



Taking Chances in Cedarwood

Author: *Megan Slayer*

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Description: He found his freedom...in Cedarwood.

Cain Ables is the it actor in Hollywood. Everyone wants to work with him, his movies make money and he's handsome—but all that glitters isn't gold. He's lonely. Growing up in the glare of the spotlight with the stage parents from hell and being protected from any scandal—and real life—has left him empty. Cain wants freedom and experience. He also wants to come out. The man who plays by the rules is about to break them all. Andrew Meadows isn't looking for love. He's at the farmers' market to sell the fruit and vegetables he's grown. When Cain shows up at his stall, he's captivated. The more they talk, the more he likes Cain, but Cain's got baggage—and he's not out yet. Yet something about Cain makes Andrew want to take a chance on romance...and forever. Will the farmer and actor find the love they both deserve, or will the glare of the spotlight ruin their future?

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Chapter One

“This is the script that’s going to catapult me into the next level?” Cain Ables stared at his agent, Dixon Nell. “You’re sure?” Cain read through the script again. He’d always wanted to do an LGBTQ movie and stretch his acting abilities. He also wanted to finally come out and admit he was gay. Jesus. No one wanted their boy wonder to be gay. He had to be approachable and make people desire him. According to his agent and parents, no one would want him if he wasn’t perfect.

Apparently, being gay wasn’t perfect.

What the fuck did anyone else know? He was gay and very imperfect.

“You’re going to work with Liam Blackwell,” Dixon said. “He’s a good guy and careful with his costars. He won’t make you do anything you’re not comfortable doing. Just say the word and he won’t kiss you or anything without your being okay. You know him, remember? You met at the celebrity baseball game last year.”

“I remember.” Cain closed the script. “How do you know I won’t want him to kiss me?”

“Please.” Dixon rolled his eyes. “You’re being a maverick by stepping out of your comfort zone. This role will have award nods all over it. You need to do this.”

“But?” He both loved and hated his agent. Dixon could act like he cared one thousand percent for Cain and his career, then he could turn on him and be so scathing. Cain never knew which side of Dixon he’d get.

“But you’re not gay. You’re theit guyin Hollywood. This is going to be a big risk, but it’ll be worth it when you get the statuette.” Dixon grasped Cain by the shoulders. “You’re getting older, and while you can age in Hollywood, you can’t be the pretty boy all your life. You’ll have to age with the roles. You’ll have to mature.”

Cain knew that. He wasn’t stupid. In his thirty years, he’d played so many roles that he swore the business had to be tired of him. He curled the script in his hands. For someone who disappeared into characters, he’d damn near lost his true self along the way. He stared at Dixon again. “What if I am gay?”

Dixon burst out laughing. “You’re not gay. Confused, maybe, and intrigued by this role, but you’re not gay.” He shook his head and continued laughing. “God, if you were really gay, you’d have come out by now and you’d be chasing Penn. That kid will fuck anything who asks.”

Cain glared at Dixon as he walked away. What an asshole. I’d be chasing Penn. Who does Dixon think he is? Dixon knew lots about the business, but nothing about dating or relationships. He certainly knew nothing about Cain. Penn wasn’t Cain’s type. Too pushy and way too young.

“Hey.” Penn strutted up to Cain. “I hear you’re working with Liam Blackwell and going to Cedarwood to make a movie.” He rubbed his hands together. “There’s not much to do in Cedarwood. It’s small, boring, dull...” His eyes flashed. “You could always take an assistant or two with you. I’ll bet Lucia would go along. She wants more exposure.”

He shook his head. Penn was no this type. He’d kept his preferences to himself, but honed them over the years. He wanted a man with muscles, a forthright attitude, who wasn’t afraid of manual labor and looked good in a baseball cap. Penn wouldn’t know what to do with himself if he had to wear a T-shirt and jeans for a living. “How old are you?”

“Twenty-three.” Penn grinned. His green eyes glittered and the smattering of hairs on his chin belied his age. He rested his hands on his narrow hips. “Interested? I’m game to go to Cedarwood. I bet we could have a great time. I’d keep my mouth shut.”

His stomach churned. Is Penn coming on to me? He hadn’t come out yet and was already being propositioned. Penn would keep quiet for a hefty price. “No thanks.”

“You’re sure?” Penn rubbed Cain’s thigh. “You don’t know what you want until you can’t have it.”

“I’m okay.” He left the chair and squeezed the script in his hand. He’d agreed to do the movie and agreed to film in Cedarwood. Maybe it was time to head out to Ohio and find himself. He knew damn well he was gay, but he had to decide what he wanted out of life. Did he want to come out? Could he live his life in the closet?

He massaged his forehead and continued walking away from Penn. In some ways, the man was attractive. He also offered an interesting proposition—he could be the first lover Cain wanted without having strings...unless he counted the financial ones. Penn would attempt to bleed him dry. If he wasn’t begging for money, he’d take him to court or wring him out in the tabloids.

His stomach churned harder. In the last year, Cain had fought the twisting ache in his belly and the fear he’d be found out. He was gay. No question. He’d dated starlets and had been with women, but he’d rather be looking at their dates or admiring another certain actor’s ass.

He was supposed to be the guy every woman wanted to fuck and the man the guys wanted to hang out with—attainable, even if he wasn’t going to be anywhere near most of his fans. His parents made sure he stayed as isolated as possible. Maybe that was his problem. He needed to get out from under their thumb. He’d been under it for long enough.

The limo waited at the side door of the offices. The driver opened the door for him and ensured Cain was ensconced in the back seat. The scent of rich leather swirled around Cain, and the darkened windows of the vehicle ensured no one would see him. He could move around without anyone knowing he was there. A ghost of himself.

He unrolled the script and read through the first three pages again. Two men, quiet romance, small town and everyone rooting for them. He needed to do this movie. If he did, he'd get to go on location. His parents wouldn't follow him to Ohio. They detested anywhere that wasn't Beverly Hills. He'd go to Ohio, read, relax and be a human being. Yeah, he'd do this movie. He'd do the hell out of it. If he happened to grow as a person or found a lover, then even better. First, he had to get the fuck out of California and be on his own.

The vehicle lurched and swerved, then stopped. He had no idea how long he'd been in the back or where he was, but he assumed the driver had taken him home. He might be a big celebrity and wanted by millions, but he had little free will.

The door opened and a valet gestured to him. "Good afternoon, Mr. Ables."

"Hello." He didn't recognize this valet. "Where's Green?"

"Reassigned, sir." The valet closed the limo door. "Your mother requests your presence."

"Thanks." He patted the valet on the arm. The guy was only doing his job. Cain's mother and father insisted on orchestrating his life as much as possible. He knew damn well why—if he stopped working or fell out of favor, they'd lose their funding. He'd kept the family afloat nearly his entire life.

He strode through the house to the massive living room. The opulence and expense of the place suffocated him. Everywhere he looked, he recognized something bought

with the money he'd made over his career. His parents hadn't worked for a damn thing.

His mother lounged on the expansive couch. She had pillows around her and a magazine on her lap. She flipped through the pages. "You're home."

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“I am.” He didn’t sit. Not now. He couldn’t relax. “Reading anything important?”

“You’re featured in this magazine.” She held up the periodical. “I see you’re with Aidyn Malachi. Good. She’s up-and-coming. You need to be seen with someone fresh.”

“I do.” Someone who isn’t a starlet.

“You look like you’re upset.” His father stood by the bar. He sipped a brandy and crossed his ankles. “Something on your mind?”

He shored up his courage. He had no plan to get to Cedarwood. No money of his own. Fuck it. He’d figure something out. Rami had always been good for a favor. He’d call his best friend to get him to the airport. “I’m leaving.”

“You are?” His father laughed. “Christ. You have no idea how to live on your own. Where in the fuck do you think you’re going? You can’t handle life without us guiding you.”

His father was such a stereotype—elbow-bending closet drunk pretending to be macho and perfect, all while he’d lost control. His wife had cheated on him multiple times. He’d cheated on her, too, and Cain swore he had a sibling somewhere he knew nothing about. The odds were in his favor for the assumption to be true. Cain gritted his teeth. “I’m being called out for a movie and need to go on location. Plain and simple. I don’t need a babysitter. Remember? I’m thirty years old. I can handle my life.” Maybe, but maybe not. He’d never actually lived on his own. He’d been given spending money and the catering trucks made sure he was fed.

“You’re not going.” His mother didn’t look up from the magazine. “You aren’t ready.” She pointed to an image of Cain tangled up with Aidyn in a bed. Both looked disheveled and sated after sex. “This is what you should be doing. Marry her. Or fake it. The public needs more of these pictures.”

He rolled his eyes. The photoshoot had been a gigantic disaster. Aidyn had cried half the time, wanting her actual boyfriend, and the photographer had pushed him and Aidyn to look more in love than they’d ever be. No one wanted to see fake pictures.

“If you’re going, then you’ll have your full treatment of servants and the corps. I won’t have you making an ass of yourself.” His father slashed his hand through the air. “You’re not a child, no, but you’re not smart enough to be on your own. You can memorize lines and channel characters, but anyone can do that.”

He groaned. If I pack a small bag, I could take one of the sports cars and drive there, right? Nah. His parents probably had trackers on the cars. He nodded to hide his frustration. “I suppose you’re right.” He turned on his heel and headed up to his bedroom.

Wouldn’t his fellow actors laugh? He still lived with his parents in the house he’d bought for them when he’d made his first television show at age five. He couldn’t bring a lover home—male or female. What would he say? Mom, Dad? I need you to go so I can fuck this lovely person. Right.

Cain shoved his wallet, license, some money he’d squirreled away over the last year, two changes of clothes, an extra pair of shoes and the stuffed cat he’d had since he was a baby into a knapsack. If he was going to blow up his home life, he refused to leave the last vestige of his childhood in the hands of his parents. The stuffed cat might look like hell and have almost no fur left, but he gave Cain more comfort than anyone. He swept his gaze around his room. Even his bedroom had no personality. It could be the room of any celebrity—perfect decor, nothing to denote that he lived

there and nothing out of place.

The churning in his stomach increased. If he didn't get the fuck out of the house and away from his life for a while, he'd have a huge-ass ulcer. The stress of living a life he didn't want had gotten to him. The doctor on the set of Victor's Rules had urged him to get some rest. Why not do it now?

He deserved to live the life he wanted.

Cain hurried down the back steps clutching his bag. The valet from before stood by the doors leading to the garage.

"Sir?" He opened the door for Cain. "Going out?"

"To Aidyn's." Cain winked. "You know."

"I used to." The man smiled. "Shall I let your mother in on this?"

"Please do. I'll be over there for a few days." He winked again and elbowed the valet.

"We don't plan on coming up for air in that time." God, he was laying it on thick.

"Yes, sir." The valet dispatched a driver, then disappeared into the main portion of the house.

Cain slipped into the back seat of the limo and waited until the car moved. His heart hammered. He was doing it—leaving the nest. He'd lied, of course, but that didn't matter. Fuck it. His hands shook and he held the bag tight. He'd never acted out before, never tried to be something he wasn't or push anyone. He'd fallen right into line because it had been required of him.

The driver dropped him off at Aidyn's hotel. Instead of expecting the car to wait on

him, Cain waved him home. “Get some rest. God knows I won’t be.” He grinned. “I’ll call for you.”

The driver nodded once and left.

Cain ducked into the hotel. He’d never stayed at this particular building and hoped no one would recognize him without his Cain Ables celebrity persona in place. He was just Cain Ables, regular guy.

He headed through the lobby to the side entrance. An attendant smiled at him. “May I help you, sir?”

“I’d like a taxi to the airport.” Holy fuck. He was doing this. “Please?”

“Sure.” The attendant waved down one of the drivers. “May I help you with anything else?”

“No, thank you.” He shook hands with the man and settled into the back seat of the taxi. As the car sped toward the airport, Cain sighed. He’d really escaped. His parents would be thrilled when they found out he was at the hotel with a woman. He was being the bad-boy actor everyone expected.

Except he wasn’t bad and he wasn’t with a woman. Fear and doubt crept into his brain. Part of him wasn’t sure he could get away with his act of transgression. The rest of him couldn’t wait to get to Ohio and be a nobody.

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Time to be myself.

Chapter Two

Andrew arranged the display of cucumbers at his farmers' market stand. He loved spending his Saturdays at the market. The other farmers kept him company, and he liked being among his people. His stepsister, Maddie, normally helped him, but she claimed she had other business. He didn't care.

He sold the last bunch of carrots, then moved the displays to fill the void. The Cedarwood Farmers' Market was the highlight of his week. He paused. Does that mean I've become boring? His stepsister would probably agree. He'd never been a hellraiser or one to call attention to himself. Selling produce had never been difficult, though.

A man approached the stand and smiled. "Hi."

"Hi." Andrew swept his gaze over the man. Handsome. Polished. Electricity filled the air. He hadn't felt this way in forever. "How are you today?" If he didn't start acting like a salesman, he risked not moving more of his goods. He hated the idea of being there just to push stuff, but that was the point—to sell produce.

"I'm just looking." The guy smiled again. "I'm Cain."

"Hello, Cain." He stuck out his hand. "It's nice to meet you. I'm Andrew."

"You grew all this?" Cain asked. He shook hands with Andrew and didn't let go right

away. “You’re talented.”

At handshakes? Hardly. Andrew rounded the display to stand beside Cain. “I can grow food, yeah.” He noticed the fine dusting of hairs along Cain’s jaw and the way his Adam’s apple bobbed as he considered the produce. Had he noticed the crackle in the air? Or was it just on Andrew’s side? Probably.

“I’ve never actually seen food coming from the ground.” Cain sighed. “That sounded strange.”

“No, it’s fine. A lot of people don’t know. They assume their dinner comes from a can.” Andrew widened his stance and folded his arms. His stepsister would’ve said he’d moved into his farmer’s pose. Maybe he had. He didn’t care. “I take it you’ve never been to a farm.”

“Never.” Cain’s eyes lit up. “Is it strange that I want to buy one of everything here, but I can’t?”

“No money?” He’d gladly donate. Cain didn’t strike him as being needy, but hey, everyone needed a good meal with hearty veggies.

“No, I can’t cook.” Cain blushed from his hairline to his collar. “Never learned.”

“That’s no big deal.”

When Cain faced Andrew, the light caught the all the shades of blond within Cain’s hair. Did he have a few freckles, too? Andrew fought the urge to whimper. He had thing for guys with freckles.

“Do you know how to cook? Or do you have someone do it for you?” Cain asked. “I’m sorry. I’m nosy.”

“I learned to cook because I live on my own. Either I cook or I starve.” He nodded to the produce. “I’m about to start cleaning up. Would you like to get together for dinner?” He’d gone way out of his comfort zone by asking Cain to go for a meal, but if he didn’t say something, he’d never know if Cain was interested or just looking for a handout.

“You’d do that?” Cain brightened. “I’d love it.” He gestured to the stand. “What can I help you pick up? I’m fairly useless, but I know how to box things.”

Interesting. He had so many questions for Cain. “Well, why don’t we put the veggies in the boxes? I’ll be right back.” He hurried behind the stand and locked the cash bag, then deposited it in the console of his truck. He hit the fob to engage the locks on his vehicle before he returned to the stand. “Had to take care of some business.”

“I don’t mind.” Cain continued to carefully pack the tomatoes in the box. “What do you do with what you don’t sell?”

“Cammie comes by and takes it for the food pantry. People will come through the line and she’ll get them bags of fresh produce.” He shrugged and boxed the last few cucumbers. “Nothing goes to waste and it helps the community.”

“That’s wicked.” Cain finished with the tomatoes, then boxed the cauliflower. “I had to do this for a commercial once.”

“A commercial?” The guy was photogenic. “I’ve never done anything like that. The local news showed up when the market opened for the season.”

“I’ll bet they focused on you.” Cain eased the flaps closed on his box. “You’ve got quite the setup.”

“Thanks, but they didn’t. The guy said I wasn’t pretty enough for television.” He

nodded in the direction of the woman selling cheese. “She made the cut.”

Cain crinkled his nose. “Cheese lady? She’s cute, but it’s cheese.” He laughed. “What am I saying? I’ll bet she helps make that cheese just like you grow this.”

“She does. She and her husband own a dairy.” He spotted Cammie. “Hold up. Cammie’s coming, and she’ll need help getting this onto the dolly.”

“Sure.” Cain wiped his hands on his jeans.

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Andrew stole a glance at Cain's backside. He'd never heard of that jeans brand, but the man certainly filled the denim out well. He shouldn't be staring at him. "Sorry I've put you to work. You showed up to shop."

"No, this is great. I feel useful," Cain said. "That hasn't happened in a long time."

Every time Cain spoke, he intrigued Andrew. He wondered what Cain did for a living that he didn't feel important or useful.

Cammie approached, keeping him from asking those questions. She fluttered her hands. "You've packed it up. Thank you." She waved her fingers at Cain. "Do I know you? You're new. Are you Andrew's boyfriend?" She turned her attention to Andrew. "Keep this one. If he helped you get this all ready for me and he's smiling, then he's one in a million."

Andrew bit back a groan. "He's not my boyfriend." He'd just met Cain. For all he knew, Cain wasn't gay.

"Oh." She massaged her forehead. "I'm sorry. I got ahead of myself."

Cain shrugged. "Think nothing of it."

"Anyway, let's get this loaded." She moved the dolly into place. "Thank you for your weekly donation, Andrew. Without you, we'd definitely have gaps in what we can distribute. People love getting fresh produce."

"You're welcome." He loaded the dolly. "You're going to need another cart. Let me

get mine.” He grabbed the handcart from behind the display. “Here.”

“Thanks.” She helped him load the rest of the boxes. “Didn’t sell much today?”

“I had a bumper harvest,” Andrew said. He stole glances at Cain. The joy in Cain’s eyes confused him. He cleared his throat. “I’ll help you take this to your van.”

“I’ll take this one,” Cain said and gestured to the dolly. “We’re here and we’re capable.”

Cammie elbowed Andrew. “Okay, if he’s not your boyfriend, snap this boy up.” She patted Cain’s arm. “And if you’re not gay, I might have to buy you dinner to thank you.”

“You wouldn’t buy me dinner?” Andrew asked, faking hurt. He’d known Cammie since high school. She might be cutthroat when it came to getting funding for the food pantry, but she could be sweet. She’d also been a good friend to him, too.

“I can buy you food any time.” She winked at Andrew. “Let’s get moving so you can go on with your life. I’ve taken up plenty of your time already.”

Andrew worked in silence as he loaded the boxes into her van. He and Cain did work in harmony. Cain seemed to fall into the job so easily.

Cain wiped his hands on his jeans legs and tucked the dolly into the van. “Need anything else?”

“I’m good.” Cammie hugged him, then Andrew. “I owe you both. Thank you.”

“Welcome.” Andrew folded his cart up. With the food pantry providing the tables, the biggest thing he had to break down were the tablecloths and empty boxes. He fell into

step beside Cain. “Don’t feel you have to come to dinner. If you’d rather have a feast with Cammie, it’s fine with me.”

“What?” Cain stopped mid-step. “You asked me, and I’m enjoying your company. Besides, she’s barking up the wrong tree.”

Andrew wanted to answer, but he’d been dumbstruck. He hadn’t thought Cain would admit he was gay.

“What do you need to put in the truck?” Cain asked. “Can I help? If you’re going to cook, I should at least keep helping.”

Andrew chuckled. “Just to put the boxes in the cargo bed of the truck. Don’t need to put them in any rhyme or reason. The cab keeps them in place and I’ll sort it out tomorrow.”

“Sure.” Cain stacked the boxes and pushed them into the back of the truck. “It’s funny. My family doesn’t think I can make it on my own.”

“No?” What was it with this guy and the strange comments? “Why? You’re like twenty-eight, right?” He hated trying to guess ages. Everyone looked about the same age after a certain point.

“I’m thirty.” Cain finished placing the boxes in the truck.

“Close enough.” Andrew closed the tailgate. “You can live on your own, you know. Did you have a hiccup in life?”

“Something like that,” Cain said. “Truth be told, I never had the chance to try living by myself.”

“You should. It’s freeing.” Andrew checked the space around his display to ensure he’d picked up everything.

“Well, I have to get used to being alone now. I’ve got an apartment here in Cedarwood,” Cain said. His phone rang and he blushed. “I’m sorry.”

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“Answer it.” Andrew busied himself with breaking down the tables for Cammie and picked up the trash in the general vicinity.

Cain tucked the phone into his pocket. “I’ll have to take a rain check on dinner. Can I see you again? Like, really have another chance at dinner?”

“Sure.” He wrote his number on an empty sales slip. “Here you go. Call me.”

“I will.” Cain clutched the piece of paper. “You bet I will.” He stared at Andrew for a moment, then hugged him. “Yay.”

Andrew stood rooted to the spot after Cain had walked away, not sure what to do next. Cain’s reaction struck him as odd, but not tinted with malice. Plus, he liked the way Cain smelled—masculine and earthy, but also like expensive leather.

“Who was that?” Maddie, his stepsister, showed up. “Sorry I’m late. My appointment went over.” She folded her arms. “You’re all done. Did you get help?”

“I did.” Andrew fiddled with his keys. “I met a guy. He didn’t buy anything, but he assisted me in delivering the extra to Cammie, and I gave him my number. I think it went well, but I’m not sure.”

She patted him on the arm. “There is a guy out there who is dying to be with a man who can take care of him, who will treat him like a prince, yet keep him honest. Don’t give up on looking. If this guy seems interesting, go on a date. No one says you have to marry him.”

“True.” He should ask Maddie about her appointment but kept quiet.

“Besides, it’s not like your future rests with this guy. You can’t know that.” She shrugged. “I’m tired. Ready to go home?”

“Sure.” He wondered where she came up with her statements. “It’s not like your future rests with this guy.” Probably not, but what if it did? What if he’d just seen a glimpse of what could be?

Cain intrigued him. He bit back a groan. But he’d forgotten to get Cain’s number. Now he remembered why he sucked at dating...he could be so clueless.

Damn.

Chapter Three

Cain wandered around his apartment. He’d walked down to the farmers’ market the day before because he’d seen the hubbub in the park. He missed the noise and bustle in bigger towns. Then again, he missed anyone who would keep him company. No one knew just how lonely he was. His friends weren’t permitted to visit, in case they messed the house. His mother insisted on keeping the family home camera ready. What if a news crew wanted to visit? What if the tabloids wanted an exclusive? They needed to be on guard and present the best image.

He wasn’t the best image. Most of the time, he barely felt like a person. Just an object.

He sank onto the couch and stared at the bland furnishings in the apartment. If given the chance, he would’ve picked different pieces. But he hadn’t been asked and didn’t have the money on hand to redecorate. He pinched the bridge of his nose. The reliance on servants and crews had a tighter grip on him than he’d ever believed. He’d grown used to asking someone to change the furniture or drive him places.

Now, he was the one in charge.

Being in control didn't help his loneliness.

His phone rang. Cain scrambled to answer the call. He'd forgotten to ditch his cell when he left town. For all he knew, his family was tracking his every movement and probably laughing.

He checked the screen and groaned. He knew the number—not Andrew from the market, because he wouldn't have known his number—but his agent. “Yes?”

“Where. The. Fuck. Are. You?” Dixon screamed. “What in the hell are you doing? You have commitments. You have people you're supposed to be seeing. You ran away.”

He measured his breaths. Time to be calm. Put on the façade of someone who knows what the hell they're doing. Cain stood and paced the length of his minuscule living room. “I'm meeting with Liam Blackwell. You told me to touch base with him and I have.” Sort of.

“Right. He says he hasn't seen you,” Dixon snapped. “Didn't think I'd check, did you?”

Actually, no, he hadn't. Cain continued to pace. “Okay, so I didn't. I haven't worked up the courage to talk to him. He's a star.”

“And what the fuck are you?” Dixon growled and made noises Cain couldn't quite decipher. Cain hated when he pissed Dixon off. True, he could be difficult, but Dixon had cornered the market on trouble. Dixon fought hard for his clients and even harder against his clients. If Dixon wanted his actor in a movie, the deal went through. Right now, Cain was teetering on the wrong side of his agent's good graces.

“I’m on a holiday.” It wasn’t the full answer, but enough to hopefully work.

“Holiday? Where? With Aidyn? Because I know you’re not. She’s in Paris and she’s telling everyone she’s engaged to that laborer,” Dixon spat. “She could do so much better.”

Laborer? What would Dixon think of Andrew? “I’m in Cedarwood. I’m getting a feel for the town and my feet under me. I want this role to be authentic, and what’s more real than being immersed in the culture of this town? Liam’s here, and I’ll touch base with him today. Promise.”

“That’s better.” Dixon made another noise Cain couldn’t make out. “You have the script. The changes have been emailed to you. Learn them. Oh, and get a piece of paper. Write down Liam’s number. You can’t mess this up.”

Cain did as told and scrawled the number onto the back of a receipt. “Got it.”

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“Good. Did you eat? Do you have money?”

“I’m not ignorant.” But his agent had a point. He tended to get wrapped up in his projects and sometimes did forget to eat. He also didn’t have a lot of funds left. In his attempt to stay out of sight, he hadn’t bothered to use his credit card. Hell, he might not have any credit on the damn thing. He might not have a whole lot of idea how to live on his own, but he wasn’t so far gone that he couldn’t start figuring it out.

“Make sure you’re eating—all organic and none of that fast-food shit—and working out. You can’t get soft. America doesn’t want to see a pudgy Cain Ables. You have an image to uphold,” Dixon said. “You know what? I don’t trust you to do this on your own. You’re clueless. I’m going to send Penn to keep an eye on you.”

“No,” Cain snapped. The last thing he needed was to be holed up with Penn. The man made his stomach churn and his skin crawl. “I’ll let you go so I can call Liam.” He’d lived in trailers on movie sets and remembered to work out then. What was different now? He didn’t have the fancy equipment or running shoes, but those could be procured in some manner. Maybe Andrew would have some suggestions? It’d give him a reason to talk to Andrew again.

“Are you sure you don’t need me or Penn to babysit you? How about your parents?” Dixon asked. “I can send them.”

