

A WHISPERING PINES RANCH NOVEL

LORCAN'S DESIRE

SJD PETERSON



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Lorcan's Desire
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Dedication

To Jason Bradley, whose knowledge, encouragement, and ~smooches~ were invaluable. Thank you for your advice, your honesty, and above all, just for being you!

And to my critique partner who never lets up until I hit send.

CHAPTER ONE

The roads may have been dusty and dry, causing clouds to swirl around each booted step he took, but at least the skies were clear. Thank heaven there was a slight chill in the air, as Lorcan didn't think he would have been able to take another step had it been as hot as it had the day before. The worst part was that it was his own damn fault that he was in this predicament to begin with. His mama had warned him that it was "rough out there" and had ended her speech with "I'll see you in a week." His foolish pride had his twenty-one-year-old butt walking all over this godforsaken country looking for adventure. All he had gotten for his troubles was nine cents in his pocket, no prospects for work or a place to stay, and some nasty-ass blisters on his feet. The last thing he wanted to do was put his tail between his legs and crawl back home to a round of Mama's "I told you so." He had one last prospect for work and a place to stay. One last chance to avoid seeing that smug grin on his mama's face. Or the look of exasperation on Daddy's face.

The gas attendant a few miles back had told him that the Whispering Pines Ranch was looking for hands, and although he was headed out in the direction the attendant had pointed, he wasn't feeling all too confident. The way the man had sneered and laughed when he'd asked about work hadn't surprised him. The way he'd suggested Lorcan was exactly what "those folks" were looking for had even had him fighting back his usual tendency to lash out. Had he not been so I-need-to-find-work-or-starve-to-

death-on-the-side-of-the-road desperate, he would have let his fist teach the country bumpkin some manners.

Lorcan was used to people looking at him and assuming they knew his sexual orientation. Because of it, he had learned young how to use his fists to prove he was male enough. Puberty hadn't improved the delicate, almost feminine features he'd inherited from his mother. Nor had his tall, lean body taken on the bulk and mass of muscles like his father and brothers. Yet he had proven himself over and over to be by far the toughest of them all. Lorcan had eventually found a perverse pleasure in taking down his tormentors. He took to growing out his thick chestnut hair, provoking others further, flaunting his waist-length braid. Only thing he could hope for now, as he walked the back dirt roads of another nameless town, was that "those folks" out at Whispering Pines could use a man with a good work ethic and a strong back, even if his braided hair did curl down around his ass.

As the Whispering Pines Ranch house came into view, Lorcan nearly turned around and hightailed it back the other direction. The big two-story house looked like it would be more at home on the cover of a magazine featuring haunted houses than *Ranchers Weekly*. Shutters hung from the paint-peeled siding, the porch tilted dangerously to the right, and it didn't look as if the lawn had been mown or weeded in forever.

He made his way through the calf-high lawn and gingerly placed his boot on the front step, testing its strength before adding his full weight. Remarkably, the half-rotten porch seemed sturdy enough. Lorcan made his way to the front entrance, swung open the scarred screen, and then knocked firmly on the more solid door beneath. Lorcan removed his hat from his head and wiped his brow of sweat as he waited for a response. He strained to listen for any signs that there might be someone approaching the door. When he neither received response nor heard anyone moving around on the other side of the door, he knocked with a little more force. When again there was no sound coming from within, he made his way around to the back of the house and was surprised that the barn and

fencing seemed to be in excellent shape. Obviously the owner cared more about the animals and their living arrangements than his own.

An old water pump called to him like a siren, and he headed for it, not realizing until that moment how thirsty he was. He pumped the handle several times before the water began to flow, and he gorged himself on the clean, cold water. Once his thirst was quenched, he took his bandanna from his back pocket, wiping his waterlogged face as he leaned against the fence. He was beginning to regret not cutting his hair before leaving home. He needed to make a good impression, one that would ensure him a job. Lorcan didn't want to have to make the trek back to his mama's home, and he damn well didn't want to have to do it today. With nothing in his belly in over twenty-four hours, an untold number of miles under his boots, and no sleep, he didn't think it below him to beg the owner for some food and a hay bale to curl up on if they couldn't offer him a job.

“Goddamn sons of bitches! If one more of you nasty beasts breaks through this fence, I swear I will be holding a beef sale like this county has never seen.”

Quinn angrily tossed his tools back in his saddlebag and mounted Jeb. He was getting too old and too damn tired to be having to tend to an entire ranch practically single-handedly. Two months ago, that bastard Henderson had started rumors about Quinn's sexuality and offered his hands nearly twice what Quinn could afford to pay them. Since then, he'd lost everyone who'd worked for him except Ole John and his partner Conner. They'd been with the ranch when his daddy had owned it, and since they had never hidden their preferences, he was sure Henderson had used them as his next attempt to shut him down.

The bitch of the thing was that no one had ever suspected

him before. He'd always been very discreet the few times he'd gone over to Jackson to scratch his itch. Hell, he'd only gone three times in the five years since his daddy had passed and left him the ranch. The only damn grudge Mr. Henderson could have against him was the fact that he'd refused to sell him his daddy's land. The old fart had spent the last five years trying to run him into the ground and make him go belly-up. It was now like an ugly obsession for them both, Henderson doing everything in his power to ensure Quinn lost the ranch and Quinn, in turn, doing everything in his power to prove the evil fuck wrong.

He couldn't begrudge his hands for going where the money was. Before they left, most of them made sure to let him know that they either didn't believe the rumors or didn't care, that it was purely for financial reasons. He couldn't blame them for wanting the extra cash flow. Still, no matter the reason, he was stuck trying to do the work of ten men and wasn't sure how much longer he could keep it up. Sighing, he reined Jeb around back toward the barn. No sense worrying on things he couldn't control. He had stalls to muck and critters to feed, and hopefully, when he was done, Conner would have him a nice spread on his dinner table.

When he reached the corral, Quinn swung down from Jeb, grabbed the reins, and led the horse to the barn for a much-needed grooming and some sweet feed. Jeb was a damn fine horse and hadn't let him down, no matter how much he'd been demanding from the stallion lately. He'd just cleared the side of the barn when the sight before him stopped him dead in his tracks.

Leaning back against the fence by the old water pump was either the most beautiful man he'd ever seen or one hell of a big woman. The vision before him had fine, delicate features, a thin nose, and high cheekbones. Dark brows and thick lashes lay against golden, sun-kissed skin. Though the eyes were closed, Quinn was sure they'd be as dark and stunning as the long chestnut hair that hung, braided, down the entire length of back to a firm, denim-clad ass. Quinn's dick twitched as a pink tongue darted out to lick full, lush lips. Jesus, he needed to get laid if just the quick

flick of a tongue was enough to make his dick stand up and say hello. Maybe a little trip down to Jackson was in his near future.

Quinn took a step forward and cleared his throat before yelling out, "Something I can help you with?"

The man jerked his head up and straightened himself to his full height, nearly stumbling. He was definitely male. The sun glinted off slight stubble on a narrow chin as he turned his head towards Quinn. If that wasn't enough to convince him, then the fact that Quinn instantly knew the man dressed to the right was a dead giveaway.

"Jesus, sir, you just took a year off my life."

Quinn's blood rushed south at the sound of the deep, velvet-smooth voice. Oh, yeah, definitely time to head to Jackson.

He held his hand out. "Sorry about that. Didn't mean to startle you. Thought you'd have heard me and Jeb coming up."

The stranger wiped his hand on his thigh before taking the one offered in a nice, firm grip. "Sorry, sir. Guess I zoned out for a moment there."

A jolt of electricity raced up Quinn's arm from the contact, and he was sure by the widening of black pupils and the slight flare of nostrils that he wasn't the only one who had felt it. Quinn reluctantly released the man's hand, petting Jeb's nose when he leaned in with a curious sniff. "Was there something I could help you with?"

The man, obviously just realizing his manners, snatched the hat off his head, kneading the brim nervously. "Yes, sir. I, well... I was hoping... I mean...." He huffed out a frustrated breath and tried again. "I heard you may be looking for some help."

Quinn stiffened slightly, suspicion creeping into him. With all the shit that he'd been through lately with Henderson, he couldn't help but be a little leery. What were the chances that someone would come looking for work just when he was starting to consider giving up and handing Henderson what he wanted? Not to mention he wouldn't put it past the prick to hire someone that looked like the kid in front of him just to tempt him. Still, he

wasn't convinced that the old man would be lucky enough to hire a guy that tripped every attraction switch Quinn had. Plus, the kid did look to be pretty desperate and didn't sound too sure of himself. He was either one hell of an actor or, in fact, just someone looking for work. His instinct told him it was the latter, but he'd still best take this offer with care.

Quinn pulled at Jeb's reins and started leading him into the barn. "I gotta brush this boy down. Why don't you help me get him settled, and we can talk." He didn't look back as he walked into the barn. Instead, he concentrated on trying to get his growing arousal under control, threatening his dick with a nice hard thump if it didn't behave.

"Yes, sir."

Once he had Jeb tied to the stall, he grabbed a couple of brushes, throwing one at the kid. "Got a name, kid?"

"Lorcan, sir. Lorcan James." He began to groom Jeb like he knew what he was doing but mumbled under his breath what sounded like "Not a kid."

"Well, Lorcan, I'm Quinn Taylor, and I guess if there's anyone here at the ranch you should be inquiring about a job with, it'd be me. You got any experience with cattle?"

Lorcan continued to groom the horse, long, slim fingers following the path of the brush. Quinn couldn't help but think that such delicate hands would look more at home on a piano's keyboard than roping and ranching. Then, of course, there was that image that popped into his head for a fleeting second. The one that had his heart speeding up when he imagined how those fine, delicate hands would look even better wrapped around something a little hard and getting harder by the minute. He shook his head and walked over to the supply stall to get the sweet feed for Jeb, trying like hell not to be too obvious that he was having more than a little trouble walking right. Lucky enough for him, Lorcan was too busy concentrating on Jeb and what he was going to say next to notice him.

"Yes, sir. My family runs a dairy farm back home in

Indiana.”

“Not too different from beef cattle, but no morning milking and a lot more bulls.”

He stared—okay, it was more like gawking—as Lorcan gave Jeb his cool-down. Quinn’s long experience in schooling his emotions and controlling the look on his face hid his arousal. An arousal that had his dick nearly punching through the denim of his jeans, his breath catching when the kid bent to clean Jeb’s hoofs. The man was a little too skinny, but the tight ass and long legs had Quinn struggling to control the tremors surging through his body. Quinn wasn’t sure if it was the fact that it had been so long since he’d had anything other than his hand for company at night or the fact that Lorcan was just that damn gorgeous. The way he moved as he encouraged Jeb to pick up each hoof, pushing into the animal with ease, he had the grace of a large cat.

He waited until all four hoofs were properly cleaned and inspected. He told himself he was watching the man so intently not because he was enjoying the way his dick pulsed or the way jolts of electricity raced through his veins but to make sure the guy knew what he was doing and didn’t cause Jeb any undue stress. Lorcan held out the grooming tools and looked at him expectantly, a question of “What next?” in those big, dark eyes.

Quinn looked down at the brush in his hand and embarrassingly realized he hadn’t helped with Jeb’s cool-down. He’d been too busy watching. He took the tools from Lorcan and returned them to the tack room, mentally chastising his lack of control, and grabbed Jeb’s reins. “Let me just turn Jeb out, and we’ll discuss this job you’re looking for over a bit of lunch.”

The kid looked like he was about to keel over from starvation and exhaustion, and wouldn’t that just be a last drop in the bucket? Henderson would have it turned around ’til he was accused of kidnapping and killing a beautiful, innocent boy. He turned the horse out, motioning for Lorcan to follow; he could use a bit of lunch himself, and hopefully he’d find a distraction from the wanderings of his naughty mind.

CHAPTER TWO

Lorcan sat at a small table in the kitchen and took in the room around him. It was bright and airy and surprisingly spotless. It reminded him of something he'd seen on one of the old '70s reruns he'd seen on Nick at Nite. The faded lace curtains waved with the cool breeze coming through the small kitchen window. Lorcan was sure that the flower-patterned wallpaper had been chosen by a grandmother rather than the large man currently at work making sandwiches. He half-expected a little old lady to pop through the door at any moment with a plate full of homemade cookies and glasses of cold milk. His stomach growled loudly in the quiet room at the image.

Quinn placed two plates piled high with meat sandwiches, potato salad, and fruit on the table, then took the chair across from him. Lorcan barely registered the other man's presence, so fixated was he on the food in front of him. He nearly forgot his manners. His mouth watered, body shaking at the need to devour the meal.

"Go ahead, kid, eat up. We'll talk when you're done."

"Thank you, sir," was all he could manage before setting to filling his mouth. The first sandwich completely bypassed his taste buds. Lorcan was on his second before he slowed enough to even let the flavor of what he was eating register. "Sorry," he mumbled around another bite. "Hungry." And he added another spoonful of potatoes to his already-full mouth. The deep chuckle gave him pause for only a split second before he dug into the rest.

God, how long had it been since he'd truly been full? He knew he must look ridiculous, but the sensation of being full and satisfied was just too great to ignore. He continued to mumble apologies around bites until his plate was clean. At least he hadn't made a total ass of himself by licking it clean, but the thought had crossed his mind. Sitting back in his chair, he finally got up the nerve to meet the man's eyes. He gave Quinn a tentative smile, even though he felt like a fool.

"Thank you, sir. I hadn't had much opportunity to eat as of late." Damn if he didn't sound pathetic.

Quinn looked at him, concern in his blue eyes, pushing his half-eaten sandwich toward him. "No apologies needed. Would you like more?"

"Oh God, no," he said, patting his near-to-bursting belly. "Afraid I'd explode if I take one more bite, but thank you, sir."

Besides, now that his hunger was sated, the fact that he hadn't had any sleep in—well, he wasn't exactly sure when the last time he'd slept well was. He fought to keep heavy lids open.

"How'd you get all the way from Indiana to Pegasus, Oklahoma, and if you don't mind me asking, why?"

"I walked, sir, and why what?"

His brain was more than a little sleep-befuddled, not totally understanding what was being asked of him. He needed to get his shit together before the man thought him a complete idiot. He needed a job in the worst kind of way. Acting like a dolt wasn't the way to get one, that much he was sure of.

"Why would you walk away from a family-owned ranch to end up looking for work on a ranch in Oklahoma?"

Lorcan leaned back further in his chair, slouching down a bit. *Oh good, an easy question.* "Didn't leave home looking to work another ranch." *Man, this chair's real cozy.* "Just looking for adventure, ya know? Tired of being the little brother, wanted to make my own way, I guess."

He stared, fixated on the patterns Quinn was drawing on the tabletop with thick, callused fingers. Distantly, he heard the man

ask, “So you weren’t run off from home?”

Run off? “No, no, nothing like that. It was just....” He needed to think how to answer that question.

He’d had it good at home. He closed his eyes for a moment, trying to come up with a good answer to why he had left. Thinking back on how his mama always had the most amazing scents coming from the kitchen when he’d walked in the house after a hard day’s work. How he’d worked harder to get his chores done faster than his three brothers so he would be sure to get a hot shower. Oh, and the way his bed felt warm and soft below him each night as he snuggled in. Hmm... why *had* he left? There must be a reason, but at the moment he couldn’t think of a good one. His last thought was just how amazing his bed felt around him and how he had no plans to leave it anytime soon.

Quinn couldn’t help the soft chuckle that bubbled up as he watched the kid’s brows furrow in concentration. Heavy lids blinking slower and slower until they eventually closed, the way his chest rose and fell softly. Lorcan’s face became peaceful as the muscles relaxed in slumber. The kid looked even younger and, to Quinn’s amazement, impossibly more beautiful than he’d first thought. His fingers ached to reach out and touch the slightly parted lips, itched to know if they were as soft as they looked. He clasped his hands together against the temptation in front of him, letting his eyes leisurely wander over the sight before him. The kid was filthy and scruffy as hell. His denim over-shirt was dusty and sweat-covered, but it looked better than the thin, threadbare jeans that would more than likely not survive a good washing. The nails on the long, elegant fingers were chipped, ragged, with filth caked under and around the nail beds. Even filth-covered, the man was gorgeous. He imagined that once Lorcan was cleaned up, he’d be devastating. He had no doubt that both man and woman would

have a hell of a hard time keeping their eyes off him. He was tall, maybe only an inch or two shorter than Quinn's own 6'3" height. Though unlike himself, the kid was lean, bordering on too skinny. For some reason Quinn couldn't explain to himself, he felt fiercely protective and possessive of the man sitting in front of him. He wanted to take him in, make sure he was safe, warm, well fed.

Jesus, where the hell had that thought come from?

He didn't know this kid. For all he knew, Lorcan could be some poser that Henderson had sent his way. Or some bum looking for a quick meal, a nap, and to steal everything he could fit in his sack.

Quinn stood and quietly cleared the table, needing to put some space between them. He'd known since he was a boy that he was attracted to the same sex, but he'd never in his life met anyone he'd been so attracted to that he couldn't control himself. Until now. His mind was telling him to send the kid right back the same way he'd come from. Make sure he had a good night's rest, a full belly, a good scrubbing, and enough money for a bus ticket home. He didn't need any more problems. Even if Lorcan wasn't here for some fucked-up plan Henderson had engineered, Quinn didn't need to add more grief to his already-full plate of crap. Plus, with the powerful lust surging through him, he wasn't sure he'd be able to control his baser urges. Even scraggly, Lorcan sent his libido into overdrive, and Quinn knew it would only be more powerful when the man was clean and fed. The way that hair must look when it was free of its tight bonds.... He could almost feel it in his hands, and a shudder went through him. No way would he be able to control it. He'd just give Henderson that much more ammunition. Taking one look at Lorcan, Henderson would be all over it like a fly on shit.

Quinn finished washing the dishes and put them away before starting a pot of coffee to brew. His mind was working through what the right thing was, not only for the kid, but for himself. He could sure as shit use the help around the place, and the kid did have some experience, so he wouldn't be wasting time showing

him the basics of ranch work. Yet he couldn't help but worry about what kind of bullshit the kid would have to face from the prick on the neighboring ranch—or from his boss lusting after him.

Grabbing his coffee, Quinn took the seat across from Lorcan again. Sipping from his mug, he watched the kid sleep. He listened to the little snuffling noises, letting them lull him. Yeah, his head told him to send him on his way, but something in his belly got all nice and tight and a little achy when he thought of Lorcan leaving. Attraction aside, there was just something about Lorcan that drew him. Though he feared losing control, that fear wasn't as powerful as the desire to know everything about the beautiful man in front of him. Oh yeah, he'd be offering the kid a job.

CHAPTER THREE

Lorcan stretched, feeling all warm and cozy. He snuggled in deeper, pulling the covers up over his head. He had no plans to get up anytime soon. He was sure there was something he needed to be doing. Some chore with his name on it, but if Mama wasn't inclined to force his lazy bum outta bed, then who was he to argue with the woman?

The scent of bacon and coffee seeped through his blanket barrier. The delicious scent had him reconsidering the whole staying in bed forever idea.

"Hey, kid. Breakfast is on the table."

What the hell? Lorcan jumped up, startled at the deep voice that was certainly not his mama's, and found himself suddenly falling through the air until his ass planted on a damn hard floor. He blinked, his heart racing like a thoroughbred. He looked up at a smiling, wrinkled face with laughter just pouring out of the eyes.

"Sorry, kid, didn't mean to startle you." The stranger reached down and offered a hand up. "I'm Conner."

Lorcan looked at the hand offered, still trying to figure out where Mama was and what the hell this man was doing calling him to breakfast. "Oh, shit," he muttered as it came back to him in a rush. *Ranch, job, fuck!* He reached out and took the offered hand and the help up. "Thanks."

Keeping his head ducked, his cheeks burning, he looked back at the pillow and blanket on the unfamiliar couch and groaned.

Great way to make a first impression! He was gonna have to practice that tail-tucking on the long walk back home.

Conner pulled on his hand. “C’mon, honey, you’ll be wanting to get to the table and get your plate before Quinn and John make it in.” He pulled Lorcan into the kitchen and pushed him toward a chair. “You’ll learn. You’re either quick with the grub or you’ll be damn hungry ’til lunch, the way Quinn eats.”

The old guy scooted off to the counter, pouring coffee into a carafe, and he really was old. Like grandpa kind of old, all wrinkles, balding-and-slumping shoulders kind of old. Lorcan felt like he’d been dropped into *The Twilight Zone*. Just sat and stared at the guy as he set the coffee down, took a seat at the table across from him, and began filling his plate.

“You with me, hun?” Conner snapped his fingers in front of his face. “With the number of stalls you gotta muck out today, you best be eating. Don’t have time to be picking your scrawny butt up when you fall down from starvation. Eat.”

Lorcan filled his plate with bacon, biscuits, and pancakes and covered it all with gravy, never taking his eyes off the man in front of him. “Sorry, kind of out of it this morning. Last thing I remember was sitting here talking to a man about a job, and then I wake up to you yellin’ at me. Kinda put me out of sorts.” He dug into his plate and groaned at the thick, salty flavor of the milk gravy. “Man, this is good! Are you Mr. Taylor’s dad?”

The guy puffed up a little, pleased as pie at the compliment. “No, no. I’m just the all-around cook and handyman. Been here with the ranch since before Quinn was born. My partner John was Cole’s foreman. Cole is... *was* Quinn’s daddy.” His eyes took on a sad, faraway look before he continued, “We lost Cole nearly five years ago.”

“Oh man, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to upset you.” God, he was just batting a thousand.

Conner reached out and patted his hand. “Such a sweet boy. It’s okay. We miss him like crazy around here. He was a damn fine man.”

The back door opened and sent Conner jumping to his feet as Quinn and presumably John came strolling in, laughing easily with each other. Conner wrapped an arm around the other old geezer, just frettin' and fussing over the man. He led him to the chair next to Lorcan and filled the man's plate up but good.

Lorcan couldn't help but gawk. He'd heard the man call John his partner but was just not thinking partner meant *partner* in the naked-wrinkled-bodies-all-wrapped-around-each-other sense. Yuck, that was one image he didn't want running around in his head, especially while he was trying to eat. He ducked his head, hiding the reaction in his eyes. He went back to eating his breakfast as his cheeks heated. Lorcan watched out of the corners of his eyes as Quinn went to the sink to wash his hands. He'd noticed the man was large the day before, but in his exhausted state he hadn't realized just how big. His back and shoulders were massive, easily twice the width of Lorcan's own. His dark blond hair was cut short and neat, and to Lorcan's dismay, he realized that the man was making things stir below that shouldn't be stirring. The man was handsome in that rugged, Marlboro Man kind of way. He'd always been comfortable admitting that men could be handsome, but what was unsettling was the little sparks of heat in his groin that the man was setting off.

Quinn took the seat next to him and started filling his own plate. Lorcan supposed he should be apologizing, saying something to redeem himself, but before he could think of anything half intelligent, Quinn started the conversation going. "See you've met this crazy coot Conner." He pointed toward the quiet, solemn man. "This here's John."

John just nodded in his direction as Lorcan said his *nice to meet yas*.

"Hope the couch wasn't too bad? We tried waking you up to get you in the guest room, but you were stone-cold out. We got you as far as the couch before old Conner here popped a nut." Quinn winked at him, eyes just twinkling. "You're a hell of a lot heavier than you look."

“Oh, Quinn.” Conner looked all put out. “You know better than tellin’ tall tales like that. We all know that John’s the only one who can pop my nuts.”

Lorcan’s head snapped up just as he swallowed around a mouthful of bacon, causing it to get lodged in his throat as he met the wicked look in Conner’s eyes. Quinn just hooted, laughing so hard he was snorting as he slapped Lorcan on the back to help dislodge the bacon. *Jesus, now I know I’m not in fucking Kansas anymore.* His only saving grace was that John’s cheeks seemed to be a darker shade of red than his own. What the hell did someone say in response to that? No way was he touching that subject, and dammit, now the image was burned into his brain. Unfortunately, it wasn’t like an Etch A Sketch—no shaking his head up and down to get rid of that image. He got himself a little under control while Quinn’s laugh faded to a light chuckle.

Okay, time for a subject change. He so did not want to be thinking about Conner’s nuts or what John did to them. Looking over at Quinn, he said, “Sorry about yesterday. Hadn’t had any sleep in a few days, ya know? I’m not lazy. I work hard, and I really need this job.” He needed to at least make enough money to get his sorry butt back to Indiana.

Quinn’s brows dropped down into a frown before he nodded at him. “Yeah, we could use the help. The pay’s a hundred a week plus room and grub.”

“Thank you, sir. It’s more than I expected.”

From the frown on Quinn’s face, he didn’t seem too happy about giving him a job, but Lorcan wasn’t going to comment on it. He knew he was a good ranch hand. If he couldn’t prove to Quinn that he was worth the chance, at least he had a little time to figure out what his next move should be. This gave him a little more time to postpone the ribbing he’d get from his brothers and the patient but smug look from his mama.

“Don’t thank me yet, kid. You’ll earn every dime and then some, and call me Quinn.”

“Yes, si—I mean Quinn.”

Lorcan listened as John and Quinn talked about what needed to be done for the day, but he was only half listening. Quinn's large body was so close to his that he could feel the heat radiating off him, seeping into his own, making it difficult to concentrate on anything else. He would only need to move his knee a fraction of an inch and it would be resting against Quinn's. He wanted to see if the electricity he had felt when they had shaken hands the day before would happen again. He'd never felt anything so powerful. Just the simple contact between two hands had started a spark that ran through him, leaving him with a warm feeling all through his body. If it had been that powerful when he was barely staying on his feet, every cell exhausted, how would it feel now that he was fully awake and aware of the man?

He fought the urge, concentrating instead on finishing his breakfast, trying to keep from staring at every movement Quinn made, but it was hard. Images of Quinn's strong, callused hands touching him had him practically squirming uncomfortably in his chair. When Quinn stood, taking his plate to the sink, Lorcan instantly felt relieved and disappointed from the loss of heat.

"C'mon. I'll give you the ten-cent tour, and then we'll see how good you are at mucking."

Lorcan stood, thanking Conner for breakfast, repeating his *nice to meet y'all*s. He took his plate to the sink, thankful for the distraction from where his thoughts had been heading, and followed Quinn out the back door. As he walked down the back steps, heading to the barn, it dawned on him where they were going. He'd walked halfway across the country, and he was right back to shoveling shit.

What a great fucking adventure.

Curious to check on the kid's progress, Quinn walked into the barn. The sight before him practically had him panting. Lorcan

was tossing clean hay around a freshly mucked stall. The sight of the man alone was something to see. Without a shirt? Breathtaking. Lorcan had removed his T-shirt, tucking it into one of the back pockets of his loose jeans. His movements caused it to sway back and forth across that tight little ass. As he worked the pitchfork, the muscles of his exposed back rippled and flexed with the effort.

Quinn watched, enthralled, as beads of sweat rolled down that sweet olive skin. His mouth watered with the urge to lick, taste, and touch. He gulped, trying to dispel the need. He could only stand and stare as his body responded in a rush of burning heat to the sight of Lorcan leaning the fork against the wall of the stall. Lorcan grabbed his shirt to wipe down his face. The material slid down his neck, right on down to that tight little belly. The sight made Quinn shift. His jeans suddenly became a denim prison that confined his shaft painfully. When Lorcan took a bottle of water and tipped his head back, throat working as he took long pulls from the bottle, Quinn couldn't help the shudder that went through him or the low growl that escaped his lips.

Christ, he's like a walking fucking wet dream.

"Hey, boss, just about done here. Was there something else you wanted me to do before dinner?"

Quinn gave himself a little internal shake, pushing the lust to the back of his head. He reminded himself that the last thing he needed was complications. God knew the kid was a whole lot of temptation and complexity he didn't need.

"Looks good. You did a damn fine job out here today." Jesus, was that his voice all husky and shit?

Lorcan preened at the praise, slipping his shirt back on over his head and pulling that long braid free. "Thanks. Not one of my favorite jobs, ya know, but figure if ya gotta do it, might as well do it right."

Quinn moved further into the barn. "Damn fine way of looking at it, kid. How about I help you put the tools away and we can have us a chat on the back porch. I'm sure Conner's got a big jug of sweet tea ready." He grabbed the shovel, throwing it in the

empty wheelbarrow, trying his damndest not to look at the way the kid moved. The smell of sweat and musk and male were strong in the air, making his arousal even harder, if not impossible, to ignore.

Lorcan grabbed the pitchfork and threw it in with the shovel. “Not a kid, but yeah, I could use a break.”

Quinn pushed the wheelbarrow into the supply room, grinning. “You look like a kid. How old are you, anyway?”

“Twenty-one. That qualifies me as no longer a kid, all legal and shit.” The kid puffed up a little as he followed him out of the barn toward the house.

He couldn’t help it; he threw his head back and laughed. “All legal, huh? You look all rough and tough. Bet you still drink milk with two hands.” The scowl on Lorcan’s face was priceless and had him laughing even harder. “Grab a chair. I’ll grab us some tea and be right back.”

Quinn hurried into the kitchen, pouring two big glasses of tea and placing them on a tray with some leftover sweet bread, then rolled his eyes at himself. Jesus, lusting after a kid nearly ten years his junior. If he wasn’t careful, the rumors about him being gay were gonna be the least of his worries. He’d be earning himself the title of “kinky old queer daddy.” The thought had him tickled as hell. He hadn’t had sex with anyone but Ruby Palm and her five sisters in nearly three years. Be damn hard to live up to the title at the rate he was going.

Still laughing at himself, he rejoined Lorcan on the back porch, setting down the tray and handing the man a glass. “Help yourself to the bread,” he told Lorcan as he took his own seat. “Conner’s practically a legend around here for it.”

“Thanks. So, um... like, him and John are... like... well, you know, together?”

Quinn watched Lorcan blush and stumble over his words. As adorable as it was, he figured he might just as well find out the man’s reaction now, since he’d more than likely hear a hell of a lot more than that when he went into town. “Yeah, they’ve been

together since I can remember.” He arched one brow at the kid, looked him right in the eye. “You got a problem with that?”

Lorcan didn’t hesitate in his reply. “No, no, man, it’s cool. I don’t have any problem with who people choose to be with. Who am I to judge?”

“Good to hear. You’re going to get a lot of crap about it when you go into town.”

Before he could even finish his sentence, the kid was up out of his chair, fists balled up tight, tea glass shattered at his feet. *What the fuck?*

The kid’s face was bright red, eyes wild like he was ready to explode. “I don’t give a fuck what people say. I’ll take on anyone who makes nasty remarks, assuming I’m gay.” The knuckles of his fists were white and twitching like he was readying for a fight. “Jesus, how many times do I have to say I’m not fucking gay before people get the Goddamn message?”

Quinn stared up in shock at the outburst. His muscles tensing for the blow, not the slightest bit intimidated but just—damn. “What the hell’s wrong with you? Sit your ass down. Nobody said a damn thing about you being gay. Jesus, did I hit a fucking nerve?”

Lorcan stood a minute longer, staring down at Quinn, just shaking and looking like he was either about to swing or run. After a moment, his shoulders slumped, and he all but fell back into his chair and dropped his head. “Sorry, man. Yeah, you hit a nerve. I’ve been fighting nearly half my life, people looking at me and making assumptions they shouldn’t be making, ya know?” He ran a hand over his stubbled chin. “I... sorry about the glass. I’ll get it cleaned up.”

Quinn reached out and grabbed his forearm to keep Lorcan in his chair. “It’s okay. Leave it. We’ll get it in a bit. I didn’t make assumptions about you one way or another.” He waited until Lorcan lifted his head to meet his eyes before he continued. “I was referring to the rumors around town about me being as *perverse* as John and Conner.”

Lorcan's eyes widened, the shock evident. "You're gay!" Quinn wasn't ashamed of the fact that he preferred dicks to tits, but it wasn't anyone's business what he did behind closed doors. He wasn't inclined to flaunt his sexuality, but he wasn't gonna deny it either. "Whether the rumors are true or not ain't nobody's business but my own. Would it matter either way?"

Lorcan held his gaze for a moment longer and then slowly shook his head. "Nope, none of my business either way," he finally replied.

Quinn let out the breath he was holding and nodded once. "Then it's settled. How about we get this mess cleaned up, and then we'll set the critters up for the night?"

He headed back in to grab the broom, trying to decide if he was relieved or disappointed that Lorcan didn't swing his way. Lorcan was beautiful, and he supposed that some of his features would make a woman green with envy, but Quinn didn't look at him and instantly assume he was gay. Well, part of him had hoped he was—the part that was presently pressed hard against his zipper. The part that had been hard since the moment Lorcan walked onto his ranch was praying like hell it would get a little attention from Lorcan, but that didn't mean he had assumed anything, and he certainly didn't look at the gorgeous man and think "female." Then it dawned on him how he hadn't been sure Lorcan was male or female when he had first seen him from a distance. Guiltily, he understood what had made Lorcan so upset. No one had ever looked at Quinn and assumed he was gay. Nothing in his physical appearance or his mannerisms ever led anyone to question him. What would it be like to be such a beautiful man that everyone would instantly assume you were gay when you weren't?

CHAPTER FOUR

The door slammed as Lorcan stomped into the kitchen, pulling open the fridge and grabbing a bottle of water. Quinn leaned against the counter, just watching him. Lorcan looked more than a little upset and hot... Jesus, he was fucking hot. Not in the “working too hard in the sun” hot—well, that too—but in the “wanna throw him down and devour every inch of that sexy ass” kinda hot.

Since walking up to his barn a week ago and finding Lorcan leaning against the fence, Quinn had spent nearly every day in a constant state of horny. It made it nearly impossible to concentrate on much else. He was finding that his ability to control his arousal was useless against the onslaught of desire that Lorcan inspired. The man was so fucking irresistible that just a whiff of Lorcan’s scent in their shared bathroom had him either stroking off in a hot shower or shivering in a cold one when his dick was too sore to touch from the constant stimulation.

He’d never messed with anyone within a hundred-mile radius of town. Well, except Hound, and *that* relationship had proven to be one of the biggest mistakes of his life.

That wasn’t entirely true. The relationship, as far as him and Hound being best friends, had been good. What he had been taught was that lust and desire could destroy good things. He learned his lesson, and now he didn’t fuck with anyone near home or with anyone he thought of as a friend. Why was he suddenly rethinking

those promises to himself?

Lorcan slammed his empty water bottle into the garbage. “I don’t know how much more I can take, Quinn. I swear I’m gonna fucking kill that bull.”

Quinn watched as Lorcan plopped his butt in one of the kitchen chairs and noticed the wince as he rubbed his right hip. “You mean Kitten? What’s he done now?”

Lorcan rolled his eyes. “Who the hell calls a bull Kitten? Isn’t that like calling a fat man Tiny?”

“Yup,” he chuckled. “Or calling a boy Sue.”

“Well, I don’t care what his name is! If he charges me through a fence one more time, I’m gonna be calling him steak. Fucker caught me with my back turned, and I ended up eatin’ dirt with a horn in my ass.”

“Damn, you okay?” Quinn moved closer, all laughter gone at the thought of Lorcan being hurt. “Let me see.”

Lorcan blinked, and a hint of red started to color his cheeks. “I’m fine. Besides, I’m not showing you my ass.”

Quinn wasn’t going to take no for an answer. The man had been hurt on his ranch by one of his critters, for fuck’s sakes. If he needed a hospital or something, Quinn was gonna make damn sure he got what he needed. “Get up,” he ordered as he grabbed Lorcan and pulled him up and out of his chair.

“I told you, I’m fine.”

“Uh huh, and you’re gonna prove it. Drop ’em.”

Lorcan stood, just staring. The color in his cheeks deepened, but he didn’t move to undo his jeans.

“Fine, you stubborn little shit. I’ll do it myself.” He reached out for Lorcan’s belt, but his hand was slapped away.

“Pushy bastard,” Lorcan grumbled as he began to unbuckle and unzip. “This isn’t necessary, ya know?” But he turned and eased his jeans down slightly.

“Jesus Goddamn Christ,” Quinn swore.

Lorcan’s right hip, from the small of his back to the middle of his ass cheek, was one solid mass of purple and red bruise. He

suspected the bruise went on down further. He was disgusted with himself when it popped into his head that even with the bruise, Lorcan's ass was still the sweetest he'd ever laid eyes on. The round globes were firm with muscle; the smooth olive skin of the unaffected cheek was a pale color compared to the tanned skin of his back. His breath hitched, and his heart began to race at the sight before him. Shit, this wasn't the time to be drooling; the man was hurting, for Christ's sake.

"Holy shit, he got you good. I don't see any open skin. How's the hip feel?"

Lorcan pulled his jeans back up, wincing as he turned around. "I'm good. Nothing broken, just might not be able to ride for a day or two."

