SAUDÎTAIN PERMEN LO His Convenient — Husband— LANGLEY

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A temporary arrangement? Don't bet the ranch on it... *Innamorati, Book 1*

At the tender age of seven, newly orphaned Micah Jiminez lost everything—and got lucky. The Delaney family opened their hearts and their home, treated him like one of their own. One Delaney in particular, though, became more than a brother to Micah. The handsome and protective Tucker is the man to whom he wants to give his love.

But after a single passionate night together, Tucker rebuffs him and hightails it to Dallas to pursue his dreams. Leaving Micah to pick up the pieces of his broken heart—and feeling like a fool.

The impending death of the Delaney patriarch brings an unsavory relative out of the woodwork, threatening Micah's beloved adopted family. They're going to need all hands in the fight to keep The Bar D from being pulled out from under them all—including Tucker. Micah steels himself to convince the man he can't forget to come home.

To his everlasting surprise, it's Tucker who comes up with the perfect solution: a marriage of convenience—to Micah. His gut tells him Tucker's motivation involves nothing more than saving the ranch. Now he just has to convince his fragile heart.

This title has been revised and expanded by more than 10,000 words from its original published version.

Warning: This book contains threatening emails, imaginary sex, excessive use of antacids, non-homophobic cowboys, a bed being misused as a trampoline, male bonding during a

gynecological examination of a pregnant mare, steamy manlove and a very hot-tempered Latino.

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His Convenient Husband

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His Convenient Husband

J.L. Langley

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Dedication

To Crissy Brashear and Brenda Bryce who share my weakness for category romances by one author in particular who shall remain nameless.

And as always, thanks to Andre and my critique partners for not killing me during the writing process.

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Chapter One

Bong.

Blinking his eyes open, Micah stared at the dust motes floating in the stream of early morning sunlight as it filtered in through the closed French doors. A rooster crowed and a calf called for his mama. A car door slammed and the floor above creaked. Was there anything more beautiful than waking up to this? *Wait*. French doors? He didn't have French doors in his room.

Bong.

Ah shit. He'd fallen asleep in the office again. All at once, his body seemed to recognize what his brain had just learned because a sharp pain shot down his spine and a dull ache settled in his lower back. "Ugh." Planting his hand on the desk, Micah intended on peeling his face off the polished oak but it slipped in something. Oh lovely. Drool. He must have been more tired than he'd thought.

After pushing up, he yawned, stretched and wiped his hand on his jeans. His back creaked then popped. *Ouch.*Sleeping in a chair all night sucked big fat hairy donkey balls. *Bong.*

Micah groaned and looked at the monitor. He had email from Duncan Delany. Great, that was all he needed. He couldn't figure out how to pay the tab at the feed store and here was Ferguson's oldest son bugging him about the ranch again. "Cabrón!" The son of a bitch didn't even have the decency to wait until his father died to try and screw the rest

of the family out of their inheritance. How could people be so cruel? A death in the family really did bring out the worst in people.

Pushing his glasses back up on his nose, he opened the email. It was short and sweet.

Micah,

I expect the ranch's books to be turned over to me before I get there next week, or I'll get my attorney involved. You aren't blood and this doesn't involve you. I want to know what I'm dealing with when my father is gone. I'm sure I'll have to fix the mess you've made of things after my father was no longer able to deal with them.

Duncan

"Over my dead body, *pendejo*." Micah hated people who tried to bully those with less money or importance. He would do everything he could to keep his loved ones from losing their inheritance, like he'd lost his. Duncan didn't know squat about family loyalty or running a ranch. No way in hell Ferguson would leave the ranch to him, he'd as much as told Micah so. Micah didn't know who was getting the ranch, but Ferguson had hinted it'd be his younger son, Jeff, or one of his two grandsons.

After dragging the note into his personal folder, Micah closed the email program. On the screen was the row of red numbers he'd been working on the night before. The nauseous feeling he'd had for the past two months flared to life. Duncan wanted to know what *he* was dealing with? Did he honestly think Ferguson would leave him the ranch?

Duncan lit out of Texas over twenty-five years ago with his younger brother's wife and never looked back.

Squashing down the anger, Micah looked back at the screen. No matter how many times he added the numbers they still came up negative. What was he going to do?

He leaned back in the chair he'd come to think of as his since he took over management from Ferguson two months ago, and mashed a fist into his stomach. Where had he put those Tums? *God, please don't let me be out.*

The office door creaked open and AJ stuck his blond head in. His gaze settled on Micah, then he yelled over his shoulder, "He's in the office!"

"Tattletale," Micah mumbled. All he needed was for Jeff or *Tio* to lecture him about working too hard again. As if everyone wasn't working their asses off lately.

Sticking his tongue out, AJ pushed the door open fully, and his shoulders sank a little. "Busted. Did you sleep in here again?"

Micah grimaced. "Coffee. I need coffee." Coffee and Tums, then he'd see what he could do with the accounts before he helped with chores.

"Bring him some coffee," AJ shouted toward the door and flopped down in one of the chairs in front of the desk.
"Granddad was asking for Tucker and Duncan again this morning. He was asking for you too. He wants you to go up and see him later when you get the chance." AJ was silent for a few moments. When he spoke again it was quieter, sad. "He's not looking so good. Doc just left. He said he didn't think Granddad would make it through the week."

"Damn." The pain in Micah's stomach intensified. Pushing harder on his abdomen, he sat back and closed his eyes. Tears welled up behind his closed lids, but he held them back. He was a traitor. Ferguson Delany had welcomed him to The Bar D with open arms fourteen years ago when Micah's parents had died, and all Micah could feel was relief. Micah hated to see the man, who was essentially his grandfather, hurt any longer. Ferguson had treated Micah like one of his own grandsons, not his foreman's orphaned nephew. Tio Juan was a great man and had done his very best for Micah, but Micah was no fool. The Delanys had gone above and beyond what they should for an employee's kin, even if the employee was Ferguson's best friend. They'd made Micah a part of the family and taken him in when his mother's family had swooped in like the vultures they were and used their money to rob Micah of everything. His grandparents had never forgiven his mom for marrying "beneath her", and when she was gone they'd wasted no time discarding her "half-breed" son.

"Don't start, brat." AJ's voice cracked a tad. "We've known it was coming for months now."

Once he had his emotions under control, Micah opened his eyes. "Yeah. I know, but—"

"I know..." AJ squeezed the bridge of his nose with his thumb and forefinger. He was on the verge of tears, and it tore Micah up to see it. AJ was always so strong and tough.

"Have you gotten a hold of Tucker?" Just saying the name made a whole heap of emotions run through Micah. Anger,

regret, love and ... yup, mostly anger. Tucker had abandoned them, abandoned Micah.

"I talked to his secretary. She's supposed to be getting him a message. Said he's out of town."

Nodding, Micah brought his feet up into the chair, trying to alleviate the pain in his stomach. His feet were bare. Where had his boots gone? He looked under the desk as he settled his feet onto the edge of the seat, hoping like hell he didn't seem like he was doubling over in pain. He wasn't going to let Tucker Delany get to him after all these years.

"Looking for this?" AJ's hand came into view under the desk and flipped Micah the bird. *Juvenile*. "Okay seriously, what are you looking for?"

Micah grinned, the tension fading. "My boots." Above the desk, he shot AJ the middle finger right back before sitting straight again.

"They're on the kitchen floor."

Hugging his raised knees closer, Micah grimaced. "What are they doing in there?" *Mierda*, his stomach was killing him.

AJ shrugged. "You're asking me?"

"Here's your coffee." Jeff walked into the office with a steaming mug and set it on the desk. He sat in the chair next to AJ and nudged his son with his foot. "You tell him your granddaddy was asking for him?"

AJ nodded.

Wondering if he'd stashed some antacids in the desk, Micah pulled open the middle drawer. "I need to finish the bills then I'll go up."

"You been down here all night again?" Jeff growled.

There was nothing but pens and paperclips. Micah aborted his search. "Yeah. I fell asleep."

"Kid-"

Holding up a hand, Micah stalled him. "I know. But until we find a way out of this hole we're in, I have to keep trying." He stared into Jeff's nearly black eyes, silently pleading with him to understand. "This is my family too, Jeff."

Jeff sighed. "Yes it is. Did it ever occur to you that's why I have a problem with you working yourself into an early grave?"

Warmth spread through Micah. He knew his place here, but he liked to hear it. "All of us are working hard right now."

"What's the damage?"

Micah should tell Jeff about his older brother's threats and demands for the ranch records, but he hated to do that on top of everything else. It was bad enough that Duncan was going to be coming back here to see his father one last time. Micah supposed he could understand Ferguson wanting to make peace with his son before he died, but even the mention of Duncan left Jeff in a black mood for days. "Can we do without the last two ranch hands? It would be better if we could handle the work between you, me, AJ and my tio." Micah hated to pile more work on everyone, but—

"If we have to." Jeff scrubbed his hands down his face then up through his white-streaked dark blond hair. "I'll let them go today. Can we give them a severance?"

No. Micah's stomach clenched, almost knocking the breath from him. He curled further into himself, pressing his leg harder against his stomach. "Yeah." He'd find a way to give

the men a severance pay. There was still the measly fifteen grand his grandparents shoved at him to assuage some of their guilt as they cast Micah out of their lives. If he used it wisely, it would pay the remaining hands a nice severance and the property taxes. He'd have to find another way to pay the feed store tab and hospital bills though.

AJ sat forward, resting his forearms on his knees. A frown creased his face as he stared at Micah.

Micah stared back, used to the intimidation tactic. Sometimes it sucked being treated like the younger brother, but it was also comforting with as crappy as everything else was lately. He had the urge to stick his tongue out and make faces. It was a normal impulse and if he hadn't had to yawn, he would have smiled.

"All right, boys. Let's get to work. The morning's a wastin'." Jeff stood and headed out the door.

Standing, AJ dug into his shirt pocket. He pulled something out and tossed it.

Out of reflex, Micah caught it before it hit him in the face. He watched AJ disappear out the door before looking down. In his palm was a half roll of Rolaids.

After popping four of the antacids, Micah sat there for a few more minutes. He needed money. A lot of money in a big hurry and it pained him to need it so badly. He'd grown up resenting rich people like his mother's family, but now he'd give just about anything to be one of them because it would help his adopted family.

He got up and wandered to the French doors, opened them and stepped out into the sunshine. Leaning on the back porch

rail, he stared out over the green pasture with a sense of foreboding. Funny, it was early spring and the ranch was teeming with life, yet he was here waiting for his surrogate grandfather to die. It didn't seem real. He dropped his head against the post, trying not to look like he was hanging on for dear life. Losing the old man was bad enough, but Micah wasn't going to lose anyone else. That meant he had to keep the ranch going and in Jeff's hands.

Micah needed to find out what Duncan was up to. Why would he even want the ranch? He hadn't shown the slightest interest in it or its inhabitants until they'd contacted him about his father's declining health.

"What's on your mind, *perrito*?" Juan's old scarred-up snakeskin boots creaked across the weathered wood porch, coming to a stop a foot from Micah's bare feet.

Micah rolled his forehead against the rough post before lifting his head. His uncle had called him *perrito*, or puppy, since Micah was a child running after the two Delany boys like an adoring puppy. It reminded him of his carefree childhood here on The Bar D. "Just trying to figure out some stuff, *Tio*."

"You'll figure it out, mijo. You always do."

The pride in *Tio*'s voice made Micah smile on a day he didn't feel like smiling. "I hope you're right. Tell me about Duncan. He was gone by the time I got here." Micah didn't remember Ferguson's oldest son at all. He'd left The Bar D when Micah was an infant, back when Micah's parents were still alive. Back before his mother's rich family used their money and power to strip Micah of his birthright. But that was a different story. If anyone knew about Duncan, it would be

Tio. Juan had been foreman of The Bar D for the past fifty years. He'd had a hand in teaching all the Delanys, and Micah for that matter, what they knew of ranching.

"Hmm..." Juan's forehead furrowed and his eyes narrowed. "Boy never did fit in. Ferguson tried his best. He loved the boy just as much as—" He shook his head. "He spoilt the boy rotten, but it didn't do no good. Was no surprise he run off with Vanessa. Neither of them ever cared much for the country life."

Just as much as what? Micah frowned but let it go.
"Neither did Tucker." Oh mierda. Why had he said that?
Apparently, he had Tucker on the brain. It was kind of funny, because he hadn't thought of Tucker much the past couple months. He'd been too busy stomping fires.

"Baloney. Tucker got caught up in his career. The boy has the ranch life in his blood. He'll be back, you mark my words." Juan nodded once and spit off the porch.

Micah shrugged, trying to keep the hurt off his face. Money was why Tucker left, but it wasn't why he stayed away. Micah didn't want to correct his uncle though. Money, it seemed, was the key to everything. The root of all evil. "I hope you're right, Ferguson wants him home." *And so do you,* cabrón. His chest hurt and tears welled in his eyes. *Damn you, Tucker.* Why did the thought of him still tear Micah up inside? Obviously, that last night hadn't meant anything to Tucker. And Micah didn't mean anything to him either ... Not that it mattered, it was in the past and Tucker was the least of Micah's problems right now.

"He does." Juan touched Micah's shoulder, gaining his attention. He stared right into Micah's eyes. "You do too."

"Me?" He shrugged again and stared out toward the pasture. The cool spring breeze brought with it the sweet, fresh smell of alfalfa. It was peaceful and familiar, helping him pretend nonchalance. "I just want to make sure the ranch stays afloat and stays with those who love it."

"It will." Juan nodded and gripped the wood rail, leaning on it a little.

"I wish I had your confidence, *Tio*. Duncan is gonna cause problems, I just know it."

Lifting his hat, Juan scratched his head then stuffed the beat-up old cowboy hat back on. "How so?"

"He's been bugging me to turn over the ranch's finances to him."

"Pshaw. Ferguson handed that job over to you." Turning, Juan leaned his hip against the porch rail. "And he did so with good reason."

Micah snorted. "What reason?"

"Because he knows what kind of man you are. You'll find a way to make it all work." Juan chuckled. "Keep looking, perrito. Duncan is no threat." He patted Micah on the back and walked down the steps out toward the barn.

That was ... odd. *Keep looking?* What did that mean? Micah frowned. What did Juan know that Micah didn't? "*Tio*?"

Without looking back, Juan waved his hand and kept walking.

Micah spun around and planted his butt against the porch rail. Why did old people always talk in riddles? The breeze

ruffled his hair and brought a slight nip, making him shiver. He crossed his arms and gazed back into the office at the computer. Was there something on there? A hidden back account? The hair on Micah's arms stood. Apprehension and anticipation coiled inside of him. Rubbing his arms, he couldn't overcome the sense that his chill wasn't entirely from the wind.

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Chapter Two

"Fuck." What is he doing here? Tucker gritted his teeth and tried to push the annoyance away. A smidgen of guilt niggled at him, which made him want to clench his teeth again. He was being an ass. Dennis wasn't the problem. Normally he was delightful company, but Tucker had stepped off the plane from California at six this morning and had been going nonstop ever since. He needed a little downtime.

At least Dennis hadn't taken Tucker's favorite spot this time. He preferred parking nearest to the elevators, even though the next space was also assigned to him. That way no one parked next to his Jag, unless someone—like Dennis—was visiting. It was a little thing but he loved his car and didn't want it dented all to hell with door dings.

Dennis stood leaning against his powder blue Jetta looking elegant in his gray suit and red tie. The epitome of successful businessman, he looked untouchable and ... fake. Dennis pretended to be so restrained and prudish, but Tucker didn't mind the act. It wasn't much of a challenge, but it was amusing ... sometimes. Today, however, wasn't one of those times. Tucker wasn't in the mood.

Wondering how long it'd take to get rid of him, Tucker pulled into the space next to Dennis's car. He'd had a long day and still had more work to do tonight. Dennis's constant chatter would likely make Tucker's head explode, which was another reason Dennis had to go. Maybe Tucker could talk

him into a blowjob first. Dennis, who professed not to do oral sex, gave decent head.

Pushing away from his car, Dennis strode briskly around it toward Tucker.

Tucker checked the navigation screen in his dashboard. It was only seven thirty-six. He never got home before seven. Dennis should know that by now, but he could bitch if he wanted to, Tucker really didn't care. He'd become rather good at tuning it out.

After putting his car in park, he cut the engine.

Shaking his head, Dennis crossed his arms over his chest, waiting for Tucker to get out of the car.

Great. The chance of a blowjob before he got rid of Dennis wasn't looking good. Tucker gathered up his briefcase and his laptop and unfolded himself from his car. "Hello, Dennis."

"You forgot."

Yup, the blowjob was history. "Forgot what?" Tucker shut the door and locked it before putting his laptop bag over his shoulder and starting toward the elevator.

"You were going to take me out tonight." Dennis maneuvered his way in front of Tucker so that Tucker had to reach past Dennis to push the button for the elevator.

Oops. "Sorry I-"

The elevator door opened.

Digging into his laptop bag for his keys, Tucker stepped around Dennis and inside the elevator. He pushed the button to his floor just as his other hand found the keys.

"Tucker, I can't believe you forgot." Dennis followed him in before the doors closed. Huffing out a breath, he blew the

elegant mahogany-colored forelock off his forehead and threw his hands in the air, letting them fall back to his sides with a slap. His gray eyes narrowed. "You forgot last time too. And the time before that."

Well damn. The elevator started moving and Tucker glanced above the door at the floor numbers. "Sorry." That was the best he could do. Offering to go anyway was out of the question. It was too bad about the blowjob though. Floor eighteen. Almost there.

"Sorry? That's it?"

Come on, floor twenty-one. Tucker jiggled his keys. Maybe he could still talk Dennis into a handjob. It wouldn't take long, and then he could get to work on the papers he'd brought home. He closed his eyes, trying to recall all the things he had to do before tomorrow morning. He needed to call Roger about the meeting at eight a.m., make sure his secretary sent the contracts to Cliff and check the stocks on Oxy Corp. again.

The chime rang and the doors parted.

Opening his eyes, Tucker headed out of the elevator and to his apartment. "You wanna come in?" He unlocked his apartment door. "I'll order us some food." Maybe he'd get Mexican food from the place next door or Italian from the restaurant up the street. He was tired of Chinese. "How about pizza?"

No answer.

"Dennis?"

Still no answer.

Tucker turned.

Dennis stood in the elevator with a frown on his face and hands on his hips. The door started to close, but he stuck his hand out, stopping it, and strode toward Tucker. "That's it?" He pushed into the apartment past Tucker. "You want to order pizza? And then what?"

Well shit. A handjob wasn't looking very promising either. Shutting the door, Tucker crossed the room and set his briefcase on the coffee table before depositing his laptop bag on the couch. He turned on the lamp beside the couch and pushed the button to open the vertical blinds. "I said I was sorry. What else do you want from me? I'm hungry and pizza sounds good. I'm ordering some. If you want to eat, fine. If not, that's fine too." He loosened his tie and took off his jacket, already bored with this conversation.

"Un-fucking-believable." Dennis's voice went so high it almost screeched. "So you aren't taking me out? Is that what you're saying?"

After tossing his jacket over the chair closest to him, Tucker unbuttoned the cuffs on his shirt. "I've got work to—"

"You always have work to do. That's all you do. Work, work, work. You're a coldhearted bastard. You don't give a damn about anything but your fucking job and making money." He put his hands on his hips again, striking a pose that would make any drama queen envious. "You can't even take holidays off to go see your own damn family. You never go out, unless it involves business."

Someone knocked on the door, fizzling Dennis's showstopping tantrum.

Relieved at the interruption, Tucker pinched the bridge of his nose and headed across the room. He opened the door and blinked. Dropping his hand from his nose, he blinked again, convinced he was seeing things. No, he wasn't imagining it. He'd know those lips anywhere. He'd seen that particular chin shadowed by a hat too many times to mistake it.

A smile spread across Tucker's face and excitement bubbled up inside him before he could quash it. "Micah?"

Micah was taller than the last time Tucker had seen him, leaner too. The black cowboy hat sat low on his head, covering his eyes and emphasizing the soft jaw, angular chin and sensual mouth pressed into a thin line. Something was wrong.

Tucker's heart sank and dread coiled in his stomach.

"Come in." He grabbed Micah by the hand, noticing his duffle bag for the first time, and tugged Micah inside. Pushing the bag off Micah's shoulder, Tucker pulled the other man into his arms. "What is it?" He rubbed Micah's lean back, hoping to abolish some of the tension, and felt the bumps of his spine. He was too thin. "What's wrong, baby?"

Micah stiffened, then his arms came around Tucker's waist loosely, almost hesitantly, but it was enough to bring Tucker back to his senses. *Thank God.* Releasing Micah, Tucker stepped back and tried not to scowl. The endearment had slipped right out, like the most natural thing in the world. "Why are you here?" Well, he hadn't scowled, but the question had come out pretty clipped. He wouldn't take it back though.

"I—" Micah winced then cleared his throat. "I came to bring you home."

"Ahem." Dennis stepped forward and thrust out his hand. "I'm Dennis Hammond. And you are?"

With red tingeing his cheeks, Micah dipped his head toward Dennis and shook his hand. "Micah Jimenez. Nice to meet you, Mr. Hammond." He glanced back at Tucker and pulled off his cowboy hat. He brushed a hand through his short black hair and his Adam's apple bobbed. There were bags under his eyes and he was wearing his glasses.

The impulse to wrap his arms around Micah again was strong, making Tucker frown. He hadn't seen Micah in four years, not since the night their relationship changed forever. The surge of emotion was swift, powerful and unwelcome. He had to find out what Micah wanted and get rid of him. Fast.

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to interrupt but—" Glancing at Dennis, Micah swallowed hard again. He twisted the hat brim in his hands, something he'd always done when he was nervous. Glancing back at Tucker, he asked, "Could we have a word in private?"

"I'll just be going then." Dennis stepped closer toward the door and consequently Micah. "Well good luck to you, Micah Jimenez. I don't know who you are, but maybe you'll have better luck than I did. See you around, Tucker."

Damn it, of all the people in the world to witness Dennis leaving like this, it would have to be Micah. Forcing himself to unclench his jaw, Tucker tried to act as if being dumped was no big deal. "Dennis—"

"No. I can't deal with this anymore. The sex was as phenomenal as everyone said, but you take too much and give too..." he glanced back at Micah and his brow furrowed, "...give too little." After shaking his head, he made eye contact with Tucker. "I can't do this." He opened the door. "If you ever want more, call me." And shut it quietly behind him.