“I’m good, and they need a break from me.” He was tired of being treated like a child. “I have to go.” He hung up before his agent could get another word in. Damn. He didn’t appreciate that everyone thought he wasn’t smart. How hard was it manage his own life? Jesus.

He'd partied and drunk a little bit, but never enough to lose control or act out. His parents insisted he toe the line. Don't make waves and don't get yourself into trouble. You can build a reputation, but if you destroy it, the damage is permanent. Most days, he followed directions, but he'd begun to wonder if his parents' mandates were impossible. Other people in the media managed comebacks. Hell, the country rooted for people to bring themselves up again when they fell.

Cain slumped back on the couch and stared at the ceiling. In his thirty years, he'd acted in plenty of movies, four television shows and countless commercials. He'd never dated anyone not approved by his management or parents. Never broke the law. Never really acted out. He embodied everything his parents claimed were the perfect attributes of an actor—good looks, good behavior, drive and determination. Plus, he played by the rules. He'd been sheltered, pampered and needed a goddamn life.

His parents would die when they found out he was gay. Nausea swept over him. The moment they learned he wasn't perfect... He wasn't sure how they'd handle the news, but they'd probably insist he changed. His mother claimed gays needed therapy. They weren't right. Was he right? Who was? Nuances were good. They made his performances better.

Speaking of performances, he needed to get going on prep for the coming movie.

He slapped at the side table and picked up a piece of paper. Cain dialed the number written on the note and waited for the call to connect. "Hi. May I speak to Liam Blackwell?"

"Liam? This is Andrew Meadows. Can I help you?" Andrew asked.

Oh shit. He'd mixed up the numbers. "I'm sorry. This is Cain. We met at the farmers' market. We were supposed to do dinner, but I had to take care of other business." He couldn't put on the mask of famous actor with Andrew. The man deserved

authenticity.

“Hi, Cain. How are you getting along?” Andrew asked.

“It’s been interesting.” He appreciated Andrew’s smooth voice and the way he didn’t sound angry that Cain had interrupted his life. Cain sighed. “I’m supposed to call Liam.”

“No problem. I misdial often,” Andrew said. “My stepsister says I have meaty hands and can’t work the buttons. It happens.”

“I guess so, but I wouldn’t call your hands meaty or think you’d have problems with phones.” He’d liked Andrew’s hands—strong and tough, but still pretty. He pinched his forehead again. The ache to spend time with someone overwhelmed him. “Andrew?”

“Yeah?”

“Are you busy tonight?” He didn’t have a ton of money left, but he wanted to meet for coffee or something.

“I’m heading into town to drop a load of straw at the community garden for the production in the park. I have no idea what the local theater group is putting on, but they wanted straw for walls,” Andrew said. “Do you need something?”

“A friend?” A companion, a buddy, someone to see Cain as anything but a celebrity? He wanted to hang out with Andrew again and not feel so solitary. Plus, Andrew was easy on the eyes.

“Sure. I can stop by after I drop off the straw. What’s your address?” Andrew asked.

He hadn't missed a beat. Cain's heart thundered. This was happening. "Uh, I'm at twenty-three Cook Court."

"Oh, the Cook Court apartments. I know where that is. Give me an hour." Andrew laughed. "And call Liam in the meantime. Then you won't forget."

"Thanks." Where his agent or parents would've spoken out of malice or irritation, Andrew sounded more jovial and offering a happy prod. "I will."

"See you soon."

Cain hung up and clasped the phone to his chest. Happiness overwhelmed him. He'd done something without any help, and so far, things were working out. He wasn't being dragged back to Beverly Hills nor being castigated too much for his behavior.

He picked up the pen and added Andrew's name to his number, then located the second phone number and dialed Liam's digits. "Hello?"

"This is Liam Blackwell, and you are?" Liam asked.

His voice faded for a moment. Fuck. Cain thumped his thigh with his fist. Get yourself together. "This is Cain Ables. We're going to work on a movie together."

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“Right, Cain. Hi. How are you?” Liam asked. “I was told we’d be touching base. Where are you? Do I need to pick you up at the airport? Or are you still coming in?”

“I’m here in Cedarwood, flying under the radar,” Cain said. “I’d like to talk to you and get more of a chance to see how we fit together for the movie.”

“Sure. You’re at this number?” Liam asked. “I need to check my schedule, but I’m positive we can make something happen in the next couple days. Do you have the script?”

“I do, but it’s not the one with revisions.”

“Why?”

He sighed. “I sort of ran away from my life. I don’t have a computer, printer, my bank cards...my stuff.”

“Why would you do that? To get to know Cedarwood?”

“Because I wanted to get the hell out from under my handlers’ thumbs,” Cain said. “I wanted to be my own man and maybe see what made Cedarwood tick. I don’t know.”

“Okay.”

He froze. Okay? “You’re going to out me, aren’t you?” Fuck. “I’m at the Cook Court apartments. It’s not the best place, but it works. If you’re going to tell everyone and sell my story, just get it over with.”

“Nope. I’m going to call you back when I have a time we can meet and we’ll sort through this,” Liam said. “I’ve been in your shoes and I know what it’s like to want to disappear for a while. I won’t say dick. The one thing I will say is this, Cedarwood isn’t a regular town. It’s a community. People around here are like a family, but they have their moments when they’re conniving and nasty. With the right people, you can blend in for years. With the wrong ones or if you act like a drama queen, you’ll be outed and gone in seconds.”

“Understood.”

“I’m not trying to sound rotten. I get it. You want to be your own person and you should be,” Liam said. “But the more you make waves and act like the celebrity, the faster you’ll attract the attention you don’t want. Get your feet under you—you deserve it.”

“Thanks.” He wasn’t sure what he deserved any longer.

“I’ll call you later.”

“I’m looking forward to it.” He relaxed and hung up.

The phone call with Liam had gone better than he’d expected. He resumed studying the ceiling. Should he order food? Did anyone around here make certified organic pizzas? He should look it up, but didn’t feel like fiddling with his phone again.

His thoughts turned to Andrew. What was it about the farmer that drew him in? The proximity? Because he was the first man Cain had met in town? Or that he’d been nice to Cain? He hadn’t fawned over him because of his celebrity status. That couldn’t be it, but every time Cain had looked at Andrew, his body had tingled all over. Electricity had crackled around him. He wanted to capture that force and bottle it. Hell, he wanted it to never end. Andrew exuded the kind of confidence Cain

wished he had when he wasn't in front of the cameras.

Had Andrew felt the pull, too? He hoped so, but had no idea.

Christ. Worrying is a bitch.

Chapter Four

Andrew arrived at the apartment complex a little later than he'd planned. The theater group had wanted him to place the straw rather than just drop it off. They didn't seem to care that he'd cleaned up to see Cain or that he wanted to stay clean, rather than get all sweaty. Still, he'd been the upstanding citizen and helped out.

He sat in his truck and debated his next move. Cain lived in apartment twenty-three. For all the times he'd driven past the complex—a line of connected houses, really—he'd never actually looked at them. The brick façade was crumbling in a few places and water had stained the spots by the downspouts. The sidewalks weren't even and weeds grew in front of two units. He'd gotten the air of wealth and prosperity from Cain. This place didn't exude either.

Does a place of residence define a man? Andrew shook his head. He'd been told his farm wasn't plush or wonderful, yet he couldn't imagine living anywhere else. He left the truck and made his way to number twenty-three. After one knock, Cain answered.

"Andrew." Cain threw his arms around Andrew. "I'm glad to see you."

"I'm happy to see you, too." Cain's jubilation confused him. "Everything okay?"

"It is." Cain let go and gestured to the living room. "Come in. It's a little messy. The housekeeper hasn't arrived yet, and I'm on my own." He laughed. "Who am I kidding? I'm the housekeeper."

“Do you need some help?” The place wasn’t in that bad a shape. The blankets were all over the couch and a newspaper lay strewn on the coffee table. Cups and silverware had been left out. An hour of determination, plus some elbow work, would have the apartment in shape again.

“I’m good.” Cain tugged Andrew to the sofa and tossed the blankets on to the armchair. “Make yourself at home.”

He perched on the couch and laced his fingers together. “Settling in?” He wasn’t sure what else to say.

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“I’m trying to.” Cain sat next to him, but faced Andrew. “I can’t find a place that makes organic pizza, so that’s blah.”

“Blah?” Andrew frowned. “Why don’t you try Tony’s Pizza? He makes his own dough, gets his veggies local and the dairy provides his cheese.”

“But is it certified organic? Organic is cleaner.”

“Right.” Everyone he knew kept their crops clean and their animals healthy. How organic did Cain want?

“You’re organic, too.” Cain grinned. “You get it, and when I get myself sorted out, I’ll buy my veggies from you. Don’t you think it’s better?”

“I grow my own food, yeah.” Andrew shifted in his seat. If he’d known he’d get a mini-lecture, he might have stayed away. He liked Cain, but the pomposity in his words annoyed Andrew.

“What’s wrong? I should’ve provided food, right?” Cain shook his head. “I’m so bad at this.”

“Bad at what?” At least they weren’t discussing organic anything. “Dating?”

“Living on my own.”

“Ah,” Andrew said. “Your boyfriends picked up after you and did the shopping?”

“Hines did it,” Cain said. “He had the best taste.”

“Ah.” The boyfriend. He should’ve known a handsome man like Cain would already have a boyfriend.

“I should get you a drink or something. I’m out of bottled water. I prefer it because it’s purer,” Cain said and left his seat.

“You can get water from the tap.” Andrew followed him into the minuscule kitchen. “This is tiny.”

“It’s tight.” Cain grabbed a glass from the cupboard. “This.” He poured water from the tap into the glass. “Huh. Looks normal.”

“It is. Cedarwood has good water.” Andrew accepted the glass. “You didn’t know there’s a tap? Don’t you do anything for yourself?”

“I’ve never been to the grocery store.” Cain folded his arms. “Never had a reason to go.”

The boyfriend must’ve done everything for Cain. Strange. “Next time I go to the store, you can tag along if you want.” He’d get this man out in public and used to doing things on his own one way or another.

“I’d love that.” Cain tensed. “Shit. Who is that?” He ducked out of the kitchen to the front door. “I’m not expecting anyone.”

Andrew stood in the doorway to the kitchen. When Cain opened the door, Liam Blackwell, the actor, stood on the stoop.

Well, shit. He didn’t know he’d been invited to a party. Andrew smiled and inched out

of the way. He'd never been introduced to Liam, but he'd never been interested in celebrity before, either.

Cain and Liam fell into a tight conversation. Andrew tried to not eavesdrop, since he hadn't been included. Cain claimed he needed someone to talk to, but it appeared he had plenty of people.

"I should go," Andrew said. He shook hands with Liam, then nodded to Cain. When he touched Liam's hand, there wasn't the spark like there was with Cain. Maybe Cain wasn't feeling it. "Call me when you want to head to the store," Andrew said and left the apartment.

He wanted to spend more time with Cain, but the conversation with Liam seemed important. He wasn't in the same league as Liam anyway. According to Maddie, Liam was supposed to be in a relationship, but he'd still be better suited to Cain than a farmer. Cain struck him as rather high maintenance. Then again, Andrew wasn't exactly the world's requisite for a catch. He had a farm, but he wasn't a cowboy and didn't own a horse.

"Wait." Cain jogged up to him. "You don't have to go."

"You're busy." Andrew put a brave face on the situation. He and Cain were acquaintances at best. "Don't worry about it."

"You went out of your way to come here." Cain grasped Andrew's hand. "Another time?"

"Yeah." He squeezed Cain's fingers. The spark returned and his belly fluttered. Andrew let go before he embarrassed himself, then ambled over to his truck. If he looked like he wasn't upset, then hopefully he'd convince Cain he wasn't—despite his spirits plummeting. He'd had plans for the meeting. Talk to Cain, get to know him,

find out his story and grow the friendship. Another day.

Besides, what were sparks for if they weren't mutual?

Andrew drove home to the farm and parked in the smaller barn. His stepsister's car was still in front of the craggy pine tree in front of the house. He loved Maddie, but wasn't in the mood to talk to her. She'd want to ask questions—ones he didn't want to answer.

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Maddie trotted up to the barn. “Hey.” She held one of the orange cats. “I called the vet. She’ll be out Monday to vaccinate the kittens and assess if they’re ready to be fixed.”

“Good.” He seemed to wind up with extra cats every year. People figured the farm was a good place to drop unwanted kittens. He made sure to have every feline vaccinated and fixed as soon as he could, but sometimes there were accidents.

“I’m going to take this guy to the house. He’s not a barn cat.” She rubbed the kitten’s head. “I’m calling him Roger. He seems to like sleeping on your dog, and Gabby likes him, so it works out.”

“Is he litter trained?” Andrew rubbed his eyes. “Whatever, yeah, bring him in.”

“Are you okay?” She followed beside him. Gabby ran across the lawn and jumped on Andrew. He knelt to pet the dog, but his sister didn’t let up. “Andy, are you okay? You seem less like yourself. You’re down.”

“I’m fine.”

“Liar.” She stood between him and the house. “You were gone a long time. Did the ladies of the theater group demand your help?”

“No—well, they did, but it wasn’t a big deal.” He finished scratching Gabby behind the ears. “I went to see a friend.”

“Blowjob friend or actual one?” she asked.

The fact she'd called anyone he knew a blowjob friendbugged him. "The guy from the market."

"Ah." She walked with Andrew into the house. "Hey, there are lots of guys in the world and there is one out there for you. This one isn't worth it if he's making you this goofy and you're not even dating."

"Maddie." He drew a glass of water from the tap. "I got the wrong message from him. I should've expected that it wasn't something deeper than it was and I messed up. That's all."

She plunked the cat on the floor, then wrapped her arms around Andrew. "I'm sorry."

He sighed. She'd been right there through the bad and the good, through his parents' split and the split between his father and her mother. She understood the strangeness of his life. "I thought when I dated Carl that I'd found the one. Then he turned out to be a dud."

"He wasn't meant to live on a farm." She dug her chin into his biceps. "But you weren't as into him as you think. I could tell he wasn't making you happy."

"I know." He sighed again. The weight of the world seemed to be on his shoulders. "You really believe there's someone out there for us?"

"I do."

Her relationship with Ross seemed to be on the rocks, and yet she still had faith. "I hope you're right." Andrew didn't understand men or Cain, but what was new? Most of the guys he'd dated hadn't amounted to much and the relationships hadn't lasted long. Why would this one be different?

Because I like Cain and I just might have a chance to make this work.

Chapter Five

Cain waited in the parking lot as Andrew drove away. A piece of his heart went with Andrew. Was he in love with Andrew? No, but he'd let the man down. He'd asked him over, and Andrew had done what Cain wanted, but then Liam had shown up.

Damn it.

"So..." Liam waited on the stoop. "Andrew?"

"Yeah. Do you know him?" Cain gestured to the apartment. "Let's go inside. It's more private."

Liam said nothing until Cain closed the door. He raked his fingers through his hair, then moved the blankets off the chair. "Okay, so look... Andrew is a loner."

"You know him?" Cain sat across from Liam. "I'm listening."

"There's nothing bad to tell about him." Liam shrugged. "He's a nice guy. Lives at a farm, works there, has a stepsister who can't seem to keep a boyfriend, his family is out of state. I think they're hippies. I heard something about they were off doing environmental work." He rubbed his hands on his jeans' legs. "I'm told they were swingers, too. Who knows, and it doesn't matter. He's just the product of a complicated home life."

Cain snorted. He knew about having a complicated home life, and Andrew's wasn't that bad. He massaged his forehead. "Why do you know so much about him? Are you friends?"

“The gay community around here talks and we’re all pretty much friends,” Liam said.
“The guys who run the support group have been trying to get him to attend, if only so he can make some friends.”

“Ah.” Cain shook his head. “Maybe he’s shy?”

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“He works that stall well at the farmers’ market.”

“He’s got produce to sell. Why not work what he’s got to get it into the hands of shoppers?” Cain asked. “He’s confident, knows himself and he’s good at selling stuff. Doesn’t sound like he’s much different from you and me. We put up a façade and try to convince viewers we’re someone we’re not.”

Liam stared at him for a long moment. “I hadn’t thought about this that way.” He nodded twice. “I should kick my own ass for believing the rumors, too.”

“You should.” Andrew probably wouldn’t know he’d stood up for him, but damn it, Cain wasn’t going to let anyone walk all over his new friend.

“We should go over the script and start working on our respective characters,” Liam said. “Why don’t you ask Andrew out? Like on a real date, and practice your act with him? He’s nice and seemed interested in you.”

“I’m not playing a character to get into his pants.” Cain refused to be that underhanded. “That’s not fair.”

“I suppose not,” Liam said. “My schedule is wide open starting next week. Stone and I were going to Vegas for the weekend, but when we’re back, you and I can start initial rehearsal.”

“Principal filming isn’t for another month,” Cain said. “I want to be ready.”

“We will.” Liam stood and hugged Cain. “Things with Andrew will work out.

You've got to be patient with him. I'd suggest being honest, too."

"Thanks." He walked Liam out and waited for his costar to leave before he ducked back into the apartment.

Cain locked the door and leaned against it. Being alone with his thoughts sucked. He couldn't get his mind off Andrew. There had to be more to him than Liam seemed to think. Andrew reeked of confidence and gentleness. He was unique and happy in his skin—at least he acted like it.

Cain wanted to be like Andrew. He only had self-assurance when he stood before a camera and was someone else. Cain Ables wasn't that exciting, but the various roles he'd played were very interesting. People liked him when he played Duncan in *FlameThrower* or Greg in *My Boyfriend's a Monster*. Silly shows, but the audiences loved them. He'd become a cult hit when he'd portrayed a nasty vampire, then turned around and made those silly rom-coms. Those characters sparked with people. Cain wouldn't spark a damn thing.

His phone beeped and Cain gnashed his teeth. Dixon must want him again. He'd set Dixon's number to register as a beep. Part of him wanted to check the message and find out what Dixon wanted, but the rest of him chose to ignore the phone. His former life would intrude on his current one soon enough.

For all he knew, his parents would swoop in and take control tomorrow. They wanted the money he made. His personal happiness meant zip.

The self-loathing set in. What am I doing? I can't live on my own. I can't break away from the set rules. He was a helpless guy and not all that smart. He needed his support system, because without it, he'd fail again.

God. He scrubbed his hands over his eyes. He hated when the depression hit. He'd

never lived alone, save for being on location. He'd survived just fine when he'd gone off to make the various movies in Utah and New Mexico. This wasn't any different. There wasn't a movie being made just yet, but so?

Other people managed to break free without incident. They lived with friends or alone. He didn't need the support of a bunch of servants. He could learn to cook and clean. Money would be tight, but that was on him for not squirrelling more cash away.

His agent knew where he was and could get him money, but he didn't want to rely on someone else. He'd made this choice to break out and had to live with it. Maybe he could get a job in Cedarwood. But where? The theater group? They'd figure him out and everyone in the world would know he'd come to the small town. Cedarwood didn't need the chaos of him not only admitting he was in the area, but coming out, too.

His head throbbed. He wanted to see Andrew again and explain himself. Christ. He'd been foolish for keeping his story from Andrew. How could he want to be with this man if he couldn't tell him the truth? Andrew deserved answers and to decide for himself if Cain suited him.

But the way he'd left things...he couldn't pounce on Andrew right now. Damn it. He scrubbed his face again. Going forward, he needed a plan. He'd give Andrew space for a couple of days, then ask him on a date. When they went out—if Andrew accepted—then he'd spill his guts. If Andrew turned him down, then he'd know not to push.

He sagged in his seat. In the space of a few days, he'd found his backbone and upended his life. Was he sorry? Not a bit. He had the chance to be his own man. Who wouldn't want that?

Holy shit.

Chapter Six

Andrew spent the next week working on the farm, happy to have something to occupy his mind. He didn't like the way he'd left things with Cain, but what was there to have? They weren't together. Weren't even trying to get together. They were friends at best.

He drove the load of straw to the barn, then parked it in front of the mower. He'd stack the straw later. Sweat slid down his temple and between his shoulder blades. The afternoon sun scorched the back of his neck. Where was his trusty water jug?

He spied the jug on the ground by the front wheel of the truck...empty.

"Are you in here?" Maddie strolled into the barn. "Hey."

"Hi." He hopped off the tractor. "Bored?" He wiped his forehead with his handkerchief and approached his stepsister. "What's happening?"

"I thought I'd come out here a while and help with the critters. The vet seemed happy with the progress the kittens are making." She ventured over to the pen the kittens and mama cat occupied. "They're almost big enough to be fixed and released."

"I know." He'd already scheduled the appointments with the vet and paid half the bill. "I wish people realized I'm not a home for wayward cats."

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She elbowed him. “But you like them. You’ve never turned a critter away.”

“I’m going to have a menagerie like Stone McCartney soon, but he runs the animal rescue. I’m trying to make a living off the farm.” Andrew folded his arms. Maddie was stalling. He knew the tactic well. “Why aren’t you with Ross? Isn’t he supposed to be the guy you’ve wanted all your life?”

She stuffed her hands into her back pockets. “I did, but he didn’t agree with me.” She shrugged. “He wanted to be with someone else.”

“You were tight.” She lived with Ross, and Andrew had thought they were getting married. “What happened?”

“He said it was a fling and wouldn’t happen again, but he’d been texting a woman named Tara for the last three months. It wasn’t just work stuff. He’d told her he loved her and wanted to get away from the nag.” She met Andrew’s gaze. “I guess that’s me.”

“I’m sorry.” He opened his arms, then hesitated. “I’d hug you, but I’m sweaty and dirty.”

She nodded. “You’re fragrant.”

At least he hadn’t been hauling shit all day. “Sorry.”

“It’s okay.” She swatted his arm. “I thought it’d do me good to be here rather than at the apartment alone. I can be of use here.”

“You can. I need to refill the water pans for the cats and check the water levels for the girls.” He planned on dumping the water from the stock tanks and adding fresh once he’d put the tractor away for the afternoon. “Pull the plug on the left tank, and while it’s emptying, fill the right one. I’ll grind the feed.”

He filled the bucket with feed, then emptied the contents into the grinder. Maddie pulled the plug from the water tank and stepped back. While the water drained from one tank, she refilled the other.

“What happened with the guy from the market?” She waved the hose. “You don’t look happy.”

He stepped back from the loud machine. “He called me to come over, but I wasn’t there long when Liam Blackwell showed up. I don’t care that Liam was over, but why call me and say he’s lonely if he knew he’d have company?”

“You do realize Liam’s a celebrity.”

He turned off the grinder. “I know.” Andrew emptied the contents into the bucket. The four cattle he kept stood at the gate, watching him. “I think the girls are ready to eat.”

“They are.” Maddie replaced the plug, then rinsed the left tank. “Liam’s famous. The cutie might want to hang out with a celebrity. It might fascinate him.”

“I suppose.” He headed into the barn to disperse the feed. The cattle happily noshed on the ground corn while Andrew surveyed the bedding in the pen. He’d have to replace it tomorrow.

“Or maybe you misinterpreted the situation,” Maddie said, joining him in the barn. “It might have been a miscommunication.”

“I doubt that.” He knew when guys weren’t interested, having been the recipient of the cold shoulder enough times.

“Give him another chance.”

“If I run into him.” He hooked the bucket handle on the nail, then wiped his hands. Andrew closed the gate, penning the cattle in for the evening. “There we go. Cats are good. The girls are safe.”

“Call him.” Maddie followed Andrew out of the barn. “What are you afraid of?”

“Nothing.” He was embarrassed that he’d escaped the situation instead of standing up and demanding attention. He spotted Gabby trotting across the lawn. “What’s my dog got in her mouth?” The canine shook something floppy. Andrew’s stomach churned. “She’s got another groundhog. Check the water and stay here.” He fought the urge to sprint across the lawn. If he chased Gabby, it’d become a game, and she wouldn’t give up the critter. “Gabby.”

The dog spotted him, and her tail wagged faster. Shit. The game was on. Andrew slowed his pace. “Drop it.” He hated having to bury the groundhogs she caught, but at least she kept them out of the corn cribs. “Gabby. Drop it.”

Gabby spit out the helpless lump of he wasn’t sure what and hopped forward, charging the clump. Her tail swished faster.

“Gabby.” He approached the dog. “Thank you. You helped out and did your job. Good girl.” He glanced back at Maddie. “Get a shovel.” He turned his attention back to the dog. “Good Gabby.” What in the hell did she get? He focused on the object the dog had dragged across the lawn. He knew that form. A doll?

“What is it?” Maddie brought the shovel. “What’d she get?”

“Not a critter. She found one of the stuffed toys you gave her.” He pointed to the ragged orange and brown form. “I think it’s a football player toy.”

“Oh my.” She crinkled her nose. “That thing stinks worse than you do.”

“It does.” He’d have to pitch the toy and buy Gabby a new one. He took the shovel from Maddie. “I’ll toss it. Take her to the house and rub Gabby down with those cleaning towels.”

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“Got it.” Maddie coned the dog toward the house.

Andrew scooped up the offensive-smelling toy with the shovel and carried Gabby’s prize to the garbage can. He loved the dog, but she tended to find the grossest, smelliest things for toys. At least she hadn’t brought a real critter.

He returned the shovel to the barn, then headed to the house. Maddie finished wiping Gabby down. “She’s not as smelly as we thought.” She stood, tossing the cloths. “I gave her a bone, too.”

“Thanks.” He washed his hands in the mud sink. “She keeps things moving.”

“Speaking of moving, I’m not letting you get out of talking about the cutie. What’s his name?” Maddie asked.

“Cain.” He leaned against the rim of the sink. “I don’t know if there’s anything to tell.”

“Why?”

“We’re not that suited for each other. He thinks organic is all there is and doesn’t understand what it is.”

“Huh?”

“Organic is a spectrum of things and not just boutique food.”

She stared at him. “What if he doesn’t know better? Like...what if no one ever told him otherwise? There are a lot of people out there who don’t know food comes from the ground. They think it comes out of cans. What if he’s never been to a farm? We don’t pull the veggies out of our ass.”

