

# FULL CIRCLE

The poster features a dark, wood-paneled background. In the upper left, a circular inset shows two shirtless men in a shower; one is leaning against the other. The main image is a close-up of two men. On the right, a man with dark hair and a slight stubble looks directly at the camera. On the left, a man with blonde hair and blue eyes also looks at the camera. The title 'FULL CIRCLE' is written in a large, gold, serif font across the top.

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## Chapter One

JAYLIN RYAN was fifteen when he came to the realization that he was gay. Unlike many young men his age, he didn't "freak out" or launch into a panic or even give much consideration to how others would react.

Being gay didn't seem like a big deal to him. He liked guys. So what? He was smart enough not to hit on anyone he knew to be straight and while he didn't exactly broadcast his sexual interest to the world, when someone asked point-blank, he readily admitted the truth without hesitation and felt no shame.

His mother was supportive. When he confided in her, she simply hugged him, told him he was her son and she loved him and as long as he someday found someone who could make him truly happy, she didn't care about that person's gender. She was remarkably open-minded and accepting for a woman who had been raised in a rather rigorous, borderline radical religious family located in the heart of the south, but Kayla Ryan had little to no contact with her family.

Most had coldly turned their back on her when she announced that (a) she was pregnant at sixteen, (b) she fully intended to keep the baby, and (c) there was no chance in hell she would even consider marrying said baby's father.

*"It would never have worked in the first place. John was too immature. And he didn't love me and I didn't love him. If we had gotten married we would have been miserable and I certainly didn't have great faith in his ability to settle down and provide for either of us."*

There was never any hate or malice in her voice when she mentioned John Carter's name and Jaylin respected her for that, though he had a much harder time respecting his father for the choices he had made. He learned early on to never expect too much from the man. John was the classic "man-child," trapped in youthful dreams built on his belief he could easily be the next big thing to take rock and roll by storm, never mind the fact he never landed anything beyond bottom-level barroom gigs in bars where music was more background noise than actual entertainment.

He came around from time to time, bringing gifts and making promises he didn't have the means or the will to keep. Jaylin simply humored him and Kayla resisted the few times he tried to start their relationship up again and while he sometimes sent money, Kayla put it away for Jaylin, grateful that she made more than enough to support her son.

It hadn't been easy, having a baby at sixteen, with no support from her family, but a move to Ruskin, North Carolina, turned out to be the best decision she ever made.

With help from neighbors that didn't mind babysitting, she earned her GED and then went to college at night, earning herself a degree in business management, which landed her a job as office manager for a large law firm. She was well-respected and admired and she worked hard but she also spent as much time as possible with Jaylin. She never missed any class functions or plays and when he fell in love with music, she was supportive.

If she worried he would be as flighty as his father, she never said as much; she just happily allowed him to take lessons and everything he tried, he excelled at. He was a natural: the music seemed to flow from inside him. It was part of him, and while the sax and other instruments appealed to him, it was the piano that became his great passion.

By the time he reached high school, it was already his plan to get into college on a music scholarship and his teachers felt certain he could do it, but Kayla insisted he have interests outside of music.

*"I just want you to be well-rounded, Jaylin. I never want you to feel limited to anything."*

He understood his mother's concerns and he didn't complain. As much as he loved music, he was happy to be involved in other activities. He never struggled in school. His grades were always on the mark; he joined the debate team;

he tutored other students; and because he loved being outdoors and he loved running, he earned a place on the track team. He was well-adjusted and had a vast number of friends, some casual, others he was closer with. He was attractive enough that he drew attention; several girls were brave enough to ask him out, but he was always kind when he explained to them exactly why he wasn't interested.

Most were a little surprised, but usually, they became friends and some went as far as to try to figure out if any other guys in school were gay so he could be set up on a date. Jaylin did what he could to discourage that. He felt no shame and was proud of who he was, but he didn't want to create problems for himself or invite trouble. Most who knew or suspected he was gay were decent about it. A few made snide comments from time to time and a few avoided him, but he didn't allow that to bother him.

He figured he would have time for romance when he got to college, but admitted it was flattering when someone admitted they found him attractive.

He had inherited his mother's sky-blue eyes, but his blond hair came from his father and the untamed curls made him crazy. He tried to keep them cut enough to maintain some control, but they were still unruly at best, especially when he was running, which he did every morning without fail and again after school during track season. His coaches were always impressed by his dedication, but he didn't think of it as a big deal, and all the exercise allowed him to indulge his famed sweet tooth and still maintain a lean but muscular form.

Only five-nine, he had a classic runner's body. He was stronger than most would have guessed and his sun-kissed skin was smooth. He liked to run shirtless when he could. He loved the feel of the sun against his bare flesh, loved simply being outdoors. It was his great passion, next to his music, and everyone knew it.

After track practice most days, he could be found in the school music room, lost in whatever piece he was playing. I It was there, late one afternoon, shortly after returning to school from winter break, that he received a surprise visitor.

Eyes closed as he played, he didn't know he wasn't alone, until the piece ended and he looked up to find Max Sydney standing just inside the doorway.

Star quarterback for the football team, star pitcher for the baseball team, both of which he had led to victory twice during his high school career, Max Sydney was a jock through and through, and he was drop-dead gorgeous.

He was six-one and nearly two hundred pounds, and every ounce of it was pure muscle. He had a body that belonged on the cover of a magazine and a face that matched: his features were classically rugged with full lips and intense milk-chocolate brown eyes and thick black hair. His skin was a lovely olive tone and perfect as far as Jaylin could tell. More than once he had daydreamed about having a chance to see all of Max's perfect skin, but he knew it would never happen because Max was as straight as a guy could get.

A host of cheerleaders could attest to that fact, at least according to the rumor mill, and while he and Max had certainly crossed paths over the years, they hadn't talked much, beyond a polite "hello" when passing in the hallway.

Finding Max listening to him play was a little unnerving, to say the least, considering how he had several very vivid fantasies with Max cast as the star.

"I'm sorry. I don't mean to interrupt. If now is a bad time, I can come back."

The statement confirmed that Max had indeed come looking for him and, surprisingly, he sounded nervous, which was strange, because Max Sydney never seemed nervous. He was the pure picture of confidence, but at the moment he looked anxious, shifting his weight from one foot to the next. Jaylin smiled to try to help him relax.

"No, it's not a bad time. I was just finishing up."

"Oh. Okay. I just...." He lifted his massive shoulders in a shrug. "You're really good. I mean, I don't know a lot about music, but I liked listening to you. It's obvious you have a talent." He smiled—a real, genuine smile—and Jaylin told himself it was insane, but he felt a rush of warmth and he prayed he wasn't blushing.

"Thanks. It's something I love."

"I've seen you run too. You kick ass, man. You should have tried out for football."

“Running is one thing, but football is another. And I don’t think I could handle the pressure.”

“It’s not as hard as you think. You would have made a hell of a running back.”

*Compliments from the hottest guy in school, the hottest guy I have ever seen! I’ve died and gone to heaven.*

“That’s a nice thing to say, Max. Thanks.”

“I mean it.”

Jaylin shifted on the piano stool, to better face Max. “Is there something I can help you with, Max?” He was smart enough to know Max wasn’t seeking him out without a reason and, to his credit, Max blushed as he came further into the room, dropping his backpack to the floor.

“What gave me away?”

“No offense, but we usually don’t talk....”

“And here I am.” Max sighed, looking a little guilty. “I know this makes me a first-class jerk, but yeah, I do need something and I was told you’re the guy who can help me.” He grabbed a chair, set it in front of Jaylin and straddled it, his arms folded and resting on the back. Jaylin drew in a breath, trying to control his growing desire.

“What is it you need?”

“Help in Biology.” His eyes were downcast. “Look, I’m not a brain. I’m doing okay in all my other classes, but when it comes to Biology, I can’t wrap my mind around it and....”



He looked up and met Jaylin's eyes and Jaylin could see he was uncomfortably anxious.

"And you want me to tutor you?"

"Yeah. Please. I heard you do that sometimes."

"I'd be happy to help, Max. It's not a big deal."

"Really? I know I'm just a dumb jock...."

"You're not dumb. Not at all. Everyone has subjects they struggle with. Not asking for help, that would be dumb." *Letting myself imagine what your lips would feel like wrapped around my cock is dumb.* "I know we both have pretty busy schedules, but if you don't mind some late nights, I always have time in the evenings."

"That's fine. I can take whatever time you've got available."

"When do you want to start?"

"Tonight too soon?"

Jaylin smiled and shook his head. "Not for me. But you realize it's Friday? Don't you have a date or plans or something?"

"No. I'm totally free and all yours."

*If only that were true!*

Needing a distraction, needing to look away from those chocolate eyes, he grabbed a sheet of paper from his notebook and quickly jotted down his address.

“How does seven sound?”

Max took the paper, folded it, and stuck it in his shirt pocket. “I’ll be there. And I can’t thank you enough for this.” He seemed so sincere. He was truly grateful. Jaylin smiled again as he set about gathering his books, and when he looked up, he was surprised to find Max was still there, seemingly waiting for him.