Dragging his tie off his neck, Tucker winced. *Guess that's a no on the handjob? Holy shit.* He wanted to punch something. It was a scary thought. Everything he did was with a calm, calculating tenacity that served him and his interests well. He'd learned long ago not to show his hand. Was that being a coldhearted bastard? And why the hell did seeing Micah after all this time have him off kilter? When he turned back, Micah was still standing in the same spot with his eyes as big as saucers, and Tucker's temper eased before it could really get going.

"Uh, I'm sorry, I didn't mean to interrupt. It's just—"
Tucker dropped his tie on top of his coat. No way in hell
was he going to let Micah see the effect his presence had on
him. "You didn't. I was trying to figure out how to get rid of
him when you showed up." As Tucker headed toward the
kitchen, he picked up the phone and punched the number two
speed-dial button. "Still like pepperoni and olives on your
pizza?" Micah could stand to gain a few pounds.

"Tucker?"

Tucker grabbed two beers out of the fridge as he ordered the pizza. How long had Dennis lasted? Two months? Three? *Ouch.* Tucker didn't know. He tried to muster up regret, but there was nothing. Not a damn thing. Tossing the phone on

the couch, he flopped down next to it. He set his beer on the table before holding the other out to Micah. "Come sit down."

Micah came around the adjacent loveseat and sat, placing his hat beside him. He appeared dead on his feet. Had he driven the six hours straight from the ranch? "Did you get AJ's call?"

"I've been out of town until this morning. My secretary left me some messages but I haven't had a chance to look at them. What's wro—?" Granddad had cancer. *Oh no.* Tucker had meant to go home. He'd wanted to see Granddad one last time. Tears brimmed in his eyes and pain lanced through him, like the time he'd fallen off his horse and flat onto his back when he was five. He took a drink of his beer, letting the tangy flavor hang in his mouth a little before swallowing. "He's dead, isn't he?"

"No! No, he's still hanging on. It's not going to be long though. But that's not why I came. Well, no, it sort of is, but it's not entirely why I came. I need—" Micah leaned his elbows on his knees and dropped his head, peering at the floor.

Tucker turned away. Why did being near Micah after all this time make Tucker feel so off balance? Damn him. Tucker had never been able to resist his protective instincts where Micah was concerned. Why hadn't AJ or Dad come to get him instead?

Micah glanced up, his eyes heavy lidded. The memories of that night came rushing back to Tucker. Micah's blissful face as Tucker sank into him, Micah's teary eyes when he begged

Tucker not to go. The rush of guilt assailed Tucker just like it had as he drove away from The Bar D that last time.

After a few seconds, Micah ran his hands over his face. His complexion had grown a little paler than before, or maybe the shadows under his eyes were just more pronounced in the lamplight. "I found his will the other day on the computer and your uncle has been emailing me every other day insisting I turn things over to him and—" Unshed tears shimmered in his eyes. "I can't sit by and let the ranch go under ... or worse, go to your uncle, but I don't know what to do."

Whoa. Wait a minute. Duncan? Rage built up inside Tucker and he had to fight to keep it from boiling over. "What do you mean go to my un—" God, he couldn't even say it. He didn't want to admit to that relation. "Duncan? Granddad wouldn't—" Last time Tucker had talked to AJ—what was it, a month ago now?—AJ had said he was taking over as foreman and Micah was acting ranch manager. It had sounded like everything was running smoothly. Micah had always been a smart little thing, and Tucker remembered thinking it was a good choice, so what had happened? Where the fuck did Duncan fit into this?

"I wouldn't have thought so either, but the way Granddad's will reads it's possible your uncle could get the ranch. I need you to look into it. It's worded strangely, as if that condition in the will only applies to your dad, you and AJ, but ... Duncan is the oldest son. I don't have the money to hire a lawyer to look at it and Ferguson isn't in any shape to discuss it."

"Over my dead body will that son of a bitch get his hands on The Bar D." Tucker stood, heading over to the window. "Tell me what's what with the ranch." He winced at the bite in his voice. This wasn't Micah's fault, but the very idea of Tucker's treacherous unc—Duncan getting his hands on the ranch did not sit well.

"We're in over our heads with your grandfather's medical bills. I've tried anything and everything I can think of and have managed most of our debt, but with the economy like it is ... We need an investor or there won't be a ranch to be passed down." His voice cracked a little. "That's why I'm here. I—we need your help, Tucker."

Tucker stared at the reflection of Micah in the glass, watching Micah's shoulders slump. He wanted to ask why they hadn't come to him sooner, but he knew. With the way he'd left, asking his help would be the last thing Micah would want to do. And who could blame him? Micah was such a proud thing. It wouldn't matter to him in the least that he was asking for help for Tucker's own family, it would still sting. The money situation must be worse than Micah was letting on for him to ask Tucker's help after everything that happened between them. But Tucker knew Micah well enough to know he'd swallow his pride and come for help, even from Tucker, rather than risk the ranch being stripped from its rightful owners.

"You have it," he said softly, hoping to encourage Micah to continue. No matter the past, Tucker would never sit by while Micah—or his family—needed.

Micah heaved a sigh, looking slightly relieved. His gaze was on the carpet, unaware Tucker was watching him. Had Micah thought Tucker would refuse to help? It hurt, but Tucker supposed he understood why Micah would think that.

"I feel like a first-rate shitheel for reading that will, but we're barely keeping our heads above water. I managed to pay off the yearly taxes, but there's nothing left. I had to do something, see if there was money somewhere else. Ferguson fades in and out, but the few times I've asked about other accounts he's said there aren't any. I was hoping that maybe there was something in the will. I figured it would all be left to your dad, but ... I just don't know."

That's what Tucker had thought. He'd known instinctively Micah would have done everything possible to keep the ranch going. Forcing his focus away from Micah's reflection, Tucker stared out at the Dallas sky. It was beautiful and the best view money could buy, but he rarely saw it. With Micah here, so close, Tucker had to wonder if leaving The Bar D had been worth it. Groaning, he rested his forehead on the glass and closed his eyes. It didn't matter, because he couldn't go back. Right or wrong, he'd made his decision years ago. "Tell me what's in the will, Micah."

"I'd rather show you. I'm afraid it won't hold up in court. I don't know what Ferguson was thinking, but—Do you have a computer? I brought a USB drive with me."

No way was Tucker going to stand by and watch his egg donor and Dun—"Is he still with her?" What must Dad be feeling about all this? Tucker's heart hurt for him.

"I don't know if she's still around. His notes have been terse and demanding. Her name hasn't come up. I haven't told Je—your dad about the emails." Micah's voice trailed off like he'd moved farther away. "From what the will says—" There was rustling. "It looks like Duncan could get the ranch, even though it specifically names your dad, you and AJ in regards to the ranch." Micah touched Tucker's back, then held his hand out over Tucker's shoulder. "Here. I haven't said anything to AJ or your dad about the will. I didn't want to hurt them any more than they're already hurting. It's bad enough that Ferguson wants to see Duncan one last time, but I'll be damned if I add this to their grief."

Swallowing the lump in his throat, Tucker opened his eyes and lifted his head off the cool glass. He grabbed Micah's hand and held on to it for a few seconds. Extracting the thumb drive from Micah's palm, Tucker felt the calluses before his hand slid away.

Standing so close Tucker could feel the heat of his body, Micah yawned. "It's a nice view, but there're no stars."

Tucker sighed. It didn't surprise him that Micah had noticed the lack of stars. Micah had always been a hopeless romantic.

Leaning back on the couch, Tucker read the will and took a bite of pizza. What in the hell could his granddad possibly be thinking? "This can't be real. He wants to leave the ranch to the first of us to marry?" Tucker swigged his beer. "It's even worded where it doesn't have to be a marriage legal in Texas or even the U.S., just a legal civil union. Technically, I could marry another man and inherit." Now that he thought about

it, maybe granddad had done this on purpose since he knew Tucker was gay. It didn't matter, because Tucker would get his lawyer on this right away. "Are you sure he was of sound mind?"

After a few seconds when Micah didn't say anything, Tucker glanced over at him.

Lips tightly pressed together, Micah sat on the loveseat adjacent to the couch with a plate on his lap. A can of Dr. Pepper sat untouched on the coffee table in front of him. His hand rested in the middle of his chest over his breastbone and his eyes were closed. There was a gray pallor to his normally tan skin.

Tucker's chest tightened and the protective feelings he'd always had where Micah was concerned surfaced. He tried to dismiss it, but he couldn't help but think Micah didn't seem quite right. "Micah?"

With a start, Micah opened his eyes. "What?"

"Are you all right?" Tucker sat forward, putting his halfeaten slice of pizza on the empty plate beside his laptop.

Micah didn't look okay. Besides being tired and too thin, Micah had bloodshot eyes. "Yeah, I'm good." Micah winced and pressed against his chest.

Glancing down at Micah's plate, Tucker realized he hadn't even touched his food. "Eat your food. You drove straight here. That's a six-hour drive. I want you to eat, then go to sleep."

Micah's eyes quickly narrowed into a hard glare. "Don't tell me what—" After taking a deep breath, Micah lowered his voice. "Jeff fixed us all a big breakfast this morning and I'm

not that tired. I'll probably head back out to the ranch tonight." He set his plate on the table and rubbed absently at his chest. "After you look at that, I mean."

For several seconds, Tucker just stared, almost disappointed that Micah had backed down. That fiery Latino temper was something else. "I'll look at the finances in a bit, but right now I want you to eat and get some rest. You look like hell." No fucking way was Tucker letting him drive back tonight. "I'll go to the ranch with you tomorrow morning so I can see Granddad. I have a meeting tomorrow but I'm going to cancel it. This is more important."

Micah squeezed his eyes together and a small moan escaped. "I don't feel like eati—" His eyes flew open and he jumped to his feet. "Bathroom?"

Shit. Tucker bolted around the couch and down the hall. "Here." He pushed open the bathroom door a split second before Micah darted past him.

Skidding to a halt in front of the toilet, Micah vomited. Or tried to, not much came up. "Sorry." Micah dropped to his knees and rested his head on the rim of the bowl.

"Don't be silly. You've nothing to apologize for, but you definitely aren't going anywhere tonight." *Damn.* As soon as Micah dozed off, Tucker was going to call Dad and AJ and ream their asses out for letting Micah drive all the way here by himself. Tucker needed to go home for a bit just to make sure the kid was taking care of himself. After wetting a washcloth, Tucker carried it to Micah. "Micah."

"Thanks." Micah took the rag and wiped his mouth before laying his head on the arm that rested on the rim of the pot.

"I don't know what's wrong with me. I haven't eaten anything to throw up." His other hand pressed against his chest again.

Tucker brushed the dark hair off Micah's pale forehead and saw the blood in the toilet. "Oh God." His chest squeezed tight and the hairs on the back of his neck and arms rose. "Come on, baby. Get up from there, you're going to the hospital."

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Chapter Three

"Oh God, he's leaving." Micah dropped the curtain and dove for his pants where they lay strewn at the foot of Tucker's bed. Fear stabbed at his chest as he hopped around off balance and put them on. Tucker couldn't be leaving. He couldn't. After throwing one last glance at the tangled sheets, Micah raced out of Tucker's bedroom. He flew down the stairs and out the back door as fast as his feet would carry him.

The screen door slammed behind Micah, and Tucker froze with his hand on the back door of his car. Micah's steps faltered as the gravel stabbed into his bare feet. He walked the rest of the way, stopping two feet from Tucker.

This couldn't be what it looked like. Tucker wouldn't leave him now. The sudden slump of Tucker's shoulders and the fact that he hadn't turned around yet ... No. Micah's throat closed, refusing to take in air. It was what he imagined swallowing jagged rocks would feel like. Unwilling to believe what logic told him, he shook his head. "Where are you going?" He didn't even care if Tucker heard the crack in his voice. "Why didn't you wake me?"

"Micah..." Tucker shut the door but didn't turn.

Looking past him, Micah spotted all the bags Tucker had brought home with him, plus some, littering the backseat of his Buick. Tears blurred Micah's vision and a deep pain flared to life in his chest. Tucker was leaving without even saying goodbye. Micah had thought—No, he wasn't going to let his

mind go there. It didn't matter now. "Turn around, damn you. Look at me!"

Slowly, Tucker turned. "I have to go back, Micah. I've made junior partner. It's an opportunity I can't turn down."

"No! You don't have to go. You don't need the job or the money. You can stay here with me."

Shaking his head, Tucker reached for Micah's cheek. "I can't. It's better this way. You'll see."

Micah leaned in to the caress, barely able to focus on Tucker's face through the tears. "Don't go," he begged. "Please don't leave me. I love you. I can't—"

"Ah, baby, don't—"

Something snapped inside Micah. The ache in his heart remained, but anger and a sense of betrayal surfaced, overpowering it. He slapped Tucker's hand away and stepped out of reach. "Don't? Don't what?"

"Shh ... You're going to wake the others." Tucker moved closer again.

Shame joined the fury. Tucker didn't want anyone to know about them. He was embarrassed. Micah shook his head, feeling like three kinds of a fool. Tucker was leaving. After the night they'd shared, Micah had naively believed that Tucker would come home for good ... come home for Micah. "Why?"

"Because you can do a hell of a lot better than me."

A laugh that sounded anything but humorous escaped Micah. He glanced at his toes and a tear streaked down his cheek, landing on his bare chest. Tucker had made love to Micah, or so he'd thought, but apparently it had meant nothing to Tucker.

He'd loved Tucker for so long. When he'd shown up last night at Micah's birthday party, Micah had been ecstatic. Tucker had stayed after everyone had left, and it had given Micah hope. Hope that maybe his fantasy about Tucker waiting until he was eighteen to claim him was true. Micah had stayed up until the rest of the family had retired for the night, and he'd gone to Tucker's room.

The tears came in earnest now, streaking down Micah's face. His nose was running. How stupid could he be? He shook his head and sniffed, trying to keep the snot from streaming down his face. Glancing up, he caught Tucker's worried expression. Or maybe it was pity shadowing his face.

"Good luck with your new job." With that, Micah turned on his heel and headed back to the house.

"Micah, wait..."

Lifting his head higher, Micah kept going. As he reached the back porch, he heard Tucker's car door slam and the engine start. Micah didn't look back. Once he entered the house, he peeked out the curtain covering the back window.

Something squeezed his arm in much the same way the panic seized his chest. *Please don't go. Don't leave me.* The tears clogged his throat as the car drove off in a cloud of dust. An annoying little beep sounded and a smooth, deep voice spoke softly in the distance. Micah couldn't tell what the voice was saying but it was soothing, easing the almost frantic feeling. Tucker. It sounded like Tucker.

The tightness in his chest diminished the more that voice spoke, until he could take a breath and not feel like someone was strangling him. The rich husky tone brought to mind a

cold night with a warm fire and a fifth of whiskey. *Oh nice*. His lips curved automatically and he snuggled down into the warmth surrounding him. Some Glenlivet would really hit the spot. Too bad the liquor stash at The Bar D was nearly depleted. Well, no, maybe not ... lately any alcohol killed his stomach, which really sucked because the past month he could've used a good nip at night to lull him to sleep. Come to think of it, this was about as cozy as he'd been in a long time.

A little niggling in the back of his mind said this couldn't be right. There was always something to worry over, always something to do, or money to figure out, so why was he asleep? He'd gone to talk to Tucker. Micah blinked his eyes open.

The hospital. He'd nearly forgotten about coming to the hospital. It was dim and blurry as hell without his glasses, but there was no mistaking the clinical look of the room and the scent of antiseptic. The blood-pressure cuff released the death grip on his arm and another beep accosted his ears. *Mierda*, he didn't have the money for this.

There was a creak that sounded like someone fidgeting in a chair. "I love you too, Granddad." Tucker paused and his voice hitched a bit. "I'll do my best." There was another pause and a long sniff. "Yes, sir, I promise. I'll make everything right."

He talked quietly, but Micah thought he heard longing in Tucker's speech. At that moment, Micah hated himself for being the reason Tucker stayed away. Maybe if he left The Bar D, Tucker would come back. Maybe he'd visit his family. Micah closed his eyes again and took a deep, calming breath.

That damned dream. God, he couldn't believe he still remembered Tucker leaving like it was yesterday. Why did it still hurt so damn much? Even being older and wiser didn't help. It just added guilt and embarrassment to the equation. He never should have begged Tucker to stay. It wasn't fair to pressure Tucker, and even though Micah been little more than a kid, it was damn humiliating.

"I'll see you in two days, okay? Bye, Granddad."

Micah had to get out of here and away from Tucker. Trying to shake his head into alertness, he snapped his eyes open. Grappling with the cuff on his arm, he edged his feet to the side of the bed and out of the covers. Shame swamped him for needing Tucker's help with the ranch. If there was any other way ... If it weren't for Jeff and AJ, Micah wouldn't even ask, but Tucker was their family.

The rip of the Velcro signaled his freedom and cold air nipped at his toes. No way was he going to be able to pay for an extended stay. He refused to ask Tucker for anything that wasn't ranch related. Unlike most wealthy people, Tucker was generous and didn't hurt people with his money or try to get his way with it, but Micah would rather die than ask Tucker to help *him*. It was bad enough he had to have the endoscopy to make sure the bleeding wasn't dire. He'd find the money somewhere, but it was an outpatient procedure, right? What was another couple thousand? He'd find a way...

A hand landed on his shoulder, pushing him back to the mattress.

Micah turned his head and looked right into Tucker's dark eyes. Everything just stopped. Micah couldn't breathe,

couldn't think and certainly couldn't talk. He froze with one leg dangling off the bed and a hand on the rail to help push himself up. Here he was flat on his back—and damn his stomach ached—he was groggy and needing to get out of here, but the sight of Tucker, even fuzzy as it was, hit him just as hard as it had when he'd seen Tucker again after all those years apart. Why couldn't he get this man out of his head? He'd thought he'd be immune to Tucker now that he'd grown up, but he wasn't. Seeing Tucker and that damn dream had proved it. Why was Tucker still the most gorgeous man he'd ever laid eyes on?

"Slow down, Hopalong." Tucker released Micah's shoulder and tucked his foot back under the covers. Twining his fingers with Micah's, he made Micah release the death grip on the bedrail. He didn't, however, release Micah's hand. "Where'd you think you were going?" He smirked and one sandy brow arched in question.

"Outta here. I can't afford—"

"Don't start. I don't think the nurses would take too kindly to me bending you over my knee. The bleeding wasn't bad, but you're stuck here for the next twenty-four hours at least. And I'm paying the hospital bill." Letting go of Micah's hand, Tucker sat in a chair next to the bed and gave Micah a stern, no-nonsense look that brooked no argument.

It irritated the piss outta Micah. Heat rushed into his neck and face. He was not the same doting kid who hung on Tucker's every word and did whatever Tucker said. Micah was a grown man with responsibilities and—He groaned. "Damn it.

I didn't call home. And where the hell are my glasses? I can't see a goddamned thing."

"I've already called The Bar D." Tucker pulled Micah's glasses out of his shirt pocket and put them on Micah's face. He leaned back in the chair and crossed his long legs out in front of him.

Now that he could see clearly, Micah studied Tucker again.

The streetlamp light coming in from the open curtain haloed him, casting a silhouette on his face. Tucker's square jaw was nearly always covered with a heavy five o'clock shadow. It had constantly amazed Micah that anyone with strawberry blond hair could have such a dark beard. More than once Micah had coveted the memory of how those prickly whiskers felt on his skin.

"I talked to my granddad." Resting his head on the back of the chair, Tucker closed his eyes.

What could Micah say to that? He'd heard. "Was he having a good day?" Micah fought the urge to reach out to Tucker by burying his hands under the blanket.

"Yeah." Smiling, Tucker nodded slightly but his eyes remained closed. He looked almost fragile, making Micah want to turn away and give him a moment, but he didn't. It was a rare thing to see cracks in Tucker's armor. Hell, if Micah hadn't seen it, he'd have said Tucker didn't have any. Funny, he seemed so vulnerable, yet his wide shoulders swallowed up the small space in the private hospital room, attesting to his power as nothing else could.

Tucker's silent strength had always made Micah feel secure and protected. Maybe that's why he'd come to get Tucker's

help. For as long as Micah could remember, Tucker had been able to carry the world on his shoulders so effortlessly. Micah almost resented him for it. Tucker didn't let himself be bogged down with normal wants and needs. He could go off on his own and make a fortune without missing his family ... without missing Micah. And wasn't that a slap to the face? Micah wanted so badly to scream and yell and tell Tucker he hated him.

He was supposed to be helping ensure they would keep The Bar D, and here he was mooning over a man he could never have and racking up more bills. Micah closed his eyes. A private room. The hospital bill was going to be outrageous. No way in hell was he not paying Tucker back though.

"He told me you needed me."

"What?" Snapping his eyes open, Micah met Tucker's gaze.
"You told him I was in the hospital?"

"No, AJ and Dad threatened to strangle me if I did." Tucker stood, leaning his forearms on the bedrail and looking down at Micah. He shrugged. "I'm not sure what he meant. Maybe he suspects something?"

Frowning, Micah wished Tucker would sit. He was too big, too imposing, too desirable and way too damn close. "He does know something. He knows how bad the debt is. I guess it's his way of reminding you where you belong and asking for help. He's been asking for you."

Tracing fingers along Micah's cheek, Tucker followed the caress with his gaze. "Maybe." He nodded. "Probably."

A tingly feeling started in Micah's stomach and spread outward. His cock even stirred and the stupid beeping got

faster. Heat rushed to Micah's cheeks and he jerked his head away. "Have you looked over the will?"

"I did. You're right, it reads like the marriage condition is only applicable to me, my dad and AJ. Duncan isn't named in that part, which could be bad, because as the oldest he could contest it. I've got a lawyer looking at it." He sat in his chair and stretched out with his hands over his stomach. "Why haven't you come to me before now?"

"Because I was handling it just—"

"Oh really?" Tucker arched one arrogant brow. "You can't even take care of yourself."