“Uh...” That wasn’t the visual he wanted.

She frowned, then laughed. “Sorry. Wrong wording, but you get the idea. What I’m trying to say, though, is that he might be more innocent than you think. He might really not know, so give him a chance.”

“If I see him.” He wasn’t rushing this. If he ran into Cain, then fine. If not, then he didn’t. Cain seemed sort of interested, but not very.

“You never know.” Maddie pointed to the cat bin. “By the way, you need to run into town tonight. You need more cat food. Oh, and get some special indoor blend for Roger.”

“Why don’t you get it, since you know what you’re talking about. I’ll give you money.” He wanted to avoid possibly running into Cain.

“Because I’m heading home to shower. I’m meeting Nic for drinks.” She shrugged. “It’s just drinks.”

“Nic?” The only Nic he knew was a lawyer and the former quarterback for the Cedarwood high school football team back in the day.

“Nic Martins. We were supposed to get together for lunch and to discuss wills—Ross and I were discussing what we wanted to do with our golden years. Since Ross is doing someone else, I don’t give a rip what he does with his years, but I didn’t want to break the date with Nic, so we agreed to go out for drinks.”

“I see.” Now he remembered. Maddie had dated Nic under the radar for a few months. “You were a couple.” At the time, Nic had said he wasn’t embarrassed to be dating a girl whose parents weren’t married and owned a farm, but he hadn’t taken her to the prom or even told people they were together. Back then, Andrew had just learned Maddie was his stepsister. His protective streak hadn’t blossomed yet.

“I know.” She fluttered her hand. “We weren’t a real couple, per se. He dated Heather, and I tried to date his brother Joey, but Joey and Heather hooked up, so that ended that.” She smoothed the wrinkles in her T-shirt. “We got to talking about wills and the conversation switched to things from high school and we realized we still have things in common.”

“Good for you.” He had no room to talk. His love life sucked and if she thought she’d found someone great in an old flame, he wasn’t going to pass judgment.

“I thought I’d help you for a while, and now I’m heading home to get ready. You need to get into town for that food.”

“Isn’t the store on your way?”

“Andy.”

He hated when she called him that and used the whiny voice. He’d never win an argument with her at this rate, either. “Fine. Lock up the house and leave Gabby in here.” If he went to the feed mill, he wouldn’t run into Cain. He picked up his keys and strode out of the house. As he drove, he tried to ignore his irritation with his sister. The niggling feeling that he’d been set up filled his brain. Maybe he hadn’t, but she had a tendency to put him in situations he didn’t like. He pulled into the lot of the grocery store and parked, then cursed himself for forgetting to go to the feed mill.

Damn. He left the truck and pulled a cart from the rack. He pushed the buggy into the

store. Instead of wandering in search of anything else he might need while there, he headed straight to the pet aisle. He smiled at his friend, Trixie, and waved to Clint before he loaded the cart with cat food. Despite the wide array of kinds and brands, he finally spotted one formulated for indoor cats. He added the bag to the pile. He'd spend a lot of money, but the cats would be happy.

Andrew pushed the cart to the register.

"I'm sorry, sir. Your card is declined." The cashier sounded impatient. "I can't help you."

Andrew couldn't see the shopper ahead, but he felt sorry for the person. He'd been the unfortunate victim of his card being declined, too.

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“Are you sure? It should be full,” the man said. “I have money.”

“That’s what they all say,” she replied. “Either try a new card or come back with cash.”

How impolite! Andrew shifted to catch a view of the man trying to pay for his groceries. The voice was familiar. Cain? His friend stood, red-cheeked, at the register. Was he embarrassed? It sounded and looked like it. Andrew’s heart squeezed. He should help Cain.

“God,” the man in front of Andrew muttered. “People need to get their shit together.”

What an asshole. “I’ll get it.” Andrew stepped around the male shopper and swiped his card through the reader. “Should be fine.”

Cain’s eyes widened. “Fuck me.”

The charge went through, preventing Andrew from having any sort of response. Cain inched away from him. “Fuck.”

“Pay me back later,” Andrew said, and resumed his place in line.

“Yeah.” Cain accepted the receipt and pushed his cart of bagged groceries aside. He waited as Andrew made his way through the line. Once Andrew had paid for the cat food, he joined Cain near the exit.

“Are you okay?” Andrew asked. “Something go sideways?”

“No.” Cain’s blush intensified, and he averted his gaze. “Thanks.”

“No problem. Sometimes the card just isn’t refilled in time or the strip demagnetizes. It happens.” Andrew nodded to the door. “I’m happy to help.”

“Thanks.” Cain still didn’t look at him. “How have you been?”

“Good. You?” He walked alongside Cain through the parking lot. “How’s Liam?”

This time, Cain paled. “It’s not what you think.”

“Doesn’t matter what I think.” He didn’t know Liam well enough to pass judgment and it wasn’t Andrew’s business to say anything.

Cain stopped by a nondescript car. “We need to talk.”

“Sure.” He nodded to the cart. “You should get your things home. The frozen stuff will melt.”

“Oh, yeah. Follow me?” Cain asked. “Come over.”

“Can’t.” He had to get back to unload the cat food and let the dog out.

“I screwed up.”

“What?”

“I screwed up,” Cain repeated. “That’s why you won’t come over.”

“No, I need to get back and let the dog out.” He pointed to his cart. “I should take the cat food home because the cats will want dinner.” Not until tomorrow, but that didn’t

matter right now. “I don’t eat the stuff, but the critters do, and they’re demanding.”

Cain offered a half-hearted chuckle. “I suppose they are. Sorry.”

“Why don’t you come out to the farm? I’m out on Webster Road, the Sunny Brooke Farm. Can’t miss the sign,” he said, the words tumbling out fast. He wanted to keep himself in check, but Cain had managed to disarm him again.

“Where is Webster Road?” Cain unlocked his car door. “I’ll be there.”

“South of town. It’s the first crossroads if you go down Route Eighty-Three. Hang a left at the road sign and go four miles. You’ll see the sign.” He flexed his hands on his cart. “I’ll be there all evening.”

“Since you live there, that’s probably good.”

“Yeah.” He wished he could help Cain relax, but then again, he wished he wasn’t wound so tightly around him. He gave in to his desire to touch Cain and hugged him. “Whatever you’re going through, I’m willing to listen.”

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Cain hugged him tight. “Thanks.” He held on longer than Andrew expected. “You have no idea.”

“Take your stuff home, then you can come out and visit. I’ll be there.” Andrew let go. He loved the way Cain felt in his arms, but Cain wasn’t his. “Okay?”

“Yeah.” Cain packed his groceries into the trunk. “See you in a bit.”

Andrew kept an eye on Cain as he loaded the cat food into the bed of his truck. Cain seemed so lonely. Odd, since he was a nice enough guy and sweet, too. Andrew waited until Cain left, then exited the parking lot to drive home.

He laughed when he reached a traffic light. He’d wanted nothing more than to stay far away from Cain. Then he’d gone and paid for Cain’s groceries. He’d invited him over, too!

Good gravy.

He’d led with his heart again. He’d probably get it broken, but such was life.

He headed out of town to the farm. Maddie had already left, and the cats waited in the front porch. He parked, then unloaded the cat food bags. As he dumped each into the metal bins, he ensured the cat food bowls were full. He let Gabby out of the house to do her business. While she inspected the front yard, Andrew sat on the front steps.

Gabby darted across the grass and barked.

Cain. Andrew hadn't expected his visitor so quickly. Cain parked in front of the barn, then exited the vehicle. "The sunset here is pretty."

"Thanks. We like it." Andrew crossed the lawn. Gabby led the way and sniffed Cain. "Don't jump on him, Gabs." Andrew petted her head. "She won't bite, but don't act scared."

"Right." Cain held his hand out to the dog. "This is a farm? I've never been to one." He scratched Gabby behind the ears. "You're a good girl."

"She is." Andrew admired the way Gabby loved on Cain—like she'd chosen him, too. Andrew cleared his throat. "This is where I grow the food I sell at the farmers' market."

"You're all organic." Cain stood tall and grinned. "I love it."

"I grow the vegetables myself, yes. I have to keep it clean, the bugs off and the critters from eating it." Andrew tipped his head. "Why? Want to check out the garden with me?"

"You'd let me?"

"Why not?" He gestured to the garden. "Gabby, come on, goof. Let's go." He patted his hip. "She can be nosy."

"She won't bite?" Cain patted her head again. "Why Gabby?"

"She used to bark all night when I first rescued her. Someone had dropped her off at the end of the lane, and I couldn't leave her there. She was just a pup and too small to really have been weaned. Oh boy, how she cried. She slept in my bed for the first year. Now she sleeps on the floor," Andrew said. "She'd probably sleep in my bed if

I'd let her again, but she likes to dig and has tangled with the skunks a few times."

Cain laughed. "I guess that would make sleeping hard."

"It does."

Cain stopped at the edge of the garden. "I noticed the scar on your eyebrow. Did a dog get you? Or was it an accident out here in the garden?"

Andrew rubbed his eyebrow. He hadn't thought about his scar in forever. "I got this from a car accident. I was on my bike and a friend accidentally ran me over. I hit the windshield, it broke and cut up my face. I'm okay."

"Good." Cain ran his fingers through the leaves of the tomato plants. "This is crazy. You grew all this?"

"I did," Andrew said. Pride swelled in his chest. "Whatever I sell, I grew. My stepsister helps, but this is my thing. That and the cattle."

"Stepsister?" Cain stared at him. "You're not alone out here?"

"She lives in town." Andrew stuffed his hands in his pockets. "My father and mother were hippies and didn't believe in marriage. They had lovers and apparently no one cared either way." He shrugged. "My folks are still together, despite my father having a tryst with Maddie's mother. Right now, my parents are trekking across California's coast, cleaning up the trash."

"I had to do that when I was on probation and had to do community service." Cain plucked a tomato from the plant. "I live in California."

"You do? I thought you lived across town."

“I was born and raised in California.”

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“Nice.” He gestured to the tomato. “Bite into that. It’s juicy, so watch you don’t get it all over your shirt.” He winked. “This is where the magic happens. I grow the food, harvest it then sell it.”

Cain’s forehead crinkled. “Seems so easy.” He bit into the tomato and juice spirted out. He curled forward as the mess landed on the grass. A laugh bubbled in his throat. “You did warn me.”

“I tried.” Andrew checked under the leaves of the pumpkin plants. Some of the pumpkins would be ready for early September sales. “Farming isn’t easy. You have to love what you do and accept defeat a lot. Sometimes the weather doesn’t cooperate, the heat can be unbearable, the equipment breaks and critters get into the crops. That’s why I’m thankful Maddie helps. We harvest, and she’ll drive the tractor while I bale the straw and hay. It’s hard, but it works.”

“You’re rather self-sufficient.” The wistfulness in Cain’s voice and eyes caught Andrew’s attention.

“Yeah, I suppose. The cows give milk, and I grow the food. I go to town for the dog and cat food, plus other stuff.” He shrugged. “It’s not an easy life, but I love it.”

“Can we sit somewhere? I want to watch the sunset with you.” Cain finished the tomato. “You were right. That was delicious.”

“Why don’t we head to the porch? The swing is good for watching sunsets.” He fell into step beside Cain. The scent of Cain’s cologne made his heart skip a beat. He directed him to the porch. “Here. Sit.”

Cain settled on the swing. “It’s like this is all out of a book.”

“I’ll get some lemonade.” He glanced over his shoulder and ambled into the house to retrieve the drinks. When he walked back to the porch, Cain was still petting Gabby.

“Your drink.” He offered one of the glasses to Cain.

“Thanks.” Cain downed the lemonade in one draw. “Fuck.”

“Are you okay?” He sat beside Cain and rubbed his back. “Hey. I don’t know what’s wrong, but we’ll figure it out.” Cain mystified him. One minute he was happy and jolly, then the next he acted so tense.

Cain stared at Andrew and the last vestiges of sunlight tinged his face with purple hues. Worry filled his eyes as he gripped the glass. “I lied to you.”

Andrew’s heart sank. A lie? He could only imagine what about.

Fuck.

Chapter Seven

Cain couldn’t lie any longer. He had to tell Andrew everything—well, most of it. Andrew deserved the whole story, no matter how much Cain worried he’d push him away. “Andrew?”

“You said you lied,” Andrew said. “I’m guessing I bought your groceries, and you didn’t need me to.”

“No.” God. This was going to be too hard. He’d never survive. His hands shook. “Do you know who Cain Aables is?”

“No.” Andrew laced his fingers together on his lap. “Never heard of him.”

“He’s me.” He should get his phone out and prove himself. He measured his breaths. So many people knew the celebrity side of him, but no one really knew the man. “I did need your help at the store.”

“Okay.” Andrew tipped his head. “Then what?”

Shit. He could do this. “I’m in the movies.” Among other things.

“Right.”

“I am.” He put the glass down and pulled up his website. “Look.” He pointed to the information on his site. “This is me.” He shoved the phone into Andrew’s hands. “This is really me. Promise.”

“You look like that guy, yeah.” Andrew shrugged. “So?”

“Until two weeks ago, I lived in California with my parents and an army of servants. I was the one who brought home the bacon, so to speak, by my acting,” Cain said. “Every time I got paid, the money was funneled through my parents and my handlers.”

“You ran away?” Andrew narrowed his eyes. “You’re thirty.”

“I know, and it took way too long for me to decide to do it,” Cain said. “It’s also hard to believe, so you’re within your rights to think I’ve lost my mind.”

“I’m beginning to wonder.”

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He had to spill his guts. Oddly enough, the more he talked, the freer he felt. “I admire you. You can do it all. I’ve never written a check, used a bank card properly, lived on my own or paid a bill. I have no workable skills outside of acting. When you saw me at the store, I really was in a jam. I’d used my ID, not a bank card, to buy food because I grabbed the wrong one, then got so flustered I couldn’t think straight. I can’t cook and never learned how to shop for myself. I’m pretty sure I bought every kind of cookie in that store.”

“Who shopped for you?” Andrew asked.

“Servants.”

“Right.”

“Remember the commercials for Funny Ones, the cereal that’ll make you laugh?”

“A joke in every box,” Andrew said and nodded. “I do. It’s nasty cereal and the jokes were terrible.”

“Try eating fourteen bowls of it.” Cain rubbed his stomach. “I hated every time we shot one of those commercials.”

“You were Benny?” Andrew asked.

“The one and only.” He’d been the original Benny and had only been replaced when he hit a growth spurt.

“You’re putting me on.”

“I wish I was.” He’d never told anyone about his past—not about eating all that cereal or hating the taste. People knew he’d starred in the commercials. Hell, every time they wanted to do a piece on his career, the media started with those awful commercials. “I started baby modeling when I was six months old and I’ve been in the business ever since. I did cereal commercials, car commercials, one for light bulbs, a television show that lasted ten episodes, then another that lasted three years. I’ve been in tween movies before being a tween was a thing. I did teen movies, graduated to major motion pictures with bit parts, then television films and rom-coms. My parents and managers kept me working because I paid the bills. I kept them all in the lap of luxury without realizing it. They have the reins on my money and I wasn’t kidding. I’ve never used a bank card or signed a check.”

Andrew stared at him and said nothing. Cain couldn’t read his expression and his heart sank.

“I know,” Cain said. “It’s sorry and a lot to take in.” He chuckled. “Anyway, I’ll get that money to you.” He wasn’t sure how, but he’d figure something out. “I’m sorry I put you out. Thanks for the lemonade and tour of the garden.” He left the porch. If he did anything well, it was retreat. He blinked back tears. He’d never told anyone about his past—no one outside of an official interview. Women didn’t give a shit about his personal life. They’d been paired up with him on the studio and his manager’s orders. All they wanted was fame. He’d never dated a guy and had few friends. He’d tried to keep a lid on his personal life, but Andrew made talking so damn easy.

He headed out to the car, and with each step, the heaviness in his soul increased. He didn’t let many people in and wanted Andrew to be different, but he couldn’t make the farmer accept him.

“Cain.” Andrew strolled up to the car. “How’d you learn to drive or get a license?”

“A movie.” Cain turned around and leaned against the fender. When he looked up, Andrew had caged him between the vehicle and his body. He slid his hands over Andrew’s chest—hard in just the right places and the perfect amount of muscle. He smelled of straw and perspiration. His hazel eyes sparkled, and Cain noticed the sprinkling of freckles on Andrew’s cheeks.

“A movie?” Andrew asked.

Cain cleared his throat. “I did a film where I spent a lot of time in a car. To keep things legal and for the right shots, I got my license. My parents didn’t have to sign anything, so they didn’t know about what I’d done until the film was over.”

The muscle in Andrew’s jaw twitched. “How old are you?”

“Thirty, like I said.” He hated sounding sheepish. He’d waited so long in his life to do so many things. Normally, he’d say he was twenty-five, but his acting resume claimed he could play anything from twenty-two to almost forty. “You?”

“Thirty-four,” Andrew didn’t move. “You’ve really been sheltered all this time?”

“When you’re the one who keeps your parents in money and you don’t know any better, then yeah.” Cain bowed his head. “It’s silly.”

“Not really.” Andrew tipped Cain’s chin, forcing him to look into Andrew’s eyes. “We all have different experiences. Yours are not the same as mine.”

“No.” Does Andrew really understand?

Andrew paled, then backed up. “I’m sorry.”

“For what?” He loved being that close to Andrew. For a few moments, his life felt

normal.

“I don’t even know if you’re gay and I’m grinding on you.” Andrew rubbed the bridge of his nose. “I’m sorry. Do you even know if you’re gay?”

“Are you? Gay?” He hoped so. Andrew rubbing on him would make so much more sense, and he thought he remembered Andrew saying he was homosexual. He wanted Andrew to cage him in again and kiss him.

“I’m gay.” Andrew nodded back toward the pride flag on the pole in front of the house. “You haven’t been out, have you? Give yourself time to find out what you want. Liam is taken, though.”

“What?” He frowned. “Liam? I knew that, and I’m not interested in him. He’s just a costar in an upcoming film.”

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“You were so excited to see him.”

“I knew him from California, sort of. But we’re slated to do an LGBTQ movie together.” Cain balled his hands to keep from reaching for Andrew.

“Oh.”

Fuck it. “I’m gay. I’ve hidden it all this time because I was told it wasn’t bankable, but I don’t care. I have to be true to myself. I’m gay.” He wanted to touch Andrew and feel his body against him again. He smoothed the wrinkles in Andrew’s shirt. “I’ll get that money. I promise.”

“It’s not a big deal.”

He hated owing people anything. Besides, he wanted a reason to see Andrew again. He’d have to talk to his manager and risk his family coming to visit, but Andrew was worth the trouble.

“I’m not worried about the money. I trust you.” Andrew smiled. “I should get the rest of the chores done. You’re welcome to stay, but it’s boring and you’re not wearing work clothes. Plus, it’s getting dark.”

“Call me?” Hope blossomed in his chest. Andrew wanted him around. He’d have to figure out what work clothes he’d need, but he’d do it.

“I will.” Andrew leaned in close. “I will.” He brushed his mouth over Cain’s, then inched back.

The kiss, if that was what it was, happened so fast that Cain thought it a figment of his imagination. He wanted Andrew to kiss him properly. Instead, Andrew trailed his fingers down Cain's arm.

"Next time, wear something you don't mind getting dirty and you can help me," Andrew murmured.

"Yeah?" His excitement grew. "I will."

Andrew swept his gaze over Cain. Cows mooed in the distance, and the dog barked. Andrew adjusted his ballcap and grinned. "See you. I need to get those chores done."

"Yeah." Cain slid behind the wheel of his car. He'd rather stay, but he couldn't help and didn't want to sit alone on the porch. He had no idea how to do the chores Andrew mentioned, but he wanted to learn. He'd rather be here than at the apartment by himself.

Still, he needed a momentary breather. He waved and left the farm. As he drove, his thoughts filled with Andrew. He'd made headway. The independence of finding his own partner and admitting his attraction to Andrew pleased him.

He'd made his first steps in his life to being his own man.

Perfect.

Andrew watched Cain drive away and a piece of his heart went with him. He still couldn't quite parse out Cain's story, but whatever. He should see if that website he'd been shown was legitimate. Cain looked like the guy from the photos, but he could just be a doppelganger.

He headed into the barn to finish his chores and close up for the night. He needed to

think about something other than Cain.

Maddie parked in front of the barn, in the space Cain had vacated. She left the vehicle. “You will never believe what I heard.”

Andrew wiped his brow, then swatted at an errant fly. “Shouldn’t you be climbing Nic right now, not here?”

“We’re taking things slow.” She strode up to him. “Seriously, you’ll never believe it.”

He stepped onto the porch and poured water from the hose into the glass Cain had abandoned. “I’ll bite. What’d your boyfriend say?”

“He’s not my boyfriend.”

“Yet.” He finished the water. “You’ve had a crush on him since we were in school. You’re in love with him and it’s pretty damn obvious.”

“So?”

“So stay out with him. Why take things slow?” He wound up the hose. “I got the cat food. Chores are done.”

“I heard about the cat food.” She leaned against the railing along the porch and crossed her ankles. “I heard you played the knight in shining armor. You bought someone groceries.”

“I did. He misplaced his card. Big deal.” Andrew picked up the broom and swept dirt from the porch. “He needed help and I could lend it, so I did.”

“Thehein question is a celebrity.”

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“Right.” He finished sweeping and replaced the broom. “The cows are fed, cats and Gabby have been fed, too. Everyone has fresh water and bedding, and I even checked in on the kittens. Everyone is good. When I looked over the garden, I noticed we’ll have a bumper crop of beans for Saturday.”

“You’re avoiding.”

“Avoiding what?” He walked away from her and escaped into the house. God, Maddie wouldn’t let up.

She joined him in the kitchen. “The gossip. You bought groceries for Cain Ables. The Cain Ables. He’s a freaking movie star.” She closed the main door. “Andy, you helped a celebrity.”

“I heard you.” How many times does she have to say ‘celebrity’?

“You don’t understand, do you?”

“I do. He showed up without his card, and I paid for his food. Big deal. I need to get cleaned up,” Andrew said. “I’m tired and I want to heat something up for a very late dinner.” So maybe Cain hadn’t been lying about his status. Still, the story seemed far-fetched. He left the kitchen. “I’m going upstairs. Gabby?” When he said her name, the dog trotted over to him. “Okay?”

“Andrew.” Maddie grasped Andrew’s arm. “I heard he’s here because he’s researching a role. He’s doing a film with Liam Blackwell. A gay film.”

“Okay?” He didn’t want to waste any more time, but now he had more confirmation for why Cain and Liam were together.

“He’s not gay.”

Andrew sighed. “It happens.”

“You’ve been seen with him.”

“Right. I was at the store when he visited.”

“Andrew.” She dug her nails into his arm. “You’re going to get hurt. He’s not gay and he’s using you. He’s learning about Cedarwood and farms. He’s not into you, but he’ll play you like he is so he can research the role. Don’t get swept up in the glamour of him.”

“Right. Point taken.” Nice. Now he couldn’t even have friends. He walked up the stairs, leaving his sister in the dining room.

“You’re going to get your heart broken. I can see in your eyes that you like him,” Maddie said. “Don’t fall for this.”

He stopped halfway up the stairs and sat. “Who says I’m falling for him?” He should talk to Cain and have this out. He wasn’t in the mood to argue right now. His head ached, he needed a shower and he’d grown tired of people thinking he was foolish.

“Andy.” She started up the stairs until she looked him in the eye. “You got hurt bad when Teddy left. I get it. He was an asshole and never deserved you. He and Ross belong in hell together.” She folded her arms. “But you’re a good guy with a big heart. You let people in. Don’t let this one make a fool of you. Cain isn’t looking to date you.”

“I never said he was.” He flattened his palms on his thighs. “I’m being nice to him, yes, because we’re friends. If he’s not gay, then he’s not.” Andrew knew better, but he wasn’t going to disclose Cain’s secret to Maddie. “I’m not forcing anyone or anything.”

“You’ll become the focus of the tabloids,” she said. “You’ll smear his celebrity.”

“Because I’m gay?”

“Because people will get the wrong impression. He’s been seen with women and was engaged to a sweet actress for a year.” She frowned. “He’s not that into you.”

He stared at her. He’d thought she was different. So much for thinking. “Me being friends with someone means I’m fucking them, right? It’s not true. Let everyone assume. They’re wrong. If they and you can’t handle the truth, then it’s on all of you.” He made his way up the stairs to the second floor of the farmhouse. When he reached the bedroom, he waited for Gabby to enter the room, then closed the door.

His head ached harder than before. Despite his stomach rumbling, he hurried through a shower, then collapsed naked onto his bed. No matter what he tried to think about, his thoughts returned to Cain. He didn’t understand how someone could be so sheltered. So used. He wanted to see Cain again. Maybe he’d give him some lessons in being a person. It couldn’t hurt.

The memory of the almost-kiss played on a loop in his brain. He could still smell the tang of Cain’s cologne and feel the softness of his skin. He’d been so used to men with rough working hands. Cain wasn’t rough. His blue eyes sparkled, and he seemed almost too pretty to be real. Thinking back on their time together, he could see how Cain would be a movie star. Cain had the right look—perfect teeth, just enough body in his hair, no visible tattoos and that mole on his cheek.

Andrew couldn't forget the strength in Cain's body. He'd bet there wasn't much fat on his frame—if any at all. If he'd been sheltered in the way he'd claimed, then Cain probably had someone monitoring his calories, making sure he worked out and harping at him if he put on too much weight.

Christ. Restrictions could be good, but too many wore people down. No wonder Cain had run away. He needed to break out and find his own path.

What if Maddie was right, and Cain was using him for research for the movie? What if he hadn't run away and he'd made the story up? Andrew retrieved his phone from his pants and tapped the internet icon. If Cain had indeed disappeared, then the media would know.

He typed Cain's name into the search engine. Instead of Cain's website coming up first, Andrew was bombarded with links about Cain not being in Hollywood.

Cain Ables escapes the bright lights of fame.

