

A movie poster for the film 'Chicken Ranch: HUNGER' starring Amanda Young. The poster features a muscular man in a white tank top, looking intensely at the camera while pulling at the fabric of his shirt. He is wearing a chain necklace and a chain bracelet. In the background, there is a large, white, classical-style house with columns and a chimney, set on a green lawn. The sky is a mix of purple and orange, suggesting a sunset or sunrise. The text 'Loose Id' is in the top right corner, and the title 'Chicken Ranch: HUNGER' and the name 'Amanda Young' are at the bottom.

Loose Id

Chicken Ranch:
HUNGER

Amanda Young

CHICKEN RANCH: HUNGER

Amanda Young

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Chicken Ranch: Hunger

Amanda Young

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Chapter One

Without money for a cab or the gonads to hitchhike, what should have been a fifteen-minute drive to the countryside took Declan Mayo almost two hours by foot. A light mist of rain began long before he made it to the muddy driveway leading up to Chicken Ranch. His head and shoulders felt more damp than wet, but his sneakers squished with water thanks to all the puddles he'd stepped in along the way.

The sign above the entrance wasn't huge or well lit, as he'd half expected from an establishment of ill repute. It looked much like any other discreet title carved into a wooden placard above the many ranches and farms in the area. No one would give it a second look, which he supposed was kind of the point. Keeping things low-key would be essential to any illicit business.

With a ragged sigh, he started up the darkened lane. Every step made the blisters on his heels burn like fire from where his shoes had rubbed his skin raw. As much as he would've liked to turn around and run in the opposite direction, he didn't have many options. Pride didn't make him any less homeless or fill the empty ache of a stomach that had gone too long without sustenance. Going back the way he'd come would only mean another long night on a hard park bench, worrying about whether he'd be accosted in his sleep or arrested for something he couldn't help.

By the time he shuffled half a mile to the large colonial house, Declan was beginning to think the hustler who'd clued him in to the existence of a local, all-male brothel had been yanking his chain. Granted, prostitution was illegal in much of the country, but surely someone who operated a thriving, modern-day whorehouse would have the money to pave their driveway.

Dread crept up his spine and settled at the base of his skull as he climbed the steps and warily approached the front door. Although interior lights were on, assuring him he wouldn't actually wake anyone up, he was a little afraid to knock. God only knew what he would discover once he did.

Would someone answer the door with a shotgun and accuse him of trespassing on private property? Better yet, maybe this was all a setup, and he'd find himself kidnapped and sold into a ring of slavers looking for fresh meat.

His stomach gurgled, too empty to work up a full growl, and reminded him why he was there. Good or bad, there was only one way to find out what fate had in store for him. Declan steeled his courage and rang the doorbell.

"State your business."

Declan jumped and glanced around, only then noticing the small voice box located on the door frame. He pressed the Talk button and leaned in close, not sure how good the little box's range was. "I, ah..." *Fuck. What the hell am I supposed to say?* "I'm here to inquire about a job."

The door buzzed and swung open, revealing a young man with bouncy chestnut curls and big brown eyes that reminded Declan of the heifers on his old friend Brody's farm. He wore a prim white dress shirt, buttoned up to the stiff collar, and pressed beige slacks – not exactly the kind of attire Declan thought of as a whore's ensemble.

"So," the man said, looking Declan up and down. "You'd like a job, huh?"

"I, uh...I guess so."

"You guess?" The brunet snorted and stepped aside. "Come on in. My name's Colt. You'll have to speak with Mr. Graves about a position, but he's always on the lookout for new boys."

Declan stepped inside and gawked, feeling out of his element. His family wasn't poor, but being middle-class did not provide crystal chandeliers. Not that his family was providing him with much of anything other than scorn these days.

Directly in front of him were two impressive curved staircases that led to the second floor. A hallway disappeared behind each set of stairs. Spacious sitting rooms were located to his left and right. As he looked on, a buff, bare-chested guy dressed in black leather chaps, sans anything underneath, jogged down the stairs and disappeared into the sitting room on the left.

All the saliva in Declan's mouth dried up. His gaze strayed to the doorway, hoping the practically naked man would appear over the threshold and let him take a long gander at the goodies he was sporting.

The door closed with a *bang* behind him, making him jump and jerk around. His face heated as the other man – Colt – shot him curious look.

Colt smirked, drawing attention to his firm lips. "You're a jittery little thing, aren't you?"

Declan shrugged. "No, sir. Well, not usually."

"You don't need to call me 'sir.' We're all working stiffs around here."

"Oh. Are you, um, are you a...?" Declan let his question trail off, unsure of what title he was supposed to give the prostitutes. They would undoubtedly take offense to being called whores.

"I'm not a rent boy, if that's what you mean. I assist Mr. Graves. You know, you're lucky it's a Monday, otherwise the boss would be too busy to see you without an appointment."

"Well, I, um, appreciate that." Declan winced. He sounded like a complete moron. The owner – was there a male term for madam? – would probably take one look at him, think he was simpleminded, and send him packing.

"Mm hmm," Colt said, turning his back on Declan. "Follow me, please."

Declan trailed after the other man, down the hallway to the right of the stairs. Colt stopped at the first door and knocked lightly. A deep male voice called out for them to enter.

Colt opened the door and waved for Declan to go in ahead of him. "In you go."

Declan stepped over the threshold, quickly taking in the tidy office before his gaze zeroed in on the man behind the desk.

"This guy – " Colt glanced at Declan, waiting.

It took Declan a second to figure out what the man wanted. "Oh. Um, my name's Declan. Declan Mayo."

"Right. Declan is here about a job." Colt backed out of the room and closed the door. The tiny *click* of the latch catching sounded like a gunshot to Declan.

"Have a seat, Declan." The raven-haired man behind the desk motioned toward the chair in front of Declan and then folded his arms across the impressive width of his chest. A charcoal gray sports coat pulled taut across the shoulders, while a white, scoop-neck shirt drew attention to the bronzed skin at his throat. The overhead light caught the slight traces of silver at the man's temples and made the individual hairs shine like strands of the finest silk.

Declan sat on the edge of the seat, his back protesting. Used to slouching, the ramrod-straight posture felt unnatural. As unobtrusively as possible, he stared at the older man and waited for him to speak first.

"What kind of work are you looking for, son?"

"I, uh..." *Why is this so hard? If I can't say it aloud, I sure as hell won't be able to actually do it.* "I want to..." Declan inhaled and let everything out in one long rush of air. "I want to have sex for money."

"Mm hmm." The older man nodded. "Men or women?"

"Excuse me?"

"Do you want to fuck men or women?"

"Uh...men." Declan was a little taken aback by the man's blasé tone. He may as well have asked what the weather was like outside.

"Are you sure about that?"

"Yes, sir." Declan didn't think he could even get it up for a woman. After discovering his attraction to males early, he had never bothered to try anything with the opposite sex.

"Good. May I ask how old you are, Declan?"

"Eighteen, sir."

"Can you prove it?"

"Yes." Declan pulled out his wallet, empty except for a driver's permit and library card, and held it out so the man could see his license.

Graves glimpsed at the ID and nodded. Declan lifted up out of his seat and returned his wallet to his back pocket. Meanwhile, Graves stared at Declan, his gaze intense and invasive. "Are you interested in working full-time or part-time?"

"Full-time, I guess." He needed to make as much as he could.

"Full-time consists of four days on, three days off. Should you change your mind, part-time is weekends only. That's generally when we're the busiest."

"I won't change my mind."

"Fair enough. I'd like to know what you have to offer this establishment that no one else can provide."

"Myself." Declan blushed. "I don't have a ton of experience, but I can make up for that with enthusiasm."

"Precisely how much experience do you have?" Mr. Graves pursed his lips.

The devil on Declan's shoulder urged him to lie. "I've messed around with a lot of men, given handjobs and blowjobs."

"What about anal? Do you prefer to top or bottom?"

"I...uh, bottom, I suppose." At least if he wasn't on top, he wouldn't be expected to keep it up. He could just lay there and let the other man get his rocks off while he used Declan's body.

Mr. Graves cleared his throat, looking uncomfortable. "You suppose? Declan, have you ever had anal sex?"

"Yes." It was a justified lie. There was no way he'd get hired if he admitted to being a virgin. The sad truth was, he'd been waiting until college to really let loose and explore his sexuality. He hadn't wanted his father to find out about his preferences until he was long gone. *A shame it didn't work out that way...*

Mr. Graves sighed and leaned forward, bracing his arms on the desk. "Listen, it's painfully clear you don't have enough experience to know what you're getting yourself into. As much as my clients would love someone green to defile, I can't in good conscience send you on the floor."

"No!" Declan snapped his mouth shut, his desperation rising. His nose burned as if someone had stuck a lit match up both his nostrils. He didn't know what he would do if he didn't get this job. Swallowing his pride, he said, "Please, sir, I really need this job. I know I don't have a lot of experience, but I swear you won't get a single complaint about my performance. I'll do my very best to satisfy all your clients."

The older man silently regarded Declan, his gaze beyond intense. Finally, he gave a terse nod. "All right. I'm willing to give you a shot, contingent on my clients' approval. As long as you keep them happy, you'll keep your job."

Declan released the air he'd been holding in. "Thank you. I promise you won't regret it."

"Not so fast, son. There's a lot of fine print we need to discuss. You may not be so excited about the position once you hear all the stipulations."

"Okay." Nothing he said could be worse than crawling into a stranger's vehicle and giving head for twenty bucks.

"First, I need to ask if you're clean."

"Yes, sir. I washed up before I came out here."

"Good hygiene is important, but that's not what I meant."

"Oh." Declan thought about it for half a second. "*Oh*. Yes, sir. I'm clean."

"Good. Then you won't mind submitting to an oral HIV-antibody test?"

"Uh, no, sir." *Except I don't have the funds to visit a doctor.*

To Declan's relief, Graves pulled a kit out of one of the desk drawers. "These tests only take about twenty minutes to produce results. Although the outcome can't be used for anything official, we've found that they suit our needs just fine."

Declan nodded, unsure of what—if anything—needed to be said. Graves snapped on latex gloves and then pulled two pouches out of the box. He tore them open and took out a little blue stand and what looked like a plastic vial. The cap on the vial was removed and set aside; the vial itself was placed on the middle of the stand.

Graves held the other pouch out to Declan. "Take the test stick and swab the flat pad over your gums on the top and bottom. Make sure not to swab the inside of your cheek when you do it, or the test could be messed up."

"Okay." Declan took the little plastic swab out of the pouch and did as instructed. He took it out of his mouth, holding it gingerly between his thumb and forefinger, and held it out. "All done. Now what?"

Graves nodded toward the stand. "Stick it in the vial, all the way down, with the result window facing outward."

Declan did as he was told, a little embarrassed by the way his fingers shook. The other man removed his gloves and stuffed them into a red plastic bag with a BIOHAZARD label on the outside.

Graves tapped his fingers on the desk. "Now that we've got that out of the way, let me explain how we work things here. If you're hired, you'll be given a price sheet that lists all the favors we provide here at Chicken Ranch. It's up to your discretion what services you provide and which you don't. However, with that being said, I'm sure you realize that the more you're willing to do, the more income you'll make. You should also be aware that all earnings are split fifty-fifty with the house. Any tips are yours to keep. Are you still with me so far?"

"Yes, sir."

"Good. As I was saying, you'll be given a sheet with a comprehensive list of services to offer each client. Clients come here because their confidentiality is guaranteed and it's safer than picking up a hustler off the street. Rubbers are to be used at all times, regardless of how much you're offered to perform raw. Sessions last as long as the client needs, but shouldn't exceed an hour unless specifically requested.

"You'll be issued a room for your private use while you're on the premises, which you rent from the house at a rate of twenty dollars a night. That covers your overhead, plus meals and supplies. Condoms and lube are stocked in each of the rooms. You'll be expected to treat all areas of the house and the other boys on the premises with the utmost respect while you're here."

Declan blinked. They expected him to split half his money with them and pay for room and board? Even if he was willing to go along with that, he didn't have a dime to his name. "Sir, um, does any of that need to be paid up-front? I hate to ask, but I'm a little short on cash right now."

The subtle lines at the corners of other man's mouth softened. "You don't need to worry about that. We'll take it out of your earnings."

"Thank you." Declan brushed an invisible piece of grass off the leg of his jeans, embarrassed to admit he was broke.

"No need to thank me, son. We do the same for everyone here." Graves glanced at his watch. "Time's up. Let's check your test."

Although Declan knew he was clean, his nerves still jangled as he waited to hear the results. He'd never been good at tests of any kind. Was there any such thing as a false positive for this sort of thing?

"The test is nonreactive," Graves said.

"Is that good or bad, sir?"

"Good. It just means there are no antibodies detected."

Declan blew out a breath and sat still, watching as Graves disposed of the kit. Once he was finished, the older man's attention returned to Declan. "Just one last thing; stand up so I can get a good look at you."

Declan rose to his feet, his pulse gaining momentum.

"Disrobe, please."

"Wh-what?" Although he should have seen it coming, the request still caught Declan by surprise. He'd never stripped down in front of anyone before – not like this at any rate. It was so impersonal, so clinical.

"Strip. I need to see what you look like."

Declan's fingers trembled as he gripped the hem of his T-shirt and pulled it over his head. The cotton slipped from his fingers and landed on the cushioned seat of the chair. Swallowing the overabundance of saliva in his mouth, he toed off his sneakers. Then he popped the button on his jeans and slid down the zipper. In a matter of seconds, he was naked and trembling. Would Graves like what he saw or find Declan too bony? He was well aware that he'd lost a little more weight than was healthy, but it wasn't as if he could do anything about it. *Scratch that; I am trying to do something. Otherwise I wouldn't be here.*

Mr. Graves walked around the desk, an unreadable expression on his face, and casually leaned back against the wood. He produced a condom and handed it to Declan. "This is your chance to wow me. Show me what you can do with that pretty mouth."

The older man unzipped his slacks and pulled out his cock and balls. Declan thought his entire body was going to burst into flames. His skin felt feverish and stretched, as if it were suddenly too small for his body. There he stood, naked in front of someone he'd just met. Now the other man wanted him to drop to his knees and give head. Considering the profession he was seeking entry into, he supposed he would have to get used to it, but that didn't mean he had to like it.

"Is there a problem?"

"No, sir." Declan snapped into action. If he wanted this job, then he was going to have to blow the other man's socks off. He knelt in front of the other man, studying the thick prick in front of his face while he tore open the condom.

There is nothing to spaz about. It isn't as if I've never sucked a cock before – and Graves has a nice, thick hunk of meat. Probably the thickest Declan had ever seen, capped by a wide, bulbous crown. He was going to have to work to get his mouth around that baby.

Declan carefully wrapped his fingers around the base, the ruddy flesh hot and heavy against his palm. He used his free hand to carefully roll the condom all the way down to the root. Holding the rubber secure, he leaned forward and experimentally flicked his tongue over the tip.

The taste of latex was foul, but at least it didn't have any of that funky Nonoxynol-9 crud on it. He and Max, his best friend up until they were caught fooling around by Max's older brother, had found out all about the right and wrong kind of condoms for oral sex when they were fifteen.

Not since that early fumbling had he felt so edgy. Nervous sweat built beneath his arms and spread along his hairline. He imagined his face shone with the anxiety of a rube.

Declan cleared his mind and tried to focus on the task at hand. He pursed his lips and wrapped them tightly around the crown, using the tip of his tongue to prod the slit through the condom reservoir and tease all the way around the brim.

The condom shifted under the pressure, rotating around. That wasn't good. Declan grasped Graves's cock to hold it in place as he swallowed the thick shaft. He kissed his fist before reversing direction and moving back up the swollen head.

He worked the base of the shaft, pumping up and down as far as he dared, while he used his free hand to cup the tight, furry sac beneath. He bobbed up and down, his mouth watering around Graves's tool. Saliva dripped from the corners of his mouth and slid down Graves's sac, making everything nice and slick. He moved the moisture around, rolling Graves's balls in the palm of his hand.

Needing a short break, Declan popped his mouth off Graves's dick and ducked lower, mouthing the soft, hair-roughened balls hanging beneath. He glided his tongue over and around Graves's balls, lapping at the silken skin while slowly stroking the other man's thick shaft. The taste of salty flesh eroded the nasty hint of latex lingering in his mouth.

While he lapped the smooth, round contours, he used his spit-slicked palm to work the uppermost inches of Graves's prick, keeping him hard and ready. Declan squeezed the broad head and twisted his fist, hoping he wouldn't be down on his knees all night. His body reacted to the cock in his mouth and scent of male musk, but his heart wasn't in it. A weird sense of detachment clouded his actions. All he needed to do was make Graves come hard and then it would be over. The job would be his.

With that goal in mind, Declan abandoned Graves's balls and lapped his way from root to head. He moistened his lips and formed a tight ring around the tip, applying pressure until his mouth popped over the flared ridge.

Graves exhaled, coloring the air with a quiet moan. Declan descended lower, taking as much as he could without gagging. He added suction on the way back to the crown, pursing his lips and caving his cheeks around the older man's thick length.

A shudder was the only response he received for his efforts. Otherwise, Graves held perfectly still, letting Declan do all the work. The harder Declan sucked, the whiter the older man's knuckles appeared where they clutched the desk's lip.

Finally, blessedly, since Declan's lips were going numb and his jaw ached like hell, Graves tensed up. The thick muscles in his thighs grew taut, promising the man wouldn't last much longer. Declan doubled his efforts, putting in a little more oomph in the hopes that Graves would shoot before his technique got sloppy. He pumped his fist in time with his mouth, willing Graves to come.

The older man bucked forward, shoving his cock farther into Declan's mouth, and started to tremble. His hips twitched, jerking through the spasms as the condom ballooned in Declan's mouth.

Declan forced back his gag reflex and held on until Graves stopped convulsing. He kept a firm grip on the base of the condom and lightly sucked, trying to bring Graves down softly.

A deep sigh sounded from above. Graves pulled back, stripped off the rubber, and shoved his damp dick back inside his pants. "Very nice. You do that well for all my clients, and we'll both stand to make a nice chunk of change."

"Thank you, sir," Declan muttered, uncomfortable with the compliment. With a wince of discomfort, he rose to his feet. "Can I, um, put my clothes back on now?"

"Go ahead." Graves returned to his seat behind the desk and picked up the phone while Declan re-dressed. While he covered up, Declan listened to the other man request for someone to come and escort Declan out of the building. After he hung up, Graves set his elbows on the desk and rested his chin on the tips of his joined fingers. "Do you have any questions for me before you leave?"

"No, sir. Not at this time, although I imagine I'll have some later." All the information was a lot to take in.

"That's fine. There's a bit of a learning curve, but I'm sure you'll catch on quick." Graves rubbed his chin. "Do you have somewhere to stay tonight, Declan?"

"I..." Shame swelled and burned in the pit of Declan's gut. "Of course I do."

A knock sounded on the door, sparing Declan from any further questioning. Colt popped his head inside. "Everything all set?"

Graves nodded. "We're good." To Declan, he said, "I'll expect to see you here at noon tomorrow. We'll give you a better tour and let you talk to the other boys and get your bearings before you begin work tomorrow evening."