"You're an asshole." Micah wasn't a fucking kid anymore. Tucker had no right. He hadn't even been around. Micah was doing the work Tucker had been born to do—he was Jeff's oldest child—so how dare he judge. Tucker had no idea how lucky he was to still have his birthright. Micah gritted his teeth. The high from the anesthesia was definitely wearing off, but his anger kept the pain away.

"Yes, I am. And since you already think that, maybe it's a good time to tell you what I've decided to do about the will."

A chill raced up Micah's spine at the cool, almost dead tone in which Tucker spoke. Oh yeah, the meds were definitely wearing off. "What?"

"We're going to get married before we go back to the ranch."

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Chapter Four

With a sinking feeling, Tucker glanced at the marriage license where it lay on the dash of the car. This had seemed like such a good idea when he'd thought of it. It would keep the ranch in the family without having to result to contesting the will ... theoretically. Micah had said that his dad and AJ weren't seeing anyone, and Tucker wasn't about to marry just anyone, so this appeared to be the perfect solution. Hell, who was he kidding? Not a lot of thought went into the decision, which was a rare thing. He didn't usually just react without weighing the consequences.

As Tucker exited the highway, he stole a glance at Micah, who was sitting in the passenger seat. Tucker could practically feel that Latino temper about to flare to life again.

Micah hadn't said two words since yesterday, not since they spoke their wedding vows. Even then, the words were forced out through gritted teeth with a glare that would have scared a lesser man. Oh well, Micah belonged to Tucker for now, like it or not. He'd known Micah would agree, even if he were less than pleased, if it kept them from contesting the will and going against Ferguson's wishes. At this point, Tucker didn't really care what the little shit wanted. Micah had been working himself to death and this was the one sure way to make him stop. No matter if Tucker had to fight him tooth and nail. He couldn't live with himself if he let things go on this way. "How do you feel?"

"Fine."

Tucker repressed the urge to grind his teeth together and shake the shit out of Micah. One thing was for certain, Micah's attitude kept Tucker at arm's length. Tucker was grateful but also sad. Had Micah always been this disagreeable? No, Tucker knew he hadn't. Once upon a time Micah was all smiles and hung on Tucker's every word. He missed it. Okay, maybe the adoring agreement was a bit much—Tucker kind of liked the new independent streak—but Tucker wanted to see that smile again. *No.* No, he didn't. This surly Micah was much easier on Tucker's conscience. He could concentrate on fixing things for his family and getting the hell outta Dodge. "No pain?"

"No." Micah continued to lean back in the seat with his eyes closed.

"Tell me about your ideas for the ranch."

"Doesn't matter."

"Goddamn it, Micah." They used to get along so well they didn't need to talk to communicate with one another. Tucker had never experienced that with anyone else, including AJ. "It does matter. I didn't marry you so I can just throw away money on the ranch. I want it profitable again. I want to make sure you, Dad, AJ and Juan have a home and an income. Y'all need to be happy with it, so I need your input."

"What? What does that mean? You're just gonna get things back on track for us and split? Yep, that sounds about right. You're abandoning us again." Micah sounded amused, which grated on Tucker's nerves even more.

"Micah..." Tucker groaned. "I'm not abandoning y'all. I never abandoned y'all." He'd had to leave. Couldn't Micah see

Tucker had given him a chance to grow up and become his own man? "I have a life and career in Dallas. I can't just move back out to the ranch and pretend otherwise." He'd never be able to keep his hands off Micah if he did. Nothing had changed. Even if Micah would forgive him—which wasn't likely given the hostility he'd shown the last few days—he was still better off without Tucker. "I did things this way to make sure that the ranch stays with who it should. It's not as if I could just ask my granddad to change his will. You said yourself it's only a matter of time until—" Tucker's throat grew tight, making him have to swallow. Jesus, he just wanted to turn around, go back home and forget everything. "Until we lose him. This way we have things secured. The ranch will be put in my name. I'll pay the inheritance tax on it and lend the ranch money to get it going again. So humor me, what is it y'all think will make the ranch solvent? I expect to make a profit too, but I'm not going to be here to run things, y'all are."

"Give me a break. We both know why you ran off. But don't worry, I promise not to make a scene. I'm not the same idiot teenager." Micah sighed and looked at Tucker. "Your granddad wants to see you, but you don't have to stay. I don't need you here to spend your money. I can make the decisions and run them by Jeff and AJ."

Ah, Tucker was starting to see the problem. Micah was used to being the go-to guy. He'd gotten accustomed to running the ranch, and why not? Dad and AJ hated anything to do with the business side of things, they were more than

happy to stay outside with the livestock. "You think I'm just going to come in and take over."

"Aren't you? That's what you always do. Hell, you wouldn't even let me drive my own damn truck home. That sure seems like taking over to me."

A growl escaped before Tucker could hold it back. "We've been over that. You need the rest. I'll take you back to get your truck in a few days. Now will you quit being such a pain in the ass and tell me what ideas you have?" He tried to focus on the passing scenery, but it was no use, he was too aware of the sulky, pissed-off man next to him. His hands flexed on the steering wheel, white-knuckling for a second.

Micah was quiet for several moments. He faced forward again and closed his eyes. "We need to increase our herd size, and AJ and I talked about adding a breeding program. So instead of just the feeding and growing outfit, we can sell breeding stock. We have some excellent bulls, but we'd need more." Apparently, he'd given it some thought. Developing a breeding herd would take a lot of capital, but it had the potential to make more too.

Tucker nearly sighed in relief. Micah was going to cooperate, at least for a little bit. "What kind of herd?"

"Commercial. We wanna mess with cross-breeding."

The Bar D had always run longhorns. "What other breeds?" Without turning his head, Micah shrugged and yawned.

"Don't know yet. We've been too busy to even discuss it."

Tucker frowned. He'd noticed how tired Micah was, but no time to discuss the ranch's future? From what Tucker could tell, Micah did nothing but worry about the ranch. Not many

twenty-two-year-old men ended up with ulcers. The doctor seemed to think it had a lot to do with Micah's anti-inflammatory use. Which made Tucker suspect Micah was working too hard. Sure, ranch work was tough, but the kid needed someone to take care of him. Tucker was going to have to jump his dad's and AJ's asses when he got home. They should be taking care of Micah better.

Slowing the truck, Tucker made a left-hand turn. "We'll discuss it tonight then. We're here."

As gravel crunched under the truck tires, Micah opened his eyes and sat up. A slow, barely perceptible grin flitted across his face.

Tucker grinned too, then cut his gaze back to the front. He drove through the open gate of rough-cut lumber with a long piece going over the top that read The Bar D, and swallowed hard. He tried to tamp down the case of nerves that suddenly appeared. He'd ridden through this gate hundreds of times. What was so different now? Why did it feel like his whole life was about to be turned upside down and inside out? Getting things settled and going back to Dallas was a must. He was losing his mind.

"What if your idiotic plan doesn't work? We're both guys, and Texans aren't too keen on that. Hell, California can't even get their shit together enough to do what's legally and morally right in regards to gay marriage."

Tucker let the insult slide. "It will work. I talked to the lawyer. The way the will was written, the marriage doesn't have to be legal in Texas, just somewhere. It's legal in a few U.S. states and Canada, so we're good."

"I thought your lawyer hadn't read it yet." Frowning, Micah turned in his seat.

"She just looked over the marriage part and said even a civil union or gay marriage would fulfill the conditions. When she finds anything else, I'll let you know."

"And what about ranch decisions?"

"Yes, I promise I will keep you in the loop and run all ranch decisions by you." It wasn't a big lie. Tucker would keep Micah in the loop as long as it wasn't going to stress Micah out.

"Promise?"

"Yes." Tucker kept his eyes forward, but sensed the ease of tension from Micah. If Tucker had known a promise to keep him informed would work, he'd have tried that earlier. Tucker's lawyer had said she was fairly certain the will could be contested, but Tucker had decided to go this route first. Micah would not want them to contest the will because of what happened with his own family. If it hadn't been for Juan ... Tucker shivered. He didn't even want to think about that.

There was also the concern that if Tucker fought the will it would draw attention toward it and maybe give Duncan ideas. Duncan might contest it anyway, but for now Tucker was going to try to get things taken care of through a marriage of convenience. Yeah right. Who are you kidding? That isn't the only reason you wanted to marry him. He was a selfish bastard and wanted more control over Micah's life. Tucker had no clue what to do with Micah once they went back to their daily lives, but Tucker was going to take care of Micah in the meantime. Tucker would let Micah go when the time came

... maybe. No, he would, he had to. He knew damned well there was no such thing as a fairy-tale happily ever after. If he stayed, he'd be tempted to try to make their marriage real, and when it finally ended ... he couldn't do that to Micah.

"Hijo de la chingada!"

Tucker smiled at the Spanish swear. Micah had always cussed in Spanish. As a kid, he'd gotten away with it most of the time, unless Juan was within earshot. "What are you swearing about?"

"That." Micah pointed to a silver Cadillac Escalade. The license plate read DUNCAN.

It was like someone had poured ice water down Tucker's back. So help him if that son of a bitch was upsetting his dad...

Micah began muttering in Spanish. Tucker caught the words "cabrón" and "pendejo" and figured whatever Micah was saying wasn't very nice. Tucker's only regret was not knowing enough Spanish to join in.

"Fuck me." Tucker pulled into the drive behind his dad's beat-up old Chevy and put his car in park. "Why is that fucking lowlife *here*?"

"I told you Ferguson asked for him, but I didn't really think he'd come." Micah's voice had a growly quality to it that made Tucker look at him more closely. It was sexy and violent at the same time. Or maybe it was sexy because it was so violent sounding. At any rate, it didn't sound like Micah.

Tucker hadn't thought Duncan would come either. He was even more puzzled over why his granddad would want to see

Duncan. Dying apparently made a man try to make amends even when it wasn't his fault. "Think he brought the bitch with him?" If his egg donor was here, Tucker was going to throw her ass off the property personally. Granddad sure as hell hadn't asked to see *her*.

"I don't know." Micah reached for the door handle. "I gotta go check on Dad."

Catching Micah's arm before he opened the door, Tucker wondered if Micah even realized he'd called Tucker's dad "Dad". "Wait, killer. Your seat belt is still on."

Micah moved to unlatch his belt, but Tucker didn't let go of his arm. As badly as Tucker would love to see Duncan get his ass kicked, he wasn't about to let Micah do it. In fact, Micah shouldn't be getting this upset. It wasn't good for him. He was supposed to be taking it easy.

Tucker frowned. "Micah, calm down." He grabbed the marriage license off the dash and held it up, before putting it in the center console. "Remember this? It's our ace in the hole. So stop worrying. Duncan can't get into the computer, can he?"

"Only AJ and I know the password." Unhooking his seat belt, Micah shook his head and turned his body toward Tucker. Micah took a deep breath and visibly tried to calm himself. "Not a chance in hell would AJ give that *pendejo* the password."

"Good. Relax. We'll let him visit with Granddad for a few hours and send him on his way." Tucker's gaze darted past Micah for a second, spotting AJ, his dad and Juan coming their way. One side of Tucker's mouth hitched up and an odd

feeling swamped him. It took him a second, but he finally realized what it was. It was contentment. God, it was good to be home.

He glanced back at Micah, noting once again the dark circles under his eyes. Tucker's chest tightened. No way was he letting Duncan stay. Micah didn't need the stress. "Come here, baby."

Micah's brows scrunched together and he glared at Tucker. "What did you call me?"

Tucker got an insane urge to kiss that glare away. He shouldn't. It would only complicate things. Fuck that, he wanted and he was going to have. He leaned forward and touched Micah under the chin to urge him closer. As he slanted his mouth over Micah's in an easy caress, he tried not to knock Micah's glasses off.

A sound caught somewhere between a protest and a plea left Micah's throat before he finally kissed Tucker back. Micah reached for his glasses with one hand and clenched and unclenched the other in the fabric of Tucker's shirt.

Tucker wanted the kiss to last, yet at the same time he knew he shouldn't. This could become an obsession. He couldn't afford to get addicted to Micah's kisses. Micah may be old enough now, but their worlds moved in different directions. It was already going to tear a piece of Tucker's heart out when he had to leave The Bar D again and go back to Dallas. And something told him it was going to hurt a lot worse this time than it did the first. Damn Micah. Why did he have to be so tempting?

Tucker pulled back, hoping Micah would think the kiss was for their audience's benefit.

"What in the holy hell do you think you're—?"

"Shh..." Tucker dipped his head a little, indicating the others.

His family had moved toward them, and now on the porch was a man in an expensive-looking gray suit. *Duncan*. Tucker hadn't remembered him looking that much like Dad, but then Tucker had been four years old the last time he saw Duncan. There was no denying Duncan was Jeff's older brother. It made Tucker's blood boil.

The passenger side door opened. "Well lookie here, the prodigal son has returned." Juan smiled. "Welcome back, young'un."

"And he brought Tucker," AJ said in a surprised whisper. "Well, I'll be damned. Hi there, big brother."

"Juan was talking about Tucker, not Micah." Dad laughed. Leaning down, he caught Tucker's gaze. "Get out here, boy!"

After taking off his seat belt, Tucker opened his own door and smiled so big his face hurt. By the time he made it around the car, AJ and Juan had gathered around Micah, fussing over him.

Micah brushed them off, telling them he was fine.

Dad met Tucker in front of the car and squeezed him so tight he couldn't breathe. He stepped back and studied his father. Dad looked older. There was more gray in his hair and more wrinkles at the corners of his eyes, but he looked good. He looked like home. Tucker hugged him again. "Hi, Dad."

"Glad you're home, son. You take care of our boy?" Dad pulled back, his focus cutting to where AJ and Juan stood with Micah.

Micah caught Tucker's gaze and his eyes fairly sparkled with happiness for a brief moment, then he looked away and said something to AJ.

Nodding, Tucker smiled. "I've tried. He's been fighting me the whole way though."

AJ laughed. "Sounds like him." He patted Micah on the back before striding forward and grabbing Tucker in a big ole bear hug and lifting him off the ground. "Glad you're back. I should've sent the brat after you sooner."

"Besa mi culo." Micah grinned at AJ.

"You should've called me sooner." Tucker frowned, but it was lost on AJ who was flipping Micah off.

"You kiss my ass, brat." AJ looked back at Tucker and the laughter and fun left his eyes. "Did you see who's here?"

Tucker's attention zeroed in on the porch and met Duncan's gaze. "Yeah. Do we need to kick his ass out?"

"I'd love to, but Granddaddy wants him here."

Duncan came down the porch steps, heading their way with his chin held high. He looked so much like Tucker's dad, Tucker had to remind himself what a bastard the man was. When Duncan reached them, he stepped up and held out his hand to Tucker. "So you've decided to come home. Or did the"—his gaze raked over Micah and a snarl appeared on his lips—"little freeloader drag you back?"

"And by freeloader I assume you are referring to my husband." Tucker stared right at Duncan, watching the shock

play over his face. Revulsion quickly followed the shock, which set Tucker's teeth on edge even more. "Come on. Call him a freeloader again. I dare you."

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Chapter Five

Tucker sat on the back porch rail drinking his whiskey and smoking a Latin Gold he'd found in the humidor in the office. Granddad had always had good taste in cigars. Tucker grinned, remembering the first time he'd gotten into his granddaddy's cigars. He'd just turned sixteen and thought he was hot shit. Dad had been livid, but Granddad had just taken it in stride, offering Tucker one after another. They'd sat out on the porch smoking and talking until Tucker had gotten so lightheaded he'd thrown up. After that, he hadn't touched another cigar. Well, not until he'd moved to Dallas anyway.

He took a puff from the cigar and looked up at the full moon. Damn, he was gonna miss the old man. It had hurt to see him lying in bed looking so frail this afternoon. Tucker should've come home more often. It was a mistake he wouldn't repeat again. From now on, he was visiting home every month, at least for a weekend.

Taking a drink, he let the whiskey slide down his throat and gazed out at the back pasture. His family wasn't all he missed. He missed the country. The fast pace of the business world was exciting, but there was just nothing like a spring night out here far from civilization. It was beautiful. There were so many stars. He'd forgotten how many. When was the last time he'd taken time to look at the stars? He'd been stuck in his high-rise office working on one project or another plenty of times after the sunlight faded, but the city lights made the stars disappear. Buildings overpowered the Dallas

horizon. The big city had its own appeal, but out here was pure magic. The sky looked so endless.

"It's pretty, isn't it?" a soft voice asked.

Tucker started, not realizing he had company, but immediately grinned as recognition set in. He hadn't seen Micah but once since they arrived this afternoon. After they'd gotten here, Tucker had gone straight up to see his grandfather. Then after his visit he'd buried himself in the office going over the bills. Micah had come in and shown him some stuff on the computer and they'd formed a sort of truce, a united front against Duncan. They had to make their marriage look real to outsiders or it'd be much easier to contest.

Taking a puff from his cigar, Tucker turned his head toward Micah and wished he hadn't.

Micah stood at the top of the back steps, a soft grin on his face. The smart little glasses he'd worn during his stay in Dallas were gone. He'd looked adorable in them, but now, without them, he was stunning. Tucker had forgotten how big his eyes were. Those glasses had concealed a lot. Micah's usual hat-covered black hair was wet, like he'd just gotten out of the shower. The red short-sleeved polo shirt pulled tightly across a slim but nicely shaped chest, and even showed off toned biceps. He was still smaller than Tucker, but Micah didn't look like a kid any longer. A pair of tight jeans emphasized the leg muscles he'd earned from years in the saddle, and his feet were bare.

Tucker's breath caught. The memory of the last time he'd seen Micah bare footed, when Tucker had left The Bar D after

their one night together, came to mind. God, he'd felt like such a cruel son of a bitch.

Micah settled beside him, leaning his tanned forearms on the rail. He stood so close the heat of his body warmed Tucker's left arm.

"Yeah, I've missed it. There aren't as many stars in the city." Taking a drink of his whiskey, Tucker glanced back out at the deep endless sky. The soft spring breeze ruffled his hair and blew the vanilla-scented smoke around him. A someone is staring at you feeling niggled at him, but he didn't look to confirm it. Part of him wanted Micah to be looking, which made Tucker want to kick his own ass. He'd ruined his chances with Micah long ago. Damn if being back here didn't have Tucker way off balance, or maybe it was the three whiskeys he'd had in the last hour. At any rate, he had to keep reminding himself he'd burned his bridges.

"Is it all you've missed?"

Apprehension trickled over Tucker, but he pushed it away. It may never be like it was before, but they could at least get along. "No, it's not all I've missed. I miss my family and working on the ranch. I miss—" *You.* Tucker's chest ached at the realization. He missed the easy friendship he and Micah had before Tucker had messed it up with that one night. It seemed wrong to regret such a wonderful, profound night, but he did.

Micah extracted the cigar from Tucker's fingers and took a puff.

It was such an intimate gesture Tucker found himself staring. "I—I miss the quiet." He watched Micah's lips pucker

as he blew out the smoke, and unbidden the image of those sweet lips kissing up his body sprang to mind. Tucker shook his head and retrieved his cigar from Micah. "Since when do you smoke?"

"I don't usually." Micah shrugged. "Why don't you come home more often? Is it because of me? I'd hate to think that—" Micah's voice lowered, almost quivering. "I don't want you to stay away from your family because of me."

Damn. A pang of guilt slapped Tucker in the gut. He did stay away because of Micah, but not for the reasons Micah thought. "It's not you." The lie slipped out of his mouth so easily, Tucker almost believed it himself. "Work keeps me busy. There are always deals to make and companies to sell." Tucker took a puff of his cigar, and it occurred to him that Micah's lips had just rested where his were. Micah's lips tasted as sweet as they had four years ago. Did Micah have more practice now? Tucker shouldn't care, but he didn't like the idea of Micah being with anyone else. He'd been Micah's first, but Tucker had no right to expect to be Micah's only.

"What're you doing out here?" Tucker winced at the growl in his voice.

Micah was quiet for several moments. When he spoke, his volume was barely above a whisper. "Couldn't sleep. I was wondering where you were."

Sucking in a breath of air, Tucker nearly choked. He covered quickly by taking a drink. Something tickled his arm as he set his drink on the porch railing. He glanced down.

Micah's long dark fingers feathered over his arm, caressing. It was an innocent touch, but it sent the blood

thrumming straight to Tucker's groin. *Fuck.* He had to get outta here before he did something he'd regret. Keeping his distance was much easier when Micah was pissed at him.

Tucker dropped his cigar to the ground and crushed it out with his boot prior to kicking it off the porch. After standing, Tucker turned and glanced right into big brown eyes.

Once again, Micah hesitantly traced his fingers over Tucker's forearm. It moved the hair and left a tickling feeling. "Have you had a chance to look over the bills?"

The innocent gesture made Tucker's cock fill fully. "Yeah. I've already transferred money to cover the outstanding debt."

Nodding, Micah looked away toward the pasture. "Thanks." He bit his bottom lip and took a deep breath.

The expression tugged at Tucker's heart. His gaze locked on the full sensual lip caught between Micah's straight white teeth. Tucker was such a goner. Stepping closer, he hooked his forefinger under Micah's chin and lifted it.

Blinking, Micah cleared his throat and tried to step back. Tucker moved with him and stared into Micah's startled eyes as their lips met.

It was like a jolt of lightning. Tucker wrapped his hand around the back of Micah's head and held him close. Slanting his mouth over Micah's, Tucker pushed his tongue inside.

Micah jerked and gasped into Tucker's mouth. His body stiffened for several seconds as Tucker explored his mouth, then Micah relaxed and wound his arms around Tucker's waist. Squeezing Tucker tight, Micah kissed back and his tongue slid hesitantly along Tucker's. Micah's breath

quickened until he panted and his hands clutched at Tucker's back. He pressed forward, mashing his erection against Tucker's thigh.

Tucker's cock lurched and his own breath came faster. His free hand gripped Micah's firm little ass, urging him closer. Trying to catch his breath, Tucker pulled back but Micah didn't stop. He rooted his face on Tucker's neck, licking and kissing. Grunting, he thrust his hips at Tucker, grinding against him.

Fuck. This was insane. Tucker had to stop this. As much as he wanted it, he knew it'd only make things more strained between them.

Micah's ragged breathing turned into moans and his hands were everywhere at once. It was nothing like their one time together. Micah was no shy virgin this time. Wanting him so badly really pissed Tucker off. Why couldn't he remain distant where Micah was concerned? Tucker managed it with every other lover he had, but Micah got under his skin.