Cain Ables: Missing in Action

Cain Ables—the Boy Next Door Disappears

Well, shit. Andrew selected one of the links. The story matched a lot of what Cain had said. Actor, happy, thirty and working steady in the business. Andrew read on.

As of August eighth, Cain claimed to be at a hotel with Aidyn Malachi, but the actor hasn't been seen in the last fourteen days. His parents and manager claim he's never left without giving them a detailed itinerary. Walking away from his life and career isn't his style, but all is well. According to sources, Cain has checked into a facility for stress and exhaustion. Fans wish him well and hope for his speedy return to his film work.

Andrew snorted. Cain hadn't said a thing about exhaustion, but when Andrew read Cain's listing on the movie website, he saw why Cain might be tired. The man had so many titles to his name. Anyone would be tired after that much work.

Andrew closed the browser window and left his phone on his nightstand. Cain's life was more complicated than he'd ever expected, but who had a simple one? He resumed staring at the ceiling. His cock rose to the occasion, so he locked the bedroom door. Might as well rub one off and get a decent night's sleep.

Andrew slipped one hand around his cock and his other hand around his balls. He closed his eyes. The sheer pleasure of stroking himself lulled him. He parted his lips and dragged a deep breath into his lungs. His synapses misfired. He got lost in the act of jerking himself off. Blood rushed into his shaft. He smeared precum all over the

head of his erection. Oh, God. He needed someone there with him. Masturbation was fun, but sex was better.

His mind drifted to Cain. Would he be good in bed? Hesitant? Andrew stroked faster but abandoned his balls in favor of pinching his nipple. The new sensation added to his pleasure, and he groaned.

He imagined Cain there, encouraging him. He gritted his teeth. No, Cain would be on top, riding him. He increased speed, needing the pressure of his own hand on his shaft. Fuck. He panted and ground his hips. Would Cain talk dirty? Or be loud? A shiver ran the length of Andrew's spine. He wanted to know.

He arched his back and planted his feet on the mattress. Damn it. He wasn't going to last much longer. The orgasm built low in his belly and spread through his limbs. He rocked faster into his hand. His skin tingled and the springs of the bed squeaked. Fuck. His muscles tightened. No holding back.

"Fuck," he muttered. A thick ribbon of cum shot onto his belly. He stopped pinching his nipple and slumped on the bed while he added a couple of extra strokes.

The weight on his shoulders lightened for a little bit. He grabbed a shirt from the floor and cleaned himself up, then flopped onto his belly.

He might not have a future with Cain, but he had his fantasies and he could live with that. It didn't mean he'd ignore the bone-deep desire to pursue him.

Cain Ables fit his wildest fantasies, and he wanted Cain to be his reality, too.

Chapter Eight

Thursday morning, Cain stared at the measly wardrobe he'd brought along with him

to Cedarwood. He hadn't planned on getting away with his transgression for this long and had assumed someone would drag him back to California. He fiddled with the button-down shirt and designer jeans. Those wouldn't work for farming. He owned nothing that was suitable.

His family hadn't shown up yet, which pleased him, but he also didn't have ready cash to buy something new. He'd told his agent where he'd gone, but the agent hadn't ensured money found its way to him.

Fuck. If he called Andrew, he'd blow the surprise. He wanted to arrive at the farm, declare his desire to work and show Andrew he could be a real man, not just a caricature.

He picked up his phone. The only other person he knew in Cedarwood was Liam. He hadn't even met Stone, Liam's husband, yet. As the call buzzed, he drummed his fingers on his thigh. "Come on, Liam. Answer, please?" he murmured.

The call connected. "Yes?"

"Hi, Liam, it's Cain. I need help." Do I sound desperate?

"We don't have our first run-through until Monday. What do you need?" Liam asked.

"You're in Vegas, aren't you?" Shit. "I'm stuck."

"In mud?"

"No, I'm heading out to Andrew's farm, but I don't know what to wear." He bounced his foot. The gesture always signaled his frayed nerves.

Liam laughed. "You're what?"

“You heard me.” He tried to keep the annoyance from his voice, but he hated when people laughed at him. Maybe he’d heard it too many times from his mother in regards to his acting ability. She sure liked the money he made in the films, but she could be savage about his performance.

“I did, but I didn’t believe it,” Liam said. “You’re going to break his heart.”

“I like him. Is that a crime?”

“You don’t know what you like.”

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To a degree, he was right. Mostly, Liam wasn't. Cain hated to be discounted—just like his parents often did to him. Indignation clouded his reply. “Really? I thought you of all people would understand. I like him and I want to get to know his life,” Cain said. “Why is that bad?”

“It's not bad,” Liam said. “If it's research and you're telling him that from the beginning, then it's fine.”

“Research?” Damn it. “Who said it was that?”

“You're a prima donna actor who doesn't know what he wants out of life. You're still figuring yourself out. He knows who he is and won't like being lied to because you're not sure if you're gay. You don't have much life experience that hasn't been orchestrated. It's not bad, but it makes you being accepted as honest hard.”

“You're not helping.” Yes, Liam had a point. Cain's life experiences had all been gleaned on movie sets and faux dates, but that didn't mean he didn't know his soul. He wasn't attracted to women. Andrew ticked the boxes for what he wanted—kind, caring, handsome and stable. Andrew wasn't interested in his celebrity, and that appealed to Cain.

“Fine. You'll need a T-shirt, jeans that aren't designer and boots,” Liam said. “Do you have those?”

“Boots?” Fuck me. “What about running shoes?” He didn't have nondescript jeans, but he had an undershirt.

“Running shoes would be okay. Andrew might have a pair of rubber boots you can wear over them,” Liam said. “You’re going to get dirty, sweaty and uncomfortable.”

“I know.” He’d seen the way Andrew glistened at the end of his working day. Cain didn’t mind being sweaty and he would learn to adjust.

“Just be good to him. He’s a decent guy, and you tend to use people,” Liam said. “You...be yourself, but don’t be a dick.”

“I know.” He picked the undershirt out of his bag and paired it with the jeans. Kind of a James Dean look. Not bad.

“I saw you with Jordan Murphy. That poor girl loved you,” Liam said, breaking Cain’s concentration.

“She knew the score. The studio set it up,” Cain said. He unbuttoned his shirt. “She wasn’t upset when we split. She wanted to be with her actual boyfriend, and I hear they got married.”

Liam sighed. “The studio played games with your love life, too?”

“All the way. One whiff of me being gay and I’d get my ass handed to me,” Cain said. He set the phone to speaker and switched shirts. He didn’t bother to fix his hair and instead picked the device up and returned it to the normal setting. “I couldn’t step out of line or the studio and my managers—read mother and father—would fine me.”

“I’m sorry.”

He had no idea. “Everyone thought I was a huge player. I’m gay,” he shouted. Shit. He shouldn’t have been so loud. “Sorry, but they took my money. The cash I made went for whatever they wanted, and if they thought I wasn’t behaving, they took more. Do

you know how degrading that is? How degrading it becomes when you realize what you're being forced to do?"

"I do," Liam said. "If you're allowing yourself to be honest and you're focused on being a better man, then I applaud you. It's hard to admit the truth and harder to go for what you want. If that's Andrew, then hey, I'm behind you. If you're not sure and you're debating going back to the madness in California, then go before you hurt him."

Cain sank onto the bed. "It's scary." Being on his own petrified him, but he couldn't stop now.

"I know," Liam said. "What's scarier is when the rug gets pulled out from under you and you have to pick up the pieces. You're kind of there right now, but you're the one who imploded your life."

"Yeah." Every day he felt a little stronger, but he couldn't help looking over his shoulder for the handlers he expected to nab him.

"Just wear your jeans and a tee to visit Andrew," Liam said. "But be honest."

"I can do that." He nodded. "I will."

"Tell him everything, even if you're afraid. He deserves it."

"He does." And when he got Andrew alone, he'd spill the rest of his guts.

"Warn him the media circus will come. You can't stop it or hide from it forever," Liam said. "Understand? He needs to know what's in his future if he's going to be with you."

“I do.” It was just a matter of time before someone found him. He needed to get in some good moments with Andrew and prove he was worthy. He could do it. “We’ll meet Monday about the movie. I’m looking forward to our read-through.”

“Yes. Keep me posted on Andrew, too. I hope it works out,” Liam said.

“Me, too. Thanks.” He hung up and his heart lightened. He finished changing and pocketed his keys. He stuffed his phone into his back pocket and switched off the lights. Soon, he’d be with the man who made him happy. He locked up and headed out to his car. He’d changed since he’d come to Cedarwood. His life had more focus.

“Cain Ables?” A woman waited at his car. She held a magazine and a marker. “You’re him. You’re really Cain Ables. Oh my God. It’s you.” She offered up the magazine and the marker. “I—oh my God.”

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He'd long tired of the intruding fans, but he knew his place. If he showed anger or frustration, it'd end up in the tabloids. For all he knew, this woman was a plant to get him to react. He signed the magazine, writing his name along his collar in the photo. "You're a fan?" He'd learned to ask this question. True fans gushed about him, but the planted people bristled.

"Since age twelve." She batted her lashes. "And you're here in the middle of Nowhere, Ohio. Are you hiding?"

"No." He offered the magazine back to her. She hadn't asked for her name with the autograph, and his antennae twitched. "I'm researching a role."

"You are?" Her eyes lit up. "Well, if you need an acting coach or just want someone to show you around town, I'm your girl. My name is Tina, and I'm a lifelong resident of Cedarwood. We're a good place to live, but we're quirky."

"How old are you?" She seemed rather young.

"Seventeen." She clutched the magazine. "I'll be eighteen in six months."

"Good to know." He smiled. "I need to get moving, but it was wonderful to meet you, Tina. I'm enjoying my time in Cedarwood and I hope to see you again."

"You're really getting into character," she said. "Because no one comes to Cedarwood otherwise. It's boring."

"I'm working on making my character authentic, so I need to prepare in the right

atmosphere.” He nodded to his car. “Have a good afternoon.”

“No picture?” She held up her phone. “Please?”

“Sure.” He stepped in next to her. She hadn’t said anything about a picture before. He smiled as she lined up the image. In his years of celebrity, he’d learned not to touch people during photos. Most didn’t care, but some fans claimed having an arm around them meant the celebrity was interested. Nope. He, like many of his friends in the business, was just being nice.

She snapped the photo. “Thanks.”

He nodded again. “You’re welcome.”

“Remember what I said.” She winked, then walked away.

He sighed. He’d have to find another place to live. She’d found him, which meant he wasn’t incognito enough any longer. It wasn’t like he’d made a point of telling anyone he was in town, but once one person knew of his existence there...everyone would show up.

He checked the area around his car, then ducked behind the wheel. The coast seemed clear, but he knew better. He’d been found out. There weren’t guards there to keep him safe, no walls to block anyone out and no way to escape.

God damn it.

Chapter Nine

Fifteen minutes later, Cain pulled into the spot behind Andrew’s truck. Wild excitement filled his chest. He’d escaped the apartment for the safety of the farm.

He'd grown attached to Andrew. Now he'd be able to talk to him in private.

Andrew drove up on the tractor. He'd ditched his shirt and his skin seemed to glow. Perspiration glistened on his bare shoulders. His ballcap sat low over his forehead and his jeans strained against his hips.

Cain shifted in his seat. Andrew was a walking wet dream. He rubbed the bulge in his jeans. He needed to get laid—by Andrew. He wanted to lick him all over like a popsicle.

Andrew stopped the tractor and parked. He left the seat of the massive vehicle and ambled up to Cain's car. "Hi."

Cain scrambled out of the vehicle. "Hi." He rammed the door into his hip but managed to get it closed. "I wanted to help and see how a farm runs."

"You do?" Andrew's lips twitched in a slight smile.

"Yeah." He launched himself at Andrew. The move was impulsive, but he needed to kiss him. He loved the way Andrew tasted—perspiration and salt, but sunshine, as well. He smoothed his hands over Andrew's torso. So taut and lean. Andrew's nipples beaded, too. Damn.

Andrew broke the kiss first. "Whoa."

Cain's lips tingled. Hell, his entire body vibrated. "Good whoa? Or stop?"

"Good." Andrew stayed close to Cain. "You kissed me."

"I did." He caressed the lines of Andrew's abs. "I'd like to kiss you again." He stared into Andrew's eyes. Hunger shot through his veins. "May I?"

“Kiss me?”

“Yes.”

“Yeah.” Andrew closed his hands over Cain’s, stopping him. “I need to get work done first, but I also want to continue this.”

“Then I can kiss you again?” The tension between them increased Cain’s desire. He’d have to wait for what he wanted, and he sucked at waiting. He rubbed his nose along Andrew’s. “I’m here to help and learn. Push me.”

“You’re too good to be true.”

Cain wouldn’t say that. The media would find him soon. The fans already knew he’d come to town. His parents would intrude on him before long, and his Nirvana would come crashing down. Why not enjoy his time with Andrew and be so good Andrew didn’t want to let him go?

Andrew couldn’t believe his luck. Other guys in his life weren’t interested in the farm. They wanted him to sell the land and move to the city. Cain seemed eager to immerse himself in life on the farm. Cain hadn’t screamed about moving or asked how much the ground was worth per acre.

“What’s first?” Cain continued to trace the cording of Andrew’s chest. “I’m eager to learn.”

“I finished raking the straw right before you got here. I’ll use the automated straw baler on the small field and the round one on the bigger field. My stepsister should be here shortly to run the round baler,” Andrew said. “If you want to help, I can use the

extra set of hands stacking the bales. If we work together, we'll get done faster."

"Will you help stack when you're done?" Cain asked. "Or at least show me what to do to get started?"

"I will. Gabby will keep you company, too. She loves climbing on the bales and arguing with the girls—the cattle. I'll show you how to stack." If he could convince Cain to stay around and if Cain enjoyed the work, they'd have a chance at being more than friends.

"Then I'll learn." Cain grasped Andrew's hand. "I know it seems crazy."

"What? Everything with you is a new adventure." He headed into the barn. The ventilation wasn't great, and the temperature soared about ten degrees. He wiped his brow with his free hand. "What's wrong now?"

"I've been found."

"Huh?" Andrew picked up two baling implements. "Tell me what happened."

"I'm kind of famous, like the kind of famous where people seek me out." Cain took one of the hooks from Andrew. "The media will find me next."

"So, I need to keep an eye out for strange people showing up and poking movie cameras into my business?" He hooked the implement into one of the unstacked bales. "Be sure you grab from the end like this. You're going against the placement of the straw. Try to bury the end or you'll just succeed in yanking straw free. You'll drag it over here and stack about six bales high. If you want, make stairs to get up higher, but I don't go above ten bales. See the pattern?"

"I do." Cain practiced hooking the bales. "Like this?"

“Uh-huh. One word of caution, though. Don’t swing it around or it can get out of control and you’ll hurt yourself.” He pointed to a spot on his belly above his navel. “I got myself when I was fourteen. It hurt, but I didn’t do any damage.”

“Wow.” Cain admired the tool. “Lethal, okay.”

“Yeah,” Andrew said. “Will anyone try to find you?”

“My parents will.” Cain held on to the hook with both hands. “It’s complicated.”

Andrew sank onto the closest bale. “Why? You’re old enough to be on your own.”

“I am, but without my bringing in money, they’re lost. I’ve sustained them for so long, I don’t know if they could pay their bills without me.” Cain remained standing. “I know it’s a lot to put on someone, hearing my story. The truth is, I ran away from my life to find me. I expected my family or my handlers to come looking for me and they haven’t—yet.” Cain sat beside him. “It took longer than I thought for anyone to find me. I lied to my parents, saying I was with a woman for the weekend. Instead, I hightailed it from Beverly Hills and came here. It’s been the best decision ever, realizing who I really am.”

“It is? Cedarwood can be boring.”

“I found you.” He palmed Andrew’s thigh. “I found myself, but I found you and that’s priceless.”

Andrew stared into Cain’s eyes. He could see himself having a life with this man and finally earning the happy ending he wanted. But Cain was a star. The odds weren’t in their favor for the relationship to work. That, and they hadn’t slept together yet. Cain could be awful in the bedroom. He doubted it, but he’d been fooled before.

Cain brushed his mouth over Andrew's and scooted closer. The heat in the barn was no match for the fever in Andrew's veins. He kissed Cain with gusto and hunger. He needed to finish the chores, but Cain was too decadent. He curled his fingers around the back of Cain's neck and deepened the kiss.

Cain left the bale and straddled Andrew's thighs. He didn't break the kiss and managed to palm one of Andrew's pecs. He sucked hard on Andrew's tongue, frazzling him.

Andrew moaned into the connection. He'd never stolen kisses before. The thought of making out in the barn seemed so cliché, but in practice, he loved the idea. He rubbed Cain's back. Such a strong body. Andrew bet Cain looked just as hot naked as he had in his fantasies.

Cain massaged Andrew's shoulders, then moved his palms to Andrew's chest again. He tweaked one of Andrew's nipples, eliciting a cry from him.

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Andrew broke the kiss. “Fuck.” Blood rushed through his body and centered in his dick. “You’ll make me explode.”

“Good. Then we’ll go up together.” Cain ground on Andrew’s lap. “This is so hot.”

My thoughts exactly. He squeezed Cain’s ass. There was just enough butt there to spank and grab during sex. Fuck. If he and Cain didn’t stop, Andrew would lose control.

“Whoa. This is better than I thought,” Maddie said. “Andy.”

Andrew froze. Shit. He hadn’t thought Maddie would show up just yet. He kept Cain close to hide the bulge in his jeans. “Hi, Maddie.”

Cain’s eyes widened, and he chuckled. “Next time, we do this in your bed. I’m having too much fun to be interrupted.”

“Yes.” He needed a second to think or he’d move too fast and screw things up. He also needed a moment to adjust himself.

Maddie rested her hands on her hips. “Don’t stop on my account.”

“Uh, yeah, we will.” Andrew patted Cain’s thigh, urging him off his lap. “You’re driving the tractor and round baler, Maddie. I’m going to finish the smaller field. Can you help Cain out here for a little bit, first?”

“Is that what I interrupted? Stacking?” She laughed. “Andy.”

“Maybe it was,” Cain said. “I volunteered to put the bales up, and he showed me how.”

“I’ll help you,” Maddie said. “But I can’t drive the Ford. It’s the one attached to the round baler, isn’t it?”

“Shit. It is.” Andrew removed his ballcap, raked his fingers through his hair, then replaced the cap. “The small field won’t take long. Will you help in here?”

“I will,” she said.

“I’ll help her,” Cain said. “Count on me.”

Andrew nodded once. He had a job to do and was losing daylight. He strode to the front of the barn, but Maddie grabbed his hand.

“I’ll be right back,” she said over her shoulder, then ushered Andrew out of the barn. “It’s hot in there.”

“It is.” He expected an argument from his stepsister. “Get it over with.”

“Get what?” She folded her arms. “The I-told-you-so?”

“Yes.” He sighed. “He showed up, like you said, and wanted to help. I can’t turn him away because we need the assistance.”

“We do.” She averted her gaze. “And he’s probably listening to us argue.”

Andrew groaned. “Whatever. I like him.”

“I can tell.”

“Then what?” He stared at her. “What’s the problem?” As if he didn’t know...

“How well do you know him?”

“Enough.” He’d learned a lot when he’d researched Cain, but the more they talked, the more he got to know the real guy, not just the celebrity. “How’s Nic?”

“This isn’t about Nic.”

He wished it were. “Maddie.”

“Cain Ables is a celebrity. He’s rumored to be in preparation for a movie to be filmed here in Cedarwood and his parents say he’s disappeared. Some accounts say he’s gone to rehab, and others say he’s been hospitalized for exhaustion. Photos of him with you are on the Internet.”

He had no idea how the pictures would’ve gotten there, but he didn’t mind. “I know.”

“About the photos?” she asked.

“Yes.” He hated lying, but he wanted to get moving.

“He’ll break your heart.”

“He might.” His frustration boiled over. Now his stepsister thought she knew what was best for him. “For all I know, he’s using me, and this is his mission to learn all he can about farms. He could be trying to get into my pants because he’s lonely and wants to say he found a short-term boyfriend here in town. It could all be a fucking sham. But it’s also possible he likes me, too, and we’re consenting adults. We’re not doing anything wrong.”

“Andy.”

She doesn’t understand. “Nic could leave you, and yet I’m not here telling you to avoid him. It wouldn’t work, even if I did. You like him. Well, I like Cain.”

“That’s different.”

“I don’t see how, but you don’t trust me. Try it. I’m thirty-four years old and I’m tired of being the guy no one wants. He seems to want me, and I like him. I liked him before he told me about the fame stuff. Okay?”

She shook her head and sighed. “I knew I should’ve said something earlier, but now it’s too late and you’re in over your head. I can’t say anything to make you reconsider, can I?”

“No.” He spotted Cain in the doorway. “It’ll be about an hour before I’m back, but it’ll take most of that time to stack what’s on the wagon. If you work together with Maddie, the time will go by faster. Sorry.”

“I’m up for the challenge.” Cain grinned. “Don’t be too long.”

Maddie said nothing and followed Cain into the barn.

Andrew sighed. He’d bet Cain would give her a piece of his mind. He should. She’d been out of line. But she was correct in one aspect—Cain could break his heart.

Carl and Thad had both broken his heart, too. Then there had been John, his college sweetheart. Guys never seemed to stick around. This time was different. He was going into the relationship with no expectations. Whatever happened, would happen.

Tonight, he wanted lots of things to happen with Cain—all good things. He’d played in the background for too long and deserved to be content for a change.

Cain made him happy.

Chapter Ten

Cain didn’t bother to wait for Maddie to return to the barn. He’d been given instructions and would make Andrew proud. He hooked the bales and stacked them according to Andrew’s orders. After five bales, he stepped back to admire his work. Not too bad.

“I didn’t think you’d be working.” Maddie joined him in front of the wagon. “You don’t even want to be here.”

“Who said that?” He resumed his job.

She groaned, then joined him. “What exactly do you want from Andrew? What are your intentions?”

He continued working. “My intentions are to be the best boyfriend I can and win him over. I want a partner and I see that in your stepbrother.”

“Really?” She placed another bale. “Why haven’t you told anyone where you are?”

“It’s no one else’s business?” What makes her think she should interrogate me?

“What do you think he’s going to do when you leave for California? He’ll wait on you?” She snorted. “He won’t. He can have lots of boyfriends.”

Cain pushed the bale into place then sighed. She was protective of Andrew. Fine. She wanted what was best for him. Great. But she didn’t have to come at him like a mother bear. “I like Andrew. I have since I met him and I believe you care about him. I do, too. But know this. I’ve told him the truth from the start. He knows I’m on a sabbatical from my other life and I’m trying to find my way here. I won’t hide anything from him.” Not if I can help it.

“You’ll mess up.” She resumed stacking the bales. “Did he tell you about Thad or John?”

“No, and why would he? We just started this.” He kept his irritation in check, but not by much. “I know you love him, but you don’t have to tear into my ass. I understand you’re concerned and why. We’ve all been hurt.”

“Hurt?” she snapped. “You’re a fucking celebrity, and he’s not here so you can salve your ego or whatever the hell you’re doing. You’re not even gay, so stay away from him.”

Damn, she kept getting rougher with each snap. “Who said I’m not gay? Huh? You do realize I’ve never said I lean either way.” He’d never gone public with a declaration, but hewasgay.

She narrowed her eyes.

“You don’t understand how it feels to have your entire life orchestrated for you. I do. I never had a chance,” Cain said. He wasn’t going to keep a lid on his frustration for much longer.

“And now?”

“I took the chance.”

“You won’t get away with this.”

“Said like a storybook villain. Please stop,” he said. “Are you going to out me?”

“Maybe.” She notched her chin in the air. “I could.”

“It’ll hurt Andrew.”

“If it saves him from long-term heartache, then it’s worth the hassle.” She hooked the last bale. “Do you know the tabloids say you’re being hospitalized for exhaustion?”

That sounded about right and like something his mother would say to cover for his absence.

“And your parents aren’t worried. You made that crap about them being overprotective all up.”

He hadn't lied about any of his past, but whatever. She wasn't listening to him. His parents were good at playing off their concern as long as it worked to their advantage.

"You'll get found out."

He had news for her. "I already have been and I told Andrew. He's an adult, and if he doesn't want me, I'll go from there." He'd be crushed and would fight tooth and nail to get Andrew back, but he'd worry about that if it ever happened.

"Bullshit."

He sighed again. He needed a new tactic with her. "Why are you upset? What's the root of this? Who destroyed your faith in people?"

"No one." She backed away from him. "Nothing."

"I don't know who screwed you over, but they had no right. You are a sweet woman, pretty and independent. They messed with the wrong person, but you're stronger than they ever believed. Don't let them win by getting bitter."

She sank onto the lowest bale and toyed with the hook. "You figured all that out on your own?"

"It shows." He sat beside her. Maybe he'd worn her down enough to listen to him. "I see the same hurt in Andrew's eyes. You both love with your entire heart. Whoever you love is a lucky man."

"Do you love Andrew?"

"Too soon to tell, but when I look into his eyes, I want to give up the biz and live here. I feel human with him. I'mmewith him, not the celebrity."

She continued to fiddle with the hook, and he wondered if she'd use it on him if he said the wrong thing. She glanced over at him. "He likes you, too."

"I know." But hearing the words from her thrilled him.

"Don't hurt him," she said. "I'd tell you what those guys did, but it's his story to share."

"It is." He rubbed her back. "I care about Andrew more than anyone. I've never considered giving up acting for anyone, but I like Cedarwood and this farm because he's here."

The rumble of the tractor interrupted anything else he had to say. He stood as Andrew backed the wagon into the barn. Sweat glistened on his tan skin. The bones of his back were more visible and dust from the bales stuck to his arms. He parked the tractor then turned the vehicle off. When he jumped from the seat, dust billowed around him.

"I'll be right back." Maddie escaped the barn.

Andrew wiped the sweat from his brow. "What'd I say? I haven't said anything."

"Nothing." Cain held on to the hook. "We chatted."

“And?”