"Thank you for the opportunity to prove myself, Mr. Graves." Declan silently followed Colt to the door.

Colt stopped with his hand on the knob and glanced back at Declan over his shoulder. "Are you sure you know what you're getting yourself into, kid?"

Declan nodded.

"All right. Good luck with it, then. You'll probably need it."

"Uh, thanks." *I think.* "See you tomorrow."

Declan had barely stepped outside when the door slammed shut behind him. He took a fleeting look back toward the entrance and shook his head. Colt certainly was friendly. He hoped the rest of the staff was a little warmer.

His empty stomach growled as he descended the steps. One more day, he silently promised himself. *All I have to do is get through one more night on the street and then things will get better. They can't possibly get any worse.*

Chapter Two

Killian took a sip of lukewarm Coke and glanced around the employee dining room. Located on the first subfloor of the Dyotech Industries, the cafeteria was lit by overhead lights that cast a sickly pallor on the men and women mingled around the large, open room. Since it was well after normal working hours, the chow line was closed; the serving area behind the steel and glass sneeze guards was dark. White, bench-style tables lined the room.

Although he was closing in on thirty, Killian felt transported right back to high school and all of its trappings. He was a math club geek then and an accountant now. It amounted to the same thing. The only differences were the subtle laugh lines around his eyes and his jaded outlook on the world. He still preferred numbers and statistics over people. Math was always a sure thing; the variables were constant. Figuring out people was nearly impossible. Frankly, he had a better chance of discovering Atlantis at the bottom of his swimming pool.

The bimonthly mixers weren't fun for anyone, but they were mandatory. The CEO, a man with more money than brains, had gotten into his head that happy employees would work harder and increase the company's profit margins. While the

idea had some basis in fact, the mixers and forced socializing were no one's idea of a good time.

He wondered how much longer he would have to stay before it would be polite to leave. After all, he'd already suffered through an inane hour of small talk and making nice with the newbies, most of whom looked just as uncomfortable. Thankfully, his speech impediment hadn't kicked into full gear. The god-awful stuttering only happened when he was really nervous or trying too hard. He couldn't care less about the impression he made at these shindigs. Like most of the others, he only wanted to put in his time and go home.

Killian swallowed his dread as he saw Cash Rosedale headed his way. With his quick wit and artificially white smile, Cash could charm his way through anything. Only those closest to him knew about the low self-esteem that had plagued Cash since he was a child. His confident swagger and gym-toned body had won the hearts of men and women alike, although Cash didn't stick with anyone long enough to let them see the real person beneath all the pretty polish.

While Cash could be a certifiable pain in the ass, he was also Killian's oldest friend. They'd been fair-weather friends since the first grade, and Killian doubted that would ever change. Even if they did get on each other's nerves more often than not. It was simpler to forgive their foibles than end a friendship spanning over two decades.

"So," Cash said, dropping down on the bench beside Killian. "What are you planning to do tonight? Any grand plans I should know about?"

"Not unless feeding my fish and staring at the TV is your idea of a good time." Killian knew what Cash's reply would be before the man uttered a single word. They went through this same back-and-forth conversation every week. Just because it was a Tuesday and they both had to be back in the office in the morning didn't mean Cash wouldn't have some kind of outlandish plans he wanted share.

"Not likely." Cash set his drink down on the table and leaned in closer. "I found out about this place in the next town over: Chicken Ranch. It's a real, honest-to-goodness, all-male brothel. Can you believe that shit?"

"Well, good for you." Killian sighed, already expecting the invitation before it was spoken aloud.

"You could come with me."

"I don't think so." The last time he'd gone out with Cash, Killian had ended up stranded an hour away from home. The time before that, he'd ended up getting punched in the nose when Cash had ducked a jealous boyfriend's fist. Needless to say, Killian had learned his lesson well.

"Come on, man. It'll be fun."

"Sure. You always say that, and I always end up miserable by the end of the night."

"It won't be like that this time. Honest."

"Uh-huh."

"Besides, when was the last time you had your ashes hauled? I'd say you're past due."

"That's none of your business." Unless his hand counted, it had been a while. He damn sure wasn't telling Cash that.

"Fine. Don't tell me. You being so cranky says more than enough."

Killian blew out a sharp breath, his impatience rising. "I am not cranky."

"Are so."

"What is this, middle school? I'm not arguing with you on the subject of something you know nothing about."

"Come with me." Cash batted his long black lashes at Killian. "Please."

"No."

"Fine." Cash stood up. "Forgive me for wanting to drag you out of your cave for a little fun. Have fun turning into a hermit in that drafty old mausoleum you call a house."

"Have a good time," Killian called out as Cash stormed away. The man was such a drama queen.

Amused, Killian wondered if Cash would actually go anywhere. The other man wasn't prone to do anything by himself, which was probably why he'd invited Killian in the first place. Lord knew, if the shoe were on the other foot, there was no way Killian would tell anyone where he was going. Prostitution was illegal; even if it weren't, he wouldn't want people to know he'd gone to a whorehouse.

Although, now that he thought about it, paying for sex wasn't such a terrible idea. He could avoid all the trappings that went hand in hand with trying to pick someone up: the awkward small talk and stuttering when his nerves got the better of him, not to mention the inevitable rejections that followed.

His last relationship – if anyone would call an entirely one-sided affection such a thing – had crashed and burned over two years earlier. Walking into a pub and finding a burly biker with his tongue tonsils-deep in your date spelled "the end" loud and clear. Since then, he'd lacked the heart to go out and find someone new. It wasn't as if he was unattractive, per se, or had the personality of a cockroach, but *sociable* was last word anyone would think of in affiliation with his name. Cash wasn't exactly wrong for calling him a hermit.

In my defense, it's damn hard to impress someone new when you can't string together a sentence without stuttering like a fool.

Killian rose to his feet, his mind made up. It wasn't as if it would be all that hard to track down. There couldn't be that many places named Chicken Ranch out in the boondocks. He could go and check it out on his own and then decide whether he actually wanted to go through with anything.

Shit, who am I kidding? It's been so long since I got laid that the opportunity to do so without having to put forth any effort is too good to resist.

It wasn't as if he couldn't afford it. After a lifetime of living frugally, he had plenty of money in the bank. Very rarely did he splurge on anything, and when he did, it was normally something useful. Not that most people would call the new high-definition sound projector he'd just purchased a necessity, but it came in handy considering the amount of time he spent at home listening to music or watching TV.

Nodding to people as he moved through the crowd, Killian managed to avoid getting trapped into a conversation with anyone. He hit the elevator button and sighed, thinking he was home free.

Out of the corner of his eye, he spotted a flash of unnaturally red hair and a bright purple dress. He tensed and tapped his foot against the floor, punching the arrow button in a useless effort to make the elevator arrive faster. Thankfully, the doors swooshed open and he quickly ducked inside, narrowly steering clear of Tracy Higgins. He had zero interest in hearing about so-and-so's latest hip replacement or her friend's cousin's brother's funeral. While he wasn't proud of running from a woman half his size, it was much simpler than trying to politely extract himself from a conversation after she'd latched her bony claws into his arm and started jibber-jabbering away.

As the elevator rose to the first floor, Killian popped a piece of cinnamon gum into his mouth and began to make plans for his evening.

What the hell do you wear to a brothel?

Chapter Three

Declan was still reeling as he descended the stairs. He'd just given a man head for money. His throat still ached from the repeated drilling. His lips were a little bruised, and his jaw ached; other than that, he was no worse for the wear. However, the pungent taste of latex lingered on his tongue like a bad memory. Thank goodness the man hadn't wanted any more than that. Although the guy seemed nice enough, he was also over fifty, with a potbelly reminiscent of a mall Santa's fake gut.

A shiver passed through Declan at the thought of someone so unattractive taking his cherry. Sex was sex, but fuck if he wanted his first time to include someone so out of shape; that dude probably would have sweat all over him and huffed and puffed like a pig. Gross.

In retrospect, he should have considered all the unattractive men he'd have to bang working as a rent boy. It stood to reason that good-looking men wouldn't frequent places like Chicken Ranch when they could get all the ass they wanted for free. The only hot men he'd seen so far that night were the other employees. As it turned out, the boss man frowned on fraternization. Go figure.

However, that didn't stop him from enjoying the view or talking to the other men. A gazillion questions had run through his mind, each one more embarrassing than the

last. Thankfully, a few nice men had lent him their ears and listened while he stuttered over one query after another. Only one was obviously perturbed by his presence.

He'd caught one svelte blond in particular shooting him dirty looks more than once throughout the afternoon. Before Declan could let it get to him, one of the other working boys had told him not to take it personal. The guy who'd been giving him the stink eye—Rich or Rick or something that started with an *R*—had a habit of being unfriendly with guys he considered competition. Declan understood that in a roundabout way, even though he doubted he would be a threat.

Comparing them was like relating a prince to a pauper. What's-his-name's hair was thick and shone like spun gold when the light hit it, whereas Declan's limp locks were so pale they verged on white. Peach freckles dotted his nose and cheeks, while the other man's complexion was as tanned and smooth as an artist's canvas. Declan was short and skinny, without a lick of fashion sense. Why would anyone worry about losing business to him?

Grey, a big man who Declan probably would have avoided under other circumstances due to the sheer amount of ink and metal covering his body, was the nicest out of the bunch. He took the time to answer Declan's questions without making him feel like the rube he was, and even went so far as to explain the items on the "menu" they were all instructed to use. Declan made a ton of mental notes until Grey was pulled away by business.

He was a little surprised by how much the men charged, considering the rural area. One of the other men—whose name escaped Declan—had assured him people from all over visited Chicken Ranch. Declan was impressed at the amount of business they seemed to do, considering he'd been born and raised in the same county and had never heard a peep about a brothel of any sort in the area, much less an all-male establishment. Sure, he'd heard whisper about hookers, but he'd just assumed they were talking about the streetwalkers. Hell, he'd never ever seen one of those until recently.

And now here I am, ready and willing to sell my ass to the first man who wants it.

Part of him still thought he was going to wake up any minute, safe and sound in his bed at home. The more realistic half prepared for the night to come. Although he'd gotten off lucky with his first client, he wasn't ignorant enough to think he would make it through the night without his ass being penetrated.

Worried about proper stretching before his first time, he'd taken it upon himself to make sure his muscles were loose and ready for whatever was thrown his way. After selecting one of the many toys stocked in the private room he was issued, he'd covered the butt plug with a condom, spread a copious amount of lube over everything, and slowly worked it into his body. Never having had more than a finger up his ass, the plug going in had burned like the devil. Afterward, he'd gradually gotten used to the feel of the silicon toy stretching him open. It was kind of hard to forget about, considering every move he made jostled the damn thing and caused it to hit his prostate—as it was doing now.

Before he reached the bottom of the staircase, a loud bell rang through the house. As it had been described to him, there were two different bells. One was high-pitched, signaling the arrival of a female. The other bell, which announced the arrival of male clients, sounded low and rusty, kind of like a cowbell. The reason for two different broadcasts was simple; some of the rent boys preferred one sex to the other, while a select few swung both ways. Declan was glad for the segregation. No way did he want to end up in the lineup for a female client. He didn't have anything against women, but the thought of sleeping with one made his stomach roll with nerves. He needed this position too much to fuck it up, and that kind of situation would be a disaster waiting to happen.

Six of the eight men on staff that night rushed out of the sitting rooms on either side of the entrance and lined up in front of the entrance. Declan hustled down the last couple of steps and joined them, standing at the very end of the row.

Colt stepped forward, with a tall, lanky brunet by his side. "Gentlemen, this is Killian. As you can see, Killian, you have your choice from the cream of the crop tonight. Introduce yourselves, boys."

Declan fidgeted as the other men greeted the client, one at a time. The selection process grated on Declan's nerves. When his turn came, he felt a little like the last kid chosen for team sports in physical education class. "Hello. I'm Declan."

Declan winced at the hoarse rasp of his voice. He sounded like he'd chain-smoked a carton of cigarettes.

The client nodded at Declan and then bent to speak quietly to Colt.

Colt smiled at whatever the man said. He then turned his attention to the lineup. "Thank you, boys. You can return to what you were doing. Declan, if you would stay behind, please."

Declan squirmed as the other men filed out of the foyer. Grey patted Declan on the back and whispered, "Hang in there, kiddo."

He clearly heard someone else mutter, "Fresh meat," but couldn't discern who had spoken. Although he was a little irritated by the snarky comment, he supposed he could understand. Regardless of whether the men were friendly during downtime, they were still competing for business.

Left standing with the client, Declan regarded the other man. He was several inches taller than Declan's own five feet eight, placing him somewhere around six feet tall, give or take an inch. His dark brown hair was a little long, the thick locks curling around his ears. Judging from the way the other man kept his hands in his pockets and repeatedly shifted his weight from one leg to the other, Declan guessed the client was almost as nervous as him.

Since the other man didn't seem in any hurry to get things started, Declan took the initiative and stepped forward. "Hi," Declan said. Up close, he noticed a fine sheen of sweat on the other man's upper lip. "Would you like to go somewhere more private and talk?"

The man nodded. "S-s-sure."

"Okay. Just follow me." Without waiting for a reply, Declan turned and started back up the stairs, certain the other man would follow. With every step, he felt more confident the other man's gaze was on his bottom. Just for the hell of it, he put a little extra wiggle in his stride. The sharp intake of breath from behind him made him smile.

Upon reaching the landing at the top of the stairs, Declan turned right and led the way down the hall to the third room on the left. He pushed open the door and stepped aside, motioning for the other man to go in ahead of him. "You first."

"T-thanks."

Declan followed the older man inside and closed the door behind them. His gaze flitted over the decor, still trying to get used to his temporary surroundings. It should have been simple enough, considering the space's resemblance to a hotel room, but he still found it hard to think of these quarters as his for the time being. Since it was unlikely he'd get the same room every time he was on duty, he'd been allowed to peek into several of the rooms to discern for himself that all the rooms were nearly identical. The only difference was the color scheme. His current room had a navy bedspread and area rug. Other than the large bed, the only things in the small, windowless room were a nightstand and an armoire. As he'd already ascertained, the nightstand was stocked with pillow packs of lube and various kinds of condoms. The armoire housed toys of all shapes and sizes in the cabinet, while the bottom drawers contained his few possessions.

"So," Declan said, his back pressed to the door. "What would you like to do this evening...um...sir?" His cheeks heated in embarrassment as the man's name eluded him.

"Killian."

"Thank you." Declan smiled, thankful the man hadn't taken offense by his momentary slip of memory. "Is this your first time here, Killian?"

Once again, the other man nodded.

"All right, so what are you interested in this evening?"

"I'm n-not r-really sure."

"Okay." Declan plucked one of the paper menus hanging off the doorknob and crossed the floor. He sat on bed and patted the mattress beside him, inviting Killian to join him. "Would you like to sit down?"

"Sure." Killian perched on the edge of the bed. "I d-don't d-do this."

"What? You don't sit on beds or talk to strangers about sex?"

Killian snorted. "The l-l-latter."

"Ah," Declan murmured, noncommittally.

Silence filled the gap between them. Finally, Declan could take no more. He scooted closer and rested his hand on Killian's thigh. He squeezed the firm flesh under his palm and met the older man's wide-eyed gaze. "Would you like to look over your options? Everything we offer is right here in black and white. I could even go over them with you, if you'd like."

Killian's Adam's apple bobbed. "All right."

"Well, first of all, I should mention that everything is referred to as a party. They're pretty much self-explanatory. There's a frottage party, an oral party, an anal party, et cetera. Time limits are broken down by the hour, but if money's an issue we're allowed to go as low as thirty minutes for half-price. I could suck you off, as slow and easy or as quick and dirty as you'd like. If that doesn't interest you" — Declan leaned in, his heart pounding — "we could always fuck." Although the thought of anal sex set his nerves on edge, he wasn't sure his throat could take another pounding so soon after the last.

Killian licked his lips. "I-I-I... The last one."

"You want to fuck me, or the other way around?" *Christ, me and my big mouth.* He'd fuck things up for sure if he had to top so soon. He'd probably come before he even got it in — and wouldn't that just be fucking fabulous? The man would surely run to Graves

and demand his money back. Rightly so, since Declan couldn't hold his load. Then Declan would be out on his ass. Again.

"I, um — "

Declan swallowed his pride and interrupted. "My ass is really tight. You won't be disappointed."

"That s-sounds really g-good."

"Okay. All you have to do is pay up front—cash only, please—and I'm all yours for the next hour." While his fear of losing his job receded, anxiety over taking a cock up his ass jumped to the forefront of his mind and yelled, *Boo*. He was in over his head, but there was no stopping now. He would just have to fake his way through it and pray for the best.

Declan bit into the inside of his cheek and observed as the older man rose to his feet and dug out his wallet. He pulled out a mound of fifty-dollar bills, counted out the right amount as Declan watched, and then handed the money over.

"Thanks." Declan took the wad of cash, stood, and stuffed it inside the pocket of his jeans. Facing the front of the bed, he slipped his T-shirt off over his head and dropped it to the floor. With his sneakers tied loose, all it took was a little nudge to rid himself of them. The jeans went next. He popped the top button and slid down the zipper, meeting the other man's heavy-lidded gaze. A shimmy-shake of his hips sent the denim pooling to his knees. He turned and bent at the waist, showing off his ass as he worked the jeans off and pitched them aside. Underwear was a waste of time. Since most of his were plain old tighty whities, he chose not to wear them.

A quiet groan from the man on the bed was all the confirmation he needed to know he was getting through loud and clear. His main objective was to turn the guy on and make him come, earn his fee, and then move on to the next.

So far, so good.

Declan sauntered over to the bed and dropped to his knees between Killian's legs. He pinched the material near the man's right knee and gave it a tug. "What do you say we take these off so you can be more comfortable?"

Since he already knew the answer, he didn't wait for Killian to respond. His hands shook as he undid Killian's black leather belt and released the top button. The zipper slid down with little fuss, revealing a pair of plain boxer briefs so white, Declan figured they had to be brand-new.

Declan tapped the other man's hip. "Lift up a little for me?"

Killian leaned back on his elbows and raised his hips, creating enough space for Declan to slide the other man's pants and underwear down over his hips. He caught a quick glimpse of a flat belly and sparse hair before Killian's shirt fell and concealed his stomach and groin from sight.

After he'd folded the pants and set them aside, Declan returned his attention to Killian. He made an exaggerated show of licking his lips and hoped his smile wasn't as wobbly as it felt.

"Do you want to take off your shirt? I'd hate for it to get messy." Not to mention the dude looked a little funny sitting on the bed sans his pants and drawers while still wearing a short-sleeved, button-down dress shirt the color of fresh salmon.

"Uh, yeah." He smiled down at Declan. "That would be a g-good idea, huh?"

The next time Declan licked his hips, it was sincere. Killian might be bashful, but he had other things going for him—like a tight, firm stomach and a long, fat cock. Unfortunately, said cock wasn't even close to hard.

If he has that many inches soft, I'd hate to see what he looks like stiff.

"S-sorry. I guess I'm a little n-n-nervous."