When Micah grabbed Tucker's cock, it was like a horse kicked Tucker in the stomach. Sanity returned along with anger ... anger at himself. He hated being weak. Tucker gripped the thick hair in his hand and tugged Micah's head back, forcing him to make eye contact. "Stop." Tucker stared into languorous brown eyes only seconds before they went wide and Micah dropped his gaze.

Micah flung himself backward out of reach, not even looking at Tucker. "I-I-I'm sorry, I—" He shook his head then darted a glance up at Tucker. Micah shook his head and turned away, heading toward the kitchen door.

"Micah..." Tucker reached out before he realized it.

Micah jerked his shoulder away from the contact. "Fuck off." He flung the door open and disappeared inside.

"Damn it." Tucker leaned back against the rail and knocked his empty glass to the ground below. He sat there for several minutes just staring at the kitchen door. "Way to go, jackass." How did he always end up screwing up where Micah was concerned? Tucker had a lot to apologize for.

Shoving himself off the railing, he went down the steps to retrieve the glass. As he bent, a flicker in the office caught his attention. What was that? Had he left the computer on? No, he knew he hadn't. And he was sure if Micah were going to go do some work, he'd just turn the light on.

Quickly, Tucker retrieved the tumbler and made his way to the French doors that led into the office.

Duncan sat at the desk in front of the monitor. What the fuck? What was he after? Micah had said Duncan had been sending emails demanding the accounts. Tucker had seen the emails earlier when he'd studied the finances, but he hadn't thought too much about it. Why would Duncan want the ranch records? Tucker was certain Duncan wasn't just here to visit Granddad one last time.

Tucker opened the door and Duncan jumped, slapping a hand to his chest. "Jesus, you scared me."

After closing the door behind him, Tucker crossed the room and flipped on the light. "What the hell do you think you're doing?"

"I was going to get online and check my email."

"Tough shit. Guess you should have brought a laptop, huh?"

Brow furrowing, Duncan stood. "Fine. Be an ass. I'll remember that when The Bar D is mine." He strode out of the office and slammed the door behind him.

Tucker hurried around the desk and set the tumbler down. He checked the screen. Duncan had used the wrong password.

Sitting in the chair, Tucker punched in the code Micah had given him and pulled up the email program. He sent off a note to a P.I. he used for business sometimes and shut the computer down. Tucker needed some dirt on the man because he had a sneaking suspicion that Duncan was not going to let things be after Granddad passed away. It was time to find out what Tucker was dealing with in regards to his uncle. Leaning back in the chair, he closed his eyes. He may not know where he stood with Micah, but he knew damn well Duncan was his enemy.

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Chapter Six

He couldn't sleep. Glancing at the clock again, Micah squinted, trying to read the time. He couldn't decide whether or not to get up. It wasn't as if he was sleeping anyway. He'd feigned sleep when Tucker climbed into bed earlier, but there was no way in hell Micah was catching any z's with all the shit running through his head. He looked over at Tucker, sound asleep, and sighed. Micah's mad had worn off and now he was just ... dejected.

He snagged his glasses off the nightstand and put them on. Easing out of bed, he tried not to disturb Tucker. Even if Tucker didn't want Micah, for whatever reason Tucker had decided he was once again Micah's keeper. And Micah really didn't want to argue right now. He checked the clock again. Three twelve a.m. Oh yeah, Tucker would definitely tell Micah to get back in bed and then the fight would be on. The really warped part of Micah's brain told him to make noise and accidentally wake Tucker. The kiss earlier and Tucker's abject horror in having initiated it stung. A good fight would do nothing, nothing constructive anyway. Micah hunched his shoulders a bit. Geez, what was wrong with him? They never used to disagree. He wished they could go back there, back before that night.

After quietly gathering his clothes, he went into the bathroom. He'd told AJ to come get him at three for his watch. Maybe Miss Kitty had gone into labor. Micah and AJ always took turns when a horse was about to foal. It just

made no sense for both of them to stay up and wait, especially now that they'd let go of all their ranch hands. It would also keep Micah's mind off Tucker's rejection.

Micah took off his sleep pants and pulled on a pair of jeans. He threw on a T-shirt and stuffed his socked feet into his boots. The excitement was already beginning to build. There was nothing quite like a new foal, or a calf for that matter, but they didn't have many foals around The Bar D. They only bred horses for their use. It brought to mind the first foal he'd helped deliver. He'd assisted Tucker. It was the summer he'd turned thirteen. He'd come home from school and found Tucker in the barn by himself. Tucker had immediately put him to work. There hadn't been much to do other than watch. It had been exciting, not just watching the new colt be born, but spending time alone with Tucker. *Mierda*, there he went, thinking about Tucker again. The man was a plague.

Turning out the light, Micah crept from the bathroom and through his room. It was strange sharing his room with someone. Being quiet wasn't easy to do on the creaky old wood floor, but Micah managed it out of habit. He knew which boards creaked the loudest because he'd snuck out plenty when he was a kid. After a stop in the kitchen to pour a cup of coffee—thank you, AJ, for keeping a pot on—he headed into the cool Texas night.

He loved this time of night. It was so peaceful. The sound of the crickets was like music to his ears. Micah took a deep breath and inhaled the country air. The coffee cup kept his hands warm, but the rest of him ... brrr. The air was a little

chilly. Making his way to the barn, Micah alternated rubbing his arm with one hand and holding his coffee with the other. Thank goodness the barn would be warmer.

Just as he reached the barn, the back screen door slammed shut. He turned to find Tucker jogging toward him.

Tucker's hair was mussed, making him look more like he belonged on a ranch rather than in a boardroom. He wore jeans, a T-shirt and boots, like Micah. He had to have thrown them on in a hurry. Hugging himself, Tucker rubbed his arms. "What are you doing?"

Micah took a sip from his cup. It looked like they were going to ignore what happened earlier in the evening. Hell, it was probably for the best. What was there to say anyway? "I'm going to relieve AJ. What're you doing?"

Tucker stepped up to him, grabbed his cup and poured it out.

"Hey!"

"The doctor said no coffee. Damn, it's fucking cold out here," Tucker mumbled. "I came out here to find you."

Glaring at Tucker, Micah wrapped his arms across his chest to keep warm. "Well you found me. Now what?" Irritation prickled his temper over Tucker's actions, but Micah dashed it away. Tucker had always been bossy. Micah had taken it in stride when they were younger and he was going to try to do so again ... within reason. He had work to do and he wasn't letting Tucker get in the way of it. Micah walked farther into the barn, confused as hell. He wanted to be mad—it would keep him from getting too attached to Tucker again. Yet at the same time Micah longed for that closeness.

"I don't know. Don't guess you'll come back to bed, will you?"

"Nope." But Micah sure as hell wished Tucker would go back to bed. It would be best if they stayed away from one another.

When Micah got to the birthing stall, he groaned. AJ was slumped against the wall, sound asleep, and Miss Kitty was lying on her side breathing heavily. "Dios mio. AJ, wake up."

AJ jerked awake. Yawning, he located Micah and glanced over at Miss Kitty. AJ jumped to his feet so quickly he had to grab the side of the stall. "Fuck. How long has she been like this?"

Micah caught AJ's shoulder to steady him. "No clue. I just got here." The mare's eyes were a little wild and that more than anything concerned Micah. He moved farther into the roomy stall and walked toward her rear end. Squatting, he dragged his hand across her side and tried to soothe her. "Hello, beautiful."

She huffed a piece of long black mane off her forehead and raised her head. Her eyes were wider than normal as she watched him. He glanced up at Tucker, then to AJ.

"AJ, go to bed. We'll watch her." Tucker slapped AJ on the back and handed him Micah's empty mug. "Put this in the sink when you go in."

As AJ left, Micah continued to pet the mare. A contraction made her groan. His instincts screamed that there was something wrong.

"What is it?"

Micah noticed Tucker staring at him. "Go get me some gloves out of the cabinet in the tack room."

Tucker nodded, already turning away. "If I remember correctly it shouldn't take too long at this point. What's wrong?"

"I don't know. Maybe nothing, but..." Micah shrugged.

"You obviously think something is. It's written all over your face. Should we call the vet?" Tucker yelled from the tack room.

Micah shook his head, then realized Tucker couldn't see him. "No. Just hold on and let's see what we're dealing with. Even if there's something wrong, he'll never make it here in time."

Coming back, Tucker held one shoulder-length glove open for Micah.

Micah stood and let Tucker help him put the glove on.
"Thank you. Just hang on to the other until I take a look at her." Scooting to the side, he slipped his fingers over her rump toward her genitals. When she laid her head back down, he lifted her tail out of the way and pressed into her body with his gloved hand. "It's okay, Mama. You're doing fine."

She made a distressed sound.

"I know, beautiful. I'm getting a little too familiar here, aren't I? I promise I'll get you something nice later, a little gift, huh?"

Tucker chuckled. "No wonder your love life is nonexistent."

"Smartass. And who says my love life is nonexistent?"

Damn, the baby wasn't in the vaginal canal. Micah felt

further, finding the cervix. There was a bump. What was it? *A tail. Damn it!* "The baby's breech."

"Shit." Tucker sobered. "That's not good."

"The foal's legs are back."

"Can you move them?"

Micah kept his face blank, trying not to show his concern. "I'm gonna try. You think you can help me out?"

Tucker nodded. "It's the only way I'm going to get you back in bed." His grin was a little wicked and a little worried. Was he flirting? Micah had seen it before, just not usually turned on him.

"What're you gonna do with me once you get me there? From what I saw, you're the one with a rocky love life." *Oh shit.* If Micah hadn't had his hand up a horse, he'd have slapped it over his mouth. Why had he said that? Tucker was only trying to lighten the mood. He hadn't been serious.

"My love life is not rocky. I don't have a love life, I have a sex life. And I promise you, I can think of a few things to do to you once I get you back in bed." Tucker squatted next to him, so close Micah could feel his heat. "We can go back and you can pretend to be my blushing, shy, virgin bride."

A shiver went down Micah's spine at Tucker's words. Or maybe it was his nearness. It made concentrating on Micah's task more difficult. "Can that bride shit." His mind reeled with the fact that Tucker hadn't been serious about anyone. That shouldn't make Micah happy, but it did.

"You're right, you weren't shy and blushing even when you were a virgin. Guess I'll have to find another fantasy."

Yeah, and Tucker should know. Micah snorted as he traced the foal's hip and found the right hind leg. "Suffocating me with a pillow?" Cupping the foot and fetlock in his hand, he began to maneuver it.

"I assure you I don't plan on—"

The foal jerked its foot, startling Micah and almost dislodging his hold.

He must have gasped because Tucker asked, "What?"
Grinning so big his cheeks hurt, Micah held tight. It was hard not to whoop and holler like an idiot. "We have a live baby."

"Yes." Tucker bobbed his head, dislodging a piece of blond hair into his eyes. He batted at the hair. "Remember the last time we did this together? When Dotty had Waldo?"

"It was a lot more simple." Sweat beaded on Micah's forehead, dripping into his eye. He blinked and bent his head toward the sleeve on his free arm to wipe it off.

"It was." Tucker beat him to it, using his hand to mop away the sweat then clean it on his jeans.

Micah froze at the intimate action, staring at Tucker. This was how they used to get along, working together without words. In the past, they'd instinctively known what the other needed. A jittery feeling came over Micah that had nothing to do with his nervousness over delivering the foal.

"Do you still ride Waldo?"

Nodding, Micah smiled. Tucker had always been good about making Micah feel more comfortable. He was the first one of the Delanys to really make Micah feel like family all those years ago. Micah had been so awkward and shy and

Tucker had constantly soothed him and helped him put his best foot forward. "Yeah. Waldo is out in the paddock."

The horse raised her head again. Her eyes were wide.

Without being told, Tucker started crooning to the pregnant horse. His voice dropped to a slow, sexy drawl, but his eyes stayed focused on Micah.

Miss Kitty snorted a little, but she lowered her head and listened to Tucker.

Micah could listen to that voice forever. If only—Yes! The leg slid out of the uterus. "Tucker, in the tack room cabinet there's some brand-new nylon cording. Bring it to me and tie a noose at the end of it."

Tucker scrambled up and headed to the tack room again. He called over his shoulder, "What about infection? Do we have anything to sterilize it in?"

"No time. We'll give her an antibiotic shot and call the vet out tomorrow."

By the time Tucker came back, he was already tying a noose. After he finished the knot, he replaced the glove on his shoulder with the rope. He helped Micah into the glove before handing Micah the noose. "Here, let me know when to pull." He sounded so sure, like he knew what he was doing, and it bolstered Micah's courage. In some form or other, it seemed Tucker had always given him strength.

"'Kay." Micah pulled his arm out of Miss Kitty, grabbed the cord and went right back in after that foot. Luckily, it was still there. He wasn't betting it would stay there until he got the other one though, so he looped the cord around the foal's fetlock joint. "Okay."

The rope tautened and Tucker's heat pressed against Micah's back. His hand landed on Micah's shoulder and squeezed. The little touch went straight to Micah's heart.

Micah went back in for the other leg. This time he tore the amniotic sac. Not much fluid leaked out because the foal's butt was blocking it. He located the other foot, and a contraction clamped around his arm, making him wince. *Shit.* "I'm sorry, sweetheart. We're almost there. Just a few more minutes, okay?" He moved the other leg out of the uterus. *Now for the tricky part.* He had to get this foal out quick.

After getting his hand around both the foal's back feet, Micah waited. "Okay, you can let go." On the next contraction, Micah pulled. In a huge gush of fluid, the foal came out.

A sigh of relief sounded behind Micah.

"Yes! We did it." Tucker chuckled.

Micah removed the rope from the foal, and Miss Kitty raised her head, looking at her baby.

Tucker kissed Micah's cheek and stood. He hauled Micah up with him and wrapped an arm around Micah's waist. Tucker pressed his face next to Micah's. "Damn, I've missed this."

Micah fought back cathartic tears and nodded. He was excited and relieved. His pulse should be slowing, not racing, but Tucker's nearness was going right to Micah's head. He closed his eyes and took a deep breath, but he was way too aware of Tucker's body touching his. Micah needed to extract himself from Tucker's embrace before he did something stupid.

"Damn, isn't she the cutest thing? I forgot how exciting this was. It makes me want my own horse again." Tucker's voice was soft and full of awe. It raised goose bumps on Micah's arms.

Being this close to Tucker and sharing this with him shouldn't be a big deal, but Micah was tired and his emotions needed somewhere to go now that the scare was over. He just wanted to wrap himself up in Tucker and rest. Micah needed to remember Tucker shoving him away earlier this evening.

A hand landed on Micah's shoulder, urging him to turn. "Micah?"

Opening his eyes, Micah spun around.

"You still have the gloves on."

Well hell, so he did. Micah peeled off one glove then the other and tossed them in the corner.

Lifting Micah's face with one finger, Tucker leaned in. His focus narrowed on Micah's lips. With a dazed expression, he moved forward as if to kiss Micah.

Micah's stomach tightened into a knot and the barn was suddenly stifling. He stepped back. "Don't."

Sighing, Tucker nodded. "You're right. I'm sorry. I'm sorry about this evening too."

Knowing he shouldn't, Micah rested his trembling hands on Tucker's arm. "It's okay, but we should probably just stay away from each other."

"What? No." Tucker glowered, then his expression softened. "Let's call it a truce. We were good together

tonight. Like old times." He smiled. "Why can't we bury the hatchet and try to go back to how we used to be?"

Micah wanted it to be that way too, but could it? He was afraid to trust in it. Afraid he'd end up melting at Tucker's feet, begging him for anything he was willing to give. Tucker had always affected him that way, but it was worse now, more intense. *Probably due to the years of unrequited love*, Micah's inner voice sneered.

Stepping back, he dropped his gaze, staring at his feet. Against his better judgment, Micah nodded. "I'd like that."

How pathetic was that? He should tell Tucker to keep his distance. Micah had pretty much already made up his mind to do just that, but the truth of it was, he'd do anything to be in Tucker's presence, even pretend not to love him.

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Chapter Seven

Micah flopped on his bed with his legs hanging over the edge. His glasses slid up a little too far and he had to readjust them. The last couple of days had been wonderful. Since the night in the barn, he and Tucker had settled into a nice routine. But something wasn't quite right. Micah couldn't put his finger on it, but Tucker seemed a bit preoccupied and he was going out of his way to irritate Duncan. It appeared as though Tucker was keeping tabs on the man, which was unusual, because Tucker generally ignored people he disliked. At least he used to, but then he'd been away for a while and Duncan was an ass. Micah wasn't complaining, he was enjoying the hell out of making Duncan uncomfortable. It was really immature of him, but he'd take his kicks where he could get them. He and Tucker were getting along well and Duncan was not happy, so all was right in Micah's world ... for the moment anyway.

A slow grin spread across his face followed by a giggle. The look of horror Duncan displayed at dinner tonight when Tucker had kissed Micah as he passed the rolls was priceless. True, Tucker shouldn't be kissing Micah and he was going to address that, but tweaking Duncan made all the harassment Micah had received from Duncan over the past two months worthwhile.

All throughout dinner, Duncan had glared at Micah. He'd just smiled, which seemed to make Duncan angrier. Why did he hate Micah so bad? Micah would have said it was because

he was gay, but Duncan had disliked Micah before knowing that. Could Duncan resent that Micah was such a part of the family? Every time Jeff, AJ, Ferguson or Juan expressed joy over Micah's newly wedded state and how he was now officially part of the family, Duncan tried to divert their attention. It was odd. Why did he even care? He was the one who had left and betrayed his kin. Micah's placement in the family shouldn't be of any concern to Duncan.

The door clicked shut, followed by a sigh.

Rising onto his elbows, Micah studied Tucker. Maybe making the deal to try to regain their former relationship wasn't such a bad thing after all. At least it wouldn't be if Tucker would quit confusing matters with a touch here and a kiss there.

Tucker leaned against the closed door, his arms and feet braced out like he was expecting someone to try and get in. "Damn. He looks bad." Closing his eyes, he took a deep breath. "I should have come back sooner."

Oh damn. Micah had forgotten that Tucker had gone up to see Ferguson after dinner. Micah, Jeff, AJ and Juan had gotten used to how the cancer had affected Ferguson, but Tucker had not. "You're back now, that's what matters. Did you have a nice visit with your grandfather?"

"Yeah. I did. He fell asleep on me though." Tucker pushed away from the door and flopped next to Micah, making the bed bounce. "He was really happy about me marrying you. I didn't think he'd remember me telling him about it yesterday, but he did."

"Yeah, he mentioned it this morning when I saw him. Pretty fucking weird. I don't think he realizes it's fake." Micah frowned. How could Ferguson not know it was fake? And why would he be so happy? It didn't matter. If anything made Ferguson happy now, Micah was happy. "He tires easily. Rest is the best thing for him. He's not hurting when he's asleep."

Micah shook his head. He didn't want to go down this road. He'd agonized and grieved too much already. It didn't help, and he sure as hell didn't wanna make Tucker feel worse.

Micah grinned, trying to lighten the mood and change the subject. "I'm still waiting for Jeff and AJ to corner me and ask why." He dropped to his back and rested his hands over his stomach. Their family had all been genuinely happy, but they knew darn well that Micah hadn't seen Tucker in years. They knew something was up. No one wanted to alert Duncan to their business though, so they pretended like it was the most normal thing in the world to find out that Micah and Tucker had married. How odd was that? They'd known Micah and Tucker were both gay, but ... God, he loved his family, the weirdos.

"Yeah. I figure we'll get the third degree once Duncan leaves." Tucker turned his head to look at Micah. The sadness in Tucker's eyes was still there. "I wonder if Duncan'll pop off again and give me an excuse to whoop his ass?" Tucker's brows pulled together. "What the hell does he want? Can't he tell no one wants him here? I understand Granddad is his father too, but he hasn't bothered to come visit over the years, so why now?"

Micah wanted to kiss Tucker's lips and make it all better. No, he didn't. *Guh!* What were they talking about? *Oh.* "Don't know. None of us has really kept our feelings for him a secret. At least he didn't bring your mother." Micah met those deep brown eyes. A weird fluttery feeling started in his belly. Swallowing the lump in his throat, he licked his lips. "I think if he'd brought her, I'd have kicked his ass on sight, regardless of Ferguson's feelings. Duncan's enough to deal with right now. That man is either smart or lucky, I haven't decided which."

Micah needed to get a grip. Being this close to Tucker was always hard, but after that kiss at dinner ... Micah couldn't stop thinking about that stupid kiss and it was really beginning to piss him off. When had he become so weak? He was supposed to be ignoring their attraction. In fact, he needed to talk to Tucker about that.

"You would've had to beat me to—" Glancing at Micah's lips, Tucker furrowed his brow. His dark lashes partially concealed his eyes as he leaned forward, bringing them almost nose to nose. Everything seemed to slow down. The tip of his tongue appeared between his lips. His breath fanned across Micah's chin.

Micah couldn't breathe. He was afraid to. If he did anything, Tucker would come to his senses and Micah didn't want to risk that. Yes, you do, cabron! Move back, clear your throat, scratch your nose, just do something.

Tucker's eyelids fluttered then flew up, making his eyes wide. He shook his head and jerked backward with a groan. "How's your stomach feeling?" Tucker whispered.

"Fine," Micah whispered back. The hair on the backs of his arms stood up.

"You work too hard. I think you should just stay in the house and relax for a couple days. You've been doing stuff since we got here."

Grrrr ... Unbelievable. Micah really didn't want to listen to a lecture on his health again. It helped break the spell though. "Oh hell, I swear if you don't stop—"

"Okay, okay..." Tucker held his hands out in surrender.

"Make noise." Pushing himself up off the bed, Tucker locked the door and checked it by turning the handle. "I'm going to take a shower, but I'm not done discussing this."

More like he wasn't done trying to boss Micah around. Wait. Did he say—? Ah, dios mio. Micah closed his eyes and took a deep breath. Tucker in the shower, naked, dripping wet, right in the next room— "What? Make noise?"

"Moan and grunt." Tucker crossed the room and pulled the curtains, before going into the adjoining bathroom.

"Ugh." Trying to get his heart to slow, Micah sat on the bed. What was Tucker doing?