“I touched a nerve, but I think we made a breakthrough.” He didn’t want to look too enthusiastic but he felt that he and Maddie had made progress.

“She can be touchy.” Andrew bowed his head. “I guess my life is just as complicated.”

“Never said it wasn’t.” He grasped Andrew’s hand. “I’m not worried.”

“No?”

“Nope. Complicated makes life interesting,” Cain said. “It also forces us to decide what we want.”

“What do you want?” Andrew asked, his voice husky.

“You.” He kissed Andrew. “Let’s put all of this away so we can enjoy the evening.” Preferably naked.

“I like how you think.”

Things with Andrew were still in flux and his life could collapse at any moment, but he and Andrew were forging something wonderful together, and soon, he’d get Andrew unfiltered.

Forty-five minutes later, Cain followed Andrew into the house. The dog trotted along

with them, making the family complete. Cain's muscles ached in ways he'd never imagined. The most grueling workouts weren't this tough. Now he'd relax with Andrew.

"I'll make dinner." Andrew removed his boots, then washed his hands in the sink just inside the door. He headed into the kitchen and plucked ingredients from the pantry. "There's lettuce in the crisper. Cut up a few tomatoes and tear the spinach."

Cain washed his hands, then hesitated before opening the fridge. His breath lodged in his throat. If he didn't tell Andrew the truth, he'd make a fool of himself. "I don't know how." Embarrassment washed over him. "I never learned."

"How what?" Andrew placed a box of spaghetti on the counter. "What's wrong?"

"I don't know how to cook. Don't know how to cut things up or tear or whatever. I never learned." He inched away from Andrew. Guys liked other guys who could cook. He wasn't one of those men. He also swore his lack of skills in the kitchen equaled failure as a person.

"Never?" Andrew filled a large pot with water. "Then I'll teach you. I've got cutting boards over on the other counter. You've never had to cut something up?"

"No." Someone had always handled preparing food and had never invited him to learn how. "I'm shit with a knife." He'd learned that on the set of the lone horror flick he'd starred in. The director had had to have a body double do the slashing for him.

"Okay." Andrew added salt and oil to the water. "When I make spaghetti, I do what my mom taught me to do—add just a little oil and a pinch of salt to the water, then turn it on. The salt encourages the water to boil faster and the oil is there to keep the pasta from sticking. I'll turn the burner on, but I'll keep an eye on it." He dried his hands on a towel. "I never actually looked up why the oil and salt trick works, and I

should.” He shrugged. “Now, about the cutting—you need knife skills.”

Cain admired Andrew’s ease in the kitchen. It was as if he was born to be there. So patient, too. Cain inspected the pot, then turned his attention to Andrew. “I’ve never had to learn to cook for a role. Drive, play rudimentary piano, paint...not cook. I even failed at learning how to slash things, but I can play Ode to Joy on the piano.”

“I didn’t know you tickled the ivories.” Andrew picked a knife from the magnetic board on the wall.

“More like annoy them into making sound—except Ode to Joy.” Cain focused on Andrew. He marveled at Andrew’s patience. He’d bet Andrew was a cautious lover until he got comfortable with his partner. Then he’d probably be wild.

“I hold the knife like this, low on the handle so I have more control. When I cut, I keep the tip of the blade on the board,” Andrew said. “It’s not about speed. It’s about watching what I’m doing so I don’t get cut.” He picked up a tomato. “And I hold the tomato so the fingers of the hand on the tomato are curled under. That way my knuckles are against the side of the blade. Like this.”

Cain paid close attention. Cutting the tomato didn’t seem too hard. “I can do that.”

“Then why don’t you try soloing?” Andrew offered up the knife. “You’ll be great, but don’t slice off your finger.”

“I’ll try not to.” He loved the rapport he’d built up with Andrew. Every time he looked at Andrew, he realized he wasn’t in the mood to eat. His stomach rumbled, but he’d rather get naked with Andrew. He wanted to kiss, touch and caress him. He focused on the tomato and appreciated Andrew being close by. “Like this?” He did just as he’d been shown, and within minutes, he’d chopped the fruit. “I did it.” And he hadn’t cut off his fingers.

“You did.” Andrew kissed him. “Want to try a cucumber?” He added the pasta to the boiling water. “See how it’s a rolling boil? It’s steady. If you put the spaghetti in too early, it’ll stick together and become mushy.”

“Makes sense.” He rubbed his cheek against Andrew’s shoulder. “Do you teach everyone to cook?”

“Just the hot ones.” He kissed Cain again. “Make sure we stir this, or it’ll all get stuck together and then we’ll have a mess.”

“Oh.” Cain stared at the pasta in the water. “You were taught to cook?”

“That, and my parents were always busy. My mother insisted I know how to feed myself.” Andrew opened a drawer. “I’m going to assume you’ve never used a peeler.”

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“Nope.” He wasn’t sure what the thing looked like.

“This.” Andrew held up the implement. “I’ll take the skin off the cuke, but watch me and stir the pasta.”

“Can do.” He watched Andrew, intrigued by his actions. Within seconds, it seemed like Andrew had the cucumber skinned and in pieces. Seeing him take charge was sexy.

“I’ll get the colander out.” Andrew dug in another drawer. When he bent over, he gave Cain a delicious view of his ass.

Cain stirred the pasta, but he couldn’t decide if he should pay attention to the pot or Andrew’s ass. Suds formed in the pot and bubbled high. “Andrew?” He had the feeling this bubbling wasn’t supposed to happen.

“Shit.” Andrew turned the heat down. “Keep stirring. I forgot this is fresher pasta and there’s a higher starch content in this brand. That’s why it’s frothing.”

“Oh.” He never knew there was starch in spaghetti.

Andrew placed a jar on the counter. “We’ll add sauce when it’s cooked. Here.” He used a spoon to capture a piece of the pasta. “I do the taste test to see if it’s done, but I like mine cooked part of the way through. It’s pasta al dente and I don’t care.” He ate the piece. “See?” He held up the end of the strand. “See how there’s a little uncooked bit in the middle?” He turned off the burner.

“Like it’s not quite done?”

“Yeah. It’ll keep cooking after we drain the water.” Andrew tucked the knife into the smaller basin of the sink. He pulled a bowl from the cupboard. “Mix the greens in this with the tomatoes and cukes. I’ll drain this.”

“Yes, sir.” He did as told, and pride swelled in his mind. “I made a salad.”

“Simple one, but you did.” Andrew smiled. “Looks good.”

“Yeah?” He wanted to photograph his work and add it to his resumé.

“Just put the bowl on the table. The dressing is in the fridge.” Andrew moved the pot to the sink and poured out the pasta. Steam billowed.

Cain placed the bowl on the table. He found the dressing in the door of the fridge. When he glanced over his shoulder, he spotted Andrew mixing the pasta and sauce. The act impressed him. He never would’ve thought to make such a meal for himself. He’d have ordered out or had someone else make it.

“I’ve got parmesan cheese, too. Do you want pepper flakes?” Andrew carried the pot and potholder to the table. “Cain?” He returned to the kitchen and stopped in the doorway. “Are you okay?”

“Yeah.” The moment was bittersweet. “No one who wasn’t a servant has ever cooked for me.” It was a small gesture and touched him. “The women I’ve dated weren’t big on cooking and I’ve never had a boyfriend before.” He held on to the back of the kitchen chair. “I know that sounds dumb.”

“It doesn’t.” Andrew crossed the room and embraced him. “We made this. It wasn’t all me.” Andrew let go and opened a tall cupboard. “All I have to drink is milk and

water. I need to pick up lemons to make lemonade.” He withdrew two cups and two bowls, then retrieved silverware from a drawer. “Ready?”

“I’m starved.” For you. He followed Andrew to the table. His stomach rumbled. Yes, he was hungry for dinner, but also for his boyfriend. Once Andrew had poured the milk, he sat across from Cain. The tenderness and simple domesticity of the moment washed over Cain. This must be what families do every day. He ate in silence. The food appealed to him, but the company was the best. He finished in no time and scooted a few inches from the table. His belly was full, and his soul was renewed. He just needed sex and he’d be complete.

“Good?” Andrew finished. “I should’ve bought some wine or beer. It’s just me most of the time, and I hate drinking alone.”

“It’s perfect.” He left his spot at the table and cleaned up. Wouldn’t his friends laugh at him for cleaning? He hated doing any kind of manual labor, but with Andrew, he’d done lots. He carried the plates to the sink, and Andrew carried in the glasses.

“Thanks.” Andrew tucked the extra pasta into a plastic container. “Lunch tomorrow.” He popped the container into the fridge.

“Smart.” Cain lingered at the sink. “Now what?”

“I should do the dishes.” Andrew grasped Cain’s hand. “Come here.” He led Cain through the house to the second floor. “You’re a dirty guy. Sweaty.”

“I did work.” He ventured into the bathroom after Andrew. “Gonna clean me up?”

“I am.” Andrew’s eyes flashed. He removed his shirt and shoved his pants down to his ankles. In seconds, he stood nude before Cain.

Not a tattoo anywhere in sight. Cain's mouth watered. He noted the few scars sprinkled on Andrew's body. Andrew had done work to keep his body in shape and the scars were reminders of his experiences. So sexy. Anticipation filled Cain's mind. He yanked his shirt off and his nipples beaded. He couldn't wait to lick Andrew all over.

Andrew ducked into the shower stall. "I've been waiting for this all day." He turned the water on and tipped his face into the spray.

"The shower?" Cain teased. He unzipped and shoved his pants, along with his boxer briefs, down his legs. He looked forward to being with Andrew. Blood rushed to his dick. He stroked himself.

"Yes." Andrew grinned. "I've looked forward to the shower, but mostly you."

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Cain bridged the gap between them. He needed to touch Andrew. He kissed him. Not a sweet, tender kiss, but a hungry one. He slid his hands over Andrew's chest, learning the ripples and planes of him. He caressed the trail of hairs leading from his navel to the curls at the base of his cock. When Andrew opened to him and moaned, he sucked on Andrew's tongue. The heady experience overwhelmed him.

Andrew broke the connection first. "Damn."

Water slid down his body. Heat seeped to Cain's core and tingled on his skin. He wrapped his fingers around Andrew's shaft. "Good?"

"Very." Andrew cupped Cain's jaw. He kissed him, then nuzzled his way along Cain's chin to his throat. "I love the way you feel."

"Do you?" Cain managed. He hated the bit of uncertainty creeping into his mind. He'd never had sex with a man before. He'd used toys, but an actual guy? He groaned and stroked Andrew's cock. Thank God he'd found a top in Andrew. Giving up control fit him, and being in charge suited Andrew.

"Uh-huh." Andrew nipped Cain's chin. "Want to feel better?"

"Yeah," he whispered. He didn't notice the heat or the sting of the water. All he saw was Andrew.

Andrew pinched one of Cain's nipples and sucked on his neck.

The combination of sensations short-circuited Cain's mind. He leaned into Andrew

and forgot all about stroking him. He raked his nails down his lover's ribs. His synapses misfired. His breath lodged in his throat, and he planted his shoulders against the wall of the shower. His cock was hard, and his balls felt heavier.

Andrew let go and put space between them.

"What?" Cain whimpered again. "Why'd you stop?"

"I want you to be clean, dirty man." Andrew lathered the washcloth. "Plus, a little waiting won't hurt."

Wouldn't hurt? No, but I might explode. Cain's knees buckled as Andrew smoothed the cloth and suds over his body. He threaded his fingers into his boyfriend's hair. "Andrew."

Andrew caressed the sensitive tissues of Cain's hole, forcing Cain to tug lightly on his hair. Andrew's eyes sparkled. "Better?"

He wanted to answer, but the words were gone. Better wasn't how he would've described the situation. His need damn near overwhelmed him. He could pound nails with his cock. He panted. "Andrew."

His boyfriend propped the washcloth on the holder, then dropped to his knees. He nuzzled Cain's belly and planted his hands on Cain's thighs.

"God, yes." Cain arched back, inviting Andrew to lick him. "Need you."

Andrew said nothing but kissed and licked along Cain's abs to his hip. When Cain jerked, Andrew switched to the other hip and kissed along the crease between his leg and groin.

The teasing spurred Cain on. He rocked his hips and his balls tingled. “Andrew.”

Andrew still didn’t speak. He cupped Cain’s sac, toying with him. He brushed his mouth along Cain’s shaft, but didn’t suck him in.

The quick touches and Andrew not directly taking him between his lips heightened Cain’s need. “Andrew.” It seemed to be the only response he could muster. Did he have to beg? He would. He widened his stance and groaned.

Andrew continued to fondle Cain’s balls, but this time he plunged his mouth down on Cain’s cock.

Cain squeezed his eyes shut, overwhelmed by the moment. It was better than he’d ever imagined. Stars exploded behind his eyes, and he hadn’t even come yet. He palmed Andrew’s head and guided him in and out. He pushed himself to the back of Andrew’s throat. His control held by a tiny thread, and he shuddered.

Andrew sucked hard and with gusto. He buried his nose in Cain’s curls and swallowed.

Cain gasped and opened his eyes. He’d never felt anything so sexy and decadent in his life. He rocked faster. Everything within him seemed to vibrate. He couldn’t breathe.

The velvet touch of Andrew’s tongue, along with the occasional scrape of his teeth and the tickle of his breath, turned Cain’s senses inside out. Water dripped into his eyes. He parted his lips and groaned.

Andrew hummed, then withdrew from Cain and licked his way down to his balls. He stroked in time with his nibbles.

Cain couldn't think straight. The orgasm built low within his belly and spiraled through his body. His limbs tingled. He planted his shoulders on the wall again and pushed faster into Andrew's fingers. "Fuck," he bit out. "Andrew."

Andrew abandoned Cain's balls and resumed sucking on him, in and out.

The climax hit the second Andrew plunged his mouth down on him. His restraint snapped. Cain shivered and rammed his cock into Andrew's mouth. "Fuck me." He jerked forward. His balls constricted and he shot cum down his lover's throat. "God."

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Andrew didn't let up. He bobbed his head and seemed to lap up every drop. Finally, he withdrew and sat back on his heels.

Cain wobbled, wrung out. Masturbating was never this powerful and overwhelming. He slid to the floor of the shower, not sure his legs could hold him long enough to get to the bedroom.

"Like that?" Andrew's eyes flashed again. He stood and wiped his mouth. "Yum." He picked up the cloth and added new soap before he washed himself. Once done, he ducked his head under the spray and washed his hair. "Need help?"

Cain sighed. He wanted to stay right here forever—or until his legs started working again. He looked up at Andrew. "I'm good."

"Give me your hands." When Cain complied, Andrew hauled him to his feet and rinsed him. He turned the water off before he dried Cain first.

Cain clung to Andrew. He managed to convince his legs to cooperate as he went with Andrew to the bedroom. He collapsed on the bed. "My brain isn't working."

"I'll bet." Andrew abandoned him on the mattress. He strode naked around the room.

Showing off? Cain didn't mind. He liked the view. He craved his boyfriend even more. He also liked being pushed and teased.

Andrew returned to the bed. He held a bottle of lube and a condom. "We'll need these."

“Hell, yes.” Cain licked his lips and opened his legs. He fondled his cock, which was still soft, but his senses were heightened.

Andrew settled at the edge of the bed. He folded Cain in half, exposing his ass. “Such a pretty hole.”

A groan bubbled within Cain. He liked being praised and adored, too.

“So pink.” Andrew tapped the bundle of nerves. “And tight.” He lubed his fingers. “Pretty.” He smeared the chilly lube over Cain’s asshole. “Want me?”

Cain grabbed the pillows to prop his head up and watch the show. “I want you more than my next breath. Do it.”

“I have to go slow.” Andrew eased his digit into Cain. He moved slowly past the tight ring of muscle. “Breathe. Bear down on me.” He flattened his free hand on Cain’s belly. “Stroke yourself and relax. It’ll feel good if you relax.”

“I know.” But relaxing was damn near impossible. He craved Andrew too much.

“Good,” Andrew murmured. He nipped along Cain’s inner thigh. “Pleasing me.”

He needed to hear Andrew say those words. The coil wound tight within him. He exhaled and measured his breaths. The snug fit frayed his nerves, but he liked being penetrated. Cain rocked on Andrew’s finger.

“There you go.” Andrew added more lube and pushed faster. “Welcoming me in.”

He groaned. “Want to be one with you.” He wasn’t sure how he’d managed such a coherent sentence. His thoughts blurred. Andrew seemed to have cast a certain magical spell over him. Andrew owned his heart, soul and his virginity.

“Want me inside you?” Andrew asked. “Do you?”

He tried to stroke in time with Andrew’s pushes, but he had too much to keep straight. “Need you.”

Andrew eased his finger out. “It’ll be tight, but I can’t wait.” He lubed Cain’s ass again, then stood. When Andrew ripped open the foil packet, Andrew groaned. He sheathed himself and stroked his erection. “Gonna be heaven.”

Cain had no doubts. He exhaled as Andrew pushed inside him. The burn destroyed his thoughts, but he refused to relent. He’d waited for this moment, and now that it was here, he embraced it.

“Fuck me.” Andrew leaned over Cain and met his gaze. “Pulling me in.”

“Need you.” Andrew had rendered him nearly speechless. The burn morphed into pleasure. He was no longer a virgin and happened to be fucking the prettiest man in the world. What a lucky man! Andrew was everything he’d ever wanted and more.

Andrew shifted his hips, pushing deep before pulling most of the way out. “Perfect for me.” He leaned over Cain and grasped his hips. Within moments, he built into a steady rhythm. Passion and hunger burned in his eyes. “Jesus Christ. I’m not going to last.”

He didn’t mind. Andrew overwhelmed him again. He was so full—not just his ass, but his heart. Cain met him thrust for thrust. Skin on skin. The world evaporated around them again. Nothing mattered but being with Andrew.

Perspiration glittered on Andrew’s temple. God, he was so manly and sexy.

Andrew tipped his head back and increased his pace. “Oh fuck.” He gritted his teeth.

“I’m right there.”

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Cain shuddered. He was getting close, too. He moved against Andrew. “God.”

“Yes. Come with me.” Andrew’s thrusts turned feral. He slammed into Cain, then leaned over and kissed him.

The kiss stole Cain’s breath. The coil snapped, and he shuddered beneath Andrew. He swore he floated.

Andrew leaned back and moved with grace but also speed. He crinkled his brow, then surged into Cain. “Fuck.” His cock throbbed. He panted and added more thrusts, but this time softer. His breath warmed Cain’s cheeks. “Damn.”

“Yeah.” He didn’t have his bearings, but no matter. He enjoyed the moment with Andrew.

Andrew slumped over him. “My knees are weak.” He withdrew and flopped onto the bed. “Are you okay?”

“My ass will burn for a while, but I regret nothing.” Cain rolled onto his side to face Andrew. “I loved it.”

“Good.” Andrew closed his eyes. “Wore my old ass out.”

“You’re not old.” He was tired, too. “Felt good.”

Andrew removed the condom, then tossed it into the bin before he gathered Cain in his embrace. He kissed Cain’s temple. “You’re staying tonight.”

“Is that a statement or question?” Cain chuckled. “Yes, I’m staying.” He wasn’t sure he could drive himself home. “Andrew?”

“Yeah?” Andrew opened his eyes. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing.” He trailed his fingers down his boyfriend’s chest. “You took my virginity.” There. He’d said it. No turning back now.

“I did?” Andrew’s eyes widened. “Cain?”

“No kidding.” How would Andrew take the news? Good? He hoped so. He pressed his finger to Andrew’s mouth. “I didn’t tell you because I didn’t want anyone to know.” He traced the seam of Andrew’s lips. “I’ve slept with girls, but this was different and perfect. It happened just like I dreamed.”

“Cain.” Concern clouded Andrew’s voice. “Are you sure? We can’t take it back, but are you sure I was the right choice?”

“I wouldn’t have participated if I wasn’t sure and wouldn’t have chosen you if I had doubts.” He tipped Andrew’s gaze. “You’re the one I need.”

Andrew yanked the bedding over them and kissed Cain hard. “You keep shocking me.”

“You surprise me, too.” He’d grown so much more attached to Andrew than he’d ever thought possible. He needed to rest, but his brain wouldn’t shut off. All he could think about was Andrew and the love they’d found.

“I never thought I’d find someone like you,” Andrew said. “Not the celebrity side of you, but the man. You’re everything I’ve ever wanted.”

“I am?” He’d never meant this much to someone without money being involved. He cuddled up to Andrew.

“You are.” He kissed Cain’s temple.

Cain hugged his boyfriend. “You’re the one I’ve waited for, too.” He hoped he’d be able to keep Andrew after everything settled. There was too much he didn’t control, and his world could come crashing down in seconds. He had to believe Andrew would stick with him to the end.

God, I hope so.

Chapter Eleven

Andrew woke first and basked in the sight of Cain beside him. He liked Cain being there. He made life comfortable. Cain shifted in the blankets. His eyes remained closed as he continued to sleep. He looked so young and innocent in slumber.

Someone’s phone rang. Andrew didn’t recognize the tone and assumed it had to be Cain’s device. He picked it up. The name Dixon filled the screen. He couldn’t answer for Cain and should wake him but didn’t want to.

Cain stretched again. “It’s mine, isn’t it?”

“Yeah.” He placed the phone in Cain’s hand. “Dixon?”

“My agent.” Cain fiddled with the screen and sighed. “Jesus. He’s called forty-six times and filled my voicemail.”

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“We must’ve really been out, because I didn’t hear it until now.” Andrew left the bed and dressed in a pair of running shorts. “I hope it’s not serious.”

“He’s dramatic, so it could be nothing or it could be something.” Cain shrugged. “He does this sometimes. Thinks the world is ending and it’s just a photo in the tabloids that looks sort of bad, or someone pulled out of a movie I wanted and there’s a chance I can get it, but it won’t go through because I wasn’t the one they wanted in the role.”

Nice guy. “Do you need a minute to talk to him?”

“Nope.” Cain sat up and tucked his legs beneath him. “I want you to hear what’s going on. I want us to be a couple, and if that’s going to happen, I want no secrets.” He dialed the phone, then placed the device on the bed.

“Dixon.” Cain rested his elbows on his knees. “You called?”

“Jesus fucking Christ. Where are you?” Dixon snarled. “What happened?”

“I’m in Cedarwood, like I told you.” Cain reached for Andrew and held his hand. “Why?”

Andrew sighed. Their quiet solace at the farm would end soon.

“I came to this awful town to save your ass and I can’t find you. No one knows where you are,” Dixon said. “What the hell were you thinking? This town is terrible. No stores, no coffee shops...it’s so behind the times. Liam Blackwell better be happy

he's been left behind, because he belongs here."

"Funny, I've found tons of things to do." Cain squeezed Andrew's fingers.

"Bullshit," Dixon replied.

Andrew hated the way Dixon spoke to Cain. His hometown wasn't that bad, and he and Cain were happy. Why make fun of something Dixon didn't understand?

"I heard you touched base with Liam, at least," Dixon said. "Did you go through the script?"

"Not yet. Filming doesn't start for another two months." Cain met Andrew's gaze. "I'm meeting with him next week. Now, I'm busy, so what do you need?"

"I need you to get the fuck away from that stupid farmer you hooked up with and get your ass back to the Hills. Your mother is upset and won't stop crying because she misses you. You should be in California doing your job, going to premieres and being seen," Dixon grumbled. "Understand?"

Andrew let go of Cain's hand. He couldn't listen to this any longer. He could handle being called 'dirty' and 'backwoods' or even 'behind the times', but not 'stupid'.

Cain whimpered. "Dixon, stop."

Andrew left Cain in the bedroom to argue with his agent. He couldn't be a witness to the anger any longer. When he headed down to the first floor, he stopped short in the living room. Three cars were in the driveway, and he didn't recognize any of them. People stood behind the vehicles—he didn't know them, either.

Gabby joined him at his side. She alternated between growling and whimpering. She

didn't make such noises most of the time and the sounds set him on edge.

"Cain?" Andrew kept his gaze on the view out the window. "I think you need to come down here."

Cain descended the stairs. "Huh?" He joined Andrew in the living room. "I could use a cup of—shit."

"I can't make shit, but coffee is doable." He grasped Andrew's hand. "Want a cup?"

Cain buried his face against Andrew's shoulder. "I knew they'd find me."

"Who are they and why do they look so disgusted?" Andrew asked. "The farm is clean, but they keep making faces like there's filth everywhere."

"Because, to them, it's a sty." Cain hugged him. "They would be my mother, my father, my agent and his assistant. I spy a photographer and writer from one of the celebrity magazines. They are here for me."

"You'll have to go soon, won't you?" Damn it. He'd become too attached to Cain, but did it matter? He liked him. "Do you?"

"Not if I can help it." Cain kissed him. "Can I borrow some of your clothes?"

"Sure." Andrew checked he'd locked the front door, then the back before he headed upstairs with Cain. "What are you planning?"

"To play up my changing image. I'm still going to do that movie with Liam and I'll fulfill my commitments, but I didn't escape just because it seemed fun. I need my sanity and this place, this farm—with you—invigorates me."

“What are you going to do?” He tucked Cain’s words close to his heart. No one had ever said anything so sweet to him. Andrew changed into a pair of boxer briefs, threadbare jeans and a T-shirt, then a pair of socks. “Here.” He offered Cain a pair of his smaller jeans.

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“Thank you. I owe you so much.” Cain dressed in seconds. “These feel good. They smell like you, too.”

“You’re poetic.” He offered Cain one of his college T-shirts. “Will this do?”

“It smells like you, too, so yes.” Cain rounded the bed. “My ass is still sore from last night and I’m loving every second. I’m falling hard for you.”

“Cain?” He and Cain could be separated by circumstances, yet he needed to hear this. “You are?”

“All the way.” Cain kissed him again. “We’ll meet them. I can’t guarantee this won’t be a circus or shouting match, but I’ll do my best to shield you.”

“Cain.” He couldn’t ask so much of him.

“I got you into this and I’m not letting them win.” Cain tugged the socks onto his feet. “You’re talking to a born performer. This is what I do. I’ll give my best performance yet because I can’t afford to lose anything else.”