He was putting on a brave front, but Quinn knew the kid was in some serious pain by the look in his eyes as he finished straightening out his clothes. He'd been dreaming of seeing Lorcan's ass every night, but not like this. At least his dick had enough sympathy not to get too excited about what he'd just seen.

Quinn went to the counter and grabbed a couple of ibuprofen and a glass of water, holding them out to Lorcan. "Won't be any riding or mucking for you for a few days."

"I gotta work. I'll be fine." Lorcan bristled, but he accepted the pills and glass of water.

"Yeah, well, you can help Conner out in the kitchen 'til you're better." He gave Lorcan a stern look, one that dared him to argue. "I'm the boss, remember? It wasn't a request."

I need that ass healed before I can fuck it into the mattress.

Okay, time to go. If he stood here any longer, he was gonna do something really stupid like tell Lorcan he knew the perfect activity that would take his mind off his hip. God, he was a sick bastard, lusting after Lorcan when the man was hurting.

"I'll be right back. Gonna get Conner to doctor you." There was no way he could put his hands on Lorcan and not shoot in his jeans like a randy teenager, hurt or not.

"Oh hell no! That crazy coot ain't touching my ass."

Quinn just ignored Lorcan's protest, heading out to find Conner. He didn't even have to give it a second thought. He wasn't letting that perfect ass go unattended. Plus, Conner loved playing doctor, nurse, whatever. Besides, he had other more important things to do.

He had him a bull to castrate.

He sat gingerly on his left hip, avoiding the pain of his right cheek. Whatever Conner had put on it had made it feel a hell of a lot better than it had, but there was a deep ache. It took him all of about ten seconds to realize that this position wasn't gonna work, and he snatched the remote off the table, easing over onto his side and flipping through the channels. He was making another pass through the channels when the back door slammed hard enough to rattle the wall.

"*Conner*," Quinn's voice downright thundered. The man was obviously pissed. "Where did you hide my fucking gun?"

Lorcan muted the volume on the TV. *This should be good.*

The loud gasp coming from Conner and the "Oh God, are you okay?" had Lorcan moving his sore ass up off the couch and into the kitchen faster than he thought he could have.

"*Last fucking time that beast will cause another bruise!*" Quinn bellowed.

Lorcan tried, he really did, but the snicker escaped his lips before he could get it under control. He couldn't help it. There Quinn stood, dark shiner blooming under his eye, the big man just shaking with anger while Conner tried to hold onto him. Conner was just a-screaming, loud enough to put a group of adolescent girls to shame.

"Don't you dare fucking laugh!" Quinn glared at him, still trying his damndest to pull a screaming Conner off him.

And that was it. Lorcan started laughing so hard he was

snorting and gasping as he tried to catch his breath and say, “Sorry.” But the giggles overwhelmed him again, and he bent at the waist and held onto his belly, wincing at the pain in his hip. But no matter how he tried, he couldn’t stop laughing.

“Quinn, *no*,” Conner screamed just as Quinn broke free from him and lunged at Lorcan.

What happened next would have put The Three Stooges to shame. Just as Lorcan turned to escape Quinn’s pursuit, his hip figured it was time to knot up in a hell of a charley horse. He went down, causing the laughter to stop abruptly and be replaced with a loud, juicy curse just before the breath rushed out of his lungs. Quinn stopped dead in his tracks at Lorcan’s yelp, forcing Conner into his back so hard that he bounced backward, landing on the kitchen table, sending it and its contents flying. The spoon must have been sitting just right, because it catapulted the stick of butter in the opposite direction from Conner, and it landed square in the middle of Quinn’s face just as he turned toward the noise behind him.

“Uh-oh...” And there went the giggles again in between grunts of “ow” as Lorcan tried to roll away from the pain in his hip and ass.

Quinn turned back, the butter sliding down his face, leaving a trail of melted goo down the bridge of his nose as he glared down at Lorcan. “On second thought, Kitten’s balls are safe,” Quinn said with a dangerous glint in his eyes. “But yours? Not so much.”

Lorcan pulled himself to his feet and headed toward the door. He’d have been more worried as he limped past John’s stunned face in his attempt to get out of the kitchen but for the way Quinn’s lips had twitched, almost curling into a smile. It gave him hope that his balls were safe. Then again, the way Quinn was charging up behind him, maybe not.

Quinn grabbed him around the waist, pulling him from his feet. “Laugh at me, will you, you little shit?”

Lorcan squirmed against Quinn, laughing between yelps of pain as his bruised ass hit the solid wall of Quinn’s stomach. Quinn

whirled him around, his arm going under his knees, the other around his shoulders, carrying him as if he were a small child. “Jesus, what are you, some Neanderthal? Put me down,” he said between giggles.

Quinn made a series of grunts, sounding more like a baboon than a cave man, causing Lorcan to laugh harder.

Quinn carried him across the living room and, before Lorcan could protest, dropped him onto the couch. As his ass made contact, Lorcan yelled out in pain. “Oh fuck! Ow! Uncle, uncle.” He twisted, scrambling to transfer his weight to his unaffected hip. Lorcan looked up at the horror-stricken look on Quinn’s face and started cracking up again. “Just for that, you have to help Conner clean up, and my balls are safe.”

A smile bloomed across Quinn’s face. “Yeah, your balls are safe.” He turned and headed back toward the kitchen, mumbling, “For now.”

CHAPTER FIVE

A few days later and what Quinn had sensed from his first day proved true. Lorcan was proving himself to be a damn fine hand. He rarely complained, needing little or no supervision. Quinn knew without a doubt that any task he gave the kid, it'd be done and done right. It really hadn't surprised him all that much, what with the kid having experience on a ranch. Plus, it hadn't hurt that Lorcan had been so desperate and bedraggled that it made him more than a little appreciative that Quinn had let him stay on. The thing that had surprised him, though, was how well Lorcan had gotten on with John and Conner. After Lorcan's outburst that first day at the thought of someone assuming he was gay, Quinn had worried on how accepting the man was actually going to be. He was more than a little pleased to say he'd been wrong, that his fears had been completely unnecessary.

Lorcan wasn't the only one who had been accepting. Conner, who guarded his sweet bread secret with his life, had been able to withstand Lorcan's pleadings for the recipe. Lorcan's claim that he wanted to send it to his mama hadn't swayed him. But Conner had crumbled in the face of Lorcan's pout. When Lorcan turned his puppy dog eyes on Conner, pushing out his full bottom lip into a pout, Quinn was ready to beat the recipe out of Conner if he had to. Unbelievably, Conner had offered not only to give the kid the recipe but to let Lorcan make it alongside him. That pout was a devastatingly powerful weapon. Quinn was almost positive that not

even John had been privy to that sweet bread secret.

Yeah, Quinn thought, looking up at his grandpa's house, the skewed porch to rights, the hanging shutters securely in place, and the lawn mowed, Lorcan had outdone himself. The place looked plumb welcoming. Not that he wanted visitors any time soon. He was gonna be needin' to hire some hands once it was time to put hay up, but he liked the idea of having Lorcan all to himself. Right now, he was good. Well, "good" might not be the best way to describe his current state, unless the good was followed up with "and horny." The kid was driving him clean out of his mind. All confident when he walked the ranch, hips always leading the way. That damn braid just swinging like a cat's tail, which he'd been tempted more than once to pounce on. Quinn swore to God the kid let the sweat run down his bare torso just to torment him. He'd always had a good relationship with his hand, but lately it was getting downright unnatural. If he wasn't careful, he'd be pulling it clean off before the month was out. No way in hell was he going to let that happen. *Time to take my ass down to Jackson!*

Quinn headed in, intent on taking a quick shower and getting on the road before Conner asked too many questions, a fence went down, a critter fell ill, or any of the hundred other things that could come up. He needed to scratch his itch in the worst way. If he had to spend one more night listening to the rhythmic squeaking of bedsprings or the low moans that floated through the walls from Lorcan's room, he knew for damn sure he would just fucking explode. *Christ, did I ever jerk off that much?* He was sure he must have when he was a teenager. Hell, he had been so randy back then that he rarely made it through his chores without having to stop to wank. Didn't mean he wanted to relive those fucking out-of-control hormones. His dick was getting sore, dammit.

On more than one occasion, he'd found his hips jerking in rhythm with the sound of the bedsprings. His hand tightening around his own shaft to the soft sighs and moans that assaulted him every night. The worst was the fucking dreams. The images of Lorcan on his knees before him or the way he would move beneath

him were so vivid. So real. Quinn woke aching in the depths of his marrow each morning, a walk in the park compared to the pain in his throbbing groin. He needed some relief that his hand couldn't give him, and he knew exactly where he could get it.

Toeing off his boots as quietly as possible, he was relieved to hear Conner puttering around in the kitchen, more than likely preparing supper, too busy to notice Quinn sneaking by. It wasn't like Quinn didn't love Conner's company. Hell, the man had been like a second daddy to him. Well, maybe that was John's title. Conner was probably more like the mama he didn't remember. Still, he didn't need the man fussing and fretting about how twitchy he was. Not like he had any plans to tell anyone, least of all Conner, that he was heading down to Jackson to The Push, the closest place to pass for a gay bar around here. *Yeah, the conversation about my big plans on gettin' my pole polished is sure as shit not gonna be happening. Ever.*

He'd just made it to the hall, heading for a quick shower and shave, when the bathroom door burst open.

Jesus fucking Christ! Out stepped a wet, dripping, way-too-fucking-sexy Lorcan. Lorcan stood blinking at him, towel tied loosely around those lean lips, another in his hand drying the dark hair that flowed down around lean shoulders and sculpted arms. The ends dripped water down Lorcan's flat belly and probably on his fine ass. The dark chestnut waves nearly looked black, even more stunning than they had been in Quinn's naughty dreams.

Quinn was relieved that he had been so busy trying to sneak past Conner that he hadn't removed his hat from his head. It was still pulled down low over his eyes, and the kid wasn't able to see how his eyes had nearly popped out of his head or how they had settled back in full of lust and want and downright gotta-have-some-now.

"Shower's free, and I even left you some hot water this time," Lorcan said with a smile.

Did the man actually expect him to converse? The blood had just flowed south, straight to his dick, including the much-needed

blood his brain required for speech. The only thing he could manage was a grunt and a nod.

“I was wondering... I mean, I got my first pay.”

That towel kept rubbing across that damp hair, muscles flexing and rippling with the effort. Quinn watched, mesmerized by the movement. Each pass of the towel seemed to make the one around his waist sway. Oh yeah, just a little more movement and it'd come free. The terrycloth slid across, hiding the sweet bulge that Quinn waited with eagerness to see. He concentrated on the movement as if he could will the towel to fall.

“Thought maybe I could buy you a burger and a beer somewhere? Kind of a thank you for taking me on as a hand?”

Quinn pried his eyes from the towel, looking up at Lorcan from under the brim of his hat. Christ, he wasn't going to make it to Jackson. No way in hell would he be able to drive a stick shift with the serious wood he was packing. He tried to pay attention, thought maybe Lorcan was saying something, but damned if the dark eyes, smooth-shaven chin, and the smell of spice and musk and Lorcan didn't short-circuit his already oxygen-deprived brain. What had he said? Quinn frowned harder, really trying to concentrate, trying to keep his mind off his aching dick long enough to hear what Lorcan was saying.

“What was that, kid?”

“Uh, nothing, maybe another time.”

Quinn thought he saw something like disappointment or embarrassment in the kid's eyes, but before he could ask what the hell had just happened, he got a good look at that tight, fine, sweet ass beneath the thin terrycloth towel walking away. He had to bite down hard on his cheek until he tasted the copper of blood to stop the moan from pouring out of him. Thank God Lorcan hadn't looked back before he shut himself up in his room, or he would have seen Quinn's knees nearly buckle. Or the way he had to hold on to the wall for a little support.

Fuck it! Whore-bath and a clean shirt will do. He had him a club to get to, and fast.

“He hates me!” Lorcan said as he threw himself into the worn La-Z-Boy across from Conner and John.

Conner looked up from the couch where he was putting some stinky eucalyptus-smelling salve on John’s hands. “He doesn’t hate you, honey. He just likes a little sugar with his domination.”

Lorcan’s heart stopped dead in his chest. *Quinn likes to be dominated? No way!* “What?” He couldn’t have heard the man right.

“Just give him a little sweet feed or a hard candy after you’ve put your spur to him. He’ll respond better to ya.”

Lorcan sat and stared for a minute, trying to get a grasp on the conversation they were having, then just cackled. “Not Jeb, you crazy ol’ coot. That beast just likes to fuck with me because I’m not his favorite human. I was talking about Quinn. The man hates me.”

It was Conner’s turn to laugh. “Oh, honey, he doesn’t hate you. Hell, that man doesn’t hate anyone. Don’t think it’s in him.”

“Henderson,” John muttered.

Conner waved him off. “Lord knows Quinn has every right to hate the old fart, but I think he feels sorry for the greedy bastard. Which is a hell of a lot more than that man deserves.” Conner shook his head. “Quinn has too much good in him to hate anyone.”

“Could have fooled me. He barely says two words to me other than to ask me if my chores are done or to give me more. Most of the time he just stands back and scowls at me.”

He couldn’t figure it out, either. He’d gone out of his way to talk to the man. To do everything that was asked of him and then some. But no matter how hard he tried, Quinn just stood and scowled at him. Kinda like Lorcan was scowling at the knots his hair was in. He should have dried and braided it. It was going to be a bitch getting the brush through it now that it was nearly dry.

Truth be told, he should grow the hell up and cut the crap off. He was getting too old to be going out of his way to provoke people.

“Quinn’s got a lot on his mind right now. I know he appreciates everything you do around here.” Conner put the lid back on the smelly stuff, wiping his hand on his jeans before snuggling in closer to John. “He was just telling us the other day how you remind him of Hound.”

Oh, great, I remind Quinn of a dog. Not the kind of compliment he was looking for. “Hound as in hound dog?”

Both men laughed at him. “No, no.” Conner snickered. “Hound was Quinn’s best friend all through school and into their early twenties. Poor kid was cursed with the last name Huckleberry.”

“Everyone used to whistle the ‘Oh My Darlin’” song every time they saw him,” John added.

They both broke into a round of the song, missing half the words, more humming than anything, just laughing at each other.

Lorcan rolled his eyes at them. “I take it Hound’s a bad memory, then? You think that’s why he’s always frowning at me?”

“Oh, Hound isn’t a bad memory,” Conner said. “I think he and Quinn shared some wonderful memories while they were growing up. They shared everything right up until they were about twenty; then Hound moved to California. I know Quinn was pretty upset when he moved away, but they still stay in contact.”

“You’re not helping, Conner. I’m trying to figure out why Quinn hates me so I can change whatever it is I’m doing wrong here.”

“And I already told you, Quinn doesn’t hate anyone. It more than likely has something to do with all the stress he’s under. Henderson’s last attempt at ruining Quinn has been pretty hard on the man.”

“You mean the rumors?” Lorcan asked.

“Yeah, son of a bitch goes to church, and instead of preaching acceptance and lovin’ your neighbor, he preaches prejudice and intolerance. I tell you, stupid people just give me the

runs.”

Prejudice and intolerance was something that Lorcan had a lot of firsthand knowledge about. “I know a lot about that kind of shit, been taunted since I was a boy just because I look more like my mama than my dad. You think that’s why he hates me? Because I could make the rumors worse?”

John looked at him real hard for a moment, ignoring his question, and then said, “Next to Conner here, I think you’re the most beautiful man I’ve ever laid eyes on.”

Conner kissed John softly on the cheek. “Thank you, babe. I feel the same way about you.”

“Well, ‘beautiful’ and ‘manly’ are two words that don’t go well together in any sentence. Beautiful is the last thing I wanna be. I don’t want to look like a nancy.”

Conner chuckled at him. “Oh honey, I know exactly what gay looks like. I look at it every morning in the mirror. To everyone else except my baby here, I’m far from beautiful, but not one person has ever mistaken me for straight.”

“Okay, fine. You’re gay and I’m beautiful. That still doesn’t help me figure out why Quinn ha— doesn’t like me.”

It was John who answered him this time. “I know he likes you. I think he’s worried about you and the way people will perceive you, since the rumors are already flying about Quinn’s sexuality. Maybe he’s keeping his distance to protect you from the backlash the rumors will cause. Or maybe,” he said with a wink, “your beauty renders him speechless.”

He highly doubted that last bit, since Quinn had never given him any reason to think he was attracted to him. Lorcan didn’t need protecting and wasn’t even embarrassed or mad that people thought he was gay. He really didn’t consider himself that way, since he’d never had a relationship with a man or a woman. He just hated the way that people judged him. How they’d sneer and taunt, like being gay was right up there with one of the seven deadly sins. It just irked him to no end that they would look down on him without reason. Most of them probably had a hell of a lot more

skeletons in their closets. Probably had done a hell of a lot more that was “immoral” than being attracted to the same sex.

“You know, John,” he finally replied, “I am not ashamed or upset that they think I’m gay because of the way I look. Hell, I’ve never done anything even close to being *perverted* like they accuse me. I ain’t ever been with a man or woman. But the way they look down on me when they do it? Now that pisses me off. You think it would be easier if I just went back home, easier on Quinn, I mean? So people can’t use me against him? I don’t need anyone protecting me from ignorance, I’m more than used to it, but I don’t want to cause Quinn more stress either.”

Conner rose from the couch and came over to hug Lorcan. “You’re a sweetie. Just give Quinn some time. It wouldn’t hurt for you to tell him how you feel, either.” Conner went back and helped John to his feet. “C’mon, old man, I got some nuts needin’ a little bustin’.”

Lorcan covered his ears and started singing “La la la” as John turned red. Conner crowed as he pulled his lover toward their room, calling out, “Goodnight.”

“Night, and keep the nut-bustin’ noise down. There’s a kid in the house, for Christ’s sake.”

Conner yelled from down the hall, “You might wanna get some earplugs. I took my Viagra!”

“*La, la, la*, not listening.”

Conner’s laughter sounded through the house as he and John made their way to their bedroom. There was the finality of a door closing tight, and then silence.

“Crazy old man,” Lorcan mumbled with a smile and a shake of his head.

Lorcan still wasn’t convinced that Quinn liked him all that much, but at least he had other things to think on now. It would be nice if he and Quinn could be friends. The man was fascinating as hell, and for some reason Lorcan was drawn to him. He couldn’t explain it, but something about Quinn just made him want... well, he wasn’t sure what he wanted from him. He just knew he liked

being around him. He'd never before been drawn to anyone like he was to Quinn. Attraction aside, it was really important to do whatever it took to make the man like him.

CHAPTER SIX

The only empty stool at the bar was next to a tiny little twink in a thick leather collar attached to a leash that was clasped tightly in the hands of an extremely large, leather-clad man. The Dom's bulging arms flexed as he petted the smaller man like one might a loyal dog. On Quinn's other side sat a man tattooed from his bald head right on down. The man was sporting tight leather pants that were one size too small and caused his inked beer gut to protrude obscenely.

The Push sure had changed since the last time he'd been there. Three years ago it had been gay-friendly but not exclusively gay. Certainly hadn't had the leather daddies and their boys like it did these days. Quinn wasn't as deep into the kind of kink that everyone else seemed to be here, but he did appreciate a little domination in his sexual conquests. He wasn't into humiliating or causing anyone real pain, but he totally got off on having someone submit to him. He wasn't looking for any kind of kink tonight though. Just someone that wasn't opposed to a little spit and shine to his pole.

"Can I get a Jack?" he asked the bartender.

At least this guy looked half-normal, dressed in faded jeans and a light T-shirt that had the bar's logo printed on it. The pierced eyebrow and his very obviously pierced nipples were the only thing giving away that the guy had some kinks of his own.

"That's four-fifty." He was just loud enough to be heard over

the thunderous beat of the music as he placed Quinn's drink in front of him.

Quinn pulled out a ten and threw it on the bar in front of him, yelling, "Keep the change."

The bartender took the money while his eyes all but undressed Quinn in obvious appreciation. "Haven't seen you in here before. I'd have remembered. Name's Ty."

Quinn let his eyes do their own wandering. Ty was short and stocky, with well-defined arms. An obvious muscular chest that tapered down to a lean waist. He was handsome in that California kind of way. Blond, shoulder-length hair, deep tan, and pale, pale blue eyes that looked almost translucent.

Perfect. Totally the opposite of the dark-haired beauty he needed to get out of his head. "Name's Quinn." He threw back his Jack and stood. "Join me on the dance floor if you got a break coming anytime soon."

Ty would either join him or he wouldn't. Either way was fine with him. He made his way to the center of the crowded dance floor, then closed his eyes and let the beat of the music move him. The bump and sway of unfamiliar bodies surrounded him. He let himself get lost in it. Quinn gave in to the rhythmic techno tempo as it took his body. Arms raised over his head, he let his hips lead. The sensual slide of hands, the arousing brush of hips and thighs moved around him. He let go of all the stress back on the ranch, the constant tension in his muscles, the worry, as he was pulled along in a sea of lust and heat.

Just as the music changed to a slower, mellower mood, a pair of arms wrapped around Quinn's waist from behind, pulling him up against a hard, compact body. The man was shorter, and Quinn's ass rested up tight against rock-hard abs.

"I have thirty minutes. Wanna get some air?"

Hell yeah, he could do with some fresh air. Deep gulps and pants of fresh air. Quinn didn't need to ask where. The back alley was private, and he doubted it had changed much other than it was more than likely all men finding a dark corner these days. Though,

looking around him, he doubted there would be many out back. There was so much open sexuality, men bending their subs over the tables, more than one on his knees in front of his master with his mouth full. He tilted his head and looked at the trio of men on the stage. *I don't even wanna know if that's real.*

He grabbed Ty's hand without looking back or saying a word, leading him to the back door and out into the cool air of the alley. He could have just dropped his jeans inside the bar, but his kinks didn't include having an audience. As he'd expected, it wasn't busy. One man was pressed face-first against the wall as another, who was fully covered except the top of his ass, pounded into him. Further down the wall, a man crouched on his knees. The act he was participating in was blocked by the wide frame of a man clad in nothing but leather pants and a harness crossing his back, but Quinn didn't need to use too much imagination to figure it out.

My thoughts exactly.

Quinn pushed Ty up against the wall, his bigger body pressing against him as his hand cupped the man's straining erection firmly. "I want you on your knees."

He didn't need any sweet kisses or promises of tomorrow. He knew exactly why he was here, what he wanted, and it had nothing to do with conversation other than the occasional grunt or moan.

Quinn pressed down on Ty's shoulder with one hand while the other one worked to open his buckle and unzip his pants. Ty went down easily, the look in his eyes anticipatory and hungry. Ty reached up to help with the zipper, but Quinn knocked his hands away. "No touching unless I tell you. Just open your mouth."

Ty looked at him for a moment, blinking. He could see the war raging behind the man's eyes. He would either play along like Quinn demanded, or Quinn would find someone who would. He was sure that in this bar, he wouldn't have any problem with finding it, either.

Ty made up his mind, dropped his hands to his sides, and opened his mouth. Quinn had to hold back his laugh at the baby-bird look on the man's handsome face.

Quinn freed his staining erection and watched as Ty's eyes widened in surprise. He knew he was large. His full length was just under nine inches, but what most lovers had bitched about in the past was the width, one lover even suggesting Quinn should bottom, since there was no way in hell he was taking anything that big up his ass. Needless to say, they had never moved past blowjobs and rubbing off on each other before they went their separate ways. Though Quinn was mainly a top, he wasn't opposed to switching once in awhile for the right person. Just, his dominating tendencies didn't allow for him to always be in a submissive position.

"Holy fuck! You're sexy all over, ain't ya?"

Quinn chuckled at the compliment. He hadn't quite expected that but was pleased as shit that the man wasn't running his ass back to the club. "Open up and say 'ah'." He stroked his cock slowly a few times, letting his arousal seep from the tip before painting Ty's lips with it.

Ty's breath on his cock made him tighten his hold, savoring the bliss of a tongue sweeping across his slit to collect his seed. Ty opened his mouth wide, wrapped his lips around the head, and began sucking eagerly. Quinn kept his hand tight around his shaft, only allowing Ty to have a couple of inches to play with. He stroked himself easily in and out of the man's wet mouth, giving Ty a chance to adjust to its girth as he explored the head of Quinn's dick with his tongue.

Quinn kept his eyes focused on the pretty blue eyes, keeping him right there in the moment. He refused to let his mind wander. As Ty sucked harder, Quinn rewarded him with another inch, drawing out his pleasure. He was enjoying the sensation of something other than his own hand wrapped around his prick. After waiting so long before seeking out someone to pleasure him, he'd be damned if he would blow his seed like a horny teenager.

He watched as Ty's head began to bob in earnest, his cheeks hollowing out as he sucked harder. "That's it, suck it good."

Ty's answering reply was a moan and sweet, deep suction.

Quinn moved his hand slowly down to the base, his hips rocking forward, fucking that mouth until he felt the head of his dick hit the back of Ty's throat. He placed one hand on the wall to steady himself, letting his hips do the work. With his other hand he grabbed onto that soft blond head, pulling the man forward each time he snapped his hips.

Ty was a true cock hound, eyes nearly rolling with need as Quinn began to thrust in earnest, fucking the man's mouth with hard, short stabs. His toes curled with the tight wet heat each time Ty swallowed, taking him into his throat. Quinn was relentless, but Ty took everything he gave, and his eyes begged for more.

Just as Quinn felt his orgasm begin to build at the base of his spine, he slowed his thrusts. He wanted Ty to come on his own, since he had no desire to reciprocate the deed in any way. "Grab that bulge in your jeans and show me just how much you like sucking my cock," he ordered.

Ty wasted no time freeing his dripping erection. Never missing a beat as the strokes of his hand fell into rhythm with the hard sucking of his mouth.

A few more hard thrusts, and Quinn knew his orgasm wouldn't be denied this time. His hand fisted tight in Ty's hair, keeping the man right there. His other hand braced against the brick wall as he shoved his dick down Ty's throat one last time. His body went tight from his toes on up as he threw his head back, grunting out his pleasure. He closed his eyes for only a second, but the image of Lorcan with a towel wrapped around his damp hips had Quinn holding his breath as mini-orgasms raced up and down his spine. When he finally came back to himself and his surroundings, he was more than a little disappointed at the blond head still bobbing gently, licking him clean. Ty had one hand braced on his own leg, the other full of spunk.

Now that Quinn's lust was sated, regret assaulted him almost immediately. He found a small smile for the man on his knees before him, knowing it didn't reach his eyes. It wasn't Ty's fault. He had been eager, damn good at giving head. Any other time, he

would have thanked the man with at least an offer to buy him a drink, but he suddenly felt even worse than before he stepped into The Push.

Quinn watched as the man stood with a sated smile on his face, and they both tucked their softening erections back into the confines of their jeans.

“That was great, man, but unfortunately I gotta get back to slinging the suds. You gonna be around at closing? I got a place not too far from here.”

The guy looked hopeful, but Quinn wasn't one to lead anyone on. “Sorry, I gotta head back to the ranch tonight.”

“Hey, no problem.” He handed Quinn a card as he began to walk past. “Next time you're over this way, look me up.”

Quinn watched the guy strut back into the bar, thankful he wasn't a clinger, or worse, one to demand that Quinn somehow owed him something for the blowjob. He leaned back against the brick wall, fighting the urge to beat his head against it. He'd gotten his nut off, taken exactly what he wanted, yet he was completely disgusted with himself. Not only had he let some stranger suck him off in an alley, he had done it nearly leaning on a fucking garbage bin. The hint of sex in the air was overpowered by the sour scent of rotting garbage. A used condom was stuck to the bottom of his boot, for fuck's sake. Quinn used a clean spot on the concrete to scrape off the bottom of his boot and then arranged his clothes. He watched another stranger come out of the bar, unbuttoning his pants as he moved toward the man on his knees, whose mouth was now free.

“Is this what I have to look forward to?” he asked himself as he pushed off the wall. He threw Ty's card into the dumpster as he headed around the club toward his truck. He'd come here to scratch that fucking mindless itch, and though he'd gotten exactly what he was looking for, now all he felt was disgust and regret. He'd gotten a healthy reminder of how lonely and pathetic he'd become.

The sound of a toilet seat dropping and the shower being turned on brought Lorcan out of his restless sleep. It had to be Quinn. Conner and John had gone to bed hours ago, and he doubted they were getting up at—he looked over at the digital clock—three a.m. to take showers.

Lorcan couldn't help but wonder whom Quinn had hooked up with tonight. He knew enough about Quinn from Conner and John that he was pretty sure the man wasn't the kind to spend a lot of time in a bar. Lorcan had never been big on the whole "get drunk, get fucked, and get home" thing, but hearing Quinn arrive home just after the bars closed had him more than a little curious.

Something Conner had said to him earlier had his mind working overtime. It was probably why he was still wide awake at this time of morning. *"I can't remember really ever seeing Quinn with male or female companion. He's more of a loner."* Lorcan tried imagining Quinn in the arms of some beautiful woman, wrapped around her as their bodies swayed together to a sweet country ballad. When he thought of the same scenario with a tight, hard body of male muscle instead of a beautiful woman, he couldn't help but wonder what it would feel like. What would it be like to have all those hard, thick muscles wrapped around him, the heat of Quinn's body surrounding him? What would it be like to have those blue eyes turned on him with intense desire instead of the frown he'd grown to expect? Lorcan was a little alarmed at how badly he wanted to find out what Quinn felt like against him. Even more alarmed that the image of Quinn with either a woman or another man caused him a twinge of jealousy.

Lorcan wasn't sure what the jealousy meant. He'd spent most of his life trying to figure himself out, which wasn't easy, since his mind and his body were constantly at war. Sometimes he would see a fine-ass-looking woman that the other guys would be hooting and hollering over, and he wouldn't feel the slightest stirring of

attraction. Yet other times he would see someone, a plain-Jane girl-next-door type or an average-looking guy that didn't really register an attraction in his mind, yet his dick would get a whole lot interested. His dick was a little more than fickle, the fucker getting stiff at the most inappropriate times. A look or a smell would get it standing at attention, and it didn't matter if the object of its desire had girl parts or boy parts. Since he and his dick were never on the same page, he figured it best to do nothing at all. Well, until now.

For the first time in his life, his brain and his dick knew exactly what they wanted. They both wanted Quinn in a big way, and it scared the shit out of him. He didn't know if the rumors were true or not. He wasn't even sure he could trust his attraction, since it was the first time both his heads had agreed on anything. He had always suspected that he might be bisexual or, at least, bi-curious, since he was attracted to women just as much as he was to men. The thought that the assumptions he had been fighting against his whole life were true had him freaked out.

I'm not fucking gay. Wasn't that what he had told Quinn? And meant it? Lorcan didn't want to admit that he could even be a little bit gay. Just the word bugged the shit out of him. He didn't have anything against those who chose same-sex partners. He fought against prejudiced, narrow-minded assholes who had the audacity to look down their noses at anyone who didn't conform to what they thought was right and moral. Had he really been fighting what he had perceived as injustice, or had he fought to prove he was something he wasn't? Did that make him as bad as them?

The word "gay" had images of the Easter Parade and movies from the forties and fifties coming to mind. Scenes where everyone was happy and gay with their stupid bonnets and nothing but blue skies and rosy fucking lives. He didn't belong in the class of Ozzie and Harriet. Labels sucked, and he didn't want one stamped across his ass. If he chose to be with a man or a woman, then that was his business, wasn't it? When he saw couples together, no matter the combination, he didn't look at them and put a label on them. He just thought how lucky they were to have found someone they

cared about. Did that make him naïve?

The sound of the bathroom door opening stopped Lorcan's rambling thoughts. He strained to listen as footsteps fell softly on the hall rug. He held his breath in... anticipation? Hope? When the steps moved past his door without hesitation, he let out the breath he didn't remember holding, berating himself. What had he been hoping for? That Quinn would sneak into his room and want him? Apologize for blowing him off when he'd asked him out for a beer? The man had been out having a good time, more than likely with a pretty little thing. Lorcan had best remember that.

It was easier to think that Quinn couldn't be attracted to him like John had suggested. That the frown meant exactly what he'd first thought. Quinn simply didn't like him much. He could just ignore his attraction to Quinn. Wait until his fucking fickle dick and his bigger brain got their shit together and agreed on a female for himself.

Yup, that's it. I just need to get back home and find my own female, and life will be good! He rolled over and covered his head to wait for the alarm to go off. He knew there was no way sleep was going to take him, because as easy as it was to think he had a plan, he knew nothing was ever that easy.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Lorcan leered at his reflection as he stood in front of the mirror brushing his way-too-long hair. No wonder everyone looked at him like a freak. He was a freak.

“That’s it! I’m cutting this shit off,” he told his reflection.

He was done with the childish provocation of others. Maybe if he got rid of the girly hair, Quinn would stop scowling at him. He didn’t care what Conner had said. He knew Quinn hated him. Since the night Quinn had ignored his offer of a beer, the man scowled more. The rest of the time, he just flat-out ignored Lorcan. That proved he’d been right. He headed off to the kitchen, wild hair flowing out behind him. *There has to be a pair of scissors in this house somewhere.*

As Lorcan walked into the kitchen, three sets of eyes focused on him from where the men were sitting at the table having breakfast. He ignored them without even so much as a fleeting glance as he started pulling open drawers and rummaging through them.

“Morning, honey,” Conner said in a voice way too sweet for this early in the morning. “Something I can help you find?”

“No,” he snapped. He didn’t need any fucking help. He needed a pair of scissors and his boots, and then he was taking his ass to town. And God dammit, he wasn’t *honey*.

“Lorcan.” The sound of Quinn’s voice snapped like a whip, one that brooked no argument.

He raised his head and met Quinn's eyes as he straightened up. "What?" he asked defiantly, with a snap of his own in his voice.

Quinn took a sip of his coffee before answering him calmly. "Conner said good morning and offered you help. There was no reason to snap at him."

Lorcan came up short, his eyes going from Quinn's to Conner's to John's and back to Quinn's. Conner looked hurt. John was just this side of pissed, and Quinn just sat there, calm as anything, sipping his coffee. Had it just been that calm look of Quinn's, he could have told the man to mind his own fucking business. He didn't feel calm. Didn't want to be calm. The man could shove his calm—and his scowling face—right up his....

Lorcan's eyes went back to Conner's hurt look, and his bravado died. He shut the drawer and took a seat at the table.

"I'm sorry, Conner. I didn't mean to snap at you. John, I'm sorry I disrespected you." He wasn't apologizing to Quinn, though. The man didn't deserve it, the way he got Lorcan's emotions all tied up and then just sat scowling. He hadn't done a fucking thing to make the man hate him. He was through. He was getting his hair cut, going to town, and finding a new ranch to work on. That was that.

Conner reached across the table and squeezed his hand briefly. "It's okay, honey. Is there something I can help you find?"

God, the man was a sweetheart. Didn't that just make Lorcan feel like an even bigger heel? "Thanks. I was looking for a pair of scissors." He kept his head bowed in guilt.

Conner jumped to his feet, heading for the pantry. "You wouldn't have found them in the drawer. I keep them in a basket in here." He returned to the table with a basket full of different shapes and sizes. "What kind did you need?"

"Just something that will cut through hair," he answered.

Conner's eyes went wide in shock before he asked, "Whose hair?"

He looked up, biting back his first reply of *Duh*. "I wanna cut

my hair before I head into town.”

All three of them just stared at him, making him feel more than a little uncomfortable. If he'd known this was going to be such a big deal, he'd have looked for the damn things in the barn. Surely there was something he could use in the tack room. He thought about getting up and doing just that, but the look on Conner's face had him hesitating. On second thought, maybe he'd just have breakfast, then head into town to find a barbershop. He grabbed the carafe, filled an empty cup, and worked on filling his plate instead of explaining himself.

“Why would you do that?” Conner squeaked, sounding as shocked as he'd looked.

“Just need a change.” And not just his hair, either.

Conner took his seat, laying the basket on his lap. “Is there something bothering you, honey? Why would you want to cut off all that beautiful hair?”

Lorcan took a couple more bites of his breakfast, but it just wasn't settling on his stomach too well. It probably had more to do with the thick, uncomfortable silence in the room than the food. He could feel all of their eyes boring into him. Either way, he'd lost his appetite. He grabbed his plate and cup and headed to the sink.

“Nothing's wrong.” He washed his dishes as he continued. “I have my morning chores done and thought since it's my day off I'd head into town. I haven't been off this ranch since I started here. Figured it was time to go check it out, ya know?” *If I'm lucky, I'll find a new job while I'm there.*

“Would you like a ride?” John asked.

He hadn't expected that. It wasn't that he really wanted to walk to town, but he did need the time alone to clear his head.