Backpack already slung over his shoulder, he waited at the door. Jaylin decided not to question it when Max followed him out into the hall and began walking with him, as if he had done so a thousand times.

*Maybe he feels like he has to be extra nice to me now. I suppose I should somehow tell him he doesn’t have to pretend he’s my friend, but I kinda like being close to him, even if there isn’t anything sexual about it. And what the hell? I can make a memory here and later I can turn it into some sexy and wanton daydream about Max pushing me into the lockers and kissing me until my toes curl.*

“Have you heard about the party tomorrow night?”

Surprised, Jaylin glanced at Max, even as he fished around his pants pocket for his always misplaced keys. “The one Bonnie Keller is throwing?”

“Yeah. Her parents are out of town on some second honeymoon and she has the house all to herself for a whole week.”

“Sweet.”

“Are you going?”

“To Bonnie’s party?”

“Well, yeah.”

“I don’t really.... I don’t go to a lot of parties.” Especially those hosted by a cheerleader who was a complete bitch to any and everyone who didn’t belong to her precious social group.

“I’ve noticed. I mean, I don’t really ever see you outside of school.”

“Guess I’m kinda antisocial.”

“Hardly. I know you have a lot of friends. And I think you should go tomorrow night.”

“I don’t....”

“I could give you a ride, if you like. It wouldn’t be a big deal.”

They reached the doors, which Max opened and held for him, and as they stepped into the chilled winter afternoon Jaylin was grateful for the blast of cold air. He really needed a cold shower, or maybe bath in a tub filled with ice or maybe, he reasoned, he needed to have a lobotomy, because it sounded like Max was asking him out.

*That’s not possible. Don’t read too much into this. He’s being nice. He’s not gay!*

Trying to think how to respond and not sound like the biggest dork ever, Jaylin didn't realize someone was approaching them, until he heard a loud, obnoxious laugh.

Looking up, he groaned when he saw Trent Miller and two other guys, Lane Turner and Hank Morgan, standing a few feet away, arms folded over their chests, eyes filled with scorn. All three were jocks, but unlike Max, they were stereotypical jerks and Trent was one of the few that tended to make snide remarks whenever he saw Jaylin.

He was even more prone to arrogance and ignorance when he had an audience.

"Well, well, well. Look what we have here." Trent smirked as he looked from Max to Jaylin, to Max again. "Care to tell the class just what this is all about, Maxie? Since when do you hang around prissy little fags like Jaylin here?" Naturally, Trent puffed out his chest in delight when Lane and Hank laughed, but it was Max's reaction Jaylin watched closely, mostly because he was curious as to how Max would handle the teasing.

All three guys were built, certainly strong, but Max had a few inches and at least thirty pounds on all of them.

"Fuck off, Trent," Max snapped, clearly tense.

"What? I'm just asking a question. I've never seen you with the fag before."

"Better a fag than a brainless, knuckle-dragging caveman." It likely wasn't wise to smart off, but Jaylin wasn't

in the mood for Trent's insults and, to his surprise, Max laughed loudly while Trent turned red and glared.

"What the fuck are you laughing at, Sydney?"

"Oh, what he said. Calling you a brainless caveman? That was funny. And true." Max turned to grin at Jaylin. "He does kinda look like a caveman, doesn't he?" His eyes danced with laughter and Jaylin smiled back, forgetting Trent for a moment, until Trent barked his name and he looked at the other guy again.

"You want to start with me, boy? I'll kick your fag ass."

"You'll have to get past me to do it." Max took a step forward. "I'm not shittin' here. If you want to lay a hand on Jaylin, you go through me to do it. And I'm willing and ready to kick your ass all over this parking lot, so just take a swing, Trent." His voice was icy, dangerous, and Jaylin held his breath as he watched the exchange, knowing he should be annoyed that Max felt he had to stand up for him. But more than anything, he was impressed.

*Trent's afraid of him and he should be. Max could seriously hurt him.*

For a brief moment, Trent tried to stare Max down, but he finally looked away and shook his head slowly.

"Not worth it."

"If you change your mind, you know where to find me."

Trent ignored that, turning his glare to Jaylin. “Max won’t always be around.” It was a clear threat, but Jaylin just shrugged and smiled and showed no fear, which seemed to make Trent all the more angry, as he turned and stomped away with his lackeys trailing behind him.

“I’m sorry about that.”

Jaylin shook his head. “Forget it. He makes comments like that from time to time.”

“He has no right.”

“He’s a prick.”

“Tell me about it.”

They began walking again, toward the parking lot. “I get why he hates me, but you two have been teammates for years....”

“So why does he hate me?”

“You can tell me it’s none of my business. That’s cool.”

“It’s not a secret. Basically, Trent’s always second string.”

“And you’re not.” *He’s jealous and he should be. He can’t hold a fucking candle to Max and he knows it and he knows everyone else sees it too.* “I should have figured that one out.” He glanced at Max again, feeling another warm rush, admiring how the wind had made a mess of his hair, leaving a few stray locks falling over his forehead.

*I am in so much trouble. How can I tutor him and not jump him? I can't stop thinking about him naked and wrapped around me and if he knew I was thinking that, he wouldn't defend me. He would likely help Trent kick my ass.*

"It's more than that, really. His dad and my dad grew up together. And they weren't what you could call friends. Kinda like me and Trent; they were always competing and, more often than not, his dad came out on top, so he gets the same kind of pressure from home that I do." He laughed, but it was a humorless sound. "My dad insists on nothing but the best. Anything less is a failure, which is the reason I really need your help. My grades are important because I need them to get into Duke." He didn't sound thrilled or excited at the possibility of attending a university as prestigious and well-respected as Duke, but Jaylin figured Duke wasn't Max's choice.

It was his father's school and therefore Max was expected to attend. Thinking about how limiting such expectations could be, Jaylin was grateful anew for his mother and her willingness to allow him to pick his own dreams.

"Where do you want to go to college?"

The question pulled Jaylin from his thoughts and he shrugged. "I don't know. I like it here and I know it would be easier to attend college close to home."

"But...."

"Juilliard. Cliché, right?"

“Not at all! I bet you could get in.”

“It’s pretty competitive.”

“So? Jaylin, you’re really good. Any college would take you.”

*Right now, I couldn’t care less about college. I would be perfectly content to have you take me in the backseat of my car.*

“Thanks, but....”

“You should have more confidence in yourself.”

“I have confidence. I just can’t get my hopes up. I need to be logical.”

“We might have to do something about that.”

They had reached Jaylin’s car, a used SUV, and Jaylin’s heart kicked in his chest as he turned and looked at Max, who was smiling down at him with something warm in those brown eyes that Jaylin knew he could easily get lost in. And Max was standing close. Less than six inches separated them and Jaylin told himself it was insane, but had he been dealing with anyone other than star jock Max Sydney, he would have sworn a serious vibe existed. He had never felt so drawn, so connected to anyone. It frightened him more than a little, but he liked it as well, and he wondered why this had to be happening to him now and with Max Sydney, of all people.



Sure, he had daydreamed about the guy, but this was different.

This felt real.

If he wasn't careful, he could fall and fall hard for Max and that would be a dozen and one different kinds of bad. He had really hoped he would make it to college before developing an intense crush on anyone and he had really hoped his first crush would be on someone he could pursue for a real relationship.

"I need to get home. But I'll see you tonight."

"I'll be there. And I want to say thanks again, Jaylin. It means a lot to me."

"It's no big deal. Really. I'm happy to help."

Needing distance, he opened the door, tossed his books into the passenger seat and crawled into the SUV, sliding the key into the ignition.

Before closing the door, he glanced at Max again and their eyes locked and held and Jaylin felt a fluttering in his chest.

*There's no "I could fall" about it. I've already fallen hard for him.*

Stepping back so Jaylin could close the door, Max smiled and waved and Jaylin forced himself to look away. He had the almost overwhelming urge to pull Max into the SUV and kiss him. It was beyond insane to even consider such a

thing, but a part of him was beginning to wonder if maybe Max wouldn't exactly reject such an advance. Maybe Max wasn't straight. Or maybe he was straight but curious or confused. Just because he hadn't had any problems figuring out he was gay didn't mean it was that cut and dry for other guys, especially guys like Max, who were expected to be macho and sexually eager.

*Don't be stupid. And don't get your hopes up. He's just being nice. It might seem like he's flirting, but flirting is second nature to a guy like Max and it's likely he doesn't realize he's even doing it, so get over yourself, Jaylin.*

That thought firmly in mind, Jaylin waved at Max once more with a trembling hand before he put the car in gear and pulled out of the parking lot.

He needed to get himself together and he knew it. He was smart. He had common sense, and while he didn't have much experience yet, when it came to relationships and sex as a gay man, he did know falling for a straight guy was pretty much the stupidest thing he could do.