Andrew nodded. All he could do was trust Cain and have faith in their bond. He followed Cain downstairs again. Cain led the way and his commanding manner showed the dominant side of his personality. He and Cain donned boots, then stepped onto the porch.

Cain held up both hands as the group bombarded them in front of the house. “First, listen up. I’m only saying this once. Cape? You’re here for the magazine, yes?”

Brought Larkin with you? Great. Hey, man. We'll get some photos now."

Andrew admired Cain's ability to rise to the situation. He wondered if Cain was really so helpless after all. But Cain had said this was him playing a part.

The woman opened her mouth, but Cain stopped her.

"Don't start with me, Mother. I've got this." Cain strode over to the split-rail fence where Andrew's father had once grown grapes. He posed against the post. "Larkin?"

"You're not fixed with makeup." The woman barreled toward him. "You don't look perfect. Your shirt is wrinkled, and have you combed your hair?"

"Fuck perfect." Cain posed a bit more, then climbed behind the wheel of Andrew's truck.

Andrew grinned to himself. His man was so pretty—even if his hair wasn't combed and his shirt looked a bit slept-in. He'd bet the photos would be dynamic and showcase the best parts of Cain.

Cain left the truck and waved to Andrew. "Babe?"

Babe?Andrew snapped into action and jogged over to Cain. "Yeah?"

Cain's mother shrieked, "You cannot do this!"

Cain grasped Andrew's hands and stood behind the truck. "Here."

"Open the tailgate," Larkin said.

Andrew let go long enough to do as told. Cain grasped his hands again, then glanced

over his shoulder. “Cape? I’ll give you an exclusive when this is over, on the condition you keep this story under wraps until after I give the interview.”

“Done,” Cape agreed.

“You can’t do that,” Cain’s mother shouted. “Edwin, tell him.”

Cain’s father said nothing.

“Where were we?” Cain turned his attention to Andrew. “I’m coming out and this is my Independence Day. Will you come with me? I’m out, and we’re us. No one can say anything to change my mind.”

Andrew cupped Cain’s jaw and kissed him. “Yes.”

Cain threaded his arms around him. “Happy Independence Day to me.”

“Hold that.” Larkin snapped photos. “This is perfect. Cain? Sit on the tailgate and Andrew, situate yourself between his knees.”

Cain scooted up onto the truck bed, rested his forehead against Andrew’s and stuffed his fingers in Andrew’s pockets. “I adore you.”

Andrew wanted to reply, but the words weren’t there. Cain humbled and honored him. He’d never thought he’d have someone like him in his life.

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“Cain Meadow Ables.” His mother pushed Andrew out of the way. “You cannot behave this way. People are watching. We brought you the proper servants to live correctly. Now stop this ridiculous act.”

Andrew wanted to say something, but this was Cain’s argument.

“No.” Cain slid off the truck bed and turned his back on his mother. He pointed to Larkin and Cape. “We’ll talk. You have my email and phone number. I expect to get final approval on the pictures and the article—deal? The interview will be yours exclusively.”

“You bet.” Cape jotted notes. “I’ll contact you tonight.”

“Perfect.” Cain nodded once, then approached Larkin. “I’ll help decide what gets posted and I’ll pay for most of the rest because I want them for framing.”

“No problem.” Larkin grinned. “They’re going to be dynamite.”

“I hope so.” Andrew slid his fingers into Cain’s back pocket. No one ever wanted to take his photo or told him he was handsome. He’d only ever posed for his high school photos and a few snapshots with Maddie. This was a whole different level.

Cain’s mother glared at Andrew. “You put him up to this.”

Cain’s father said nothing, and the silence unnerved Andrew. He’d never run into anyone he didn’t like—save for his ex-boyfriends.

Cain walked Larkin and Cape to the car. Cain said something Andrew couldn't hear. When Cain returned, he applauded. "Congratulations."

"Yes, congratulations on this big charade," Dixon said, finally getting off the phone. "You've played house long enough."

"House?" Cain rolled his eyes. "You are clueless."

Andrew hung back. This was Cain's fight. He could give support, but interference would add fuel to the fire.

"You can send the serving staff away," Cain said. "I'm fine. Better than fine."

"Too late," Dixon said. "We've relocated your things to a better living situation. Why would you want to live in that shitty apartment? Pure trash. The furnishings were used and dingy, the carpets awful, and the neighborhood...what if the papers found out you were living there? You'd be the laughingstock."

Cain shrugged. The building wasn't the best, but it wasn't too bad.

"Servers, guards and the mystery a person of your caliber needs is being provided at the better house," Cain's mother grumbled. "You thought you could keep us away. You need us and you need the luxury. You're a star, not a farmer." She said the last word like a curse.

"I needed freedom," Cain shot back.

Andrew spotted the cattle poking around in the barn. He should get the chores done. He elbowed Cain. "I have to feed the girls."

"Sure." Cain kissed him. "I'll help you when I'm done here."

“The hell you will.” Dixon curled his lip in a sneer. “You can’t take care of yourself. How in the hell will you care for children?”

Andrew bit back a groan. “They’re cattle. Mimsy, Pansy, Buttercup and Rose. I need to get over to the barn and feed them.”

“I’ll be there in a moment.” Cain grinned. “Go. It’s okay.”

Andrew shook his head and cleared his throat. “Sorry to have to leave this party, but I’m required in the barn. Have a good morning.” He didn’t bother to look back as he left. The collection of intruders said things he didn’t care to hear. How could people be so rude? How had Cain managed to live with them for so long?

Maybe Cain hadn’t known any better. Andrew did, and he didn’t like the intruders at all. He wanted his heaven on earth with Cain.

Chapter Twelve

Cain hated the life that had once fulfilled his being. He still loved acting and considered his performances his best contributions to the arts, but he hated the pageantry and glitter his family insisted he use. No one needed that many servants or should spend that much money. Beyond that, he hated the way his family and agent had spoken to Andrew.

“Get your real clothes on and let’s go,” his mother, Marcia, said. “You’ve wasted enough time.”

Dixon stepped between Cain and the barn. “You can’t love him. He’s beneath you.”

“Think of your reputation,” his father, Ed, said. “You’ll be embarrassed. Will he know how to behave at a premiere? No, he’ll act like a farmer.”

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“He’ll bring a cow,” Dixon said. “Or a chicken.”

“You should be talking to producers and trying to get hired onto different films, not goofing around here,” Marcia said. “We have bills to pay, and you can’t be lazy.”

Said just like a typical stage mom. “Stop.” His anger overwhelmed him. “You haven’t once mentioned missing me, being worried about my being gone or concerned over my welfare. All you care about is the money I’m not bringing in.”

“That’s not it at all.” Marcia dropped her voice. “But this guy is rough and he’s a guy. You could be royalty in Hollywood if you’d play along and stop getting so deep into character. Once you realize you’re not the character from this upcoming film, you’ll see you’re not really taken with this man.”

In character? Fuck. She’d never believe him and would make up lies to explain away why he’d gone against her wishes. “Mother.”

“She’s right. You need to stop thinking like that character and be the man we molded you into being,” Ed said. “Get over yourself.”

His father had said the magic words. They’d molded him to be a star—their breadwinner.

An oversized van drove down the lane. Cain frowned. He hoped against hope the van was a delivery or the veterinarian, but he knew better. The fans had found him.

Andrew strode out of the barn at the same time. “Cain?”

“I don’t know what’s going on with the van,” Cain said. But he had a good idea. “Sorry.”

“No.” Andrew made his way up to Cain. “You have another guest. She was in the barn, sleeping on the straw. She wants to meet Cain Ables.” He escorted a girl to the group.

A young blonde woman, about fifteen or sixteen years old, grinned at him. She launched herself into Cain’s arms.

Dixon blocked Cain’s access to Andrew. “Slow down now. You’ll get to meet Cain.”

Cain nudged Dixon out of the way as the girl hugged him. “Hi,” he said to her. “You really shouldn’t sleep in the barn.” He met the girl’s gaze. “Why’d you hide in there?”

“To see you,” she said. Tears slid down her cheeks. “I heard you were in town and I didn’t believe it because no one like you would ever come here because it’s so boring, but she had your autograph, and I wanted it so I came out here, but I didn’t see you and I got tired, so I went in there and he found me and you’re here.” She sobbed louder.

Cain hugged her. “Breathe.” He wasn’t sure how she’d managed to say so much while barely taking a pause in her gigantic sentence. “Did you want an autograph?”

“And a picture.” She hiccupped. “Please?”

“Sure.” He posed with her, then signed her autograph book.

“Thanks. I’ll hashtag you when I post it.” She fumbled with the phone and book.

“Uh...I need a ride home.”

“How’d you get out here?” Cain asked. “It’s a long way from town.”

“My friend gave me a ride.” She shrugged. “She said if you were here, then to tell her so she could meet you, too.”

Fuck. “I see.” Cain snapped his fingers. Of all the times he appreciated having some luxuries, this was one. “Dixon, get her a ride home.”

Dixon waved to the driver of one of the cars. “Moore will drive you home.”

“Thanks.” She blushed. “Bye.”

Cain smiled and waved. “Bye.” He’d put Andrew in danger. If this girl had found the farm, then other fans would show up, too. If additional fans converged on the house, Andrew wouldn’t get any peace.

Moore, the driver, ushered the young lady away. Cain sighed. Damn it. He was used to this kind of interruption and invasion of his privacy, but Andrew had no idea what Cain put up with on a daily basis. Andrew stood at the edge of the group. Cain shrugged away from his family and reached for the man he’d come to love.

“Sorry.” Cain twined their fingers. “This is my circus.”

“I see that,” Andrew said. “It happens a lot, doesn’t it?”

“It can.” Cain turned his back on his family. “When I was a teenager and before I started doing major films, my parents encouraged the people to visit the house and made me go outside to sign autographs. I have a feeling they got this whole charade going here, too.”

“Nice.” Andrew’s eyebrows rose, and his lips parted. “That van is here, too? For

you?”

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Cain's blood chilled. He'd forgotten about the van. A whole group of fans had arrived to watch him and demand Cain's attention. His ire rose. "Sorry," he muttered to Andrew. He turned to his parents. "You told them."

His father shrugged, and Dixon glared. "You knew they'd find you," Marcia said. "You knew you couldn't hide. I told you this wouldn't work, but you had to run. You had to do things your way."

"I guess you did tell me."

She'd lied. He wasn't that special. He was just lucky enough to be on television and in the movies. He'd perpetuated the myth that he was important. Now, he had to live with the damage.

"I'll get this sorted out," Cain said. He directed Andrew away from the others. "I'll fix this. I will."

Andrew nodded and toyed with the front of Cain's shirt. "Sure."

The caress reminded Cain of a lover's touch—the last vestiges of a love withering.

Fuck. He'd never been in this position before. Then again, he'd never been in a real relationship before. When he looked into Andrew's eyes, the pain rent his heart in two.

"You'd better go." Andrew raked his nails over Cain's chest. "Will the van follow?"

“It will. You might get a few more visitors, but it’ll taper off once they know I’m not here.” Cain rested his forehead against Andrew’s and whimpered. “I can’t expect it, but wait for me.”

Andrew threaded his arm around Cain. “Don’t take forever.”

“You’ll wait?” God, he had nothing else but hope that Andrew might love him, even a tiny bit as much as he loved Andrew.

“I have a job to do here, and animals who depend on me. You have your role.” Andrew shook his head once. “We’ll figure something out.”

A tiny blossom of hope grew in Cain’s chest. His celebrity had destroyed so much, and he worried it’d cost him his relationship with Andrew, too. Maybe not.

“Go before your mother bores holes in my skull,” Andrew said. “If you decide to visit or escape and come here, tell me so I know to look for you. I want you here. I want you with me, but I know I’m not what they want for you.”

“Fuck them.” He wanted Andrew. Cain breathed in the scent of Andrew once more. His heart stayed with the farmer. He’d found the man who made him whole and he wasn’t about to walk away without a fight.

Chapter Thirteen

Cain left Andrew at the farm and allowed his family to bring him to a gigantic house in the Cedarwood city limits. The home reeked of money, plush carpets, expensive sculptures, pricy furnishings, servants everywhere—all the same old trappings from his life in Beverly Hills. His knees buckled as he stood in the middle of the walled-in gardens comprising the back yard, and he whimpered. He’d been captured.

He wasn't the same man, though. He'd morphed and found his place in the world. There was a theater group in Cedarwood, and the movie was going to be made in town. Why couldn't he stay in Ohio with Andrew? He'd come to love the farm and wanted to keep trying to learn the ins and outs of tending to the land.

"Change. Those clothes are awful," Marcia said. "I've set up an interview with the tabloids for you tonight. You need to be cleaned up and camera-ready by five. Oh, and you'll be posing for better photos for your social media feed. I've called Cape to get that story killed, so don't try to contact him. Larkin's destroying those pictures from earlier. If those get out, your reputation will be ruined. I won't have that."

He raked his fingers through his hair. "Mother, I was fine. You didn't need to rescue me." Or run his life or determine that he hadn't lived according to her rules. He knew what he'd done.

"No?" Ed glared at him. "We made you and you owe us. If it weren't for us, you'd be no better than that farmer."

"His name is Andrew," Cain snapped. And I love him. Shit. He hadn't thought of their relationship in such definite terms, but it was true. He loved Andrew.

"Forget his name. You won't be going there any longer and will never associate with him again," Marcia said. She snapped her fingers. "Where is my martini?"

"Excuse me?" Oh hell no. Cain shook his head. "You can't do that."

"You will not see him again. You're going to be engaged to a girl and show the world you're not gay. You're not going to embarrass me this way." She pointed to him. "You're going to marry a starlet, make children and like it."

"I'm playing a gay man in the movie with Liam," Cain said. "You wanted me to do

it.”

“It’s an art film and will get you nominated for an award,” Marcia thundered. “You need to think of your career.”

He was. “I don’t want children and I don’t want to marry a girl.” He seethed and tried to keep his anger tempered. “Why don’t you like the idea of me being gay? What’s wrong with gay men?”

“What’s wrong is that you’re not gay.” She glared at him and snapped her fingers. “Where in the fuck is my drink?”

A servant brought the martini, then darted away again.

Cain gritted his teeth. “Well? You haven’t told me what’s wrong with my being gay. Doesn’t it fit your perfect image of me? It makes you feel like you’ve done something incorrectly?” He narrowed his eyes. “I’ve always felt different. I knew when I was fourteen that I wasn’t attracted to women and I wasn’t going to marry a girl. There’s nothing wrong with me and I’m not going to lie any longer. Will my career tank? It might. Will my fans leave? They may, but they might also decide they like the idea of me being gay. I don’t know. What I do know is that I want to be happy. I want to be my own man and I’d love it for you to accept me—warts and all. This is who I am. Love me for me.”

“You’re foolish and throwing everything away.” His mother sipped her drink. “Don’t be stupid.”

He wobbled again. Fine. She wanted him to think of his career? He’d do it. “I need some air.”

“You’re outside and you’re not going to leave this property.” She stepped between him and the door. “Unless you’re meeting with Liam for a run-through or talking to a producer, you’re not going anywhere. I forbid it and I’ve given express instructions to the staff to keep you here. If you so much as think you’re leaving, I’ll know about it.”

“I’m thirty years old.” He couldn’t believe she was behaving this way. “I lived just fine on my own.”

“You pretended and ended up with that man.” Ed shook his head and waved one

hand. “You have a job. Do it and don’t bitch.”

“You’re both unreal.” Cain ducked into the house and escaped to his room on the second floor. He flopped onto the bed and his heart ached. He’d become a prisoner. His life was a mess, and no one trusted him. Okay, yes, he’d escaped once, but this was different. He’d tasted freedom and wanted more. No, he needed it just as much as he needed Andrew.

He should have a plan. But what idea would work? He had no life experience with dating or even having a normal relationship. He’d never had either.

“Hi.” Penn ventured into the bedroom. “Are you okay?”

“I’m not in the mood to chat.” Cain continued to stare at the ceiling. Penn was the last person he wanted to converse with, but he had the feeling the younger man wasn’t going away.

“I won’t argue with you.” Penn sat on the bed. “But I’d like to chat. I wanted to apologize, too.”

“You do?” He didn’t trust Penn. “Why?”

“I used to think you were an empty-headed actor, the cookie-cutter Hollywood type,” Penn said. “I used to think you didn’t believe in anything. Then I saw how you stood up to your folks for Andrew. You found something within you. I admire that.”

Penn wasn’t helping, but he wasn’t about to let his frustration show.

“You love Andrew.”

“So?” His gut screamed not to trust Penn, but the more Penn talked, the more Cain

wanted to converse. “Are you going to use that against me?” He had to be cautious. “It won’t work. I’m not lying any longer.”

“Who said you should?” Penn sighed. “I didn’t.”

“I know you. Every time you get a little information, you run with it—to Dixon, to my folks, to the producers...” He sat up and finger-combed his hair. “I don’t trust you.”

“I know and I deserve it.” Penn laced his fingers together. “I thought it was being cutthroat, but I helped destroy you and I’m sorry.”

“You’re sorry, yet you didn’t say no. You didn’t stop until now.” He left the bed and paced the length of the room. If he wanted to get back to Andrew, he had to be smart. He couldn’t just escape and couldn’t shake Penn. He stopped mid-stride. “Why are you in here? To spy?”

“No.” Penn held his gaze. “I’m here because I want to help you.”

“Really?” God. “Don’t start.”

“Cain.” Penn stood. “Listen to me. There’s a guy I like, and you were the catalyst for me telling him. I want you to be happy in the way I am.”

Cain groaned. “What? Who?”

“His name is Shayne. He’s twenty-six and lives here in Cedarwood.” Penn’s eyes glittered. “The moment we met it was magic.”

“How long have you known him?” He hadn’t been in Cedarwood long and doubted Penn had been there any longer.

“Since you left. I knew you’d escape here because of the movie, so I kept an eye on you. I didn’t say anything to your folks,” Penn said. “They figured it out because of Dixon.”

“So you’re going to blackmail me?” He couldn’t make heads or tails of Penn’s comments. Goddamn it.

“No.” Penn held up his hands. “I’ve seen how it’s killed you to be with people you don’t love. I know how it feels.”

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He gritted his teeth. Part of him wanted to believe Penn, but he'd been burned too many times. People wanted dirt and Penn, among others, seemed happy to share. He sighed. He wanted Andrew, not this headache. He couldn't think straight without his other half.

"Your parents can't keep you here. They can't restrain you." Penn folded his arms. "You should have protection, but that doesn't mean you can't be yourself. You should have a life."

He sighed again. He agreed with Penn, but he still didn't trust him.

"Look, you want to be with Andrew, right? You want to come out, yes?" Penn asked. "You gave your story through photos to Larkin and you're supposed to talk to the tabloids tonight. When you're loose and talking to them, maybe you could get a phone call in to Cape and one to Andrew? I'll help you. I'm tired of seeing people destroyed because they can't be themselves. The fans will be happy that you're happy. They'll follow you."

"I wish I could be so positive." Cain massaged his temples. "Mother has my phone and probably has it tracked. I'm surprised she didn't have it tracked before now."

"She's not tracking mine." Penn nodded. "Use the numbers on yours to make the calls on mine. Text Andrew and tell him what's going on."

"Why are you doing this again?" Cain asked.

"Because I want to stay here in Cedarwood and be with Shayne. If you're staying

here, then maybe you can use me. Why not? We'll help each other and have the happy endings we deserve."

Ah. There was the payoff for Penn. A job. Cain debated his next move. He didn't have much choice, and Penn was offering a lifeline. "I'll get cleaned up for the tabloid shit. You just stay on the level with me and maybe we can work something out. I want that happy ending."

"Me, too." Penn nodded. "We deserve it."

He needed something to believe in and Penn could be slime, but he could also be just what Cain wanted for business. "Let's do this."

* * * *

Andrew got through the chores, but everywhere he looked something reminded him of Cain. He'd spent the last week alone, save for Maddie and the animals. Life wasn't so much fun without Cain around. He'd sunk so deep, but he'd fallen hard for Cain.

One night he looked Cain up on the internet. His boyfriend had so many credits to his name. So many stories, too. He'd never been linked to any one person for more than a few weeks, and never men. When Cain and Andrew had made love, it had sure seemed like Cain had experience with other guys.

In the dark of night, Andrew couldn't shake the feeling he'd been used. He didn't want to think Cain could be so callous, but he'd been wrong before.

He parked the tractor in the barn Thursday afternoon, then checked on the kittens. He picked up the lone orange one and cuddled the feline against his chin. So small and fluffy. The little thing seemed to like him.

“Andrew?” Maddie made her way into the barn. “Hey.” She joined him by the kitten pen. “Awe. You found Ollie.”

“Ollie?” He stroked the kitten’s fur. The little ball of puff rumbled like an engine.

“I think he likes you.” She scratched Ollie behind the ears.

“He does. Once he’s fixed, I’ll probably take him to the house to hang with Roger.” He’d become rather fond of the kitten. “Roger needs a friend, and Gabby likes having kitties to care for.”

“She does.” Maddie folded her arms. “Did you see you’re on the web?”

“I am?”

She withdrew her phone from her pocket. “You took pictures with Cain, didn’t you?”

“I did.” He spied the images and the caption.

Actor Comes Clean—I’m Gay and In Love

In love?He hadn’t told Andrew he was in love. Andrew resumed petting Ollie. “I guess I did.”

“Are you okay? It’s been a week since he left.” She picked up another of the kittens and cuddled it.

“I’ll survive.” He’d rather not do it without Cain there, but he had to be patient.

“I know.” She hesitated beside him. “I heard from Dad.”

Oh God. What did their father want? The man had been more of a cheat than a hippie and never honest with anyone. The hippie act hid his proclivity for sneaking around on whatever partner he had at the time. “Yeah?” He didn’t keep in touch with his father. “Did he and one of our mothers save a whale or clean up a beach?”

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“They cleaned a coastline.” She leaned against the tractor tire. “They saw your pictures.”

“Did they?” Then that was why his father had contacted her. “Who is they?”

“Not your mother or mine. Her name is...” Maddie scrunched her nose. “Zoe? I think it’s Zoe. Anyway, our mothers are happily living in a commune, and Dad is with Zoe. Dad and company wanted to know if they could visit. They’re proud you have a popular boyfriend.”

“He couldn’t send a letter and tell me that himself?” Andrew carried the kitten to the wagon and sat on the hitch. Ollie wriggled, then settled against his chest.

“He’ll sleep there if you let him,” Maddie said. “And you’ll love it. He’s so soft and cuddly.”

“I know.” He wanted more action going on in the house. “So Dad wants to see me?”

“Now he does.”

“He could handle my having five wives or six girlfriends, but my being gay was against the law,” Andrew said. “He only gave me the farm because he didn’t want to sell it. He hated my choices. Why would he want to see me?”

“He was harsh,” she said. “He used to tell my mother he thought he failed because you ended up being gay.”

“Failed?” That was a new one. His being gay had nothing to do with his father.

“He thought you weren’t enough of a man, but he was wrong.” She nodded once. “He made a lot of mistakes, and you don’t have to forgive him or let him visit. I wouldn’t.”

Andrew groaned. “But?”

“There’s no but. He doesn’t like gay people. You just happened to be the target for his frustration.” She sighed. “Our mothers didn’t give a shit, and I don’t either. He hated that he couldn’t change you, and I always loved that you were authentic.”

“Authentic.” Nice way of explaining me.

“You can’t force someone to change—not in the way he wanted to change you.” She crossed her ankles. “You don’t have to see him.”

“Good.” He wasn’t planning on a big family reunion.

“But you might want to get cleaned up,” she said. “It’s important.”

“Why?”

“Well...” She grinned and put the kitten back in the pen. “Cain’s coming over tonight.”

“He is?” He almost dropped Ollie. “How? Really?”

“Really.” She left the pen and wiped her hands on her jeans’ legs. “You have to do a bit of playing along for a little while because Liam wants to scope out the farm for a few scenes. He’s bringing Cain with him so they can discuss camera angles.”

“Here?” Who would want to film a movie at the farm?

She lowered her voice. “Liam’s meeting with Cain tonight and they’re coming here, not for locations, but so you can be together. None of us want you apart and it’s the only way at the moment to make it work. If all goes well, then you’ll have the weekend with him.”

“Yeah!” He wanted Cain to be able to visit without restriction. His fears surfaced, and his stomach lurched. “What if he realizes he’s not really in love with me or he changes his mind? What if we’re permitted to be together and the love fades? Or it was just because we were forbidden from seeing each other?” God. He didn’t want to think through all the possibilities.

“What if? What if it’s the beginning of the rest of your life with him?”

He snuggled Ollie again. “Cain wants to see me?”

“Yes.”

“Dad wants to visit me because of Cain.”

“He does.”

His annoyance grew. “I’m gay and it’s okay as long as Dad gets to meet someone famous. Any other time, it’d be terrible, and he’d tell me so.”

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“Seems like.” She clapped him on the back. “Focus on being with Cain tonight. I’m willing to be his beard if it allows him to stay here longer. He loves you, and I think you love him, too.”

“Maddie?” It was too much to ask of her.

“I’m still a romantic and I want you to be with the man you love. Nic’s even in on this. He agreed to be your lawyer.” She grinned. “Things will work out.”

“Thanks.”

“Welcome.” She squeezed his biceps. “I’m sorry I was wrong about Cain, but I’m not sorry about being protective. You deserve the best.”

“I try.”

“You do.” She stuffed her hands into her pockets. “They’ll be here at six, so get cleaned up and I’ll finish the rest of the chores. While you’re at it, he’s litter trained, so take Ollie in.”

“Thanks.”

“Any time.” She winked. “Make that boy drool.”

“I will.” He carried Ollie to the house. Gabby raced after him. His heart lightened and his spirits lifted. He just might have a future with Cain after all. Hot damn.

* * * *

At six-thirty, he paced the length of the living room. Andrew couldn't look too eager—not with Cain traipsing all over the farm with Maddie, Liam and three other guys. Maddie had told him to stay inside with Nic until Cain could leave the group.