Declan was glad he wasn't the only one, even if they weren't nervous for the same reasons. "You don't need to be. I'll do whatever you want." *Within reason.*

"I know, but this is w-weird."

"Yeah, I can see that." It was strange for him too — being intimate with someone he didn't know and yet forced to keep an emotional distance from them at the same time. He hoped it would get easier with time. "Is there anything I can do to put you at ease?"

Heat crept up the man's chest and spread to his neck. "Kiss me?"

"All right." There was nothing hard about a kiss.

Instead of leaning up and giving the man what he asked for, Declan decided to rush things along. He got up, gave Killian a light shove backward, and straddled his lap. The older man blinked up at him, silently exuding anticipation through his big brown eyes.

Declan moistened his lips and gently slanted them over Killian's. The older man's lips were soft and firm, hesitant in the way they lightly skimmed his own before coming back for a harder, deeper kiss. Declan parted his lips, inviting Killian inside, and the client's tongue slid into his mouth as if it belonged there, bringing a hint of cinnamon and an unidentifiable earthy flavor that Declan couldn't get enough of. Reacting more on instinct than thought, he angled his head to the right for deeper access and lost himself in the taste and feel of the other man's hard body beneath him.

It's been so long since he'd made out with anyone. Declan loved to kiss, but finding someone else who shared his desires was never simple. Being forced to hide who he was from his father hadn't made it easy to put himself out there for prospective boyfriends. A lack of transportation had kept him out of the neighboring city, where his possibilities might have broadened.

Killian groaned into Declan's mouth, tugging him out of his head and back into the spider web of reality. The man beneath him was not his boyfriend. Killian was a client, a man who'd paid to fuck Declan, and nothing more. Time and place slammed back into perspective, forcing Declan to end the kiss and pull away.

To cover the abrupt departure, he quickly slid down the bed and lay flat on the mattress between Killian's legs. He shot a nervous smile up at Killian, then bent and ran

his tongue up the thin line bisecting Killian's hair-roughened sac. The musky scent of skin rose beneath a hint of soap, growing stronger with every swipe of his tongue.

As odd as it seemed, licking the older man's balls wasn't as invasive as kissing his lips. Without the mouth-to-mouth connection, Declan was better able to keep perspective. For instance, now that he was wrapped up in the cinnamon flavor of Killian's tongue, he noticed the state of Killian's erection. While not exactly hard, he was definitely on the rise. *And it appears as if he's a show-er instead of a grower.*

Declan was relieved to say the least. Taking a normal cock up his ass was one thing; letting something massive ream him a new asshole was an entirely different matter. Killian's cock was long and thick, but he wasn't freakishly large. *Thank fuck.*

He ducked his head lower and laved the smooth skin behind Killian's balls. He ran the flat of his tongue from the backside of Killian's sac to the front, delighting in the way the sprinkling of coarse hair over smooth, silky skin abraded his tongue and made his mouth water.

While lavaging Killian's balls, Declan wrapped his fist around the man's shaft and stroked his hardening cock to full tumescence. As much as he would've loved to sneak a taste, he had to play safe. Although he could get Killian ready for sex a lot faster by using his mouth, it was virtually impossible to put a condom on a soft cock.

A quick glance up revealed Killian staring down at him with an expression so lustful even a virgin would have the ability to identify it. Knowing he was wanted went a long way toward boosting Declan's confidence. He bent and licked the thick shaft up one side and down the other, carefully avoiding the leaking head. The husky sound of the other man's moans drove him on.

Without taking his mouth off Killian, Declan blindly searched for the condom he'd dropped on the mattress. The tips of his fingers skimmed the little foil package, fumbled with it, then snatched it up off the blanket. Declan sat up on his knees between Killian's thighs, tore the package open with his teeth, and deftly rolled the lubricated latex down the other man's shaft.

With that accomplished, he reached behind himself and eased out the butt plug and pitched it over the side of the bed. He didn't delude himself into thinking there wouldn't be a little pain regardless of the efforts he took, but he hoped it would be minimal.

Killian's eyes widened. "Has that been up your ass this whole time?"

"Yep." Declan smirked. "Want to put something else up there now?"

"Oh yeah." Killian waggled his fingers in a come-hither motion. "Come here."

Killian was dressed to play, and Declan's ass was lubed and ready to go. There was no reason to put off the inevitable. He carefully climbed up onto Killian's lap and sat astride his groin. The stiff proof of Killian's desire pressed up into Declan's balls.

At least he was on top and could control what was going to happen.

Declan lifted up a little and reached beneath him to grasp Killian's shaft. "Ready for me?"

"Oh yeah." Killian clasped Declan's hips, his palms warm and damp.

Declan was grateful for the help. He needed a little something to steady him as he lined Killian's cock up with his hole. The blunt, sheathed tip felt twice as large against his entrance. He took a deep gulp of air and slowly let it out as he pushed down, forcing his muscles into submission as the wide head popped into his body.

Killian's sharp inhale was drowned out by the gasp that exploded from Declan's mouth. Fuck, it burned. Flames of agony licked his anus and shot up his channel. He knew it would sting, but he hadn't expected it to feel like his asshole was being reamed by a telephone pole.

Killian's fingers opened and closed on Declan's hips. "Ah...you're tight."

"Uh-huh." Declan braced his hands on Killian's smooth chest and rocked back and forth, taking a little more of Killian's length inside him with every shift of his hips. The other man's pulse thundered against his palms.

Declan sank his teeth into his lower lip and tried to concentrate on the slight sting of his teeth rather than the rising burn of tender, unused muscles giving way. He panted and pushed through most of the pain, his mind focused on the goal at hand. The little plug he'd been using didn't have anything on Killian's fat cock. It might not have been wider, but it was damn sure a lot longer, touching places the plug hadn't even thought to reach.

Christ. Is it supposed to hurt like this? He couldn't imagine why anyone would like it if that was the case. *Unless the only people who bottomed got off on the pain.*

Do I have to be a pain slut to like anal sex? God, he hoped not. He'd never been keen on the sight of his own blood. Just the thought of it made him feel a little woozy.

With Killian fully sheathed, Declan gently rolled his hips. There was a slight twinge of pain, but it was manageable. Taking a deep gulp of air, he slowly raised up until only the broad head of Killian's prick remained inside. The empty, aching sensation left behind was a pleasant surprise. Regardless of the initial pain, his body wanted Killian's fat cock.

That isn't so bad. Maybe I can do this after all.

Killian shifted, putting his feet flat on the bed and changing the angle of penetration in the process. The front of his thighs provided back support to Declan as he descended, slowly taking Killian back inside. Halfway home, something bright and sparkly lit up inside of him. His muscles clenched, but it wasn't from pain. "Oh, fuck. Do that again."

"This?" Killian rolled his hips and shoved upward, his steady gaze locked on Declan's face.

"Yes!" Declan squeezed his eyes shut, the pleasure too intense to share.

Killian kept pumping into him, shallow at first and then deeper and deeper until his groin was slamming up into Declan's ass. Declan's dick surged to full length, hard as granite where it bobbed up and down in the wake of each thrust. He met each snap of

Killian's hips, pushing back for more, and rode through the burn, anticipating the quick flashes of pleasure he got whenever Killian's cock rubbed over his sweet spot.

Sounds unlike anything he'd ever heard spilled from Killian's throat, coloring the air with breathy pants crossed with guttural moans. Declan fought to stay silent, concentrating on the way his pulse echoed in his ears and the sound of the bedsprings creaking beneath them.

Somewhere between the pain and the mind-numbing pleasure, making Killian come hard morphed into a matter of pride rather than an obligation. He wanted to see the other man's face go slack and twist in pleasure. He needed to know he was the one responsible for making Killian feel good. The yearning almost eclipsed his own need to get off. *Almost.*

As it stood, the skin on his dick felt tight and ached as if it were too small to contain his need. His balls were tender and swollen, heavy where they hung from his body. He didn't think it was going to take very much more for him to spill. Once he did, he was going to make it his mission to get Killian off in spectacular fashion.

Declan grabbed his dick where it bobbed unaided and gave it a loose stroke. Precum spilled down his shaft, lubing him up nice and slick. *Oh, yeah. It's not going to take much at all to...*

Out of the blue, Killian quit moving. Declan dropped his dick and stared down at the other man. "What's wrong?"

"This isn't going to work." Killian stared up at him, breathing heavily.

"What?" Declan's spirits crashed and burned. Had he done something wrong? Was Killian going to complain about his performance and get him fired? Oh God. He couldn't go back to sleeping outside. It was cold and dark, and he was so fucking lonely.

"Hang on tight," Killian said, rising up from below.

Before Declan could question what the other man was going to do, he found himself flipped over onto his back, Killian hovering above him. "Oh my God." *That's*

great. He didn't know it was possible to flip-flop like that and not hurt yourself in the process.

Killian grinned down at him. "Like that?"

"Uh-huh." Declan thought the other man should smile more often, although he didn't say so. The joyful expression transformed Killian from cute to stunning. Or maybe that was the mussed hair and flushed cheeks. Declan wasn't sure, but the man above did not look like the bashful guy he'd brought upstairs.

While looking down at Declan, Killian eased back and then thrust deep inside. He sped up with each subsequent stroke until he was slamming into Declan. Their bodies slapped together; the sweat coating their skin made them slide against each other and grapple for purchase. Declan clung to Killian's shoulders, his fingers biting into the man's skin. Although Killian started out by bracing his weight on his arms, he quickly switched tactics and grasped each of Declan's calves, lifting them up and over his shoulders.

The new position shifted Killian deeper, his cock rubbing against all new nerve endings and setting them alight. Killian plunged into him in a fast, punishing rhythm. His fat prick reamed Declan's ass with every hard lunge forward, making him cringe and whimper from the mixture of pleasure and pain coursing through his body.

Nevertheless, Declan rocked his hips and met each stroke. He panted through the pleasure and whimpered through the pain. Somehow, the aching fullness furthered his desire, making it all the more gratifying while driving it ever higher.

With each thrust, Declan felt himself getting closer. Ecstasy coiled low in gut, ready to burst free at the slightest additional encouragement. His muscles tautened in warning, preparing to send him into orbit. Only sheer will kept him from giving in to the gratification that was just out of reach. He was not going to be the first one to come. *Absolutely not.*

Declan shut his eyes and concentrated on squeezing his muscles around Killian's cock. It wasn't as easy as he'd thought it would be. He was almost ready to give up

when a raw moan spilled from Killian's lips. Declan opened his eyes just in time to see Killian's face go slack. The other man's hips stuttered and slowed, grinding against Declan's ass in tiny circles.

"Oh God," Killian gasped, burying his face in the curve of Declan's throat.

Watching the other man come was the final shove Declan needed. He grabbed his cock and stroked it hard, not wanting to be left behind. He needed to come too, and there was no guarantee Killian would be thoughtful enough to help him out before he left.

Two quick, hard pumps and a tight squeeze around the head was all it took. His cock bucked in his hand, firing off one volley of cum after another. He closed his eyelids, shutting out the man above him as his climax rushed through him in wave after wave of unbearable ecstasy. The feel of his balls unloading was secondary to the way his ass contracted, squeezing Killian's meat with every single pulse of hot, slick fluid that escaped. It went on and on until Declan was sure his nuts were trying to crawl up inside his body.

He bit his tongue to stifle the yell building in his throat. Although he hadn't thought there would be anything more intimate than having another man's cock in his ass, he was dead wrong. Sharing his pleasure with a stranger, a man who paid to use his body, crossed a line Declan wasn't ready to travel. Maybe he could get to the point where it would be no big deal, but that time wasn't now.

Declan winced as Killian pulled out of his body and rolled off him. He kept his eyes shut and listened as the other man moved around, presuming Killian was cleaning up by the resounding *snap* of latex coming off.

The mattress shifted as Killian slid back into bed. Soft lips pressed against Declan's collarbone. "That was great."

"Mm hmm," Declan murmured, his lips curving at the compliment. He opened his eyes and found himself gazing up into Killian's deep brown eyes. Up so close, Declan could count each individual lash framing the other man's eyes.

An urge to curl into the big man's heat and take a nap overwhelmed Declan. Killian was so nice and warm. Being with him was unlike anything Declan had expected.

Killian's lips brushed over Declan's, soft as can be. Declan stretched up into the kiss, his lips parting for more. Killian seemed to know precisely what he needed. The older man cupped Declan's cheek, holding him close, while he slid his tongue past Declan's lips. Their tongues leisurely batted back and forth, comforting more than reigniting the flames of desire.

Before they could get carried away, Declan pulled back. Killian sighed and rolled over onto his back, throwing an arm over his face to block out the harsh glare from the overhead light.

As much as Declan hated to move, he really didn't have time to be idle. His schedule didn't allow for afterglow. Graves had warned him not to let a session go beyond an hour unless the client specifically requested it.

More importantly, he needed to remember his place. Curling up beside the other man and basking in the moment probably defeated the purpose of coming to a professional to get off. The trick was to be friendly while keeping a professional distance.

Now if I could just figure out how to do that when I have a stranger's dick up my ass...

With a touch of reluctance, Declan sat up on the side of the bed. Newly broken-in muscles cramped; his ass was sore and bruised. How the hell was anyone supposed to fuck more than once a night? All he wanted to do was curl up into a ball and go to sleep.

He glanced over at the man beside him and sighed. He liked Killian, but it wouldn't do to forget why he was there. It would be all too easy to get lost in the feel of his flesh merged with another's and forget he wasn't a friend or lover.

He was only a whore.

Chapter Four

Declan counted his cash, noted that his latest john had given him a hundred-dollar tip—which was damn good for a trick before nine a.m.—and happily trotted down the stairs to the main floor. He was coming off another four-day shift, and he was more than ready to get the hell out of there.

Part of him still found his occupation hard to believe, even after nearly three months. He was supposed to be in college, staying in a cramped dorm room and working a little part-time gig for spending money. Instead, he was sucking and fucking to pay the rent. For his efforts, he had a tiny furnished efficiency apartment that usually smelled like whatever nasty crap his neighbors were cooking, and a beat-up old Chevy to call his own. It was a damn sight better than sleeping on a park bench and worrying about where his next meal was coming from.

The thing he was most proud of, however, was scraping up enough dough to enroll in a couple of business classes at the local community college. It wasn't everything he'd dreamed of in an education, but it was his and he'd done it all on his own.

After cashing out and pocketing his money, Declan strolled into the casual lounge to say good-bye to his buddies. He had the next three days off, and he didn't plan on having any reminders of the business until he stepped foot back on the ranch.

He walked right into the middle of a conversation and stood off to the side as Grey and Ricky finished yet another argument over the merits of being a working stiff.

"This job is a means to an end." Ricky Heart, the same guy who'd gone out of his way to be pissy to Declan when he'd first arrived, tossed his bangs out of his face and glared at Grey and Colt, who sat on the sofa. "As soon as I can find a hot sugar daddy, I'm getting the fuck out of here, and you can bet your balls that I'm not going to miss selling my ass to smelly old men."

Grey snorted. "That's your opinion, sweetcheeks. And you know what people say about opinions, don't you?"

Colt laughed. "Oh yeah. Everyone has one, and they're all full of shit."

"Exactly," Grey said, talking right over Ricky's weak "fuck you." "I don't know what's not to like about this job. Personally, I get off as many times a night as I can, and I get paid for the pleasure of fucking as many tight asses as I can. It doesn't get much better than that."

"Hey," Declan interrupted before the men got into full mode with the arguing. "I just wanted to say I'm leaving, guys. I'll talk to you all in a few days."

He waved and quickly left the room before anyone could ask what he thought. Although things had gotten easier for him, he highly doubted he would ever be in love with selling his body to pay the bills. It was a means to an end and nothing more, just like Ricky had said. While he didn't always see eye to eye with the other man, they did have common feelings about selling their asses. Some people just weren't cut out for the business, even if life and circumstances forced them into it.

Declan crossed the gravel parking lot and got into his car. The door creaked, in need of a good oiling, as he slammed it shut. He'd have to try and remember to spray

some more WD-40 in the hinges when he got home. With a little luck, he'd still have a can or two at the apartment. He could put it to use after he took a much-needed nap.

By noon, Declan had given up sleep and lounging around his nearly bare apartment. There was nothing to do within the four walls he called home except sleep or jack off, and his body wasn't interested in either. What it wanted was food.

Since he'd eaten the junk food he'd bought during his last work break, and the minifridge that doubled as a nightstand was empty, he was forced to go out and visit the most despised grocery store. If he wanted to make it anywhere, he needed to fill up the tank on his gas-guzzler first. As far as he was concerned, the only thing worse than spending his hard-earned money on food was blowing it on gas. If fuel went much higher, he was going to be traveling on his feet again.

At the last minute, Declan decided to hit some thrift stores and see if he could find anything worthwhile before he went grocery shopping. While his responsible side wanted to sock away all his earnings for a rainy day, the indulgent half of him wanted to splurge a little. He didn't really need anything, but that didn't mean there weren't things he wanted.

In the months since he'd started working, he'd been frugal to the extreme. Terrified of finding himself homeless again, he'd scrimped and saved and counted every penny. The only real splurge he'd made was on school. Even that wasn't so much a luxury as an investment in his future. He did not want to turn tricks forever. He figured he'd graduate with an associate's degree in two years and land a job doing something, although he wasn't sure what yet. That was the good thing about a business management degree. As he saw it, he could do many things with that one little slip of paper.

All he had to do was figure out what he wanted to do with his life.

* * * * *

Killian wandered aimlessly up and down one aisle after another as he tried to figure out what he wanted to eat for the next week. He hated grocery shopping, but it was a necessity if he didn't want to rely on fast food. Although he loved a juicy hamburger and fries as much as the next man, he needed to stay away from the grease. Newly thirty—his birthday having passed without so much as a peep the week before—his body wasn't as forgiving toward a bad diet as it used to be.

Cooking was a nice stress reliever, but it lost its effect when he had to pitch half of whatever he made in the trash at the end of the night. Recipes were typically designed for two or more, making it difficult—if not downright impossible—to cook for one without having abundant leftovers. It was one of the hidden drawbacks of being single.

Not counting his adventure into prostitution, he'd had exactly one date in the last three months, which had ended in disaster. After mistakenly allowing a woman at work to set him up with her brother, Killian had spent a two-hour meal eating rabbit food and listening to a smug yuppie describe his calling as a proctologist and brag about his custom Porsche. There'd been so many one-liners running through his head that he'd bitten into his cheek to keep from cracking jokes at the other man's expense. He'd been so relieved at the end of the night that he'd left a twenty-dollar tip.

That was the very last time he was going to allow someone to set him up on a blind date. He wasn't ever, ever, *ever* doing that again. If he couldn't find his own dates, then too bad, too sad. He'd rather be alone than miserable.

Besides, it wasn't like he was pitiful. Not everyone was cut out to be part of a happy couple. While he'd love to have someone to share his life with, he didn't need a significant other to fulfill him. It wasn't as if he didn't have friends. There were people he talked to at work and Cash. Although now that he thought about it, they hadn't really hung out together all that much lately. That wasn't really anything new. Cash went out and had his little adventures and inevitably came back to brag about them because he knew Killian would placate him and listen to all his tall tales.