“Nah, thanks for offering, but I think I'd rather walk.”

He finished up his dishes before heading for the door. He had intended to ask Quinn if there was anything he needed from him before he left, but the deep frown on the man's face and the hand clenched around his coffee mug like he was holding it in place stopped him. The man looked more pissed off than usual. Lorcan

scowled right back before turning; then, instead of heading to the barn, he stomped off toward his room.

Jesus fuck. Why does the man hate me so much? I can't help how I fucking look. If I was going to be such a threat to his precious fucking ranch, then why did he hire me in the first place? By the time he made it back to his room and slammed the door, he was nearly in tears. That just pissed him off even more.

He was sick and tired of people looking at him like he was some kind of sideshow freak. Always having to prove he was a goddamn man. He didn't need to go to town looking for a job. He needed to pack his shit and get his ass back home. He had more than enough money for a bus ticket without asking for this week's wages. Let Quinn keep it for the inconvenience of hiring a flipping drag queen lookalike. He might have to listen to Mama's "I told you so," but at least he knew his family would accept him as just Lorcan.

His plan made, he wiped the angry tears from his cheeks and started packing his meager belongings into his duffel. If he was lucky, by this time tomorrow, he'd be home. The only place where he obviously belonged.

"Well, are you just gonna sit there and do nothing, or are you gonna get your hiney up out of that chair and go after him and make this right?"

Quinn looked over at Conner, who was now sitting back in his chair, arms across his chest, with a look on his face like he was dealing with a naughty schoolboy. Quinn should have realized Conner had sent John off to the barn so he could give him shit.

"He's going into town. What business is it of mine what he does on his day off?"

"*Quinn Michael Taylor*, you get up and go talk to that boy. He thinks you hate him! It's your fault, the way you go around

here scowling at him all the time.” He shook his finger at him.
“You should be ashamed of yourself.”

Quinn just stared, more than a little confused. He didn’t hate Lorcan. Hell, if anything, he admired the way the man worked without complaint, always going that extra mile. The kid was a damn fine worker, respectful, polite, and funny as hell when he and Conner got going at each other. What was there to hate about him? Well, other than the fact that the man was the sexiest thing Quinn had ever seen in his life—and that he had Quinn fighting on a daily basis not to follow him around drooling. He hated that he couldn’t touch him. Hated that the man was the center of his lust-filled dreams each night. Hated that Lorcan was the first person he’d ever met that he wanted more from than just a quick fuck. What he hated the most was that he could see himself falling in love with Lorcan, but he could never have him.

“I don’t hate him. Why the hell would he think that?”

“The way you frown at him, even when he’s doing a good job? The way you hardly ever speak to him except to give him his chores? Or the way you ignored him when he offered to buy you dinner and a beer?” He spread his hands out in a questioning gesture and shrugged. “Hmm, you tell me why he would think you hate him.”

“I don’t frown at him, and, dammit, I talk to him.” *Wait a minute? Dinner?* “I’ve never turned down a dinner and beer with him. What the hell are you talking about?”

“Yes, you did. Last week when you went off to God knows where in some kind of hissy fit. He told me that he’d asked if he could buy you dinner and a beer as a thank-you for hiring him. You didn’t even have care enough to politely decline.” Conner folded his hands on his lap. “He says you just stared at him, frowning, until he fled to his room in embarrassment.” Conner shook his head. “That’s not like you, Quinn. Do you not like him because you’re worried that the old prick Henderson is gonna use him against you?”

Quinn went over the night in question, trying to remember

what had been said. He remembered meeting Lorcan in the hall. Remembered how all rational thought had fled his mind in the presence of all that mind-blowing beauty. That he'd been reduced to a pool of want and need the likes of which he'd never experienced. A lust-filled daze had settled over him, and all he could think about was getting the hell out of there and going to Jackson before he made a fool of himself by falling at Lorcan's feet to beg for just one touch.

The rest of Conner's statement came back to him. "I don't give a fuck what Henderson does! He's not getting my ranch. It has nothing to do with Lorcan." The anger seeped out of him as the realization hit him of what *did* have something to do with Lorcan. He propped his elbows on the table and buried his face in his hands. "I want him," he said so softly he wasn't sure if Conner would be able to hear him. He was afraid to say it any louder. "I want him so much that it's driving me crazy."

Conner ran his hand through Quinn's hair, soothing him. "Have you told him?"

He could only shake his head. How was he supposed to tell a man who wasn't gay, who fought against anyone who accused him of being gay, that he was wanted by not only a man, but his boss, no less? He could just imagine that would go over like a ton of bricks.

"Quinn, look at me."

He lifted his head and met Conner's concerned eyes. "I can't...."

"Shh, it's okay. Wanting someone you don't think you can ever have is a scary thing." Conner reached out and took his hand in his, entwining their fingers. "I remember when I first met John. I didn't believe in love at first sight until that moment. For me, it was pure anguish. I believed that John was straight. That he would never return my love. Every day I walked around this ranch watching him. Wondering what it would be like to just touch him once. Every day, my feelings for him grew. It nearly drove me insane with how much I wanted him. After nearly thirty years

together, I still thank God every day that he gave me the courage to tell John how I felt.”

Quinn stared down at their entwined hands, trying to get his thoughts together. He hadn’t meant to make Lorcan feel that he hated him. That was the furthest thing from the truth. It would be almost laughable if it wasn’t so painful. He’d never met another couple, straight or gay, that was more perfect or more in love than Conner and John. That kind of love was so rare that Quinn had never fooled himself into thinking he’d ever find anything like it for himself. He had been content to share that love with them from the outside, content to be alone, until Lorcan came along. Now he was having foolish dreams that maybe he could have his own perfect love. It was a stupid, foolish, never-going-to-happen dream.

“There is one big difference. You only thought John was straight, and I know Lorcan is.”

“How do you know? Have you asked him?”

“Conner, I don’t have to ask him. He nearly ripped my head off when he thought I was assuming he was gay. I don’t think he could be any clearer than that.”

Conner raised a brow at him. “You never asked yourself why he reacted like that? I’ve spent a lot of time with him. Did you know he has never been with a man or a woman?”

He shook his head. “No.”

“Did you know that what he hates most about people assuming he’s gay isn’t the fact that they think he’s gay, but the way they look down at him and judge him when they say it?”

“No.” He was starting to get a better understanding of Lorcan’s personality. He hated that he hadn’t bothered to find out more about the man by talking to him instead of making assumptions.

“Have you ever bothered to notice that when you walk into a room, Lorcan’s eyes light up and his skin flushes? Did you also ever bother to notice the way he slumps and the light in his eyes burns out when you ignore him?”

Jesus, how had he missed that? Had he been so busy trying to

cover up his own desires that he'd unintentionally hurt Lorcan? "I never noticed," he answered guiltily.

Conner patted the back of his hand. "I can't tell you if Lorcan is gay or will ever want a relationship with you. Only he can answer that. What I do know is, he is looking for acceptance, and he looks up to you. He's trying very hard to earn your respect and be your friend." Conner lifted his chin up, forcing Quinn to look at him. "Don't you think he at least deserves a friend?"

Dammit, Conner was right. He needed to stop worrying about what he wanted, how he was never going to get it, and stop being such a selfish bastard. Lorcan deserved to be treated right. He was a great guy. It wasn't Lorcan's fault that Quinn couldn't handle his libido when the sexy bastard walked in the room. Quinn had some major sucking up to do, a whole lot of begging forgiveness. He still wanted to beg a kiss, but having Lorcan as a friend seemed a lot more important to him at the moment. He got up, kissing Conner on top of his head. "You're a wise old bastard, did you know that?"

"Yup, wise and sexy, that's me." He chuckled. "Now go on and make this right."

Quinn wasn't sure how well he was going to do with making this right. He wasn't the best at talking about his feelings, but he knew he sure as hell was gonna try.

CHAPTER EIGHT

The first couple of swigs from the whiskey hadn't tasted all that great. It had burned from his throat all the way down to his gut. He was glad no one had been around to watch him coughing and choking to get the shit down. Now halfway through the bottle, Lorcan was becoming an old pro at throwing back a shot. The burn felt damn fine. The way it made his body light and his brain a little swimmy was even better.

He'd planned on heading to town. With every intention of hopping on a bus and never looking back, he'd made it as far as the barn in search of something to cut off his braid. Instead, he'd found a partly full bottle of Wild Turkey someone had stashed behind the ointments and soaps. It was as far as he got. He took the whiskey, hid himself in one of the empty stalls, and started drinking every thought of that cranky prick out of his head.

Fuck him! Lorcan didn't need to stick around this doomed ranch taking the shit he had from Quinn. The man was arrogant, rude, and... and... stupid. He didn't need to try and make friends with everyone he met. Just because his brain and his dick agreed the man was sexy.... Well, his heart and his gut were telling him he didn't need the grief. It wasn't like he was gonna spend the rest of his life pining after the man. He was going to grow the fuck up, head home, and find him a woman that either his dick or his head wanted, he didn't care which. Who needed happily-ever-after and some stupid fairy tale of having it all? He should have listened to

Lenn. His brother had always been the smartest of the four of them. When Lenn had told him that nobody was perfect, that the best one could hope for was a nice spread of land, a wife that didn't bitch too much and worked hard, money in the bank, and a couple of kids to carry on his name, Lorcan should have listened. Sounded like a damn fine plan to him right about now.

He threw back more whiskey, savoring the burn before tipping it up again and again. Hopefully he'd drink his foolish ass into oblivion. Then, in the wee hours before dawn, he'd take his hung-over ass down to the bus station. *Stupid fuck. Who does he think he is with his stupid scowling face and stupid bulging muscles in all the right places? Stupid tight ass and the stupid way he sways his hips when he walks. Stupid. Stupid. Stupid.*

"Did you hear me, you stupid, mean bastard?" He screamed at the empty barn. "I'm going home. I hope Henderson takes your stupid ranch, and you can spend the rest of your stupid life scowling at him." He took another long pull of the whiskey, slumping down further against the back of the stall.

"I probably deserve that, but Conner and John don't. You're right, I am a stupid bastard."

Lorcan sat up fast. His world tilted a moment before righting itself. He looked up to see Quinn leaning on his arms, looking down at him. "Sorry, didn't think anyone was out here." He wasn't sorry for what he'd said, just sorry that he'd been heard. He slumped back against the wall and took another pull off the whiskey, planning on just ignoring the man until he went away. Stupid bastard.

"You're going home?" Quinn asked.

"Yup."

"Were you gonna say good-bye?"

"Not to you." *Stupid bastard. Go away.*

"Ah. Gonna have Conner and John tell me?"

He wasn't even gonna answer that. He didn't care if Conner and John told Quinn he'd sprouted wings and flew away. The image of his drag queen-looking ass with big angel wings flying

away started him giggling. He could just picture it, swooping down on all the unsuspecting homophobes, yelling, "*This fairy is gonna smoke your ass.*" That had him laughing outright. *One swish of my magical rod, and you'll be ass-deep in fairy spunk.* His sides were hurting as tears rolled down his cheeks with the images of men screaming, running for their lives. He wiped at his tears when he suddenly remembered Quinn was watching him. He took another quick shot, trying to get the giggles under control.

"Sorry, just thought of something funny, is all."

"You have a nice laugh," Quinn said softly.

That had Lorcan sitting up and looking at the man in confusion. He'd been quick to tell Lorcan how good a job he was doing, how clean the stalls were or how good he was with a horse, but he'd never given any personal compliments before. Damn, this whiskey had his head all messed up. No way was Quinn complimenting him. He wasn't only seeing flying drag queens; he was hearing shit too. "Yeah, well, I'll be careful not to bother you with it much longer."

Quinn regarded him for a moment, then asked, "Mind if I have a drink with ya?"

Lorcan looked down at the nearly empty bottle and shrugged. "Help yourself. It was probably yours anyway." He held out the bottle to Quinn. He didn't need any more. He'd be lucky if he was able to get his drunken ass back to the house before the puking started.

Quinn stepped into the stall, closing the gate behind him. Taking the bottle, he tipped it back and took a long drink before settling next to him on the stall floor. "I'm glad you didn't leave without me getting a chance to apologize first."

Lorcan kept his head down, trying to ignore the heat coming off Quinn. The way he sounded so sincere, like he really wanted to apologize. He already had his plan set and didn't need Quinn making him second-guess himself. He was going home. It was where he belonged, the only place he'd ever belong. He watched Quinn out of the corner of his eye. How his hands clenched and

unclenched around the bottle. Rough, callused fingers rubbed across the label, making his dick choose another inappropriate time to take notice. It twitched, coming to life as he watched those hands move against that damn bottle. He hated how he had no control over himself when Quinn was this near.

“I’m not sure if it’s too late, but I’d like another chance to start over with you. Show you I’m not mean, just stupid.”

Nope, no second chances. He was gonna go home. Needed to go home. Had to. If he stayed here, he’d just be miserable, fighting a daily case of blue balls, and for what? So he could move on one day and start him a family back in Indiana? Nah, better to just head out now.

“I’ve already packed my stuff. Gonna catch a bus in town in the morning, be home by the next.” He closed his eyes against those hands. He leaned his head back, not trusting himself to look at Quinn.

The silence stretched out for so long, he thought Quinn might have left, but then he heard him let out a breath on a sigh. “Can I at least explain to ya why I behaved the way I did before you go? I don’t want any hard feelings between us, ya know?”

He stayed where he was with his eyes closed. “Not gonna be any hard feelings. I appreciate you giving me a place to stay, a chance to earn enough money to get home. If you feel you need to, go ahead if you want.”

“I don’t let people get too close to me. I mean, I have a few friends, more like acquaintances, and I have John and Conner, who I think of more as family. But ever since Hound left, I haven’t let anyone get close, never really wanted anyone to.”

Lorcan could totally understand that, at least the part about not having any real friends. All he really had for companionship was his brothers. That was part of what had driven him from home. He desperately wanted his own friends, his own life, not just bits and pieces of a life through his family.

“I don’t understand not wanting anyone to get close to you. Man, for just one fucking day, I’d like to just be normal. Shit, I’d

give my left nut, maybe even my right one, to have someone close to me that wasn't related by blood. Christ, that Hound guy must have really messed up your head." He hated how his head was going all fuzzy with his eyes closed, so he opened them, finding a spot on the ceiling to try and focus on. The alcohol must have been working him real good now, getting his tongue all nice and loose, if he was talking about how pathetic he was with Quinn.

"Yeah, he did," Quinn said with a sigh.

"Okay, so you don't want anyone close to you, and I tried to do that. Got it. No hard feelings." He started to get up on his feet, ready to take his drunken ass to the house so he could pass out in a bed instead of the hard dirt floor, but the world started spinning, forcing him to sit his ass right back down. *Beds are overrated.*

"Maybe I'll just hang out here, take a nap."

"I want to," Quinn responded quietly.

Yeah, okay. Whatever, you stupid bastard. "It's your barn. Nap wherever you want."

Quinn tipped back the bottle, drinking down the rest of the whiskey before setting the bottle down next to him. "I meant I want to get close to someone."

"Yeah, well, if you ever wanna find a little lady, then don't be frowning at people all the time. I'm sure you'll have no problem."

"I don't have any interest in finding a little lady. Never have. I would like to get close to you, though."

Now Lorcan knew he'd drunk too much, because he thought he'd just heard Quinn say he wanted to get close to him. He knew that was some kind of bullshit. The man didn't like him. He turned his head and looked at Quinn. "Yeah? What's the fucking punch line? You've proven you don't like me. Just because I'm leaving now and you don't want hard feelings, don't pump sunshine up my ass. It chafes."

Quinn met his gaze with complete seriousness in his eyes. "I didn't want to get close to you, become your friend, because I didn't want the same thing to happen between us that happened

between me and Hound.” He took a deep breath, letting it all out before continuing, “I don’t want to lose another friend because I’m attracted to them.”

“Huh? Okay, wait! What the hell did you just say?” This conversation was just getting all fucked up. He was lost, probably because he was drunk, but more than likely because he was drunk *and* Quinn wasn’t making any sense.

“I was attracted to you from the first moment I saw you, and then... well, when you thought I was assuming you were gay, you freaked out.” Quinn huffed out a breath. “Look, I never assumed you were gay. Yeah, I hoped you were, but you set me straight on that real fast. I figured you wouldn’t want some gay guy to be your friend if you knew I was attracted to you, so I just kept my distance. Was probably the hardest fucking thing I’ve ever done, trying to hide my attraction for you.”

Lorcan stared at Quinn, his handsome face solemn and serious. His deep blue eyes full of apprehension and fear. Lorcan’s mind recognized how the stubble on Quinn’s strong chin gave the older man a more rugged look, toning down his classic good looks with a little masculine flare. Quinn’s deep red lips were full, as if they were swollen from recently being devoured in a passionate kiss. Lorcan’s dick recognized how attractive Quinn was but was paying much more attention to the broad shoulders and thick, muscular chest. The way his chest tapered down to a tight abdomen and lean hips. Oh, and it certainly noticed the bulge in the man’s tight Levi’s. The way it lay heavy and thick against the juncture of hip and thigh even when not aroused. Yeah, if he listened to his little head, he’d more than likely be devouring that kissable mouth. He’d be rubbing every inch of his skin against every inch of Quinn’s.

He stared at Quinn a moment longer, and then, before he even realized he had moved, his body had taken the choice out of his hands. He was leaning forward, his lips barely brushing against Quinn’s. Quinn stiffened at the contact, not moving, not encouraging the kiss, but not pushing him away either. Lorcan took

it as a sign to deepen the kiss. He let the tip of his tongue trace Quinn's lips, nearly groaning at the explosion of the man's flavor mixed with the spicy whiskey on his tongue. His head was spinning. His heart thudded in his chest as he continued to coax Quinn to respond to the kiss. *God, please let him respond.* Lorcan didn't think he could stand another rejection from Quinn.

Just when he was beginning to think that Quinn wasn't going to, the man groaned and opened his mouth, tongue coming out to battle his own. The kiss deepened as they each wrapped a hand in the other's hair, pulling the other closer. It went from tentative and exploring to raw and hungry, teeth clinking together in their sudden need. The feel of Quinn's tongue sliding against his, the sensation of the man's hand fisted in his hair, had his cock so hard he thought the skin would burst wide open. He let his free hand travel down Quinn's chest and further, needing to know if the other man was as aroused as he was. His body wouldn't be able to lie. Just as he reached his goal, his fingers barely skimming across the evidence of Quinn's arousal, the larger man broke the kiss and rested his head against Lorcan's. Quinn's hand gripped his wrist to stop its movement. Their breath mingled as they stared at each other.

Quinn was the first to speak. "I don't think this is a very good idea."

It wasn't what he'd expected the man to say. He thought it was a very good idea. His hard-as-a-diamond shaft thought it was an excellent fucking idea and was prepared to beg if need be. He couldn't remember anything ever feeling as right as the way Quinn's tongue felt against his or the way his hand fisted in his hair. He knew he'd never heard a more satisfying sound than when Quinn had given in to the kiss with a groan. His heart was full to bursting. Even through his whiskey haze, he knew nothing had ever sounded better than when Quinn had admitted that he was attracted to him, that he wanted to get closer to him. He might be feeling the effects of the alcohol, but he knew it had nothing to do with how badly he wanted Quinn. It only intensified what he'd

already been feeling for weeks.

He met Quinn's eyes and let the emotions he'd been holding back shine. He let him see for the first time how badly he wanted him. "You don't know how long I've wanted to touch you. Please?"

CHAPTER NINE

Jesus! The way Lorcan begged, the way his eyes held Quinn's, pleading with his desire. Quinn wanted to give in to the man. Give him anything and everything he wanted. He found willpower deep inside that he would never have dreamed he possessed and shook his head. "I can't, not like this."

He wanted Lorcan with a need so strong, so overwhelming, that it was frightening in its intensity. But not like this. Not with Lorcan drunk on whiskey. He didn't want to do anything Lorcan could regret in the morning. He damn sure didn't want their first time together to be rutting like fucking animals on a stall floor.

He held Lorcan's eyes until he saw the lust and need in his beautiful brown eyes turn to hurt with the sting of rejection. He reached out to hold the man. Quinn wanted to explain why this wasn't right, but just as his hand touched Lorcan's shoulder, Lorcan spun out of his reach and got to his feet.

"Lorcan, please, let me explain. It's not that I don't want you. God, I want you! Just not here, not like this."

Lorcan kept his back to him as he got to his feet.

"Please, look at me," Quinn asked.

Lorcan didn't turn. Instead, he staggered toward the stall door. "Just leave me alone."

"Lorcan, stop being so damn stubborn and listen. If you still want this when you're sober...."

Lorcan turned just as he opened the gate and glared at him.

“You know what? Fuck you. I’m sick and tired of you assuming you know who and what I am. Making choices for me as to whether I want something, whether I am something, or if I’m too drunk to know what the fuck I want. You’ve only known me a month, though you have barely said ten words to me that weren’t related to work, but you’re a fucking expert on me, right?” He backed out the door, moving into the open area of the barn, his eyes never leaving Quinn’s. “I can see why an arrogant fuck like you doesn’t let anyone get close. At least I have the balls to try to know people without judgment.” He pushed his tangled hair back out of his face, throwing it over his shoulder, laughing without humor. “Funny thing is, no matter what I do, I get judged.” Lorcan spun and fled from the barn.

Quinn had to hold onto the gate to keep himself from running after him. He doubted the man wanted to hear anything he had to say at the moment. The whiskey was talking for him. Quinn wished he could think of something to say to make this better. If he had just kept his fool mouth shut, he’d have Lorcan wrapped in his arms right now instead of standing here feeling like the biggest piece of horseshit. Still, he knew if he’d let things go beyond a kiss, he’d feel like an even bigger pile come morning.

Everything he’d done since he had hired Lorcan had been the wrong thing. Why should he be surprised that today wasn’t any different? The only thing he could hope for at this point was that he’d be able to keep Lorcan on the ranch until he was sobered up enough to listen to reason. Not that he deserved the man to forgive him, but as he made his way back to the house, he prayed like hell that the stubborn shit would.

Sitting alone at his kitchen table, working on his second pot of coffee for the day, Quinn strained to listen for any sounds coming from the hallway beyond. It had been a good five hours

since Lorcan had stormed out of the barn, locking himself in his room. He'd been relieved when the undeniable sounds of snoring had come from the room beyond as he stood outside Lorcan's room, trying to gather up enough courage to knock. He was thankful that Lorcan hadn't grabbed his bag and hightailed it off the ranch. Quinn could only sit, waiting until he got the chance to try and make things right.

Conner had made them all supper, but Quinn hadn't been able to do anything more than push his food around on his plate, not even daring to take a bite with as knotted up as his gut was. Both Conner and John had tried to make him feel better. They had assured him that once Lorcan woke up he'd get his chance, but Quinn couldn't help but think that even if he did, he'd still somehow fuck it up and say all the wrong things.

He had certainly fucked up everything with Hound. Letting his lust for him get out of control until he'd given in and let Hound suck him off in the loft after they had had one too many. Quinn hadn't been able to control his anger the next morning when Hound had looked at him with disgust for what they had done, what he had allowed Hound to do. Instead of trying to understand what Hound was going through, he'd taken his hurt and slung it back at the man with a vengeance. They had both come out of the resulting battle with scars, some visible on the flesh, others deeper, ones that couldn't be healed. He'd let his stupid pride and his uncontrolled lust destroy the best friendship he'd ever had. He'd promised himself he would never let anything like that happen again. Quinn found it ironic that once again, his lust was destroying a possibly great friendship before it ever got a chance to begin.

The sound of a doorknob rattling brought Quinn to his feet, and he headed toward the hall. He knew it was Lorcan, since John and Conner had headed into town to give him and Lorcan some privacy. He made it to the hall just as Lorcan stepped out of his room, but his gut fell when he noticed the old duffel bag slung over one shoulder, though it shouldn't have surprised him. He knew that

Lorcan would run without saying a word if he got the chance, but he'd be damned if he would let him.

"I know you plan on leaving, but can we at least talk before you go?"

Lorcan visibly stiffened, looking unsure and ready to bolt at any provocation. He kept his eyes averted as he spoke. "Last time we talked didn't work out so good. Let's just leave it as it is, and I'll be on my way."

Jesus, the man was stubborn, but Quinn knew a thing or two about stubborn himself. "Hear me out, and if you still wanna leave, then I'll step aside and let you go."

Lorcan's head snapped up. "Let me? You've got some nerve. Just get the fuck out of my way. I got a bus to catch."

Quinn took a step forward. "I'm not moving, and you're not leaving 'til you hear me out, so we can do this the hard way or the easy way." He was going to get his say, dammit. If the man still wanted to run, then there wasn't much he could do about that, but it wouldn't be because he thought that Quinn didn't want him.

Lorcan moved a step forward, only ten feet separating them. For Quinn, it was ten feet too many. He took another step in Lorcan's direction. "You gonna make me hold you down and force you to listen?"

Lorcan took another step, his gaze intense. "You're more than welcome to fucking try."

Quinn moved closer. "Oh, I'll more than try. You didn't give me a chance to explain before you stormed off, and I aim to get my chance now."

Lorcan puffed up his chest, taking another step. Quinn had to give the kid credit. Even though Quinn had two inches on him and a good seventy pounds, he didn't back down in the slightest. *God, what would it be like to have all that intensity and confidence beneath me?*

He let his gaze wander down, taking in the cocky stance and the way Lorcan's lean muscles flexed as he shifted from foot to foot. Quinn's body heated as his gaze took in the lean hips, the

way the jeans hung low on them. He wanted more than anything to reach out and touch the slight bulge in those loose jeans. To feel the heat of it as it swelled in his hand. Every cell in his body was on edge. His blood surged through his body like liquid fire as his arousal reached a fevered peak. He'd fought hard, but he knew he couldn't control his libido around Lorcan any longer. He had to have him. Now.

When he lifted his eyes back to Lorcan's face, the man curled the corners of his mouth into an ugly sneer, as if he'd been reading Quinn's mind. "You had your fucking chance. Now move your ass before I move it for you."

Barely six feet separated them, and Quinn could practically feel the heat radiating out of Lorcan's vibrating body. Quinn took another step.

The twitch in Lorcan's eyes was enough of a warning for Quinn to realize the man had made a decision to pounce, enough of a warning that he was able to take advantage of the delay. Within a heartbeat Quinn had the man pinned face first against the wall, arms stretched above his head in Quinn's tight grip, his duffel making a loud thud as it hit the floor.

Lorcan struggled, hissing, "Get your fucking hands off me."

Quinn leaned in. Lorcan was no match for his larger body as it pressed him into the wall. His lips were only a hair's breadth away from Lorcan's ear. "Shall I tell you now that I only just found out today that you offered to buy me dinner and a beer?"

"Bullshit! Let me go," Lorcan said as he tried to twist his lower body away from the wall.

Quinn forced his knee between Lorcan's legs, his straining arousal pushing hard against the zipper of his jeans in a painful kiss to his flesh. "Do you know why I didn't hear you?"

Lorcan didn't respond, but his struggling eased. Quinn spoke against the sensitive skin just below his ear. "When you walked out with only a towel around your wet body, my only focus was the way the water slid down this beautiful body. My only thought was how badly I wanted to trace each path of those droplets with my

tongue.” He pushed in a little closer. “This hair...” He buried his nose at the nape of Lorcan’s neck, inhaling deeply, taking in the intoxicating scent of sweat and musk over the hint of wood spice shampoo. “This hair was free of its tight braid, flowing down your gorgeous body, wet and dripping. Do you know what I was imagining?”

When Lorcan didn’t respond, Quinn ground his hips against the firm swell of Lorcan’s tight ass, letting him feel his arousal until a small groan was heard, rising from deep within Lorcan’s chest.

“I imagined what all that hair would feel like under my hands as I stroked down your back. The way the silk of it would rub against the palms of my hands as I squeezed your ass.” His mouth returned to the side of Lorcan’s neck, feeling the rapid pulse race under the thin skin. He wanted to suck that skin into his mouth, feel it against his tongue, to mark the man. Instead, he licked slowly up the large vein with the flat of his tongue, feeling the pulse quicken further.

“Do you know why I keep my distance? Why I seem to frown at you all the time?” He let his lips and his words brush against Lorcan’s flushed skin.

Lorcan responded in a breathless whisper, his voice strained with his own growing arousal. “No.”

Quinn rocked his hips harder, spreading Lorcan’s legs wider until he could nestle his body between Lorcan’s thighs. Quinn’s body gave a shiver, and he moaned as his erection rubbed against the seam of Lorcan’s jeans between the firm globes of his ass. Quinn was breathless when he whispered into Lorcan’s skin, “I have to fight the urge to throw myself to my knees at your feet and beg to touch you.”

He thrust harder against the smaller man for emphasis of his next words. “Do you feel what you do to me? Do you feel how badly I want you?” He licked down Lorcan’s throat as his hips ground harder and harder. “Let me touch you, Lorcan. Let me feel how much you want me too.”

Lorcan began to tremble against him, his breath coming in short pants. He didn't respond, but he didn't try to pull away either as Quinn released his wrists and trailed his fingers down the arms he had held captive, giving Quinn the courage to continue. He pulled his hips back just enough to reach between Lorcan's body and the wall.

Lorcan stiffened as Quinn's fingers reached for the button of his jeans, but he pushed into the touch. He folded his arms against the wall, resting his cheek against them.

With nimble fingers, Quinn released the button of Lorcan's jeans and eased down the zipper. The rock-hard cock practically leaped into his hand, seeking attention. As his fingers brushed against the silky skin over hard steel, they moaned in unison at the contact. Quinn's fingers continued feather-soft touches as he spoke, never taking his eyes from Lorcan's.

"You're trembling. Are you afraid?"

Lorcan shook his head slightly from side to side but kept their gazes locked, showing all the want, need, and lust he was feeling.

Quinn wrapped his fingers lightly around Lorcan's cock, stroking slowly up and down from base to crown, feeling it twitch and pulse under his fingers. "You should be afraid. I want to own you, Lorcan. I want to possess you like I've never wanted to possess anyone before." His fingers tightened, his movements speeding up. "I want you beneath me, on your knees at my feet. I want to dominate and master all this beauty."

Lorcan's body shook harder, his cock leaking a steady stream that made the movement of Quinn's hand glide with ease against the heated skin.

"Please...." Lorcan moaned as his ass pushed back against Quinn's painful erection, then tried to push forward in the limited space to get more friction against his dick.

"Please what? Tell me what you want." In this moment he would give the man anything he wanted. He'd give him his soul for just one taste of the man's parted lips. "Tell me," he whispered

as he leaned in closer to Lorcan's mouth, keeping his eyes focused on the glazed eyes before him.

Lorcan's mouth opened and closed a few times, but no sound came out. Quinn flicked his tongue out, letting the tip wet Lorcan's dry lips. His hand slowed its pace while tightening further on Lorcan's throbbing prick.

Lorcan gasped, then whispered in a deep, sensual moan, "Anything, just don't stop. God, please, don't stop." Once the words began to tumble out of his mouth, he didn't seem to be able to stop the flow, and he begged for more of what Quinn was giving him.

Lorcan's total submission to the pleasure pulled something loose in Quinn's chest. The deep, possessive need to mark him felt so overwhelming, it was terrifying. He struggled to hold on to the last of his control. He wanted nothing more than to rip the jeans away and thrust himself deep inside Lorcan's body, marking him inside while he marked him as thoroughly on the outside. He wanted to leave his mark on every inch of his body, inside and out, wanted to hear Lorcan scream his name, watch him submit to his every desire. But as much as he wanted that and so much more, his desire not to hurt Lorcan was even greater.

Quinn fought the need to bury himself in Lorcan and fuck him until he only knew Quinn. He spun Lorcan around and dropped to his knees at the same instant. Lorcan cried out as Quinn took the man's long, slender prick into his mouth to the hilt. The flavor of Lorcan overwhelmed his taste buds. The pearl of cum at the tip was bitter and salty but still more delicious than anything he'd ever tasted. He pulled back, his tongue teasing the slit as he hungrily searched out more of Lorcan's flavor.

Lorcan murmured constant moans and whimpers. His hands fisted in Quinn's hair, holding him firm as his hips snapped forward with each of Quinn's groans. Quinn opened up to him, letting the man fuck his face with abandon. He relaxed his aching jaw and swallowed Lorcan's cock deep. As his throat closed around the head of Lorcan's prick, Lorcan's body arched away

from the wall and his hands tightened painfully in Quinn's hair, sending sparks along his skull. The cock in his mouth swelled even further for an instant before exploding. Lorcan screamed long and hard as the first blast of cum began to flow down Quinn's throat. Quinn pulled back slightly, wanting to taste every drop of this exquisite creature. He continued to lave and lick through each shudder of aftershock, licking Lorcan's prick clean, unwilling to miss a single drop, until Lorcan began to soften in his mouth. Quinn then rose to his feet, keeping their bodies tightly together as he moved up, ignoring his own erection. When he reached Lorcan's eyes, the man was staring at him with a glazed look, one of awe, wonder, and satisfaction, in his deep brown eyes.

He leaned in, gently kissing Lorcan before whispering, "Are you okay?"

Lorcan looked at him, blinking a couple of times before his eyes focused. He wrapped his arms around Quinn's neck and took him in a bruising kiss. Quinn opened wide, letting the man take the kiss where he needed to. He shared Lorcan's flavor with him, their tongues sliding against each other, until their mingled flavors became one and the same.

Quinn pulled away from the kiss, breathless, laying his forehead against Lorcan's as he tried to catch his breath. He fought to control the way his body was tightening, begging for release. He tried to ignore the fact that his entire being had suddenly become one excruciating need for release.

Lorcan cupped his face in his hands and spoke softly. "Take me to bed."

It was Quinn's turn to blink and stare. He wanted nothing more than to throw Lorcan on his bed and fuck him into the mattress, but in his current state of need, he knew he couldn't be easy or gentle. He wouldn't hurt Lorcan for anything.

Lorcan's cock began to fill again against his stomach, and his eyes began to darken until the pupils ate up the brown of his eyes and he became the aggressor. He pushed Quinn backward towards Quinn's room, placing hard kisses on his face. "I want you to show

me how much you want me.”

Quinn could so do that. He didn't have to fuck the man to show him how much he wanted him. He grabbed Lorcan's hand and rushed them to his bed. He pushed Lorcan down on the mattress, covering the slender, beautiful body with his own. Hands and fingers hurriedly began pulling and tugging at clothes. Lorcan let out a frustrated growl when he couldn't get Quinn's pants pushed down his hips. Quinn rolled slightly with a chuckle, pushing his own jeans and boxers down and off his feet. He took a moment to let his eyes wander along every inch of Lorcan's body. His breath hitched as he took in the sight of perfect olive skin and lean muscles that were trembling slightly. His mouth watered as he took in the sight of Lorcan's hard, slender cock pushing up toward his tight belly, a small pearl of seed at the tip.

“My God, Lorcan, I have never seen anything so fucking beautiful.”

Lorcan's skin flushed at the compliment as he eased his body back down. Quinn took Lorcan's mouth in a deep, punishing kiss. They both cried out into the other's mouth as their hard cocks came into contact.

Quinn pressed down against Lorcan. Every inch of skin from shoulder to toes was firmly against that of the man beneath him. Lorcan couldn't form words with the way Quinn was devouring his mouth, but the constant flow of moans and whimpers Quinn pulled into his own mouth was like a fine wine that vibrated and danced across his tongue.

As Quinn began to rock his hips hard against Lorcan's, the friction of their cocks sliding together made the pleasure nearly too much to contain. It was Lorcan who finally broke the kiss, crying out as his hand grabbed Quinn's ass and he began to thrust his own hips upward to meet every downward thrust of Quinn's.

“Please... oh God, Quinn, please!” he sobbed between thrusts.

“Shh, I got you, babe.” He kept the pressure of his hips hard, but the slide of their cocks was made smoother by the now-

constant flow of pre-cum from both of them. “Just like this.”

Lorcan began to beg in earnest, submitting every part of himself to Quinn, and Quinn, in turn, soaked in every ounce of passion and need and want pouring off Lorcan’s skin. He propped his upper body up on his hands, one on each side of Lorcan’s face, increasing the pressure of his thrusts with the new change in position. Lorcan squeezed his eyes shut as he squirmed and convulsed beneath him.

Quinn was so close he didn’t think he could hold back much longer. His orgasm was already beginning to race down his spine. Everything about Lorcan made each touch, each breath that much more intense. Quinn wanted this pleasure that had been denied for so long to last. But it couldn’t. It was too powerful, and he was lost to it.

“Look at me, Lorcan. I don’t ever want you to doubt how much I want you.”

Lorcan’s lids lifted, but his eyes were nearly rolled back in his head. He tried to focus on Quinn and failed.