Max had come to him because he needed help with Biology and Jaylin assured himself he could and would help him without making a fool of himself and without letting his crush get completely out of hand.

He didn't try to tell himself he wouldn't daydream or picture Max whenever he jacked off.

Everyone had a right to indulge in a little naughty fantasy from time to time.

## Chapter Two

BY the time Jaylin made it home, he was nearly a nervous wreck, the speech he had given himself forgotten.

He was truly terrified he had gotten in over his head. He had tutored people in the past, and he was around good-looking guys all the time. At school. During track meets. But he had never been knocked off balance by anyone; he had never felt so out of sorts and lightheaded. Just being around Max turned his brain to mush and sent all the blood in his body rushing to his cock, which didn't seem to understand that Max really wasn't an option.

He really wished he could talk to someone, but as much as he loved his mother, he couldn't bring himself to discuss such matters with her. And she was out of town. She wouldn't be back until late tomorrow night. While he had a number of friends, he didn't want any of them to know he had feelings for Max Sydney.

Disgusted and annoyed with himself, he decided to put the two hours he had before Max's arrival to good use.

A long shower helped ease some of his tension and after he changed into old jeans and a T-shirt, he went downstairs and sat down at the piano.

Nothing relaxed him as music did. When he played, he could forget about everything and everyone. It was his escape from reality and he needed that escape now. He needed some peace, and for a while, as always, he found it, but at five before seven, the doorbell rang and he tensed, drew in a breath, and went to open the door.

As expected, he found Max there, dressed in jeans and a sweater, his backpack slung casually over his shoulder.

When he smiled that causal, carefree smile, Jaylin felt his heart kick against his chest and he knew there was no maybe about it.

He was in over his head and it was too late to do anything about it. All he could do was make the best of the situation and not throw himself at Max Sydney or do or say anything that would allow Max to see how much he wanted him.

Stepping aside, he allowed Max to step into the room before he closed the door and turned to see Max looking around the room.

“Nice place.”

“Thanks.”

Max set his backpack down and crossed the room to the fireplace, where he looked intently at a picture on the mantel.

“Is that your mom?”

“Yeah.”

“She’s beautiful.” Max glanced back over his shoulder. “You have her eyes. But I guess the hair comes from your father.”

“It does. But he’s not really around. Never has been.”

“I’m sorry.”

Jaylin shrugged and crossed the room to stand beside Max, his heart still racing, questions and stray thoughts running rapidly through his mind. Max seemed so casual, so relaxed, yet there was an energy about him, something that Jaylin found intoxicating and exciting as Max looked at him and he felt his breath catch.

“My mom left when I was six. My dad remarried when I was ten.”

“I didn’t know that.”

“I don’t talk about it much. Neither does my dad. He doesn’t like anyone knowing someone had the balls to actually walk away from him.”

He didn’t dare say it, but it sounded to Jaylin like Max’s dad was a real hard-ass and he was sorry for Max.

“Would you like something to drink? Soda? Tea?” He would have offered beer, if there had been any in the house, because at the moment, it occurred to Jaylin that a drink would have done him some serious good. “If you want coffee or something I think I can manage to make some.” He knew he was bordering on babbling, but he needed to talk, to keep himself distracted. Max smiled and shook his head.

“I’m good, thanks. I just....” He shook his head, shoving his hands in his pockets in a gesture that might have been nervous. “Look, Jaylin, I kinda lied to you. And I’m sorry, but I...I really had no idea how to go about this and needed to talk to you. But I couldn’t just come up and say what I need to say and....” Trailing off, he shook his head again and Jaylin frowned a little, not understanding, as Max glanced at him, clearly anxious and on edge. Despite his own confusion, Jaylin wanted to somehow put Max at ease.

“Whatever it is, Max, you can just say it. I mean, you asked for help with Biology....”

“See, that’s what I lied about. I don’t need help. I totally hate Biology, but I’m passing with a B average, and Bs are usually as good as it gets for me, so I really don’t need help.”

“Okay. Then why did you ask me to tutor you?”

Max glanced at him, then paced nervously to the sofa, where he sat down, hunched forward, his arms resting on his legs while he stared at the floor.

*Something is eating him up inside. He looks like he’s about to jump out of his skin.*

Concerned, but not certain what to do, since he didn't really know what was wrong, Jaylin decided to stand, waiting for Max to say what he needed to say. He didn't think pushing would be a good idea. Whatever Max was struggling to get out, he needed to do it on his own, at his own pace, and Jaylin respected that, even if he was undeniably curious.

Finally, Max glanced up at him, but quickly looked down again as he blew out a breath.

"When did you know?"

Confused, Jaylin frowned a little. "When did I know what?"

"When did...well, when did you know that you're...you know...."

"Are you asking me when I knew I was gay?"

Seemingly relieved he didn't actually have to say the words, Max nodded. Jaylin's mind was reeling, but he firmly forced himself to focus on what Max had asked and not the possibilities his asking such a question could suggest.

"I guess on some level, I always knew I was different. I mean, I know a beautiful girl whenever I see one, but I've never been attracted...." He shrugged. "I was fifteen when I really understood and, for me, it wasn't a big deal. I just sort of accepted it and I told my mom and she was great. She said she'll always love me and she only wants me to be happy."

“Your mother sounds pretty great.”

“She is. And I know I’m lucky. I know a lot of guys don’t find that kind of understanding.”

Max nodded, but fell silent again, and Jaylin finally moved, to sit on the other end of the sofa, still careful to give Max plenty of space. And time. If what he suspected was indeed true, Max had to actually say it for himself. He needed to be able to open that door and accept himself and learn not to be afraid.

“My dad is nothing like your mother. He’s a jerk. A bigot. He hates anyone different.”

“Unfortunately, some people are like that.”

“What about your dad? Does he know?”

“I’ve never come right out and told him, but I only see him once a year at the most.”

“Do you think he’ll freak?”

Jaylin shook his head. “Not really. He’s pretty open-minded.” And if he did have some issue with it, both Jaylin and Kayla would tell him to shove off. It was far too late for him to have any real say or voice in exactly how Jaylin lived his life.

“My dad will freak out. I know it. And my stepmother will, too.”

“Max....”



“I’ve known for a while. How could I not? But I wouldn’t admit it. Admitting it means it’s a fact, and I can’t take it back, once I admit it.” His voice was soft, thick with emotion. Wanting to comfort him somehow, Jaylin laid a hand gently on his back, and Max didn’t shrink from the touch. “I’ve gone out with girls. I’m sure you’ve heard all the rumors. Everyone at school thinks I’ll nail anything with breasts and a vagina, but truth is, I’ve only had sex once and it...well, it was really horrible. But she wouldn’t admit that and she just told her friends it was really great and the next girl didn’t want to admit we didn’t do more than kiss....” Shaking his head, he looked at Jaylin, his eyes reflecting confusion and fear and a dozen different emotions Jaylin understood and sympathized with, even if he wasn’t certain what to say to help Max.

He really had been lucky, to have a mother who loved and accepted him without condition and he wished Max could expect the same, but it was obvious his father would blow up and not accept Max for who he was.

“I can’t tell you not to be afraid. Because it can be scary. My mother handled it well, but I’ve had some so-called friends up and turn their backs on me when I admitted to them that I’m gay, and it does hurt. But you learn to be grateful for your true friends and you learn who you can count on to be there through the hard times.”

“Most of the guys on the team will hate me.”

“Maybe. Some of them may surprise you.”

“I wish I could believe that and I...” He looked at Jaylin. “I can’t actually ‘come out’ yet. I’m still too afraid. I’m afraid my dad will throw me out and then what would I do? I could likely get into a good college on a football or baseball scholarship, but I still have a few months of high school left. I need a place to live and...God, Jaylin, I don’t want to live a lie, but I don’t know if I’m brave enough to admit the truth when it will cost me so much.”

“You’ve taken the first step, by opening up to me.”

“It’s easy with you. I knew you would understand.”

“I do understand. And I will help you in any way I can.”

“You mean that, don’t you?”

Jaylin smiled. “I mean it. I’ll listen if you want to talk. Help you when you are ready to tell your dad, if you like. Just let me know what you need and I swear, I’ll be there.” It was an easy promise to make and one he knew he would easily keep, because he knew Max needed the support and he really wanted to be a friend to someone who clearly needed it. And there was no denying to himself that he cared about Max. He was the kind of guy it would be easy to fall for, but Jaylin was trying hard not to think about that too much as their eyes held. Max smiled, seeming to relax a little, and Jaylin was glad for that.

He wanted Max to be completely comfortable with him, wanted him to understand that he didn’t have to hide anything or be afraid. Max needed someone to be a safe place for him, someone he could count on for support and

understanding, and Jaylin wanted to be that person. He felt honored that Max had opened up to him.

“Jaylin, I want you to know, I didn’t pick you to talk to just because I already knew about you being gay and all. I mean, that was part of it.”

“I understand. You didn’t want to go to your friends with this.”