Waiting was so hard.

“It's going to be okay.” Nic glanced out of the window. “If it's any consolation, I'm not wild about seeing Mads with another guy. It's strange.”

“I know.” He stopped pacing. “You really like her.”

“I have since school.” Nic shrugged. “She's been the one I can't forget. Is that how you feel about Cain?”

“It is.” He spied Cain on the lawn and talking to Maddie. They had to pretend they were falling for each other. Seeing them paired up hurt his heart, even if he knew it was all a farce. He wanted to be the one holding Cain, not watching him.

“It won't be much longer,” Nic said. “By the way, I talked to Cain. He's going to need a lawyer once he breaks away and I volunteered. I'm working on how to get him out of his contracts and allow him to get paid while he lives here. I'm on your side.”

“I know,” Andrew said. He knew about Nic being a good lawyer and being on his side, but nothing about contracts. “Thanks.”

“Welcome.” Nic balled his hands and grinned. “The guys are leaving, and Liam's coming in. Won't be long now.”

Liam ventured into the house. “Hey, guys. Nic, you're welcome to head out.”

Andrew waited for Nic to vacate the room before he spoke. “I hate subterfuge. I know why this is such a big deal, but that doesn’t help much.”

“Cain’s been the poster boy for good behavior in Hollywood. Everyone likes him, he plays well with others, doesn’t make waves or grab his costars and gets the job done in relatively few takes. I’ve never known him or heard of him being a prima donna.”

“He’s a good worker and pleasant.” Andrew turned away from the window. “He came out. Why isn’t that enough?”

“Because his parents are pieces of work... You’ve met them. That’s why he’s been careful. They seem to think he’ll lose fans, which means he’ll lose jobs.” Liam shrugged. “Having fans is good because it draws people to the theaters and eyeballs watching the television or whatever, but it’s not everything.”

“They’re worried they’ll lose money,” Andrew said.

“That’s it.” Liam tucked his hands into his pockets and sighed. “I’m trying to help as much as I can because I know how he feels. When I met Stone, I wanted to spend every second with him. It killed me to leave town, even for a little while.”

“How did you work it out?” He saw no good coming from lying to people.

“I had faith in Stone, for one. I also had a good support system,” Liam said. “But I also believed that Stone and I could make it. I knew I loved him, and he loved me. How do you feel about Cain?”

“I love him.” He exhaled to settle his nerves. “I can’t look outside at him with Maddie. I know she’s not a threat and I know I’m attached to Cain, but I’m scared he’ll see someone better looking who doesn’t own a farm and can handle his situation. He’ll find that person and leave me. We’re from different worlds, but I see

us having a future. Whether we will is another question. He might want someone better suited to him.” He was rambling and he knew it.

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“He could, but I doubt it. He’s bending over backwards to get with you,” Liam said. “I have no need to film this movie here. I only dragged everyone out to the farm for Cain.”

“It’s not a good enough location?” Andrew asked.

“I don’t have any scenes that would fit being filmed at a farm. It takes place in a small town, but there’s nothing a farm would work with.” Liam leaned against the doorframe. “You’ve got a beautiful place, and I’ll bet the sunsets are dynamite. They are at Stone’s place and it’s sort of a farm. It’s more of an animal menagerie.”

“The sunsets are pretty.” He’d never been to Stone’s property. Andrew met Liam’s gaze. “What do I do?”

“What do you want?” Liam asked. “If you could have anything you want, what would it be?”

His gut response? Cain. That was too much to ask. He thought about his desires for another moment. “I want Cain to be happy and out—if that’s what he wants. I’d like him to be here, but working, too. I don’t want to hold him down because I don’t think anyone could if they tried.”

“True.” Liam half-smiled. “Do you truly love him?”

“I do.”

“Then tell him and stand beside him as he goes through this. He needs you. He’s

going to have to get really tough, and you need to be his strength. You will be his soft place to land, too. Can you do that?"

"Yes." He had no choice. He needed Cain.

"Good." Liam wrestled his hands free from his pockets and shook hands with Andrew. "By the way, I'm signing you up as an advisor on the film. Nic out there is going to make sure it's all legal."

"He is?" Andrew shook his head. "Why?"

"So you're permitted on the set and you get a little bit from the film." Liam winked. "We need you there to keep Cain centered, and you should get paid something for your efforts."

"I don't know about the money, but I'll be there for Cain."

"Good." Liam walked through the house to the front porch. "I'll be back, but you need time with Cain right now."

"Thanks." Andrew waited for Cain. Once Liam left, then Maddie and Nic followed, Cain headed up to the porch. Andrew sucked in a ragged breath. "Hi."

"Hi." Cain didn't touch him. "We need to talk."

Not the rousing hello he'd expected... "Okay?" Was this goodbye or the next Chapter of their story? "Come inside."

Cain followed him into the house. "Andrew."

"Liam hired me to help with the movie," Andrew blurted. "I know nothing about

movies.”

“I know.” Cain grasped Andrew’s hand. “Stop.”

“What?” His nerves got the best of him and his fear overwhelmed Andrew. “I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be sorry.” Cain smiled. “I wanted to show you something.”

“Yeah.” He allowed Cain to lead him into the family room.

“Sit.” He settled next to Andrew on the sofa. “Here.” He whipped out his phone. “I’m out. It’s all over social media and there’s no taking it back, but I don’t want to because I’m free.”

“I saw the article and our pictures.” He nodded and his hands shook. “You called me your boyfriend.” Andrew measured his breaths. “You’re not taking any of it back?”

“No taking it back, like I said.” Cain pulled up his social media feed. “I’m out, and our pictures are popular. Andrew, we’ve been accepted. The fans love us together.”

Relief swept over Andrew. The fans were a big part of the problem. “What about your parents?”

“We’ll handle that on Saturday, and I have a plan. Nic’s in on it—mostly because I needed a lawyer and he’s smart with legal shit,” Cain said. “I need you to trust me.”

“I do.”

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“Andrew?” Cain’s eyes glittered. “You do?”

“I love you, too.” He kissed Cain. “I’m here for you. Tell me what you need, and I’ll do it.”

“Andrew?” Tears filled Cain’s eyes. “You love me?”

“Yeah, and I’m not giving up. No way.” He’d poured out his heart.

“Take me upstairs and fuck me until we can’t think straight.” Cain launched himself into Andrew’s arms. “I love you, too.”

Hell, yes. He had the love of a good man and could call Cain his boyfriend. Now he had to convince the family to give Cain his freedom. He’d do anything to keep Cain happy. Anything.

Chapter Fourteen

Andrew kissed Cain. They loved each other and they’d find a way for the relationship to work. That was what mattered. He had a partner and a lover in the same man.

“Take me upstairs.” Cain left the sofa and held out his hand. “I want to feel you in my soul.”

He followed Cain through the house. When Cain stumbled on the stairs, Andrew captured him between his body and the steps. He kissed him and ground against Cain’s groin. “If you’re trying to get me to catch you, it’s working. I win and I love

the chase.”

“I do, too.” Cain’s eyes flashed as he kissed Andrew.

The tender sweetness of the kiss only lasted seconds. The feral position on the steps and the passion in his veins spurred Andrew on. He nipped Cain’s bottom lip. “I could take you on the stairs.” He’d have to add it to their list of places to fuck.

“I’d let you.”

The husky sound of Cain’s voice sent delicious shivers down Andrew’s spine. He released Cain. “I’ll follow you.” They’d fuck on the steps later.

Cain tweaked Andrew’s nipple through his shirt. He scampered up the steps, leaving Andrew in his wake.

Andrew chuckled and admired Cain’s ass. Such a nice little ass. He’d bet Cain knew his sex appeal, but doubted Cain saw his true attractiveness.

Andrew caught up to Cain and collided with him again, but this time on the bed. He crawled on top of his lover and kissed him. He caressed Cain through the fabric of his shirt. Cain rubbed his groin on Andrew.

A groan rumbled within Andrew. Christ, he was hard for Cain. He straddled him and removed his shirt.

“Have I told you I love you naked?” Cain’s eyes glittered. “So strong and sexy.” He smoothed his hands over Andrew’s chest. “You aren’t inked. I thought you’d have ink.”

“I’m not wild about needles.” He wriggled his hips. Heat built within him and he

groaned again. The fact that they were able to have a conversation impressed him. “You aren’t tatted either.”

“Didn’t help with film roles.” He pinched Andrew’s nipples. “I don’t strike anyone as a bad boy.”

“They don’t know you.” He scooted off Cain long enough to unzip and remove his jeans. His cock bobbed free and the chilly air caressed his shaft. The cool air did little to mellow his fever. He stroked himself.

Cain’s eyes lit up. “Don’t ever get ink. You’re perfect.”

“I won’t.” He had no desire to. Andrew focused on unzipping Cain’s jeans. “Right now it’s Christmas and I want my present.” He tugged the denim down Cain’s legs.

“God, yes.” Cain writhed, helping Andrew and whimpered. “I want to taste you.”

“Yeah?” He rounded the bed and tugged the hem of Cain’s shirt. “Off. Can’t have me with this on.”

Cain shrugged out of his shirt and tossed the garment onto the floor, then reached for Andrew. “Yes. Fuck me over the end of the bed. Fuck me in the straw, on the steps, the tractor...wherever you want. I’m yours.”

“After I get a taste.” He crawled onto Cain again, but lined them up so that he could suck Cain’s cock while Cain serviced him.

Cain groaned. “I’ve never sixty-nine-ed before. Teach me.”

He’d figured Cain would be new to this experience. He’d gladly be his teacher and, if he had his way, Cain’s only lover from now on. He straddled Cain’s head. Power

from his position surged through Andrew. Every cell and synapse vibrated on high alert. He nuzzled Cain's pubic hair, needing to tease him.

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“Andrew.” Cain moaned. He flexed his toes. “You know how to drag this out, and I love it.”

He rubbed Cain’s shaft across his cheek and lips, marking himself.

Cain adjusted and sucked on Andrew’s cock. He hummed around Andrew. The move sent fresh shivers down Andrew’s spine. He’d never be the same. Cain managed to engulf him and toy with his balls, too. God, so sexy.

Cain whimpered and bobbed his head.

For a split second, Andrew forgot to return the favor and lap at Cain. He cupped Cain’s sac. His boyfriend knew how to make him happy and he was determined to please him, too.

He moved up and down to the root before he withdrew. He buried his nose into Cain’s curls to breathe him in. When he took Cain to the back of his throat, he swallowed.

Cain wrenched his mouth free. “Oh fuck. I love that.”

Good. He continued to bob his head. He rocked his hips in time with each plunge onto Cain’s dick. Between them, they’d created the perfect rhythm. His nerve endings tingled, and excitement overwhelmed him. He massaged Cain’s balls, then eased one finger between his ass cheeks.

Cain jerked. “Yes.” He resumed licking Andrew and rubbed Andrew’s sac on his

face. "Love it."

So did Andrew. He focused on Cain. The more his boyfriend moaned, the better. He wanted him right at the edge.

Cain shivered. He tightened his legs around Andrew. "God, I am so close. Fuck."

He stopped licking and centered his attention on Cain's hole. He toyed with the puckered skin. So pink and pretty.

"I need you in me," Cain whispered. "Andrew."

He almost had Cain craving him enough. He stroked his lover while massaging Cain's pucker. So sensitive. Cain flexed his hole. Andrew nipped Cain's inner thigh. Almost there.

Cain's movements turned jerky. He slid his dick through Andrew's fingers. "I need to come. God, please?"

That was where he wanted him. Andrew withdrew and rolled off Cain.

Another whimper vibrated in Cain. "You'll make me explode."

"Uh-huh, but it'll be worth it." He stood long enough to fold Cain in half, then retrieved the condom and lube. He knelt on the bed between Cain's legs. He wanted to focus on prepping him and needed Cain as ready and loose as possible. He nibbled his way up Cain's inner thigh to the swell of his ass.

Cain reached between his legs and stroked himself. "Feels so good."

He pushed and probed Cain, working lube into his hole. When they had sex, he

wanted Cain good and ready. Cain shivered as he breached him again.

Andrew nipped Cain's sac. He kept his gaze focused on Cain's, needing to know exactly how his lover felt. He needed this intimacy.

Cain bucked against him. The vein in his cock stood out and precum coated the tip of his erection. "Andrew." He flexed his asshole around Andrew's digit. "More."

He'd give Cain just about anything his heart desired. He pushed another finger into Cain and scissored. Cain writhed beneath him.

"Oh, God." Cain rocked his hips, pushing Andrew deep. "I'm so close again." He tensed. "Too much more and I'll come."

"No, you won't." He swatted Cain's hip. "Not until I'm with you."

A dazed look filled Cain's eyes and a lazy smile formed on his lips. "Yes."

Andrew withdrew his fingers. He added more lube to Cain's asshole, then stood. Desire overflowed in his mind. He tore open the condom wrapper. "Need me?" Christ, he was teasing Cain, but himself as well.

"Yes." Cain held onto his knees. "So much." He panted. "Hurry."

He sheathed himself. He wasn't going to last at this rate, but that didn't matter. He stroked himself. "Mine. All mine." He lined his dick up with Cain's ass.

"I am yours." Cain arched his back to meet Andrew halfway.

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Andrew pushed into Cain. He was tight, but it felt like coming home. He belonged in and with this man. He felt every ripple and detail of Cain. When he stared into Cain's eyes, he knew he'd found his one. His match. His heart, body, soul and everything else belonged to him. It was heady, but he'd found the man he wanted forever.

Cain wriggled his hips. "You're blowing my mind."

He nipped Cain's ankle as he pulled most of the way out, then pushed deep again. He truly wasn't going to last long. "Fuck." Andrew withdrew long enough to climb onto the bed for better leverage. He pushed right back into his lover. "Breathe for me and relax."

Cain groaned. "Feels too good."

He couldn't agree more.

"I'm not a virgin any longer and I love it," Cain shouted. "Fuck."

Cain's words spurred him on. He built into a snappy cadence, pushing in and pulling out. The sound of his skin on Cain's echoed in the room. Their groans filled the air. His brain cells were on high alert. He gritted his teeth as the orgasm grew in his belly. His limbs tingled and his control frayed.

Cain stroked himself in time with Andrew's thrusts. "I'm right there again." He met him push for push. "Oh God."

Exactly. Andrew moved with abandon. Sex with Cain was always heady, but he'd

never been this caught up before. Cain had tangled him in his web and he never wanted to be free. He grasped Cain's hips and the orgasm swept through his veins. No holding back now. "Christ. Come with me."

Instead of answering in words, Cain moaned. He stroked faster and jerked. A line of cum shot across his belly. He tensed, then sagged beneath Andrew. "Holy shit."

Andrew slammed into Cain. He pushed to the hilt, making them one body. He growled. "Fuck." His control disappeared. He buried himself in Cain as he hit his climax and shuddered. His knees buckled. He managed to add a couple extra thrusts as the orgasm washed over him. He collapsed on Cain and smeared cum between them. "Damn, damn, damn." He needed a few moments to gather his wits.

Cain lowered his legs and draped his arms around Andrew's neck. "You've glued us together."

He noticed the slippery mess and didn't care. "Uh-huh." He should pull out and ditch the condom.

Cain toyed with the hairs at the base of Andrew's skull. "Just wait. I like you being right here."

"I'll pin you." He braced himself on his elbows and knees. "You won't be able to breathe."

"Andrew, you're about the same size as me." Cain kissed him. "I'll be fine."

Still, he should move. He managed to get up enough to pull out. After a moment, he wobbled to the side of the bed and removed the condom. "Want a towel?" He wasn't a fan of wearing cum to bed.

“Use my shirt,” Cain said. “It’ll wash.”

That worked for Andrew. He picked up the garment and wiped the jizz from his chest, then cleaned up Cain.

“You’re too good to me,” Cain said. “Come here.”

Andrew ditched the shirt, then stretched out beside Cain on the bed. Bone-deep weariness set in. He hadn’t realized he was so tired until now.

Cain snuggled up to him. “You blow my mind when we make love.”

“It’s not just a hot fuck?” He threaded his arm around Cain. He’d call what they’d done making love, but he needed to be sure Cain meant what he’d said.

“This is us making love.” Cain twined his legs with Andrew’s and draped his arm across his belly. “I never knew how much I needed you in my life.”

“Yeah?” He was still trying to get his bearings, and Cain wanted to muse on life. He sighed to catch his breath. “My heart is pounding.”

“We made love, so it should be.” Cain chuckled. “Mine is.” He tipped Andrew’s head to meet his gaze. “I’ve never felt whole before. Never felt like I belonged. I had temporary homes on the locations of my films but being with you is different.”

Cain’s words touched him, but he wasn’t sure if his boyfriend wanted him to answer, so he kept quiet.

“I knew I was a bottom, but I never understood what that meant until you came along,” Cain said. He trailed his fingers down Andrew’s cheek. “You changed me in the best way. I’ve got a home here. A home with you. That wouldn’t have happened

if I hadn't come to Cedarwood and ventured to that market. I'm happy and I'm whole."

He kissed Cain's palm. "You are?" He'd never been this close to anyone outside his family. He loved Cain. "You belong here."

Cain smiled. "I wasn't going to find anyone like you in California. I had to leave the bubble and live to find my heart's desire." He whimpered as he tucked closer to Andrew. "You're authentic."

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“I am?” He wouldn’t have described himself that way. “I’m just me.”

“You didn’t put on airs when you met me and you opened my eyes,” Cain said. “I had a narrow view of the world, life and farms. I now know how I want to live my life, who I want to love and where I should be. I know how to take care of myself and that’s huge. Anyone else might have catered to my celebrity status. They’d have used me, but you didn’t.”

“You’ve always had it in you to handle your own life.” Andrew appreciated Cain’s words because he believed those exact same things about Cain. “So you’ve been looking for a regular guy?”

“I guess I was, but not just any regular guy.” Cain grinned. “I needed to find you. You made the difference.”

Andrew reached over and turned off the lamp, plunging the room into darkness. “Is your entourage still here?” Andrew asked. “It’s dark out. I’m guessing they left, but if they didn’t, they just got one hell of a show.”

“They took off when Liam exited. But you’re right, they’d have gotten a show. It’d be in the papers, too, so I’m glad they didn’t know,” Cain said. “The only one still hanging around is Penn, and that’s because he’s in an RV at the end of the driveway. He’s with his boyfriend and I don’t want to think about what they’re doing out there.”

“Penn?” He frowned. “Who is Penn?”

“He’s now my personal assistant.” Cain toyed with the thin wisp of hair between

Andrew's pecs. "I needed someone to handle my affairs and work with Nic since it won't be up to Dixon and my parents. I know it's complicated." He tangled up tighter with Andrew. "Penn met someone here in Cedarwood, so he's got incentive to help me. He wants to stay here with him. I can't blame him. Cedarwood has some mighty fine men."

"And your family?" "Mighty fine men?" Andrew bit back a snort. He wasn't that great-looking.

"Starting with Liam's movie, I'm being paid directly—not through the machine."

"Will they accept it?"

"My being out is all over the media," Cain said. "I've already lined up security staff to protect the farm and critters here. I can't be totally on my own without some sort of protection because of my celebrity status, but I'm in control of what I'm doing."

"I respect that."

"Good, because I'm basing myself here with you."

Holy shit. Cain was serious. "Your mother will burn down the farm."

"She might, but she'll want money first, so I doubt she'll actually commit arson." Cain shrugged. "Babe, we'll figure it out tomorrow. Trust me."

He had everything he'd ever wanted in Cain. If Cain wanted his trust, then fine. He had it.

"Do you trust me?" Cain asked. "Andrew?"

“I do.”

* * * *

Saturday morning, Cain woke to an empty bed. He should have been concerned but wasn't because he heard the rumble of the tractor. Andrew was out doing chores. He grinned to himself and tucked his hands behind his head. He had his plans in place for the next part of his life and finally felt in control.

His phone buzzed. He wanted to laze in bed longer, but the ringer didn't stop making noise.

He rolled over long enough to dig the device out of his pants. Penn.

“Yes?” Cain asked as he answered the call.

“It's all set up,” Penn said. “I thought I'd get your voicemail. Good weekend so far?”

“It has been. Why aren't you with your boyfriend?” He couldn't remember the guy's name. “Shayne?”

“He's at work. He does PR for the baseball team and they've got a game today. It's sexy. He's in a button-down and tie. I love men in business wear,” Penn said. “So hot.”

“Ah.” He sighed. He had no desire to get up yet. Andrew's bed was too comfy.

“Where is yours? Sleeping?” Penn laughed. “I hope you've worn each other out.”

“He's doing chores. Hear the tractor?” He probably should've offered to help Andrew, but he didn't even know when Andrew had woken to start the chores.

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“I didn’t until you said something,” Penn replied. “Well, when you’re ready, the plan’s all set. I’ve got your security in place around the farm and Nic will be with you at the house when it’s time.”

“Okay.” Meeting Nic had been a stroke of luck. “Dix and my parents aren’t the wiser right now?” A kitten clawed its way onto the bed and sniffed at Cain. He held his hand out to the feline. When the kitten approached, he petted its head.

“Not entirely. They know something’s happening since you’ve disappeared again,” Penn said. “They’re not stupid.”

“No, they aren’t.” He continued to pet the tiny fuzzball, soothed by its presence. “I know I’m making the right decision, but it’s still scary.”

“It is, but you need this, Cain. They stole a lot of money and time from you,” Penn said. “You should be in control of your life.”

“Yeah.” He snuggled the kitten. “Thanks.” He put the phone down and focused on the animal. “I haven’t met you yet. You’re adorable.”

Another orange cat hopped onto the bed. He didn’t know this one either, but both seemed friendly and accepting of him. He petted both cats and wondered about the dog. Gabby was probably out with Andrew.

“Hi, kids.” Cain rolled onto his side and scratched the bigger cat behind the ears. “I love your master and I hope you’ll let me live here. I’m drawn to him. He makes me happy and whole. Am I allowed to stay?”

The smaller cat tucked up to him and purred as it fell asleep. The larger cat stared at him and batted Cain's hand when he stopped petting it.

"Persistent. I like that." Cain resumed scratching the bigger feline and stroked the smaller one's fur. The kitties soothed him. He'd never had pets before. Sure, animals were probably messy and noisy, but they were therapeutic.

He noted the clunk of footfalls in the corridor. Neither cat left the bed, but the larger cat curled up and proceeded to clean itself.

Andrew strolled into the bedroom. He grinned. "I see I've been replaced."

Gabby trotted into the room and plopped onto her dog bed.

"Not replaced." Cain continued to pet the kitten. "This one has claws like razors. He climbed right up here and fell asleep. That one just started his bath. I think we're interrupting him."

"Ollie, the baby, is a cuddler. Maddie named them both. The bigger one is Roger." Andrew sat on the armchair and removed his socks. "They'll snuggle you to death if given the chance." He tossed the socks into the clothes basket. "What's the plan for today? You've run away, and I'm guessing someone's on the hunt for you. I noticed there are guards posted at each corner of the property and a few at the edges of the fields. That's your version of keeping us all safe?"

"Protected, yes." Cain propped himself up on his elbow and kept petting Ollie. "It's so you don't have a visitor in the barn."

"Unless it's you." Andrew crooked his eyebrow, then removed his watch.

"True." Cain nodded once and a smile tugged at the corners of his mouth. "I still want

a quickie in the barn.”

“You’ll get straw in your ass.” Andrew removed his ballcap. “But I want to do that, too. Not the straw in your ass. The quickie.”

“See?” Cain sighed. “I want to be here with you. I know it’s fast and there’s a chance we won’t make it, but I want what we have.”

“I do, too.” Andrew rested his elbows on his knees. “I found you and I’m not letting go.”

Love swelled in his heart. Being with Andrew was cozy and perfect. The cats, dog, the house, the land...he had a home with this man. He belonged.

“I’m being protected from kids trespassing?” Andrew asked and stood.

“That and the media,” Cain said. “And my parents. Dixon. They don’t want me to do what I’ve done, but I don’t care.”

“What else did you do?” Andrew asked and wrestled out of his shirt.

“The interview with Cape for one, the photos for another, then I put the pictures and my confession on social media... Everyone knows about me coming out, my having a boyfriend and my taking a turn in my career. I’m out,” Cain said. “Just like I told you. I’m not trying to find acceptance or get hired on a film. I did it all for me—me and you.”

Andrew said nothing.

“My fans didn’t leave me like my parents suggested. I’m more popular than ever,” Cain said. “Which is why I wanted this farm to be safe. I want you to know I can be

here with you and our family without being chased.” He had to make Andrew understand.

“I suppose you’re right.” Andrew unzipped. “I need to shower.”

And Cain needed to watch—from within the shower. He ensured the kitten had a snugly yet visible spot on the bedding, then hurried nude into the bathroom.

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“Took you long enough.” Andrew dropped his jeans and boxer briefs, then turned the water on in the shower. “Are the kids okay?”

“Gabby’s asleep, Ollie is nestled in the blankets and Roger is still mid-bath.” He joined Andrew. “You look good sweaty.”

“You look good naked.” Andrew ducked under the spray. “So...guards?”

“Guards.” Cain added soap to the washcloth. “I have a plan.”

“Oh?” Andrew rested his hand on the wall of the shower. “For?”

“We’re meeting with my parents—like Nic has to have told you—and Dixon. I’m ending the contracts with them.” He smoothed the soapy cloth over the expanse of Andrew’s chest, loving the planes of his body. “I’m being paid directly for my services on Liam’s movie, too. It’s all legal and my parents can’t do dick about it.” He scrubbed along Andrew’s chest to his navel, then around his hips and cock.

“They’ll challenge it,” Andrew managed.

“How?” He hadn’t expected any issues. He scrubbed down Andrew’s legs to his feet, then stood again. “Rinse so I can wash your back.”

“They’ll say they’re continuing your original agreement.” Andrew turned his back on Cain. “They’ll try something. You know they will.”