Killian was weighing the pros and cons of fixing yet another boxed meal versus some kind of frozen heat-and-eat dinner when he heard a god-awful crash behind him. He set a package of Hamburger Helper back on the shelf and turned in time to see a slender blond picking himself up off the floor. Two cans rolled off what remained of the center aisle display and slid into the young man's white sneaker.

An involuntary smile spread across Killian's face as he recognized the blond. Declan, the hot prostitute he'd had the pleasure of sleeping with a few months earlier, stood a few feet away. He clutched a family-size bag of plain potato chips to his chest like a shield. The younger man's hair was a little longer and he looked as if he'd put on a little weight, but it was most definitely him. No way would Killian forget those big blue eyes or the sweet way Declan's fair skin flushed when he was uncomfortable or getting ready to come. He looked even better than Killian recalled, which was quite a feat considering the number of times he'd pulled the younger man's image out of his spank bank and put it to good use.

At the moment, Declan's cheeks were pink with embarrassment. His eyes appeared a little wild, as if he expected someone to pop out of the shelves and lecture him for standing too near a display and knocking it off center.

Killian wasn't sure what the protocol was for acknowledging a man you paid to have sex with, but he wasn't going to look a gift horse in the mouth. An opportunity to strike up a conversation was at hand; he wasn't going to miss it.

A couple of steps brought him closer. Killian stopped a few feet away and offered a smile. "Are you okay?"

"Uh, yeah. I guess so." Declan glanced around and settled his bright gaze on Killian. One hand absently rubbed his left arm. "They should have a warning label out front: 'Beware of cans; they pack a wallop if crossed.'"

"Right." Killian smiled and nodded. "You don't r-remember me, do you?" He bit into his tongue, cursing his stupid stutter. Even after very careful enunciation, the strength of how very much he cared showed in a much-too-obvious way. He didn't like

the way his weaknesses were stripped bare for all to see. He wished he didn't get so damn flustered. The way it exacerbated his speech impediment was infuriating. Deep down, he knew he was a good man. He was smart and kind, but that never seemed to be enough. Humanity also expected men to be charming and aggressive, two traits he'd been born without. Perfection was the price a gay man had to pay to succeed in today's world, and he inevitably came up lacking.

"I..." Declan stared at him for a moment. His expression slowly morphed from bored placidity to dawning recognition. "*Oh...* I do remember you. I'm not so great with names, but yours was something that started with a C. It was something unusual, right?"

"Close enough. I'm Killian, Killian Hamilton. It's nice to see you again. You look great."

"Thanks. So do you." Declan shuffled his feet. "Could we move this conversation to another aisle? I don't want to get caught next to the mess I made."

"Sure." Killian laughed, relaxing a little. "Lead the way."

Declan mumbled something about toaster waffles and took off down the aisle. Killian followed, doing his best not to stare at the man's ass. The memory of how hot and tight Declan had felt around his cock caused blood to flood south much quicker than it should have.

Killian dragged his gaze away from the firm, denim-encased globes. "So you have a sweet tooth, huh?"

"Hmm?" Declan stopped at the end of the aisle and looked both ways before turning right. "Oh, well, a little bit. I like sweets just fine. Mostly the waffles are just quick and easy to fix, though. I'm not much of a cook."

"That's a shame." Killian saw his opening and jumped on it, while hustling to keep up. "I really love to cook. I could make you dinner sometime, maybe show you how to make a few simple things."

Declan stopped next to the frozen foods, pulled a box of strawberry waffles out of one of the cases, then looked up at Killian. "Thanks for the offer, but I probably shouldn't."

"Well," Killian continued. "If you don't feel comfortable coming to my house, I could take you out for dinner somewhere?"

"I don't know if I should date anyone I know from, uh" — Declan shot a glance at the little old woman perusing frozen veggies — "work."

"I promise I'm not a loony stalker or anything. I just..." Killian thought over his words carefully. At this point he didn't really have anything to lose. "I could really use another friend. It doesn't have to be any more than that, if you don't want it to."

A heartbeat went by before Declan met Killian's gaze and gave a tight nod. "All right."

Chapter Five

On the following Friday, Declan stood outside the theater on First Street and wondered if he'd made a huge mistake in agreeing to a date with a former john. Killian seemed like an all-right guy, from what Declan could remember of their night together, but he didn't know the man from Adam. It wasn't like they'd traded life histories before they'd fucked. As a matter of fact, they hadn't talked very much at all.

Going to the movies with Killian, rather than having dinner, was Grey's brainchild. He seemed to think sitting in the dark with Killian would tell Declan more about the other man than sharing a meal and conversation would. Declan still wasn't sure how Grey had come to that deduction, but he was willing to give it a whirl since there were a couple of good action movies out that he wanted to see anyway.

He supposed if they made it through two hours of explosions in the dark without Killian trying to cop a feel, he would feel better about the state of affairs. At the moment, however, he was nervous and uncertain about the whole situation.

Declan paced back and forth in front of the ticket window, watching people come and go. Finally, before his nerves had time to talk him out of waiting any longer, he spotted Killian striding toward him. The older man looked good in the twilight of evening. His hair caught the faded rays of light and reflected it, making his dark brown

hair shine with red highlights. His broad shoulders stretched a white polo shirt to capacity, with the collar open just enough to show off the tender dip at the base of his throat. Pressed khakis and loafers rounded out his look and made him look like Declan's idea of an executive yuppie. He wished he'd paid attention and noticed what Killian had driven to the theater. He'd bet his right ear that the older man drove an economical four-door car. There didn't seem to be anything flashy about Killian Hamilton. Declan hoped Killian was as nice and down-to-earth as he seemed.

"Hey," Killian called, stepping up on the sidewalk. "I hope I'm not late."

"No, you're right on time. I was just early."

"You haven't been waiting long, have you?"

"Nope." *Just long enough to have second thoughts.*

"Well, are you ready to go in? I've been looking forward to seeing this movie all week. It looks really good. Of course, Liam Neeson is a point in the movie's favor." Killian smiled and winked.

"He is a beautiful man." Declan smiled. Maybe this wouldn't be so bad after all.

An hour and a half later, Declan exited the theater with Killian by his side, feeling a lot more optimistic. The movie had sucked, but Killian had proven to have a good sense of humor and an amazing laugh. More importantly, he hadn't tried to get handsy during the film.

Declan shoved through the glass door leading out into the parking lot. "That movie was insane."

"You've got that right. I don't know what they were thinking about when they killed the hero off at the end of the movie."

"I agree. It was a total downer." Declan stepped off the sidewalk and glanced around. "Well, I'm right there." He pointed to where his clunker was parked under the streetlight. "Where are you parked?"

"See the silver Hummer two rows behind you? That's me."

"Nice," Declan said, impressed. Other than sports cars, a Hummer was about the least economical vehicle he could think of.

"Thanks. I probably wouldn't have gotten it, but a salesman offered me a hell of a deal after the gas prices skyrocketed. I couldn't resist."

"I don't blame you. It's a sweet ride."

Declan headed toward their vehicles. He stopped by the driver's-side door of his car. "Well, I had fun tonight."

Killian stepped a little closer. "Me too. I hope we can do it again sometime."

The sounds of the other vehicles and moviegoers passing nearby faded out. Declan licked his lips. "I'd like that."

"I'd really like to kiss you right now."

Declan licked his lips. "Okay." *A little kiss wouldn't hurt anything.*

He tilted his chin up as Killian closed the space between them. Killian's warm lips descended over his own, teasing his senses. Firm and salty from the popcorn they'd shared during the movie, Killian's mouth stroked and played Declan's flesh, compelling his lips and tongue to join in on the fun.

A slick tongue skimmed his lips, making him shiver. He parted his lips and met Killian's tongue with the tip of his own, flicking it back and forth in a long, gentle dance of seduction. He wanted Killian to desire him even if he didn't intend to go home with the other man. Sure, he was being a little bit of a tease, but it felt damn good to just let go and make out with someone he liked, to know deep down in his bones that nothing was expected of him and he wasn't required to put out at the end of the evening.

It was oddly liberating.

All too soon, the gentle, feathery caresses weren't enough. Declan twined his arms around Killian's neck and pulled him closer. Their lips meshed until he wasn't certain where he began and Killian ended.

Killian's tongue swept beyond Declan's teeth, circling and dancing to a primal rhythm older than time. He plundered Declan's mouth with a soulful intensity that stole his breath and made his knees weak. Arousal flooded his groin and filled his cock so fast his head spun.

Killian was everywhere: the spicy scent of his cologne, the heat of his large, strong body. Even the taste of the cinnamon gum he favored was burned into Declan's taste buds. The sweet invasion of Killian's tongue only a small sampling of the pleasure the other man was capable of bestowing. If the older man was using the kiss as an opportunity to show Declan what he was missing out on, he was succeeding.

One long drugging kiss led to another and another until Declan didn't know up from down or left from right. He slid his thigh between Killian's and rutted against him, rubbing his hard, aching cock into the groove of Killian's hip.

Killian fought back by catching Declan's lower lip between his teeth. He nipped the swollen flesh and then soothed away the sting with a glide of his nimble tongue. Declan jerked, moaning into Killian's mouth, and bumped into the car behind him.

Cold metal pressed into his back and brought him to his senses. With a touch of reluctance, Declan eased his mouth away from Killian's. He blinked up at Killian, staring into dark eyes glazed with the same desire coursing through his blood. "Wow."

Killian took a step back, giving him some space. "I, um...I'm sorry. I really didn't mean to get so carried away."

"It's all right. I was right there with you."

"Oh yeah?"

"Definitely." Declan grinned. "So, maybe we could do this again next week?"

"Sure," Killian said with a smile. "I'd like that."

* * * * *

The following weekend, Declan agreed to meet Killian for dinner at a small Italian restaurant in town. Although he'd been forced to plead with one of the other men at

work and agree to swap days in order to get the evening off, he had high hopes for the night. Just the thought of the kiss Killian had lain on him the weekend before had Declan's toes curling in anticipation.

Killian seemed sweet enough to give Declan a toothache. He could only hope his first impression of the man held up through another date. It had been nice having something to look forward to for a change.

They'd just been seated when Killian asked the question Declan had dreaded. "If you don't mind my asking, how did you end up working out at the ranch?"

As far as questions went, it wasn't anything over the top. That didn't prevent Declan's stomach from churning with dread. "That's kind of a long story."

"We have time."

"Are you sure you really want to hear this? It isn't exactly sparkling dinner conversation." Declan wasn't sure he really wanted to share that shameful story so early on.

"Well, I am curious, but I don't want to force you into telling me anything you're uncomfortable with. I really like you, Declan. I just want to get to know you a little better."

"Okay." Declan took a deep breath while he tried to figure out where to begin. "Well, after my mom passed away last year, my dad really started to lay into the booze. As I'm sure you can imagine, he wasn't the easiest person to get along with while he was drinking. The alcohol made his temper skyrocket until even the smallest things set him off.

"Rather than rock the boat, I toed the line and kept my mouth shut. I mean, I only had about a year until I could graduate and leave for college. I figured it wouldn't be so bad. A lot of people had it worse than me, you know?"

"Sure," Killian said, nodding.

His mouth suddenly dry at the prospect of recounting what happened next, Declan took a sip of his drink. "Are you positive you want to hear the rest?"

"I do."

"All right." Declan squirmed under Killian's perusal. "So, anyway... I made it through okay until the end of July. I only had a couple of weeks to go when I came inside from mowing the grass one afternoon and found my dad sitting in his recliner with a beer in one hand and a handful of my dirty magazines in the other. Apparently he'd gone into my room in search of batteries and stumbled on the small stash of porn hidden at the bottom of my desk instead."

Killian leaned forward. "Oh, shit. I take it he didn't know you're gay?"

"No. Don't get me wrong, I'm not trying to paint my dad as the bad guy here. He was always there for me when I was little. But losing Mom was just too much for him. I wasn't about to tell him I was gay. Even without the booze, he wasn't the most liberal guy. With it..." Declan shuddered. "I didn't dare say a word or go out on a date with anyone on the off chance that word would get out. Not that it ended up doing me much good."

"We got into a huge fight, and he kicked me out. Things got so loud, our nearest neighbors called the police. I could hear the sirens getting louder as I left." He didn't mention that his cheek had stung with the evidence of his father's disapproval, or the impotent tears that streamed down his face as he'd been forced away from the only home he'd ever known. Admitting he was homeless was bad enough. He didn't want Killian to think he was some spineless crybaby as well.

Declan expected Killian to interrupt, to speak up and say something, but he continued to sit there, a concerned expression marring his handsome features. Declan had never been the recipient of such undivided attention before. It was flattering, if a little unnerving. Killian's dark gaze was so intense, it felt as if he could see beyond Declan's words to the ugly truth beneath.

"At first, I was convinced I would be all right." Declan shivered, remembering how alone he'd felt that first night on the streets. "I thought I would find a job and make it on my own, you know? But people asked too many questions. No address and no phone number meant those who might have given me a chance had no way of contacting me later.

"It didn't take long to realize how hopeless the situation was. What little cash I had ran out in a couple of days, and there was no way to earn more. I don't know what I would have done if not for the hustler I met the night the police chased me out of the park. He referred me to Chicken Ranch. The night you came in was my first shift there."

With startling clarity, that night replayed in Declan's mind.

After being chased out of the park by the police for loitering, Declan aimlessly walked the streets. He wrinkled his nose at the foul scent of sweat and body odor. Although he'd like to blame the stench on his surroundings, five days on the street had left him pretty ripe.

His stomach growled, reminding him it had been over forty-eight hours since he'd eaten. The last dollar he'd possessed was long gone, spent on a cheapo hamburger at a local fast-food joint.

He kicked an aluminum can and watched as it rattled down the litter-strewn alley. It rolled and twisted along the asphalt, coming to an abrupt stop against a plum-colored boot with a thick platform heel. Declan's gaze lifted, tracing over a smooth, well-rounded calf and a slender thigh. Obscenely tiny black shorts cupped a male groin and firm buttocks. The guy's midriff was bare, a bright orange mesh tank top cut off beneath his nipples.

Declan stared. He'd heard about the hookers who occasionally could be spotted downtown, but he'd assumed they were all women. Frankly, he'd thought the notion was a load of horseshit. What kind of whore would want to stand on a street corner in the suburbs? Surely they'd be better off in New York, Washington DC, or any number of other places Declan could think of.

"You gonna stare all night, sweetcheeks, or are you gonna come closer?"

Declan lifted his gaze and met wide, kohl-rimmed eyes. Because of the distance between the two of them, he couldn't tell what shade the other man's eyes were, but they appeared dark. His nose was a thin, vertical slash across the heart-shaped width of his face. The man's hair was bleached as white as snow and looked stiff to the touch, it was so spiky.

"Excuse me," Declan said, edging closer to the prostitute.

The hooker propped a hand on his hip. The cheap silver rings on his fingers caught the castoff from the light overhead and twinkled. "I said," he enunciated slowly, "are you going to come closer or stand there and gawk all night?"

Declan shrugged but stepped closer all the same. A thought popped into his head and spilled from his mouth before he could think about it twice. "Is it hard?"

"What? My dick?" The hooker's thin lips twisted into a gruesome smile. "For the right amount, I can be as hard or soft as you want me to be."

"No. Not that." Declan shuffled his feet. "I mean, is it hard to, you know, sell yourself?"

The hooker scowled. "I'm trying to work here, kid. Go bug someone else to teach you the ropes."

"I'm not asking you to teach me how to screw. It isn't rocket science. I was just wondering if it's hard to sleep with all those men. I-I don't have a lot of choices right now."

"You're cute, kid, but I wouldn't advise it. Spreading your legs for money isn't as easy as you'd think."

"I don't know what other options I'm going to have. Nobody wants to hire a homeless schmo to work their cash register."

"They might hire you out at the Chicken Ranch. I tried to land a job there myself, but they had too many rules and shit." He quirked an eyebrow. "Then again, sweetcheeks, maybe you should just forget about the whole thing and go home to Mommy and Daddy."

Declan's back stiffened. "I can take care of myself."

"Don't go gettin' all offended. I don't mean nothing by it."

"What difference does it make whether I'm selling my ass here or somewhere else?" More than likely, the other guy just wanted to get rid of Declan so he didn't have any competition.

The whore shrugged. "None, I guess. Just you have to be ready to take of yourself out here. Ain't nobody going to come running to your rescue."

"What about that other place you mentioned? What's it like?"

"I dunno. Ain't never worked there. But I heard they screen the johns or some shit in exchange for a cut of what their boy's make."

"Oh," Declan muttered, his mind working overtime. It definitely sounded like he'd be better off taking his chances on whatever place the guy was talking about – safer, at any rate. Handing over a cut of whatever he made would be preferable to taking his chances on his own.

"Look." The whore propped one hand on his skinny hip and glared through the gloom. "I'm trying to earn a living here. If you want to rent it out, go find your own damn corner. This one's mine."

"Um, yeah... I'll disappear, but could you at least tell me where that ranch place is first?" There was no reason not to check it out. It couldn't be any worse than trying to hock his ass on the street. Truthfully, the thought of getting into some stranger's vehicle gave him the creeps. He'd watched enough true-crime shows to realize no good would come of it. However, common sense and morals wouldn't fill his stomach or put a roof over his head.

"Whatever, man. The Chicken Ranch is on the outskirts of town, toward the mill. There's a big sign over the driveway. You can't miss it."

"Thanks," Declan threw over his shoulder, already walking away from the jaded man. Hope fluttered in his chest. He didn't like the thought of sleeping with men for money, but beggars couldn't be choosers.

The timely arrival of the server snapped Declan out of his trip down memory lane. Killian shooed the woman away, claiming they were both fine, while Declan pulled himself together. He lifted his gaze from the untouched, rapidly cooling plate of food before him, afraid of what he might find reflected in Killian's eyes. He figured it would go one of two ways: Killian would feel sorry for him, or the other man would realize what a loser Declan was and it would be the last time Declan heard from him. He

wasn't sure which outcome was worse. To his surprise, he found neither. Instead, what looked like pure anger brewed behind Killian's dark eyes.

Killian reached across the table and laid his hand over Declan's where it rested on the table next to his plate. "I'm sorry, but your father's an asshole. It must have been hard living with a man like that. I know it had to be beyond rough going through everything by yourself like that, but I think you're better off without him. It's his loss, not yours."

Declan released the breath he hadn't even realized he was holding. It took everything he had not to lean across the table and lay a big, wet kiss on Killian. Instead, he shrugged, feigning nonchalance. "Yeah, well... What doesn't kill you makes you stronger, right?"

"I guess." Killian finally picked up his fork and twirled the tines through his pasta. He took a bite and swallowed before speaking. "So, if you were so inexperienced before you started, and I met you early on that first night, does that mean that I was the person to take your —"

"Yes." Declan cut Killian off before he could say the dreaded *V* word. "You weren't my first client, but you pretty much conquered that whole territory."

Killian grinned, his eyes twinkling. "Good to know."