“I didn’t. But I came to you because...well, because I’ve been watching you.”

“What?”

He blushed and looked down again. “For the past year, I’ve been watching you. I see you when you’re at school, of course. But I go to your track meets whenever I can. I know you never see me, because I’m in the stands. And I went to the past few school concerts, just so I could hear you play, and I.... The thing is, you’re what made me realize I really don’t want to live a lie.”

“Max....”

“I like you, Jaylin. I mean, I really like you. I think you’re just about perfect.”

“Are you serious?” *God, this is all a dream and any second, I’m gonna wake up, alone in my bed, hard as a rock and seriously disappointed.* “Max, I don’t know what to say. I never expected you to actually be interested in me. Hell, I never even suspected for a second you were gay!” Okay, he had hoped, daydreamed, but this was reality and he couldn’t

quite wrap his mind around what he was hearing from the man of his dreams.

“Jaylin, you are the most amazing guy.” Max turned so he was better facing him and it seemed to Jaylin that the rest of the world had ceased to exist. “You are smart and you have a great sense of humor. Not to mention you are super talented. I could sit and listen to you play the piano all day. It’s almost hypnotic. I listen to you and watch you get lost in the music and I can feel what you’re feeling and it’s so incredible. And I love to watch you run. I’ve never see anyone so graceful and so completely in tune with their body, so focused. It’s sexy and, believe me when I say you have no idea how many times I’ve wanted....” His words quickly faded and he again blushed, which was maybe the cutest sight Jaylin had ever seen. Jaylin grinned, warm both inside and out, as he reached out and took Max’s hand in his. Their eyes locked and held once more.

It was an intense moment. Jaylin swore he could actually hear the sound of his heart pounding against his chest, but he wasn’t scared as much as he was excited.

His dream was coming true and it was exhilarating.

“I’ve thought about you too, Max. A lot. I never thought you noticed me.”

“You’re the most beautiful thing I’ve ever seen. I’d be blind not to notice you.”

“I wish I could see myself the way you see me.”

“Maybe I can help you see yourself the way I do.”

“Max....”

“Do you think you could ever like me, Jaylin?”

He sounded so unsure, so afraid, as if he expected to be rejected, when rejecting him was the last thing Jaylin could even consider.

“Max, I already like you.”

“Do you? As maybe more than a friend?”

“Do you have any idea how often I....” He laughed. “Max, I think about you all the time. And I about died when you came to me today. I kept wondering how I could be around you and not act on all I feel when I look at you.”

“Really? I was afraid you would tell me I’m not your type.”

“Are you kidding?”

“I’m just a jock. I’m nothing special....”

“That’s where you’re wrong. God, you are so much more than a jock.”

“But I’m not like you. You already know what you want in life.”

“So you still have a few things to figure out. It doesn’t change the fact that you are smart and kind and funny.” He gently squeezed the hand he held. “Trent and his buddies? Those are the jocks that don’t have a brain in their head. And you aren’t anything like that.”

“Now I wish I could see myself the way you see me.”

“We can work on that.”

Max smiled, a smile that reached his eyes and made them dance. He had a smile that people instantly wanted to return. How he couldn't see his worth was beyond Jaylin, but he would keep his promise, he would help Max see himself as incredible and kind. He searched his mind, knowing there was more he should say, but he couldn't find the words.

“I know it's not fair to you, because I'm too afraid to really come out yet, but I...well, I've never actually kissed a guy before.”

“Neither have I.”

“Seriously?”

“There aren't a lot of gay guys at our school. At least not that I know about. And until now, I didn't think I could have a chance at the guy I really want to kiss.”

“Well, since you know now, do you think you would be willing to kiss me?”

“I can't think of anything I want more.”

Jaylin easily sensed that Max was just as nervous as he was, but they both wanted this, needed this. He could feel his heart thundering and butterflies fluttered around his stomach, but any and all physical and external distractions

faded when Max's full lips brushed against his and Jaylin shivered once, then melted completely.

Hands resting on Max's shoulders, he leaned into the kiss that quickly went from testing and hesitant to passionate and hungry. His lips parted of their own accord and he moaned in delight when Max slipped his tongue into his mouth while tangling one hand in Jaylin's hair, taking control of the kiss, his hard body pushing Jaylin back, until he was stretched out on the sofa with Max pressing him gently into the cushions.

It was a heady, delicious feeling. Max was warm and solid and he shivered, becoming more and more aroused.

When Max finally broke the kiss, they were both breathless, their lips damp and swollen. Jaylin smiled when he saw the desire and longing he felt clearly reflected in Max's eyes.

"I think I like kissing you."

"I think I like kissing you too, Max."

Smiling, Max laid his head on Jaylin's shoulder and Jaylin wrapped his arms around him, loving how it felt to have Max this close to him. It was even more wonderful than anything he had ever imagined and he had no doubt that something truly special existed between them, but he knew they would have to play this very carefully.

Max still wasn't "out" and he wasn't ready to be and, while Jaylin would have loved to be with him openly, he understood Max needed more time.

And he was willing to wait.

*One step at a time. We'll take it slow. Set our own pace and enjoy it.*

Pressing a kiss into Max's hair, he held him a little tighter and Max held him back.

The strength of the embrace told Jaylin all he needed to know.



## Chapter Three

THE months that followed their first kiss were some of the most incredible and certainly the most exhilarating Jaylin had ever experienced.

He and Max couldn't be together openly, but they did hang out some at school. More than a few eyebrows were raised at their sudden friendship, but only Trent and his brainless goons made comments, and they were careful to never say anything when Max was within earshot. And most were happy to believe the excuse that Max and Jaylin had become friends when Jaylin began tutoring him and the tutoring excuse gave Max cause to be at Jaylin's house often.

Jaylin's mother figured out the truth, of course, and when she confronted Jaylin, he told her that yes, he and Max were together and he explained why they couldn't be open and she more than understood. She knew Chad Sydney and she admitted he was a jerk. She had no doubt he wouldn't be overly thrilled when he learned his son was gay and she cautioned Jaylin to be careful. And, naturally, he received the safe-sex lecture.

It was a little awkward, but he knew his mother meant well and she didn't give him a hard time when Max came over often.

Following their first kiss, they both admitted they were nervous and, being inexperienced, they agreed to take things slowly and enjoy exploring. And they were surprisingly comfortable together. It seemed perfectly natural to discuss what appealed and what didn't appeal to them and they loved just being together.

Max admitted he felt completely free around Jaylin, and Jaylin let down his guard, content just to be close to Max. He loved it when they lay together, wrapped in a warm embrace. and it was amusing to realize just how much Max liked cuddling close. Max often fell asleep in his arms. He could relax with Jaylin and any shyness faded quickly, leaving them eager to touch, to learn what felt good and how to drive each other to the brink and beyond.

Max was warm and affectionate and Jaylin loved it, loved him, loved the passion. He loved to see Max breathless, gasping his name. Max was always eager and vocal, especially when Jaylin's lips were wrapped around him and Max was just as talented and just as eager to please. Both learned to ask for what they wanted, what they were ready to attempt, but they held off on having intercourse, each knowing what that would mean and how it was truly a big step.

It was freeing, being each other's firsts. It allowed them to share an honesty that was rare to find and, after two

months, Jaylin knew he loved Max and when Max said the words to him, Jaylin was thrilled to say them back.

He made it clear that he didn't want them to end after high school and they began looking at colleges that could provide both of them what they sought.

Max told him Duke wasn't his idea and he would happily go to New York so Jaylin could attend his dream school.

"What about your dreams, Max? What do you want?"

"Honestly? I don't really know. All I've ever done is play sports. My dad thinks I should go to Duke and be a star like he was, but that isn't what I want. I do know that much."

"You have a world of options open to you. Just find what appeals to you most."

"What appeals to me most is you."

The flirty comment resulted in an intense makeout session and the next day, Jaylin was still smiling when he stopped by his locker in between classes. He and Max had already made plans to get together that evening, after Max's baseball game. He was having a great season and Jaylin attended as many games as he could. He really enjoyed watching Max play, and it only annoyed him a little when girls would throw themselves at Max, who kindly brushed them off.

Sorting through his locker for the book he needed, he jumped slightly when someone delivered a hard slap to the

locker next to his. He looked up to see Trent Miller standing there, with Hank and Lane lingering a few feet behind.

“Hey, fag boy.” Trent smirked, but there was open hate in his eyes. “Where’s Max? Aren’t you two joined at the hip these days?”

“Fuck off, Trent.”

“Sorry, but you’re not my type. I’m normal. Meaning I like girls.”

*They just don’t like you, you prick. When did you last have a date?*

Knowing it was best not to antagonize him, Jaylin tried to ignore the bastard, but he stood there, glaring.

“So you’re the one that takes it up the ass, right? I mean, Max might be going gay, but I can’t imagine him taking it up the ass.”

“Trent....”

“Come on, Jaylin! Share with me. What do you do that made Max go gay?”