“Lorcan,” Quinn snapped with as much dominance as he could muster.

Lorcan froze, his eyes going wide as he finally looked at him. His eyes were focused now. The way Lorcan responded to his command had Quinn’s own eyes nearly rolling back in his head.

He eased one hand between them, wrapping his fingers around both their pricks, and began to pull hard and rough. “Right here, Lorcan. Look at me, focus on me, and see how much I want you.”

He could feel the pulsing of blood through Lorcan’s cock, knew the man was struggling to hold back his orgasm, but he wanted Lorcan to take his pleasure into his own, making Lorcan’s orgasm that much more powerful. He thrust one last time and, through gritted teeth, bit out, “You do this to me.” He erupted, the pleasure finally exploding out of every pore of his body. Quinn jerked hard, his seed pouring out in long pulses, covering his hand and Lorcan’s stomach.

Lorcan did as he was told, his eyes never leaving those above him through Quinn's orgasm. Each aftershock, every thrust pulled more of his seed from his body. When, finally, his muscles began to ease, he looked down at Lorcan with a sly smile.

"Good boy," he said as he pulled hard one last time.

With those words Lorcan screamed, his body going wire-tight. He arched off the bed as he shot hard. Lorcan's spunk landed on his own chest and neck as he cried with each roll of orgasm working its way through his body. Quinn held him tight, feeling the convulsions slow in their intensity until Lorcan flopped back, his body boneless as he melted into the mattress beneath Quinn.

Quinn could do nothing but stare at the beautiful face beneath him. Dark, thick lashes were long against Lorcan's flushed cheeks. A satisfied, lazy smile curled his kiss-swollen lips. Quinn's chest tightened. He couldn't take a breath for being so affected by the devastating beauty beneath him. The only thing Quinn could do was wrap himself tightly around Lorcan and pray like hell that he could somehow be worthy of it.

CHAPTER TEN

The first clue that Lorcan wasn't alone in his own bed was the soft sound of someone snoring next to him. The second was the warm body pressed against his back with a heavy leg thrown over his. Lorcan lay in the silent room watching the walls dance. They appeared to have come alive and were swaying to some melody that wasn't audible to the human ear. Everything seemed surreal, from the way his body fit perfectly against Quinn's as if they had been two missing pieces of a puzzle to the dreamlike quality of the room. The acrid smell burning his nose was the only thing that took away from the perfection of the dream. Somewhere deep in the subconscious part of his mind, a voice screamed at him that something wasn't right. It was a feeling he tried to ignore. Lorcan didn't want to leave the perfect heat of Quinn's body. The longer he lay there watching the dancing walls, the louder and more insistent the voice got until he couldn't ignore it any longer.

He tried slipping out from Quinn's tight embrace, but the man only grumbled and pulled him closer. "Quinn, wake up. Something's not right."

Quinn pulled him closer and grumbled, "I got ya."

Lorcan's heart rate started to quicken, and panic began to wash over him. *This isn't right. Something is wrong.* He struggled harder against Quinn's hold. "Quinn, wake up!" He finally managed to pull free from Quinn, instantly looking for his discarded jeans.

Quinn sat up abruptly, wild eyes scanning the room. “What... what’s wrong?”

Lorcan made his way to the window and screamed. “Fire!” The far end of the barn was engulfed in flames. “The fucking barn’s on fire.” He jumped into his jeans and grabbed his shirt as he raced out the door behind Quinn, who was hopping into his own jeans.

“Call 911 and meet me at the barn! We gotta save the horses!” Quinn yelled as he raced through the house.

Lorcan was one step ahead, grabbing the cordless phone off its cradle and dialing as they ran out the back door. By the time they reached the far end of the barn, he had the fire department en route.

“They’re on their way,” he called out as Quinn threw open the double doors.

Thick smoke poured from the doorway, making it nearly impossible to see. “I’m going to open the stalls and send the horses your way. Make sure this door stays open.”

Before Lorcan could protest, Quinn disappeared into the thick black smoke. It was only seconds before the first horse came at him, snorting and kicking. He was lucky enough to get behind him, shooing the excited horse toward the door. The smoke was already making it difficult to catch a breath. He could do little more than wave his arms and cough. After a few minutes, Lorcan thought he had counted five horses pass. That left... one more? He couldn’t be sure. His brain was having a difficult time focusing on anything other than the demand that Lorcan get the hell out of the barn, now. He ignored it, pulling his shirt back off and wrapping it around his face. It helped slightly but did nothing to improve his vision or stop the moisture pouring from his eyes.

Where the hell is Quinn? Lorcan took a couple steps further into the barn and strained to hear anything other than the roar of the fire, but it was too loud to hear anything over it. It had only been a couple of minutes since they’d entered the barn, hadn’t it? Any second, Quinn would appear with the last horse, and

everything would be fine. His body ignored the idea of waiting, his feet moving forward.

“Quinn!” he screamed, but he only heard the scream in his head. The sounds of the fire were too loud to be heard over.

Lorcan made his way further in the direction he hoped would lead to Quinn, but he couldn’t be sure. The smoke was burning his lungs. The shirt was not enough of a barrier to keep it out. He took a few more steps forward. There was no way he was leaving without Quinn. As he took another step, he nearly fell over a lump on the barn floor. He leaned down, reaching out and coming into contact with an arm laid across a still body. *Thank God.*

“Quinn! We gotta get out of here!” he yelled, though he doubted he could be heard.

Quinn didn’t stir beneath his hands, so he got a good hold on his shoulders and began pulling him back in the same direction he’d come. At least, he hoped he was going in that direction. His eyes were now swelling shut, his lungs screaming at him with the need for oxygen, but he ignored the pain and kept pulling. There was no way he was stopping. They were gonna make it out of this damn place. He’d just spent the most incredible night of his life with this man. He’d be damned if he’d let anything take him away now.

Lorcan thought he felt something cool at his back, but it barely registered over the searing pain of his lungs and eyes. His breathing was nearly nonexistent; it was more one continuous cough. He felt his oxygen-deprived muscles begin to knot and weaken, but Lorcan kept pulling. Black dots began to form behind his swollen eyes, and his legs felt as if he were walking through quicksand, yet he kept pulling.

Blackness began to take him. There was no more pain, no more need to breathe. He was unable to feel his body anymore, but he fought the blackness. He needed to keep pulling. He screamed, “*No!*” as the blackness overpowered him, but it didn’t listen. It simply took him.

“What part of ‘let me up’ didn’t you fucking get?” He was going to bust some goddamn heads if someone didn’t start listening to him. “I need to see Lorcan, *goddammit*.”

“Mr. Taylor, please calm down! You’ll hurt yourself.”

The little nurse playing with the machines that were attached to him was smarter than she looked. She stayed just out of his reach. At this point, he wasn’t beyond taking fucking hostages. “I told you to either let me up or get the fuck out!”

“Mr. Taylor, that’s enough,” an authoritative voice sounded as a man dressed in scrubs covered by a white coat came in. “Sara is only trying to do her job and help you.”

“I don’t need any help, other than for you to untie my fucking hands.” Jesus, for people with degrees in medicine, they were a bunch of fucking idiots. He needed to get up. Needed to find out what the hell had happened to Lorcan. The last thing he remembered before waking up tied to a bed was being in the barn, thinking he had to get to Lorcan and get out. He struggled harder against the restraints. “Fucking let me loose. I need to find Lorcan.”

“Mr. Taylor, I’m Dr. Boboc,” the man said as he stepped closer to the bed. “If you’ll calm down and allow me to listen to your lungs, I’ll tell you how your friend is doing. Deal?”

Quinn glared at the man but finally nodded. His voice was too raw and too weak to maintain anything that sounded close to pissed off anyway. His lungs felt as if he’d swallowed hot coals.

Dr. Boboc took the stethoscope from around his neck and placed one end against Quinn’s chest while the earpieces went in his ears. “If you’ll take a deep breath, please.”

God, that hurts.

He moved the chestpiece. “Again.”

Quinn grudgingly complied. It hurt like hell, but it was a small price to pay to find out something about Lorcan.

Dr. Boboc rose up, returning the stethoscope to his neck. “Your lungs are sounding a little better. You’re a very lucky man.”

He didn’t give a damn about himself. “Can I see Lorcan now?”

“Mr. James had to be sedated. He’s resting comfortably. You two are quite the pair, but I’ll admit he was nowhere near as vocal as you.”

“What happened?”

“I don’t have all the details, but from what I understand, the paramedic found the two of you lying in the yard between the barn and house. It appears your friend pulled you from the barn.”

Lorcan had saved him? His gut twisted painfully. He could feel the bile begin to rise in his raw throat at the sickening thought that Lorcan could have been killed. He was going to paddle that stubborn ass but good when he saw him. How dare he endanger himself like that? Well, he’d paddle him after he thanked him proper, but then that ass was his. “When can I see him?”

“We extubated him this morning. When he became so agitated we feared he would hurt himself, we had to sedate him. I expect that it won’t be until much later this evening before he wakes up.”

Rancher here. Talk fucking English. “Exto-what?”

Dr. Boboc picked up a chart, scrawling a few things before continuing. “It means we removed the mechanical breathing machine from him. We had hoped he’d be ready to come off the machine like you did yesterday, but he needed a little more time to recover. His lungs were damaged quite severely, but I don’t expect there to be any permanent damage for either of you.”

He was extubated yesterday? How long have we been here?

“What day is it?” he finally asked, trying to get an understanding of what had happened and what was going on.

Dr. Boboc flipped through the chart. “What you mean to ask is how long have you been here. My colleague was on call when they brought you in.” He flipped a few more pages “Ah yes, here it is. You were brought in Thursday morning. It’s now Tuesday, so

five days.”

Five days? What the hell has been going on? Shit, poor Conner and John couldn't keep up with the daily routine of the ranch. Jesus, his animals were probably starving to death. Quinn began pulling at the restraints. “I gotta get out of here! You don't understand! I have a ranch to run and no one to do it for me. I have critters to feed.”

“I spoke with your family this morning. They asked me to inform you that the ranch is in good hands. They will be up later tonight to see you, so please stop worrying. Try to get some rest. The sooner you heal, the sooner you'll be out of here.”

Quinn gritted his teeth. “Fine, just untie me, and I'll behave.”

Dr. Boboc laughed, a deep chuckle that would normally have been a good laugh, but it pissed Quinn off. “How about you get some rest and let Mrs. Glasco here do her job? If you're a good boy after lunch, we'll untie you.”

Good boy? Jesus! Is this fucking kindergarten? “Not like I have a choice, is there?”

“Nope. I'll be back later today. You do everything Nurse Glasco tells you, and you might be out of here in the next day or so.” He handed the chart to the nurse as he walked to the door. “I need to check on Mr. James. If he's awake, I'll tell him you're asking about him. We'll try and get you up soon so you can see him for yourself.”

Quinn laid his head back on the pillow, staring at the ceiling until both the nurse and the doctor left the room. He doubted he'd get any rest. He was too pissed off, too worried, and he wouldn't be okay until they let him see for himself that Lorcan was truly okay. Once he could do that, he was going to find a paddle, and then everything would be put to rights.

It took begging, pleading, and threats of sheer anarchy before

Dr. Boboc gave in and allowed Quinn to see Lorcan. As he pushed open the door to Lorcan's room, Quinn felt his chest tighten. Tears stung at the back of his eyes.

"Jesus, you're a sight for sore eyes. I thought I was going to have to tear this place apart in order to get to you."

Lorcan didn't stir, didn't open his eyes, and didn't tell him to behave. The slow rise and fall of his chest and the steady beat from the heart monitor were the only things that assured Quinn that Lorcan was alive.

He moved to the side of the bed and reached out to take Lorcan's pale hand, sighing with relief at the warmth of it against his own.

"You scared me. God, what were you thinking, running into a fire like that? Don't you know you could have died?"

Quinn's chest constricted so tightly at the thought of almost losing Lorcan that he couldn't breathe. He fought against the tears that filled his eyes, which threatened to spill over and run down his face. He wouldn't cry, dammit! Lorcan was here. They both were. He had no reason to cry. Except he didn't remember ever being so angry or so fucking scared in his life as when he had woken up in the hospital and been unable to find Lorcan. He hooked the chair with his foot, bringing it over and sitting down next to the bed. He took Lorcan's lax hand in both of his and lowered his head, letting his lips brush against the warm skin. He was thankful he was alive, that they both were, but he couldn't get over the pain in his heart at what could have happened. What had almost happened.

Quinn had never been much of a praying man. He figured God didn't have much use for him, but he prayed now. He offered God every last breath in his body if he'd please just make Lorcan wake up and be okay. He didn't have shit to offer—his last breath probably didn't mean much—but he would willingly give it for Lorcan.

"Please, baby, please be okay," he whispered as he clung to Lorcan's hand.

Quinn didn't know how long he had been sitting there. He

hadn't even noticed feeling tired, but he must have dozed off, because the sensation of fingers in his hair startled him awake. He looked up right into Lorcan's warm brown eyes.

"Hey." It came out as more of a movement of Lorcan's lips than a real noise.

"Hey," he replied around the lump in his throat. "How you feeling?"

"Feels li..." Lorcan's voice was barely a groan, sounding painful.

"Shh! Don't try to talk, baby. Throat hurts like hell, huh?"

Lorcan nodded as Quinn reached over, bringing a glass of water to Lorcan's lips.

"Just sips. It's gonna hurt like a bitch to swallow, but trust me, it's worth it."

Lorcan raised his head, taking a couple of tentative sips, visibly wincing as he swallowed. "I was so scared."

"Shhh, told you no talking yet. You're going to be fine."

"Not for me," he whispered, looking at Quinn. Telling him with his eyes just how scared he was and whom he'd been scared for.

"I know, baby, I know." He eased Lorcan's head back to the pillow, letting his fingertips caress the dark silky hair at his temples.

And he did know. He knew what the knot felt like in your gut when you were so fucking scared it was like something had entered your body and was ripping your chest to shreds. He knew what real fear felt like. How it was overwhelming enough to drive someone to their knees and offer anything. He'd felt it right before the blackness took him in the barn. The feeling not easing until Lorcan finally opened his beautiful brown eyes today and looked at him.

He stared at Lorcan until his eyes fluttered shut, the muscles of his face going soft as he slipped back into slumber. Quinn felt the soft silk of Lorcan's hair, savored the heat of his skin beneath his palm. For the first time in what felt like forever, the fear began

to finally ease.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Certain things bring a smile to a face. Others make that smile nearly crack your face wide open with delight. Hearing “you’re being discharged” after a week in the hospital was one of those face-crackers for sure. Finally getting out of the Mash Ward, as Lorcan not-so-lovingly referred to it, having nothing to do with the old TV show and a whole lot to do with the food they served, was right up there high on his list of greatest all-time events in his life. Sadly, with everything good, there had to be something shitty to go along with it. Someone’s bright idea of balancing the cosmos or some bullshit. Lorcan’s shitty was the fact that Quinn had forgotten his clothes, and he was now trying to keep his ass covered while riding in the other shitty part, a wheelchair that the staff had insisted was hospital policy.

“As fond as I am of your pout, knock it off until we get in the truck. You’re scaring the poor bastards that aren’t getting sprung today.”

Lorcan was able to keep from sticking out his tongue, but just barely. Instead, he settled on rolling his eyes. “Why the hell am I in this damn chair with my ass hanging out, and you’re getting to push me fully dressed? You were here just as long as I was.”

“First of all, your ass is not hanging out.” Quinn leaned down closer, whispering, “Trust me, I would have noticed.”

“Then why is my ass getting smacked by cold air then, hmm?”

“Not the only thing gonna be smacking your ass,” Quinn said before straightening up. “Secondly, I was discharged yesterday. I had the pleasure of enduring the policy, so just shut up and enjoy the ride.”

“Just like you did, I’m sure,” he mumbled, more to himself than to Quinn.

Okay, so he had to admit that the shitty was definitely worth the good. He was heading back to the ranch with only a few minor complaints—sore throat, shortness of breath, and feeling weak. All in all, not bad considering what the outcome could have been. He refused to think too hard on that. Quinn was safe, he was safe, and they were both going to be fine. He wouldn’t admit it to Quinn, didn’t want the man to worry or, worse, look at him like he was some kind of pansy, but sometimes he was still scared.

The panic attacks were easy enough to deal with, to cover up, since they were brought on when Quinn wasn’t in his room. They were brought on when he couldn’t lay his eyes on the man to reassure himself that he really was okay. That he’d gotten Quinn out of that barn. The nightmares were a hell of a lot harder to deal with, since he had no control over them, couldn’t hide them. He’d woken that morning screaming, tears rolling down his face, to find Quinn with his arms wrapped around him, soothing him with caresses and soft words.

The acrid smell of burning hay and wood, the roar of the fire pounding in his ears, the heat, the unbearable heat as it scorched his lungs, had all felt so real. It hadn’t been any of the physical pains that had made him cry out. It wasn’t the way his muscles strained or the painful pounding of his heart as he pulled Quinn from the barn, but the agony of grief when, just as he pulled Quinn safely into the yard, his body had turned to ash. The wind had then whipped out from the barn, swirling the ashes into the air like a mist around Lorcan, before it all sucked back into the barn and disappeared. He tried to fight his way back in, the fire dancing around him, mocking him. He could hear its wicked laughter as it licked his skin with a searing touch.

Stop it! It was just a dream! He could feel the panic beginning to bubble up to the surface, the tears building at the back of his eyes, and he forced it all away. Quinn was here, pushing him in the shitty wheelchair, he was wearing the shitty gown, and they were going home. He took a deep breath and schooled his features as they made it to the front door and freedom.

“Let me lock the chair before—”

Lorcan didn’t wait for Quinn to finish his sentence or lock the damn chair before he was up and out of it, reaching for the door of the truck. One hand grabbed the door handle. The other stayed behind him to keep the thin material gathered at his ass.

“You stubborn shit,” Quinn huffed as he pushed the chair out of the way, holding onto the truck door as Lorcan got himself settled in the seat. “I can see I’m going to have to resort to drastic measures to get you to comply with the doctors’ rules of taking it easy for a week or so.”

“And what is that?” Lorcan asked with a wry smile. “Tie me to the bed?” He was only joking, partly, maybe hoping.

Quinn waited until he had himself behind the wheel, the truck moving out of the parking lot, before answering. “Nope. Knowing you, you would act out just so I would tie your ass to my bed.” Quinn gave him a heated look. It was obvious that he was imagining it as his eyes darkened, but he got control of it pretty quickly, his eyes clearing as he shook his head. “Nope, gonna give Conner a copy of your discharge instructions.”

“You wouldn’t dare!” Lorcan crossed his arms over his chest, letting his bottom lip push out in a pout.

Quinn glanced at him and groaned. “Turn your head.”

“What?”

“Look out your fucking window.”

Lorcan’s head snapped around, and he looked out, seeing nothing but buildings and trees, not even another car next to them. “I don’t see anything.”

“And neither do I. I’m giving Conner a copy of your instructions, and you’re going to keep that pout to yourself.”

Lorcan laughed at Quinn's frustrated tone as he settled himself back into the seat. It was a good thing to know that Quinn was powerless against his pout. Maybe he would get tied to Quinn's bed after all.

"Oh God, honey, get over here and let me get a good look at you."

Lorcan barely had time to get out of the truck and grab the back of his gown before Conner had him in his arms, squeezing him with surprising strength.

"Jesus, Conner," Lorcan hissed as the air was pushed out of his lungs. "Stop with the Wheaties for breakfast."

Conner giggled, squeezing his hand as he released the vise grip on Lorcan's sore lungs and pulled him toward the house.

"C'mon, I got lunch on the table. What the hell is wrong with those medical people? They can fix a broken body but can't seem to cook a decent meal. What's the point in healing anyone if you're just going to turn around and starve them to death?"

Lorcan just laughed and let the old man pull him into the kitchen, then push him into a chair. There was no point trying to talk to the man when he was on one of his rants. He was certainly gearing up for a doozy of one.

"Look at you, honey. You don't look like you've had a decent meal in a coon's age! And, Christ, where the hell are your clothes? Quinn, stop standing there like a lump on a log and go get the boy some pants and a shirt. God, it's a damn good thing you have me here. Wouldn't be able to find your way...."

Lorcan tuned the rest of what Conner was saying out. He only had to pretend to be listening, adding in the *uh huhs* and *yes sirs* every now and then when Conner took a breath. Right now he was too busy watching Quinn's fine jean-clad ass moving down the hall as it shook with his laughter.

Lorcan waited until Quinn disappeared into his room before turning back to the sights and smells of the warm kitchen. It stopped Lorcan short when it suddenly dawned on him that he was home. That he even thought of this place as home. He'd never imagined that he would ever think of anything other than his mama and daddy's place as his home. Yet the familiar scents, the sight of Conner heaping enough food to feed an army onto his plate—both sure as hell felt like home to him.

“...And another thing, don't you dare try and escape this house, you're on house arrest until further notice. I won't be taking any back talk, either. You're going to be a good boy. Rest and eat until I think you've gotten enough. Then I may just make you do it for another few days just for good measure.”

One of those face-breaking smiles burst out of him. He couldn't help but grab onto Conner's hand, squeezing until the man stopped his ranting and looked at him.

“Thanks, Conner. It looks delicious and I'm starved.”

Conner stared at him, his eyes softening. “I'm glad you're okay, honey. Good to have you home.”

“Glad to be home.”

He dug in, smiling like a fool. His chest was feeling all warm and gooey, maybe a little bit because of the way Conner was smiling at him as he turned to the stove, but mostly, after nearly dying, he smiled because he still could.

Dinner had been nice. Conner went all out, making most of Lorcan's favorites. He even treated them to fresh cinnamon bread for dessert, but Quinn couldn't remember much else. He'd been so focused on every move Lorcan had made that he hadn't really tasted anything. Nor had he heard a word of what John and Conner had said. He was just glad that dinner was over. He was happy as shit that the old farts were considerate enough to give them some

privacy and retired early to their room. Quinn now had him an armful of sleepy Lorcan as they snuggled on the couch with something on TV. Again, he didn't pay attention to anything but the way Lorcan breathed, the way he smelled, and the heat of his body against Quinn's own. How perfectly they fit together. The times when he could see and touch him were the only times the memories didn't assault him.

The scene of walking into Lorcan's hospital room that first time kept playing over and over in his mind on a continual loop. Lorcan had looked so pale, so vulnerable against the stark white of the room. The beeping from various machines had seemed too loud in the otherwise quiet room.

Even now as he held Lorcan, those feelings of helplessness assaulted him. God, he had come so close to losing him. Quinn wasn't sure where things were heading between them, but for the first time in his life, he'd met someone whom he would lay his life down to protect. Sure, he would do the same for Conner or John, but it was different with Lorcan. With John and Conner, it was the kind of love one had for their parents. With Lorcan, it felt like... he wasn't sure what it was like, since he'd never felt this way about anyone before. The feelings were both exhilarating and frightening.

Quinn loved the way his heart skipped a beat, how his breath hitched and a tingling sensation ran through him every time he looked at Lorcan. He loved the way he could feel Lorcan's laugh right in the pit of his soul. How a simple touch set off fireworks in his chest. Was that love? He wasn't sure. Wasn't sure he wanted to know, since with every good, there always seemed to be something bad to balance it. Quinn didn't know if he could handle the bad. He hated how helpless it made him feel. How scared he'd been when he hadn't been able to protect Lorcan. Feeling that it was his fault that Lorcan had been hurt in the first place. The authorities suspected Henderson had set the blaze or hired someone to set it, which didn't surprise him, but now his issues with Henderson had fallen down on Lorcan, nearly killing him. As amazing as it felt to

be with Lorcan, the idea of something going wrong had Quinn trying to shield his heart. Loving someone hurt. Hound had taught him that valuable lesson. Now he wasn't sure he could ever really love anyone. Did that make him a coward? Perhaps, but it didn't change how he felt.

Lorcan's soft snores snapped Quinn out of his morose thoughts. He looked down at Lorcan's beautiful face, knowing he had to let go of the pain. Lorcan was okay, he was in his arms, and Quinn didn't have to be afraid anymore. He didn't have to be, but he was. He pulled Lorcan tighter to him, easing his head back against the couch as he stared beyond the ceiling. "Thank you," he whispered. "Thank you for letting me stay with him."

Quinn held Lorcan until the sun began to set. He had chores to do, animals to settle for the night. He gently eased himself out from under Lorcan, covering him with a thick afghan and pressing a soft kiss to his brow. Quinn pulled on his boots and hat, making his way out the back door.

The sun was just barely visible over the horizon, casting a warm glow across the land. His land. The pride in that statement made his chest swell. Henderson hadn't won. It was still his land. His neighbors had come out to help him rebuild, and that made that pride grow even stronger. His community had rallied together when he needed them the most, and for that he was indebted to them. He wasn't sure how he would ever repay their kindness.

Stepping down off the porch, he looked up to see Henry Carrol's truck pulling up the drive. Henry and his wife Grace owned the local feed store. Quinn had been a customer since taking over the ranch. Hell, his daddy had been a customer since he could remember.

"Hey, Henry!" Quinn called out as he stepped up to the truck. "What brings you out here this late?"

Henry extended a hand, which Quinn readily accepted and shook. "Thought you might need some extra feed," he said as he gestured toward the back of the truck with his thumb. "Clint came in this afternoon to order some, but I was running low on the kind

you use. So I brought you some from my personal stock to tide you over until your order comes in day after tomorrow.”

“I appreciate that, Henry, but you didn’t need to come all this way. We’d have managed until the shipment came in.”

“Don’t have nothing to do with having to. You’re a part of this community. We take care of our own.”

The pride that Quinn had felt earlier grew until it was nearly bursting from his chest. He’d nearly given up on this land. He’d been so tired, so disheartened with the shit that had been going on with Henderson, that he’d nearly thrown it all away. He had to swallow around a lump that had formed in his throat before he could reply. “Thanks, Henry. I can’t tell you how much this means to me. To my family.”

“Think nothing of it.”

Quinn unloaded the truck as quickly as he could, placing the bags of feed on the ground near the barn. He’d put them away after Henry left. He didn’t want to over-extend the man’s generosity by making him wait too long. Once the truck was unloaded, he went back to the front of the vehicle and peered in at Henry, who had gotten back behind the wheel.

“That’s the last of it. Make sure you send me a bill for both the feed and the delivery charge.”

Henry waved it off with his hand. “No charge, Quinn. I’m sure you’d help me out if I needed it.”

“You can count on that. I really appreciate it.”

Henry stared at him for a moment, his eyes going serious. “I just want you to know I didn’t believe the shit Henderson was spouting off about you being queer. Grace and I were just talking about it the other day, saying how Henderson had reached an all-time low, even for him, when he started those rumors. You being a successful, respected rancher and all, he was just jealous, I think. Talking about you being perverted and unnatural was just his stupidity showing through.”

Quinn’s stomach rolled as if he’d just been sucker punched. Perverted and unnatural? Was that what Henry thought being gay

meant? If he told Henry that he was gay, would he still be willing to help him out? Would the community still want to help out a queer? Well, he wasn't about to find out. It was none of their business what he did in the privacy of his own bedroom. Quinn pushed the unease down, patting Henry on the shoulder. "Thanks again. Let me know if there is anything I can do to repay your kindness."

"Just glad I could help. Have a good night, Quinn." Henry pulled out, leaving Quinn alone in the drive, his thoughts racing.

Unnatural.

Perverved.

He needed the people of this town to stand behind him. He depended on them for many of the goods and services he required to run this ranch. What would he do if Henry refused to sell him feed? The next closest feed store was over fifty miles away, and he didn't have the time or the resources to be driving over to the next county just to pick up grain. What about the other ranchers that he depended on to purchase his bulls? Would they still buy from him if they knew he was gay? Not to mention that he needed help running this ranch. He needed people to look after the cattle, help get them to market, fix fences. Needed hands to cut and bale hay. He'd already proven to himself that he couldn't run this ranch alone. Even the help of John, Conner, and Lorcan wasn't enough. He needed these people. As much as he cared about Lorcan, he couldn't put his ranch at risk.

John and Conner depended on him. What would they do if he was selfish and only thought about his own needs? His own desires? They were too old to find jobs with another ranch. John could barely get out of bed some days, his back was so bad. Conner could possibly find a job cooking, but as out-and-proud as he was, would it make getting a job harder? Hell, it was hard enough for anyone in their sixties to get a job. Compound that with the prejudice against gays and he'd be lucky to find a job slinging burgers.

Looking out over his ranch, Quinn realized that it didn't

matter if they could get jobs or not. They shouldn't have to. This was their home, and he had to do whatever he could to make sure they kept their home. He felt sick to his core at the thought of giving up Lorcan. The thought of not having Lorcan made his entire body ache. Not just his heart, but his entire being. How the hell could he give him up?

"Fuck!" he yelled into the silent night. "I can't do this."

Quinn felt his knees weaken, an all-consuming grief threatening to overcome him. There had to be a way. He was so tired of being alone. He hadn't realized how lonely he was until Lorcan had come into his life. How the hell was he going to go back to the way he had been before Lorcan arrived? The thought of the occasional trips to Jackson and the endless nights of lying alone in his bed made him physically ill.

Making his way back to the house, his steps slow, his heart heavy, Quinn made a decision. He wouldn't give up Lorcan. There was no way he could. He'd somehow find a way to manage both. As long as he kept his distance from him during the day, he could share at least an occasional evening with the man who was quickly becoming so important to him. It wasn't a perfect solution, but for now it was the only one he had—the only *option* he had if he wanted to keep his ranch, the respect of his community, and Lorcan. Quinn just hoped that he didn't lose what little self-respect he still had in the process.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Quinn was busy with the investigation of the fire and dealing with the insurance company. John and Conner had stepped up with organizing all the people, food, and work. That left Lorcan with only a reduced amount of his normal daily chores and not much else to keep him busy. He was supposed to be healing, but he was bored. He needed to find something to occupy himself or he'd go plum stir crazy.

When word had gotten out that they had caught the arsonist and he'd given up Mr. Henderson as the man who had hired him, the hands that Henderson had stolen away from Quinn came flocking back. All but a few returning said they would rather work for nothing than work for a no-good son of a bitch like Henderson. People in the community understood how hard it was to work a ranch. They didn't take too kindly to the extreme measures that Henderson had used to shut one down. Lorcan was glad that things were working out for Quinn and his ranch, but he couldn't help but worry. He was worried that Quinn would continue to stay aloof to him in order to protect his ranch. Now that everyone was back to work, the community standing behind him, would he want people confirming he was gay? If the answer was no, then there was no way he would want someone who looked like Lorcan to stay around.

Lorcan perched himself on the top of the corral fence, watching as Quinn and his foreman, Clint, inspected the progress

on the barn. Quinn's excitement was infectious, as evidenced by the wide grin on Clint's face. Lorcan couldn't help but smile as well at the childlike awe on Quinn's face. He'd never seen the man so happy. A happiness that faded quickly as Quinn noticed Lorcan watching him and quickly averted his eyes. Lorcan knew from the look in Quinn's eyes before looking away that his fears were well-founded. Quinn didn't want anyone to know about them. Lorcan felt the sting of rejection like a physical slap. He had wanted to share the excitement with Quinn, wanted to be a part of the happiness he was experiencing, but Quinn wouldn't include him in it. Lorcan watched as Quinn steered Clint around the edge of the barn and out of sight without even a glance back.

Lorcan felt sick to his stomach, pain in his heart, and an unbelievable amount of rage. A deluge of so many emotions all at once left him feeling as if he were drowning. He wasn't sure if he wanted to puke, cry, or beat something to a bloody pulp.

"I'll admit one thing."

Lorcan looked up to see Jess Jenkins walking toward him. The big man walked straight for him with a knowing look on his face. He felt the stirrings of panic begin along with the grief, hurt, and anger. Had Jess been watching what had transpired between him and Quinn? Jesus, how many emotions could he handle at once before he ended up in a fucking padded room with a new jacket of his very own? Could one die from an overload of emotions?

"He is rather easy on the eyes," Jess continued as he took a seat next to Lorcan. "The way that man moves is sexy as hell."

"Who?" Lorcan played dumb even though he knew exactly whom Jess was talking about.

"The boss man. I'd have thought he was the sexiest man alive"—he looked at Lorcan and winked—"that is, until I laid eyes on you."

"Yeah, he's all right, I guess," Lorcan deadpanned as he shrugged. He didn't want Jess to see how Quinn affected him. The last thing he wanted to do was to make anyone suspicious.

“All right?” Jess laughed. “Please, I would love to have someone look at me like you do him. It would be even better if that someone was you.”

Was it really that obvious how he felt for Quinn? Fuck, no wonder Quinn didn’t want the other hands to see them together, if just by the look in Lorcan’s eyes, everyone could tell he had the hots for Quinn. As hurt and pissed off as he was, he still didn’t want to out a man who didn’t want to be outed. His feelings may have been hurt, but he wasn’t a complete bastard.

“You always this forward?” Lorcan asked, ready for a subject change.

“Yeah, pretty much.” Jess smiled. “I know what I like. I’ve been accused of going after something I want with a bit of tenacity from time to time.”

“Why do I get the feeling that it’s more like all the time?”

“What makes you think that?” Jess asked with a teasing grin.

Lorcan couldn’t help but return the smile Jess gave him. The guy was one of the only hands that had hired on with Quinn that went out of his way to talk to Lorcan. He got along fine with most of the townsfolk of Pegasus. Some looked at him differently, sometimes with the same old disdain he was used to, others more curiously, like he was some kind of complicated puzzle that they were having a difficult time solving. Either way, it bothered him. He wanted more than anything to be accepted, but he knew that wasn’t likely to happen, since Quinn couldn’t even seem to treat him like a friend when others were around. Jess, on the other hand, seemed to accept him just fine. He never looked at Lorcan like he was a freak. His obvious interest in him unsettled Lorcan a little, but he could admit that he kind of liked it too.

“Oh, I don’t know.” Lorcan gave a mock-sowl. “Maybe the way you professed your undying love for me when we met might have a wee bit to do with it.”

“I never said undying.” Jess’s teasing smile turned serious before he continued. “I do, however, believe in love at first sight.”

“And I believe in the tooth fairy,” Lorcan responded, not

willing to give too much thought to Jess's statement or the look in his eyes.

Jess must have felt Lorcan's unease, because he suddenly jumped down from the fence, the silly smile back on his face. "I gotta ride the western fence line. Wanna come with?"

Lorcan was grateful Jess wasn't going to push the issue. He looked over to where Quinn had disappeared around the barn. The idea of spending time with Jess was suddenly very appealing. "Yeah, I think I'd like that."

The cool sheets felt amazing against his shower-heated skin. After the emotional roller coaster he'd been riding all day, it felt like heaven to have a few minutes alone. He didn't want to think about what was happening between him and Quinn. He just wanted to spend a minute, catch his breath, and not think about anything at all. Well, maybe the way his soft bed felt damn good against his sore muscles. After being out of the saddle for a couple of weeks, he'd forgotten about some very important muscles, but they were reminding him now. Instead of worrying about how Quinn had made him feel earlier, he wanted to focus on how the rest of his day had turned out to be amazingly wonderful. Jess was just one of those people you couldn't help but like. He was outgoing, friendly, and always had a ready smile. Jess had been a welcome distraction. Lorcan couldn't remember laughing so much or having such a good time just hanging with someone in a long time. They hadn't done anything other than ride the fence line and chat, but to Lorcan, it had felt fantastic. It had also reminded him of what he was missing with Quinn.

Since he had come home from the hospital, he and Quinn had barely had five minutes alone together. Though he'd only spent one night in Quinn's arms—he didn't count the couch—he missed it terribly. It was like he'd never had a peaceful night sleep before

that one night with Quinn or since. Something about the way Quinn had wrapped his entire body around him in sleep had made him feel safe and cherished.

As angry as he was at Quinn for ignoring him lately, he tried not to place blame. He tried to understand how he would feel if he were in Quinn's shoes. With everyone showing up to help out, Quinn had the support of his community for the first time in a long while. They both needed time to heal, to regain their strength, but with the amount of people around.... He missed it being just the four of them, and dammit, he could still miss it if he felt like it, couldn't he? He could still dream about it, wish for it, right?

Though Lorcan hated the way Quinn stayed so aloof when others were around, he worked hard at trying to understand, to accept it, knowing how Quinn felt about flaunting his preferences, but he didn't have to like it. Quinn didn't scowl or frown at him as much since they'd been home. Every now and then, he would catch Quinn staring at him. His heart melted when those soft smiles curled Quinn's tempting mouth while no one else was around. The look in his eyes said volumes about Quinn wanting him. Patience had never been Lorcan's strong point, but as long as he kept getting those heated looks from Quinn, he could be patient a little longer.