"Micah..."

Micah opened his mouth to ask why, then snapped it shut. Why not just turn on the radio? Did Tucker really think Duncan was listening to them? Micah glanced at the door. There wasn't that much space under the door, probably less than an inch. It was doubtful anyone was standing outside it. Micah went to the door, lay in front of it and looked under. His glasses shifted when the frames touched the floor but he

could still see through them. It didn't look like anyone was there.

"What are you doing?" Tucker kept his voice low and leaned against the bathroom threshold, a smirk on his handsome face.

"What're you doing?" Micah got to his feet.

"Looking for shaving cream. Why aren't you making noise?"

"Ugh!" Micah stomped his feet in place a few times.

Tucker rolled his eyes. "You sound like a dying cow."

"I don't think anyone is out there listening," Micah whispered back, walking closer to Tucker. "The shaving cream is in the cabinet to the left of the sink."

"Thanks." Grinning, Tucker dragged a hand over his face and through his short, dark blond hair, and turned back toward the bathroom. "Try to sound like you're having sex. Duncan's in the room across the hall."

"Oh." *Oh!* Micah rolled his eyes at himself. *Dork.* Shaking his head, he went back to the iron-framed bed. He sat on the edge and bounced a little. The bed protested nicely. This could be fun. He pulled off his shoes and tossed them away. Bouncing again, he let out a long, ragged moan. Just like old times, he wondered why he let Tucker talk him into these kinds of things. *Oh yeah, 'cause you're in love with him and would do anything for him.* Micah was really gonna have to stop that. He groaned, but it added to the sex noise.

"Oh Lord. Don't overdo it. You just got out of the hospital, remember?" Tucker disappeared back into the bathroom.

Of course he remembered. Tucker wouldn't let him freaking forget. "Oh, oh yeah. Mmm..." Crawling onto the bed, Micah hopped on his knees a little. The bed squeaked. "Oh yeah, baby." *Take that, Duncan. You* pendejo!

The water turned on in the bathroom and Micah grunted, trying to cover the sound. He climbed to his feet and wobbled on the soft mattress. Bending his knees, he made the bed squeak again. Would the bed hold him if he actually jumped? He'd always wanted to jump on a bed. His mom would have killed him when he was a child. Jostling the bed, he glanced around the room. The floor was wood. If he jumped, would the bed be too loud? "Oh yes, yes, yes." He moaned for effect. He really, really wanted to jump. "Micah," his mother's voice admonished in his head. He could almost see her shaking her finger at him.

Fuck it. Micah's feet left the mattress and the headboard thunked against the wall. "Oh yeah, baby, take it." His glasses slid down his nose and he had to push them back up. This was fun. He'd wanted some fun back in his relationship with Tucker, but what an odd way to get it. Micah stifled a chuckle.

The water shut off.

"Oh yeah, take that cock."

Tucker appeared in the doorway with half his face covered in shaving cream and his mouth hanging open. "What. Are. You. Doing?"

Holding his glasses with one hand, Micah jumped and lifted his legs, coming down on his butt. *Clunk, clunk, screech.* The bed walked back and forth on the wood. "Oh yeah, baby!" He

hopped back up, grinning from ear to ear. "You said to act like I was having sex," he whispered. Dipping his knees a few times, he made the springs bounce. Chuckling, he hopped in a circle. "You like that, baby?"

"Micah," Tucker snapped out.

"What? You said—"

"I top. Stop with the 'take it' stuff. And quit jumping on the bed before you hurt yourself."

What? "Dios mio." Micah froze mid-bounce. When he came down, his teeth slammed together. Ow. "Are you kidding me?"

"No, I'm not."

"You're irritated because I'm pretending to top?"

"I always top." Tucker crossed his arms and leaned against the door, staring at him incredulously.

Despite Micah's resolve to get over his infatuation, the little giddy feeling started up again. The stark reminder of their one time together came crashing back. It had been good before Tucker had run out on him while he slept. There was just something about having a nice hard cock up—

Micah frowned. His irritation with Tucker was coming back. "Just what're you insinuating?" He hopped on the bed a couple times in a row. He was not some wuss because he liked to get fucked, damn it. And he was getting really tired of the whole "you're just out of the hospital" crap.

"I'm not insinuating anything. I'm stating a fact. I top. Always." Tucker's brow furrowed. It became apparent why opposing football players in college had feared him and why businessmen probably still did, but that glare didn't work on

Micah. "No one, especially my family, would ever believe otherwise."

"Well, I get to top in imaginary sex." Micah pushed the wire frames back up his nose and resisted the childish urge to stick his tongue out.

"No, you don't." Pushing away from the door, Tucker strode forward, scowling now. He looked mean.

This was the most ridiculous conversation ever. Micah should just drop it, it was beyond silly, but he didn't. "Oh yes I do." He jumped a few more times. "Oh yeah, baby. Take. It. You like my big fat cock up yo—"

Tucker tackled him.

"Oof." Micah landed flat on his back in the middle of the mattress with a bounce. The bed screeched across the floor and the headboard slammed into the wall. Shocked, Micah looked up into wide, dark, fathomless eyes.

Tucker stayed braced above him, holding himself up with his muscular arms. His knees bracketed Micah's thighs and for several seconds, Tucker just stared. Finally, he shifted his gaze to Micah's lips. Half of Tucker's face still had shaving cream on it. He should have looked ridiculous, but he didn't. The chiseled jaw appeared even more masculine.

Micah licked his lips out of self-consciousness. "Tucker, I, uh—Um." He cleared his throat. "Get the fuck off me."

Tucker didn't move.

There was a little catch in the middle of Micah's chest, and his pulse raced. His cock grew hard. *Oh God, please don't let Tucker feel that.*

"I get to top, Micah." Tucker's voice was hardly above a whisper. He shifted, sliding his legs along the outside of Micah's. Micah should move, get out from under him.

The only sound in the room was their breathing and their jeans brushing against each other's. When Tucker's lower body pressed down on top of Micah's, a hard ridge mashed against Micah's hip, right next to his prick. Micah sucked in a breath.

Moaning, Tucker flicked his tongue out, moistening his lips, and his eyes closed. Tilting his head, Tucker fluttered his eyes open and ground his erection against Micah.

Micah stared, barely able to breathe. He had loved this man for years. Even at the tender age of fourteen, Micah had fantasized about kissing Tucker over and over in his dreams. Heck, not much had changed. He still daydreamed about that, but now, he was ... scared. Micah swallowed, trying to get some moisture in his suddenly dry mouth. They couldn't do this. Micah wouldn't. Tucker was just going to leave again. Micah squeezed his eyes shut.

Tucker's fingers skimmed Micah's cheek. "You gonna—" His lips brushed Micah's.

It was nothing really, but Micah's whole body tingled, starting at his lips and traveling down his body, making him tremble. He opened his eyes and stared into Tucker's black eyes. "Gonna?"

"Let me top? Just like last time."

Mierda. Was Tucker serious?

Bang, bang, bang. Someone pounded on the door.

Micah gasped.

Tucker jumped, rolling off Micah, and stared at the door.

"You two keep it down in there. Christ, no one wants to even know you two are having sex, much less hear it." AJ chuckled.

"Fuck off, AJ." Micah and Tucker yelled at the same time, then burst into laughter.

Micah's laugh was a little strained, but fortunately Tucker didn't seem to notice. Tucker hopped up and held a hand down to Micah.

Taking his hand, Micah allowed Tucker to help him up. As Tucker disappeared back into the bathroom, shaking his head, Micah swallowed the lump in his throat. He knew Tucker was leaving. Micah just had to make sure his heart stayed here when Tucker left.

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Chapter Eight

Tucker woke in the middle of the night to a warm, firm body snuggled against him. Ah damn, that's nice. His mind struggled to remember what had led up to him having a man in his bed, but couldn't quite focus past the warmth and comfort. How long had it been since he'd allowed a lover to spend the whole night? It wasn't something he normally did, but at the moment, he couldn't remember why he didn't like his lovers sleeping over. He was very cozy. He wrapped his arm around the slim waist and burrowed his face in the man's neck. Tucker stuck his tongue out, tasting the slightly salty skin, and received an "Mmm" from the body in front of him.

Bucking up against the firm ass nestled against his erection, Tucker ran his fingers over smooth, bare ab muscles. *Lovely.* Slim and sleek like a swimmer, or a runner. Whoever it was had a sinewy build with very little body hair. The type of lover Tucker had always adored. It was a nice contrast to his own body and always reminded him of Mic—

Tucker's eyes flew open, and he was afraid to breathe. Glancing down, he studied the black sleep-tousled hair and stunning profile. *Micah*.

"Mmm ... 'ker."

Tucker sucked in a breath. Had Micah just said Tucker? Micah's voice was rough and drowsy, but it had sure sounded like Tucker's name. If Micah did say Tucker, it meant he realized what he was doing. Right? And that meant Tucker could enjoy it, right? Tucker questioned his logic for about

two seconds before running his hand over Micah's belly again. "What?"

"Doan stob." Micah wiggled his butt up against Tucker's cock again and pressed his back to Tucker's chest.

Micah wasn't eighteen anymore, he was an adult now. If Micah wanted Tucker too, what would it really hurt? They were married. And why did that make Tucker smile? Lord, he really was a possessive bastard. His cock was so fucking hard it throbbed. This was, in a sense, looking after Micah. Okay, that was a stretch, even for Tucker, but still ... He was so tired of denying them both what they wanted. This moment had been inevitable since the second Micah walked back into Tucker's life.

Tucker trailed his fingers down Micah's belly, over the tight cotton briefs. Oh yeah, Tucker wasn't the only one wanting. Flattening his hand, he rubbed it over the hard ridge of Micah's cock and was rewarded with a moan. A long, throaty moan that sounded sexy as hell.

Micah thrust forward, asking for more.

"You sure about this?"

"Please." Goddamn, Micah's voice sounded good first thing in the morning. It was all rusty and ... deep.

Nuzzling his face in the bend of Micah's neck, Tucker slipped his hand past the elastic in Micah's briefs and gripped one of the thickest pricks Tucker had ever had the pleasure of touching. It jerked in his hand.

Micah thrust his hips forward, making his dick slide through Tucker's grip. He fumbled behind him and over Tucker's hip. Finally, Micah's hand slid between them, tickling

Tucker's hipbone, then gripping his boner without moving his boxers.

"Fuck." Aw man, he was such a goner. He hadn't wanted to admit it even to himself, but after they'd made love the first time, he'd never been able to get over Micah. Tucker had missed Micah something terrible and wondered if he'd done the right thing by leaving that night. To this day, abandoning Micah had been one of the hardest things Tucker had ever done.

Licking a line up Micah's neck, Tucker closed his eyes. He lost himself in the salty taste and musky smell of his man.

Micah stroked up then down through the thin cotton of Tucker's boxers as he pushed his own cock through Tucker's hand again.

A tingle raced up Tucker's back. Damn, that felt good. It'd feel better if he could lose the shorts though. Kissing Micah's stubbly jaw right behind his ear, Tucker reluctantly let go of Micah's dick. "Turn over, baby."

With a groan of protest, Micah loosened his grip on Tucker and rolled over and tangled the bedcovers. Micah's long dark lashes hid his big copper-colored eyes. If not for the light dusting of beard stubble on his cheeks, he'd have looked sweet and innocent.

Who was Tucker kidding? Micah did look sweet and innocent. Pushing the blanket and sheets off them, Tucker bunched the covers around their knees. He shouldn't do this. It was going to make leaving even harder than it was going to be already.

Micah pressed against Tucker, snuggling close. As Micah fished out Tucker's prick, Micah rooted around with his face until he buried it against the base of Tucker's neck. Little grunts and moans poured out of Micah. Languorously, he ran his hand up and down Tucker's cock, completely oblivious to the inner struggle Tucker waged with himself. Micah situated his knee between Tucker's thighs, and ground against Tucker. Micah made no move to hurry, just sort of went with the flow.

Fuck it. Stuffing his hand past the cotton waistband of Micah's underwear, Tucker grabbed Micah's cock again and started stroking the smooth skin in time with Micah's ministrations. Using his other hand, Tucker dislodged Micah's mouth from his neck and tilted his face up. Micah's eyes were still closed and the serene peaceful expression was still in place. He was amazing. How had no one snatched him up already? Thank God for small country towns where being gay just wasn't an option for most. Slanting his lips down over Micah's, Tucker probed for entrance with his tongue.

Micah's eyes shot open wide. He gasped and jerked back, letting go of Tucker. Micah clutched his hands into his chest, looking like a child caught with his hand in the cookie jar.

Tucker frowned. A sinking feeling settled in his stomach and his erection dwindled. Micah had been asleep.

"Don't stop. We both want this. I'm tired of fighting it."
Catching Micah around the waist, Tucker covered Micah's mouth with his again. He pressed through Micah's lips as the heat of Micah's nearly naked body pushed against him. It was absolute heaven. Micah felt so damn right in his arms, like he belonged there. *Please don't let him pull away again.*

A small whimper left Micah's lips as he opened his mouth and kissed Tucker back. His tongue tangled with Tucker's and his arms wound around Tucker's neck. Micah thrust against Tucker's leg then moved back, gasping. Micah's gaze traveled down Tucker's body, focusing on Tucker's already hard prick.

"Oh damn." Tucker looked his fill too.

Micah's stomach heaved in and out with his breath. His cock was hard and begging for attention with a wet spot staining the cotton briefs.

Tucker's own breath caught at the sheer beauty before him. Grabbing Micah's underwear, Tucker yanked them down Micah's thighs and off, then drew him forward by his prick. Feeling the hard heat against his lower stomach, Tucker moaned before crashing his mouth down on Micah's.

With a dazed look on his face, Micah pulled back again and shook his head as if to clear it. "We shouldn't do this." His voice didn't sound at all convincing.

"The hell we shouldn't."

Micah closed his eyes for a few seconds, clearly struggling against his conscience, and opened them. "Okay." Just like that, Micah was on Tucker, knocking him onto his back and climbing on top of him. Micah was everywhere. It was exactly what Tucker remembered of their one night together. The sounds of their breathing and wet kisses filled Tucker's head, making him ache as much as the feel of Micah against him did. Why had Tucker waited so long to do this? Never again was he going to go without this.

Wedging his hand between them, Micah shoved it down the front of Tucker's boxers and gripped him. Micah broke

their kiss, gazing at Tucker with a smirk on his lips. "I'm on top."

Tucker chuckled, feeling happy down deep in his bones. "So you are. Why don't you scoot up here?" Gripping Micah's bare butt, Tucker urged him closer.

Micah groaned and scooted up. Holding his prick with one hand, he dropped forward and rested his other hand on the bed above Tucker's head. The tip of his cock stopped only inches away from Tucker's lips. Fuck, Micah was something. Tucker pulled Micah closer and opened his mouth, taking Micah in.

"Ah, mios dio."

Oh my God is right. Micah's smooth, hard prick slid through Tucker's lips. At first Micah moved slow, his prick gliding along Tucker's tongue, stopping just before the head popped from Tucker's mouth. The not quite salty taste of precome was faint, but it was like manna from heaven. The look of pure bliss on Micah's face and the taut ab muscles had Tucker's own prick throbbing and begging for relief. He used his grip on Micah's ass to control the speed of Micah's thrust, making him move faster.

"Oh *mierda*, that feels good." Sitting and still holding his prick, Micah stared at Tucker's mouth. With his other hand he traced Tucker's lips where they stretched around his cock.

Tucker moaned at the sheer excitement he read in Micah's face. Imagining the sight Micah was seeing, Tucker reached up with his free hand and held his fingers to Micah's lips.

Micah sucked his fingers in with relish. His eyes closed but his hips never faltered. Goddamn, that was hot. Closing his

own eyes, Tucker savored the wet heat surrounding his fingers. He couldn't wait to watch his own cock push into Micah's pretty mouth.

Crawling off Tucker, Micah landed on the mattress beside him, digging at something on his side of the bed. Micah's pale, muscular ass wiggled.

"What're you doing?" Cupping one cheek, Tucker squeezed.

"Getting lube." Micah made a distressed groan. "Damn it, I can't find it."

Jerking his gaze away from Micah's behind, Tucker scooted so he could see what Micah was doing.

Digging between the mattress and box springs, Micah removed a small flip-top bottle. "Ah-ha!" As he sat, Micah's pretty prick bobbed. "Why do you still have your underwear on?"

Tucker lifted his butt and slid his underwear off. He removed them so quick, his cock slapped against his belly. Before he even knew what hit him, Micah tossed the lube at him and engulfed his dick.

"Oh Jesus!" Even though Tucker had wanted this, he wasn't ready for it. His balls drew closer and his stomach muscles flexed. A tingle raced up his spine. There was a muffled "hmm" and a vibration tickled his prick. Tucker closed his eyes, just feeling the glorious mouth on him. *Oh God, did he just—? Ah.* The tip of his cock hit soft tissue. "Oh damn, baby." Tucker had to see this. He lifted his head and threaded his fingers through Micah's thick black hair, urging him on.

Fingers skimmed over Tucker's balls and the sexy slurping sounds started. He dropped his head back down, staring at the plain white ceiling, trying not to come. His head was going to shoot right off if Micah kept that up.

Releasing Tucker's prick, Micah raised his head but didn't stop caressing Tucker's balls. When Micah didn't continue sucking after a few seconds, Tucker looked down at him.

Micah blinked as if he was trying to focus. He probably was, without his glasses. "Lube."

Lube? Oh, right. Tucker located the bottle and squirted some on his fingers. Closing it and tossing it aside, he trailed his fingers through Micah's crease. Tucker was rewarded with a little wiggle of Micah's hips. Oh, the way Micah situated himself on his knees did nice things for his cock and balls. Damn, that looked obscene and ... delicious. Tucker kept rubbing the puckered opening with his slick fingers but used his other hand to swat the pale ass, just to see that wiggle again. Oh yeah, there it is. Tucker sank a finger in Micah's tight body as Micah's mouth closed around him. The moan around Tucker's cock had him gasping.

"Mmmm..." Micah's head came up and he pushed back onto Tucker's finger. Abruptly, he dislodged Tucker's finger from his ass and reached for the lube. Turning around, Micah opened it. He grabbed Tucker's already saliva-slicked prick and poured the slippery liquid over it.

"Micah..." Tucker sounded desperate, even to his own ears.

Flicking the bottle shut with his chin, Micah tossed it toward the head of the bed. He straddled Tucker's hips and lowered himself on Tucker's cock.

Tucker couldn't do anything but watch and feel. His breath completely left his lungs, and he savored the feeling. He wasn't sure what was better, the tight heat of Micah's hole engulfing him or the sight of Micah's hard, leaking cock. Grabbing Micah's waist, Tucker raised his head, watching as his prick disappeared inside Micah. Only when Micah's ass rested on his hips did Tucker look at Micah's face. "Oh damn."

With his eyes closed, Micah caught his bottom lip between his teeth and dropped his head forward. After a few seconds, he opened his eyes and licked his lips. He chuckled. "I—I can't see you."

Damn, wasn't Micah something? Tucker slid his hand up Micah's tanned side, urging him closer. When Micah's face was inches from Tucker's, Tucker raised and kissed Micah on the lips. "How about now?"

Micah nodded. "Yeah," he whispered. "I can feel you too." His voice quivered.

They sat there for several minutes staring at one another. Tucker knew at that very moment it was going to be hell leaving Micah again. Tucker wished he could stay on The Bar D and make Micah more than a convenient husband.

Tucker's eyes grew watery and he closed them. Damn, what was wrong with him? He wasn't usually this emotional.

Moving, Micah put his hands on Tucker's chest and rose onto his knees before sitting right back down.

A shiver raced up Tucker's spine and he opened his eyes. Jesus, Micah was so tight. There was no way this was going to last. Tucker should take charge but all he could do was lay there and feel as Micah began to fuck him in a slow, steady pace.

Grasping Micah's hips, Tucker held on and watched the slim body ride him. The tight grip of Micah's body had Tucker gasping for breath in no time. "Come on, baby." Tucker grabbed Micah's cock and tightened his hand, letting Micah push up into it then sink back down on his cock.

"Dios mio." Micah hurried his pace. His head dropped back and a ragged groan tore from his throat seconds before hot spunk spilled over Tucker's hand and on his stomach.

That was all it took. Tucker thrust up, pulled Micah down and came. Tucker's whole body shook as Micah collapsed on top of him.

After several seconds, Tucker wrapped his arms around the slim back and stared up at the ceiling, listening to their panting breaths. Running his hand through Micah's hair, Tucker kissed Micah's forehead. It was hot but Tucker would rather gouge his own eyes out than move the precious weight on top of him.

Feeling like his bones had melted, Tucker lay there until Micah's breath evened out. *Asleep*. Good, Micah needed it.

Tucker didn't want to sleep. As long as he could, he was going to hang on to this feeling. Tomorrow was only going to bring questions he couldn't answer. He knew without a doubt Micah loved him, but what the hell could they do about it?

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Chapter Nine

Granddad was dead and it didn't seem real. Tucker watched with a heavy heart as the coffin was lowered into the ground. Maybe he'd deluded himself into thinking that his grandfather would live forever, he didn't know, but he felt guilty for not spending more time with him. Tucker couldn't let this happen with the rest of his family. No matter what, he wasn't staying away so long again. Shaking himself out of his daze, he focused on Micah.

Micah sat next to Tucker, tears brimming in his eyes and his hands clasped in his lap. It hurt to see him this way. Tucker had been doing his best to protect Micah from any kind of pain, physical or emotional. It made Tucker feel helpless knowing he couldn't protect Micah from this. The ulcer pain was very infrequent lately and somehow Tucker had managed to distract Micah when he started thinking about their relationship, but this? Tucker couldn't shield Micah or himself from this. He glanced over at his dad, AJ and Juan. He couldn't shelter them either.

Swallowing the lump in his throat, Tucker turned his head toward the preacher, not really hearing what he said. The graveside service was brief and before long they were tossing carnations on the casket and leaving the cemetery. Now they'd have to put up with guests. What idiot came up with that tradition? Did anyone really enjoy guests with tons of food tromping through your house after losing a loved one?