Relieved beyond measure, Declan tucked into his steak with relish. The meat was so rare, it practically melted in his mouth. Between bites, he observed Killian. Even the way the man ate was sexy. He plowed through his food with gusto, his strong, thick fingers holding the fork firmly but gently. Killian repeatedly licked his lips, his slick tongue moving sinuously, unaware of how every damn sexy peek of his tongue affected Declan.

With his appetite suddenly focused on things other than his meal, Declan set his utensil down on the side of his plate. He cleared his throat, trying to dislodge the longing crowding his throat, determined to get to know Killian a little better before they

hopped into bed. "Now that you know all my dirty little secrets, why don't you tell me a little more about you?"

"All right." Killian wiped his mouth and dropped his napkin on top of his plate. "What would you like to know?"

"Absolutely everything."

"Well, that certainly narrows things down for me."

Declan sipped his water. "You could start with what you do for a living."

"That's easy and entirely boring. I'm an accountant."

"Oh, yeah? How'd you get into that line of work?"

"Working with numbers appealed to me. Math was always one of my strong suits. Math and science both, I suppose."

"I can see that about you. I'm the exact opposite. In school, I always liked English and history the most. I actually had to take algebra twice before I passed the class. I bet you were an honor-roll student."

Killian nodded. "Afraid so."

"I'm always right about these things. You have this superserious vibe going on."

"I do?"

"Yup. It's kind of sexy, but you definitely need to loosen up a little." Declan figured he could do a thing or two to aid in that goal, if Killian would let him.

"And I suppose you know a 'thing or two' about how to help me relax?"

"I think I can manage, if you're game."

"That depends. What do you have in mind?"

"There's a new comedy playing at the multiplex next week. Want to go with me?" Declan smiled, knowing that wasn't what Killian had expected him to say. If nothing else, he'd keep the man on his toes.

Killian laughed, signaling for the check. "That sounds like fun."

Chapter Six

The twinkling lights of town faded in Declan's rearview mirror. Killian sat beside him in the car, staring out the passenger-side window. Although the movie they'd seen in town had been pretty good, Declan couldn't have told anyone the name of it to save his life. His mind was on yesterday's holiday and the man next to him.

After working half a day on Thanksgiving, Declan had gone home to his dreary little apartment and crashed for much of the afternoon. Although Killian had invited him to come over, he just didn't feel like being around people. Like a vulture, his thoughts circled around the meaning of the holiday and inevitably kept coming back to his mother. Turkey Day had been her favorite of the fall holidays. She'd gone out of her way to make a meal large enough to feed an army and then spent the day making Declan and his father tell her what they were thankful for in their lives. While it had annoyed the piss out of him as a kid, he missed the tradition now that she was gone.

Thinking of her, he'd decided to call his father. Even knowing it was an effort in futility didn't stop him. His mom had been big on family and, homophobic bastard or not, his father was the only kin he had left. Extending one last olive branch to the man who'd sired him was what his mom would have wanted.

With a heart full of forgiveness, he'd dialed the old man's number and waited. His father had picked up on the fourth ring, just before the answering machine would have kicked on. The slur in his voice was more than enough warning to hang up, but Declan had soldiered on and announced himself, saying, *"Hi, Dad. It's me."*

The monotonous shrill of the dial tone replied.

After being hung up on, Declan had lazed around feeling sorry for himself for the rest of the day. He went to bed early and slept until noon that morning. Thankfully, Killian had yet to press him for details on what he'd done the day before. He'd seemed satisfied with Declan's work excuse and left it at that.

Since Killian's vehicle was in the shop, Declan had offered to provide their transportation for the evening. It was the least he could do, since they normally either met up wherever they were going or Killian drove. Plus, he felt more like an equal partner in their date rather than a charity case. It wasn't that he minded letting Killian pay for things he couldn't afford—like the fancy restaurant they'd dined at the week before. However, he could swing gas money and paying for their movie, so he'd insisted on treating the older man for a change.

It was the first time Killian had let him pay for anything in the month or so they'd been dating. Although, to be honest, between Declan's work schedule and the night classes he was taking at the local community college, they'd only gone out on a few dates.

Nevertheless, Declan was frustrated with the way Killian never seemed to want to do anything more than neck like green adolescents. While he appreciated Killian's determination to prove he wasn't using Declan for sexual favors, he was also tired of going home to beat off after each date.

Considering the amount of sex he had on a regular basis, he should have been sick of it. Thankfully, he found the prospect of being with Killian completely different than work. The act was the same, but the purpose behind it was not. With Killian, he yearned for more than the orgasm at the end of the rainbow. For once, he actually wanted the

intimacy and closeness that came from making love to someone. Granted, he ached to strip Killian bare and lick every inch of his naked skin, but the rest held true as well.

He supposed he was going to have to make the first move if anything was ever going to happen between them. Tonight was as good a night as any. His nerves would have gotten the best of him, if not for the simple fact that he knew Killian wanted him. It was kind of hard to miss an erection beneath the dress slacks and pressed khakis Killian favored.

Each good-bye kiss was flavored with a hint of desperation, the tang of male pheromones clouding the air upon every parting. If the sexual tension grew any stronger, Declan planned to start wearing a condom to dinner in case of spontaneous orgasm. Squishy pants were not his idea of a good time.

All too soon, he pulled up outside Killian's house. Tension mounted, filling the interior of the car. Declan didn't know whether to use the blunt approach and ask to spend the night, or take the more subtle route and suggest a nightcap of some kind. Did people even use the term "nightcap" in conversation, or did that only happen in porn?

"Well, here we are," Declan muttered, stalling for time to figure out which approach was more likely to get him laid without making him sound like a moron.

"So it seems." Killian unbuckled his seat belt and turned sideways. "I had fun tonight."

"Me too." So much so, he wasn't ready for it to end.

"Would you, um, like to come in?"

Hell, yes! Declan schooled his features into a placid smile. "Okay."

"Great." Killian grinned bright enough to light up the interior of the car.

A virtual cornucopia of X-rated images and hopeful plans for the rest of the night rushed through Declan's mind as he exited the car and followed Killian inside the small brick house.

Declan entered the house first and curiously glanced around. The space was large and clean, if sparsely furnished. Light from a single lamp illuminated bits of the living room. A plush blue sofa sat against the back wall and faced a large, wall-mounted flat-screen television and waist-high cabinet. Clunky wooden end tables and chrome-colored lamps flanked the couch. The lack of chairs lent the impression that Killian didn't have people over often.

"Home sweet home," Killian said, entering behind Declan. "It isn't much, but it's mine."

"It's nice, Killian. A lot better than my place." His tiny efficiency apartment was cramped and cold. It felt more like a hotel room than home.

Killian pressed up against Declan from behind. He wrapped his arms around him and kissed the back of his neck. "Would you like something to drink?"

Declan turned in Killian's arms. "Sure. Just water, if you don't mind."

"No problem." Killian kissed the tip of Declan's nose. "Just give me a sec."

"All right."

Declan looked on as Killian strode through a threshold at the back of the living room and disappeared into blackness. Bright light quickly spilled from the kitchen, illuminating the view of sterile white room. Almost everything was colorless, from the floor to the walls. The only variance Declan could see from where he stood was chrome handles on the cabinets above and below the white marble counter. A dining-room table sat against the far wall to the right, constructed from clear glass and stainless steel.

With the sound of running water and the clank of ice echoing in the background, Declan turned his attention to the narrow hallway to his right. Four doors stood closed, like silent sentries protecting Killian's loot from intruding eyes. He wondered what treasures were waiting to be discovered behind each one. Surely Killian had some kind of skeletons hiding in his closets. Handsome, sweet, and thoughtful to a fault, the man was too good to be true.

And Mama always warned me not to believe in anything that seemed too perfect.

Declan sat down on the edge of the sofa. As much as he hated to admit it, even if only to himself, a small part of him was buying into what the guys at work said. Over and over he'd listened to them predict doom and gloom for not only his but every single one of their relationships. Although he didn't want to believe it, a very tiny part of his psyche spoke up and justified his fears. If his own father couldn't love him, what hope did he have of finding anyone who could?

Killian walked back into room carrying two glasses of ice water. "Are you in a hurry to get home? We could snuggle up and watch another movie or something."

"Thanks." Declan accepted his glass and took a sip, enjoying the view. While sitting, he was right at eye level with Killian's groin. Even soft, the other man had a nice bulge behind his fly. "I know something we could do."

Killian sat down beside Declan. "What's that?"

"This." Declan took Killian's glass and set it and his own on the end table. Then he wasted no time closing the space between them. He straddled Killian's lap, pushing their groins together, and faced the older man head-on. "I realize you've tried to take things slow – and I appreciate the gesture – but I think we've waited long enough."

Killian released a deep breath, murmured, "Thank God," and captured Declan's lips with his own. Strong hands bit into Declan's hips; long fingers sank into each of his buttocks as he was pulled in closer.

Declan parted his lips, inviting Killian inside. The first touch of Killian's tongue seared away all conscious thought. The nimble appendage danced around his mouth, only to withdraw just when he was really getting into it. Declan advanced, fighting for more over the battleground of Killian's lips and teeth. Fueled by nearly a month of fantasies, the soft, wet tease heightened his body's need for more. Sparks of desire caught fire and heated him from the inside out. Killian's kiss was only a small appetizer, while Declan hungered for the full meal.

Declan dragged his mouth away from Killian's. He buried his face in Killian's neck, licking and sucking the smooth, heated skin as he tugged Killian's shirt out of his pants. "Want you."

"Me too." Killian dropped his head onto the back of the couch, giving Declan's mouth more room to play. His hips surged up, grinding against Declan's ass. "I haven't been able to think about anything else."

Declan grasped Killian's shirt and jerked it up and over his head. He tossed it over his shoulder, heedless of where it flew, and reached for Killian's belt. His fingers fumbled with the buckle, too unsteady to get the tongue through the hole. He groaned in frustration, jerking the belt to no avail.

"Hey." Killian grabbed Declan's hands and brought them to his mouth, kissing one palm and then the other. "Calm down. I'm not going anywhere."

"I know." Declan backed off and took a deep breath, trying to compose himself. His heart was racing, the echo of his pulse thrumming through his aching shaft. The desire to rip Killian's clothes off and ride him to satisfaction was strong, almost too powerful to resist. The watery memory of Killian's fat prick surging inside him had carried Declan through a lot of lonely nights and unsavory clients, but it was no longer enough. He needed the real thing. Pronto.

"You know I want you too, right?" Killian slid his hand beneath Declan's T-shirt and rubbed his stomach. "I'm not slowing things down because I don't want to fuck you into tomorrow. I just... I've thought about little else other than being with you again. Now that I can, I'd really like to take my time and do you right."

Declan snickered. "Do me right?"

Killian blushed. "You know what I mean."

"Yes, I do." Declan mussed Killian's hair, just because he could, and scrambled off his lap. Once standing, he held out his hand. "Why don't you show me to your room?"

Killian took Declan's hand and rose to his feet. "It would be my pleasure."

With their fingers entwined, Killian led Declan down the short hall and through the second door on the right. Just beyond the entrance, he released Declan's fingers and walked over to the nightstand, where he turned on a small lamp with a deep blue shade. Dim light illuminated a large, four-poster bed covered in a plush navy coverlet.

Declan barely noticed the rest of the decor; he caught sight of the long, mirrored dresser across from the foot of the bed out of his peripheral vision, but he only had eyes for the man standing by the bed. It felt as if he'd waited a lifetime for this moment. In a way, he had. He'd never made love with anyone who wanted him just for him. This would be the first time he'd completely shared himself with someone when there wasn't a monetary reason attached. The blunt realization caused his pulse to race faster and his palms to dampen, yet his groin throbbed with a fresh pulse of desire.

As he watched, Killian reached into the nightstand drawer and removed a strip of condoms and a dented bottle of lube. Without looking away from Declan, he tossed the lube and condoms onto the bed.

Neither of them said a word as they both began to disrobe. Their lustful gazes expressed more than enough. The very way Killian looked at him made Declan burn with impatience. He would've liked to take his time and undress the other man, but he didn't want to delay getting his hands on Killian's body for another second. Clothing would only get in the way and was liable to be ripped if he dared to try and help with anything other than getting himself naked.

In a matter of moments, they were both bare and staring at each other with interest. Killian's chest rose and fell exaggeratedly, as if he were having trouble breathing. Declan didn't feel so calm himself. His palms itched to trace the sparse whirl of hair beneath Killian's navel, to follow its path until his fingers were buried in the curls around Killian's thick shaft. If he'd had any doubt of whether Killian wanted him, it quickly evaporated in sight of the man's erection. Killian's dick was so swollen, it looked painful, the broad crown already wet and ruddy with need. An intricate web of

thick blue veins circled the wide shaft. Declan's mouth watered to sketch each one until Killian spilled on his face.

Another time...

Tonight, he had something else in mind.

A handful of steps brought him to Killian. "You have no idea how long I've wanted this."

Killian wrapped his arms around Declan and pulled him close enough to make their erections sword fight. His Adam's apple bobbed. "I think I do."

Declan twined his arms around Killian's neck and nipped the other man's strong chin. "Prove it."

Killian fell backward onto the bed, taking Declan with him. They bounced on the mattress, wiggling until they were situated side by side, their mouths locked together. Declan put his all into the kiss, licking and nibbling at Killian's lips and tongue. In return, Killian kissed him back with an enthusiasm that robbed him of the ability to think about anything but the man wriggling in his embrace and the burning need building in his body.

Breathless, Declan slid his hands over every inch of skin he could reach without ending their kiss. He rubbed over solid shoulders and the firm rise of pectoral muscles. Killian's stiff nipples stabbed his palms, earning a pinch before he moved on to the shallow dip between muscular abs. Skin, warm and alive under his touch, quivered from the lightest of caresses. Upon traveling farther down, soft and curly hair tickled his fingertips. He wrapped his hand around Killian's big prick and gave it a loose pump from root to crown.

The taste of Killian's groan was as unexpected as it was delicious. So was the way he cupped Declan's buttocks and squeezed. Killian's fingertips dipped into Declan's crease, the very tips skimming over his hole.

Declan bucked, pushing his ass back against Killian's hands. In desperate need of air, he tore his mouth away from Killian's. "Fuck...*please*...I want you so bad."

"You have me." Killian buried his face in the curve of Declan's neck, kissing from ear to throat. "I'm not going anywhere."

"Damn right you're not." Declan tightened his hand around Killian's shaft and pumped it hard. "I have you right where I want you."

"Are you sure?" Killian feathered his lips over Declan's collarbone. "I can think of several things you might prefer for me to do—a couple of very specific places where I could use my mouth." He lifted his head and looked down at Declan while his hand migrated south and cupped Declan's balls. "But if you'd rather just hold my dick..."

"No! No, that's okay." Declan skimmed his fingers over Killian's lips. "You go right ahead and lick whatever you want." *Please*. He wasn't about to refuse having Killian's mouth on his junk. In fact, he could hardly wait for it.

"Mmm." Killian's lips whispered down the center of Declan's chest and angled over the curve of his right pec. Warm, humid breath wafted over his nipple. "I've been thinking about this. Planning all the ways I wanted to love on you. Starting right here..." He flicked his tongue back and forth over Declan's nipple, caught it with his lips, and sucked on the tender bud.

"Oh yeah." Declan arched his back, pushing his chest up for more contact. "Good...ah...good start."

"Mm hmm." Killian switched to the other and tormented it with his lips, teeth, and tongue until it stood as hard and inflamed as the first. Then he diverted his attention to the shallow valley between Declan's pec and below, licking his way from solar plexus to upper groin.

Declan wiggled, eager to feel Killian's mouth where he needed it most. He gripped Killian's broad shoulders, lightly nudging him to no avail. Killian obviously wasn't going to budge until he was ready. "Fuck, Killian. Suck me already."

Killian nuzzled the smooth, tender plane of bare skin beside Declan's right hip. "In a minute."

"Quit. That's ticklish." Declan bucked, driving the tip of his cock into the side of Killian's jaw. He moaned and did it again, relishing the way Killian's coarse stubble abraded the sensitive knot of nerves beneath the head.

Killian grasped Declan's shaft and held it upright. He leaned forward and ran his tongue around the circumference of the head. "Is this what you want?"

"Yes. *Oh, yes.* God, suck me." He was going to lose his mind if his dick didn't get some attention soon.

With no further fanfare, Killian sucked him in and swallowed half his shaft in one long, wet pull. Nimble fingers cupped his balls and rolled them, the very tips rubbing the soft, sensitive skin beneath. He bobbed up and down, licking and slurping, taking Declan into what had to be the sweetest place his dick had ever known over and over again.

Before Declan was ready, Killian popped his mouth off Declan's prick and looked up at him over the rise of his chest. "Lift up for me."

Was he going to...?

Declan lifted his legs, caught them each right behind the knee, and pulled them back to his chest. Anticipation built, making even the light caress of Killian's breath a cruel taunt. He knew what was coming, and he wanted it. God, did he want it.

The first touch of Killian's tongue made him moan. The second made him quiver and whine. Killian licked from top to bottom, lightly gliding back and forth over his hole. The slick, wet abrasion felt divine. "Oh, yes...don't stop."

Declan wanted a turn to play with Killian too, but what the other man was doing felt so good. Killian's mouth was hot, his tongue the perfect mixture of soft and wet. Declan didn't want to move. *Maybe I can just be selfish for another minute.*

Just a little longer...

Killian took the choice out of his hands. He lifted away the sweet, wet pressure of his mouth from Declan's ass and slid up his body. "You taste so good."

Any reply Declan might have had was thwarted by Killian's lips swooping down to cover his own. Killian slanted his mouth over Declan's and thrust within, darting his tongue back and forth in a rhythm older than the tide. Declan dropped his legs and clung to Killian's shoulders instead. His dick leaked silent tears where it curved over his abdomen, so in need of attention, it hurt. Every inch of his skin felt taut, as if the desire within him had swelled beyond controllable limits and was trying to break free to find its own fulfillment.

Declan drew his lips away from Killian's and stared up at him, dragging air into his lungs in great ragged gulps. "I want you. Now."

"Mm..." Killian ran his lips over Declan's chin and down his throat. "Want you too. So bad. But you still need to be stretched."

"No. I don't." Killian's mouth had more than done the job. He was wet, open, and ready for business. *Uh, well, not business...*

Killian quit kissing Declan's throat and lifted his head. "You don't want me to finger you? I was looking forward to touching you, inside and out, to feeling you open up for me one finger at a time after I ate your ass and got you all wet."

How am I supposed to say no to that? "Well, when you put it that way..."

Killian rolled off Declan and stretched out by his side. He reached across Declan's chest and snatched the lube off the pillow. Following a flick of the cap, he poured a healthy dollop of lube onto the fingers of his right hand. "Sorry if this is cold."

"It's *okay*." The last word ended on a high note as cold lube was spread over the backside of his balls and down between his cheeks. "Shit. You weren't kidding."

"Don't worry. It'll warm up quick." Killian leaned down and slanted his lips over Declan's. Declan parted his lips and kissed Killian back as the blunt tip of one finger breached his ass and slid inside.