People had to have labels, to put everyone in neat little categories so they could understand the world around them, but Lorcan didn't need to understand it all. He just knew what he wanted. He would have liked to think that Quinn would feel the same way, that what was growing between them was something real, something special. That it didn't have to be understood or accepted as long as they were happy. He was more than a little certain that Quinn didn't see it the same way he did. The way Quinn averted his eyes from Lorcan while others were around, the way he'd exclude Lorcan from casual conversations with others, made him pretty sure that they didn't see things the same way. Lorcan felt as if Quinn was putting a label on him, one that read, in bold letters, "Secret."

The sound of his bedroom door opening had him looking up to see Quinn standing inside the door, dressed in a soft T-shirt and faded jeans, his hair damp from a recent shower. The man looked like a walking, talking, breathing dream come true. Lorcan's heart was fluttering, all thoughts of understanding and patience gone in the blink of an eye.

His breath hitched at the sight before him, but he managed to say, "Hey."

"Hey, yourself," Quinn said as he stepped into the room and shut the door behind him, locking it. "Everyone has gone home for the night except John and Conner. They went to bed."

Lorcan's heart skipped a beat as Quinn stared at him, his eyes darkening with desire as he came further into the room. Quinn's gaze was like a kiss against his skin as he seemed to take in every inch of Lorcan's naked body, only a sheet covering his most private areas. Lorcan's hair was free from its tight braid and flowing out next to him, still damp from his own shower.

"Jesus, Lorcan! You're gorgeous."

Lorcan felt the familiar heat of embarrassment at the compliment. The way Quinn said it, his voice deep and full of lust, had something in Lorcan's stomach tightening, his cock going from half-mast to rock-hard instantly at the sensual sound. He could only stare as the man stalked toward him like a graceful predator. Lorcan's pulse quickened in anticipation of that first touch, his skin suddenly alive with desire.

Just as Quinn came to the side of the bed, he reached out a shaky hand, his knuckles just barely touching the skin on Lorcan's chest, but it was enough to elicit a soft sigh from Lorcan's lips.

"Do you know what I wanted to do the first time I heard that you nearly killed yourself trying to save me?" Quinn's fingers drew small circles around the skin just below Lorcan's pecs.

Lorcan could only stare, his voice escaping him. He often lost his ability to speak around Quinn; he could only respond with a shiver as Quinn stared down at him. The only thing he could do was shake his head no.

“I wanted to paddle your ass.” The softness of his voice took the sting out of his words as his fingers moved up until they circled around his left nipple in smaller and smaller circles.

Quinn pinched Lorcan’s nipple, rolling it between his fingers, making him arch his back and cry out. His cry turned into a moan as Quinn bent and licked his abused flesh, replacing the sting with soothing strokes of his tongue. His other hand found Lorcan’s other nipple, rolling and pulling it until the tight nub throbbed.

Quinn spoke against his skin as he continued to suck and nibble at him. “I still want to paddle that gorgeous ass of yours.” He let the nail of his finger scrape across the sensitive flesh, causing Lorcan to cry out again before he continued. “But first I want to lick every inch of your skin.” He leaned his head over further and soothed the aching nipple with his tongue and warm lips.

Lorcan was so caught up between the dual sensations of pleasure and pain that his body began to move of its own accord. Hips rocked in small, disjointed movements, causing the sheet to brush across his cock, the feel of cotton almost too coarse against his over-stimulated skin.

As Quinn began licking his way down Lorcan’s chest, the younger man’s body bowed off the bed, and he gripped Quinn’s damp hair to pull him closer.

Quinn instantly pulled back and looked at him with a grin that could only be called evil, his eyes nearly black with desire. “Bad boy! No touching until I tell you.”

No touching? Was he fucking crazy? Quinn was driving him to madness with his tongue. How could he not touch? He stared at him with a questioning look.

Quinn’s head bowed again, and he ran his tongue from Lorcan’s breastbone to his navel before looking back up. “I promise, I will make it worth your while.”

Now this Lorcan had no doubt about, but he still didn’t think he could keep his hands off Quinn. His whole body screamed to feel the man against him. “I don’t... I don’t think I can *not* touch,”

he said breathlessly.

Quinn gave him that same grin. “Try, or I will have to tie your hands.”

A shiver ran from his toes to the top of his head. He’d never thought much about being at someone’s mercy before, but the image of being tied to the bed for Quinn excited the hell out of him. It had been steady on his mind since Quinn had threatened it at the hospital.

“You like that idea, don’t you, baby?” Quinn’s tongue darted out again, licking around his navel. “I might have to just do that sometime, since you seem to like it so much it’s making you tremble.”

Lorcan fisted his hands in the sheets with a death grip. As much as the idea of Quinn tying him down had him hard enough to hammer nails, he wanted to please Quinn. That thought unnerved him a little, but it was true. He would do anything to please Quinn. Anything. “Quinn, please.”

“Good boy,” Quinn replied as he eased up onto the bed to kneel next to Lorcan, lowering the sheet around his waist.

Lorcan felt a little vulnerable being naked and exposed with Quinn fully dressed, but it also made him hot as hell. Being the focus of this man was like a drug. The more he had it, the more he wanted it. Quinn took his time exploring every inch of Lorcan’s skin between the top of his thighs and his navel, but never where Lorcan wanted it most. He arched his hips, trying to get the attention of that wicked tongue, but Quinn grabbed his hips and pressed Lorcan hard into the mattress. He could feel the strength in Quinn, knew he would have finger-sized bruises come morning. Lorcan sighed a moan as Quinn’s tongue finally swept across the head of his cock, but just as he registered the touch, Quinn moved away. The absence of Quinn’s body made him shiver with the loss of heat and sensation.

He opened his eyes to see Quinn rising up off the bed. “Where are you going?” The frustration was evident in his voice.

Quinn stood and began to remove his clothes. Ah... this was

what Lorcan wanted. He stared, entranced, as Quinn began to expose those beautiful tanned muscles.

“Roll over onto your stomach,” Quinn said as he removed the rest of his clothes.

Lorcan’s entire body seized up, fear causing his muscles to strain and twitch involuntarily. He was torn between not wanting to turn away from the sight before him and the thought that Quinn meant to take him. One part of him wanted that more than anything, wanted to have Quinn deep inside his body, owning him. The other part was scared shitless at the thought of the pain it would cause. The war raged between the desire to please Quinn, the expected pain, and the fear that his lack of experience would somehow disappoint Quinn. What if he couldn’t take him? What if he couldn’t give Quinn what he wanted? He wanted to ask Quinn what he intended to do, wanted to know if it would hurt. But his throat was just as frozen as the rest of him.

Quinn tossed his jeans behind him, his heavy erection jutting out proudly from his body. Lorcan had known Quinn was large, but in that moment he seemed beyond huge, and Lorcan’s fear intensified. Quinn must have seen the fear clouding his face, because his voice became gentle as he spoke. “I would never hurt you, Lorcan, I promise.”

Lorcan jumped as Quinn’s hand landed on his thigh, and he chastised himself for being such a pansy. “I... it’s just that I....”

“Shh, it’s okay,” Quinn said as he pushed at Lorcan, encouraging him to roll onto his stomach. “I would never hurt you. We won’t do anything unless you’re ready. I just want to touch you.”

Lorcan rolled onto his stomach, some of the tension leaving his body at what sounded like a vow from Quinn. “I do trust you,” he whispered as he settled further into the mattress, trying to relax.

Quinn got on the bed, straddling Lorcan’s lower legs, his hands massaging his back in long, slow caresses meant to soothe rather than arouse. Quinn treated him with gentleness and patience, like he would a spooked colt, until the tension left his body.

“That’s it, baby, relax for me.”

Lorcan could only moan in response as Quinn began to arrange his hair across his back and down his ass. The image of what Quinn had told him he wanted to do to him, how he wanted to feel him through his hair, had his hips moving ever so slightly, looking for friction for his cock, which had lagged at the thought of pain but was now hardening again with a vengeance.

Quinn’s hands were rough and soothing at the same time as he began to massage the last of the tension from each and every muscle in Lorcan’s back, replacing it with a new kind of tension, the good kind. The straining, tightening kind that came with pleasure, anticipation, and need. Lorcan’s hips weren’t the only ones seeming to need to move. The soft hairs on Quinn’s inner thighs tickled against Lorcan’s skin as Quinn began to rock slowly, and soon Lorcan was beginning to squirm.

“Fuck! I love the way your hair feels.” Quinn tugged it a little for emphasis. “You make me want to do all kinds of naughty things with it.” Quinn’s voice was back to its deep, husky whisper, as much evidence of his arousal as the heavy cock that rocked against Lorcan’s thighs.

Lorcan pushed back into Quinn’s touch as his hands began to rub and squeeze the muscles of his ass, pulling his hair just enough to force Lorcan’s head back, setting off little sparks of pain that settled into warmth that spread through him.

“Please....” He didn’t know what he was begging for, but he wanted it bad, his hips rolling as he frantically looked for that perfect friction for his now-weeping cock.

“I got you.” Quinn pulled at Lorcan’s hips, forcing him to his knees before laying his body heavily over Lorcan’s. “God, you feel good.”

Lorcan just melted at the heat of Quinn’s body covering his, his own hair tickling against his skin as Quinn began to rock harder against him. Quinn’s hands held down his shoulders as his fingers dug in, massaging the muscles deep. He could feel Quinn’s erection sliding through his hair, against the crack of his ass, and

the fear was gone, chased away by the pleasure that was surging through his body. Lorcan could only clasp the sheets in his hands and beg for more.

Quinn thrust harder, the tip of his prick teasing at Lorcan's opening but never pushing in, never causing pain, just mind-numbing pleasure as their bodies moved together. Lorcan could only plead for Quinn to take him. His mind may have had its doubts, but his body knew exactly what it wanted. His cock was so hard a slight breeze would send him over the top.

Quinn's right hand came around Lorcan's waist, bringing with it a handful of Lorcan's hair, wrapping it around his cock. The dual sensation of the hard strength of callused fingers and the silkiness of his hair around him had him crying out. "So good... oh fuck! So good, Quinn!" He was panting to keep his breath, not wanting the pleasure to end but wanting—no, needing—more. "Harder... fuck...."

Quinn's other hand tightened around his hip, pulling him back harder against Quinn's thrusting hips. "Come for me, Lorcan! Let me smell you." He thrust hard, the large, pulsing vein on the underside of Quinn's cock causing delicious friction against his tight hole. "Come for me now," Quinn commanded as his body went tight behind Lorcan.

Lorcan could only scream his pleasure as he responded to Quinn's command, his cock jerking as thick jets of cum were pulled from his body. He climbed higher and higher until he felt as if he were floating above his body. He could see the way Quinn threw his head back in pleasure, jaw lax as he came. He could feel the hot evidence of Quinn's own release wet and warm against his lower back as he began to come back to his own body. He felt the delicious weight of Quinn as he collapsed, pushing Lorcan's boneless body into the mattress. The weight and heat were perfect against him. He wanted to weep with joy at the rightness of it. It was moments like this that made all the confusion about his relationship with Quinn melt away. This was worth any amount of rejection when others were around. He could be patient for this.

Quinn nuzzled into the hair at his neck, his lips seeking out skin to press kisses against. "You feel perfect against me," he murmured into Lorcan's neck between kisses. "I could get addicted to the feel of you." His tongue lapped at the skin beneath his hair. "The taste of you."

Lorcan let Quinn hold him, savoring the afterglow, but it didn't take long for reality to interfere, and his mind began to wander. He couldn't help but worry that Quinn hadn't truly been as satisfied as he could have been if Lorcan hadn't been so afraid to let Quinn enter him. He felt guilty for not trusting Quinn not to hurt him, and he worried he wouldn't be good enough. He tried to roll over, needing to see Quinn's face.

Quinn groaned, rolling over onto his back, and pulled Lorcan close to his chest. Quinn's arms wrapped tightly around Lorcan in that possessive embrace that made him feel like he belonged.

He rested his head on Quinn's shoulder as his breath and heart slowed to a more normal pace. He silently watched Quinn's face. His eyes were closed, muscles relaxed. He looked content and satisfied, but still Lorcan needed to ask, needed to know. "I'm sorry," was what he blurted out.

Quinn opened his eyes, looking over at him, confusion evident on his handsome face. "Sorry for what, baby?"

"For being... for not wanting... I mean for not letting you...." He couldn't say it.

He tried to bury his burning cheeks against Quinn's shoulder to hide, but Quinn wouldn't let him. Quinn grabbed the back of his hair gently, pulling his head back and forcing him to look at him. "You have nothing to be sorry for." He leaned over and kissed the tip of Lorcan's nose. "You were perfect."

"It's just... I'm sorry I didn't trust you. It's not that I don't want you to... well, you know. It's just that...." Lorcan closed his eyes, mustering up as much courage as he could before saying, "I'm a virgin." He couldn't look at Quinn, couldn't bear to see the disappointment, or worse, the laughter at his inexperience.

"Lorcan, look at me." The hand in his hair gentled as Quinn's

other hand stroked his cheek lightly. “I don’t need to fuck you to know you’re perfect. I love the way you respond to me, the way you make me feel. If we both decide we want that later, then fine, but right now I’m happiest when I’m just touching you.”

It was Lorcan’s turn to stare in confusion.

“It’s not about just fucking. It’s about everything you make me feel.” Quinn rolled onto his side, his free hand caressing down Lorcan’s back until he reached his ass, then pulling him tight against him. “This is what I need most from you right now. Just this.”

Then Quinn was kissing him, hard and deep, with possessiveness that had Lorcan’s head spinning. Yeah, this was enough for now. This was exactly what he needed most too. He gave in to the kiss and just let Quinn own him.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

The ranch was a flurry of activity, cattle being moved to the back property, hay being put up, the house being painted—everywhere Quinn looked, someone was busy doing something, but he couldn't find the one person he needed to see the most.

It had been a week since he'd been alone with Lorcan, except for stolen kisses in the barn and one occasion when they had found a dark corner just to rub off on each other. His skin felt itchy, and he just felt fucking growly. Things had to change. He was tired of not being able to touch Lorcan when he wanted, where he wanted. *This is my damn ranch! Why the hell can't I touch him when I want?*

Because you'll lose it all. He couldn't risk losing his ranch, but Jesus, it pissed him off that he had to hide how he felt about Lorcan.

He would watch John and Conner holding hands on the porch swing or kissing each other before Conner would head in to cook or John out to tend cattle. Each day he grew more restless, jealousy riding him hard. He wanted what they had. For the first time in his life, he thought he might just have found it, but he didn't have the nerve to take what he wanted. He knew he couldn't risk losing his ranch, it was the only home John and Conner had, but if he was honest with himself, he was also scared of being an outcast.

The hardest part was the way Lorcan would look at him sometimes, longing in his eyes, questioning him from a distance

with such seriousness. He knew that if he went to Lorcan, no matter what he was doing or who was around, the man would open up and embrace him. Quinn just didn't have the balls to do it. Everyone had heard the rumors, but not one man or woman could say for sure if they were true. Not one could prove it, and that felt safe. For the first time in five years, he finally had his ranch running the way it should. He didn't want to rock the boat. This land meant everything to him. It was the only thing he had that made him proud at the end of the day, proved that he mattered.

Lorcan makes you feel like you matter.

The truth in that made him want to shout out to the world how he felt about Lorcan, consequences be damned, but he wanted to eat his cake too, as the saying went. He wanted Lorcan by his side, but he wasn't sure if he'd still have the support of the community. He wouldn't be the same man he was without his ranch, but would he truly be the man he wanted to be without Lorcan? Hell, would Lorcan even want to be a part of his future?

They needed to talk, but he needed to find the man first. He approached the barn, but what he heard coming from beyond the door stopped him dead in his tracks.

"C'mon, pretty boy, I see the way you look at him and the way he ignores you."

Quinn couldn't identify the voice by sound, so he eased closer to the door, trying to get a glimpse of who it was. He could damn well bet that pretty boy would be Lorcan.

"It's not like that," Lorcan replied.

He caught a glimpse of a broad back in a denim overshirt, but whoever it was moved out of the line of Quinn's vision before he got a glimpse of his face.

"What's it like, then? You follow him around like a love-struck puppy, and he ignores you. I would never ignore you like that. I'd be damn proud to have you at my side."

Something broke loose in Quinn's chest. Rage surged through his veins. His fists clenched as he fought to stay where he was. *Son of a bitch is trying to take what's mine.*

But was Lorcan really his? Did he have any right to claim the man as his when he wasn't sure he was willing to completely come out of his safe closet?

"Jess, keep your voice down. Someone will hear you."

"Don't care. If he ain't man enough to own up to how he feels about you, then that's his loss. You deserve better than that, pretty boy. You deserve to be shown off, to be on the arm of someone who cares more about how you feel than the feelings of stupid people."

"Jess."

Jess? Had to be Jess Jenkins. He was new to the ranch, had come over with Jerry Snider for hay season. The man was open and proud of his sexuality. Quinn didn't really think the county would normally take to someone being gay, but Jess was bigger and broader than Quinn. People didn't have the balls to taunt him. He was more the kind you gave a wide berth. Quinn had met him a few times at the local bar. He seemed friendly enough but gave the impression that you didn't want to be on his bad side. Gossip was he'd beaten three college boys who tried to jump him nearly to death.

Well, Quinn wasn't afraid of him, and he'd be damned if he just stood there and let Jess take Lorcan from him.

Quinn pushed the door open, easing into the barn, then stopped dead at the sight before him. It froze the blood in his veins and his feet to the dirt floor. To his right, Jess had Lorcan pushed up against a stall door and had his big body wrapped around Lorcan, their mouths locked in what looked like a deep, passionate kiss.

Quinn's first instinct was to march over and beat the living fuck out of the man, but the way Lorcan had his hands fisted in the denim shirt made him hesitate. He couldn't tell if Lorcan was pulling Jess to him or trying to pull him off. Quinn was afraid of knowing the answer. He didn't stick around long enough to figure it out. He didn't want to know if Lorcan was returning Jess's kiss. He knew for a fact that his heart couldn't handle it if the answer

was yes. Besides, what could he do if Lorcan was returning the kiss? *Nothing, because you're a fucking coward, Taylor.* Turning on his heels, he spun and fled the barn.

Lorcan finally got a good grip on Jess's shirt and pushed, breaking the kiss. "Jess, stop it."

He stepped out from around Jess, wiping at his mouth. It wasn't that he wasn't attracted to the guy. The man was gorgeous and sweet and all the other things he should want, but Lorcan couldn't help but wish he was Quinn every time they touched or joked or just laughed together. Jess was so easygoing, so cool to hang with, and not afraid to admit who he was attracted to, nor was he afraid to go after what he wanted. All qualities Lorcan admired in a person, but his heart was already pining for Quinn, even if his head told him he was a damn fool.

"Jess, you gotta stop this. I already told you that I don't want you that way."

Jess took a step toward him, hands open like he was waiting for Lorcan to come back into his embrace. "Just give me a chance, pretty boy. I know you and me would be right for each other. I'm just askin' for a chance to prove it to ya."

He should be jumping at the chance. But just like in the past when he'd seen someone attractive, his two heads just didn't agree with each other. His head was telling him that this was the kind of person he needed in his life, but everything south of the border was dead. It only took a glimpse of Quinn, and his dick would stand proud and start waving, trying to get the man's attention. He just didn't feel that with Jess.

"Look, Jess, Quinn's had a hard enough time with what's going on around here. Me being here hasn't helped in the slightest." He spread his own arms out wide. "I mean, look at me. If I start walking around with you all arm-in-arm and shit, it's

gonna make it bad for Quinn.”

“Conner and John don’t seem to make it worse,” Jess said.

“They’ve been a part of this town for thirty years, people’ve grown used to them, but that don’t mean they want to see it with anyone else. To tell you the truth, I have to fight enough now as it is. I don’t wanna fight anymore. Don’t you get it?”

Jess took another step forward, reaching out for him.

“C’mon, pretty boy, I would never let anyone hurt you.”

Lorcan spun away before Jess could grab him. “I don’t need you to protect me. I want you for a friend, but if you can’t control yourself, then we can’t even be that.”

Jess stared at him for a minute, his full lips in a pout, but then his eyes lit up. “Okay, yeah, we can just be friends.” He winked, grabbing his hat off the stall door and plopping it back on his head. “I got nothing but time to show you just how irresistible I am.”

Lorcan just laughed at him. “You’re a real baby doll, Jess. Now get your ass back to work before you get us both fired.”

Jess tipped his hat, giving a slight bow at his waist before heading for the door. “Anything for you, pretty boy. Anything at all.”

Lorcan didn’t respond, just watched him swagger out the door. He really did like Jess. The man was great to spend time with. Well, when he wasn’t trying to convince Lorcan how perfect they would be together. Lorcan wished he could feel something more for Jess, he really did. It would make things so much easier, but he couldn’t. When he closed his eyes at night, he saw Quinn. His first thought each morning was of Quinn. He missed him so much that he felt like he was being crushed by the weight of it. Something had to give. He needed to know something of what was going on in Quinn’s head. Did the man just want the occasional quickie, a stolen moment in a barn? Would that be enough?

He knew the answer without even having to give it a thought—not just no, but *hell no*. He was coming to terms with the fact that he was completely attracted to Quinn. He still didn’t like the labels, but it was what it was. He didn’t need to walk hand in

hand with the man around the ranch or flaunt their attraction in front of others. He wasn't comfortable with the level of openness that Jess offered him, but he did wish he felt like more than just Quinn's buddy with benefits.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

He'd busted his ass all day, finding plenty of work to keep him busy, keeping his mind from replaying what he'd seen in the barn that morning. Quinn had been able to avoid seeing Lorcan the rest of the day, even skipping supper, opting to take a ride on Jeb instead of having to sit across the table from the man. Had he had to look at Lorcan's kiss-swollen lips from such a short distance, he didn't think he'd have been able to control himself. Best just not to put himself in a situation he knew he wouldn't be able to handle and end up saying something that fucked up things any further than they already were. Jess had been right: Lorcan did deserve to have someone who was proud to show him off. Quinn wished he could do it, but when he tried to picture himself in an open relationship with Lorcan, he felt nearly sick with fear. *So much for not hiding my sexuality.* He'd always talked a big talk in his head, telling himself he wasn't going to deny he was gay but that it wasn't anybody's business but his own. When push came to shove? He was a fucking coward.

The last rays of the sun were setting across the fields, lighting everything with a warm orange and red glow. The heat of the day had given way to a cool early-evening breeze. Quinn could smell just a hint of rain beginning to settle in with the scent of newly cut hay. It was a serene view. Quinn took full advantage of it to help calm the growing storm inside him. He had a choice to make. He either had to let Lorcan go or he had to be a man and stand up to

everyone in town and admit that he loved him.

Love? Do I love Lorcan?

Quinn wasn't sure what it was that he felt for Lorcan, but he knew that his chest had hurt like his heart was being ripped out when he'd seen him and Jess together. He'd known that when he'd first seen them; something so powerful inside him had burned like lava running through his system. In that moment, he had wanted nothing more than to kill Jess and claim Lorcan as his. Something primal and possessive had wanted to mark Lorcan so that everyone who saw him would know to whom he belonged. Those thoughts had scared the shit out of him. He'd never felt anything so all-consuming before, yet as afraid of those intense feelings as he was, the thought of not having Lorcan scared him even more.

Quinn had been so lost in thought he hadn't heard Jake approach, and he nearly jumped out of his skin when the man slapped him on the back and said, "Boys and I are all heading into town for a beer. Wanna come?"

Normally Quinn would turn the offer down, but Jake was a good man, and tonight he needed the distraction. He needed to stop thinking of the situation with Lorcan before he lost his goddamn mind, even if for a little while.

"Yeah, I think I will. I'll buy, you find someone to drive us home?" He had a funny feeling that tonight he was gonna need a hell of a lot more than just one beer to pull him out of his funk.

"Deal! I already told my boy he might have to come pick up his old man and a few of his buddies. Only damn good thing about a teenager with a permit. Kinda makes up for the increase in insurance and the sleepless nights to come."

Quinn laughed and followed Jake around the barn to his pickup. With any luck, he wouldn't remember his name in an hour, and with a little more luck and a whole lot of whiskey, he could scrub the image of Jess wrapped around Lorcan right out of his brain.

The looks from the men and women around the bar ranged from curiosity to outright hostility as he sat with his chair leaned back against a far wall. Lorcan didn't like anyone at his back, especially not in a bar full of macho bullshit country boys. Jess sat across the table, his face animated, hands in constant motion as he told the story of how he'd nearly gotten his ass slapped—and not in a good way—by the big Brahma bull Quinn lovingly referred to as Kitten. The son of a bitch was the meanest, nastiest critter Lorcan had ever seen. Just the image of big ol' Jess running from him had Kyle laughing his ass off next to him. Lorcan just shook his head and went back to scanning the crowd. How the hell had he let them talk him into this? He avoided town at all costs, hated being in public, and yet here he was sitting in some fucking redneck bar. The only thing he wanted to do was bury his head under the covers of his bed and forget the world for a week or so.

“You okay, pretty boy?” Jess asked him.

He looked up at the man's concerned eyes and found a small smile for him. “Yeah, I'm okay. Just don't do well in big crowds, ya know?”

Lorcan doubted he'd have to fight tonight, with the way that Jess would scowl and puff up his impressive chest at anyone who dared to look at Lorcan with anything other than respect. It was kind of endearing the way the big guy tried to keep people from staring, wanting to make Lorcan comfortable enough to have a good time.

“If you ask me my opinion, they aren't really meaning to be rude, just jealous as hell that I'm with the most beautiful person in the place.” Jess winked and tipped his beer back as if he'd been reading Lorcan's thoughts.

“Beautiful isn't something a guy normally wants someone to call him. Handsome, cute, studly, but beautiful is way down on the macho descriptions, Jess.”

Jess laughed, a full, happy belly laugh. “Oh, pretty boy, there

is nothing girlish about your beauty. I'm telling you, half these bastards in here are gonna be fucking the first female they can get their dicks in to prove they're still all-male after the boner you made each of them pop."

Kyle's eyes went wide as he looked back and forth between Lorcan and Jess. Even his ears went bright red.

Jess laughed even harder. "I rest my case."

"Fuck you," Kyle mumbled as he got up. "I'm gonna hit the head."

"More like get some head," Jess called over his shoulder. Kyle just kept right on walking, bird just a-flying.

Lorcan waited until Kyle was out of earshot before turning to Jess. "You're such a shit, Jess. That poor guy ain't ever gonna look at me without turning ten shades of red." But he had to admit it was pretty damn funny.

Jess motioned for the waitress to bring them another round. "You just gotta ignore stupid people, pretty boy. Sometimes they just don't have enough sense to know to behave."

Once the waitress set their beers down and took away the empties, Lorcan replied, "It's kinda hard to ignore some people when they wanna do their talking with their fists. I've gotten pretty good at responding to those kinds of people, actually used to enjoy it. Why do you think I got this shit?" He waved his braid at Jess.

"Not that I wanna see you have to fight because of your hair, but whatever reason you got for growing it out, I'm damn glad you did. It's fucking gorgeous."

It was Lorcan's turn to turn red. "You're good for my ego, big guy."

Jess's face grew serious as he stared intently at Lorcan. "I wanna be good for every part of you."

"Jess."

Jess sat back, raising his hands in front of him like he was defending himself. "I know! I know! But a man can dream, can't he?"

Lorcan chuckled. "Just drink your beer and be a good boy."

Jess raised his beer at him. “Anything you want, pretty boy. Anything.”

The next couple of hours flew by in a blur of laughing, drinking, and getting his ass royally kicked on the pool table. Lorcan couldn't remember the last time he'd had so much fun, except maybe with his family, but this was different. Jess just oozed confidence as he walked around, hooting and slapping people on the back, and he stared at Lorcan like he was the most precious thing he'd ever laid eyes on. Jess's good nature and easy smile were infectious. It was like he was a light and everyone around them was a moth attracted to him. Lorcan wasn't sure if it was the alcohol or just the man, but he was feeling a bit like a moth himself.

Jess walked past him, bumping his hip against Lorcan's and winking at him. “Sorry, pretty boy, looks like you're gonna owe me another beer,” he said as he chalked up his cue stick.

Lorcan looked at the table. There was no way in hell Jess was gonna have a shot. The cue ball was blocked behind three of his solids. The eight ball was at the opposite end, sitting flush against the far left side. He knew Jess was good, but he also understood angles, and the shot just wasn't possible.

“No way in hell you're gonna make that shot, Jess! Not even you're that good.”

Jess looked up from where he was leaning down and setting up his shot, giving Lorcan a sly smile. “Is that a challenge, pretty boy?”

Lorcan just shook his head. “Not a challenge, just a fact.”

Jess straightened himself out, moving close to Lorcan, eyes intent on the table like he was checking his shot before he whispered loud enough for only Lorcan to hear, “Wanna make a side bet?”

Now Lorcan knew he'd had too much to drink, because the way Jess was looking at him, the heat in his eyes, had his dick perking up and wanting to get behind that bet. *What the hell?* Jess had been relegated to the category of "mind sexy, but dick dead," and suddenly it was like both heads popped online in sync. Lorcan would have to give that some more thought later. "What's the bet?"

Jess leaned in closer, his lips nearly touching Lorcan's ear, sending a shiver down him as warm breath blew across the sensitive flesh. "I make this shot, you gotta take your braid out."

Lorcan stiffened. He didn't wear his hair down in public very often. It was just like waving a red flag in front of a room full of bulls. It usually ended up with split lips and bloodied knuckles. "Here?"

Jess walked back to the end of the table, leaning back down and setting up his shot. "Yup, right here, right now."

Lorcan stared at the table and was convinced that Jess was just trying to get another rise out of him—there was no shot. He might as well get something out of the bet for himself. "Fine! I'll take your bet, but when you miss, you have to stop calling me 'pretty boy'."

Laughter had Jess's shoulders shaking; then his face went serious, and he nodded. Jess called out his shot, and it was met with hoots and hollers from the people around them. They were all in agreement with Lorcan, and he couldn't stop the grin from spreading across his face. A grin that disappeared as completely as the noise in the room when Jess took the shot. The cue jumped the solids in its path, hitting the eight ball at just the perfect angle and sending it into the far pocket.

No fucking way. Lorcan just stared in stunned silence, as did everyone around them. Then the hooting started up again, people slapping Jess on the back in congratulations.

Jess made his way around the table toward him, one brow lifted. "Well?"

Lorcan just stared in awe for a moment longer. In the next, he

became aware of just how handsome Jess was. His light-brown hair was cut short but had enough length to it that it was always standing out in spiky points around his head from Jess's habit of running his hands through it. His large blue eyes were so dark that they were almost black. His large, square face and powerful chin were softened with the deep dimples in his cheeks, which only grew deeper when he smiled. His large body was thick with muscle. Jess was huge, but it wasn't the kind of muscle you got from a gym. This was the muscle that came from working his body hard on a ranch.

For the first time, Lorcan let his eyes wander down Jess's body, taking in the way his thick chest stretched his T-shirt until it lay smooth against his skin, exposing the definition of his muscles as they tapered down to a lean, flat stomach and hips. His Wranglers were faded, hugging his body like a second skin and giving Lorcan a perfect view of his very evident, very hard erection. As Lorcan took in the sight of the bulge, Jess's erection twitched as if it could feel his eyes on it. Lorcan's own cock hardened further in response. He lifted his eyes to meet Jess's knowing look. He blushed a little at being caught, but the look on Jess's face told him he didn't mind. It was a look that said, *Look all you want and touch if you dare*. Did he dare?

"Well, pretty boy, I'm waiting."

Yeah, but I'm trying to decide if touching is the right thing. Did he want to encourage Jess? He'd obviously made a huge mistake thinking that Quinn wanted him for more than just a fuck-buddy. His heart was still telling him that Quinn was the one that made it skip a beat. Yet his brain was telling him he was a fucking idiot for caring. Did he dare encourage Jess when he couldn't even figure out what the hell he was feeling anymore? Wouldn't it just be another layer of complication to the mix?

"You're not backing out on our bet, are you?"

Lorcan gave himself a shake. "Nah, my word's good." He removed the tight band from around his braid, letting his fingers work out the knots until his hair was free and pushing it back

behind his shoulders.

“Fuck,” Jess moaned in a breathy whisper. “‘Gorgeous’ don’t do you justice.”

The heat rolling off the big guy and the way he was staring at him made Lorcan a little uncomfortable, especially with the way his own body was beginning to heat up. The people around them might have stopped glaring at him, but that didn’t mean they wanted to see him outright flirting with another man.

“C’mon, Jess, you can buy me a beer.”

Jess stretched his arm out. “After you, pretty boy.”

He could feel Jess’s eyes boring into him as he walked toward the bar. He didn’t put an extra swing to his hips, but just the fact that he thought about it made him smile. Yeah, he liked the way Jess let everyone around them know he was interested in him. He liked it a lot.

Quinn was more than ready to take his drunken ass home, but since he didn’t have his truck, he was at the mercy of Jake and his boy, Blay, who had agreed to pick them up and take them to Contos for last call. Not that either he or Jake needed last call, but the offer of a big country breakfast at the all-night diner afterward had been enough to convince him that one more beer was a perfect idea.

The music was loud, the ground beneath his feet seeming to vibrate with it as he stepped out of the truck. Not that he was too worried. The caterwauling he’d listened to all night from the local cover band at The Saloon had already done everlasting damage to his hearing.

After the shock of sound that rattled bones, the next things they became aware of when they stepped into Contos were the thick wall of smoke and the pungent smell of stale beer. The latter of which had Quinn’s stomach rolling. He forced himself to keep

walking toward the bar. He only had to endure it for one more drink, and then Ms. Sally's biscuits and gravy were so his.

"Couple of Miller drafts," Jake yelled over to the bartender. "Shit! We should have been here earlier, this place is fuckin' rockin'."

Jake had to lean into Quinn to be heard over the music, and the added noise made Quinn's head pound just that much more. Quinn just nodded and took his beer. There was no sense answering Jake; his voice was already beyond hoarse, and Jake was too busy eyeing a little blonde waitress to really care what Quinn had to say at the moment anyway. He swung his stool around, taking in the crowd around him. He knew most of the locals, the majority of them by name, even. He got a few quizzical looks, but for the most part they'd just nod or acknowledge him with a smile. It made him feel a lot better, with the shit that had been going down lately. Most folks were too busy being pissed off about what Henderson had done to worry on rumors. Quinn sipped his beer, taking in everything until his gaze settled on the pool room, and his entire fucking world went upside down.

At one table, Jess stood towering over another man about to take a shot. Quinn watched as Jess leaned down, speaking close into the man's ear before straightening up and throwing his head back to laugh. Quinn didn't need to see the man's face to know who it was. The long flow of chestnut hair spilling down around the man's back told him instantly. He couldn't rip his eyes away from the sight. Lorcan took his shot, then jumped back, bouncing up and down, those lean hips just a-shaking as he pumped his fist, the sexy, unbound hair wrapping around his body like a fine cape of silk. Quinn's breath caught in his throat, his dick trying to jump out of his jeans at the sight. He'd never seen Lorcan's hair down except for the time he'd run into him coming out of the shower and once when he'd snuck into Lorcan's room before Clint, his foreman, had moved back into the house.

Never had Lorcan worn it down around other people. Quinn had had more than one naughty dream about what he wanted to do

with that hair. He knew what it felt like beneath his hands, the softness of it against his body. Seeing Lorcan with it free in public, the way he flipped it back over his shoulder when he took a drink of his beer, had Quinn diamond-hard, his dick pressed so hard against the zipper of his jeans he had no doubt it was leaving little teeth marks against his entire length. Still, he couldn't help but feel a little jealous as well, like the feel of Lorcan's body, the unbound hair, was something he wanted to keep just between himself and Lorcan.

Quinn's ass had just started to come up from the stool, his body responding to Lorcan like he was a puppet on an invisible string that Lorcan commanded, but before he could stand up, his knees gave out and dropped him back onto his stool as Jess wrapped his arms around Lorcan from behind. Jess pulled the smaller man back against him and leaned down to speak into his ear. Quinn's first reaction was to search the area to see if anyone had seen what he had. He was ready to go to their rescue when the shit hit the fan, but no one noticed, or if they did, no one gave it a second glance. In fact, Kyle was pulling a laughing Lorcan away from the big guy, pushing him toward the pool table for his next shot.

Jesus, had he been dropped into an alternate reality? This wasn't The Push or any of the other gay bars in Jackson. This was the redneck center of the world. Guys just didn't make that kind of public display in places like this. Did they?