Slamming his locker shut, Jaylin turned, trying to walk away, but Trent caught him painfully by the arm, spun him around and shoved him against the locker.

“Don’t walk away from me, you faggot!”

“Get your hands off me.”

“Why? You think Max might be pissed if I rough up his boy toy?”

Jaylin didn’t answer. He just glared and Trent laughed, leaning closer to him, to whisper harsh words into his ear.

“Me and some of the boys got plans for you and Maxie. Just you wait, fag boy. I’m gonna get both of you good.”

With a final smirk, he turned and stalked away. Jaylin let out a breath, telling himself he had no reason to be afraid because Trent was a jerk. He wouldn’t go as far as to actually come after him and Max. And he had no proof Max was gay. It was something Max could still deny. Trent could spout off all he wanted, but at the end of the day, everyone in school liked Max better, because he was a nice guy while Trent was a prick.

Somewhat confident, Jaylin went to his next class, but two periods later, when he was alone in the music room, Max came in, looking shaken.

“I heard what happened with Trent. Did he hurt you? Are you okay?”

“I’m fine. He just made some stupid threats. Said he and a few of the guys are planning to teach us a lesson.”

Max cursed under his breath and came closer and Jaylin could see he wanted to touch him, but even with the door closed, it was too great of a risk. He knew having to live in secret was starting to take a toll on Max, but until they graduated, they couldn’t be open about their relationship and they both knew why.

Max's father would never allow them to be together, even if they were both eighteen. Max lived with his father and he was depending on him. But he was looking into scholarships for college so he could finally live life on his own terms, and Jaylin was looking forward to a time when he and Max could do something as simple as walk down the street holding hands.

"Shit. I'm sorry, Jay...."

"Don't be. I don't care what Trent says. And I.... Max, don't even say anything to him."

"But...."

"He wants you to come after him." Jaylin reasoned. "He wants an excuse to start a fight, so don't give him one. I know you can kick his ass without any problem, but Trent isn't about to take you on in a fair fight. He'll have someone helping him. And you could get hurt."

"I can't let him make you a target."

"Screw him. In just a few months, we never have to see the guy again."

Max sighed, but finally nodded and Jaylin glanced toward the closed door, before reaching out just long enough to quickly brush his fingers down Max's chest. He wanted so much to pull Max close and kiss him, but he couldn't. It would have to wait until later, until they were alone and cut off from judgmental and condemning eyes that couldn't understand that their feelings for each other were genuine and real and nothing to find shame in.

“Max, I’ve been thinking and I...I’m ready. For what comes next.”

“Are you sure?”

He nodded. “I’ve been thinking about it for a while.”

“So have I.”

“Does that mean you’re ready, too?”

“God yes!” Max grinned and Jaylin laughed. “I know it’s a big step. But I love you. So yeah, I’m ready.” Everything he felt was evident in his eyes and Jaylin loved it, loved that Max could be so open with him. His heart raced, thinking about what it would feel like to finally have Max inside of him, at one with him.

“Where can we...?”

“My dad has a place in the woods. A cabin he never uses. We could go there. My dad is out of town this weekend, so we could go there after the game Friday night and maybe stay until Sunday, if you want to.”

“I want to.”

“Good.”

“Max....”

“Do you have any idea how badly I want to kiss you right now?”

“As badly as I want to kiss you, I’m sure. But we can’t. If someone saw....” He trailed off, and Max nodded, looking

more than a little disappointed, which was exactly how Jaylin felt.

“At graduation, after we have our diplomas in hand, I am going to grab you and kiss you in front of God and everyone.”

Laughing, Jaylin shook his head. “Do you really think that’s the best way to come out to your father and stepmother?”

“Who cares? I’ll be free then and I want the world to know I love you.”

“I love you too, Max.”

A look passed between them, one that said more than words, a look that allowed their hearts and souls to touch, even if they couldn’t touch with their bodies at the moment.

“I need to get to class.”

“I’ll see you after the game tonight.”

Max nodded and turned, looking back at him once more when he reached the door. Jaylin smiled, feeling almost giddy, he was so excited to know that he and Max would have the entire weekend together.

He was finally going to have Max inside of him, filling him, completing him.

Still smiling as he sat down at the piano, the music that flowed seemed sweeter than ever and Jaylin was truly happy.



SLIPPING from around the corner, as Max left the music room and walked down the hall to his next class, Trent Miller grinned.

He had stood outside the door, with it cracked just enough to allow him to hear the conversation inside and now he knew for a fact that Max and Jaylin were fucking. No one had believed him, but he could prove it now; he had even heard them saying they loved each other and making plans for some twisted weekend together.

*This is perfect! I know just what cabin Max is talking about. And I think I'll have a nice little surprise waiting for Max and Jaylin.*

He was going to make good on what he had told Jaylin. He was going to make certain Jaylin and, more importantly, Max, learned an important lesson.

And he was going to enjoy making them suffer.

## Chapter Four

BY Friday, Jaylin was buzzing with excitement and anticipation, thinking about an entire weekend with Max.

It was more than just knowing they would be having sex for the first time. This was a chance to be completely alone. No one would find them. No one would walk in. He could hold Max's hand and kiss him and not worry; they could be completely free and affectionate. Max was just as eager and ready for their time cut off from the world.

Jaylin was honest with his mother. He told her he would be with Max, but she didn't object. It was obvious to her just how serious he and Max were and she wanted them to be happy. She worried for Max, what would happen when Chad finally learned his son was gay, but she had already assured Max and Jaylin that they had her full support.

*"If Max needs a place to stay, after Chad has his meltdown, he can stay here. He's a good boy and I won't let Chad toss him out onto the streets."*

*"Mom, you are, without a doubt, the best."*

*"Hardly. I just love you and I want you to be happy."*

It meant a lot to Max too, knowing they had Kayla's full support. He wished his father could take a lesson from her, but he never would. And he was working up to the moment when he had to face Chad. He was nervous, but determined to take control of his life. Being with Jaylin was the most important thing to him and Jaylin knew his love was eager for their time alone. It showed in Max's eyes when they had a chance to talk before the game.

Max was having a great season, as everyone expected, and he pitched a great game. Some of his teammates wanted to party after another big win, but Max told them he had something to do, and he was in Jaylin's SUV at fifteen after eight.

Fresh from a postgame shower, his hair was damp, his eyes dancing, and as they drove out of town, Jaylin held his hand.

Max was always pumped after a game. He was filled with an emotional energy and Jaylin loved seeing him so happy. He especially loved that Chad hadn't been there to ruin it. Max's father tended to pick apart how he played; win or lose, he always found some sort of flaw, and the constant nagging never failed to make Max feel bad about himself.

*Bastard. Max is wonderful. Anyone who can't see that is a fool.*

As they drove toward the cabin, they talked easily, as always. Jaylin had already gone to the drugstore right after school and he had gotten everything he felt they would need. He was excited, a little nervous, but he knew it would be

wonderful and Max would certainly take enough time to make sure Jaylin was ready for him.

They reached the cabin at nine and they quickly gathered everything and went inside.

Max flipped on the light, and Jaylin looked around, finding the room to be spacious and rugged with the living and kitchen in one. Max said the master bedroom was to the right and it had a very spacious private bath with a hot tub Max had already said he wanted to put to good use. Jaylin liked the idea.

Setting their bags down, Max hauled Jaylin into his arms, landing a hard, hungry kiss that had Jaylin clinging helplessly to him when they finally broke apart and Jaylin laughed.

“I have you completely to myself.”

“Indeed you do. So what do you plan to do with me?”

Max grinned, pulling him into another kiss, and Jaylin melted against him, sliding his hands down his lover’s strong back. Already, his heart was pounding and he felt lightheaded. Max put all he felt into a kiss. He didn’t hold back; he gave and demanded, and Jaylin soon had his hands beneath Max’s shirt, savoring the feel of smooth, warm skin.

Without prompting, Max lifted his arms, and Jaylin pulled the T-shirt over his head, dropping it to the floor, fingers moving to unbutton Max’s pants.

“Eager?”

“Always eager for you,” Jaylin whispered, gasping when Max began kissing his neck.

“Need you. Naked. Now.”

Grinning, Jaylin stepped back, just far enough to pull off his own shirt, which soon joined Max’s on the floor. It wasn’t the first time they had undressed together. They had certainly spent a lot of time naked, but this, this was different; this time, they were crossing an important line and every nerve Jaylin possessed was alive. He could feel excitement and desire making his heart pound and he wanted this, wanted Max, more than he had ever wanted anything, and he could see in Max’s eyes that he felt just as eager and excited.

Stepping close again, he leaned into the touch when Max cupped his cheek, his thumb brushing gently over Jaylin’s full bottom lip.

“You’re too good to me,” he whispered, but Jaylin shook his head. “I’m serious. I have to put all these restrictions on our relationship and you never complain. It’s not fair to you. But I swear, that will all change, Jay. It won’t always be like this.”

“I know that. And it’s okay.”

“You deserve better....”