The hair on the back of Tucker's arms stood as he walked to the limo hand in hand with Micah. People were staring. Tucker knew he probably shouldn't show affection in public, but he needed the connection to Micah right now. Just knowing Micah was so close made the crushing sadness of losing his grandfather not quite so stifling. Tucker was being unfair though. There were going to be questions. Too many people had noticed them together. Some damage control would be in order, but Tucker didn't know what to say. What would be less of a hassle for Micah? He had to live here in small-town Texas, Tucker was going back to Dallas. Tucker's stomach tightened, tying in knots at the thought. He opened the door and let a silent Micah precede him. Damn, he was going to miss this. Miss the closeness they'd shared the past few days.

Micah scooted across the bench seat and turned to face Tucker. A smile lit Micah's face and he patted the seat next to him. "Come on."

AJ, Dad, Juan and Duncan all slid in from the other open door. AJ sat beside Micah, while Juan and Dad took the seat next to Duncan on the opposite side of the car.

After getting in, Tucker shut the door and studied his family. They were holding up pretty well. But then they'd had more time to get used to Granddad dying, hadn't they? Guilt swamped Tucker. He should have been here too.

"It was nice. Ferguson would have liked it." Tears filled Juan's eyes before he averted his gaze out the window.

Dad smiled and patted Juan on the leg. "No, he wouldn't have. He'd have been bored to death and half drunk already

from taking discreet nips from the flask he'd hidden in his suit jacket."

Everyone laughed except Duncan.

Tucker refused to let the SOB get to him today. He staunchly ignored his uncle just as everyone else was doing.

"Granddad didn't do sad." Tucker smiled, remembering the man and his crazy antics. Even at Grandma's funeral he'd managed to remain in good spirits. If Tucker remembered correctly, Juan and Granddad had passed the flask back and forth between them in church. "Granddaddy was one of a kind."

AJ nodded. "Yup. They broke the mold after they made him."

Dad laughed. "Thank God."

Again, everyone laughed but Duncan, who stared out the window, ignoring all of them.

It got quiet for a few minutes then Micah looked around at all of them. "I say we all have a drink tonight after everyone leaves. You know, our own celebration and remembrance."

"He would've liked that." Juan smiled.

Tucker started to remind Micah that he shouldn't drink with his ulcer, but decided against it. Tucker would do something about it when the time came. There was no use getting into an argument now. He patted Micah's leg, and then for the hell of it leaned over and kissed his cheek. When Tucker turned back to the front, everyone was watching him. Juan and Dad were smiling, AJ and Micah looked confused and Duncan was openly glaring.

After that, no one said anything. They rode back to The Bar D in silence, but Duncan's look disturbed Tucker. It'd felt like the most natural thing in the world to kiss Micah, but Tucker knew that not everyone felt that way. There were always going to be men like Duncan around.

When they pulled up to the front door of the ranch house and stopped, everyone bailed out. AJ unlocked the front door with Micah and Juan hot on his heels. Duncan trailed behind at a slower pace and Dad stood at the other side of the car. He shut the door and stared across the car at Tucker. "Wanna talk while they get things ready for the horde that's about to descend?"

Tucker closed his own door and frowned. "Sure, what's up?"

Dad shrugged and walked around the car and up on the porch. "You just look like you have a lot on your mind."

Following Dad around the side of the porch to the back, Tucker wished he already had the drink Micah proposed they all have. "I'm okay, are you?"

After pulling off his suit jacket, Dad laid it on the porch rail. He leaned his elbows on the jacket and looked out at the pasture. "I'm fine. Guess I dealt with it already. I miss him, sure, but living like he was the past couple of months is no way to live. I'm a little worried about Juan though. We're gonna have to keep him busy."

Tucker nodded and joined his dad, resting his forearms on the railing. "I think we can manage. I'm going to be putting money into the ranch."

His dad looked at him and Tucker suddenly remembered that he didn't know about Tucker and Micah's arrangement. *Damn.* "If y'all will let me. Micah mentioned a breeding stock and I want to invest."

Looking back out to the field where a couple of calves loped along playing not far from their mamas, Dad chuckled. "Want to tell me what's going on?"

"What do you mean?"

"I know you and I know Micah. Why did you really marry?"

It was strange. Even though Tucker had gone into this marriage planning for this moment, he'd hoped it would never happen. Now that it had, he owed his dad an explanation. Tucker groaned and spilled the truth to his dad.

"I thought so. Well, I like the idea. I like you being home."

Tucker dropped his head, feeling about two feet high. He hadn't planned on staying. Could he? Would there be enough work here on the ranch to keep him busy? Truthfully, he didn't need the money. An ache started deep in his chest. "Do you regret it?"

Dad looked at him, his black eyes serious. "Regret what?" "Leaving the rodeo for our mom?"

"I don't regret leaving the rodeo, but I regret her. I love this ranch and I love you boys, the rodeo just couldn't compare. I got to chase my dream for a while, see what it's like, but this—" He stood and swept his arms wide. "This, and my family, is worth any price. Even putting up with your mother's desertion and losing my brother."

Out of nowhere tears sprang to Tucker's eyes and he dashed them away. The sunshine warmed his face, but his

chest felt empty. Had he made the wrong decision in leaving to follow his career? He'd told himself that Micah was better off without him, but it wasn't just Micah. Tucker missed his family and his ... life. The ranch had been his life.

Dad touched his shoulder. "Don't do this to yourself. You can't change the past. You can only move on."

Swallowing hard, Tucker nodded and fought back tears again. *Geez*. He was emotional today, but then why wouldn't he be? It wasn't every day he buried his grandfather.

"And don't worry about the ranch. It'll work out. Your granddad wouldn't leave us high and dry." He headed toward the door and stopped once he had the screen door open. "Don't be too long. From the sounds of it we're already receiving guests." He opened the door, leaving Tucker alone with his thoughts.

Could he just come back? Was it that easy?

Something vibrated against his chest, startling him. What the—? Oh, his phone. Tucker extracted it from his suit jacket and looked at the display. He had an email. It was probably from his secretary. Tucker had neglected his work the past few days. He'd spent most of his time following Micah around in the guise of learning the ranch again. True, he'd been discussing the ranch decisions with Micah, but he'd also been keeping an eye on Micah. It had worked. Micah had let Tucker help, taking some of the load off Micah's shoulders.

Tucker pushed the touchscreen to bring up his email. The mail was from the P.I. Tucker had looking into Duncan. Tucker scanned it quickly, learning that Duncan was broke. He'd filed bankruptcy a few years back, and Tucker's mother

had left shortly after. Tucker winced. That woman was a piece of work.

A soft breeze knocked his hair into his eyes and Tucker brushed it out. A nervous flutter settled in his stomach. It looked like Duncan was after money, which meant he'd fight their claim on the ranch. Could Tucker's and Micah's wedding of convenience hold up in court? If it didn't, could they contest it in Dad's favor? Would Dad's living and working on the ranch all these years count? He wasn't the oldest son. Maybe Duncan would allow Tucker to buy him out. Tucker's heart sank. Dad, AJ and Micah would never allow Tucker to buy them the ranch ... especially Micah. He'd think Tucker was abusing the power of money. Micah might want the ranch, but he was all about fairness and not using money to get one's way. Which Tucker supposed he understood given Micah's past.

"What're you doing out here?" Micah appeared around the corner of the porch. He'd removed his suit jacket and tie and had his shirt sleeves rolled up.

Tucker swiftly put his phone away and held out his arm. "Nothing. Come here."

Micah nestled himself against Tucker's side and wrapped his arms around Tucker's waist with ease.

Tucker's heart leapt as he hugged Micah tight. Tucker didn't want to lose this renewed closeness he had now with Micah, but could he keep from it? Even if he stayed, could he keep the ranch? He kissed the top of Micah's head, marveling at the change in their relationship these past few days. It was almost too good to be true.

"Dios, I love it out here. Think anyone would notice if we don't go back in?" Micah mumbled against his chest.

Tucker inhaled the fresh scent of Micah's dark hair and glanced out over the pasture. He could almost see his granddad sitting on Cherry Blossom, a wad of chewing tobacco in his mouth. What would Granddad want? Tucker knew he wouldn't want the ranch to go to Duncan. He knew that as sure as he breathed. If only you'd been more specific in your wishes, Granddaddy.

The image in his head smiled. "Fix it, Tucker. Do whatever it takes."

Tucker squeezed Micah, making him yelp a little. Whatever it took, he'd keep the ranch where it belonged, even if Micah didn't approve. To Tucker, his family's and Micah's happiness was worth more than his own.

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Chapter Ten

"This is horse shit. You"—Duncan pointed at Micah—"you little—You knew about this. You knew what was in the will."

Tucker raised a brow at Duncan, trying for intimidation, but the man stayed focused on Micah. It was probably in poor taste to have the will read so soon following the funeral, but Tucker wanted his uncle gone. Duncan's presence was wearing on Dad.

Tucker had hoped that Duncan would let things go when he heard what was in the will, but the flutter in Tucker's stomach and Duncan's outrage attested to the futility of that.

Leaning back in the chair, Tucker propped his booted feet on the desk and hoped like hell Micah didn't commence to pounding the shit outta Duncan. From the looks of Micah, he was running low on patience. And Tucker hadn't helped any by taking the seat behind the desk. Micah was used to being in the place of power, and why not? Dad and AJ encouraged it, but Tucker was now in control of the situation, so Micah was going to have to get used to it. "Duncan—"

AJ bolted from the chair, banged his fist on the top of the old oak desk and glared at Duncan. "You've no right! Just who the fuck do you think you are? You aren't even part of this family, you back-stabbing bastard. And speaking of which, where's your whore?" AJ slammed his fist down again, making the penholder bounce and topple. Pens and pencils spilled off the front of the desk.

In rapt fascination, Tucker watched Duncan flinch at AJ's outburst. It was a spectacular show of pique, but it wasn't getting them anywhere. Whooping Duncan's ass might actually be fun, but it was counterproductive. Tucker wanted the man gone and the easiest way to do that was to make it clear there was nothing else for him here now that Granddad was gone. Although maybe intimidation would keep Duncan from contesting the will.

Jumping out of his chair, Dad made a grab for the pens. "Damn it, AJ, sit your ass down and stop the hollerin'. Just because Duncan's an asshole doesn't mean you have to be."

"Fuck you, Jeff." Duncan turned his glare from Micah to Dad, but the statement had very little heat behind it. He sighed, some of the tension leaving his shoulders. He looked tired too.

Standing from the fireplace hearth, Micah smiled and helped Dad pick up the mess AJ had made.

"But, Daddy—" AJ started.

"Don't *but Daddy* me." Dad rose from picking up a pen and pointed it at AJ, ignoring Duncan altogether. "Sit!"

AJ shut right up, dropping back into the beat-up brown leather desk chair with a groan.

"Your mother left me several years ago. Found some other sap with a bigger bank account." Duncan glanced up at Jeff. "Go ahead, say I told you so, and crow about how you were right."

"What good would that do?" Jeff raised a brow. "I'd say from the looks of it, you figured that out."

Ouch. If Tucker hadn't been so worried over the outcome of the ranch, he might have laughed at the non-confrontational jab his dad threw at Duncan.

Tucker cleared his throat to gain everyone's attention. "Duncan, my marriage is none of your business, but I'm the first to marry and the ranch is being put in my name, end of story. From now on if you've something to say, you'll say it to me, not Micah."

Micah's head popped up from behind the desk. He scowled at Tucker then went back to picking up the clutter on the floor.

Tucker noted the warning gleam in those baby browns. Irritated or not, Micah looked much better these past few days. He had his contacts in instead of glasses, so the lack of bags under his eyes was apparent. Now, if Tucker could just keep him from overworking himself again...

AJ whispered something else Tucker couldn't make out, and Micah chuckled. Micah's mirth shot right through Tucker. He liked that sound. That was the Micah Tucker was used to. Tucker grinned. That was the Micah he loved, not the tired, grouchy—

Oh damn. A lump formed in Tucker's throat. He swallowed, trying to push the thought away, but he couldn't. He *did* love Micah. He always had. At first, it was just a brotherly kind of love like he felt for AJ, but now it was different. The realization shook Tucker to the core. He'd wanted Micah ever since the first night Micah had given himself to Tucker. He'd tried to convince himself he'd never gotten close to anyone because of what he watched his dad go through when his

mom left, but it was a lie. No one had measured up to Micah, even when Micah had been too young. But he wasn't now.

"This is bullshit, Tucker. We both know you've no need for this"—waving his arms, Duncan motioned around the room— "place. You pretending to be a fag is a waste of your time. I'm the oldest. The ranch should go to me. When's the last time you were even here?"

"None of your fuckin' business who any of us sleep with," AJ mumbled.

Micah pinched AJ's thigh as he stood and placed the last of the pens back in the penholder. "Quit antagonizing," he whispered.

Ignoring them both, Tucker dropped his feet and sat straight. "Duncan, when was the last time you were here? Don't pretend to know anything about me. I'm only going to tell you this one more time. You'd better cease with the name-calling. If anyone has a right to be upset over this, it's my dad, not you. The ranch is mine now and that is that. I'll do with it as I see fit. Micah and this ranch are none of your business. So I suggest you pack your bags and be out of here within the hour."

Tucker stood. Glancing at AJ, Tucker jerked his head toward the door. He needed to think, somewhere away from Micah, and he had a feeling if he didn't get AJ away from their uncle, Tucker was going to end up replacing office furniture. "Goodbye. You're welcome to take a few mementos, but you'll clear them with my dad first." He walked around the desk and motioned for AJ to follow.

"Nice speech, big brother." AJ slapped him on the back as they reached the back door.

Tucker tried to smile, but with all that was on his mind it fell short. "Thanks." He'd missed his family something fierce. He should have been here all this time instead of in Dallas. Sure, he'd made a name for himself and a lot of money too, but family was what mattered. It was a damn shame it took his granddad dying to drive the point home.

They headed out toward the corral, walking side by side. It was a companionable silence, one Tucker and AJ, and Micah too for that matter, always shared. Tucker had missed this time with his brother as much as he'd missed the time with Micah. *Damn it.* He was a selfish bastard, but he wanted Micah permanently. Tucker regretted leaving the way he did, even if it was for the best at the time.

"Think he regrets it?"

"What?" Tucker glanced at his brother. What was AJ, a mind reader now?

AJ stared out into the west pasture, his brow furrowed, looking a little worried. "Duncan. You think he regrets hightailing it outta here with our egg donor? Think he misses his family?"

Tucker shrugged. "Don't know. Maybe. I doubt it. But he burned his bridges. He was a fool. Did he really think he could make a relationship work with her? Hell, he should've known what she was like when she cast Dad and us aside so easily." He suspected the only thing Duncan regretted was going bankrupt.

"Yeah, what kind of man falls for a woman who'd leave her children? Don't know what he has against Micah, but it's pissing me off." They arrived at the corral fence, and AJ leaned his arms against the top rail and put his booted foot on the bottom. "Speaking of the brat, what's up with you and Micah?"

"I wish I knew." Tucker mimicked AJ's pose, staring out at a calf and its mother.

"He looks better. He's been running himself ragged. Don't know what we'd have done without him. I hate doing the books. Dad sucks at it and well, Micah hates it too, but he's good at it. Problem is Granddad's hospital bills nearly did us in. Did you know Micah used that fifteen grand he got as an inheritance to pay stuff off?" AJ glanced over at Tucker, making eye contact. "He doesn't know that I know."

Well, son of a bitch. It sounded exactly like something Micah would do. Tucker growled at the reminder of how badly Micah had been treated after his parents' deaths. If it wasn't for Juan, Micah probably would have gone to a foster home. "I'll make sure he gets every penny back."

"He won't take it." AJ looked back at the silver pipe fence. He started picking at the silver paint. "I wouldn't insult him by trying to pay it back." He shrugged. "You gotta pay him back without him knowing. He's part of this family. Paying him back would seem like we didn't think so." AJ flicked a piece of silver off the rail with his thumbnail. "I just hate to see him going back to worrying over the finances. Not surprised he has an ulcer. He works harder than two men. We had to let go of the hands and Micah has single-handedly tried to take

all five of their places, plus Granddad's." AJ was silent for several moments, and when he spoke again it was quieter, almost a whisper. "He's happy. He doesn't like turning over things to you, which I guess is understandable, but he's glad you're back. We all are."

Tucker leaned forward, resting his chin on his hand that rested on the fence. He could understand why Micah didn't like turning things over to him. Micah had made a place for himself here and he saw Tucker as a threat to that. Micah thought Tucker was going to take over his spot. Funny, Tucker hadn't realized it before, but Micah had taken over the spot Tucker left when he moved to Dallas.

"What're you grinning at?"

"What?" Tucker turned his head, looking at his younger brother. "Just thinking that Micah took over my spot when I left."

"Nah. There's still room for you. Micah's always had his own spot."

"Yeah. I guess he has." Micah belonged with them ... with Tucker. Deep down he'd always known it, but he'd tried like hell to deny it. He couldn't have stayed. It wouldn't have been fair to Micah. Micah had needed to find his own way ... to grow up. Hell, in the back of Tucker's mind he still felt like he wasn't giving Micah much of a choice. Tucker wanted Micah to want him for him, not because of some childhood crush.

"Yeah." AJ chuckled. "He has. Is it sinking in?"

"Is what sinking in?"

"The fact that Micah has always been yours."
Tucker started. "What do you mean by that?"

"I mean you can run but you can't hide. It's time to come home, big brother. Micah needs you. We all do."

"It won't work."

"Why not?" AJ scoffed. "And don't use our dad's relationship as an excuse. He didn't love her any more than she loved him. You and Micah don't have that problem."

Tucker stood and climbed up on the top post, sitting. Put that way, it made perfect sense. "Well shit." Tucker's mood lifted, leaving him damn near giddy. Staying and making Micah his for real was still a gamble, but not near as scary after talking to AJ. "I guess I'm staying. Or commuting at the very least."

"Now that that's out of the way, what're we gonna do about the ranch? Something tells me Duncan isn't going to let things rest."

"Yeah, something tells me that too. I had hoped mine and Micah's marriage would take care of it. I have lawyers looking into it, but—" Tucker glanced over at his brother, wondering if he could trust AJ with what he was thinking. Tucker knew Micah and his dad would be opposed to his idea, they had way too much pride. And Micah had a skewed view of this sort of thing because of his past. Not that Tucker could blame him. "Can I trust you to keep your mouth shut and let me do what's best?"

"Something tells me your plan isn't going to be very popular."

"Probably not, but I'll be damned if I let you, Dad and Micah down. It's my job to take care of Micah, and losing the ranch isn't in his best interest. But he wouldn't want me to

contest the will." Tucker ran his hands down his face, regretting what he was thinking, but knowing it was for the best. He'd just have to keep Micah from finding out. "So, I'm going to buy Duncan out. It's the lesser of two evils."

There was a gasp behind them.

Tucker's heart plummeted to his feet, and he turned to find Micah standing no more than four feet away.

Chapter Eleven

"Un-freaking-believable." Micah stomped away with his heart in his throat, ignoring the calls from both Tucker and AJ. Not only was Tucker keeping secrets, he was trying to use his money to get his way. Micah couldn't decide what hurt most. Tucker had promised to keep Micah informed and swore he wasn't trying to take over. Tucker had always treated Micah like a kid, making the decisions without Micah's input. Just like the night Tucker left.

Micah jerked the back door open and let the screen slam behind him. Why had he thought things had changed? Because they'd fucked? That's clearly all it was to Tucker. Micah snorted at himself. It hurt to think the relationship they had the past few days, the closeness, was all a lie. When was Micah going to learn? Heat surged up his neck and face. Not only was Tucker treating him like a mindless idiot, he was doing exactly what Micah's mother's family had done. Duncan may be an ass, and hell maybe he'd take the money and be happy, but it hurt to think Tucker was trying to throw money around to get what he wanted. It just seemed wrong. If Ferguson really wanted things to go to Duncan, then who were they to change that?

Micah stepped into the kitchen and locked gazes with Duncan.

"Well, well, if it isn't the newlywed faggot." Duncan took a drink from his coffee mug and set it on the table in front of him.

Fury washed over Micah like a tidal wave. "Fuck you, you son of a bitch. I've had enough of your mouth." He didn't even think, he just walked right over to Duncan and picked him up by the front of his shirt.

"Ah shit." The door slammed, boots pounded on the tile floor, then Tucker's arms wound around Micah's waist.

"Let go, you queer." Duncan batted at Micah's hands and shoved at him, trying to get him off. It shouldn't have been hard, Micah was quite a bit smaller than Duncan, but Micah was beyond pissed. He'd had enough of Duncan Delany to last him a lifetime. Micah hauled back his fist, ready to belt Duncan a good one, and his elbow connected with skin.

"Goddamn it." The hold on Micah's waist vanished, followed by muffled cursing.

Micah didn't take the time to look back at Tucker. He let his fist fly, catching Duncan right square in the nose. The sickening thwack and the spray of blood was like fuel to the fire. The son of a bitch had called Micah names and threatened him for the last time. He shoved Duncan away from him, pleased as can be when Duncan tripped over his chair and landed on his ass with a thud that rattled the table and chairs. Reaching for Duncan again, Micah was brought up short by Tucker grabbing him and pinning his arms to his sides. "Let me go!"

Eyes wide, Duncan scrambled up, clutching his nose. Blood poured over his hand and his eyes narrowed. "You'll be hearing from my lawyer. I intend to contest the will. There's no way I'm letting the ranch go to a couple of fags." He turned and stormed out of the kitchen.

"Fuck you." Rage boiled in Micah and he struggled to get loose of Tucker's grasp. His glasses fell off, clattering to the ground. "Let me go, Tucker." Micah struggled and fought, wanting to rip Duncan to pieces, but Tucker retained his grip. If Micah got out of the hold, he was gonna beat Tucker's ass too. Sweat dripped down his forehead, making him blink to keep from slinging it in his eyes. His whole body was like an inferno, hot and ready to explode, but Tucker held firm, not even fazed by Micah's struggles.

"Stop it. Goddamn it, Micah. Be still."

That pissed Micah off even more, but no matter how hard he tried, he couldn't get loose. Finally, when he was panting for breath and his limbs were exhausted, he sagged in Tucker's arms. Micah was tired and he wanted to destroy something. Everything had gone to shit. Damn Duncan. Damn Tucker. And damn Ferguson for dying.