Quinn eased off his stool, making his way toward the pool room, careful to keep out of Lorcan's sight. He found a spot that hid him just well enough that he wouldn't be seen but was close enough that he could make out some of the conversation between the men shooting pool. He watched as Lorcan lined up his shot, studying the table in concentration before letting the stick fly. The cue hit the eight ball at the other end of the table with a crack, sending it speeding into the corner pocket. The men and women that had gathered around to watch Lorcan's shot roared and clapped at his success. Then Lorcan handed his stick to Kyle, his

eyes on Jess, a come-hither look on his face. The crowd cheered and laughed at the blush on Jess's face. Jess moved to Lorcan, and the two men wrapped their arms around each other as Lorcan dropped a big, wet smack on Jess's lips to the hooting crowd's approval.

Quinn could only stare, mouth gaping open at what was happening in front of him. Not one person in the room made any move to rush the two men holding each other. Not one face had a look of disgust as they all went back to their tables and their beers like they hadn't just seen the same thing he had. Could he have been this wrong about the people of his own town? He'd known most of these people all his life. Never once had he thought to wonder if they would accept him if they knew he was gay. He'd never given a single one of them the chance. He'd been too afraid of the rejection and the scorn he'd assumed he would receive if they knew.

Quinn had always figured that after thirty years of seeing John and Conner together, they had learned to tolerate the town's two little queers. He never imagined that it just didn't bother them. Hadn't the men that walked away from his ranch when offered the larger paycheck told him that it didn't have shit to do with the rumor? That they hadn't cared one way or another, just couldn't turn down that kind of cash? Was he really that stupid? Looking at the way everyone was having a good time, laughing and joking with Jess and Lorcan—yeah, he was that stupid.

He'd spent every day in fucking agony wanting to touch Lorcan, biding his time between stolen kisses and casual brushes of fingertips, and for what? He hadn't been man enough to admit who he was and what he wanted. It was his own fault that Lorcan was standing in the arms of someone else.

The room was suddenly awash in overhead lighting, and the music went silent except for the constant buzz from the conversations around him.

"Hey, Quinn, you ready to hit Sally's?" Jake yelled too loudly in the now-quiet room, his arm hung over the shoulder of

the waitress he'd set his sights on. "Carla's gonna join us. Ain't that right, darlin'?"

Carla squealed as Jake cupped her breast with the hand slung over her shoulder, but she didn't try to pull away from him. "Yeah, I'll join ya as long as you promise a nightcap after."

Jake bent and licked at her overly painted lips before exclaiming in the loud tone he had used earlier to yell over the music, "You are the nightcap, sugar, and if you're a really good girl, Quinn will be our caboose. He loves a tight ass." He whirled Carla around, herding her toward the front door. "Train's leaving in five, Quinn. Get your ass aboard," he called out without looking back.

Quinn turned to take one last look at Lorcan before following. Just as he turned, he met Lorcan's eyes. The look in them had Quinn's blood turning to arctic crystals in his veins. Lorcan's stare cut through him like daggers, the hurt and scorn plain on his face. Had he heard what Jake had said? From the look on the man's face, it was obvious that he had. He tried to fight his way through the crowd now pushing toward the door. He needed to talk to Lorcan, to apologize for... for everything... but before he could make it to the pool room, Lorcan grabbed Jess's hand, spinning in a flurry of chestnut waves, and pulled the big guy toward him and out the back door.

"Fuck," Quinn yelled. "God dammit, Lorcan! Don't do this!" But the man was already gone, not looking back once, like he didn't owe a damn thing to Quinn. Just fucking turned and walked out. "Fuck!" He wanted to scream, lash out and beat something until it begged for mercy. Except the last rational part left in his brain told him that it was his own ass that needed to be begging for mercy. He turned with the flow of the crowd, heading for the front door and the waiting "train." *Toot fucking toot.*

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

“You okay, pretty boy? What’s got that pretty face of yours all screwed up in a frown?”

Lorcan turned from the window and caught Jess staring at him out of the corner of his eye as he drove. He’d been so upset after hearing how Quinn and Jake were gonna make some kind of train out of the waitress that before he thought better of it, he’d grabbed on to Jess, asking him to take him home. He had wanted Quinn to know that he wasn’t the only one who was going to be having a good time tonight. Now he just felt guilty as hell. Jess didn’t deserve to be used like that. The man was the sweetest thing he’d ever met, had been proud that everyone in the bar knew they were together. Lorcan would do right smart by remembering that too. So what if Jess didn’t send his body into molten lava like Quinn did? There was a hell of a lot more to a relationship, no matter how long or how short, than just sex.

“I’m fine, Jess, just the silence seems a little weird after the entire crowd and craziness of Contos.”

“You wanna stop at the diner and grab something to eat before we head to my place?”

Lorcan shook his head a little too quickly, making his vision swim. “Nah, just take me home, big guy. I’ve had enough of the crowds.” And there was no way in hell he was going to Sally’s for anything, not with the Quinn and Jake train pulling in.

“Anything you want, pretty boy.”

Anything, huh? What he wanted more than anything at this moment was for Jess to make him forget that Quinn even existed. He knew that more than likely wasn't gonna happen, but he deserved to feel special to someone, even if it was for one night.

Lorcan reached out, laying his hand on Jess's thigh. The firm muscles flexed beneath his palm. "I just want you right now, Jess." And right now, that was actually God's honest truth.

It took them no time at all to pull up in front of Jess's little ranch. The house was small but well maintained. It sat back from the road, the closest neighbor half a mile down. Lorcan stepped out of the truck, breathing the cool night air in deeply. It felt good against his skin after the heat and thick smoke that had filled the bar. The only sounds were the rustle of leaves in the trees and the array of night critters singing.

Jess came around the truck and wrapped one of his big arms around Lorcan's shoulders, steering him toward the front door. "It's not much," he said as they walked up the small stone path, "but it's peaceful, and it's mine."

Lorcan let Jess lead him into the house. Jess threw his keys and wallet in a glass bowl on the small table by the door.

"Home sweet home, pretty boy," Jess exclaimed as he turned on a small lamp on the table next to the couch. "Make yourself at home. I'll make us some coffee."

Lorcan looked around the small living room. It was artfully decorated in soft creams and blues. The large leather sofa was a soft butter color that looked like you could just melt into it. The furniture was arranged so that no matter where you sat, you had an unobstructed view of both the large fireplace and the flat screen above it. It was warm and comfortable, just like the man who owned it.

Lorcan removed his boots and left them neatly by the door,

then hung his hat on a free hook before moving to the case that held Jess's collection of CDs and DVDs. They had similar tastes in music and film. He laughed when he realized he had the same set of bad B zombie movies Jess had, everything from the 60s classic *Night of the Living Dead* to his personal favorite, the remake of *Dawn of the Dead*.

He called out to Jess, "Hey, you have all the same bad zombie movies I do. Wanna watch one?"

Jess's deep chuckle reached him from the other room, making Lorcan feel even warmer. "Yeah, why don't you set one up for us? I'll be right there."

Lorcan popped *Day of the Dead* into the Blu-ray player before taking a seat on the leather couch, sighing. It was even more comfortable than it looked.

Jess appeared through the door, setting a tray down on the table with coffee and slices of banana bread.

"Dude," he said in his best imitation of a stoner, "I love banana bread. You so rock." He grabbed a piece, shoving the whole thing into his mouth with a moan. He wasn't sure if it was that good or if it wasn't until that moment that he realized how hungry he was. Jess's smile was brilliant as he took the seat next to him and grabbed his own slice of bread and popped it in his mouth before grabbing his coffee.

"Didn't know what you liked in your coffee, so I brought out the kitchen sink."

Jess hadn't been kidding, either. There was the usual cream and sugar, but he'd added little bottles of flavored creams, Bailey's, Irish whiskey, and even a can of whipped cream and chocolate shavings. Lorcan eyed the whipped cream and chocolate but settled for just a little cream and sugar before taking his own mug, tucking his feet up under him and snuggling into Jess's side. Jess moaned over the top of his mug and stretched his arm out along the back of the couch, giving Lorcan more room to snuggle in.

Jess just felt comfortable and homey and all the things

Lorcan had never thought he'd find outside of his mama's house. He took a sip from his mug, his eyes meeting Jess's. "This is good. I would have pegged you for a Styrofoam gas station coffee kinda guy, not a gourmet coffee kind."

"I only look big and dumb. I got hooked on all the fancy coffees when I was at school in Auburn." He shrugged his big shoulders. "Guess it just stuck with me."

Lorcan's eyes widened in surprise. "You went to Auburn? No shit, they got a great team this year."

"Yeah, played a little ball there myself, 'til I blew my knee out during my sophomore year." He tipped his mug again. "At least I learned something while I was there."

"Yeah, I never wanted to go to college. I figured I'd always work my folks' ranch. What was your major?"

Jess set his mug on the table and then took Lorcan's, setting it down before pulling him into a tighter embrace. "Snuggling."

Lorcan let Jess hold him, amazed at how perfectly he fit against his side. "You can't major in snuggling, big guy, though you'd get an easy A in it."

Jess kissed the top of his head, laying his cheek against Lorcan's hair. "I didn't really major in anything, just took the basic classes the advisors signed me up for. Only reason I went was my old man had always hoped I'd be the first in the family to graduate college. Only thing I've ever wanted to do is ranch, ya know?"

"Yeah, I get that."

"What about you, pretty boy? What did you wanna be when you grew up?"

Lorcan's first thought was to say *normal*, but that wasn't really a fair answer. He didn't want to have to explain why that was, so instead he replied, "I wanted to be the head of the STARS unit."

"Chris or Wesker?"

Lorcan snorted. "Neither, big guy. Leon would have made a kick-ass commander of STARS."

"Yeah, can't argue with you there. Though Claire would have

done a kick-ass job too.” One of Jess’s big hands began stroking up and down Lorcan’s arm, the other drawing small circles on Lorcan’s stomach through his shirt. “You wanna watch the movie you picked?”

Lorcan thought about it. He was kind of enjoying the peace and quiet after the roar of the club. The steady beat of Jess’s heartbeat was the perfect rhythm. “I kinda like it the way it is. It’s quiet and warm. Feels good just like this, Jess.”

Jess rubbed his chin across Lorcan’s scalp, then began placing soft kisses against his temple. “Yeah, it feels real good, pretty boy.”

The need to make Jess feel even better drove Lorcan to turn in the man’s arms and lift his head, begging for a kiss. Jess didn’t hesitate, his head lowering until his full lips brushed against Lorcan’s. The feeling was incredible. Lorcan wasn’t sure if it was the alcohol, seeing Quinn at the bar, or just Jess, but it didn’t matter. All he knew was that he wanted more than just soft kisses. He wanted to devour the man.

Lorcan rose up, grabbing the back of Jess’s head without breaking the kiss, taking it deeper while he moved around until he was straddling Jess’s hips. Jess wrapped his arms around him, running his hands through Lorcan’s hair and pulling him in even closer as the battle of tongues, teeth, and lips grew more frantic. The slide of tongues against each other, the nibbling and sucking, were soon pulling moans from both men.

Lorcan wasn’t sure how it happened, but one moment they were kissing, the next he was thrown onto his back while they both frantically tried to rip each other’s clothes off. It took forever and no time at all before they were stretched out skin-to-skin. Jess’s hands were roaming his shoulders and down Lorcan’s breastbone to his stomach, then back up. His work-callused fingers added just the perfect amount of friction until Lorcan’s skin felt as if it were electrified.

The look on Jess’s face was one of awe as his fingers continued to explore every inch of Lorcan’s chest. “I hadn’t

thought it possible, but you're even more beautiful," Jess whispered as he lowered his head, letting his tongue and lips trace the same patterns as his hands.

Lorcan meant to thank Jess for the compliments, but the words came out as a moan as Jess licked at one of his nipples before sucking it into his mouth. His tongue worked the hard nub as he sucked. Lorcan's hips responded by pressing his dick harder against Jess's belly, leaving little wet kisses against his skin. By the time Jess moved to his other nipple, Lorcan was grabbing Jess's hair, pulling him harder to him as his back arched, his body begging for more. "Ah, God! Jess, that feels so good!"

Lorcan felt Jess smile against his skin as he moved further down to his hips. "If you liked that, you're gonna love this," he said before biting into the flesh of Lorcan's hip where it met his thigh, causing Lorcan to cry out.

The sting was soothed with a wet tongue before Jess sucked the patch of skin into his mouth, marking him. Lorcan could barely keep his body from jerking off the couch as Jess moved back and forth between his hips. Jess's strong hands pressed down on his thighs, the only thing keeping him from falling to the floor.

"I have to know." Jess looked up at him from under thick lashes. "I have to know how you taste."

Jess didn't wait for a response to take what he wanted. His mouth closed over the head of Lorcan's swollen rod, and the tip of his tongue began licking and probing at the small slit. Lorcan wasn't sure which of them was moaning louder. He could feel the vibrations of Jess's moans against his skin, setting it on fire and sending a rush of warmth to his balls as they pulled up tight against his body. He didn't think he was going to last long, the frustration, the need too close to the surface.

Jess must have sensed how close he was, because his tongue pulled away from his slit as his big hand wrapped around the base of his cock, using just enough frustrating pressure to stall Lorcan's orgasm. Jess didn't seem to be ready to move anytime soon but just held the thick head in his mouth.

Lorcan wanted to beg, plead, promise, anything if Jess would just not stop. He tried thrusting his hips, but Jess's free hand held his hips immobile like the grip of a vice.

"Fuck, Jess... suck me." He was thrashing his head back and forth, babbling and pleading. He just needed release so bad, he just needed Jess to fucking move.

Just when Lorcan thought he would lose his mind, Jess swished the saliva that had been gathering in his mouth and swallowed at the same time as he lowered his head, taking Lorcan all the way into his throat. As Jess's throat contracted around the head of Lorcan's dick, Lorcan threw his head back and screamed. The orgasm that ripped from his body was so unexpected, setting off every nerve in his body, that he didn't have time to warn Jess. His body bowed tight as jet after jet of spunk shot from him like liquid silver.

Jess licked and lapped at him, cleaning his prick through the small aftershocks that racked Lorcan's body. He pulled back just as the sensation began to become too much. "Thought so," Jess said with a smirk on his face as he licked his lips clean. "You taste even better than you look, pretty boy."

"Holy shit," Lorcan murmured once he regained the ability to speak. "That was amazing."

Jess moved up Lorcan's body until he could lick at his lips, tracing around the edges until Lorcan opened to Jess, and without hesitation, he dove in. His tongue explored every molecule, sharing Lorcan's own flavor. It was a heady mix of Jess and his own essence. Lorcan sucked at Jess's tongue, pulling it further inside his mouth until the only thing he could taste was Jess's own unique flavor. The kiss was hungry until they both had to pull back, gasping for air.

Jess panted into his neck, his warm breath causing Lorcan's skin to tingle. He had a brief flashback to the way Quinn had kissed and licked along the same path of his neck, but he pushed the image away. Quinn had no business here. He'd told Lorcan he felt perfect, looked perfect, but had never once said he was perfect

for him. Not once had the man approached him except when they were alone. He hadn't even cared enough about Lorcan's feelings to talk to him as more than a hired hand when the other hands were around. Not once had he wanted anything to do with Lorcan except when no one could see, as if Quinn were embarrassed to be seen with him. It didn't matter. Though he still felt a twinge of regret and guilt that he was with Jess right now because of Quinn, he wasn't sorry for it.

Jess had proven that he would be proud to be seen with him, had said he'd be the luckiest man alive to have Lorcan on his arm, and Lorcan believed him. The way he'd looked at him and touched him in the bar tonight told Lorcan so much more than words ever could. As much as he lusted after Quinn—and it had to be just lust, or he wouldn't be here with Jess right now, would he?—Jess offered him something that his soul was seeking even more than love. It was seeking acceptance, and it could find that with Jess.

"What are you thinking about?" Jess whispered into his neck.

"You. How you didn't seem embarrassed that people might think we were... you know, together, at the bar tonight."

Jess pulled back, looking at him with genuine shock on his handsome face. "Why would I be embarrassed? I was the luckiest fucker in that bar tonight." He placed a soft kiss on Lorcan's chin. "I had the most beautiful person by my side."

And then Jess was taking his mouth in another passionate kiss that curled his toes nearly as much as the man's words had. When Jess pushed down against him, Jess's erect cock slid against Lorcan's reawakening hardness. Guiltily, Lorcan realized that he'd gotten off, had had the most delicious orgasm, and yet had left his lover hanging. How could he be so insensitive? He wasn't ready to give his body completely over to anyone just yet. Though he had never given a blowjob, he knew what he liked. What he lacked in experience he was sure he could make up for with raw enthusiasm.

He pushed at Jess's shoulders until the man leaned back, gasping as the kiss was broken.

"What's wrong?" he asked.

Lorcan kept pushing at Jess until he was forced to sit back on the couch. “Nothing is wrong.” He looked at Jess’s erection jutting out from his body. His large cock was so swollen. The head was purple, leaking a nearly steady stream of pre-cum. Jess had been so concerned about Lorcan’s own pleasure and comfort that he had neglected his own, and Lorcan meant to rectify that problem right now.

“Only thing that might be wrong is how painful this looks,” Lorcan said as he wrapped one hand around Jess’s cock, squeezing and eliciting a hiss from Jess at the contact.

Jess leaned back further, his legs spreading in invitation, his lust-filled eyes never breaking contact with Lorcan’s. “Ah, God, pretty boy!”

“My turn to taste,” he said as he leaned down and let his tongue flick across the dark head. Jess was bitter, salty, and all-male. Groaning at the musky flavor, Lorcan looked up from under his lashes, making it as sensual as he could. “Can I have more, Jess?”

Jess’s pulse sped up, his chest heaving as he panted and nodded his head. “You can have anything you want. Anything.”

Lorcan pulled Jess’s cock up and away from his body, opening his mouth wide as he leaned down. He wrapped his lips around the flared head of Jess’s cock and tentatively sucked. Jess’s moans became almost constant. Lorcan couldn’t take him very far into his mouth without gagging, so he wrapped his fingers tighter, stroking up and down as he began to bob his head, hollowing his cheeks as he sucked harder. Setting a rhythm designed to make Jess feed him every ounce of his pleasure.

“Ah, Jesus, pretty boy! So good.”

Jess’s hips began to move under Lorcan’s assault, and he moaned around the heated flesh in his mouth. Lorcan’s own cock was beginning to respond to Jess’s pleasure, a fire just waiting to be coaxed back to life as Jess began taking Lorcan’s mouth in short, powerful thrusts. Lorcan sucked harder, letting the string of pleas and promises that poured from Jess’s parted lips guide him in

what Jess liked. He got the reaction he was looking for when his teeth scraped lightly just below the flared head as he pulled back to lick at the small, oozing slit. Jess's body arched, and Lorcan felt raw lust and power surge through him as he made Jess lose control.

"Not gonna... Christ, you're gonna make me cum."

Lorcan felt the head of Jess's cock swell even larger against his tongue. The next move was pure evil, given how the man loved his hair. He pulled back, pulling off Jess's cock with a wet pop, grabbing the long lengths of his own hair, wrapping them around Jess's cock. With the silky strands, he began to pump from base to tip.

Jess's eyes went wide. "Oh fuck... oh fuck, pretty." His body bowed up off the couch, eyes intent on what Lorcan was doing with his hair.

Lorcan began wrapping his hair around Jess's shaft, pulling it tight and off before repeating the process, the silky strands caressing Jess's cock completely.

"Oh God... gonna... fuck!" Jess bellowed while his big hands fisted in Lorcan's hair as he shot stream after stream of hot cum across Lorcan's chest and neck, a small droplet landing on Lorcan's lips that he quickly licked away, savoring the taste.

Jess helped to untangle Lorcan's hair before pulling him up against his heaving chest, stroking up and down the man's back as he tried to catch his breath. Lorcan melted into the heat of Jess's body as he listened to the steady beat of the heart below his cheek begin to slow.

"Jesus, pretty boy, that was fucking amazing," Jess said as he lifted Lorcan's head up with his free hand. "That was the sexiest thing I've ever seen. Now, do you know what the second sexiest thing I've ever seen is gonna be?"

"I take it you liked that?" he asked with a sly smile.

"*Like* don't touch it. I fucking loved it. Now I'm gonna love the way your hair is gonna look flowing down your back and gorgeous ass while I wash it." He gave Lorcan a sheepish grin. "I think I may have made a little mess of your hair."

Lorcan pulled away enough to look down his body. His hair was plastered to his chest and neck with Jess's spunk. Smiling, he said, "I hear protein is good for hair. Gives it a sleek shine."

Jess chuckled, pulling Lorcan tighter to his chest as he heaved himself up off the couch, forcing Lorcan to wrap his legs around Jess's waist as Jess carried him toward the bathroom. "Shower, then I'll make sure you have the sleekest shine in town."

Oh yeah, he could so get behind that, or in front of that, whatever. Sounded like the perfect plan to him.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

The hot water was pounding against the aching muscles of his back, making him melt further into Jess's warmth as strong hands lathered his hair and massaged his scalp. Lorcan felt like a glob of blissed-out goo, thankful for the strong body in front of him to cling to. He had expected to feel ashamed of what he'd done with Jess, had been bracing for the assault of guilt, but it hadn't come. The only thing he felt bad about was the reason he'd ended up with Jess, but looking at the sweet man as he scrubbed Lorcan's body so gently and thoroughly, with a look of such care in his beautiful dark eyes, he didn't regret being here.

Jess pushed him further into the spray, hands running through Lorcan's hair as the suds were washed away. "That feels amazing."

He had always loved it when his mama had washed his hair or brushed it for him. It soothed him, reminding Lorcan how much he missed being home. How much he missed being able to just tune out the world, not having to worry about what others thought of him. It reminded him of a place where he could breathe and relax. Where he knew that no one was looking down at him, where he was accepted and loved—the way Jess was making him feel right now. For the first time since he had left Indiana, he felt like he could really breathe.

"You feel amazing," Jess whispered as he pulled Lorcan tighter to his chest, his hands still stroking up and down Lorcan's back through his hair.

Lorcan was licking at the rivulets of water rolling down Jess's skin when the memory of Quinn's words hit him.

This hair was free of its tight braid and flowed down your gorgeous body, wet and dripping, and do you know what I was imagining?

Lorcan tried to push away the images of Quinn holding him against the wall, the way the man's body felt against his as he pushed hard against it, describing what Quinn had been fantasizing about. *Dammit! Why can't I get that bastard out of my head?*

Jess was the one holding him, loving on him with a tenderness that he'd never get from Quinn. He shouldn't be letting Quinn step into this moment he was sharing with Jess, but he just couldn't seem to help it. There was something about the rough, no-nonsense cowboy that had his nerve endings lighting up whenever he was within a half-mile radius of the man. Right now he hated Quinn for that. Hated that he couldn't stop thinking about him, wanting him, even when he was standing in the arms of the man that he should be lusting after. Jess was the kind of man that anyone would be damn lucky to have attention from, and here he stood in his arms, thinking about someone else. He was going to get that stubborn, cranky bastard out of his system one way or another, and God dammit, he was going to do it now.

Lorcan lifted his head, reaching up to cup Jess's face in his hands and pulling him down toward him until their lips met. He flicked his tongue out to lick at Jess's full lower lip, then pulled it into his mouth, nipping at it. Jess moaned at the contact, his big body beginning to tremble as he pulled Lorcan closer.

The way Jess responded to his touch reminded Lorcan of how he responded to Quinn, and he deepened the kiss. He became the aggressor, taking Jess's mouth in a bruising, demanding kiss. Jess might not have been able to pull from him the all-consuming lust and desire that Quinn could, but he could pull it from Jess's body. The thought of that was intoxicating.

Lorcan pushed against Jess until his body was flush against the cool tile wall as he fisted his hands in the silky lengths of Jess's

hair, eating at his mouth until the need for oxygen forced them both to break the kiss. Jess's dark blue eyes had gone wide and solid black as his massive chest heaved to catch his breath. Lorcan felt something inside him switch on, a thrill of adrenaline racing through him at the thought of this powerful man beneath him and at his mercy. It set every cell in his body alight with fire.

Lorcan barely recognized his own voice as he grasped Jess's erection forcefully in his hand. He locked eyes with the taller man and gritted out, "I want to fuck you."

He'd never thought of himself on the giving end of a sexual encounter. The fantasies he'd been having about Quinn, he always envisioned himself spreading his legs wide to receive his lover into his body, but the image of himself taking Jess, pounding into his powerful body, had his knees nearly buckling at the thought. He couldn't think of a single thing he wanted more than to be sheathed to the hilt in Jess's heat.

Jess's eyes went wider for a split second before his large hand wrapped around the hand Lorcan was already squeezing Jess's cock with, crushing Lorcan's grip even tighter around his shaft. The strength of the grip pulled a whimper from Jess before he reached out with his free hand and turned off the water without a word.

Lorcan barely registered Jess pulling him from the shower or the soft towel drying his skin. The only thing running through his brain was his need. His need to fuck Jess was so fervent that he felt he would literally explode, scatter into a thousand pieces, if he didn't have him right now.

He felt Jess pull him down onto the bed on top of his body. Wet, heated skin, slick where it met, causing sparks to jump between them in a nearly painful explosion of sensation. Both men cried out when the hard steel of their erections came into contact again.

"Ah, fuck," Lorcan moaned as he ground his erection harder against Jess's. Both of their pricks were leaking, which made their shower-damp skin glide easily together. He wanted this like he

needed his next breath. Still, was he doing this just to get Quinn out of his mind? Was he going to do something that would end up hurting Jess in the long run?

Part of him didn't care why he was doing it or what his motives were. He just knew what he wanted and that he wanted it now.

Their mouths met in a ferocious kiss, Lorcan's body undulating against Jess's, a physical reaction to the power surging through him. He couldn't have stopped his body from moving any more than he could have stopped his mouth from devouring Jess's. It was raw and cannibalistic as he ate at Jess's mouth until he tasted the copper hint of blood, and still he couldn't release Jess's mouth. The taste of Jess pushed him further, deeper into a lust-filled haze. He wanted to consume Jess, take him into his body and savor every morsel.

It was Jess who pulled free, gasping, drawing in gulp after gulp of air and fighting to pull the much-needed oxygen into his lungs. The sight of this large man struggling for something Lorcan had taken from him, the blood dripping from Jess's swollen lips, rocketed Lorcan's arousal even higher than he thought possible.

"Lube... hurry...." Jess gestured with his head toward the bedside table between gasps of air.

Lorcan twisted his body and reached for the drawer, yanking it from its encasement, then pulling it toward him on the bed. He reached in and grabbed a battered tube of lube, snatching it and a condom before pushing the drawer and the rest of its contents to spill onto the floor.

As he lowered his body back fully on top of Jess, their eyes locked. The naked look of love and desire in Jess's eyes stilled his fevered thoughts. Jess was more than just a hole to fuck, more than someone to be used so that Lorcan could eradicate Quinn from his brain. He still wanted Jess, but he wanted to make this good for both of them. It suddenly mattered a great deal to Lorcan that this moment be just as special for Jess as it was for him.

His hands trembled as he opened the lube and squeezed out a

generous amount onto his fingers. "I want to make this good for you too," he said, never looking away from the beautiful blue eyes holding his.

"You already have," Jess sighed, his breathing almost back to normal.

Lorcan leaned back, situating himself between Jess's powerful thighs, and let his slick fingers run down Jess's tight sac, back until he felt the tight pucker of Jess's opening. He watched Jess for any signs of distress or discomfort as he teased his opening with gentle strokes of his fingers. Jess's body responded to each flick of Lorcan's fingers against his sensitive flesh, his thighs parting further in invitation.

Resistance met his finger as he pushed and probed at Jess's opening. "Fuck, you're tight! You sure you want this? Don't want to hurt you."

"You won't. It's been awhile... please, Lorcan...."

Lorcan pushed harder and was rewarded when the muscle gave way, contracting around his digit like it was trying to pull Lorcan further inside.

"Ah... that's it... more."

Jess was bearing down on Lorcan's hand, hips rolling, never looking away. Lorcan wanted to give Jess anything he wanted in that moment. As Jess's body began to relax, Lorcan eased a second digit in alongside the first, slowly twisting and turning his hand, letting his fingers scissor out to stretch the tight passage with each turn of his wrist. Lorcan let his other hand caress the ripped abs, the sleek, hairless flesh of Jess's hips, as the first continued its dance in and out of Jess's body. The image of Jess losing control from his ministrations had his dick twitching and aching.

"I want you," he huffed in a near-breathless whisper. "God, Jess, so fucking bad."

"Take what you need... it's yours."

Lorcan continued the thrusts of his fingers as he opened the foil packet, rolling the condom on one-handed. As he pulled his fingers free of Jess's passage to slick his erection, he heard Jess

whisper his name like a prayer. Moving closer, he guided his erection toward the tight ass before him while his other hand massaged the muscles of Jess's thick thigh.

Then Lorcan was pressing the head of his cock against Jess, rocking slowly in a sensual dance of push and retreat. Each time he pushed a little harder, feeling the tight muscles begin to ease. On the next gentle thrust, he felt Jess's passage open up, taking him in. He groaned at the exquisite heat and tight hold on the head of his prick. Lorcan froze, savoring the way the muscles clamped around the crown of his shaft, tightening and easing in rhythm to Jess's thundering pulse. He'd never felt anything so wonderful. Even a strong hand or a warm mouth was no match for the sensations that were surrounding him.

"Please... more. God, Lorcan, please just move."

Lorcan took confidence from Jess's pleas, knowing he must not be hurting him if he was begging for more. He pushed all the way into Jess's ass with one strong, slow stroke until his balls were flush against the soft skin of Jess's ass. Jess groaned as a shudder ran through his body. He panted as his body began to relax, releasing the death grip around Lorcan's shaft.

Lorcan had never felt anything so fucking good in his life, and he couldn't keep from moving. Not with the way Jess was undulating beneath him, and especially not with the way his ass was milking his cock. It was like Jess's entire being was begging him to move, and Lorcan couldn't ignore the call.

He pulled back slowly as Jess looped his hands beneath his knees, pulling them up closer to his chest, exposing his ass further. It was an invitation Lorcan couldn't resist, and he plunged back in with his full force, making them both cry out in pleasure.

"Oh fuck... oh... Jesus! Jess, you feel good." Lorcan's hips began to piston in and out of Jess in short, stabbing motions. "Please, tell me this is okay.... God! Jess, I can't stop."

Jess released his legs, wrapping them around Lorcan's waist and pulling him tighter against him. His hand grabbed Lorcan behind his neck to bring their mouths together in a frantic kiss that

sent Lorcan soaring higher. His hips increased in speed as he began to slam against Jess with uncontrolled passion.

“Don’t you dare fucking stop.... Fuck me... fuck....”

Jess’s words were cut off, all sound dying in his throat as Lorcan hit something inside Jess that made the man tighten, his face offering a reflection of pure bliss. Lorcan changed the angle of his thrusts in order to hit Jess’s sweet spot over and over as Jess reached his arms up over his head to grab the headboard in order to keep himself in place. Jess began thrusting his hips upward to meet every downward thrust of Lorcan’s hips. Lorcan knew it was a dance as old as time, but still he doubted that anyone had been matched more perfectly than he and Jess. Their bodies were in perfect sync.

“Not gonna... can’t...,” Lorcan panted. God, he was so close, but he didn’t want this pleasure to end.

All those gorgeous muscles rippling and flexing beneath him had Lorcan’s mouth watering. The heady scents of passion and sex in the air only heightened his pleasure further as he felt the first telltale signs of his orgasm rushing down his spine. Lorcan gave one last brutal thrust of his hips and, at the same time, bent down to bite into the taut muscle of Jess’s chest.

Lorcan only had enough brain cells left in his head to grab onto Jess’s swollen flesh and jerk it hard. The action made Jess cry out and fall into the abyss of ecstasy with him. As the muscles in Jess’s ass clamped down tight on Lorcan’s prick, his orgasm stretched out harder and longer than he’d ever thought possible. Through the convulsions that racked Lorcan’s body, he felt Jess’s hot seed pour over his hand and land on Jess’s stomach. He felt complete.

As the aftershocks of their coupling began to recede and their breathing slowed to less painful gasps, Lorcan’s muscles gave out, and he collapsed full-force on top of Jess. Jess wrapped his arms around him, squeezing him against his chest. Lorcan’s heavy-lidded eyes closed, refusing to open as he savored the feel of Jess completely wrapped around him. He was just giving in to the

demand for sleep when he heard Jess whisper, “I love you, pretty boy.”

But he couldn’t respond, sleep already taking him.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

The thick smell of bacon frying made Quinn's stomach feel like forgoing the whole breakfast thing and opting for upchucking, then lying really, really still in some dark corner. Some really, really *dark* corner that was really, really *quiet*, his head added. *What the fuck was I thinking, drinking like a goddamn lush?* He was painfully reminded why he didn't like drinking, but at the time it had seemed like a good idea. If he could just drink himself into a coma, he wouldn't have to see the look in Lorcan's eyes or the way he pulled Jess out of the bar over and over.

"Morning, Quinn," Conner yelled out as he walked into the too-bright kitchen that had him pulling his hat down further on his head.

Did the man have to sound so fucking cheery in the morning?

"Morning," he grumbled as he took a seat at the table and reached for the coffee. *Oh, there is a God.*

"Late night?" John asked.

Quinn just glared at the man for asking such a stupid question and went back to nursing his coffee.

Conner set the nauseating bacon on the table in front of him, taking the chair opposite Quinn. "Must have been one hell of a party. You look like shit! What happened? Did you have to leave Lorcan to sleep it off in the truck?"

That got Quinn's attention. "Lorcan's not here?"

Lorcan wouldn't have actually gone home and stayed with

Jess? Fuck! He should have gone after him. Should have chased his ass down and hogtied him if he had to. No way would Lorcan spend the night with Jess, would he? Had Lorcan been that mad at the stupid comment that Jake had made about the train? He couldn't have taken it seriously. Lorcan knew how Quinn felt about him, and *hello*—gay!

“You mean he didn't come home with you?” Conner grabbed his hand across the table, panic in his voice. “Did you have a fight? Did he have a ride? You think I should call the sheriff and make sure he's okay? The hospitals?”

“I'm sure he's fine,” Quinn said as he pulled his hand free.

Probably more than fine. Probably still wrapped up in Jess's arms. The image of Lorcan in Jess's arms was so painful that Quinn felt as if he was being crushed. His chest felt as if it was imploding in on itself, and he couldn't catch his breath.

“You know where he is?” Conner pleaded.

He nodded, fighting back the tears that were burning at the back of his eyes. “He's with Jess.”

It felt as if the walls were closing in on him and there was no air in the room. He got to his feet and headed for the door, but before he could make it, Conner grabbed his arm, spinning him around.

“Why is Lorcan with Jess? Why the hell didn't you bring him home?” Conner glared at him, the anger turning his wrinkled face an ugly shade of purple. “What the hell did you do, Quinn?”

Quinn ripped his arm from Conner's grasp. “I didn't do a fucking thing!” he yelled. “I got to the bar, and he was all over Jess.” The anger felt a hell of a lot better than the sheer misery he'd felt a moment ago, and he used it to push away the pain. “What the fuck was I supposed to do, Conner? Lorcan is a grown man and can do whatever the fuck he wants. It has nothing to do with me.”

God, this is so fucked up, and yeah, I probably haven't treated Lorcan right, but did he have to run to Jess? Did he care so little about my feelings that he jumped in bed with Jess the first

chance he got? Fuck, fuck, fuck!

He fled from the room, staggering out the front door and slamming it hard enough behind him that the hinges threatened to come loose from the frame. The only thing he could think of doing was running. His heart hurt, and he couldn't get enough air in his lungs. He'd be damned if he was going to stand here where anyone could see him fucking cry.

Quinn headed for the barn, just one foot in front of the other. Right, left, right, left. He fought the urge to wrap his arms around himself and just start bawling. Quinn concentrated on his boots, blocking everything out. *Just get to the barn, saddle up Jeb, and get the hell out of here.* Right, left, right, left.

He stayed focused on grabbing the saddle, the blanket, the reins, stuff he could do with his eyes closed, but he ran through the process over and over in his head so as not to think about anything but the task in front of him. He'd nearly gotten the job done when he heard footsteps behind him.

"Quinn," John said in his quiet tone.

Quinn had expected the little bantam rooster, Conner, to follow him out and demand to know what was going on, but John's voice shocked him into standing still instead of mounting Jeb and running like hell. Run from the pain, the hurt, the confusion, all of it. He sure as hell didn't want to look too deep inside himself, knowing he wouldn't like what he found there or the idea that he was the one that had pushed Lorcan away.

"I'm okay," he said, working to keep his voice even. "Go on back inside and calm Conner down."

John moved up next to him, petting Jeb's neck as he spoke. "Conner's fine. It's you I'm more worried about. Wanna talk about it?"