One finger quickly became two, stroking him to a fever pitch of need. In his line of work, no one took the time to prepare him; he either did it himself or suffered the consequences. That Killian cared enough to make sure he was ready brought a wealth

of emotion surging up inside him. Thankfully, Killian chose that moment to twist his wrist and prod Declan's sweet spot. The mushy emotions were pushed into the background as he moaned, his body clamoring for more.

Finally, he'd had enough. He couldn't wait any longer. The need to feel Killian deep inside him was killing him by slow degrees. He'd lost count of the number of times he'd taken someone's dick and imagined it was Killian fucking his mouth, Killian's fat cock plunging into his ass. Now he wanted the real thing. He yearned for it like people in hell yearned for ice water. The constant ache wasn't going to go away until he had what he wanted. Even then, he feared it wouldn't abate; that his desire for Killian would grow stronger until he could do nothing but lie on his back and beg for satisfaction.

"God...Killian...enough." Declan rolled his hips, dislodging Killian's fingers. "Fuck me."

"Hold that thought." Killian grabbed one of the condoms and tore into it, ripping the foil in half in his haste to get it open. He discarded the wrapper, throwing it to the floor, and then rolled the thin, lubricated latex over his shaft.

Declan flipped around on the bed and rested his head on one of the three pillows topping the bed. He spread his legs and motioned to Killian. "Get over here."

"I'm coming."

"Not yet, but you will be soon." Declan cupped his balls and transferred some of the lube coating them to his cock. He stroked his shaft lightly, too horny to risk much more if he wanted to hold his load until Killian was inside him.

Killian stopped and stared, watching Declan beat off. With a groan, he crawled up between Declan's legs and leaned over him, kissing him lightly.

Impatient, Declan reached between them and lined up Killian's prick with his hole. He sucked Killian's lower lip into his mouth and then released it with a *pop*. "If you don't fuck me soon..."

"So pushy." Grinning, Killian sat back on his calves. He pulled Declan's legs over his elbows and leaned forward. "You want it? Take it."

Declan shivered. Killian wasn't going to have to ask him twice. Once again, he guided Killian's dick to his entrance and lined it up. No matter how he squirmed and wiggled, he couldn't get it inside. There was just no way when Killian was holding his legs. He groaned in frustration. "Goddamn it. Fuck me, or I'll do it myself."

"I'd like to see that." Killian thrust forward, burying himself to the hilt in one long, continuous plunge.

The smart-ass comment Declan was about to make came out as a long, guttural whine. He closed his eyes and panted through the initial sting, knowing it would fade soon. Killian wasn't small by any means, but Declan wasn't exactly the naive virgin he used to be. He'd pay Killian back for taunting him... *Just as soon as I regain the ability to think about anything other than how fucking good he feels in my ass.*

"Christ, Declan. You feel so good. Better than I remembered." Killian slowly dragged his hips backward, leaving behind a dull ache that Declan itched for him to scratch. He retreated until the wide flange around his crown caught on the rim and stretched him so good, Declan wanted to cry from the pleasure of it. Instead, he called out Killian's name and begged for more.

Killian slowly shuffled forward, filling Declan's channel with every inch he had to give, before repeating the process again and again. The languorous rhythm was enough to drive Declan mad with need. "More...Killian... *Please*, give it to me."

"Patience, baby." Killian's thrusts slowly picked up momentum. However, the length of his strokes never altered. Killian continued to pull all the way out and push all the way back in.

With every slow drag out and thrust back in, Declan's desire soared higher. Killian fucked him with long, hard lunges that nudged his prostate with every pass. In and out, on and on, Killian kept pumping until Declan was sure he was either going to die or come so hard he blacked out.

Killian dropped Declan's calves and bent forward. Bracing his weight on his elbows, Killian captured Declan's lips. Declan wrapped his legs around Killian's hips and kissed his lover back. Finally able to move, he pumped his hips in time with Killian's thrusts.

Sensations rained down on Declan, tearing him asunder. Lust was there, familiar but different. He felt the distinction in their kiss, in the way Killian held him close. This wasn't just about sex. The actions were similar, but the level of intimacy was as diverse as night from day. A connection thrummed between them: shared breath colored with sound of their pleasure, joined flesh straining toward the same objective.

Declan arched his back, his head slamming into the pillow. He came so hard, his vision blurred around the edges. Through it all, his eyes remained wide open, staring directly up at his lover. *Killian*.

Killian kept thrusting, his steady gaze focused on Declan as if he were the only thing in the world that mattered. A grunt flew from his mouth each and every time he bottomed out, joining the breathless pants and whimpers Declan couldn't seem to quit making.

More than anything, Declan wanted to see those deep brown eyes glazed from pleasure. He threaded his fingers through Killian's hair and pulled his head down for a kiss. As their lips brushed together, he tightened down with his pelvic muscles and squeezed Killian's cock with every ounce of strength he had left.

"Oh God. *Declan...*" Killian moaned and pushed deep, shivering against Declan as he came. Even through the thin barrier of latex, Declan could feel the short, sharp pulses of Killian's release.

Killian collapsed, his weight bearing down on Declan. With their bodies pressed flush, the echo of Killian's heartbeat was as loud as a drum. Although Declan could barely draw in enough air to fill his lungs, nothing had ever felt more right.

Chapter Seven

On his way back from the bathroom, Declan stopped in the doorway and stared at his lover. Killian lay on his back, his long legs stretched out and spread wide, his semihard shaft lying over to one side and his large balls hanging loose and heavy. His arms were folded behind his head, the muscles bulging.

Declan licked his lips. Killian was a damn fine-looking man. He could hardly believe Killian wanted to be with someone like him.

He approached the bed, wondering if Killian would mind. He'd never stayed the night with a lover before, and the idea appealed to him. He could go back to his apartment if he had to, but he'd much rather sleep with Killian.

Killian jerked upright, his gaze wild and startled. "Shit. You startled me. I'm not used to having people in the house."

"Oh, well, I should get going then. If you could just —"

"Sure." Killian cut him off. He stood, went to his pants, and pulled his wallet out of his back pocket. "How much do I owe you for tonight?"

Declan stared at Killian, his gut cramping. "What?"

Killian shrugged. "I thought —"

Declan held up his hand. "Save it. I know what you thought."

He bent and picked his clothes up off the floor. Although his shirt, pants, and shoes were right within sight, he couldn't figure out where the hell his socks had gone. Fuck 'em. He'd buy new ones. He needed to get out of there. Right the fuck now. Before he did something stupid, like cry or kill Killian. It was a toss-up.

Killian circled the foot of the bed. "You don't have to leave, Declan. I didn't mean to insult you."

Of course he hadn't. He just thought he was offering payment for services rendered. It was Declan's foolish pride that was bleeding. He'd actually believed they had some kind of mythical connection.

Well, the joke's on me. I'm a fucking idiot.

"I think it's best if I leave." Declan stomped into his shoes, not even taking the time to tie them properly. "Don't worry about paying me for the fuck. Just consider it on the house."

Killian was still sputtering as Declan left the room. Although he knew it was petty, he slammed the door on his way out of the house. The dull ache building inside him screamed for some kind of punishment to be meted out. He only wished he could make Killian feel half as cheap and tawdry as he himself did at that very moment.

The bad thing was, he wasn't even sure he had a right to be mad. After all, he *was* a whore.

* * * * *

Killian was forced to wait three days to apologize to Declan. It damn near killed him, but his lover wasn't answering his phone, and Killian still had no idea where Declan actually lived. He'd cursed himself more than once over the last seventy-two hours for letting the matter go whenever Declan not-so-subtly steered the conversation away from his place of residence.

Not wanting to rock the boat had left him between a rock and a hard place. Like so many other times he'd stuck his foot in his mouth, offering to pay Declan had seemed

like the right thing to do at the time. He'd figured Declan would either laugh it off or take the money. It wasn't as if Killian didn't have the money to spare, while little tidbits Declan dropped into conversation here and there made it sound as if he could use the extra cash. What he hadn't expected was for the offer to piss Declan off and ruin what had been the perfect evening.

Lacking a better idea of how to contact Declan, Killian resolved to stop over at Chicken Ranch on his way home. Although he wasn't thrilled with the thought of visiting Declan at work, he didn't have many options. He even left work early—just short of four o'clock—in the hopes he could steal a minute of Declan's time.

It wasn't the greatest plan he'd ever come up with, but it was the best he could do with the hand he was dealt. Declan would either appreciate that he'd gone out of his way to apologize or just get more pissed off at his audacity. Either way, he didn't have anything to lose. As things stood, it appeared as if his lack of deportment had already cost him Declan.

Killian signaled, then turned onto the long, bumpy driveway leading up to the brothel. The Hummer breezed over the rutted dirt and gravel lane like he was driving on fluffy white clouds. Luck appeared to be with him as he noticed the nearly empty lot. Only two vehicles, a late-model sedan and a black F-150 with a monstrous lift kit, sat in the visitor parking area.

He pulled in beside the truck and hopped out of the vehicle. He hit the locking mechanism on his key fob and started toward the house, butterflies gnawing at his gut. The shame he'd glimpsed beneath Declan's anger on the night he left flashed through Killian's mind, reminding him why he was here, making himself vulnerable to a man who most likely didn't want anything to do with him.

Fighting down the urge to pace, Killian rang the doorbell and stood while he waited.

A tinny voice spoke, "State your business."

Killian glanced at the camera. "I'm here to see one of your men." That seemed suitably vague enough. He knew better than to demand to see the man he'd been dating up until three nights prior.

A loud bell rang inside as the door swung open.

The same man who'd greeted him the previous time he'd visited the brothel answered the door. "Welcome to Chicken Ranch. If you'd follow me, please..."

The other man didn't wait for a reply before he turned and disappeared inside. Killian stepped inside and called after him, "I'd like to see Declan, if he, um, isn't busy."

He needn't have wasted his breath. The same lineup that had greeted him before, plus a few faces he didn't recall, was once again in place. Declan stood in the center of the men, his gaze lowered to the floor.

The man who had answered the door stopped a few feet away from the men. "I'm sorry. I know you've visited us before, but your name escapes me."

A few steps brought Killian to the center of the room. "It's Killian."

Declan's head jerked up. His eyes widened and then went hard, all the light draining from behind the limpid pools of blue Killian found so beguiling.

Although it took considerable effort, Killian dragged his attention away from his lover and turned to the man beside him. In a voice barely loud enough to be heard, he said, "There's been a misunderstanding. I'm not here to make use of your services. I need to speak with Declan."

The gentleman's dark brown eyes narrowed. "If you aren't here on business, then I'm going to have to ask you to leave. The men in our employ don't have time to socialize. If you'd like someone to *talk* to, perhaps you'd be better off consulting a chat line."

The condescending tone of the man's voice grated on Killian's nerves. How dare this little pissant talk down to him like he was some kind of freak? "Listen, asshole, I'm not going anywhere until I speak to Declan."

"What's going on here, Colt?"

The barking male voice forced Killian to quit glaring at the man by his side. He glanced around and saw a tall, dark-haired man striding toward them.

The insulting little jerk — whose name was apparently Colt — was quick to answer. "This *gentleman* refuses to leave until he *speaks* to Declan."

Declan stepped forward out of the lineup. "What do you think you're doing? I have to work here."

Killian took a deep breath and prayed for composure. "I'm s-sorry, but I didn't have any other w-w-way to get in touch with you."

Declan shot a nervous glance at the other men. "Would you just get the fuck out of here, Killian? Please. Just go."

Before Killian could say anything further, the man in charge intervened. "I'm sorry, sir, but you need to leave. Please don't make me call in the authorities. I don't think either of us would relish answering their questions."

Killian glanced at Declan, imploring him to say something, anything. Declan stepped back into the line and lowered his eyes.

An all-encompassing ball of lead built in Killian's chest, numbing him from the inside out. He tore his gaze away from Declan and met the tall dude's steely gaze. "Fine. It looks like I was wasting my time here anyway."

Chapter Eight

Alone in the dark, Killian lounged on the sofa and obsessed about everything that happened in the last few hours. All he'd wanted to do was apologize. How had things gone so wrong so quickly? With his head leaning against the back of the couch, he stared blindly up at the ceiling and wondered how he'd let everything go to hell.

If he hadn't opened his big mouth and screwed things up, he'd probably be able to sleep right now, instead of sitting in the dark and feeling sorry for himself. Or maybe he'd be in bed thinking about all the wicked things he could do to Declan's scrumptious body, as he'd done so very often since the night they'd spent together at the brothel.

Things he didn't have a slim chance in hell of doing now.

Killian slapped his hands down on the sofa and rose to his feet. He had to stop torturing himself. There was nothing he could do to change the day's outcome. No matter how much he cared about Declan, the other man was long gone. Killian just needed to get over it and move on. It wasn't the first relationship that had ended before he was ready, and it probably wouldn't be the last. Some people were lucky in love, but he wasn't one of them.

The shrill whine of the doorbell filled the house with the sound of bells and scared the hell out of Killian. He jumped and then cursed his stupidity.

A glance at the clock over the sink in the kitchen revealed it was closing in on eight o'clock. He wasn't sure who was at his door, but he had a pretty good idea. Cash was the only person he knew who was apt to show up on someone's doorstep without calling first. Killian figured he was due for an impromptu visit. After all, it'd been a while since he was on the receiving end of one of his friend's tall tales.

Killian pulled the door open without glancing through the peephole. Declan stood on the stoop, looking almost as lost as Killian felt. "Um...hi."

Declan stuffed his hands in his pockets. "Hi."

"What are you doing here?"

"Will you let me in, or am I going to have to stand out here in the cold?"

"Sorry." Killian stepped back and allowed Declan space to enter. His stomach churned with anxiety, while his thoughts hovered around why Declan would show up now. Was he there to read Killian the riot act about showing up at his place of employment? Maybe he'd been fired because of the scene Killian had caused in front of his boss.

Fuck. Killian hoped he hadn't cost Declan his job. He closed the door and turned to find Declan standing beside the sofa. They stared at each other for a long moment, the air between them rife with tension. Body language didn't lend many clues, but the steel set of Declan's jaw and the tense line of his shoulders didn't bode well.

Killian stiffened his spine and stood up straight. No matter what Declan had come to say, he was going to take it like a man. What he did after Declan said his piece and left was his own business.

"So," he said. "Why are you here, Declan?"

Declan crossed his arms over his chest. "You have no idea how pissed I was when you left. Graves reamed me a new asshole for bringing my boyfriend issues to work. I swear, I was so angry I never wanted to see you again."

Killian breathed. It was all he could do. "I'm sorry about that. It wasn't my intention to cause you any problems at work."

"Why were you there?"

"I wanted to apologize for what I said the other night. I didn't mean to hurt you."

Declan snorted. "What did you expect to happen when you offered to pay me for something I thought was mutual and...? *Fuck*. How would you have liked it if the shoe were on the other foot?"

"I don't know."

"Yeah, well..." Declan shrugged. "It's over and done with, right?"

Killian sighed. "I suppose so, if that's what you want."

"I—What?"

"If you want to end things between us, there isn't really anything I can do to change your mind."

"Maybe coming here was a bad idea." Declan's gaze searched Killian's face. "I should go."

"I guess so." Hopelessness swelled within Killian, making it hard to breathe. The longing to ask Declan to stay was overwhelming in its intensity, but fruitless. He swallowed the words and tried to remain stoic, not wanting Declan to see how deeply he was affected.

Declan brushed by Killian on his way to the door. At the last minute, he turned back and shoved Killian against the wall. "You meant something to me, goddamn it. Am I so easy to let go that you aren't even willing to explain yourself?"

Killian recoiled at the fire in Declan's eyes. "No. I—" The rest of what he was going to say was lost in the hard press of Declan's lips against his own. He groaned, eagerly accepting every ounce of Declan's rage through the cushion of his lips and tongue. In return, he poured all his pent-up hurt and frustration into the kiss, crushing Declan's mouth beneath his own.

Declan pushed in closer, grinding the hard edge of his erection into Killian's upper thigh. Whether Declan's desire was born of anger or need, Killian was happy to take what he could get. He'd more than willingly lie down and sacrifice his body to sate Declan's lust.

Declan twisted his face to the side, broke free of their kiss, and dropped to his knees. In a matter of seconds, he had Killian's pants around his ankles.

Killian leaned back against the wall for support and carded his fingers through Declan's pale hair. "You don't have to —"

Declan ignored Killian and pressed on. He wrapped his fingers around the base of Killian's dick and pulled it down to his mouth. His tongue appeared, pink and slick as rain, and flicked over the fissure in Killian's crown. He leaned in closer and ran the tip of his tongue over the shallow groove beneath the head, setting Killian's nerve endings alight. The wide flare was treated to the same, licked and lapped like an ice-cream cone.

Killian rolled his hips, pushing his prick through the soft ring of Declan's lips. The inferno beyond was slick and moist. Declan's tongue wiggled, licking over every millimeter of the shaft as he swallowed Killian's prick.

Killian closed his eyes and then instantly reopened them, fighting his natural inclination to focus all his senses on the ecstasy rolling through his body. The way Declan looked on his knees, his sweet mouth spread swollen around Killian's meat, was too good to miss. He almost looked as good as it felt, but not quite. Declan was damn good with his mouth.

Killian shut down that line of thought before it could branch out into a reminder of just how Declan had come by his dick-sucking expertise. He didn't want to think about all the other men who paid for the pleasure he was being given. The important thing was that Declan was there with him now, being with him of his own free will and desire to do so, rather than because he was being paid to submit.

The reminder pushed back his ardor by brief measures, convincing him he could hold out just a little longer. Then his cock butted the soft tissue at the back of Declan's throat. Declan swallowed around Killian's tip, his throat palpitating in rhythmic waves.

With a groan, Killian fisted Declan's hair. "Stop. I'm too close."

Declan ignored his request and sucked harder. He gazed up at Killian through a veil of platinum lashes and hollowed his cheeks around Killian's cock. They stared at each other as Declan continued bobbing up and down his length, making Killian's shaft glisten with saliva.

Killian shuddered and tightened his grip on Declan's hair. "Quit. I don't want to come in your mouth."

Instead of waiting for Declan to comply, Killian bent, seized Declan by his arms, and lifted. His dick popped free of Declan's mouth with a lewd *squelch*, almost making him reconsider what he was doing. Letting Declan finish him off was too damn tempting. Despite the mutinous expression on Declan's face, Killian yanked his lover to his feet and forced Declan's back against the wall.

He ripped at Declan's jeans, shoving them down and over his hips. He crouched at Declan's feet and yanked the younger man's athletic shoes off. By the time Killian finished pulling Declan's pants the rest of the way off, Declan had discarded his shirt and was staring down at him with languid eyes darkened by desire. The normally pale pink of his lips was shades darker, the plump flesh swollen and flushed from sucking Killian's cock.

Killian sucked in a much-needed deep breath and pinched the base of his shaft, trying to compose himself. Unless he wanted to spew before he made it inside Declan, he needed to calm the fuck down. Unfortunately, that was easier said than done when Declan was naked, his long prick standing tall and proud, and he was staring down at Killian with come-fuck-me eyes.

Killian rose to his feet, towering over Declan by several inches. He buried his face in the curve of Declan's throat and kissed his lover's neck. He brushed his fingertips

over one stiff nipple and then the other, relishing the way they puckered right up for him. "You are so fucking sexy."