Tucker loosed his grip but didn't let go. He brushed Micah's sweaty hair off his forehead and pushed his head back onto Tucker's shoulder. "It's okay, baby."

Tears welled up in Micah's eyes, but he refused to let them fall. No, it wasn't okay. It would never be okay again. With one last heave he shoved out of Tucker's arms and stomped up the stairs to his room.

Tucker was hot on his heels, clearing the door only seconds behind Micah. "Micah..."

"What?" Micah snapped.

"What? Are you fucking kidding me?" Tucker slammed the door shut and glared. "Why in the hell did you do that? Now he's going to contest the will for sure, just to get back at you.

And I'll be surprised if the asshole doesn't press assault charges."

"Good. Let him file charges. I don't give a shit anymore."

"Look, you're right the asshole was asking for it, but I'd just assume you not be in jail." Striding past Micah, Tucker crossed to the window, opened the curtain and looked out.

The fight went right out of Micah and he flopped onto the bed, staring at the ceiling. He didn't want to mess things up for his family, but he wanted to uphold Ferguson's wishes. The courts weren't the way to do that, and neither was flaunting the almighty dollar. Slapping his hand against the mattress once, Micah let his arm fall back to his side. He just felt so damn helpless. "Do you think Duncan will be able to contest the will and get the ranch? Did my punching him hurt our chances of keeping The Bar D?" Micah struggled to hold in his tears. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have hit him."

"Don't worry about it. I'm not going to let him take The Bar D."

Yeah, that was what Micah was afraid Tucker would say. Logically, Micah knew Tucker was right. Duncan wasn't the innocent party. Jeff deserved The Bar D. He'd worked it and devoted his life to it. Ferguson wouldn't do this to them, which was why the will had been worded the way it was, but why didn't he protect all of them? Surely, he'd known the will could be contested. Or could it? Micah didn't know. "Have you talked to your lawyer?"

[&]quot;Yes."

[&]quot;And?" Micah closed his eyes against the tears.

[&]quot;Duncan can contest it."

"Why didn't you tell me? What happened to keeping me in the loop? Don't I mean enough to you for you to tell me the truth?"

"What?" Tucker's footsteps came closer until he was peering down at Micah. "Is that what this is about? You're pissed because I was trying to protect you?"

Meeting Tucker's gaze, Micah sat up. "You're treating me like a child."

"I'm treating you like someone who had a bleeding ulcer from stress." Tucker put his hands on his hips and narrowed his eyes.

The anger that had been fading was now flaring to life again. Micah stood, forcing Tucker to step back. Micah's chest hurt like someone had stabbed him in it. He couldn't draw a deep breath. The truth of the situation hit him like a brick upside the head. "You never meant to let me help. You'd always intended to take over and do things your way all along. I'm just a convenient husband to you."

"Micah, that's not tr-"

Shoving past Tucker and knocking their shoulders together, Micah hurried for the door with tears blurring his vision. He couldn't stay here. Tucker was back where he belonged, but there was no longer a place here for Micah. Without turning around, he opened the door. "You win. You no longer have to worry about me being in the way."

Chapter Twelve

Micah made it as far as the porch before he realized that he didn't even have his truck. "Chingada Madre!" He shut the door and started around the back of the wraparound porch. For several moments he just stood there, unsure what to do. Leaving tonight obviously wasn't an option. Perhaps a ride on Waldo would do him some good until he could figure out what he wanted. No way in hell was he going back inside.

As Micah got to the side of the porch, Duncan's angry voice brought him up short. "Why should I?"

"Because it's the right thing to do. You don't want the ranch. You're just being an ass. The Bar D is Jeff's home. This is all he has, Duncan." Juan sounded exasperated, like he was explaining something to an idiot. Micah remembered that tone well. Juan had used it on him a time or two during Micah's youth.

Micah stayed where he was. The scent of cigarette smoke drifted toward him, making him wrinkle his nose, but he stayed quiet. He probably shouldn't eavesdrop, but Micah didn't think making his presence known was too good of an idea either, considering his and Duncan's last encounter. Duncan was a volatile son of a bitch. What if he started some shit with *Tio*?

"But it should be mine, I'm the oldest. The ranch is my birthright."

Good Lord, Duncan was a pompous jerk. Micah snorted. How could Duncan possibly think that, given how he left the

ranch and his family? Forcing himself to un-fist his hands, Micah took a deep breath and leaned against the porch rail. He stayed on the side of the house and out of sight, but ready in case his uncle needed him.

"Bullshit! Your daddy didn't owe you a damn thing. He gave you everything you ever wanted and would've continued to do so. You're the one who screwed that up by leaving here with Vanessa. Drop it, Duncan. Please." The pitch of his uncle's voice was ... unusual. The anger had faded to more of a softer, pleading timbre.

Micah nearly gasped when he realized what that tone meant. Juan cared for Duncan. How had Micah not seen that? It made sense. *Tio* had known Duncan since he was a baby. Come to think on it, Duncan didn't sound like himself either. He didn't sound condescending. He sounded as though he was having an honest discussion with someone he knew ... an old friend.

"No. You know I respect you, Juan. But I want The Bar D. I need—"

"You aren't Ferguson's child."

What? This had the potential to be ugly. Micah's muscles bunched in anticipation, and he pushed away from the rail, certain there would be trouble.

"What? What'd you say?" Duncan's voice rose with each word.

Micah hurried around the corner in time to see Duncan slump against the porch newel post. He shook his head, not even looking at *Tio*. "That's not true. You lie, Juan. You—"

"You know better than that, boy. I've never lied to you and I'm not now. Ferguson never wanted you to know. He loved you like his own. I didn't want to tell you, but I'll be damned if I let you torment your brother." *Tio* sat on the porch rail with a cigarette in hand and a bottle of beer on the railing. He turned his head and met Micah's gaze.

Duncan didn't seem to notice Micah, just shook his head and looked away out toward the pasture. "That's a lie. My dad—" The protest went right out of Duncan. "Why didn't he tell me?" His shoulders sank and he looked defeated. Micah actually felt sorry for him.

"Because there was no need for you to know until you started threatening to take the ranch from your brother."

"Why? How, Juan? Tell me. Please."

"Rita was pregnant with you when Ferguson married her. Her daddy was a mean sumbitch. If he'd found out she got pregnant by some drifter, he would've beat that girl black and blue. Ferguson married her to protect her and you. She was a good woman and she made a hell of a wife. A more understanding woman I've never met." Juan took a drink of his beer and looked back at Duncan. "He didn't want you to know. He loved you. To him you were his son. I shouldn't have told you, but I'll damn sure tell everyone before I let you screw over your brother. Never understood you. You've been acting like a horse's ass too long, Duncan. It's time to knock that shit out. It's what your daddy wanted. He wanted you to come back and make amends."

Duncan sat on the railing. "What about Jeff? Is he...?"

"Jeff? Oh, you mean is he Ferguson's son? Yeah, Jeffery is Ferguson's natural son."

Glancing up, Duncan spotted Micah. His eyes grew wide and he hopped to his feet. "What do you want?" he snarled, but his heart just didn't seem to be in it.

Micah shrugged. It was on the tip of his tongue to say something cutting, but he just couldn't bring himself to do it. He knew all too well what it was like not to have family. It was obviously a big blow to Duncan to find out the man who he'd thought was his father wasn't. "Nothing. I was going to go for a ride and I heard y'all talking." Micah glanced at his uncle then back to Duncan.

Duncan nodded. "Go ahead and gloat." He sat back on the rail. Tears streamed down his cheeks.

Shaking his head, Micah swallowed the lump in his throat. "I wouldn't do that."

"I would." Duncan snorted. "If it were you, I'd gloat."

"I'm not like you. I'm sorry you had to learn the truth." And he was, but he also wanted to know if Duncan really believed *Tio* and if he was going to continue to contest the will. Micah didn't dare ask though. It just didn't seem like the right time to bring it up. Duncan seemed to be hurting. He may not have any compassion, but Micah did.

Standing, Duncan wiped away the tears on his cheeks. He reached out to Juan. "I'm sorry, Juan. I won't make any more trouble, I just—Never mind." He turned to go down the steps then stopped and looked at Juan.

Tio set his beer and cigarette down and walked toward Duncan. He held his arms out and just like that Duncan

walked into them. He hugged Juan and rested his tearstreaked face on Juan's shoulder for several seconds.

Juan patted Duncan's back. "It's our secret. No sense in everyone knowing."

Nodding, Duncan stepped back. He shot one last glance at Micah, then walked toward his car.

Sitting back down on the rail, Juan waved as Duncan drove away. He sat there quietly for several minutes. "What brings you out here, *mijo*?"

Shrugging, Micah extracted the bottle from his uncle and took a drink before handing it back. His chest sank at what he'd just learned. How was it possible for him to actually feel bad for Duncan? Duncan was such a shit. Micah felt ... numb.

Tio frowned, and almost as an afterthought added, "And no more beer. Ain't good for your ulcer."

Micah groaned. "You sound like Tucker."

"Tucker always was a smart one. Now give it up. What has you out here instead of spending time with your husband?"

Should he tell his uncle? Sighing, Micah looked away. He didn't want to sound like some pathetic lovesick fool. "Was all that true? You know, about Duncan not being Ferguson's son?"

"Of course it's true." *Tio* sniffed and wiped his nose on his sleeve. "I don't want you saying anything to the others."

"I won't." Micah didn't figure it was his place. "You think he really believed you?"

"He knows I wouldn't lie to him and I don't think he'll cause any more problems."

"I hope you're right." Micah sent up a silent prayer that his tio was correct about Duncan not causing more complications.

"I'm right. Now, tell me why you're out here at this time a night. I 'magine it's about Tucker. It usually is where you're concerned."

Shock washed over Micah and he gazed up at his *tio*. "What makes you say that?"

"Because I know you. You've been in love with Tucker since the day I brought you home." Juan took a drink of his beer.

Smiling, Micah shook his head. "I have not."

"Well fine, since a month after I brought you here. What about Tucker has you so upset? You're married. I thought that was a good thing."

"He lied to me." Micah closed his eyes. Damn, it hurt to even say it. "He's still treating me like a damn kid. Like I'm in the way."

"You sure about that?"

"What do you mean?"

"He seems to have a lot of respect for your opinion. People don't ask kids what to do to make a ranch profitable again. Million dollar decisions aren't usually left in the hands of kids." Taking a puff from his smoke, Juan exhaled. "Tucker's a businessman, he's not an idiot."

"But he promised to tell me what his lawyer said about—" Oh no. No one knew that Micah had gotten a copy of the will beforehand.

"The will. Yes, go on."

"But how did—?" Micah asked. *Tio* had told Micah where to look. "You knew. You knew I'd take it to Tucker."

"I hoped. I knew you'd ask him for help eventually with the ranch. Only a moron would let his home rot because of pride. You're no moron, *mijo*."

"But how'd you know it'd be me who asked for Tucker's help?" If Micah hadn't been sitting, he was certain his legs would have given out.

"You're the one handling the money. Figured you know better than anyone how bad things had gotten. I thought the will might speed things up though." *Tio* grinned again. "Glad they did. Listen, and listen carefully. Life's too short to waste, *perrito*. Don't let a misunderstanding get in the way of your heart's desire. Love isn't always easy, but it's worth it." His voice wavered again and he turned his head away, like there was something interesting out in the pasture.

Micah looked toward the field. There was nothing there. "You're too much, *Tio*. I thought cowboys were supposed to be anti-gay. Shouldn't you be damning me to hell and all that good stuff?"

Tio chuckled, but it sounded rusty, not his usual merry self. "I'm no hypocrite, *mijo*. 'Sides, I love you. I want you to be happy."

Hypocrite? Micah nearly fell off the rail. Why hadn't he seen it before? What foreman slept in the main house with a connecting bathroom to the master suite? His uncle and Ferguson had been lovers. "Well, I'll be damned. Did his wife know?" It made perfect sense now that he thought about it.

"'Course she did. She was a good woman. Why do you think the bed in my room is bigger than the one in the master bedroom? Only time she ever shared his bed was to get us Jeffery."

Oh, damn. Tio must hurt worse than anyone. Micah couldn't imagine what he'd feel like if something happened to Tucker. Even Tucker being gone wasn't so bad, not compared to death. If Tucker died ... It felt like Micah had swallowed glass, and his heart hurt.

Micah shook his head, trying to get rid of the thought of Tucker dying. "I guess this means I shouldn't set you up with Mrs. Higgins."

"Good Lord, boy, she must be eighty!"

They both snickered, then fell silent for several moments.

"He should've told me what he'd found out about Duncan and the will," Micah whispered. "He's just taken over like I'm not even a part of the family."

"Did you ever consider he was trying to keep from getting you worked up? You have an ulcer, son. You've enough stress to deal with. You and your damnable Latin temperament. Nothing you do is halfway. It's full tilt or not at all. What would it have done for him to tell you? You'd have just worried on it. Or maybe I should say, you'd have worried even more than you already were."

Micah's shoulders slumped. His *tio* was right. Tucker had let him help with the ranch business. Tucker had as much as said he was protecting Micah. How could Micah get it across to Tucker that he didn't need protecting?

"Before you say it ... it's a natural thing. We all try to protect those we love."

Good grief, now *Tio* was a mind reader. "How do you do that? It's weird."

Tio shrugged. "I've been where you are now. And I know you. Didn't raise you without learning a few things about you."

Tears sprang to Micah's eyes and he sniffed them back. He should thank his mother's family for what they did. Otherwise he'd have never had what his uncle gave him. "I love you, *Tio.*"

"I love you too, *mijo*, but I'm not the person you need to be telling that to right now."

All the wind rushed from Micah's sails again. "I don't even know if he's staying."

The porch door opened and slammed shut. "He's staying and he's sorry." Tucker's voice was a little shaky.

Turning a startled glance to Tucker, Micah froze, not believing he'd heard right. How long had Tucker been there? What had he heard? Micah's throat closed up, refusing to allow air in. Uncertainty rose within him. He'd been set to leave, at least until Tucker was gone, but—

Could it really be this easy?

Chapter Thirteen

Tucker grabbed Micah's hand. "Can I talk to you?" As an afterthought he added, "Please?" He'd really messed up and if he didn't tread carefully, Micah might not hear him out. Tucker didn't want to take that chance. As it was his heart was still in his throat from Micah walking out on him. Tucker had never thought Micah would really leave.

Micah glanced back at Juan then nodded, letting Tucker lead him.

Relief washed through Tucker. At least Micah was willing to listen. Tucker hadn't been so sure, the way he'd stormed out. Meeting Juan's gaze over Micah's shoulder, Tucker bobbed his head. "Night, Juan."

Grinning, Juan winked. "Night, boys."

As Tucker opened the door, Micah pulled them to a halt. "*Tio*?"

"Yeah?" Juan flicked the ashes off his cigarette.

Holding the door open, Tucker squeezed Micah's hand, not wanting him to pull away.

Micah's Adam's apple bobbed as he swallowed. "Thank you. And if you need someone to talk to..."

"Go, *mijo*. And remember what I said." Juan glanced at Tucker then back to Micah. "Talk things out. There are worse things. You have each other, all the rest is trivial."

Nodding, Micah acknowledged his uncle's words. "Night, Tio."

Shutting the door behind them, Tucker asked, "What was that about?"

Letting go of Tucker's hand, Micah stopped at the fridge and pulled out a bottle of water. He shrugged. "Are you really staying?"

"Do you want me to stay?" A flutter of unease trickled up Tucker's spine when Micah didn't answer right away. Had he ruined things between them?

Micah stopped with the bottle halfway to his mouth. "Can you stop trying to protect me?"

Sighing, Tucker leaned against the counter next to Micah. "I'll try." It wasn't going to be easy. He had protected Micah since they'd first met. Tucker had left Micah and The Bar D to protect Micah.

Nodding slowly, Micah took a drink, then put the cap back on the bottle and set it on the counter. "I guess that's all I can ask for." He didn't look at Tucker, just kept his gaze on the floor. Unsure. He was unsure.

Tucker's chest swelled with hope. Micah cared. He wouldn't be so unsure if he didn't. Lifting Micah's chin, Tucker stared into his brown eyes. "I can't promise I won't try to take care of you. It's what I do. I've watched over you since you were a kid. It's habit. But I can promise you it's done out of love."

"Are you telling me you love me?" Micah's eyes were watery and wide.

"Yeah. I love you. Have for as long as I can remember. I never should've left The Bar D, but I was so afraid I wasn't being fair to you. You were so damn young. I never should have—"

Micah grabbed Tucker's head and yanked it down to him. He crushed his mouth over Tucker's in a punishing kiss. Micah's tongue plunged into Tucker's mouth and his fingers gripped Tucker's head, tugging Tucker's hair, giving Tucker no choice but to submit. It was uncomfortable, but exhilarating at the same time. This was Micah. His Micah ... his husband.

Winding his arms around Micah's waist, Tucker hugged him closer, reveling in the feel of his lean, hard body. He didn't try to take over, just enjoyed what Micah gave and tried to give back the best he could, running his hands up and down Micah's slim back.

Finally, the brutal assault gentled into a loving, tender kiss. Micah released the death grip on Tucker's head and slipped down to wrap around Tucker's neck and rest on his shoulders. Tilting his head to the side, Micah made a breathy little sound and pulled back. He pressed his lips to Tucker's again before retreating and opening his eyes. He looked ... blissful ... happy. Micah looked happy.

Tucker traced his thumb over Micah's lower lip and gave him a quick kiss. "I thought you were going to leave me."

Micah took a deep breath and hugged Tucker tighter, resting his head on Tucker's shoulder. "I was."

"What stopped you?" Rubbing his hand up and down Micah's back, he marveled that this man was really his. He'd loved Micah for so long. None of the men he'd dated had ever compared.

"You have my truck at your townhouse." Tucker froze. "What?"

"I didn't have a car."

Tucker leaned back, a smirk on his lips. "You're absolute hell on my ego."

"Good, your ego could use some deflating." Micah grinned then buried his head on Tucker's shoulder again. "I'd have come back. Does that help?"

Laughing, Tucker shook his head. This was what a relationship was all about. Not only were they lovers but friends. This connection between them was what Tucker could never get over, what he was so afraid of ruining with taking Micah as a lover. Yet resisting Micah had been futile, then and now. Tucker kissed the top of Micah's head and ran his fingers through his hair. "You're wrong, you know."

Micah snuggled in, hugging Tucker tighter. "About?"

"You being a convenient husband. The will was a convenient excuse to finally claim you, but you've always been the goal, not keeping the ranch. I just didn't want to admit it at first, even to myself."

Micah's jaw dropped open and he cocked his head to the side, a look of utter confusion on his handsome face. "Re—Really?"

Grinning ear to ear, Tucker tugged him close again and wrapped Micah in his arms where he belonged. "Really. Besides, loving you has never been convenient."

Epilogue

A year later

Leaning over and resting his forearm on his saddle horn, Micah tried not to laugh. He was happy to see *Tio* so happy, but...

Micah shook his head and smiled. If *Tio* rode any closer to Devon, one of their new ranch hands, he was going to mash their legs together between the horses. When was the last time Micah had seen his uncle so captivated and spending all his free time with someone? Not since Ferguson was alive. It did Micah's heart good to see his *tio* with Devon. And Devon seemed to like *Tio*'s company. Fishing in the stock tank after chores had become a habit of theirs since a week after Devon started working at The Bar D.

"What's so funny?" Tucker reined in beside him.

Micah was so caught up in his mirth he hadn't even realized he had company.

Tucker sat on Dandelion, wearing a pair of cargo shorts, T-shirt, flip-flops and sunglasses, with no saddle. He obviously wasn't going far. When Micah had last seen him, Tucker had been poring over the accounts in the office.

"What're you doing out here?"

"I came to find you." Tucker looked past Micah and cocked his head to the side, a grin on his face. "What is Juan? Eighty?"

"He's only sixty-nine." Micah looked back to where his uncle rode close to Devon. "Devon's at least, what? Forty-five?"

"Thirty-eight. I checked his application."

"Oh, well that's not too bad, then. Was his sexual orientation on that application, by any chance?"

Tucker chuckled. "Nope, but if he hasn't decked Juan yet, I'm guessing he's gay. Either that or he really likes working on The Bar D."

Micah laughed.

"Is 'going fishing' code for something else?" Tucker mused.

"I've no idea, but I love to see Juan happy. Losing Ferguson was hard on him. Now if we can just find a woman for your dad."

"Good luck with that. My mom put him off relationships.
But that isn't why I came out here." Tucker dug into the pocket of his khaki shorts and pulled out something. Holding it fisted in his hand, he extended it toward Micah.

"What's that?" Micah frowned.

"The reason I came out here." Tucker shook his fist. "Hold your hand out."

What was Tucker up to? Micah held his hand open, palm up.

Tucker dropped a gold ring into his hand.

"What's this?"

"A wedding ring."

Warmth spread through Micah's body and his chest tightened. His life was good. His family was safe and happy. Ferguson had his wish and they hadn't had to contest the will

to get the ranch, nor had Duncan contested it. They'd even buried the hatchet enough to loan Duncan money to invest. He'd already paid them back and even called occasionally to talk to Jeff. They still didn't get along, but Duncan was trying. AJ kept claiming that Duncan regretted his actions and missed his family. Micah agreed but he stayed out of it. Duncan had stopped calling Micah names, but they weren't friendly by any stretch of the imagination. Micah didn't care, it wasn't up to him. If Jeff wanted to forgive Duncan, he would. It didn't affect Micah one way or another. He had everything he needed, everything he'd always wanted.

Leaning forward, Tucker wrapped a hand around Micah's neck and pulled him closer. Tucker pressed his mouth to Micah's in a quick kiss before releasing him. "Read the inscription."

It took Micah several seconds to pull his attention away from Tucker's mouth. "Huh?"

"Read the inside of the ring."

"Did you get you one too?"

"Yup." Tucker held up his left hand, showing off the gold band on his finger. "Now read it."

Holding the ring up to the fading sunlight, Micah read the engraved message. To my convenient husband, love Tucker.

Pure joy made Micah throw his head back and laugh. Yes, he definitely had everything he'd always wanted.

About the Author

To learn more about J.L. Langley, please visit www.jllangley.com/. Send an email to J.L at 10star@jllangley.com or join her Yahoo! group to join in the fun with other readers as well as J.L. groups.yahoo.com/group/theyellowrose.