Quinn just stared at Jeb's saddle, not wanting John to see the pain in his eyes. "Nothing to say. Lorcan made his choice."

"Did you even give him a choice?" John asked quietly.

Quinn's first instinct was to blame this on Lorcan. He was the one in Jess's arms, the one who had left with the man without

even saying a word. Turned right around after looking Quinn straight in the eye and walked out of the bar with Jess.

As badly as he wanted to blame Lorcan for the pain he was suffering, he knew that it wasn't fair, that it was his own fault.

"No, I didn't," Quinn finally admitted to John and to himself.

"C'mon, let's go have a seat on the back porch. I wanna tell you something."

Quinn could only follow John out of the barn. The man rarely talked, even more rarely about personal shit. He was more of the "actions speak louder than words" kind. He showed his love and passions with everything he set out to do. John never did anything half-assed, and Quinn's respect for the man had him taking a seat next to him on the porch.

John stared out over the fields with quiet concentration on his face for a moment before he finally began to speak. "When I first met Conner, I knew he was like no one I'd ever met. He knew what he was, was proud of the fact that he didn't hide who he was, and had some idealistic belief that love couldn't be wrong even if that love was for another man. I didn't agree with him, and I nearly threw away the best thing that ever happened to me because I was too afraid of people knowing I was gay."

"I can understand that."

John turned and looked at him with eyes just a-blazing in anger. "Why would you understand that? He was the one who was honest. I was living a lie. Back then it wasn't nearly as accepted as it is now, and he was brave enough to stand up and say that loving someone was worth any amount of scorn or rejection or even violence. He stood with his head held high no matter what others did to him. He believed that every ounce of the bad was worth having a shot at happiness with me. And do you know what?"

Quinn didn't answer, knew he didn't have to. John was going to tell him whether he wanted to hear it or not. He had a damn good idea he wasn't going to like it.

"It took me nearly losing him before I realized that he was right." John shook his head. "I was a coward. I had the belief that

the approval of the whole community was more important than what Conner was offering me. But those beliefs didn't make me happy, they didn't make me laugh, and they sure as hell didn't keep me warm at night. Your Lorcan is a lot like my Conner. He has lived with scorn and rejection his whole life, but it didn't stop him from hoping for a shot at his own happiness."

Quinn let his head rest back on the chair, closing his eyes. John was right. Lorcan did wear his feelings on his sleeve. The way the man would look at him, no matter who was around, or the way he'd stand quietly waiting for Quinn with a look of desire in his eyes. Not a sexual desire, but one of wanting to be recognized as someone who mattered to Quinn.

You're a fucking coward, Taylor.

Not once had he found the balls to show Lorcan any kind of care. He'd avoided him when others were around so they wouldn't see the way Lorcan looked at him. He only sought Lorcan out in dark corners or in the wee hours of the night, like he was some dirty little secret that Quinn was ashamed of. How in the hell could he have been such an idiot?

"What do I do?" he finally asked John. How was he ever going to make this up to Lorcan?

John stood and patted his shoulder. "I can't answer that for you, Quinn. You have to decide if he's worth the shot."

Quinn sat and watched as John walked back into the house. He had a lot to think about, but one thing he knew for sure: Lorcan was worth a hell of a lot more than what Quinn had given him.

The warm press of lips against his forehead had Lorcan blinking his eyes open and smiling into Jess's warm blue eyes. "Morning."

Jess's smile was wide and brilliant. "Morning, pretty boy." He lowered his head, placing a soft kiss against Lorcan's mouth.

“Did you sleep good?”

Lorcan’s smile widened as he realized that he’d slept better than he had in weeks. His head was a little fuzzy, his gut feeling a little off from the alcohol, but he felt good. He felt, for the first time since leaving home, like he was where he was truly and completely wanted.

“Mmm-hmm, how about you, big guy? How you feeling this morning?”

“Like I need to be pinched.”

Lorcan reached over and pinched Jess’s nipple between his finger and thumb.

“Ow!” Jess yelped before busting out in a full belly laugh, the sound so happy that Lorcan couldn’t help but laugh along with him.

“Guess you’re not dreaming.”

Jess pulled him in tighter to his chest, peppering his face with kisses before he answered, “Thank God. I was so worried that I’d wake up to realize that my dream of having the most beautiful man I’d ever laid eyes on wrapped up in my arms would only be that, a dream.”

Lorcan snuggled in further against Jess’s warmth. He felt a pang of guilt when Quinn popped into his head. He had felt the same way about Quinn the first and only time he’d woken in Quinn’s arms. Felt as if his dreams of finding someone he could so easily love, someone who might love him back in return, had finally come true. But his dream hadn’t lasted very long before the cruel taste of reality had slapped him in the face when he realized that he could only have Quinn’s attentions behind closed doors. That Quinn would never acknowledge that there was anything between them in public. He wished he could feel the all-consuming desire for Jess that he did for Quinn, but in some ways, this was better. Jess was warm and safe. He was proud to admit to anyone and everyone who would listen that he wanted to be with Lorcan.

“You’re such a sap! C’mon, big guy, what’s the plan for the day? You gonna give me a ride back to the ranch?”

“I could, but I’d rather spend the day with you, since it’s our day off. Show you the sights around Pegasus.”

Yeah, that worked for him. The last thing he wanted to do was spend his day trying to avoid Quinn. “Sounds good, I’d like that. How about you run me back to the ranch, let me grab some clean clothes, and then we can make a day of it?”

Jess nuzzled in, kissing along Lorcan’s jaw and neck. “Mmm, I like that plan, except the idea of you with clothes on, but we can work around that, I’m sure.”

Lorcan chuckled not only at Jess’s words but at the tingling he was inflicting on his skin. He pushed at Jess, needing to get the man moving, or they wouldn’t be going anywhere. “You show me the right sights today, and we can negotiate the clothes.”

“Ooh, strip-sightseeing! You’re on.” Jess laughed as he reluctantly let Lorcan go and slid out of bed. “I’ll take a quick shower and be ready in no time. That is, unless you wanna join me?” he said as he waggled his brows.

Lorcan pointed a finger towards the door with a mock-stern look on his face. “Go! I want breakfast and coffee before I’ll be in any mood to let you woo me.”

Jess pouted but headed toward the door. “Fine, but just for that, you can make it up to me by snuggling me tonight.”

Lorcan watched as Jess walked out the door. Damn, the man was fine, all that muscle and that perfect tight ass. His dick jerked as if it remembered just how tight and hot that ass had been around him. His head was all onboard for spending time following that gorgeous body around, and his dick was catching up. It might not have been racing to get noticed, but it was definitely getting interested. *What was it the turtle said? Oh yeah, sure and steady wins the race, and Jess is certainly a hell of a prize.*

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

He'd putzed around all morning, trying to find excuses not to head out to the back pasture and check the cattle. Now, as he watched Jess pull into the yard with Lorcan, he was rethinking this whole self-abuse thing. Seeing them together in the light of day after knowing that the men had spent the night together was causing a pain in his chest that felt as if his heart was being ripped out.

Quinn stayed seated on the porch, doubting his legs would carry him at the moment, and watched as the two laughed together in the cab of the truck, and he wanted to fucking cry. He had known that Jess was interested in Lorcan the moment he'd introduced them—the man did nothing to hide his attraction. Right in front of God and everyone, he had said, *Jesus, I think I'm in love*. Quinn hadn't worried too much on it at the time, since Lorcan just blushed and hadn't encouraged Jess's attentions. In fact, he still looked at Quinn with desire in his eyes even when Jess was around. Had Quinn not been such a fucking coward, it would be Jess sitting here watching him and Lorcan laugh, feeling like he was about to lose his best friend.

Quinn watched as Lorcan stepped out of the truck, making his way to the house. He knew the exact moment when Lorcan realized he was sitting there by the way Lorcan's boot hesitated on the step and he averted his eyes.

"Morning, Lorcan."

Lorcan didn't raise his head, just said, "Morning," as he started moving toward the back door.

"Got a minute? I was hoping I'd get a chance to talk to you."

Lorcan stopped with his hand on the doorknob. "It's my day off, sir. Jess is waiting for me, gonna show me the sights."

Sir? Oh, someone was pissed. "I'm reduced to 'sir'?"

"Yup. Can I go now?"

"Lorcan, please, can we not do this?" He stood but didn't make any move toward Lorcan. "I just want to apologize."

Lorcan's knuckles turned white as he held on to the doorknob, but he didn't look up. "Apology accepted. Now I gotta go."

He hadn't planned on doing it. In fact, he had promised himself he was only going to apologize, but what came out of his mouth was, "You spent the whole Goddamn night with him, but you can't give me five fucking minutes?" *Shit. So much for only trying to apologize.*

Lorcan whirled, meeting his gaze with pure rage in his dark eyes. "You're my boss, and when I'm on the clock, I have to listen to you, but what I do in my free time or who I do it with is none of your fucking business."

"Jesus, would you just let me explain?" *Explain that you're ripping my fucking heart out here?*

Lorcan fisted his hands at his sides, his face flushed in anger. "You forget, I know exactly how you apologize and explain shit. Been there, done that, and don't plan to ever do it again."

"Everything all right?" Jess called from where he was now standing next to his truck.

"Fine, just letting the boss know we'll both be back here tomorrow at five a.m. for morning chores," Lorcan called back to Jess without taking his eyes off Quinn, the challenge evident in his eyes. "Be right there, big guy."

"God, baby, what do I have to do to make you listen? Jake was drunk and just being stupid. I didn't go home with them." He hated the way he sounded like he was begging, but that was

exactly what he was doing.

He'd do that and more if Lorcan would just give him a chance. He didn't really deserve the chance but, dammit, if he could make this right, he wouldn't ever let Lorcan think he wasn't wanted or that he was ever embarrassed for anyone to know how he felt about him.

"Don't you dare call me that," Lorcan hissed under his breath. "This has nothing to do with your little train. I hope you didn't miss the train on my account."

"Will you—" Quinn tried to speak, but Lorcan cut him off.

"*No!*" he screamed "I don't want to hear a fucking word out of your mouth! You made me feel like I was shit. Like I didn't fucking matter one bit to you." His voice rose as his body began to shake in rage. "I saved your life, for fuck's sakes, and you couldn't even treat me like I was your friend! Nothing but someone you wanted to get your rocks off on, like I was dirty or something." He pointed toward Jess, his voice continuing to rise, nearly frantic now. "Jess showed me more respect and care in one night than you have in a month." Lorcan turned and jerked the door open. "Jess is waiting, and I'll be damned if it will be because of you that he's standing over there fretting. Fire me if you want. I hope you fucking do." With a flurry of chestnut hair trailing behind him, he stomped into the house and disappeared.

Quinn plopped his ass down in the chair he'd vacated as his knees gave out. He'd royally fucked up. He couldn't deny one thing that Lorcan had accused him of. He watched as Jess got back into his truck, shutting the door. The sound of it closing was like a curtain going down at the end of a show, the finality of it, the last encore. For the audience, there was always the hope the show would play again, if not here, then in another town, another state. There wouldn't be another show for Quinn. He knew he'd done irreparable damage to his relationship with Lorcan, and sadly, there wasn't a damn thing he could do about it. He'd committed the highest of offenses to Lorcan. He'd judged him, scorned him, and made him an outcast. Perhaps not for the same reason that

others had done throughout Lorcan's life, but that did little to dissipate the god-awful feeling that what he had done was far worse. He was what others had thought Lorcan was. He was the one who had known most of his life that he was attracted to the same sex, though he hid it. Had been blessed with an exterior that no one questioned; no one looked at him with suspicious eyes or curious looks. Until Henderson's attempt to take his land, he'd not once been accused of being gay, of hiding behind a lie, because it wasn't anyone's business. He wasn't just a coward, but a liar. Quinn had been lying to himself for years.

Lorcan, on the other hand, had suffered his entire life at the hands of others, the perpetual outsider, the butt of jokes and ridicule, yet he hadn't been afraid of his attraction to Quinn. He hadn't tried to hide his desire, even knowing he was heading down a path that would lead him to more of the painful and humiliating treatment he'd endured.

Quinn heaved himself out of his chair and headed inside. He didn't deserve someone like Lorcan. He'd turned Lorcan's pure and wonderful feelings into something ugly, something to be ashamed of. He stepped into his room, shutting the door quietly behind him, sitting on the edge of the bed with his head in his hands as he listened to Lorcan move around his room. He did something he hadn't allowed himself since his daddy had passed. He cried—for his loss, for what could have been... but mostly, he cried in shame.

He flipped the knob on the shower and stepped in, cursing as the cold water hit him. Lorcan was pissed and too fucking impatient to wait for the water to warm up. His sole focus was on getting out of here and far away from Quinn as quickly as he could. Lorcan didn't want to hear the man's apologies or anything else he had to say. He was half tempted to pack his crap and ask

Jess if he could stay with him. Even as he thought it, he knew that wasn't fair. He didn't want to move into Jess's place because Quinn had pissed him off. Jess deserved better than that. Hell, he deserved better than what Lorcan could give him. Even after the way Quinn had ignored him when others were around, he had still felt his heart speed up and his body respond when he'd first noticed Quinn sitting on the porch. Why in the hell did life have to be so complicated? It was supposed to be black and white. Someone was nice to you? You fell in love with them. Someone treated you wrong? You stayed the fuck away from them.

Turning off the shower, Lorcan snagged a towel as he headed back into his room, slamming the door. He dried quickly, dressing in jeans and a soft button-up shirt before looking at himself in the mirror. So much had happened to him since he'd first announced to his family that he was going off on a little adventure. He didn't look any different, still the spittin' image of his mama, but he was totally rearranged on the inside. It felt as if some crazy interior designer had shown up unannounced, deciding that everything Lorcan liked and was comfortable with should be ripped away and donated to the Goodwill or some other charity before he could protest. What was left was all shiny and new and, in some ways, better, and in others? Not so much.

Lorcan ran his brush through his hair, making sure every knot and snarl was free, knowing how Jess loved to run his fingers through it. He smiled at himself when he thought of Jess. The man was the part of the rearranging that he thought was better. He hadn't expected to be more than friends, though he had some guilt over why they had ended up spending the night together, but he didn't regret it. Jess might not have made rockets fly or set fireworks off, but what Lorcan did feel for the man was sweet and homey. Sometimes that was more important than passion and flashy gunpowder.

Throwing his brush back onto the dresser, he headed out the door, quietly making his way past Quinn's room. Lorcan hesitated for a moment when he thought he heard a muffled sob, but that

was ridiculous. Wishful thinking on his part, no doubt. Quinn wouldn't spare a tear for him. It just made him all the more angry that he was still holding onto some kind of hope that he hadn't been the only one to have felt something between them.

Jess is out there waiting on me, no conflict, no wondering how he feels. Lorcan quickened his steps and headed out. He had a date with an amazing man who was willing to parade his *beautiful* ass around in broad daylight. He'd be damned if he was going to let thoughts of Quinn ruin it.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Quinn had just started into that place where sleep was about to take him when the phone rang. “Hello?” he snapped into the receiver.

“Quinn? It’s Sheriff Carlton.”

Quinn straightened himself up in his office chair and wiped at his sleep-heavy eyes. “Hey, Ed. Sorry about snapping at you. You caught me just as I was about to doze off. What’s up?”

Ed chuckled into the phone. “You must be working too hard. I didn’t take you for one to be sleeping in the middle of the afternoon.”

“Not usually, but I’ve been having a hard time sleeping at night.” That was the understatement of the year. He didn’t think he’d slept more than a couple of hours in the last few days. His nerves were raw. He pitied anyone coming too close if he didn’t get some sleep soon.

“Understandable. Look, the reason I’m calling, I was at the courthouse today, and Henderson entered a plea of ‘not guilty’. Thought you should know.”

“What?” Quinn came fully awake like he’d just been doused with ice water. “I thought the judge was going to set a sentence date after Henderson pleads guilty? Some bullshit technicality?”

“Yeah, that’s what I thought too. His lawyer entered a not guilty plea and invoked his right to a trial by jury.”

“God dammit! What is that fucking bastard up to now?” He

was so sick and tired of dealing with Henderson. He was going to have to take time away from his ranch to sit across from the evil shit for God knew how long. He had enough shit to deal with without having to spend his time on some bullshit trial.

Ed sighed into the phone. "I'm sorry, Quinn. If there's anything I can do, just ask."

"Yeah, thanks, Ed. It just pisses me off that after everything the man's done to me, I gotta take more time away from my ranch on his account."

"I know. I'm sure your attorney will be calling you later today with the same shit news. Just thought I'd give you a heads-up."

"Thanks. Appreciate the call." Quinn hung up the phone and leaned back in his chair. Well, he had been hoping to find an excuse to talk to Lorcan about something other than what needed to be done around the ranch. *Careful what you wish for.*

He found Lorcan sitting on a bale of hay in the barn, sweat dripping off him as he took a break from mucking stalls. As usual, Quinn's dick started bouncing up and down, trying to get Lorcan's attention. He had to give it a hard thump to settle it the fuck down. Lorcan already believed that Quinn only wanted him just to get his rocks off. The last thing he needed to be doing was popping a boner in front of him. Problem was, he couldn't help it. He was in a constant state of arousal when Lorcan was around. As much as his heart wanted Lorcan for more, he couldn't control what his body wanted when the man was around.

He took a deep breath and stepped into the barn. "Hey, Lorcan, got a minute?"

"Not slackin', boss, just taking five."

Quinn noticed there were only a couple of stalls left to do. What should have been an all-day job for most, Lorcan could complete by noon. Hell, he could do it better than those who took all day.

"Never accused you of being a slacker. Stalls look great."

"Thanks. You got something else you want me to do after

lunch?” Lorcan said, looking at him warily.

He hated that he was the one who put that look in Lorcan’s eyes. “No, didn’t come to talk to you about work.”

“Then I’m not interested. I told you that.”

“I’m not here to force my apology on you.” Quinn had to put his hands in his pockets when the urge to reach out to Lorcan grew with each step he took closer. “I got a call from the sheriff.”

Lorcan’s smile was cocky. “So when do we get to go to his sentencing?”

Quinn grabbed his own bale, moving it around to sit across from Lorcan. “We don’t.”

“What? Why the hell not? Fucker nearly killed us. We deserve to hear how many years he gets.”

“Ed called to let me know that Henderson’s attorney entered a plea of not guilty. Guess we go to trial.” Quinn shrugged.

“Fuck.” Lorcan frowned. “Everyone knows he did it. What the hell is he trying to pull?”

“My guess is it’s a delay tactic. He’s out on bond, and the longer he can draw this out, the longer he can stay a free man. The guy is old. He’s probably thinking he can draw this out long enough that he won’t ever have to serve a single day of his sentence.” He ran his hand through his too-long hair. It needed to see the inside of a barbershop real soon. “Just sucks that I gotta take time from the ranch to play this game, ya know?”

Lorcan shook his head, sending the droplets of sweat flying, his dark hair nearly black with the dampness of it. Quinn watched as a bead of sweat rolled down Lorcan’s throat and disappeared into the V of skin exposed at his neck. Before he realized it, he was licking his lips at the thought of following down the same path. *Stop it. Stop fucking torturing yourself.* “Um... the attorney will want to see both of us. Want me to make our appointments together, or would you prefer...?”

“No, together is fine,” Lorcan interrupted. “I’m sure you wanna get this shit over with as soon as possible.” He met Quinn’s eyes. “I’m really sorry you gotta go through this.”

Quinn nodded, staring back at those warm brown eyes. “This isn’t the hardest thing I’ve had to go through lately.”

“Yeah, nearly dying would probably be at the top of your list.”

“I was talking about how I fucked up things with you.”

“Quinn, I...”

Before Lorcan could finish his sentence, Jess walked in, calling out, “Hey, pretty boy, you ready for lunch?”

Lorcan smiled as Jess moved up to stand behind him. Quinn was sure he had seen—desire? Want?—in Lorcan’s eyes before Jess had shown up. Was he just seeing what he wanted to see, or had it really been there?

“Hey, big guy,” Lorcan replied “I got two more stalls to do, and then I’ll be ready.” He motioned toward Quinn with his thumb. “Quinn got some shit news. Henderson pled not guilty today. We gotta go to trial.”

Jess looked down at him from where he stood behind Lorcan. One of his big hands was resting on Lorcan’s shoulder in a “don’t forget, you fucked up, and now he’s mine” gesture, but there was real sympathy in his eyes too. “Oh, that sucks. Sorry to hear that, man. Do you have any idea when or how long it will take?”

He shook his head but couldn’t take his eyes from where Jess was touching Lorcan. “No, was telling Lorcan here that the attorney would no doubt be calling to see us both.” He needed to get the fuck out of here. He couldn’t stand to see them in the same room together, let alone touching each other. The final straw was when Lorcan reached up and grabbed Jess’s hand, giving it a squeeze.

“I got some calls to make,” Quinn announced as he jumped to his feet.

Lorcan stood as well, the desire still there in his eyes as he looked up at Quinn. “Just let me know when, and I’m there.”

“Thanks. Y’all have a nice lunch.” He even managed to say it with an even voice instead of a bitter one. He’d even been able to keep the wince at bay as Jess wrapped his arm around Lorcan just

as Quinn turned to head out of the barn.

“That goes for me too,” Jess called out. “Just let me know if there is anything I can do.”

Did the man have to be so fucking nice? Quinn wanted to hate him. Wanted to find some flaw in him, some reason why he wasn't good enough for Lorcan. Fuck if he could find one. As Quinn made it to the house, he had to concede that the best man had won. He didn't have to like it. It didn't stop the self-loathing, since he was the one who had pushed Lorcan to the man in the first place, but he did have to admit it. Jess was perfect. *Fuck.*

Lorcan watched as Quinn walked out of the barn. Though the man hid it well, Lorcan had spent enough time just watching Quinn that he knew what he was feeling. The look in his eyes as Jess touched him, the way he held himself as he walked away, screamed “defeated.”

“C'mon, big guy, you can help me muck the fuck.” He started to walk past, but Jess stepped in front of him.

“You okay?”

“Yeah, I just feel bad for him. This ranch is the most important thing in his life. I hate to see anyone have to fight so hard for something they love.”

Jess reached up, pushing a strand of unruly hair behind Lorcan's ear. “You want me to muck the stalls so you can go talk to him?”

Jesus, the man was unbelievable. Lorcan looked up and met Jess's eyes. Though Jess had offered, his eyes told Lorcan he was begging him to say no, which he did. “No, I'm sure he'll be fine. Plus, you promised to share your lunch with me.” He found a smile for Jess—the guy just made it easy.

Jess's eyes lit up, and the relief was evident in his big grin. “Good, 'cause I brought you a banana. Wanna play monkey?”

“Hey, you keep your banana peel up,” he laughed. “I said lunch. Dessert’s for after hours.”

Jess’s pout was priceless. “I was only thinking about your needs. Protein is an important part of a healthy diet.”

“Uh huh. If you were thinking about healthy shit, you’d have gotten your daily dose of protein before work this morning.” He spun out of the way just in time to avoid a slap to his ass.

“You little shit,” Jess said as he stalked toward Lorcan. “Not my fault you missed my mouth.”

Lorcan just giggled, running for the stalls. “Well, if you had held still....”

“And how was I supposed to do that when you bit my banana just as yours exploded?”

“Oh, fuck, that was funny.” His belly ached with laughter. “I never knew someone your size could move that fast.”

“I’ll show you fast.”

Lorcan had to scale the stall to avoid the tackle. He took off at a dead run out of the barn, laughing so hard he was nearly crying. Jess was right on his tail. “C’mon, monkey, wanna bite?”

The air rushed out of him with an *oomph* as Jess tackled him to the ground, laughing just as hard as he was.

He felt bad for Quinn. He wished things were different, and Lord knew he was still a puddle of want whenever the man looked at him, but the way Jess made him laugh, the fun they had whenever they were together.... Lorcan knew that things had worked out exactly the way they should have.

CHAPTER TWENTY

The trial for Henderson was set to start that morning, and since Jess was out of town for a family emergency, Lorcan found himself riding to town with Quinn. Being so close to the man made everything that much more intense. When it came to Quinn, the attraction he felt for him was already off the charts at a distance. This close, he was downright in agony in the confines of the cab. He didn't dare squirm or try to adjust his aching cock with the man so close. The only thing making it even remotely tolerable was Quinn's file folder sitting on his lap, hiding the evidence of his desire.

Quinn hadn't turned on the radio, and the silence in the truck was so thick that it felt as if it were a living entity. Lorcan tried to focus on the scenery passing by his window, but it blurred into just one mass of color. As hard as he tried, he couldn't concentrate on anything but the man sitting next to him. He'd made up his mind that he'd made the right choice in seeing where things could go with Jess. He was convinced that Jess was the right person for him, but his dick hadn't gotten the memo that it wasn't supposed to be lusting after anyone but Jess. *Stubborn bastard.*

"How's Jess's dad doing?"

Thank goodness Quinn had picked a topic of conversation that wasn't going to make him too uncomfortable. "Don't know yet. He called from the airport this morning, but I haven't talked to him since he went to the hospital. He's supposed to call tonight."

Quinn nodded but kept his eyes on the road. "Sucks that he finally got to retire in sunny Florida and he falls ill. Don't seem fair."

Lorcan shrugged. "Yeah, well, hopefully he'll be okay."

They rode in silence for a few minutes, Lorcan's tension rising with each passing minute.

"How's—"

"What can—"

They both laughed, a little of the tension easing with it.

"You first," Quinn said.

"Was just going to ask what we could expect today?"

Quinn shrugged. "I'm guessin' a whole lot of boring today. Knowing Henderson is trying to draw this out as long as he can, I suspect his attorney will motion to postpone."

"This could go on for months. Hell, maybe years."

Lorcan had talked to Mama last night, had thought maybe he could go home for a little while, get his head on straight. He hadn't made any concrete plans, but after Mama started crying, Daddy had taken the phone. When he had gotten choked up too, Lorcan had promised them he would be home in December. Man, he didn't want to make that call if he had to tell them he couldn't come. It would break their hearts.

"I told Mama I'd be home by December. Do you think the trial could still be going on?"

"You're still going home?" Quinn asked, sounding a little startled. "I thought you would stay on here. What with you and Jess... well, you know."

Lorcan glanced over, catching the sadness and pain in Quinn's eyes, and had to turn away. "Not sure what I'm going to do come winter. Jess and me..." Jesus, he didn't want to talk about Jess with Quinn.

"What?"

"I care about him, but Mama was crying, and then Daddy got upset. Yeah, I told them I would think about it, and I will."

"Have you told Jess?"

“Do you really want to talk about Jess and my relationship with him?”

“I guess I was hoping it wasn’t a relationship.” Quinn sighed. “Maybe there was still hope that I’d eventually get a chance to make up for how I behaved?”

Lorcan laid his head back in the seat and stared out the window, letting out a sigh of his own. He knew Quinn was sorry. He could see it in the way he looked at him, the self-loathing in the slump of his shoulders, and Lorcan hated that he still wanted Quinn to make it up to him. He hated that he still wanted him with an all-consuming desire, but Jess deserved a chance. He wasn’t going to do anything to hurt Jess if he could help it. Besides, just because Quinn was sorry didn’t necessarily mean the man could change the way he was.

“I know you’re sorry, Quinn, I get that. It’s... Jess is a great guy. Just....”

Quinn stared at Lorcan for so long that he wondered not *if*, but *when* they would go off the road.

“What?” Quinn finally asked quietly.

“Nothing.”

He wasn’t sure how to explain to Quinn what he meant. He knew he hadn’t liked the way Quinn made him feel around others. He found it hard to let it go, since he was still having a hard enough time dealing with the fact that he finally had to admit to himself that he wasn’t just curious about his attraction to men, but that he preferred them. He didn’t have anything to compare it to except kisses and a little heavy petting with a woman, but then again, he didn’t really need the comparison, did he? He knew he’d never found any woman as intriguing or as desirable as he had Quinn, and he doubted that would ever change. He couldn’t imagine that any woman would make him feel as powerful as he did when Jess submitted to Lorcan’s desires. He was damn well sure that the soft curves of a female couldn’t make his dick as hard, as thick, as hard muscles did. Still, it weighed heavily on him. It had been one thing to fight against those who accused him of being

“unnatural” just because of the way he looked. How would he deal with it when he went home and had to admit that what people had always assumed about him was true?

The truck slowed and eased off the side of the road. Quinn put the truck in park before turning toward him. He waited to speak until Lorcan met his eyes. “Please, Lorcan, it’s just what?”

He had been hoping that Quinn would explain what had gone wrong. What he’d done wrong to make Quinn treat him the way he had around other people. He didn’t want to be the one to put it into words, to be the one putting his emotions out on the line. But the pleading sound of Quinn’s voice and the grief he saw in his eyes had him replying.

“It’s just whatever you call what we did together, it ignited something in me. I don’t know if I was denying or hiding or what, but it made me truly look at myself. The minute I realized it, I accepted it.” He turned away, hiding his burning eyes. “You made me feel....” He couldn’t finish. His voice had begun to crack, and he’d be damned if he was going to let Quinn see him cry like a little boy. Making a fool of himself when he knew he couldn’t continue without losing it.

“Feel what?”

Lorcan shook his head. “Never mind, it doesn’t matter.”

“Please?” Quinn pleaded. “I need to understand what I did.”

Understand? How could he not understand what he had done? Did Lorcan mean so little to Quinn that he wasn’t even worth being treated decently in public? Lorcan could feel the anger begin to simmer and rise. He fought to keep his voice neutral as he turned and met Quinn’s eyes. He didn’t think he did very well at hiding his anger, and he certainly hadn’t controlled his voice when he snarled, “What is there to understand? The part where you didn’t give a shit enough about me to even treat me like a fucking friend in public, or the part where you made me feel for the first time in my life that I was ashamed of who I am?”

Quinn flinched as if he’d been struck before turning away. His face looked like it had been carved out of granite as he stared

at the empty road in front of him, not giving away anything he might be thinking or feeling. Was he going to say anything? Would he even acknowledge Lorcan's feeling?

Quinn stayed silent for so long Lorcan could feel his throat close as a lump formed, and he fought back the angry tears that threatened to spill. He wasn't sure whom he was angrier at: himself for revealing his feelings, or Quinn for not even acknowledging them. His embarrassment and anger at Quinn had him reaching for the door and stepping out onto the gravel. He wasn't sure where he was going, but he knew he needed to be as far away from Quinn as he could get at the moment.

The slamming of his door must have brought Quinn out of his thoughts, since before he could make it to the front of the truck, Quinn was out and coming around the front towards him.

"Lorcan, wait."

Not "Lorcan, I'm sorry," or "Lorcan, forgive me"—just *wait*. He tried stepping around Quinn as he advanced on him, but Quinn blocked his way.

"Dammit, Lorcan, just stop!"

"Fuck you!" he screamed. "Why is it that the only time you want to talk is when I get pissed off? It's like you don't hear me until I'm screaming for you to fuck off and leave me alone. Jesus, what are you, some kind of masochist?"

"I'm sorry," he said quietly.

"Sorry for what, Quinn? Sorry you piss me off? Sorry you met me? I just don't get what I did to you. Did I say something stupid? Is it because the way I look embarrassed you in front of your precious townsfolk? For fuck's sake, what did I do?"

There was no embarrassment now, nothing but pure white rage. He didn't want a Goddamn apology. He wanted to understand what the hell had happened. He wanted to know why he was so hurt and angry and miserable. He wanted to know how Quinn was going to fix it, make it right between them.

The pain in his heart threatened to drop Quinn where he stood. The emotional pain rolling off Lorcan and mingling with his own was the most excruciating sensation he'd ever had to endure. The only thing he wanted to do was wrap Lorcan in his arms and show him how sorry he was, how much he loved him, but he knew Lorcan wouldn't welcome or want it. He couldn't blame him, but he'd give anything to make this right, to have a second chance—or was it a third chance he was asking for? Did he even deserve it?

Lorcan's near-death while trying to save his life hadn't been enough to overcome Quinn's cowardice. He'd been more concerned with how others in the community would shun him, look down on him, than what he was doing to Lorcan. He'd always thought himself comfortable in his own sexuality, never threatened or embarrassed about it. Always told himself that he didn't hide the fact that he was gay because of what others thought, but because it was nobody's business who he slept with. It had been nothing more than a way to keep anyone from getting too close to him. He didn't have the balls to put himself on the line for fear of what would happen, fear that they would leave him just like Hound had. Yeah, he was Mr. Wonderful. He had kept himself nicely hidden away with the excuse that he was only protecting himself when, in fact, what he had done was hurt the most amazing person he'd ever met. He was nothing more than a spineless bastard.

"I'll never be sorry I met you, only sorry that I hurt you."

Lorcan took a step back from him, but his gaze never left his. "Yeah. Life is all about hurt, isn't it? I'm used to it, no big deal." Lorcan's words were blasé, but the look in his eyes and the way he held himself betrayed his efforts to make it sound light.

"It a big deal to me. I'm...."

"Jesus, Quinn! Would you just stop it? I'm a grown man. I'm not going to fall on the ground and cry like a baby because I got my little feelings hurt. I'm not going to seek revenge or upset your precious reputation. Your secret is safe with me. Just let it go."

“Is that why you think I’m trying to apologize? For fuck’s sake, I love you, and it’s killing me that I made you feel ashamed when the only person who should feel that way is me.”

Quinn wasn’t sure who was more shocked by the admission, himself or Lorcan. He hadn’t meant to let that part slip out, but he couldn’t take it back now. He was done denying his feelings. He may have ruined his chance to find happiness with Lorcan, but dammit, he was done being a coward. He wanted nothing more than to wrap himself around Lorcan and whisper it against his skin over and over until the man believed him, but he just stood there. It was now up to Lorcan. Quinn had laid his heart out there. Lorcan would either accept it or walk away.

After what seemed like an eternity, Lorcan finally turned and headed back toward the truck, his spine ramrod straight. Quinn didn’t think he could feel any worse until Lorcan stopped at the open door and looked at him despondently, saying. “Let’s get this meeting over with. I want to go home.”

As Quinn started the truck and pulled back onto the road, he knew that Lorcan hadn’t meant his little room on the ranch. Lorcan was going home to Indiana, and Quinn had sent him there.

It shouldn’t have mattered that Quinn had told him he loved him. Lorcan was a firm believer that actions spoke louder than words, but it did matter. He couldn’t help how those simple words had made his heart soar. Quinn might not have been willing or able to show his feelings for Lorcan in public, but when they had been alone, he had known there was something between them. Something real. The way Quinn looked at him, the tenderness in his touch—it spoke volumes. That was the side of Quinn that he had fallen madly and hopelessly in love with. It should have been enough. But it wasn’t. It would never be enough.

Conner had said it perfectly. “Sometimes being in love hurts.

Hiding it or denying it causes the greatest hurt of all.”

Lorcan knew how true that was. He did love Quinn, but he also knew that if he had to hide it, had to be an outsider to Quinn when anyone was around, eventually he would grow to resent that love. It would turn something wonderful into something ugly and painful. In his mind, leaving before that happened was for the best.

As much as he cared about Jess, it wasn't fair to continue their relationship. He would be no better than Quinn if he let it go on any longer. He would always be hiding how he felt about Quinn. No matter how much Lorcan didn't want to hurt him, eventually he would. Better to end it now.

Feeling somber, he reached for his phone and dialed.

“Hello?”

The sweet, happy sound of his mother's voice did little to lift the heaviness in his heart. “Hi, Mama.”

“Oh baby, what's wrong?”

Funny how she only needed to hear his greeting to know what his mood was. It just confirmed that he was making the right choice in going home where he belonged. “Nothing's wrong, just wanted to call, is all.”

“You know it's not nice to lie to your mama?”

“Would I lie to you?”

He could hear her smile through the phone line. “Yeah, you would. But why you would even try is beyond me, since you're so terrible at it.”

“Good point. But really, I'm okay. Just wondering if you've rented out my room yet?”

“Oh baby, does that mean you're coming home? Wait! I got to tell your daddy.”

“Wait—” But before he could get the word out, he heard his mama yelling, “Matt, Lorcan's on the phone. He's coming home.”

Daddy must have been close by, because within seconds, he had taken the phone. “When are you coming home? Do you need money? Need me to come get you?”

Lorcan smiled at the excited sound of his father's voice. He

might put on the attitude of a big, strong rancher, but under it all, he was more emotional and sweeter than Lorcan's mama. Kind of like someone else he knew, but he wasn't going to go there.

"Yeah, Dad, I'm gonna come home for a visit. No, I don't need money, but I could use a ride home from the bus station."

"Bus station?" he huffed. "I'll send you a plane ticket."

"No, I've already got the ticket, just need a ride from the station."