“You’re the best there is, Max. And you are all I want.”

Max smiled at that, pulling him close again, but before their lips could touch in a heated and desperate kiss, they

both jumped, startled, as the door leading into the bedroom opened and Jaylin felt ice-cold fear wash over him when he saw Trent step into the living room.

And he wasn't alone.

Lane and Hank were with him, the lapdogs that they were, but there was another guy and Jaylin recognized him as Trent's cousin, Greg, a twenty-one-year-old high school dropout known for being a violent troublemaker. He had been arrested a dozen times, and was a true badass where Trent only liked to think he was one. But together, Jaylin knew they would be a force, and Lane and Hank would do whatever they were ordered to do.

*"Me and some of the boys got plans for you and Maxie. Just you wait, fag boy. I'm gonna get both of you good."*

The words came back to him. The threat he had considered idle and hadn't taken seriously had obviously been more than idle and Jaylin could tell by the way Trent and Greg looked at him that he and Max were in serious trouble.

"What the fuck are you doing here?" Max snapped from his shock first, moving to stand in front of Jaylin, in an obvious effort to protect him. "Get out of here! I don't know what kind of game you're trying to play, Trent, but my dad owns this place and it's private property."

"Your dad? Are you kidding me? As if your dad knows what you're doing here."

"Trent...."

“Come on, Maxie. I overheard you and fag boy talking in the music room.” Trent laughed a loud, barking laugh that echoed hate. “I know you two came here to fuck. And me and the boys, we’ve got a good look at....” He waved a hand in their direction. “We saw what you two have been doing, and it’s disgusting! Both of you make me sick.”

“What we do is none of your business.”

“We’re making it our business.” Greg moved to stand beside his cousin, his greasy brown hair long enough it fell to his shoulders. “When Trent here told me there were some fags running around town, I wasn’t surprised to hear about Jaylin, but you, Max....” He shook his head as he pulled out a cigarette, taking his time lighting it. “I got to say, Max, I was pretty amazed to find out you were now playing for the other team. And Trent’s right. It’s disgusting.”

“Just leave us....”

“You don’t give the orders here, Max,” Trent fired. “We’re in control.”

Swallowing back his fear, Jaylin moved from behind Max to stand beside him and Max reached for his hand.

“We’ve never done anything to you,” Jaylin reasoned, trying not to show how afraid he felt, as he looked from Trent to Greg and back again. “What we do doesn’t impact you. Just leave us alone, and....” His words faded when Trent reached behind his back and withdrew a handgun from the waistband of his jeans. Jaylin glanced at Max, who stared at Trent.

“Shut up!” Coldly, Trent barked the order, but Jaylin noticed an almost frightened look pass between Lane and Hank. “You both shut up and do just what we say, or I blow your brains out and smile while I do it.”

“Trent, man, what the hell?” Lane seemed suddenly pale. “Dude, you said we were gonna give them a scare, but a gun.... Man, that’s hard core.”

“We didn’t sign up for any deep shit like this.” Hank shook his head. “Put the gun away and let’s get out of here. Let Max and Jaylin do whatever they want. I don’t want any trouble.”

“You two shut up and do what Trent and I say or that gun will be used on you.”

The threat from Greg ended any protest from Lane and Hank and Jaylin knew they wouldn’t question Trent again.

“Trent, put the gun away,” Max spoke, voice firm, but Jaylin knew he was afraid.

“I got the gun. I give the orders.” Trent grinned and it was a sickly, twisted sight as he glanced at Hank and Lane. “Hank, get the bag I left in the bedroom. Now!” Clearly willing and ready to do anything required to save himself, Hank jumped and ran back into the bedroom, returning quickly with a leather duffel bag.

He handed the bag to Trent, who passed it to Lane. “Get a pair of handcuffs out of there.”

“Trent....”



“Do as I say, Lane!”

Hands shaking, Lane followed the order and withdrew a pair of handcuffs. Jaylin found himself pushed firmly behind Max, who seemed determined to protect him, despite the fact he was in just as much danger. He would do anything to protect Jaylin, but Jaylin felt the same intense need to keep his lover from suffering and he wondered what, if anything, he could do or possibly say to reason with Trent.

“Hank. Lane. Get Jaylin.”

“No! No way! You stay the fuck away from him!”

Hearing the malice in Max’s voice, seeing the rage in his eyes, Lane wisely hesitated and Hank looked ready to bolt.

“You two, do it now! And Max, you got a choice.” Trent took a step closer. “You can let the boys here take Jaylin and handcuff him to the bed, sitting up, so he can see the action, or I can put a bullet in his brain. And believe me when I say I’ll kill him. I’ll blow his brains out. Do you want that? Is that what you want? You want to see your lover’s head explode?”

Stepping from behind Max again, Jaylin squeezed his lover’s hand, and Max looked at him, stark fear evident in his eyes.

“It’s okay.” But it wasn’t and they both knew it, but Jaylin knew he had to keep calm. He had no other choice, because he had to keep Max calm. “Just...whatever happens, I love you.” God, this was so unfair. This night was supposed to be perfect, their first night together, but it had become some twisted nightmare. And it was far from over. Jaylin was

certain Trent had something horrible in mind for them, but as long as he had the gun, there was nothing he or Max could do but follow his orders and pray they would live.

“Jaylin....”

“He has a gun. If you try anything....”

“Listen to your boy toy, Maxie. If you try anything, you both die.”

Angry, terrified, Max looked from Trent to Jaylin, nodding slowly, but his grip on Jaylin’s hand didn’t ease. Jaylin had to pull away from him and doing so nearly killed him. More than anything in the world, he wanted to throw himself into Max’s arms and hold on forever. He wanted to close his eyes and reopen them to find all of this was nothing more than a bad dream, but that wasn’t going to happen.

*God, please let us get out of this alive.*

Not certain that prayer would be answered, but knowing a struggle now would certainly get them killed, he didn’t resist when Hank stepped forward to take him by the arm, leading him toward the bedroom. His knees felt weak and his stomach burned. He wanted to try to reason with Hank, or Lane, but as long as Trent had the gun, they were all trapped. That was a fact Jaylin knew he couldn’t afford to forget as they reached the bed and Trent came into the room with Max in front of him, the gun shoved into his back.

Greg followed, almost casually, still puffing on his cigarette and the smell of the smoke only made Jaylin more nauseas.

“Sit on the bed with your back against the headboard and your arms behind you.”

Quietly glancing at Max, Jaylin did as he was told, sitting down with his legs stretched out in front of him and his arms behind him. He was trying hard not to let Trent see just how afraid he was, but he suspected the fear showed clearly in his eyes, as Trent looked at Lane, ordering him to handcuff Jaylin firmly to the bed.

When Lane hesitated, Greg cursed and snatched the cuffs from his hand.

“I’ll do it. I want this done right.”

Kneeling on the bed, he slapped a cuff around Jaylin’s right wrist, hooked the chain around a wooden bar in the headboard and then cuffed the left wrist. His arms were pulled tightly behind him, and at an odd angle that made his shoulders cramp and ache, but he said nothing. Greg smirked down at him.

“You think you’re a tough guy, don’t you?” Greg taunted. “I bet you’re thinking how you’d like to kick my ass, but that won’t happen in this lifetime, you dirty, worthless fag.” His ignorance and his hate echoed in the words and Jaylin wanted to spit in his face but he knew it wouldn’t do him or Max any good.

Laughing, Greg glanced at Max, then back to Jaylin, and without warning, he pressed the glowing end of his cigarette against Jaylin’s shoulder. Searing pain made Jaylin scream out loud. He could feel tears spring to his eyes and

Greg and Trent laughed and he heard Max yelling for Greg to stop and leave Jaylin alone.

Jaylin watched in horror as Max tried to get to him, but Trent blocked him, kicking him hard in the stomach. Jaylin forgot his own pain as Max doubled over and dropped to his knees.

“Stop it! Please, don’t hurt him!” Jaylin half-sobbed, half-screamed. “Please!” He knew his pleas were falling on deaf ears, but it ripped at his soul to see Max in pain and Trent certainly knew that, as he kicked Max again, even harder this time.

Enjoying the power, Trent looked at Hank and Lane. “Stand him up.” This time, neither of them hesitated. They were likely far too afraid to see what would happen if Trent turned on them. Jaylin watched helplessly as Hank and Lane grabbed Max by the arms and forced him to stand even as he struggled to breathe.

He lifted his head and looked at Trent, and Jaylin could see the pain in his eyes. “You have a problem with me. I get it. I know you’ve always hated me, so do whatever in the hell you want to do to me, but leave Jaylin out of this. Please. He’s never hurt you.”

“You begging to save your fag boyfriend?”

“Trent, please....”

“Don’t worry, Maxie. Jaylin isn’t the one whose really gonna suffer here. I just want him to sit and watch what I have in mind for you.”

Panicked, Jaylin struggled against the handcuffs, but it was useless; he wasn't getting free. Greg laughed at his efforts.