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ePistols at Dawn

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Jae-sun Fields is pissed. Someone has taken the seminal coming-out, coming-of-age novel Doorways and satirized it. He's determined to use his Internet skills and his job as a tabloid reporter to out the author as the fraud and no-talent hack he's sure she is.

Kelly Kendall likes his anonymity and, except for his houseboy, factorum and all-around slut, Will, he craves solitude. There's also that crippling case of OCD that makes it virtually impossible for him to leave the house. He's hidden his authorship of Doorways behind layers of secrets and several years' worth of lies—until he loses a bet.

Satirizing his own work, as far as he can see, is his own damned prerogative. Except now he has an online stalker, one who always seems several steps ahead of him in their online duel for information.

A chance meeting reveals more than hidden identities—it exposes a mutual magnetic attraction that can't be denied. And pushes the stakes that much higher, into a zone that could get way too personal...

Warning: This book contains large Korean men; Will, the houseboy, factotum, and all-around slut; hot sexy manlove

including oral sex, and serious ass play. (Jae's note to self: OCD + socks + mouth = BAD.)

Enjoy the following excerpt for ePistols at Dawn:

Kelly stood looking at the clock tower. Jae broke the silence. "Originally, I thought maybe we could go to the observatory."

"Oh, that would be-"

"We don't have to." Jae took his hand. "I don't want you to feel like you have to, I don't know, gird your loins to come and see me. I don't want you to dread coming up here."

Kelly quirked a small smile that was genuine and dazzling and then whispered, "I think it far more likely I'm going to dread going home."

"Yeah?" Jae used his remote, but instead of entering the car Kelly leaned against the door and smiled up at him in invitation.

"You make me feel like a doll," Kelly said on a breath, his eyes on Jae's. For all Jae had been thinking about Kelly's eyes, he found things in them he hadn't noticed before, tiny gold and orange flecks inside the hazel irises and coal-colored rings around them. Long, dusky eyelashes caused smudgy shadows when they swept down, either to blink or to hide his thoughts. Kelly lowered them right then and a delicate flush stained his cheeks.

"Do I stand too close?" Jae asked. "Loom too much?"

"No." Kelly swallowed, and his Adam's apple bobbed. The first pleasant rush of arousal flooded Jae's body. For once he didn't want to act on it immediately. He didn't want to shatter the delicacy of the moment.

"I can think of someplace to go. Someplace quiet."

Kelly smiled. Jae could see what he thought. He thought Jae was suggesting someplace where they could act on what Jae was sure they both wanted.

"All right," Kelly murmured with an expression that defined surrender. Jae opened the door for him and helped him in, sliding a hand down his arm and around to help him buckle up in a gesture that became an excuse for brushing touches on skin that rippled and got gooseflesh with anticipation. Kelly made the most of the opportunity to touch him back.

"I have just the place." Jae closed the door and walked around the back of the car. While Jae drove, Kelly kneaded his shoulder. Jae had placed his coat in the back of the car. With only the thin fabric of a black T-shirt between his skin and Kelly's fingertips, he felt the warmth of the man's hand as it caressed him. He pulled into the parking lot of the Kyoto Grand Hotel, and to his surprise, Kelly asked no questions, just allowed himself to be led.

It was as if Kelly didn't look at anything but him. That unnerving and frank gaze was serene as he waited for Jae to tell him—to show him—what was going to happen. There was a waiting stillness in him that Jae was willing to attribute to wisdom, to age, to tranquility, to fear. To anything, really, but indifference. When Jae put his hand on the small of Kelly's back and led him from the elevator out into the garden, he felt the heat coming off Kelly in waves. *Not indifference then, far from it. Submission*.

Jae had a moment's regret that he hadn't taken Kelly straight home to his apartment.

"Wow," Kelly breathed.

"Yeah." Jae began down a path rich with mounds of blooming pink azaleas and sprays of ornamental grasses, dotted by bonsai trees. They walked slowly, savoring the scents of late summer flowers and soil and water, which fell in sheets from a waterfall and collected in placid pools.

"Oh, good, good place." Kelly seemed to examine each and every plant and rock eagerly as he passed the large chunks of rosy-colored stone imported from Japan. Beds of sand had been meticulously combed into swirls and patterns, like south sea island tattoos, evocative representations of the ocean. "You could hardly believe anything like this existed if you were simply down on the street looking up."

"I come here when I need to think." Jae didn't mention that he'd come here once or twice to think about *Windows*, and how to draw out the writer and expose what he'd thought was the woman who'd mishandled his sacred text.

"It's wonderful." Kelly let him lead the way. "I like to garden. At home, I have a kind of gazebo in the middle of mine, where I like to sit. I've found over the years that it's important to me."

"You garden?" Jae couldn't equate the act of gardening with the seeming grab bag of phobias that manifested themselves in Kelly. "Isn't that kind of..."

"Dirty? Messy?" Kelly laughed. "I had a friend growing up whose mother had a crippling case of OCD. She had to bleach anything, and I mean even my friend, before she could touch it. It was actually kind of sad. But for some inexplicable reason she used to eat at fast food restaurants whenever I

went to visit." Kelly shook his head. "It was as if whatever made her phobic about germs hadn't quite presented itself logically and said, here, germs are everywhere. She would go for miles to avoid touching a child's toy, but drove through a chain restaurant for lunch without giving it a second thought."

"So what you're saying is it makes no sense?"

"Yup."

"How do you stand it?"

"The very fact that it makes no sense *is* how I stand it," Kelly explained. "It's like ... being allergic to something, only you don't know what it is ... or maybe it changes every day. You go through all the motions, and you think, well, crap. Here we go again."

"You're very well adjusted for—"

Kelly barked a laugh. "For someone who is so obviously not."

"I didn't mean it like that," Jae said, taking Kelly's hand and leading him along the path beside the sand ocean.

"It's all right. Sometimes I feel so old. I didn't always have this, but it didn't happen overnight. The panic attacks came on gradually, and at first ... well. I don't want to talk about that. I just got some help dealing with the physical manifestations and worked on trying not to avoid or anticipate the events."

"That's almost ... heroic." Jae stopped him. "I doubt if I could be that sanguine about it."

Pain flickered briefly in Kelly's eyes and Jae wondered if he'd accidentally said something wrong. It was there and

gone so quickly he might have believed he'd imagined it if Kelly hadn't tightened his grip on Jae's hand.

"That's the joke. Everything extraordinary that I've ever done has occurred entirely in my head."

Jae touched the back of one of his fingers to Kelly's cheek. "Surely not everything."

"Well—" A loud cough from someone on the path nearby caused Kelly to begin moving again, and Jae was sorry Kelly never finished his thought. They spent the rest of the early afternoon sitting in the rooftop garden, and then they wandered over to the section of Little Tokyo where they explored the shops and found another Japanese garden next to a community center. They walked around that for a while. Kelly sat on a stone bench near a lotus pool. Jae joined him there, enjoying a lengthy companionable silence.

Eventually Jae's stomach rumbled loudly and they both laughed.

"Hungry?" Kelly watched schools of tiny fish darting back and forth in the water.

"I am." Jae sighed, getting up.

"What a spectacular place to spend time, thank you so very much."

"It wasn't the most exciting afternoon." Jae took his hand again and began to lead him back the way they'd come. "I've been known to show a date a better time."

"Different," said Kelly. "But I doubt better."

"Thank you."

Kelly turned to him, looking up. He had to shade his eyes as the afternoon sun slanted over them. "Well. Not if you

didn't think so. It might have been less than exciting for you. I've been known to bore more outgoing people to death."

"I don't ever think I could find you boring. You take such interest in things. It's fun to watch."

Kelly smiled as Jae led him back to the car. In the dark and isolated cool of the parking garage, Jae pulled Kelly in and kissed him, smoothing down the crisp white fabric covering the smaller man's torso. He didn't stop until his hands cupped each of Kelly's tight ass cheeks. He lifted Kelly up to his toes in an incendiary embrace, from which they eventually broke apart, dazed and panting.

"It's official, I will *never* find you boring," Jae stated shakily, taking Kelly's hand. To his surprise, he felt a sharp tug of resistance. He turned. "What?"

"I don't know." Kelly glanced back the way they came.

"Problem?"

"Kind of."

"Can you tell me?" Jae put his hand on Kelly's shoulder, experiencing a protective surge somewhere in his chest, which felt tight and expansive all at once.

"I just..." Kelly's eyes rose to meet his. "I wanted to freeze that. Get it right here." He fisted the front of his shirt. "So I would never lose it."

"Kelly..."

Kelly began moving toward the car again, catching Jae's hand as he went. He shot Jae a smile over his shoulder that was at once sweet and sheepish. "I wanted to hang on to that a little longer, is all."

I thought I knew what love was...

Boys of Summer

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My name is Hunter Willis and I've found love. The problem? I'm not sure I'm ready for the rest of the world to know I've fallen for my best friend. Everyone knows Max is gay. Me? They think I'm straight as an arrow. So did I, until Max and I shared a kiss that blew that theory right out of the water.

Now, by the ocean in Florida, thousands of miles away from prying eyes, I'm finally ready to admit to myself that Max and I have something special. Max has been ready for a long time—and he's been waiting for me. *Really* waiting. As in ... he's still a virgin.

There's nothing I want more than to be Max's first lover. But I know when Max gives away that part of himself, it won't be just a summer fling. It'll be for keeps. Max deserves the best. I'm just not sure, when it comes right down to it, that I won't break his heart.

Did I mention I'm scared as hell?

Enjoy the following excerpt for Boys of Summer:

The sun dips low into the ocean, and I wonder how much longer I can possibly wait. Especially as I watch Max's crisp T-shirt catch in the wind, rippling up over his back.

I steal furtive glances at his torso, at the cordons of muscle that wind across his abdomen and sides.

He's beautiful, and I'll be damned if I can lie about that.

We're on the beach, and he's fired up the grill, probably about an hour ago. He's been cooking burgers ever since, the kind I most love, the ones with pickle relish and melted pimento cheese.

The burgers started out as a Louisa thing, but now they're a "me" thing, and Max makes them whenever he wants to dote on me.

Like tonight, when so much hovers in the balance between the two of us.

He knows how I love them and, as he flips the patties on the grill, I feel a little bit courted. But unfortunately our neighbors have wandered over from the house next door, and Max gets all chatty with them while he cooks.

I'm selfish, because I wonder why they won't simply go away. Worse still, I worry that he's encouraging the husband to stick around, making conversation with him. Like he is. The man straddles the bench of the picnic table, opening a beer, and next thing I know, he and Max are talking shop about stocks.

Max is one hell of a trader, and he earns a pile of money it's how we've managed to rent this million-dollar beach house for the week.

But I'm beginning to feel the neighbors' unasked questions burning between us like unsure currency. You know, two guys vacationing alone, one of them so damned sexy that every head on the beach jerks in his direction. I know what the

neighbors are thinking. A guy like that can't possibly be straight, not with every girl on the beach watching him every day. Not with how he spends so much time with me.

Yeah, sure, we're here for the girls all right, I think, as the wind kicks up, and the T-shirt clings to Max's sinewy body. Breathtaking. Gorgeous.

He's mine already, and I wish I had the nerve to announce it to these strangers.

Max stands before the grill, clueless about their curious glances, and chats happily along.

I struggle to be calm, feet squared in the sand, unable to believe how easy he is about everything. Then he makes his move, pushing past me. He runs his hand down my arm, and I can't help but blush. Hell, my face is fevered by his subtle touch.

The neighbor husband catches my darting glance, and smiles nervously.

That's when I get it.

Max is coming out to these people, and he intends to drag me out of the closet right along with him.

He's seeing how I'll handle this back in L.A.

"Hungry?" he pipes, dropping a plateful of cheeseburgers on the table right in front of me. He presses a loving hand into the small of my back, as he leans past me for the ketchup.

But I focus on the wife, as she walks up to the table. "Yeah, sure." I nod vaquely. I'm somewhere else.

I stand awkwardly as Max makes me a plate, pampering me like I'm his boyfriend.

I am his boyfriend, I think with no small amount of panic, as he passes the plate into my hand.

"Thanks," I mumble, feeling sullen and angry. I wander away from the group, and drop heavily into the sand. The ocean rolls in front of me, and I realize that I'm shaking almost as forcefully.

But Max has followed me. "What's wrong?" he asks, settling beside me.

I don't answer; fight the urge to grumble about the way he's set me up with these people.

He smiles shyly at me. "You're just scared, Hunter." My heart lurches because he understands me so damn well. "Don't be."

He's right. I should be myself, and tonight, *myself* is that I want to make love to him. Easy, effortless ... I wish it were truly that way, as I stare into his lovely eyes.

Our moment is ruptured when the neighbors' daughter trots into our view, giggling and innocent.

"Hey!" she shouts, presenting herself to Max. She stands tall like a soldier reporting for inspection. They've become fast friends this week.

Max grins, giving the hem of her dress a gentle tug as he asks, "A Lily?"

I have no clue what he's even talking about, and apparently it's some secret language, because she becomes bashful, as she looks down at her bright dress and whispers, "My mommy found it for me." She points at a large appliqué on the front and explains, "It has a palm tree."

"Well your mommy has great taste," Max agrees, and I wonder what it is I'm not privy to.

His compliment sends her darting away, back toward the picnic table, where her parents sit, hovering over the delicious burgers.

So Max and I are alone again, and there's only the rush of wind between us.

He lifts his baseball cap, giving his hair a little toss as he squints into the setting sun.

"Don't be scared," he says, then hesitates a moment. "You know ... about later." His jaw tightens as he stares at the waves and he slips a palm onto my thigh for everyone to see.

I stiffen, and want to shove him away.

But I don't. I stare at his golden hand like an invader, and think of how it rubs and loves and caresses me. That hand has stroked me into oblivion dozens of times.

I love this hand same as I love him; so I don't push it away.

The wife wanders toward us, dropping onto the hard, wet sand. We form a little triangle, as she tucks her feet beneath her.

"You have a real way with kids," she laughs with Max. "She's so proud of that dress."

I have to suppress a wild snort of laughter behind my hand, as his thigh falls against mine. Max would make the ideal wife, I think with a sly grin. He cooks like a mojo. He's great with kids. And I *know* he's going to be killer in bed.

Too bad he's the wrong gender.

But I've realized this summer that love simply doesn't bother with those kinds of distinctions. It falls over you like a mystery, and once it does, you're gone for life. I'm with Max because I can't be anywhere else. I was lost to him months ago, and we've been dancing this strange, uncomfortable dance ever since. Finding our rhythm in secret.

Our neighbor beams about her daughter's dress—amazed that he knew it was a Lily Pulitzer, and as he credits Louisa for his fashion sense, I still wonder what the hell they're even talking about. Next thing I know, they're chattering away about vintage clothes shops in West Hollywood, and I'm only aware of Max's palm resting on my thigh.

Isn't she? I think, shifting a bit. But they keep talking until finally I relax. As easy as that.

His palm no longer scalds my thigh, and I no longer worry what these strangers think.

He's mine and I'm damn proud of it. I even scoot a little closer, wondering if he notices.

I wonder until he strokes my leg with deliberate slowness, a lovers' gesture, and tosses me a flirty grin as he does it.

Our neighbor doesn't even blink. I'm getting a hard-on because of his little streak of exhibitionism, and she couldn't care less.

Why didn't I figure this out months ago?
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In hiding who he was, Payton found himself ... and the man he would grow to love.

The Englor Affair

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After his brother is kidnapped, Prince Payton Townsend masquerades as an Admiral's assistant in order to track the culprits through the tangled mysteries of the planet Englor. He finds way more than he bargained for in the form of Marine Colonel Simon Hollister.

Simon is no ordinary soldier. He's heir to Englor and his life is mapped out for him: throne, bride, and eventually an heir. He never expected a dalliance with Payton to blossom into love, or that the organization that taught him to lead would threaten that love—and their lives.

Danger and intrigue abound as they learn more about their shared enemy, and about each other. What they learn could help them rise above to an enduring love—or pull them apart.

Warning: Hot sweaty manlove of the interplanetary kind. Enjoy the following excerpt for The Englor Affair:

Six. Payton grunted and hefted the bar up again. He hadn't worked out his upper body yesterday and now he knew why. Seven. His upper body strength was next to none. After hoisting the bar back onto the stand, he left his hands on it. "Eight." At least no one was here to witness him struggling with such miniscule weight. Pulling his feet up onto the

bench, he lay there staring at the staggered white tile and fluorescent light ceiling. It was ugly. The gym looked like a gym, not the pristine workout room at home.

Good grief, he was becoming a whiner. He huffed out a breath, making the hair on his forehead flutter, and closed his eyes. First, he was melancholy over not having a consort. Which was stupid, he didn't want a consort. It was just from watching Nate talk to Aiden, and witnessing how happy they both were. Second, he didn't want to work, which he really needed to do. The guilt was gnawing at him. That was also stupid because as soon as he figured out why Benson was on Regelence, he was going to go home and back to being under constant surveillance. He actually had a bit of freedom here ... and he was using it to lift weights. Yeah, he was whining, most unbecoming, but he couldn't seem to help it.

"Lifting free weights by yourself is a very bad idea."

Payton sucked in a breath, dropped his feet back to the floor and opened his eyes.

Si stood at the end of the bench, his hands on the bar. How had Payton not heard him come in? He loomed over Payton with his brow furrowed over crystal blue eyes. "No more lifting weights on your own. It's dangerous." A couple strands of auburn hair fell onto his forehead.

Payton let go of the bar and suppressed a shiver. His mood was suddenly looking up. This was the reason he'd come here in the first place. To hear that voice again and see if the man was as handsome as he remembered. Last night, he'd dreamed of that smooth sexy voice whispering unspeakable things in his ear while they did unspeakable things to each

other. Good grief, he was getting aroused. He was obsessed. How pathetic. All it took was a perfect body, a handsome face and someone to be nice to him for no particular reason.

Si crossed his arms on the bar, leaned over toward Payton and grinned. "How many are you doing?"

Galaxy, the man was every bit as gorgeous as Payton remembered. The clothes emphasized his masculinity. Red hair peeked out from under his arms, not concealed at all by the white sleeveless shirt he wore. His gray shorts were practically threadbare and very short, the hair on his legs visible right up to his upper thighs. There was almost nothing covering him. Unlike Payton, Si didn't seem the least bit embarrassed by wearing so little. He seemed quite secure and sure of himself.

That confidence made Payton's cock even harder. He swallowed the lump in his throat and hurried to sit up. He barely noticed his aching thigh muscles as he turned toward Si, hoping he hadn't spotted Payton's growing erection. "I—You—you don't have to help me. I'll slow you down. You—I—"He groaned and bit his bottom lip. There was just no way to get around it. "I'm not up to your"—he waved his hand, searching his brain for the right word—"standards."

Chuckling, Si darted a gaze down Payton's body then back up. "You are definitely up to my standards." The gleam in his eyes made it clear he wasn't talking about working out and weight limits. "Besides, I need a workout partner, my friends abandoned me tonight." Si pushed himself upright and grabbed the bar, ready to spot him. "Now lay back down and finish your set. How many?"

After hesitating for only a second, Payton decided the hell with it and lay back down. Si hadn't even tried to hide his erection yesterday in the shower. Either he'd ignore Payton's or—Payton didn't know what, but he was willing to take the chance. He knew he wasn't reading Si wrong. The man was definitely interested in him and Payton had nothing to lose. After all, wasn't this what he'd come here hoping for? It wasn't like anyone would find out. What was a little flirtation? "Three sets of eight, I've done one set." He got his hands on the bar on the outsides of Si's and pushed up.

Si didn't let go of the bar until Payton held it steady above him.

Payton brought the bar down then back up easily.

"One." Si's hands hovered above the bar. His legs were so muscular and—dust, his shorts are short.

Doing another rep fairly easily, Payton let his attention stray upward.

"Two."

Si's prick was right there, in his face. Payton couldn't *not* look.

"Three." Si stepped closer, his legs against the edge of the bench. He wore something white under the loose gray shorts. Underclothes, but none like Payton had ever seen. It only covered the genitals, with bands around the waist and each leg, leaving the arse bare. "Four." The garment cupped Si's testicles and outlined his prick.

Payton's cock twitched.

"Five." Si dipped toward Payton, his hands ready to catch the bar. His groin was scandalously close to Payton's face.

"Come on, Payton. Three more." Was his voice more raspy than before?

Shoving the bar up, Payton ignored the burn in his arms. That was really not the way to get him to do three more. He had the insane urge to nuzzle his face into Si and see if he smelled as good as he looked. Whoa, where had that come from? Thankfully, his face was already heated from the strain of moving the weights, because after that thought he was surely blushing. He shouldn't think things like that, but dust if his cock wasn't throbbing and straining against his shorts.

"Six. Two more."

The weights were getting really heavy. His heart was thrumming in his ear.

Si scooted forward, his legs now straddling the edge of the bench. Payton could feel the heat of Si's thighs on his ears as Si took some of the weight of the bar, making it easier on Payton. Sweat and a musky warm scent teased Payton's nose as Si dipped again, following the barbell.

"Seven. Come on, do one more." His blue eyes glittered down at Payton, and his voice was definitely lower and huskier than before.

Gulping in a breath, Payton steeled himself for one last rep. He was not going to notice the thick cock outlined in those strange underclothes. He wanted to bury his nose there and—oh galaxy, he wanted to know how Si tasted. Payton gasped, shocked at the admission. He wanted to taste and touch and do whatever Si would—*Oh.* Payton's arms buckled.

The bar never touched him.

Si hauled the bar up like it weighed nothing, making the veins on his forearms obvious, and set it on the stand. He leaned his forearms on the bar and looked down at Payton.

At least Payton thought he did. His attention stayed focused on Si's erection, outlined through the thin gray shorts. Payton made a noise halfway between a gasp and a growl. He reached up, his hand hovering in front of Si's groin, before he came to himself and stopped.

Groaning, Si caught Payton's wrist and pressed his palm against the hard length of Si's cock.

Payton curled his fingers, and Si's cock jerked under his hand. It was so odd touching someone else like this. He squeezed.

Making a strangled noise, Si tugged upward on Payton's wrist. "Sit up."

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