Declan gripped Killian's shoulders. "I want you."

"I know." Killian kissed his way from Declan's neck to his ear. "I want you too."

"No." Declan tightened his grasp on Killian's shoulders. "I want you now."

"All right." The thought of fucking Declan bare popped into his mind. He swallowed a whine and forced away the thought of how hot and tight Declan would feel without the rubber separating them. "Just let me go get supplies."

Declan shook his head. "I have stuff in my pants."

Killian bent and snagged Declan's pants off the floor. The right pocket produced two condoms, but there was no lube to be found. "We still need slick. Just let me go and —"

"No. Fuck me now or forget it."

"Fine. Hug the wall." If Declan wanted his cock so desperately, who was he to say no?

While Killian tore open the wrapper and smoothed the prelubricated condom down his shaft, Declan turned and presented his ass. He positioned his legs just wide enough apart to showcase the shadowy cleft between his cheeks and plump, low-hanging balls. Killian hoped Declan knew what he was asking for, because the sight wasn't inspiring him to slow down or take it easy. Although the last thing he wanted to do was hurt Declan in any way, his lust overrode good sense and demanded he take what Declan so readily offered.

Killian spread Declan's cheeks wide and spit, letting his saliva run down Declan's crevice. Unable to resist, he ran his thumb over the tightly furled pucker, rubbing in the moisture, and watched it clench and wink at him in response.

Declan wiggled his ass. "What are you waiting for?"

"Nothing." Far be it from him to make his impatient lover wait another minute. Killian lined his dick up and thrust, pushing all the way in. He grunted as his balls swung forward and back, slapping his taint.

"Oh God." Declan groaned and spread his legs wider. "That's it. Take me."

Sweet pressure sucked at Killian's shaft like a hungry mouth, demanding he move. Instead of giving in, he pressed his chest against Declan's back and kissed the sensitive dip under his lover's right ear. "Love the way you feel around me. Can't get enough."

Declan squirmed, grinding his ass back against Killian. "*Please...*"

Once Killian got a good grip on Declan's narrow hips, he rolled his pelvis backward, retreating until just the head remained trapped inside Declan's body. He lunged back inside, hard and fast, and then did it again, setting a violent pace that made his dick ache and his balls bounce with the force behind each brutal shove forward and back.

Declan met each inward plunge, shoving back for more and calling out Killian's name with little breathless whimpers that had Killian ready to come long before he was ready. Killian gritted his teeth and pushed through the desire to spill, determined to make this encounter last as long as he possibly could. God knew, it could very well be the last time he got to feel Declan's ass holding him tight.

But he wasn't going to think about that. Not now, when all his concentration needed to be focused on the task at hand. He rocked his hips and propelled his dick in and out, over and over, and lost himself in the feel of Declan pressed against him.

"Oh yeah." Declan let go of the wall and reached for his dick. "Feels so good."

Killian leaned forward, plastering his sweaty chest against Declan's slick back, and batted Declan's hand away. He wrapped his fist around Declan's cock and pumped in time with his strokes. "Mine."

"God, Killian." Declan bowed his head. "Keep going...*ah...* just like that. Not going to last..."

Killian wanted to tell Declan it didn't matter. That he wasn't going to last much longer either. But he couldn't draw enough air into his lungs to form the words. Instead, he moaned his agreement and pushed on, fucking Declan with long, deep strokes guaranteed to bring them both off.

All too soon, a familiar tremor zigzagged down Killian's spine and shot between his legs. His balls migrated north and hugged the trunk of his cock. It wasn't going to be long now. As much as he wanted to keep going, keep fucking Declan long into the night and beyond, his body just wasn't willing to suffer the pleasurable torment for much longer.

Just when he began to fear he wasn't going to be able to hold out and make Declan come first—when his balls felt like they were trying to crawl back inside his groin and his dick was swollen passed the point of no return—Declan cried out. His ass clenched Killian's cock, each contraction squeezing down in time with the slick pulses of fluid spurting over Killian's fist.

Killian kept pumping Declan's cock until it sagged and finished drooling. Then he closed his eyes, shoved deep one last time, and let go. Shivering through each mind-numbing shot his balls fired, Killian held Declan tight and silently suffered through wave after wave of nearly painful pleasure. Three little words replayed over and over in his mind, where they would remain until he was sure of their welcome. Now certainly wasn't the time to say them.

With more than a touch of reluctance, Killian wrapped his fingers around the base of his cock to hold the condom in place and slowly eased free of Declan's clinging channel. Declan shivered and pulled himself upright to lean against the wall, though he didn't turn to face Killian.

"Are you okay?" Now that the endorphin rush was over, Killian worried he'd hurt Declan.

"Fine." Declan glanced back over his shoulder. "Do you think you could get me a towel or something? I made a mess on the wall."

"Yeah. Sure." Killian left Declan standing in the living room. Once in the bathroom, he got rid of the rubber, gave himself a hasty cleanup, and snatched a fresh washcloth for Declan on the way out of the room.

Declan was still right where Killian had left him. Instead of standing, he squatted against the wall. The moment he saw Killian, he rose to his feet.

Killian stopped a few feet away. A sudden fear that Declan would now leave overwhelmed him. He wasn't ready to let him go yet. Stalling for time, he said, "Why don't you go ahead and take a shower? Help yourself to whatever you need. I can clean up out here."

"All right. Thanks." Declan brushed past Killian and disappeared inside the bathroom.

A moment later, Killian heard the shower turn on. He pulled himself out of his funk and set about cleaning up the wall. After he finished, Killian picked up their clothes. He folded Declan's and set them on the end of the couch. He put his sweatpants back on and sat down to wait.

His mind circled around and around, coming up with one reason after another why Declan should give him another shot. Then he realized that none of them mattered. The amount of money he made was of little importance, neither was the size of his dick or his ability to eat Declan's ass until he came.

If Declan wanted to leave the moment he came out of the bathroom, there wasn't a damn thing Killian could do about it. He'd already apologized and explained his actions. He was not going to grovel for forgiveness.

Declan finally came out of the bathroom several minutes later. His pale hair was combed back away from his face, his skin scrubbed shiny. A thick blue towel was slung low across his hips.

"Feel better?" Killian tried not to ogle the younger man as he picked up his jeans and slipped into them sans underwear.

Declan buttoned his pants. "Yeah. Thanks."

"So, what happens now?"

"Honestly..." Declan tugged his shirt over his head and then sat down beside Killian. "I really don't know."

"I didn't mean to hurt you, Declan. I just didn't want you to think I was using you in some fucked-up attempt to get laid for free."

"I know that, but..." Declan abruptly cut off midsentence and wrenched a hand through his hair, making the wet strands stand up in white-blond peaks all over his head.

"But what?"

"I'm not sure I can date someone who only sees me as a whore."

"What? I don't see you as whore, Declan. What you do for a living doesn't make you who you are. I may not be in love with the thought of what you do, but I wouldn't hold it against you."

"Do you mean that?"

"I wouldn't have said it otherwise."

Declan looked away, his teeth biting into his lower lip. Silence filled the air with palpable tension.

Curiosity churned in Killian's stomach. Part of him wanted to know what Declan was thinking, and the other half didn't, expecting the worse. He remained where he was, giving his lover space and time to think.

After long, pregnant moments, Declan finally looked up at Killian with eyes a tad too bright. "All right."

Killian frowned. "All right, what?"

"If you really meant what you said, I'd like to keep seeing you."

Without a word, Killian pulled Declan into his arms and hugged him. He buried his nose in Declan's hair and breathed in the scent of his lover's shampoo, relieved Declan was willing to forgive his slipup.

Although tense at first, Declan slowly relaxed and returned the embrace. Killian pressed his lips against Declan's temple. "Thank you."

Declan looked up. "For what?"

Killian cupped Declan's jaw and kissed him softly. "For giving me another chance."

Chapter Nine

By the middle of January, after having spent a low-key holiday season with his lover, Killian began to entertain thoughts of asking Declan to move in with him. As it stood, he coasted along on the rare evenings they spent together and tried to make do. However, the longer they dated, the more he longed for additional quality time with his lover.

Sharing a home would fix the situation; all Killian needed to do was find the balls to propose the move to Declan. Unfortunately, as much as Killian cared for Declan, he wasn't sure how the younger man would respond to such a suggestion. While neither of them had used the *L* word, Killian knew he was in love with Declan. He felt confident Declan cared for him as well, although he wasn't so certain about the depth of his lover's feelings.

After much internal debate, he'd decided to broach the subject with Declan when he arrived that evening. A quick glance at the clock on the microwave revealed it was five minutes before seven o'clock. Declan was due to arrive any minute.

Killian absently stirred the pasta sauce simmering on the stove and turned off the heat. The noodles sat on the table, kept soft with a touch of olive oil. All he needed to do

was toast the French bread and light the candles on the table, and everything would be set.

There was absolutely nothing he could do about the butterflies swimming in his stomach. They weren't going to dissipate until he'd said his piece and had secured Declan's agreement. He didn't even want to think about the other possibilities.

The doorbell sang through the house as Killian was sliding the French bread into the oven. He stood upright, took a deep breath imbued with the scents of garlic and tomatoes, and strode toward the door.

A quick glance out the peephole revealed his lover. Declan stood on the front stoop, more handsome than ever in a plain black T-shirt that hugged his whipcord-lean torso and highlighted his creamy complexion. His flaxen hair had grown out a little in the last week, the pale locks curling around the delicate shells of his ears.

With a smile, Killian pulled the door open. "Hey."

"Hey, yourself." Declan stepped right into Killian's personal space and kissed him. "Mm... That's better. Missed you."

"I missed you too." *So much.* Killian kissed the tip of Declan's nose and then stepped aside to let him enter. "Come on in and get warm. You're going to freeze without a jacket on."

"I'm fine."

Killian shut the door and locked it. "I hope you don't mind, but I thought we could eat in instead of going out tonight."

"Okay. To be honest, I'm not really in the mood for crowds tonight anyway. It's been a long few days. I kind of like the thought of staying in and keeping you all to myself."

A dozen hedonistic ideas played out in Killian's mind. "That sounds...promising."

"Oh, it is." Declan stretched up on tiptoe and kissed Killian's chin. "For starters, how about a better kiss hello?"

"Anything for you." Killian wrapped his arms around his lover and covered Declan's lips with his own. The younger man's tongue slipped into his mouth, barely teasing the tip of Killian's before skittering away. Killian gave chase, following every stealthy move Declan made. They danced back and forth, sharing air and gentle, slick caresses of nimble appendages.

Before long, Killian's desire for more physical contact grew stronger. The proof of his lover's need was as obvious as the erection pressing against Killian's thigh. If he wanted to be coherent over dinner, with his mind on something other than the insistent throb between his legs, then he needed to back off and gain some perspective. The night was young; they could always pick up where they left off later.

Maybe just another moment...

He'd missed Declan, and his lover's lips tasted so sweet.

The ring of the oven timer saved him from himself. With reluctance, Killian pulled away and dropped his arms to his sides. "Dinner calls."

"It smells good," Declan said, following Killian into the kitchen.

Killian pulled the bread from the oven and slid the toasted slices into a lined basket on the table. The aromatic scent of garlic and butter filled the air.

"Is there anything I can do to help?"

"You can pour us something to drink, if you want. I'd like sweet tea, I think, but there are a couple of different kinds of soda and juice in there if you'd prefer something else."

"Tea works for me as long it's made with sugar instead of that nasty artificial sweetener stuff."

"You don't have to worry about that. The fake stuff always leaves a bad taste in my mouth." From the corner of his eye, Killian watched Declan move around the kitchen as he pulled plates from the cabinet above the stove and served up two heaping portions of spaghetti. He was probably overdoing it a bit, God knew he probably

wouldn't be able to eat half of what he'd put on his own plate, but the prospect of feeding all Declan's appetites appealed to him. Something about the younger man made Killian want to take care of him almost as much as he wanted to debauch him.

Although he'd initially thought about picking up some wine to go with dinner, he hadn't known whether it was appropriate. Only eighteen, Declan still had three years to go until he could legally drink. While he didn't want to be a stick-in-the-mud, he didn't want to contribute to the delinquency of a minor either. It seemed a little strange to think of Declan that way, considering they were sleeping together, but Killian figured he'd rather be safe than sorry. Besides, he wanted Declan to have a clear mind when he oh-so-casually suggested they shack up together.

They both dug into their dinner, stopping every now and then to make small talk. Killian noticed that Declan changed the subject every time something about work was mentioned. Although he wanted to know everything about his lover, Killian was a little relieved Declan didn't want to discuss the ins and outs of his occupation. It wasn't as if he wanted to discuss his own job either. Crunching numbers did not make an interesting topic of conversation.

"Man, I'm stuffed." Declan pushed his plate away and leaned back in his chair. "I shouldn't have eaten so much, but it was really good."

"Thanks." Killian wiped his mouth, balled up the paper napkin, and dropped it on top of his plate. "There's, um, something I've been meaning to talk to you about."

"Oh yeah?" Declan frowned. "What is it?"

"Nothing bad. I promise."

"All right; spill it then. Don't leave me hanging in suspense."

"I was just thinking that it seems silly for you to keep paying rent on an apartment you never see. M-more often than not, you're here when you're not w-w-working." Killian coughed, trying to clear the frog in his throat. "So, if you w-want, I thought maybe you could move in here...w-w-with me."

"You want to live together?"

Killian nodded, not trusting himself to speak clearly. *Stupid fucking stutter*. His speech impediment was going to be the death of him.

"Are you sure?"

"Yes." He wouldn't have asked if he hadn't been sure. Nothing sounded better than having Declan around more often.

Declan bit into his lower lip. "Can I think about it?"

"Sure." Killian's spirits plummeted. "Take all the time you need."

"It's not that I don't want to, but it's just a big step, you know?"

"It's okay, Declan. I understand." Killian shoved the tiny fibers of hurt as far down inside him as he could and tried to smother them with rationalizations. Declan was a lot younger than him. It stood to reason that he might not be quite as ready to settle down. That didn't mean he didn't care.

Killian was just going to have to be patient. He could handle that.

Chapter Ten

Loud voices broke through the barrier of Declan's thoughts as he reached the bottom of the staircase. He blamed his preoccupation on Killian; his lover had haunted his thoughts all week. Otherwise he might have avoided the awkward interruption he was about to make.

A glance to his right revealed Colt and Graves locked in a heated argument. Colt's arms swung wildly, while Graves stood with his muscular forearms crossed over his chest. Declan stopped as he spied the other men, unsure of whether he should go about his business or duck and hide. The decision was taken out of his hands when Colt turned and settled his dark gaze on Declan. The other man narrowed his eyes and scowled before returning his attention to Graves. The frenzied outpouring of words between the two men was too quiet for Declan to make out, but Colt clearly wasn't happy about something. Colt shook his head from side to side, his chestnut curls bouncing around his pixieish face. He stopped abruptly, his expression thunderous, spun around, and stalked toward the front door. Colt's hands repeatedly curled into tight fists and then relaxed, as if he couldn't make up his mind about whether he wanted to punch someone or something.

Graves followed as far as the threshold of the sitting room and then stopped. "This isn't finished, Colt."

Colt froze with his hand on the doorknob. His back stiffened until Declan feared the other man's spine would snap like a dry piece of kindling. Rather than respond, Colt yanked open the door, exited, and slammed it shut behind him. The windows rattled from the force of his anger.

Glancing back at Graves, Declan tried to figure out if he should say something. He needn't have bothered. Graves shot one last glare at the door, totally ignoring Declan's presence at the base of the stairs, and stormed off in the opposite direction.

Declan breathed a sigh of relief and continued on his way into the sitting room to the left. He preferred it over the one to the right, where his boss and Colt had been arguing in plain view, because the couches were more comfortable and the atmosphere was homier than the formal sitting room. There was even a large flat-screen television, several gaming consoles, and various games, although they weren't allowed to turn on the sound for fear of disturbing the atmosphere. Predictably, the lack of accoutrement didn't stop any of them from passing the time by staring at the monitor.

As expected, Declan found Grey sitting in front of the television. He sauntered across the large room and dropped down on the sofa beside Grey, whose concentration was on dodging zombies left and right on the big screen.

"Nice move," Declan commented, watching as Grey took down a man-eating dog. When no reply was forthcoming, he looked closer and noticed the flesh-colored earbuds wedged into Grey's ears.

He sat quietly for a few minutes, watching Grey play, until his curiosity got the better of him. Then he nudged Grey's shoulder to get his attention.

Grey paused the game and removed the earbuds. "What's up, kiddo? I was just fooling around with this dumbass game. I swear, if things get any more dead around here, they're going to need to call in the paramedics to make sure I still have a fucking pulse."

"Yeah. I know what you mean. I haven't made squat tonight. Ricky seems to be doing well, though."

"Yeah." Grey scowled. "I think he's on his fourth client tonight. Everyone's who has been in tonight was looking for a cute little blond twink."

Declan picked at a loose thread on the sofa cushion, ignoring Grey's comment, since the description pretty much fit him too. "So, um... What do you think is going on with Colt and the boss man?"

Grey's thick black brows furrowed. "What do you mean?"

"Sorry. I guess you didn't hear the big fight they were having in the other room, what with *Resident Evil* blaring in your ears and all."

"Oh, that. They've been at each other's throats for weeks now. I'm surprised you haven't noticed sooner."

Declan thought back over the time he'd been working at Chicken Ranch. While Graves and Colt had never seemed all that friendly toward each other, he'd never seen them be openly hostile either.

"So what gives?" Declan reclined back against the seat. "Is Colt in trouble or something?"

"I don't know." Grey shrugged. "I'd say they're having a big ole lovers' spat. On the other hand, Ricky thinks Colt was skimming money off the books. The little twink swears he was shorted money when he cashed out after his last shift. Personally, I think he's full of shit, but that's just me."

Declan snickered. "You have a point. Ricky can be a little brain-dead."

"You're telling me. That boy doesn't have two brain cells to rub together." Grey's smile turned wicked. "What I'd really like to talk about is how things are going with you and Mr. W-w-wonderful."

"All right now. That's not fair. Killian can't help his stutter. Besides, I think it's kind of cute, and he hasn't been doing it much lately. He says he only stutters when he's really nervous, which I think is kind of sweet."

"Calm down, kiddo. You don't have to go into protective mode. I didn't mean any offense."

"Sorry." Declan's cheeks heated. "I didn't mean to go all postal on you."

"Hey, it's no hair off my balls. So...how are things on lover's lane?"

"Things are good. Great, really." Declan bit into his lip and then released it. "Killian asked me to move in with him."

"And?" Grey's eyes widened. "What did you say?"

"I told him I needed to think about it. I'm not quite sure whether I want to give up my place or not. I haven't had it for very long." He was falling in love with Killian, but trust was a completely different matter. How could he depend on anyone not to fuck him over when his own father had no problem turning on him at the drop of a hat?

"Well, that's good." Grey nodded. "I'm glad you're being careful and thinking things through rather than jumping in headfirst."

Declan frowned. He had a sneaking suspicion Grey wasn't saying everything. The man's tone didn't match his words at all. "Why do I get the feeling there's more to that little statement?"