*He's going to hurt Max. All of them are. Something horrible will happen to him and there's not a damn thing I can do to stop it.*

He was completely powerless to save the man he loved from suffering. All he could do was pray that both he and Max would survive whatever nightmare Trent and Greg had in mind for them.

But even if they did survive, Jaylin knew one thing for certain.

Nothing would ever again be the same, when this night was finally over.

The world as he knew and loved it was coming to an end.

LANE had never seen so much blood in his life. He wasn't certain a person could lose that kind of blood and live, and that thought terrified him as he looked around the room, eyes finally falling to Jaylin Ryan, who sat on the floor, holding Max's battered body in his arms, crying as he begged the other man to live.

*Shit! What have we done? How did I get into this fucked-up mess?*

Four hours after they first confronted Jaylin and Max, Trent and Greg had finally grown tired of their so-called games. They had already left.

Hank was outside, throwing up, and Lane stood there, gun in his hand.

Trent had handed it to him with one final order.

*“Kill them. Both of them.”*

*“What? Why me?”*

*“Because I think you’re a fucking pussy and you need to man up. And I want you to finish the game for me. Put a bullet in both of them. If you don’t, I’ll find you and use that gun to kill you.”*

Lane had no doubt Trent meant it. He would kill him. And Hank too.

*Just shoot them and get it over with.*

As the thought ran through his mind, Jaylin looked up at him, hate in his eyes, but mixed with that hate was a desperation. It snagged Lane’s heart, and what was left of his soul, and he felt heated tears rush to his eyes.

*“I’m not a killer.”*

Hands shaking, he dumped the bullets from the gun, threw them to the floor and tossed the gun onto the bed, before dropping down to kneel beside Jaylin.

*“We’ll get him help. Okay? We’ll get him to the hospital.”*

Fumbling, Lane pulled his cell phone from his pocket, turning to glance over his shoulder at the sound of Hank coming into the room.

“I’ve already called the cops, Lane.”

Hank sounded defeated as he leaned against the wall and sank to the floor, burying his face in his hands as he began to sob.

Closing his eyes, Lane cried along with him, but while he cried, he prayed as he had never before prayed in all his life. He didn’t pray for forgiveness. He was fairly certain he didn’t deserve to be forgiven for the role he had played in what had happened to Max and Jaylin, so he simply prayed that somehow, Max would live, despite all he had suffered.

He was sure Jaylin was praying too.

Maybe his prayers would make it through to God, even if Lane’s didn’t.

## Chapter Five

JAYLIN had always hated hospitals, but he supposed no one really liked them, not even the people that worked in them.

This hospital seemed particularly horrible. It smelled funny and the walls were a horrible pale green that was meant to match the white-and-green speckled tile on the floor. He couldn't sit still in the ugly, plastic green chair he sat in, with his mother at his side, holding his hand, the tears she had shed when she learned what had happened finally ceasing for a while.

She knew now that he was okay, he hadn't been hurt badly, at least in the physical sense, though she agreed when a doctor suggested shock was likely settling in. Jaylin wasn't so sure. It was obvious to him that he was well past shock. He felt suspended in time. His mind kept replaying, in vivid detail, every monstrous, brutal act Trent and Greg had taken such delight in while he was totally powerless to stop them.

If he lived to be a hundred and one, he would never forget the sight, the sound of Max's screams or the smell of blood.



Closing his eyes, he drew in a breath, fighting for calm, knowing he needed it. He had already given a statement to the police on the way to the hospital, after they had refused to let him ride in the ambulance with Max. And both Lane and Hank backed his story. They were ready and willing to take a stand against Trent, even if it was too little too late in Jaylin's mind. An officer had stopped by fifteen minutes ago to tell him Trent and Greg had already been located hanging out at a local bar and had been arrested without incident.

Jaylin wished they had resisted.

He wished they had given the police an excuse to shoot them dead.

*They should die. Max could. And if he does, I'll be as good as dead, too.*

He didn't voice that thought out loud—he knew it would just upset his mother—but it was true and he knew it.

If he lost Max, he lost everything, his heart and soul included.

What would there be to live for?

Opening his eyes, Jaylin chanced a glance at the woman seated on the other side of the waiting room, looking annoyed and disgusted.

Maryann Sydney was a beautiful woman, in a cold, almost plastic sort of way. There was nothing warm about her. She hadn't been happy to learn what had happened to Max and she had felt compelled to show undeniable disgust

when Jaylin had to confirm for her that yes, he and Max were lovers and yes, what had happened to them had been a calculated hate crime.

*“How am I going to explain this to my husband? He’s away on business and I have to call him and tell him what? That his son is a fag and he got the shit beat out of him because of it?”*

Despite his own anger and pain and fear, Jaylin had pulled his mother away from Maryann, before she could tell the blonde exactly what she thought.

He tried not to think about what would happen when Max’s father showed up. He knew the man was a jerk and he would be pissed. But Jaylin didn’t care about Chad Sydney or his wife; Max was the only one he cared about and in the three hours since they had arrived at the hospital, Jaylin had waited to hear something, but so far, no doctor had emerged with information.

*Is that good or bad? Maybe it’s good. If they haven’t told us anything yet, that means he’s still alive, at least.*

Closing his eyes again, he sat there, trying to pray, trying to understand. He couldn’t fully believe that the past few hours were real. How could this happen? How could anyone be as vicious or as brutal as Greg and Trent? Max hadn’t deserved what they had done to him. He had suffered and endured so much while both Greg and Trent laughed and Jaylin begged them to stop, but they only laughed at his pleas.

Feeling a hand on his back, he opened his eyes and looked at his mother, seeing her concern for him, the horror she felt. And she only knew vague details; she didn't know everything that had happened, and Jaylin didn't want her to know more.

"I'm scared, Mom. I'm so scared...."

She pulled him close and he rested his head against her shoulder, crying softly, needing to release some of the pain and fear, but mostly, more than anything, he wanted to see Max. He needed to see him, touch him, tell him that he loved him and it would all be okay. Max just needed to get better and everything would be fine. Jaylin would do everything he could to help him heal and cope with what had happened and then they could run away together.

*No one will hurt us again. We'll go far, far away. And Trent and Greg can rot in jail.*

Hearing someone come into the room, Jaylin jumped up when he realized it was the doctor from the emergency room. He half-raced to the man, while Maryann stood calmly and followed, not looking overly interested in hearing any word about her stepson's condition. Jaylin truly hated her, but she was the least of his concerns at the moment. The doctor looked at him before turning his attention to Maryann.

"Are you Max Sydney's mother?"

"Stepmother."

The doctor nodded. "Of course. I'm Dr. Roger Cameron."

“How is he, Doctor? Is he....” Jaylin couldn’t bring himself to say the actual words.

“He lost a great deal of blood. He actually required a transfusion and around three hundred stitches on his back alone.”

Jaylin’s mother slipped an arm around his waist and he was grateful for it, because his knees felt weak and his stomach burned.

“His right leg is broken in three places and his left ankle is broken as well. He has three ribs that are broken and four more that are cracked.” The doctor paused for a moment and Jaylin easily sensed he was uncomfortable. “He had some internal bleeding, which we repaired and he...well, he has some serious rectal trauma as a result of the assault, and we repaired that as well. He will survive, but there is a long physical recovery ahead of him and preparations for that will need to be made.”

The doctor looked at Maryann, but she sighed and shook her head. “That will fall to my husband to handle.”

“When will Mr. Sydney arrive?”

“Tomorrow morning.”

“Would you like to see your stepson?”

“Is that necessary? Isn’t he doped up from the surgery?”

“Well, yes, but I....”

“I’ll see him tomorrow.” She picked up her purse. “I’m going home. It’s late and I really need a few hours’ rest. I trust someone on the staff can call me if there is a serious problem.” Her tone as well as her words made it clear she didn’t give a damn about Max. Jaylin glared at her, but she didn’t notice, or pretended she didn’t, as the doctor nodded.

“Of course, Ms. Sydney.”

Satisfied with the doctor’s answer, she turned her cool eyes to Jaylin. “I would suggest you see Max now, if that’s what you want, young man. And I would use it as a chance to say goodbye. As soon as my husband arrives, I assure you, he will limit your access to Max.”

“No one can keep us from each other.”

“You think so?”

“I love Max and he loves me.”

“Love? Please. Max’s father will never allow him to be a fag.”

Jaylin winced, because Trent and Greg had repeatedly used that word before and during the assault and it made him ill.

“Don’t use that word.” Jaylin blinked, as his mother moved to stand in front of him, her arms folded over her chest. “Don’t use that word to describe Max or my son. Neither of them deserved to suffer what happened tonight. Max is a good boy, the same as Jaylin is, and you should respect them and, at the moment, you should find a way to

express some compassion.” Kayla’s voice was hard with anger; it was obvious Maryann Sydney had crossed a line, and the way the blonde paled slightly suggested she knew it wouldn’t be wise to provoke her further.