He gave his dad the details of his itinerary and, after promising them both he'd be careful, then assuring Mama that he was fine again, he hung up. It should have made him feel better, how excited they were that he was coming home, how much they wanted him there, but it did little to soothe the ache in his heart. Just because he knew he was going back to where he belonged didn't mean he felt all warm and fuzzy about it. He felt like he was giving up. He'd left home looking for an adventure, but more than that, he'd been looking for himself. He had discovered himself, but it had been at an extremely high price. In finding himself, he'd fallen in love and found a dear friend. He was losing both.

Lorcan was still staring at the phone when a soft rap sounded on his door. Sighing, he said, "Come in."

Conner opened the door, stepping in and closing it behind him. "Hey, supper is ready."

"Not hungry, but thanks."

Conner gestured toward the bed. "Mind if I have a seat?"

Lorcan really didn't feel like company. Didn't feel like talking, but he nodded anyway, moving over to give Conner some room to sit. "Sure."

Conner sat at the end of the bed, his hand coming out to rest on Lorcan's calf. "You want to talk about it?"

"No." He took a deep breath. "Yeah, I do. But I'm afraid if I start talking about what I'm feeling, I'm gonna lose it."

Conner stared at him with understanding. It was easy to talk to Conner. If anyone understood what it was that Lorcan was dealing with, it would be Conner. He didn't want to dump all his

grief on him, especially since this might be the last time he saw him. He had no plans to ever come back to Oklahoma.

“Sometimes the first step in healing is giving the grief a voice.”

“I’m not so sure it’s that easy.”

Conner nodded and gave him a small smile. “I never said it was easy. The heart never is.”

Before Lorcan could stop the barrage of emotions, they were pouring out of him, as if a dam had burst. “Sometimes I look at him and it takes my breath away. My heart tightens in my chest at how much I love him. Other times, it cracks wide open at the pain he can inflict when he turns away. I can’t do this, Conner. I hurt. I’m hurting Jess, and I can’t do anything to stop any of it.”

He was appalled at the tears that started rolling down his cheeks, but it didn’t stop the words. “I’m ashamed that I treated Jess like I did. I’m ashamed that I let Quinn push me to use Jess, and I’m ashamed that I wasn’t worth more to him.”

The sobs cut him off. Even if he wanted to say more, he couldn’t have. He felt Conner wrap his arms around him, and he buried his face in his neck and let all the pain, hurt, and misery out. He let all the bad just flow out of him with each tear. Conner held him tight, letting him grieve. He was strong and solid against Lorcan. At the moment, the sweet old coot was the only thing that was keeping him from flying apart. He’d been told the first heartbreak was the hardest. The way he felt at the moment, he couldn’t imagine ever letting anyone close enough to him to let this ever happen again.

Is this what Quinn felt like when Hound left? Quinn had said he loved him. Maybe the small, private moments of tenderness were all Quinn could give after his heart was broken. He didn’t know the whole story about Hound, but he’d seen the anguish in Quinn when he’d talked about him. Was that what he had to look forward to in the future when he thought of Quinn?

He wasn’t sure how long he sat there wrapped in Conner’s arms, but once the tears stopped flowing, he felt raw and

exhausted. He pulled away from Conner, wiping at the wet streaks on his cheeks. "Sorry, didn't mean to dump all that on you."

Conner sat up but kept his hand on Lorcan's. "Not a thing to be sorry for. I hate that you're so upset, but I'm glad I could lend you my shoulder. Have you told Quinn what you just told me?"

Lorcan laughed without humor. "No, and I don't plan on it."

Conner started to say something, but Lorcan cut him off with a wave of a hand. "I know what you're going to say, and I'm not you. Quinn is not John. You were older, probably a hell of a lot wiser than I am, when you found John. Who knows, maybe I'll find my John one day."

He got off the bed, needing to move, feeling like a caged animal as the tension started coursing through him again. "I will be fine, Conner. Thanks for listening. Thanks for making me feel at home here. You're a great friend."

Conner rose to his feet, taking the dismissal for what it was, and moved toward the door. "You have your recipe?"

That was the best thing about Conner. He knew when not to push. He knew that Lorcan was leaving and wasn't going to try and stop him. He walked to Conner and hugged him one last time. "Yeah, I got the recipe, and I'll call if I need any help."

Conner hugged him back tightly and whispered, "You call even if you don't." He gave Lorcan one last squeeze and left with tears in his eyes.

Lorcan leaned against the closed door and took a deep breath. Taking a final look at the room he'd spent the last couple of months in. He'd learned a lot about himself during the time he spent here. As painful as it was to leave, as bad as his heart hurt, he knew he wouldn't ever regret coming here. He grabbed his duffel and placed the note he'd written to Quinn on his pillow. It was time for this adventure to be over.

The cool wind came through the open window and left goose bumps on Quinn's damp skin. He was getting used to the nightmares and waking covered in sweat. The thing he couldn't get used to was the horrified look on Lorcan's face as Quinn sank the knife deep into his heart. That look of agony and terror now clouded even the good memories he had of Lorcan. He knew what the dream meant. He didn't need to talk to a head shrink or read any bullshit book to tell him how to interpret his dreams. Quinn knew it haunted him because of the pain he'd caused Lorcan. How he'd broken his heart. He didn't need a dream to remind him of it or how it felt, because he'd also broken his own heart in the process. The pain of that was real, and he felt it with everything he did. Felt it in every tick of the clock over the last two weeks since Lorcan had left. If he wasn't thinking about the pain he'd caused Lorcan, then he was thinking about the way he had felt the first time he walked into Lorcan's room and found him gone. The only thing remaining had been a letter. A letter he'd read so many times he could quote every word by heart.

Quinn,

Sorry I didn't stick around for the trial. Mr. Johanson said my sworn statement would be all he needed. Thank you for taking me in when I was so desperate and needing a place to stay. I learned a lot about myself while I was here on the ranch. As crazy as it sounds, I don't regret a day of it. I don't regret meeting you or knowing you. I only regret how it ended. That old saying has a lot of merit. You know, the one that says something about, "What doesn't kill us makes us stronger." I think it's true, though I don't feel stronger right now. I'm still breathing. It didn't kill me. Maybe the stronger part comes in later. I also don't regret loving you, so maybe that's my strength.

Take care of yourself and those two old coots.

Love,

Lorcan

Lorcan's strength had definitely been in the way he loved. The way he'd accepted anyone and everyone. As passionate as he was about caring, he was just as passionate in his belief that no one had a right to judge others. Quinn couldn't really think of anything good that he'd taught Lorcan, but there must have been something, since Lorcan had admitted that he hadn't regretted loving Quinn. Did he still love him? Did he now regret it?

Quinn rolled over on the narrow bed, wrapping up in the covers against the chill. He'd taken to sleeping in the spare room that Lorcan had occupied. He couldn't stand to lie alone in his, assaulted by the images of Lorcan beneath him. The way his face would become even more painfully beautiful when he was sated or when he was sleeping. The way Lorcan had felt in his arms, their bodies molded to one another. The way Quinn couldn't seem to get close enough to the man.

The cotton sheets were a pale comparison to the feel of Lorcan's silky hair laid across his flesh. The way it felt as it ran through his fingers. The memories of Lorcan had Quinn reaching for his engorged shaft. Imagining that instead of his own hand, it was Lorcan's hand wrapped around him. His breaths came in shallow pants as he remembered the way Lorcan looked as he worked. His muscles flexing and glistening with sweat. His hand sped faster, increasing the pressure, when behind his closed eyes, he imagined Lorcan coming out of the shower, his dark hair streaming down his smooth, lean body, droplets of water leaving a wet trail down his chest.

Quinn felt his balls draw up as the orgasm began to shoot down his spine. He didn't want it to end. The only time he felt something other than pain was when he imagined Lorcan before Quinn had hurt him, shamed him. He added pressure to his tight sac, trying to hold back his orgasm, but he was too far gone. Instead of the pleasure he should have experienced, it felt empty, like giving up. As his seed burst from his body, his tears of agony,

of loss, leaked from his eyes.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

“Lorcan, there’s someone here to see you,” his mama called from what sounded like the bottom of the stairs of his apartment above the garage.

Lorcan sat up in alarm, looking toward the bedside clock. He was used to her calling him to supper, to chores, and for a host of other reasons, but she rarely called him to tell him he had company, and never this late at night. The only *company* he ever had was his brothers. His mama sure wouldn’t be announcing them. They would have run into the room without knocking and tried to give him a noogie or some other stupid shit to remind him he was still the smallest. The baby of the family, he would forever be known as the *little brother*.

Swinging his legs around, Lorcan sat on the edge of the bed. *Who the hell would be coming to see me?* He considered ignoring whoever it was, telling Mama to send them away. He hadn’t been sleeping well since he’d returned from Oklahoma, and he was just too tired to care.

Being tired wasn’t the only thing that made him not care. He missed Quinn. He missed John and Conner. And dammit, he missed Jess.

Here on his family’s farm, he was just the little brother, dependent on his family for his companionship and his entertainment. The time he had spent at Whispering Pines Ranch made him realize how badly he wanted more than just the

protection and acceptance of his family. He wanted his own life on his own terms. He wanted friends who were there for him, not because they had some kind of loyalty to his brothers or mama and daddy. He missed having people in his life who wanted to know him and hang out with him because he was Lorcan, not because he was one of the James boys.

Standing up, he made his way across his bedroom, grabbing a T-shirt and throwing it on. If he knew Mama, and he did, she'd whop him upside the head for being rude. Best to see who it was, what they wanted, and send them on their way. He would be nice and polite, since his mama raised him right, but he didn't want to deal with anyone right now. His stomach was in knots, his chest achy, and he was in the mood for wallowing in a little self-pity tonight.

Sighing, he opened the door.

Lorcan's knees nearly went out from under him, his heart skipping a beat, and a wide smile bloomed across his face. Standing on the other side of Lorcan's bedroom door was a sight that brought tears to his eyes.

Jess.

The beloved silly grin on Jess's face highlighted his dimples. His blue eyes sparkled as if happiness itself was dancing in them. "I warned you I was tenacious." Jess opened his arms wide. "Now get over here and let me show you just how tenacious I am."

Lorcan didn't hesitate. He launched himself into Jess's waiting arms. Wrapping his arms around his best friend, he nuzzled into Jess's neck as those big, strong arms wrapped around him, pulling him into a tight bear hug. Lorcan couldn't speak. His mouth was dry, his eyes wet with overflowing emotion. The feel of Jess's solid body against his, his unique smell filling his nostrils, and the taste of his skin against his mouth soothed his soul. He couldn't speak, could only cling desperately to Jess as if he would disappear if he let go.

"Now that's what I call a hello," Jess murmured against Lorcan's temple. Jess's voice was tight, strained, as if he were

trying to hold his own emotions in check. His hands caressed Lorcan's back while pulling him tighter against his chest.

They stood there for long moments, wrapped in each other's arms. There were no words needed. Letting their hands, lips, and bodies say *hello, where the hell have you been* and *God, I missed you*.

Lorcan finally got enough control over his emotions that he was able to pull back slightly, look up at Jess, and speak for the first time. "It's so good to see you, big guy." His voice was rough like gravel even to his own ears. "How long are you staying?"

Jess placed a tender kiss on Lorcan's forehead. "As long as you will let me."

He wasn't sure how he felt about Jess's response. He didn't want to analyze it right now. He was just too happy to see Jess. They would talk about what that meant later. He grabbed Jess's hand, pulling him toward the bed after shutting the door and locking it. "C'mon, got a couple of weeks to catch up on."

As soon as they sat on the bed, Jess pulled Lorcan onto his lap. "First this." Jess's lips brushed his. The kiss was gentle, a soft press of lips.

Jess didn't deepen the kiss. Though his arousal was evident in his heated gaze, the tenderness of his touch was patient.

They both smiled like silly fools at each other as the kiss ended, their joy in seeing each other again obvious. Lorcan had tried to push Jess away when he had left Oklahoma. The last thing he had ever wanted to do was hurt Jess. The way he'd felt about how things had turned out with Quinn made it impossible to let Jess comfort him. He didn't want to make the mistake of leading Jess on. He had, in fact, been scared that it would be so easy to use Jess as a way to soften the pain in his heart from the loss of Quinn.

The last two weeks had been sheer hell. He'd been miserable, lonely, and he was just selfish enough to be thankful Jess was here now, no matter the reason.

Lorcan stroked Jess's cheek. Jess leaning into his touch was heartwarming. "Jesus, it's good to see you."

Jess took Lorcan's hand, kissing the tender skin of his wrist. "I missed you so much, pretty boy." Their fingers entwined, and it felt like the most natural thing.

"I missed you too. Did you come straight from Florida? How are your mom and dad?"

Pain flashed across Jess's face. His smile faded. "Daddy passed away the day after you left. Mom is hanging in there. She went to stay with her sister for awhile."

Lorcan's heart sank. "I'm so sorry. Why didn't you call me?"

Jess used his free hand to pull Lorcan's head against his chest. He placed a kiss on the top of his head before responding. "It was quick. You didn't know him, so I didn't want to burden you with it."

"I still would have been there for you."

Another kiss was placed against his head. "I know you would have. Thank you, but you were dealing with your own pain. You didn't need mine compounded on top of it."

In all his life, Lorcan had never met anyone so magnanimous. Jess's unselfish consideration of others was boundless. Lorcan's issues with Quinn's refusal to acknowledge his feelings for him in public suddenly seemed trivial. Jess had just lost his father, for Christ's sake, and he had worried about Lorcan's feelings. As he allowed Jess's warmth to enfold him, he felt unworthy of someone like Jess.

"How did I ever deserve someone like you as a friend?" He couldn't stop the tears from escaping his eyes. Jess had been there for him since the first moment they had met. He was his laughter, his happiness, and his strength when he had felt alone.

Jess lifted their entwined hands, forcing Lorcan to look up at him. He leaned in and kissed away the tears from Lorcan's eyes. His own tears began to fall. "Don't you get it? I love you. I would do anything for you. You deserve your heart's desire. If I could give you Quinn's heart, I would. If I could make him see you the way I do and take away your pain, I would."

"Jess."

Jess quieted him with a fingertip to his lips. “How far do I have to go to make you understand that I want you in my life? I won’t lie, I want your heart, want to be your lover, but if I can’t have those things, I still want to be your best friend. You’re the most amazing person I’ve ever met, and I’m better for knowing you. You make me better.”

Lorcan stared at Jess, feeling Jess’s words sink into his soul. As he searched those amazing blue eyes, he made a startling realization. Yes, he loved Quinn. More than likely, he always would. Forever would there be an empty hole that only Quinn could fill. But Jess owned a part of his heart too. Losing Jess would be another hole that couldn’t be filled. Jess was everything he could ever want in a partner. His love and compassion knew no bounds and were gifts to be cherished. Jess would always put Lorcan’s feelings first. Their life would be happy, comfortable like a pair of favorite PJs, warm cocoa, and snuggling on the couch before a roaring fire. It certainly didn’t hurt that Jess was gorgeous and sexy as hell, and the sex was amazing. Lorcan wasn’t in love with Jess like he was Quinn, but he did love him.

It took clearing his throat twice before he could finally speak. “I don’t want you to give me Quinn’s heart. I want your heart. I can’t stop loving him—”

“I know—”

It was Lorcan’s turn to silence Jess with a touch of his fingertip to his lips. “I know what I’m asking is unfair, given the way I feel about Quinn, but I love you too. I’m so sorry I pushed you away. I need you.” He replaced his fingertip with his own lips. “Please don’t ever leave me,” he said against those sweet lips. “I can’t give you my whole heart. I’m broken, Jess. But I promise I won’t ever give you up. Not even for Quinn. I need my best friend.”

Lorcan felt Jess smile against his lips. “Jesus, I love you,” Jess whispered. “I’ll always be yours.”

The gentle press of lips grew deeper. Jess groaned as Lorcan licked at his lips, seeking entrance into his warm heat. Jess opened

up for him and Lorcan's tongue dove in, seeking out Jess's flavor hidden behind a hint of mint and the salt of tears.

Hands explored skin as clothes began to fall away, both men reacquainting themselves with each other, relearning every inch of skin they could reach.

Lorcan eased Jess back onto his bed, the kiss never breaking, growing deeper, more passionate. There was a sense of urgency as arousal grew, but the slide of fingertips on heated skin, the stroke of tongues, held sweet tenderness.

After long moments, Lorcan broke the kiss, leaving Jess nearly breathless as he moved down his chin and across his jaw until he was placing open-mouthed kisses against the side of Jess's neck. Jess's rapid pulse vibrated against Lorcan's tongue, his own heartbeat quickening to match the beat. Lorcan let his hands brush lazily down Jess's chest, soft hairs tickling his palms. An electrical current shot out from the contact, up his arm, exploding throughout his body and leaving goose bumps to burst out on his skin. Jess's thick muscles flexed in a rhythm that matched the throbbing pulse of Lorcan's throbbing shaft. God, he'd missed the feel of Jess's body.

As Lorcan let his hand wander further down Jess's body, he felt a shudder ripple through Jess as he lightly followed the soft trail down Jess's tight stomach to the waistband of his jeans. "Need you," Lorcan whispered against Jess's skin as he popped the button on Jess's jeans and eased the zipper down.

"Oh God, yes," Jess moaned as he reached for Lorcan's jeans and began fumbling with the button.

They were rolling together, fighting to reveal more skin. Neither was willing to give up the contact between their bodies; laughter mingled with the gasps and moans. It was clumsy and awkward, but finally clothing disappeared as their desperation for each other intensified.

Lorcan wanted, no, *needed* Jess's heat wrapped around him. He suddenly couldn't get close enough. Wanted to crawl inside Jess, take him into his own body through his lips and hands.

Lorcan rolled Jess onto his back, straddling his hips as he took Jess's mouth in a deep kiss. A low hiss filled the air as their engorged shafts made contact, and they started to rock against each other, picking up that familiar rhythm as if they had never been separated. Their bodies moved in perfect time.

When Jess came, it was with a sigh of Lorcan's name. His body shook as warm heat spread against Lorcan's stomach. Lorcan thrust once more, staring at the beloved, passion-flushed face below him, his own pleasure erupting from his body as Jess's name passed his lips.

They lay in each other's arms, a sated tangle of arms and legs, as their breathing returned to normal. There were so many things Lorcan wanted to say, but he was afraid to ruin the perfect moment with words. He was thankful Jess had come looking for him. He had missed him like crazy. Hell, he hadn't even truly realized how much he had missed him until he had opened his bedroom door and found him standing on the other side of it.

Having to return home, feeling as if he'd failed, combined with the loss of Quinn and Jess, had been too much, the pain too big, making it difficult to figure out which had hurt the most. Not that he was trying to compare them. It was like trying to compare apples and oranges. The only thing he knew for sure was that with Jess lying next to him, it no longer felt too big. Part of him felt at ease.

Jesus, you're a selfish bastard. Here he was thinking about his own pain, feeling at ease because of Jess, when Jess was suffering a horrible loss, suffering what must be indescribable pain.

Lorcan propped himself up on his elbow and leaned in to place a kiss on Jess's cheek. "I'm really sorry about your dad. I wish I could have been there for you."

Jess placed a hand against Lorcan's cheek. "Thank you. I wish you could have been there too. It was...." Jess cleared his throat, letting his hand fall away. "It was really hard being strong for Mama, ya know?"

Lorcan lay back onto the bed, pulling Jess so that his head rested on Lorcan's chest. He ran his fingers through the silky strands of Jess's hair, the need to comfort automatic. "How is your mom holding up?"

"Seriously? I have no idea. She wanted to get away after the funeral. She's staying with her sister in Atlanta for a little while. She said the memories were just too painful to deal with right now."

Lorcan felt Jess begin to shake. He pulled him tighter against him as he felt Jess's hot tears drip onto his chest.

"I don't know how she stands it, knowing he's gone forever." Jess's voice cracked with emotion. He continued in a soft whisper, "I miss him."

Lorcan's heart was breaking. He understood what Jess had meant earlier, because in this moment, he would do anything to take Jess's pain away. He did the only thing he could: he held Jess, stroked his back and kissed the top of his head, trying to soothe a pain that was inconsolable. "I got ya," he whispered. "Just let it out, I've got you."

Sobs wracked through Jess, and Lorcan held him until they turned to soft cries of grief.

"Sorry." Jess tried to pull away, but Lorcan refused to release him.

"Shh, nothing to be sorry for."

"It's just... I feel a little guilty, ya know? I mean, I'm going to miss him like crazy, yet when I saw you open the door tonight, I'd never been happier in my life. When I have you in my arms, I feel nothing but joy. How will Mama get through this now that her joy is gone?"

Lorcan didn't know the answer to that. He knew people survived the loss of a loved one all the time. He didn't have a clue what to say. No one close to him had ever died. "I don't know, Jess, but I'm sure having you as her son will make it a little easier to bear."

Jess wiped his face and then placed a kiss on Lorcan's chest

before snuggling deeper. “God, I don’t know what got into me, crying like a baby. I didn’t want to upset Mama with my tears, and then I was so busy with the funeral, getting Mama settled, and then trying to get to you. I just haven’t had time to think about it much. I guess it all just kind of caught up with me.”

“I’m glad I was here when it did.” He reached for the covers, pulling them up over them, pulling Jess into a tight cocoon and holding him. “I’m glad I could help ease the ache in your heart.”

It was the least he could do, since Jess eased the pain from the hole in his heart. Actually, the hole in his heart wasn’t quite so big with Jess close to him. Jess made the pain bearable. Lorcan held Jess, listening as his breathing became slower, soft snores fluttering against his skin as Jess drifted off to sleep. This was what he had needed, what he had sought after his entire life, and he’d nearly thrown it away. Unconditional love, complete acceptance, and someone who could put a smile on his face every day. Jess was all those things and more. No, he didn’t feel the all-consuming passion he felt when Quinn looked at him, but what he had with Jess was somehow better.

Quinn had been his first love, the first person to ever leave an imprint on his heart. Part of him would always love Quinn; he would always be special. He would always wonder what could have been. What-ifs would always play through his mind, but the pain of loss would ease with Jess to help, just as he planned to be there to help Jess ease his pain.

EPILOGUE

“Did you use self-rising yeast?”

“Hmmm... Did you let the bread stand until it rose fully?”

Conner pointed to the table before turning back to the stove, opening the oven, and taking out the biscuits he'd been baking. Quinn all but ignored him. He didn't want to intrude on his phone conversation, but the sooner he had his lunch, the sooner he could head back out and work himself to exhaustion. It was the only way he could sleep. Well, he had to mix the exhaustion with a bit of whiskey before bed, but whatever worked. He was willing to try anything to stop the nightmares. He ignored Conner's *mhmms* and *uh huhs* and filled his plate with green beans, last night's leftover roast, and biscuits.

Conner sat in front of him. “I can't come all the way to Indiana and show your mama how to make my sweet bread. I showed you how many times?”

Quinn was suddenly very interested in Conner's conversation. He had to be talking to Lorcan. No one else they knew lived in Indiana, and no one but Lorcan had Conner's sweet bread recipe. Quinn was out of his chair and reaching for the phone before another thought registered.

Conner shot him a glare, moving out of his reach and slapping at his hands. “I miss you too. Maybe in the fall John and I can take some time off, come up and see you.”

“Let me talk to him,” Quinn growled low, advancing on

Conner.

Conner covered the phone, shaking his head. "He doesn't want to talk to you. I already asked." He placed the phone back to his ear. "Sorry, dropped the phone. What were you saying?"

Quinn had been trying to get hold of Lorcan for nearly a month. He'd be damned if Conner was going to keep him from talking to him. "Give me the phone, now."

Conner tried stepping past him, but Quinn snatched the phone, ignoring Conner's protest. "Lorcan, it's Quinn. Didn't you get my messages?"

Conner threw up his hands in defeat as he stormed out of the kitchen, uttering curses under his breath. Quinn didn't give a shit if the man didn't talk to him for a week. Hell, he would welcome it if it meant he got a chance to talk to Lorcan.

"Lorcan, are you there?"

Lorcan didn't respond, but he could hear breathing on the other end of the phone. At least he wasn't hanging up on him.

"I know you don't really want to talk to me, but I need to tell you some things I've figured out. Some things that I should have told you a long time ago. If you still don't want to talk to me afterward, I'll understand. Doesn't mean I'll quit trying, but I will understand."

When he didn't hear the phone clicking off and could still hear a light breath coming through the phone, it gave him courage to continue.

"I was wrong in how I treated you, so very wrong. I know you think I was embarrassed to be seen with you. That couldn't be further from the truth. I'll admit I was a coward. I was worried how people would treat me once they confirmed the rumors as true. I'm not making any excuses for my actions or justifying them in any way. I just wanted you to know that it was me and my fears. It had nothing to do with being ashamed or embarrassed of you."

Quinn slumped in the chair, praying that Lorcan would say something, anything, to let him know he was at least listening. He waited, but the only thing coming through the line was Lorcan's

steady breath. When the silence stretched to an uncomfortable length of time, Quinn feared he wouldn't get another chance to say what he needed to. He took a deep breath and mustered up the last of his courage.

"I love you, Lorcan. Please come back and give me a chance to show you just how much. I promise to fly a goddamn banner and parade around town shouting how much I love you until everyone in this town knows it. God, baby, please, just give me a chance. I ache all the time. I'm nothing without you."

Quinn's heart soared when he finally heard Lorcan whisper into the phone. "I love you too." But then it stopped beating in his chest before it shattered when Lorcan said before clicking off, "I'm sorry, I can't. I'm giving Jess the chance he deserves. I won't hurt him."

Quinn could only sit and stare at the phone, too numb to move. Lorcan was with Jess? Jess must have gone to Indiana after his daddy passed. He hadn't even given the man a thought when he hadn't returned to work on the ranch. He figured he was still in Florida taking care of his mama. He'd never imagined that he was with Lorcan. He had hoped that Lorcan was as miserable and lonely as he was. Obviously he was a bigger fool than he already believed.

After what he had done to Lorcan, he didn't have a right to expect that he was holding on to Quinn like he was holding on to the memories of Lorcan. But Lorcan had told him he loved him too. That had to mean something, didn't it? He hadn't said he loved Jess, just that he wouldn't hurt him. Did he dare to hope that Lorcan would eventually come back to him?

"From the slump of your shoulders, I take it the conversation didn't go the way you hoped it would."

Quinn could only shake his head in response to Conner's question. He didn't think he could get any words out past the lump in his throat.

Conner pulled a chair closer to Quinn, sitting next to him and taking his hand in his. "I tried to stop you. Lorcan and I have been

talking a lot. He promised he'd call you when he was ready to talk."

Quinn's head snapped up. "Did you know he was with Jess?"

Conner nodded, his face looking grim.

"Jesus, Conner! You could have fucking told me."

"Would it have made it hurt any less?"

Nothing was going to make the pain in his heart hurt less short of Lorcan coming back to him. Conner still could have saved him a little pride. "No, but at least I wouldn't have started begging Lorcan to come back to me, wouldn't have told him what I did."

Conner raised a brow at him. "I did try to stop you, but after what I heard, I'm glad I didn't."

"What the fuck is that supposed to mean?"

Christ, he'd put his entire heart and soul on the line. He'd offered them to Lorcan on a silver platter. Just fucking gave them to him, and he wasn't getting either back. Not his heart, not his soul, and not the one thing that mattered even more than the other two: Lorcan.

"Lorcan needed to hear it. He needed to stop blaming himself for what happened between you two. I think, more importantly, he needed to be reminded that you were never ashamed of him."

Quinn stood, grabbing his plate of uneaten food and throwing it away. No way would his stomach ever accept it with the knot that had formed there. He had no desire to eat or do anything else that didn't include mass quantities of alcohol. He knew from experience that the whiskey wouldn't chase Lorcan out of his mind. Hopefully, if he drank enough, he'd pass out into a blissful, nightmare-free slumber.

"He loves you, you know?" Conner said quietly. "He's having a hard time with this too."

Yeah, what a hardship, to be wrapped up in Jess's arms, letting the man comfort him while Quinn sat here, completely alone, with nothing but the promise of an alcohol-induced coma.

That's not fair, and you know it.

Yeah, he knew it. Didn't do a damn thing to change anything,

either. Lorcan had moved on, and maybe he did love him. Maybe he had done so much harm that Lorcan would never truly trust him again. But that didn't mean he was going to stop hoping, wishing things could be different. He'd given Lorcan his heart and soul. Whether Lorcan realized it, he held them. Quinn didn't want them back. He knew there would never be anyone else for him. No one he would ever want to give his heart to. It was just as well that Lorcan kept them. He wasn't ever going to need them again.

Lorcan watched Jess sleep, his hair matted against his head where it had dried damp with sweat after they'd made love. Actually, he couldn't really call it "making love." At least, not love for Jess, anyway. He'd been forceful tonight, pounding brutally into Jess with every bit of pain, hurt, and loss that he felt in his heart. As he watched Jess in peaceful sleep, he was attacked with familiar guilt.

Jess never complained, no matter how hard he fucked him or how rough he was. He let Lorcan pour every bad feeling into his body and begged for more. He knew Jess would bear the burden of his heart if he could, knew Jess would do anything humanly possible to keep Lorcan from hurting. Unfortunately, there was nothing Jess could do to make Lorcan miss Quinn any less.

He had tried to push Jess away, telling him it wasn't fair to him, that no matter how hard he tried, he couldn't stop loving Quinn. Jess hadn't left. He'd said owning a small part of Lorcan's heart was better than not having any place in it. Jess did own a part of his heart. It might not have been his whole heart, but as he watched the man sleep, he was thankful that Jess hadn't given up on him. He wouldn't have been able to survive the last few weeks without him. When Lorcan hadn't wanted to get out of bed, wanted to hide from the world and cry, Jess hadn't let him. Every morning, he would wake Lorcan with a brilliant smile and thank him for

allowing him to love him.

After his conversation with Quinn earlier, he thought he would be upset or regret letting Jess back into his life, but he didn't. Yes, he missed Quinn. It had stolen his breath and broken his heart when he'd heard the man pleading for him to come back, promising to profess his love for him to everyone and anyone, but he could never regret Jess. Jess was his best friend. Jess loved every inch of him, even the flawed parts. Lorcan loved him in return for that. He didn't get his heart's desire. His dream of a happily ever after with Quinn would always be just a fantasy. In the end he got something so much better than just a fantasy; he got Jess.

Jess had ignited a spark in Lorcan's heart, called friendship, when they'd first met. Each time Jess stood by him, supported him, made him laugh, that spark grew until Jess became his best friend. When Jess put his own pain and loss aside, placing Lorcan's needs and happiness above his own, that small flame burst into a roaring fire. As he snuggled deeper against the strong, comfortable man in his arms, he couldn't feel an ounce of remorse. He might not have gotten the prince who owned his heart, but he was more than thankful that he had the prince whose heart he owned.

He had made the right choice. "I love you, Jess," he whispered to his sleeping prince.

Coming Soon

Quinn's Need

By SJD Peterson

Sequel to Lorcan's Desire

It's been a year since Lorcan James left Whispering Pines Ranch, and Quinn Taylor has barely recovered. Only two things keep him from falling into the abyss of despair: his work at the ranch and his escape into the world of BDSM at a club called The Push. At The Push, the sound of men begging him helps drown out the bitter memory of his own voice begging Lorcan to stay.

When Lorcan comes back to Pegasus, the same blistering heat simmers between them, but almost nothing has changed. Lorcan is still with Jess, the man he left the ranch with, and Quinn has captured the attention of Ty Callahan, a man who will beg Quinn for anything, anytime, and any way Quinn wants it. Despite how much he wants Lorcan, Quinn swears he'll never beg a man again. If there's one thing Quinn has learned the hard way, it's that not even begging can fill love's aching need.

About the Author

SJD Peterson, better known as Jo, hails from Michigan. Not the best place to live for someone who hates the cold and snow. When not reading or writing, Jo can be found close to the heater checking out NHL stats and watching the Red Wings kick a little butt. Can't cook, misses the clothes hamper nine out of ten tries, but is handy with power tools.

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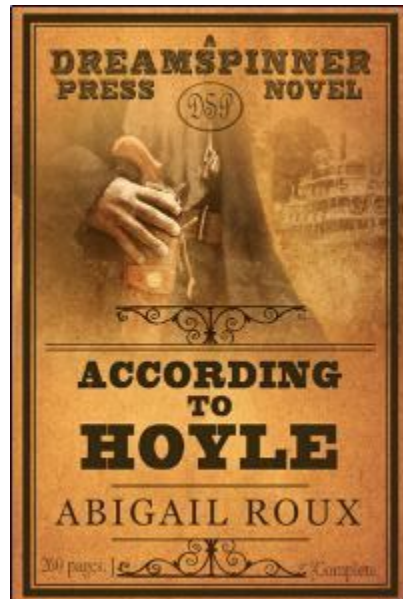
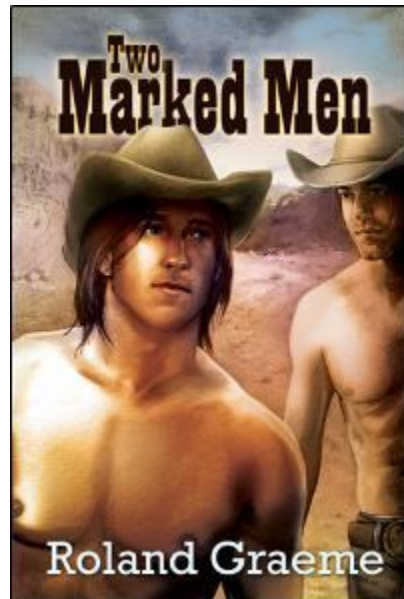
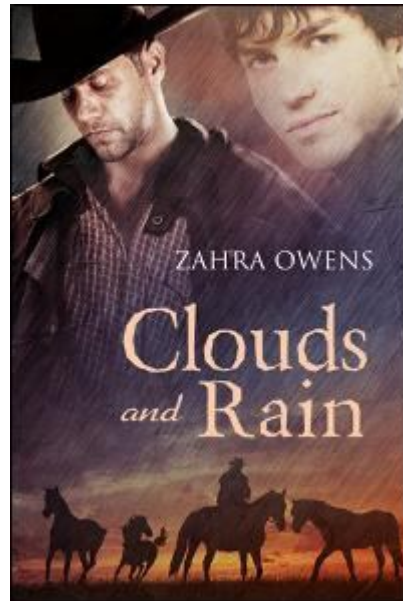
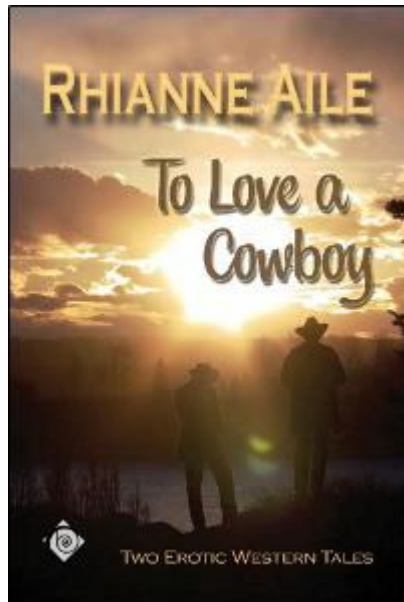
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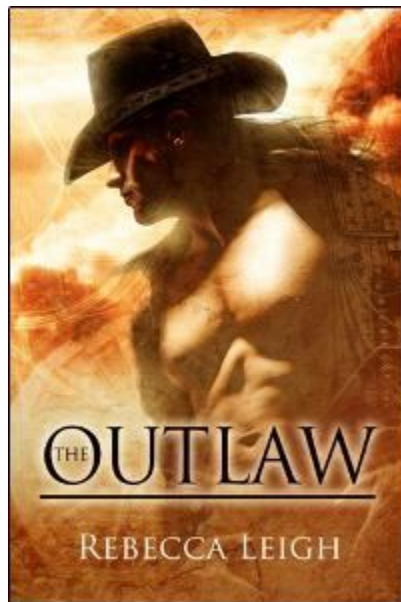
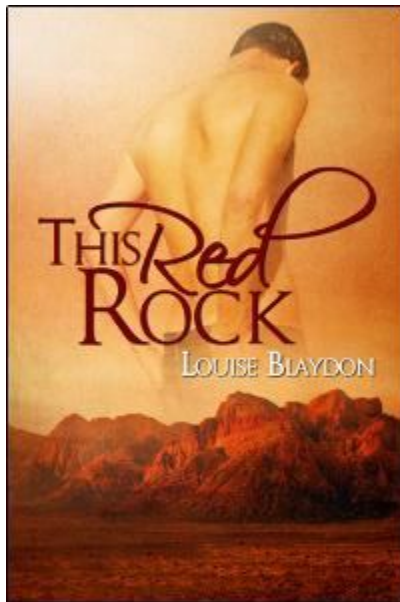
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