"Nah, not really."

"Uh-huh. Spill it. I'm a big boy. I can take whatever you have to say. Besides, I wouldn't have brought the subject up if I didn't value your opinion."

"All right, if you want advice from someone who has been around the block a time or two. I would keep my own pad, if I were you. Whores don't engender fidelity."

Declan snorted. "Aren't you just a big ray of sunshine tonight?"

"I'm realistic, kiddo. Enjoy the good times while they last and then walk before the shit hits the fan. Trust me when I say it will." Grey patted Declan's leg. "Look at it this

way: The chances of a gay man finding happiness in this shitty world are slim. Add in being a whore, and you might as well forget about it. No one wants to bring home a whore to Mommy and Daddy."

"I don't believe that." Declan shifted, suddenly uncomfortable. Even as the words crossed his lips, he knew he was lying. While he could hope for the best, he wasn't sure he deserved someone as kind and thoughtful as Killian. Part of him was constantly waiting for the other shoe to drop, for Killian to realize he was too good for Declan and move on to someone else.

"Take my advice for what it is, kiddo—the words of a man who has been in this business long enough to see damn near everything." Grey's dark eyes softened. "I've seen rent boys graduate college, find sugar daddies, move on to other careers, and sadly enough, I've even seen a few of them OD. The one thing I've never witnessed is a relationship with a happy ending."

Chapter Eleven

Killian was surprised when Declan called him out of the blue and invited him to lunch. It wasn't that they hadn't done things spontaneously, but he could have sworn Declan was scheduled to work. He usually pulled a four-day shift, and it had only been three since Declan had gone back to Chicken Ranch. Three days since Killian had suggested they move in together and had gotten no reply. To Killian, it felt like a lifetime. Although pushing away his pessimistic streak wasn't easy, he held on to the fragile hope that Declan was ready to give him the answer he wanted.

While he hoped nothing was wrong, he was still anxious to see his lover. They spoke most nights, but it wasn't the same as being together. Killian missed his lover's smile, his quick wit, and most of all, the way Declan made him feel when they were together. They didn't have to talk, fuck, or any of the other myriad things possible. Just being in the younger man's presence fulfilled Killian in a way nothing else ever had. He was so in love, he almost made himself sick with all the mushy stuff running through his mind.

Killian found himself whistling as he left work and traveled to the rustic little diner where Declan had requested they meet. Knowing he was early, he went ahead inside and took a seat in one of the booths by the window, smiling as he waited for his

lover. An older couple at the next table shot him a strange look, probably because they thought he was a moron for grinning while he was sitting there all alone, but he didn't let their superficial opinion bother him.

It was a beautiful day, the bright midday sun shining through the fingerprint-littered window, and he was in a good mood. For the first time in his life, he was truly happy.

Sometimes he felt as if he were walking on a bubble set to burst at any moment, but the rush of tender emotions Declan engendered was worth the uncertainties that crept into his mind from time to time. Most of them simply came from Killian's own lack of confidence. It was hard not to be apprehensive when the man you loved fucked other people for a living, most of whom were probably wealthier, better looking, and a hell of a lot more charming than Killian could ever hope to be.

As much as he tried not to think about how Declan supported himself, there were times when the doubts wouldn't be dissuaded, when horrible thoughts and images refused to be purged from his mind. All he could do was trust that their relationship was as important to Declan as it was to him. Even if he had to accept sharing Declan's body with other men, Killian couldn't settle for less than everything when it came to his young lover's affections. Sex was one thing; emotional intimacy was another.

However, now was not the time to dwell on things he couldn't change. He was trying his very best not to hold Declan's job against him. It wasn't his fault he'd been forced to do less-than-favorable things to survive. Killian couldn't say what he would have done in the same situation.

He glanced up in time to see Declan breeze through the door. The fine locks of his lover's platinum hair were windblown into spiky peaks and valleys, his cheeks pinkened from the brisk wind. He wore a bright blue jacket that brought out the color of his eyes and skintight jeans that hugged his long, athletic legs.

Killian had never seen anyone more attractive. His smile spread farther as his lover approached the booth. "Hey."

Declan slid into the booth across from Killian. "Hey, yourself, handsome. Thanks for meeting me here on such short notice."

"It wasn't any trouble. I'm glad you called."

The waitress arrived and interrupted him before he could ask why Declan had wanted to meet. A woman with hair the color of steel wool pulled back into a tight bun at her nape and a large, round face marred with wrinkles briskly took their order and then left them to their own devices.

"So," Killian began. "What's up? I thought you were supposed to be on duty today."

"I am... Well, I was. Things have been really slow this week, so I slipped out for lunch."

"All right."

Declan reached across the table and covered Killian's hand with his own. "I really wanted to talk to you, and I didn't want to wait until this weekend."

Killian chuckled, although it sounded as forced as it felt. "That sounds ominous."

"No, not really. I've been doing some thinking about what you said."

Killian forced himself to take a breath. "And?"

"I want to give it a try — living together."

"You do?"

Declan smiled. "Yes."

"That's great." Their gazes met and locked. Declan's expression was so soft and tender, it took all of Killian's willpower not to lean across the table and kiss him senseless. He didn't know what his own mug looked like, but it felt big and dopey. He didn't care. "I can't wait to get you moved in. I miss you when you're not around."

"I miss you too." Declan rubbed his thumb over Killian's knuckles. "There's just one thing... I'd like to hang on to my apartment for a while. It isn't that I don't trust you, but I don't want to be caught in a bad place if you decide you hate living with me."

Killian threaded his fingers through Declan's. "That'll never happen. I love having you around."

"You say that now, but you never know what might happen down the road."

The waitress chose that moment to deliver their meals. She set Declan's BLT and fries down in front of Killian, and Killian's cheeseburger in front of Declan. Unlike their meals, she got their drink orders right.

The men traded plates and then dug into their food, eating silently for a few minutes. Surprisingly, although the service wasn't the greatest, the diner's burgers were quite good. The meat practically melted in his mouth and the tomatoes were ripe and juicy.

Between bites, Killian said, "This is good. How's yours?"

"It's fine." Declan sipped his iced tea. "The seasoned fries are really good here."

"Oh yeah?" Killian snagged one of Declan's fries and popped it in his mouth. "You're right. They're great. Crispy."

Declan laughed and pretended to hide his plate behind his arm. "Get your own, fry thief."

"But they might not be as good as yours," Killian teased.

"All right." Declan reached across the table and snatched one of the pickles off Killian's plate. "I'll share my fries, if you share your pickles."

"You can have my pickle anytime you want it."

Declan snorted. "Oh, that was terrible."

"I know." Killian winked. "I couldn't help myself."

Declan appeared pensive as he nibbled a fry. "What do you think about my moving in? Do you want to do it while I'm off later this week or wait?"

"As soon as possible works for me, but I'll go along with whatever you want. It isn't like you don't spend most of your downtime at my place anyway."

"It isn't like I have very much to move. Just some clothes and stuff. After I finish off my shift, I could go home, get my stuff, and meet you at your place around the same time you get in from work."

Killian squeezed Declan's hand. "That sounds good to me. Really good. But are you sure you don't need any help getting your things?"

"Nah, I'll take care of it."

"Take care of what?" a new voice asked.

Killian turned his head and goggled at Cash. "What are you doing here?"

"What?" Cash said. "Aren't you going to introduce me to your little friend?"

"Um..." Killian shot a sympathetic look at his lover. "This is Declan. Declan, this is Cash."

"Hi." Cash thrust his hand forward. "Nice to meet you."

"You too." Declan slid his palm out from underneath Killian's and shook Cash's hand.

Cash wiped his hand on his pants and slid into the booth next to Killian, forcing Killian up against the window. "So, how long has this been going on? I didn't know you had it in you, Killian, you old dog."

Declan's attention shifted from Cash to Killian. "Excuse me?"

"Oh, you know... I mentioned the whorehouse to Killian months ago, but I didn't know he'd take it upon himself to rent a little action."

"I-I'm not sure what you mean. Declan and I are d-d-dating." Heat exploded up Killian's neck and blossomed over his face. This situation was a train wreck waiting to happen unless he did something to fix it really quick. He didn't want to think about how Cash recognized Declan as being someone from Chicken Ranch, but it didn't take a genius to figure out that two plus two equaled four.

"Hey, man, it's all right. You don't need to play dumb with me. I've been out to the country more than once since I mentioned it to you. I can't say that I've sampled this

sweet little piece, but I can rectify that right quick." Cash stood and leaned across the booth. "How much do you charge for a little bump and grind, sugar?"

The heat of embarrassment Killian felt disappeared, replaced by pure, unadulterated rage. Before he could consider his actions, Killian thrust his hands out and shoved Cash out of the booth.

The other man hit the ground on his side and quickly rolled to his feet while the few other people in the diner looked on. "What the fuck, man? If you wanted him all to yourself, all you had to do is say so. We're buds, aren't we?"

"No," Killian said quietly. "I don't think we are." He turned his attention to his lover, who he only then realized hadn't said a single word to defend himself. "Are you ready to go, love?"

"Yeah." Declan nodded. His straight white upper teeth sank into the blushing flesh of his bottom lip as he scooted toward the end of the booth. Unable to miss the nervous glance Declan shot Cash's way, Killian held out his hand. "Come on. Let's get out of here."

"All right." Declan took Killian's hand and stepped around Cash.

Killian was chagrined to find Declan's gaze didn't lift high enough to meet his own. Was Declan pissed at his outburst? He'd never gotten physically violent with anyone in his life, but he couldn't sit by and listen to Cash accost the man he loved. He wouldn't stand for it. Surely Declan wouldn't believe Killian would turn that anger on him?

"You don't want to do this, Killian." Cash wiped imagined dirt off the seat of his designer slacks. "We've been friends for far too long to let a used-up piece of ass come between us."

Killian forced his hands to relax and shot a withering look toward Cash. "If you'd like to keep all those pretty caps you had put on your front teeth, I suggest you watch how you refer to the man I love. As far as what you and I used to be to each other, you can consider that past tense. I don't associate with jackasses."

Killian ignored Declan's soft gasp in favor of watching Cash storm out of the diner. He wasn't sorry to see the other man go. Their friendship had run its course; he just wished he would have ended the association long ago. Maybe if he had, he would have saved Declan the discomfiture of meeting the other man.

It wasn't until after he'd paid for their meal and led them outside that Declan finally spoke. "I'm sorry for causing you problems, Killian. Maybe we should rethink me moving in with you."

"What?" Killian exclaimed, flabbergasted. "No. I'm sorry for what I said and did in there, but you have to know I would never lay a finger on you in anger. I'd just as soon cut my own hand off first."

"It's not that." Declan leaned against the rust bucket he called a car.

"What it is then?" Killian's fingers itched to soothe away the worry lines crossing Declan's forehead. He wanted nothing more than to take his lover in his arms and comfort him, but his feet stayed rooted to the gravel below. Declan was giving off a strong vibe that practically shouted, *Back off*.

"I don't want to come between you and your friends. That guy in there isn't the only one who's going to look down on you for dating a whore."

"That's bullshit, Declan. What you do for a living is irrelevant. Any person who looks down on me for finally finding someone to love isn't worth having as a friend. I apologize for the scene I made in the diner, but I'm not going to let you use it as an excuse to end things between us. If you don't want to be with me, then say so. Otherwise, I'm going to assume nothing has changed between us. I still want you to move in; nothing would please me more."

Declan fidgeted, kicking at the gravel. "Things have changed."

"Oh." Killian felt the color leech out of his world. Cash's foul mouth and Killian's own outburst had obviously killed any prayer of a relationship with Declan. *What the hell am I going to do now?* He had to think of some way to mend fences with Declan. The

thought of never seeing the younger man again twisted something dark and nasty deep within Killian's chest.

"What you said in there... Did you mean it?"

"Oh." Realization dawned on Killian and restored his hope that he'd misread the situation. "Oh. Yes! Every syllable."

"Say it again." Declan grabbed hold of Killian's blazer, twisted his fingers around the lapel, and pulled him forward. "Say it to me this time."

Killian stared down at his lover, taken by the tiny ember of optimism burning in the china blue depths of Declan's eyes. He cupped the shorter man's cheek, brushing Declan's hair away from his face, and rubbed his thumb over the plump flesh of Declan's lower lip. He held Declan's gaze, staring into his lover's expressive eyes. "I love you, Declan. I think I have for a while now; I just didn't want to say the words and scare you off. These last few months we've spent together have been the happiest of my life."

"Mine too."

Killian couldn't resist the soft, beguiling smile curving Declan's luscious lips. Furthermore, he didn't want to try. Closing the distance between them, he bent and covered Declan's mouth with his own. Declan's lips parted beneath Killian's and moved in response to the gentle rhythm Killian craved. The slick touch of Declan's tongue dragged a groan out of the depths of his soul and filled the shared space of their mouths with the flavor of pleasure. Killian wasn't sure what he would have done if he'd lost this connection, but he was damn thankful he didn't have to worry about it.

Declan loves me.

Wait...

Declan didn't actually say the words. Shit.

Slowly dragging his mouth away from Declan's, Killian said, "Um, is there anything you want to tell me?"

"I don't know. What else did you have in mind?" Declan pressed a quick peck of a kiss against Killian's lips.

Killian groaned and chased Declan's lips, kissing him back. "You are an evil, evil man."

"I am not." All signs of teasing fled as Declan's expression sobered. "What I am is head over heels in love with you."

"Head over heels, huh?"

Declan playfully punched Killian's shoulder. "You're ruining the moment."

"Oh, I wouldn't worry about it; we'll have a lifetime of special moments."

Declan grinned and hugged Killian tight. "I'm counting on it."

Epilogue

Eighteen months later

Surrounded by Declan's friends, both from school and work, Killian sat amid a huge crowd at the local civic center and impatiently waited to hear his lover's name announced over the loudspeakers.

Killian rose to his feet when the first last name starting with an *M* was called. He got his camera ready, the zoom in full gear, and pointed it at the stage. The speaker called, "Mayo, Declan," and everyone around him soared to their feet, shouting Declan's name and waving like idiots.

Killian shot one picture after another, wanting to immortalize this moment for his sentimental lover. Seeing his lover was difficult from where they sat in the nosebleed section, but he knew well how handsome Declan looked in his cap and gown, having put it to good use playing dress-up the night before. The very thought of Declan bent over the foot of the bed, his bright blue gown pulled up around his narrow hips while Killian pounded into him from behind was enough to rouse Killian's cock.

He pushed the image away before he got a full-fledged hard-on and embarrassed himself. Through the camera lens, Killian watched his lover accept his degree and walk

across the opposite podium. As soon as Declan descended the steps and disappeared from view, Killian began making his way toward the parking lot. He felt a little bad for not staying through the whole ceremony, but he couldn't wait another second to give his lover a congratulatory kiss. It would probably be the only moment they got to themselves for the rest of the night.

A huge party was planned for that evening. Graves had offered to shut down Chicken Ranch for the night and throw a bash to celebrate Declan's graduation. Quite frankly, Killian thought it was the least the man could do after everything Declan had done to lend a hand after Colt had quit and left Graves hanging in the breeze. Not long after Declan moved in with Killian, Declan had quit working as a rent boy and assumed a position as an assistant to Graves and an all-around gofer. Despite the steep pay decrease, Declan seemed happy with the job change. Killian was thrilled.

Now that he had his degree, there was no telling what he would do. Although they talked about his options often, Declan still wasn't sure whether he wanted to leave his friends and strike out doing something new. Killian suspected Graves's offer of a raise and better hours would sway Declan into staying. With the assurance that Declan would never go back to hooking, Killian didn't much care what his lover did for a living, as long as Declan was happy.

Killian burst through the auditorium doors and out onto the asphalt parking lot. Sunshine warmed his shoulders as he jogged across the lot toward his Hummer. With any luck, he'd beat Declan there and be able to retrieve the present he'd hidden from his lover for the last month.

After much consideration, and no little worry, Killian had gone with his gut feeling and bought Declan a beautiful platinum Claddagh ring. The symbolism behind the ring signified everything he held dear in their relationship. The hands denoted friendship and togetherness, while the heart stood for love and the crown represented loyalty. He only hoped Declan didn't find the overture too saccharine-sweet.

As it turned out, luck was with Killian. He not only had time to retrieve the ring but was innocently standing beside the Hummer for several minutes before Declan appeared. A huge smile graced his lover's face as he approached. "Did you see? Can you believe it?"

Killian laughed. "I did, and I can."

Declan threw himself into Killian's open arms. "I didn't think today would ever get here."

"I never doubted you for a minute."

"Oh yeah? How about when we got into that huge argument over my apartment?"

"Nope. Not even then." Killian kept quiet about how ridiculous it would have been to quit school in an effort to keep paying rent on an apartment Declan didn't even live in. He was just thankful Declan had finally put a little faith in Killian and gotten rid of the hovel before it broke him. An apartment was a damn expensive security blanket.

"Liar." Declan was still grinning as he caught Killian's lips and kissed him hard enough to scandalize the little old ladies exiting the building.

Killian wouldn't have even noticed if one of the women hadn't shrieked as if they were fucking on the middle of the stage inside. He reluctantly pulled out of the kiss and stared down at his lover, at the man he could happily spend the rest of his life waking up beside. Contrary to Declan's fears, Killian found the younger man's idiosyncrasies adorable—even the snuffling noise he made in his sleep and the way he drooled on the pillows.

"I have something for you."

Declan's smile spread farther. "What is it?"

Killian reached into his pocket and pulled out a small black velvet jeweler's box. He held his breath as Declan took the box and peered inside. "If you don't like it—"

"Hush." Declan pulled out the ring and slid it on his finger. "I love it."

"Really?"

"Yes, really." Declan hugged Killian tight. "Do you know what the Claddagh stands for?"

"Of course I do: friendship, love, and loyalty. I'd say that sums up my feelings about you pretty well."

Declan nodded. "Now all we have to do is get you one."

"All in good time." Killian hoped that one day, when it was legally recognized, they would upgrade to wedding rings. He'd love nothing more than to call Declan his husband. But that was a conversation for another day.

Declan squeezed Killian tight and then released him. "Now, what say you take me home before all the others catch on to my escape plans and come kidnap me? I'm looking forward to serious loving before the party tonight."

"Oh yeah? Just who did you have in mind for that pleasurable task?"

Declan rolled his eyes. "Who do you think?"

"The mailman?" Killian teased.

"No."

"The milkman?"

"Well, he is kind of hot." Declan laughed and swatted Killian on the ass. "Take me home, you big goof. If you're really lucky, I might even keep my gown on."

 THE END 

Amanda Young

Amanda Young is a multi-published, erotic romance author. Since she tends to write whatever strikes her whimsy, all of her novels fall into various subgenres. You never know what merry adventure her evil muse will devise next.

Basically, she writes stories about people who love indiscriminately and wholeheartedly. Her characters are never perfect; they're flawed and oftentimes troubled. Which makes it that much more satisfying when they receive the happy ending we all deserve. No matter what genre her books fall into, she can guarantee they'll end with a happily ever after. In her opinion, it's just not a romance without one.