“I do.” He washed Andrew’s back, then inched away to admire the view. “There was

never a new contract—not since I was seventeen. They’ve been operating under the agreement made when I made my first movie. Since I had no idea they were using me and stealing my money, I didn’t question what happened. Now that I am, and with Nic’s help, I’ve realized they’ve stolen a lot of money from me over the years and the agreement is out of date.”

Andrew faced him again. “You’ve worked hard on this.”

“Which is why I seemed to ignore you for the last week. I had to make sure I had everything in order before I broke away.” Cain offered up the washcloth. “The first time I looked into your eyes, I knew you’d be my undoing.”

“You did?” Andrew lathered the cloth. “I’m not that bad.”

“No, but you made me see the world wasn’t the small place my parents and experiences made it out to be.” Cain whimpered as Andrew washed him. Blood rushed to his dick. He groaned. “You’ve been my salvation.”

“We’re not safe yet.” Andrew continued to rub and clean Cain’s body. He worked his way up Cain’s legs to his torso, then stroked Cain’s erection. “When we get back home and it’s all over, then I’ll be happy.”

“True.” He threaded his arms around Andrew. “We meet them at five this afternoon.”

“I should make sure you’re extra clean.” Andrew winked. “Or super dirty.”

“You’re naughty.” Cain squeezed Andrew’s ass. “Whatever happens, we’ve got each other. I’m not leaving. This—our life and family—is what I’ve always wanted. What I’ve needed. I love you.”

Andrew swayed with him in the stall. “I love you, too.”

Thank God. All he needed now was for his family to accept that he'd moved out and on with his life—then his existence would be perfect.

Fingers crossed.

Chapter Fifteen

Cain held on to Andrew's hand and begged his stomach to settle. He hadn't been this nervous since he was seventeen and learning in secret about contracts. Now that Nic had fully explained the documents, he saw just how much he'd been exploited. His fear didn't subside, either. His parents and Dixon had the upper hand—for now.

Nic stopped at a traffic light and adjusted his necktie. "It'll be okay." He smiled at Cain's reflection in the rearview mirror. "I promise."

He wished he could be so calm. When Nic drove the rest of the way to the rented house, Cain's stomach lurched. He peered out at the home. To anyone passing by, it seemed like a fancy house, but nothing too exciting about it. The gate opened and Nic drove through to the main portion of the building. He parked, and Cain sucked in a ragged breath.

Three luxury cars were parked in front of the garage. To anyone watching the property, the people occupying the house seemed to be wealthy, but Cain knew better. The cars were all rented and charged to his accounts. When he'd left two days ago, the cars hadn't been there. What scheme were his parents trying to play?

He tried to look at the situation through their eyes. They were only trying to do what they thought was the best for him. Doing what they thought was right. They'd chosen an odd way of going about their plans. They wanted to protect him. He'd been threatened in the past and he'd heard rumors of kidnapping threats, too. His parents could've been scared for his well-being.

Or worried about losing their meal ticket. Because of him, they'd gained entry into the hottest restaurants and clubs. They'd hobnobbed with stars and attended exclusive parties. They'd spent his money on things they wanted, not his education or saved any back for the time he chose to have his own family. They'd never taken into account that he might want to get out of the business.

His stomach roiled. "I can't do this."

"Stop," Andrew murmured. "If you want to be free of them, then you need to do this. You'll never get what you want without standing up to them and for yourself. I'm here for you for whatever you decide."

He'd needed to hear that.

"I'll back your decision," Andrew said. "What do you want?"

"I want the life we've created at the farm." He opened the car door, then exited the vehicle. "I want us and my freedom to make my own choices." He stopped on the front porch and turned to Andrew. "And I want you."

"I want you, too." Andrew slid his hand into Cain's. "Ready?"

"No, but I don't have any choice." He headed into the house. The servants weren't around, and no one met him as he entered. Typical. The people there to tend to anyone's needs were actually there for his parents.

He squeezed Andrew's fingers and ventured into the living room, then through the house to the back patio. The furnishings had changed since he'd left, the original ones having been exchanged for items better fitting his parents' tastes.

His mother reclined on a chaise longue on the patio. She held a martini in one hand and fiddled with a tablet. Her hair appeared freshly colored and the swimsuit had to be new. The water in the pool rippled, sparkling off the privacy fence. His father sat at the bar table with Dixon.

"You came back," Marcia, said. "Tail between your legs? Being on your own got to be harder than you thought?" She flicked her fingers, no doubt showing off her new manicure.

“We knew you’d come crawling back,” his father, Ed, said. “Sad, but we knew you couldn’t live without us.”

Cain gritted his teeth. These people were supposed to care about him. Supposed to love him.

“They always come crawling back.” Ed closed the newspaper. “Well? You want to level with me?”

“No.” Cain stood tall and summoned his courage. He’d stripped down to nothing but a sock over his dick and strutted all over a set. He’d bared his soul and his ass for another role. He’d even played out an achingly rough split for another film. Standing up for himself shouldn’t be difficult.

Marcia rolled her eyes. “You owe us for the damage done. Your career will tank.”

“It’s falling like a rock,” Dixon said. “Since you came out, you’re toast.”

“Actually, since coming out, he’s had more offers come in.” Nic extended his hand, but no one bothered to shake with him. “Ah. I’m Nic Martins and I represent Mr. Ables.”

“You hired a lawyer?” Marcia’s eyes widened and she paled. “Dixon.”

This time, Cain took the lead. “Call him off.”

“Yes,” Ed said. “Call your lawyer off, Cain.”

“No, Dixon, you stay out of this,” Cain said. He used the tension as strength. “I know what you’ve been doing. I saw the contracts. You’ve been ripping me off for the last thirteen years. You said I wasn’t smart enough to manage my own money. Wasn’t

wise enough to pick my own roles. You lied. Those contracts I signed when I was a teenager all expired when I turned eighteen, but no one renegotiated them for me. I trusted you and you took years and cash from me without taking the time to educate me on contracts.”

“Doesn’t matter. We made you,” Ed growled. “Without us, you wouldn’t be anything.”

“Oh?” Cain snorted. “Then I’d be whatever I wanted to be.”

“You would’ve wasted your time in school, in college, with girls and you probably would’ve gotten someone pregnant or turned to drugs.” Marcia sniffed. “We saved you.”

“Without us, you’d be nothing,” Ed added.

“You don’t know that,” Cain said. He glanced over at Andrew, who nodded to encourage him.

“We do.” Ed sneered. “You’re a pretty face. That’s it. Your acting ability is shit and no great movie will ever fix it.”

For the first time since he was a kid, Cain saw his father not as dad-figure, but as a stranger. His parents had wounded Cain, but he’d expected the nasty responses. Cain squeezed Andrew’s hand again, thankful he’d come along and also because he hadn’t said anything.

“Well?” Marcia smiled. “See? You know it, too. Now stop acting out and get your ass to work. Dump this...person...and let’s get back to civilization.” She fluttered her hand. “Where is my fresh martini and where is Alyssa to touch up my face? I can’t be seen by anyone with wrinkles or worry lines.” She resumed glaring at Cain. “You’re

causing this damage to my face.”

A makeup artist and a butler appeared. The girl touched up Marcia’s face, and the butler poured a new drink. Cain grumbled. The servants required payment—probably on his dime.

“We’ll have you hospitalized for exhaustion,” Ed said. “You’ve lost touch with reality because of him. He’s messed with your head and turned you against us.”

“Enough.” Cain held up both hands. “Jesus. You hate my choices, I get it. For the first time in my life, I’ve made my own decisions, and because I didn’t ask for help, it’s driving you both berserk. Well, tough. Stop blaming Andrew—a man you don’t even know—for the mistakes you’ve made. My eyes were opened to your bullshit long before I met him.” He met Andrew’s gaze for a split second, then resumed his speech. “He simply proved my point. I needed to be on my own. This situation here is not only dangerous to my health, but to my financial health. It’s over. I’m done with you.”

Andrew smiled, but said nothing.

“It’s not over,” Marcia said, her tone smug. “We have contracts, and you can’t break them.”

Cain gestured to Nic. “Your turn.”

Nic cleared his throat. “I’ve gone over the contracts. Unless there are notarized addendums and revisions—which I doubt there are—these contracts have expired.”

“No, they’re grandfathered,” Dixon said. “He never argued or asked for new ones, so these stand.”

Cain bit back a groan. Trust Dixon to have an answer.

“Excuse me,” Nic said. “Are you a lawyer?”

“No, but I know the law,” Dixon snapped. “I know what’s going on.”

“And we trust him,” Marcia interjected. She downed her drink. “The contracts are all good.”

“They expired three years ago and that’s if taken to their extended limits.” Nic frowned. “Let me guess. You had a gravy train and couldn’t let go? He brought in such good money that you didn’t have to work, and keeping him under your thumb was the best way to ensure you’d keep the cash rolling in? Am I right? And you started out wanting the best for him, but the money was too good. Just a few

commercials, just one television show—enough to be comfortable—and you’d pull him out of the business? But it got too hard. You liked the money and fame, so you left him in.”

“Wrong,” Marcia said. This time her voice cracked. “We did it because we love our son, and it was what he wanted. He said he wanted to act, and we let him.”

“What is best,” Ed corrected. “We did what is best.”

“Then you should’ve updated these contracts.” Nic tapped papers together. “Unfortunately, you’re too late.”

Cain folded his arms. “I’m severing ties. Whatever money that’s coming in now, then that’s yours. Starting tonight, the rest and anything I make from now on is mine.”

“We control the accounts,” Ed replied. “Good luck trying to get access.”

“I’ve opened my own accounts.” With Nic and Andrew’s help, he’d created his own life.

“The money is ours,” Marcia said. “You owe us. Without us, you wouldn’t be here.”

“You’re right, Mother, but I’ve more than paid you back.” Cain nodded to Nic. “We’re good here?”

“The monies already in your family accounts are under their control. The house, cars and everything in California are in their names. Your name isn’t listed on the deeds or bills of sale. Now that we’ve notified the studios of the changes, and they’ve sent the paperwork stating you’ll be paid directly,” Nic said, “you’re in the clear.”

“Even my credit cards?” Cain asked. He’d shredded them back at the farmhouse.

“As I told you, they’re not in your name.” Nic closed his briefcase. “You’re done here.”

Cain smiled. His family could sue for money, but they’d taken enough from him. He twined his fingers with Andrew’s and nodded once. “Let’s go.”

“You owe us. You should pay those bills for us,” Marcia screamed. “How will we pay them without you?”

“You weren’t supposed to be gay,” Ed said. “You were supposed to fall in line, marry a good girl and take care of us because you loved what we’ve done for you.”

“You had a job to do,” Marcia said. “You should be making us a priority, but what did you do? You abandoned us.”

“He screwed up,” Ed added. “You don’t want to take care of us. Rotten bastard. When you’re ready to come back, you’re not welcome at our home. You’re dead to us.”

He wasn’t shocked, but it didn’t lessen the hurt from hearing his father say those words. “Very well. Goodbye.” Cain walked through the house to the front door. He and Andrew would fly to Beverly Hills that evening to retrieve his belongings and have whatever he wished to keep sent to the farmhouse. He didn’t want most of the contents of his former home, but he wanted some of the mementos.

He strode out to the car. His parents shouted after him, but he paid them no mind. He slid into the back seat with Andrew and sighed.

Nic assumed his place behind the wheel and locked the doors. “Well, that went better than I thought.”

“Did it?” Anger boiled in Cain from his parents’ venom, but he refused to take his frustrations out on his lover and friend. He’d thought his folks could work something out with him and might look at the situation a bit more rationally, but no.

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“You did fine.” Andrew draped his arm around Cain. “You took control of your life.”

“Why does it feel like I made a mistake?” Cain asked.

“Because it’s a big choice and scary,” Nic said. “You’ve struck out on your own and now they can’t be your safety net.”

“I’m not on my own.” He had Andrew. “It sucks because I don’t like having to cut things off with my parents, but I can stomach the pain now that I know their true motivations. It’s time I lived my life with the people who love me and in the place that makes me happy.”

Andrew kissed Cain’s temple. “You’re right where you belong.”

“I am.” He nuzzled Andrew’s neck. “With you.” His life felt upended, but he had grounding with the man he loved.

Chapter Sixteen

Andrew drove the last few miles to the initial filming location for Cain’s movie. He’d been told to meet Cain and Liam there to discuss the next steps for the film. In the six months since he’d been with Cain, Andrew still didn’t understand the business of making movies. He’d never seen so much planning and reorganizing. Maybe that was why he wasn’t in that industry and grew crops instead.

He didn’t know how much he’d contribute to the film, but he barely tamped down his excitement about seeing Cain.

He pulled into the old school building lot at the south end of Cedarwood and parked. Liam's car was already there, next to the sporty one Cain had bought when he'd put down roots in town. A few other vehicles were there, but none he recognized.

His stomach fluttered, and his giddiness washed over him. He left his truck and locked up, then headed into the building. The February wind surged around him and stung his cheeks. He tugged his parka tighter around his body. If given the opportunity, he wouldn't have chosen the old school for a filming location—especially not to serve as an apartment building.

Six months on, he'd fallen deeper in love with Cain. Seeing Cain's face in the morning and falling asleep beside him at night, plus watching Cain come into his own, pleased Andrew. Also, the sex was off the charts. His body warmed as he thought about having made love to Cain the night before.

"Andrew." Cain jogged down the hallway. His voice echoed and he grinned. "You made it."

"I did." He hugged Cain. "You thought I wouldn't?"

"It's cruddy out and cold. I thought you'd change your mind." Cain threaded his arm around Andrew's waist and tugged him into one of the old classrooms.

"You really want to have a quickie here?" Andrew asked. "Isn't it risky?"

"It is," Cain said. "But it's not why I dragged you in here." He laughed. "I did it because I wanted to ease you into the movie lifestyle. It's all smoke and mirrors. There are a lot of lies...and I'm expected to kiss Liam. Shit's going to get real and I need to know you're okay with it."

"Shit? Like you're going to have a love scene?"

“Probably.” Cain wagged his head. “The script says we’re going to kiss, and one thing leads to another. It means nothing.”

Relief swept over Andrew. He didn’t mind Cain kissing Liam, because Liam was in a committed relationship with Stone and he trusted the bond he shared with Cain. He didn’t need to hover over a movie set to know how Cain was behaving.

“Andrew?” Cain’s brow furrowed. “We’ve talked about keeping the scene very PG, but we’ve also considered making it a little hotter. One of us will probably show our ass.”

“I expected that.” Why have a love scene if it wasn’t hot and steamy? Andrew laughed and ruffled Cain’s hair. There was nothing to worry about.

“Why are you laughing?” A blush crept up Cain’s face and he met Andrew’s gaze, but fiddled with his hands.

“Because you’re worried that I don’t trust you. I do.” He tugged Cain into his arms. “Besides, you have a terrible habit of telegraphing your guilt.”

“I do?” Cain wobbled against him. “Maybe I’m not such a great actor after all.”

“You are. It’s not super visible—unless you’re looking for it—but I know what to expect. You meet my gaze, but you blush and you twiddle with your hands.”

“How’d you figure that out?”

“When you managed to bleach my football shirt, you didn’t want to admit what you’d done because it ruined the shirt. But...you and I are the only ones who do the laundry at the house. If I didn’t bleach my shirt, you had to be the bleach-er. When you finally told me, you blushed, but did your best to hold my gaze. You fidgeted and picked at

your hands, too. I didn't go hunting for the gestures that time and I don't actively look for them, but I've noticed. Doesn't matter to me if you do this love scene. I trust you."

Cain sighed. "I should be embarrassed, but I'm not. No one else knows me well enough to have realized I have nervous gestures. You have."

Andrew shrugged and unzipped his parka. "You being guilty every so often doesn't make me love you less or distrust you. It shows you're human."

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“I never should’ve been worried, should I?”

“You should always be a bit worried. It’s who you are, and I respect that. Plus, I sort of like it.” He squeezed Cain’s ass. “Pertaining to the love scene, I know who you’re coming home to and it’s not Liam.”

“True.”

“What else?” He disengaged from Cain and sat on one of the desks. “You don’t need to waste money paying me to be part of the movie.”

“It’s only five hundred bucks.” Cain helped Andrew out of his parka. “You’ve helped to keep me here in town and it’s incidental money. But there’s another reason I asked you to come up.”

“Oh? The quickie?” He needed to lighten the mood. “I’m game if you are.”

“I wish we could.” Hunger tinged Cain’s voice and resonated in his eyes. “No, we can do that later. Right now... It’s something else.”

“Okay?” He folded his parka up and placed it on a nearby desk. “Then what?”

Maddie and Nic rushed into the room. Maddie threw her arms around Andrew. Her mother, Deborah, and Andrew’s mother, Joan, joined them in the classroom. Both women joined Maddie in hugging him.

“Moms.” Andrew continued to embrace them but couldn’t hide his confusion. “What

brings you to Ohio?” He glanced over at Cain. “I’d like to introduce you to my boyfriend, Cain Ables. Cain, this is my mother, Joan. Deborah is Maddie’s mother.”

“Hi, ladies.” Cain beamed. “We’ve sort of met already, but I love when you show off your manners.”

Andrew froze. He hated surprises—like, ‘with a vengeance’ hated them. “Okay?” If he wasn’t there to introduce everyone, then what was the deal?

“They arrived before you did, and Maddie did the introductions.” Cain blushed and fidgeted. “I didn’t want to withhold information from you, but it’s part of the bigger surprise.” He flattened his palms on his thighs. “Sorry.”

Well, shit. A bigger surprise?“Okay, let’s hear it.”

“I told you he’d hate being surprised,” Joan said. She waved her hand. “But here goes. The first surprise—and there are a few—is that I’m thrilled you are with Cain. He’s a doll and we love him.”

“Thanks.” It was good to know Deb and Joan approved.

“Second, Deb and I are together,” Joan said. “As in...together.”

“We’re girlfriends,” Deborah said. “That’s why your father left us. He saw the writing on the wall and knew he wasn’t needed. He spent too much time away from us and it happened.”

“We’ve been together for five years, but we were afraid to tell you,” Joan said. “I thought you’d be upset that we’d withheld it and that we pushed out your father.”

“Mom.” He hugged them both. Twin feelings of frustration and joy battled in him.

Part of him was angry that his father had stepped out on them and that they'd pushed him aside, but his father wasn't innocent. If Joan and Deb had found love together, then good. They deserved to be happy. "I'm glad you have each other."

Joan hugged him again. "Thanks, Andrew."

Tears burned in Andrew's eyes. All he'd ever wanted for his mother was for her to be happy.

"I knew this would work out," Cain said and blinked back his own tears. "I did."

Maddie's grin widened. "Makes my heart happy, too."

"Next?" Andrew rubbed his mother's back. "Is that all? I'm thrilled you're here and got to meet Cain. I've missed you both and it's been too long since you've been back."

"I know, sweetheart," Joan said. "We were afraid, but we're not now, so we might have to hang around a little longer."

"Which is good," Maddie said. She narrowed her eyes. "Dad isn't coming to visit."

"Good." Most likely, their father was staying away because he didn't feel welcome. He wasn't wrong. "Did anyone here invite him?"

"Sort of," Maddie said. "I needed to tell him something and didn't want to do it over the phone."

Andrew paused as her words sunk in. "Okay?" He couldn't help but be concerned. "What'd you need to tell him?"

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“We’re pregnant,” Maddie blurted. She held up her left hand. “And we’re engaged.” Her diamond ring sparkled, and Nic beamed. “I needed to tell Dad he wasn’t walking me down the aisle. I don’t want him there.”

Ouch. He stared at his stepsister. “Did Dad want to know?”

“When he found out, he spewed a line of profanity to make anyone blush,” Nic said. “He hates me, said I was terrible for her and he refuses to return to Ohio.”

“He hates everything.” Andrew shrugged. “Dad isn’t the best at hiding his feelings—even for the sake of a big event.” He paused. “Did Dad say anything about us having to accept his new squeeze before he’d come back to the farm?”

“He did.” Maddie frowned. She groaned, then leaned into Nic. “That figures. He’ll only accept us if we allow him to do what he wants. He can insult Nic and Cain and our moms, but we have to accept him.” She rubbed her forehead. “Enough about him. We’re all here because I wanted to tell everyone in person that I want you, Andrew, to walk me down the aisle.”

“Me?” He wobbled, despite sitting. “Maddie?”

“You’ve been there more than Dad ever was and you tried, even when I was a pain in your ass. You’re the brother I never thought I’d have and the one I don’t deserve. You walking me down the aisle is what I want.” Tears slid down her cheeks. “It’d mean a lot to me if you’ll accept. Will you?”

He didn’t have to think about this. “Yeah, I will.”

Maddie sobbed. “Thank you.” She threw her arms around him. “I was afraid you’d say no.”

“Why?” What was it about him that made everyone think he’d be upset? Was he that much of an ogre?

“Because you’re not—you don’t subscribe to marriage.” Maddie wiped her face. “I was afraid you’d tell me not to get married.”

“Never. I’m happy for you and honored to be there for you on your big day.” He’d make sure her wedding was beautiful.

Maddie let go and tucked against Nic. “Thanks.”

Nic held on to Maddie. “Andrew? We have a favor to ask.”

Cain grinned. His eyes sparkled.

“Okay?” He hated the concern dripping into his mind. What did they want from him now?

“We’d like to get married at the farm in the orchard,” Nic said. “In April. We’ll plan it as much as we can so it doesn’t interrupt planting season. May we use the space?”

“Of course.” He couldn’t tell them no. They’d probably have rain or mud, but whatever worked.

“Good.” Maddie dried her face again. “Whew. I thought you’d say no.”

“Never.” He’d spoil her rotten, just like he had once he’d found out she was part of the family. “Am I that much of a grouch? Everyone thinks I’ll be upset.”

Cain eased over to Andrew. “These are big decisions and they’ve all thought of the worst outcome in order to brace themselves. No one thinks you’re a grouch.”

Deborah hugged Maddie, then Nic. “It’s all worked out.”

“It did.” Maddie sighed. “Liam invited us to tour the sets and have dinner with him and Stone. I guess they’ve turned this building into a soundstage and a whole selection of sets. Who knew?” She composed herself. “We should go or we’ll be late.”

Joan hugged Andrew. “I know it’s a lot to take in, but I’m proud of you. I knew you’d make the farm into something special and you’d be successful. I did.”

“Thanks, Mom.” She’d always told him she was proud of him, but hearing the words again helped.

“And I knew you’d find this guy and be happy.” Joan grasped Cain’s hand. “Don’t let anyone take that away from you.”

“I won’t.” Cain hugged her.

Andrew’s head spun. He hadn’t embraced anyone or anything so much in his life.

Maddie waved her hand. “We should go. We’re late.”

“Come along,” Joan said. “You have to see these sets.”

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“We will.” Cain held Andrew’s hand and waited for the group to exit.

“Do you have a surprise, too?” Andrew sagged in his seat. “I’m not sure I can handle another shock.”

Cain stood between Andrew’s knees. “What I wanted to add might be a surprise, but I doubt it.” He shrugged. “I’ve done a lot of thinking. We’ve been together for six months.”

Andrew’s stomach soured again. “Are you going to ask me to marry you?”

“Do you want me to?” Cain’s eyes widened. “Andrew?”

He might have misread Cain, but he doubted it. “Maddie’s right. I’m not sure marriage is the right fit for me.”

“Do you want to split?” Cain asked.

“No.” Andrew caressed the back of Cain’s hands. “Then what are you trying to tell me? I think I’m reading too much into this and expecting a bad outcome. Everything between us has been good and almost too perfect.”

“Do you want to get married someday?” Cain asked. “Not today or tomorrow, but in the future at some point?”

He held on to Cain’s fingers. “I do, even though I’m not sure I’m marriage material. Until you came along, I hadn’t had much luck in relationships and I’m scared I won’t

be good at being married. I'm shocked you've stuck around this long, but you haven't experienced planting season."

"I experienced harvest. You were gone a lot, but I got to help and I know how hard you worked," Cain said. "I don't think you'll be bad at marriage, and it's normal to be scared." He paused. "If I asked you to marry me at some point, would you?"

Andrew laughed to hide his frustration with himself. He'd read Cain wrong and expected the worst. God, he needed a break—or sex.

"Why are you laughing now?" Cain's smile faded. "Andrew?"

He tried to stop but couldn't. "I'm sorry. I'm not laughing at you, but at me. I thought you were going to dump me." He'd been so wrong and wished he could get the doubts from his mind.

"God, no." Cain draped his arms around Andrew's neck. "I love you too much to dump you. Until you came along, I thought I'd be stuck doing what I was told and not having a life. You showed me how to be myself and enjoy my life. I love you for your spirit and belief in me."

"I love you, too." Andrew sighed. "So now that I've screwed this all up. Are you going to ask me to marry you?"

Cain nodded, then fished in his pocket. "I am. I'll do something more formal later, but I've had so much fake in my life that I need to know your answer first. I need to know this is for real." He held a pair of silver rings. "These are simple, like our love, but show everyone we're a pair." His hand trembled. "But I'd like to know your answer and go public with that rather than propose to you in public and get turned down. I don't want to look silly in front of your family."

Andrew gazed at the rings. They were indeed simple silver bands, but he didn't want

anything too fancy or complicated. At the root, he and Cain were simple people. Did he want to be married? He did—to Cain. “Meeting me was a chance. Leaving everything you knew was a chance, too,” he said. “It’s all been a gamble.”

“True.” Cain toyed with the rings. “But you’re the best risk I’ve ever taken. I can’t see my life without you.”

“Same here.” The moment he’d seen Cain at the farmers’ market, he’d known his life would change forever.

“Well? Will you marry me?” Cain asked. “Or am I making a fool of myself?”

“Will I take a chance on lasting love with you?” Andrew asked. “Yes, I will.” Andrew kissed his boyfriend—fiancé. He hadn’t thought he’d have any success at the farm because the elements were against him, but he’d persevered. Same thing with Cain. He’d refused to give up and now he had his heart’s delight. Life was one gigantic gamble, but it’d never be boring with Cain. He’d brought color and enthusiasm to the farm and Cedarwood. The risk was worth the reward because he had Cain.