Clearly desperate for an escape, Maryann nodded at the doctor once more and moved down the hall, her high heels clicking loudly. Watching her go, Jaylin sighed.

Forcing the things Maryann said from his mind, he looked at the doctor. “Could I please go sit with him?”

“Of course. Follow me.”

“I’ll wait here for you.” His mother squeezed his hand and he nodded, knowing it would be just about pointless to tell her to go on home, because she wouldn’t leave him. “Go sit with Max and don’t worry, sweetheart. Everything will be just fine.”

Jaylin wasn’t certain he believed that. He had no idea how anything could be fine, especially if what Maryann had said was true, but he followed after the doctor, who guided him down a long hall and finally paused in front of a closed door.

“He is sedated. If he wakes up, it won’t be for long.”

“Thank you, Doctor.”

“Have you been examined, son?”

“Someone looked at me, but I wasn’t hurt. Not like Max.”

The doctor nodded, leaving him. Jaylin drew in a breath, pushing the door open and quietly stepping inside.

A dim light fixture above the bed provided the only light in the room, but it was bright enough for Jaylin to clearly see Max as he went to the bed and sank down into a stiff chair. He could feel a rush of fresh tears burn his eyes and he didn't make even a token effort to stop them, as he reached for Max's hand, holding it gently.

His head was bandaged and his face was covered with bruises. His wrists were wrapped—they had been cut badly by the handcuffs—and his chest and back were also wrapped in white gauze. What skin that wasn't horribly bruised and discolored seemed unnaturally pale and he recalled what the doctor had said about the amount of blood he had lost.

*He really could have died. I could have lost him tonight. He suffered so much. And tonight, it was supposed to be special. Somehow, I've got to make all of this up to him.*

Holding Max's hand, he cried openly. He couldn't help it. Everything kept replaying itself, again and again, like some twisted movie he wanted to turn off but couldn't. He would never find a way to put the sound of Max's screams from his memory. And it would be worse for Max. He was so badly hurt, he certainly wouldn't be able to finish the baseball season, and if he didn't heal properly, he would never play football or baseball again.

His father was going to be so furious, and not because he cared about Max.

*What if Maryann is right? What if Chad tries to keep us apart? What will we do?*

He shook the thought away, brushing at his tears, as a low moan sounded and he watched, holding his breath, as Max's eyes fluttered several times, before finally opening completely.

"Jay."

"I'm here, baby. Right here. It's okay. I swear, you're safe now."

He swallowed hard and winced. "You...did they...?"

"No. No, they didn't hurt me."

His eyes closed. "Good. Don't...don't want you hurt...." He opened his eyes again and fresh tears slipped down Jaylin's cheek as he lifted the hand he held to his lips, kissing it gently. After all he had suffered, Max was worried about him. "So tired...." Another low moan escaped him and Jaylin kissed his hand again.

"Close your eyes and sleep, baby. I'll stay here. I won't leave you."

"Promise?"

"I promise. No one can make me leave you. Ever. I love you."

Max tried to speak, only to have the words fade as he drifted off to sleep again, but Jaylin knew what he had been trying to say.



*He wants me to know he loves me and that's all that matters. I won't let anyone keep us from what we are meant to have together.*

They had faced hell and they were alive and while they weren't completely back from the brink, Jaylin assured himself they would be.

All they needed was time, because they already had their love.

That had to be enough.

AT seven o'clock the next morning, Max was still asleep and Jaylin left him long enough to go to the bathroom and get a cup of coffee.

His mother tried to get him to eat something, but he refused. He wasn't certain his stomach could handle food. He still felt ill. And he was so tired he could hardly keep his eyes open. But Max needed him, and he wasn't about to leave Max.

Walking back down the hall, toward Max's room, he stopped when he saw a striking figure standing just outside the door. Jaylin felt his heart fall to his stomach.

Chad Sydney had arrived.

He was dressed in an expensive-looking three-piece suit and, as he approached, Jaylin realized Chad and Max had

similar eyes, but Max's eyes were warm where Chad's seemed cold and angry when they turned on Jaylin.

"Mr. Sydney...."

"Don't you fucking speak to me, you fag." He jabbed a finger in Jaylin's direction. "I heard about what happened. I know you...you somehow pulled my son into your sick lifestyle, and look what happened to him as a result! All of this falls on your shoulders." His eyes blazed, his face was red, it looked as if he might have a heart attack he was so angry, and Jaylin nearly shivered because Chad seemed just as hate-filled and crazy as Trent or Greg.

Mind reeling, wondering why he hadn't better prepared himself for this moment, Jaylin was fairly certain he wouldn't be able to find a way to reason with Chad.

"I didn't.... There's nothing wrong with me or Max or what we feel for each other."

"Bullshit. It's sick. And disgusting."

"It's not. And Max.... This happened because Greg and Trent are sick...."

Chad waved a dismissive hand. "Oh, I am fully disgusted by everything those two did to my son, but none of it would ever have happened if you hadn't turned Max into a fag."

"Don't use that word!"

“Don’t tell me what to do! I give orders. And you listen.” He took a step closer and Jaylin couldn’t help himself; he took a retreating step back. “My son is a mess. He may never play football, or baseball again and I’m not even certain he will recover enough to finish high school or start college on time and I blame you for that.”

“Mr. Sydney....”

“I don’t want to know exactly what happened between you and Max.”

“I wouldn’t give you the details. Because they aren’t any of your business.”

“Smartass, aren’t you?”

“I love your son.” Jaylin found strength to face the man. “And he loves me. And now, this isn’t how Max wanted you to find out. He...he didn’t deserve what happened. He is a good person, better than you could ever hope to be, and I will not allow you to make what we have seem ugly or wrong, because it’s not.”

“Young man, you will never see my son again.”

“You can’t...,”

“I can!”

Terrified, Jaylin shook his head. He was close to a panic when a hand touched his back. He looked to find his mother there.

“I would thank you not to raise your voice to my son.”

“Lady, I’ll do a lot more than raise my voice to your faggot son if he ever comes near Max again, so you keep him away.” The elder Sydney glared down at Kayla, who stared back at him without so much as flinching.

“They are adults.”

“I really don’t care.” His eyes returned to Jaylin. “Get out! Now!”

“I want to see Max!”

“Too fucking bad. Get out. Or I will have security throw you out.”

Jaylin shook his head. He wanted to argue, but he knew he couldn’t. He couldn’t fight this man and win. At least now. He needed time. He needed to get his thoughts in order and decide what to do, what to say. He had to find a way to make Max’s father understand how much he loved his son, how they loved and needed each other.

“I’ll go. For now. But I’ll come back.”

He turned then, walking down the hall with his mother at his side, well aware that Chad watched him and hated him. But Jaylin didn’t care.

He would fight anyone who dared to stand between him and his love.

*I’ll be back, Max. Don’t worry. I’ll be back and we’ll be together, I swear.*

FIVE hours after Chad Sydney arrived at the hospital, he had made a dozen calls, securing the necessary arrangements.

By this time tomorrow, Max would be on the other side of the country in a rehabilitation center where he would get the help he needed. And more importantly, he would be well away from his so-called boyfriend. No chance would that bastard get near his son again. He didn't care what Max, or Jaylin, or anyone else said: Max would never have been in harm's way if he hadn't gotten involved with that prissy bastard.

Max wasn't gay. No way was his son gay. He wouldn't stand for it, wouldn't allow it. He would realize that, once he was away from Jaylin's twisted influence. He couldn't even place much blame on Trent and Greg. They had obviously been provoked, likely by Jaylin. Max had suffered and Chad was furious.

And determined.

Max's disgusting relationship with Jaylin Ryan was over, even if Jaylin and Max didn't realize it just yet.

Sliding his cell phone back into his pocket, Chad went into Max's room, to find he was finally fully awake, sitting up in bed. He was reclined against some pillows and he looked like hell. Chad and the doctors had already engaged in several long discussions and he knew it would take months for Max to physically heal, and even after the bones in his

legs and his ankle were mended, he would need intense and painful physical therapy.

Football and baseball were out of the question, as was Duke, which pissed Chad off more than anything, but what was done was done and he couldn't change the past.

But he could and he would direct the future.

Pausing at the foot of the bed, Chad glared at his son, until Max lowered his eyes, staring at his hands and the bandages on his wrist.

"I don't even know where to begin, Max. Needless to say, I am disappointed."

"Where's Jaylin?"

Eyes narrowing, Chad remained silent, until Max looked at him again. "Jaylin isn't here and I for one do not care where he is at. He's a bastard and you will never speak to him or see him again."

"But, Dad...."

"Shut up! I don't want to hear it. Besides, I know enough." His hands gripped the footboard of the bed until his knuckles ached. "I know you have been involved in some sort of relationship with a fag and it ends. I don't care what you think or what Jaylin told you, because you are not gay. I will not stand for it, young man."

"My being gay isn't something you can decide. It's a fact. It's part of me."

“It’s a sickness.”

Max shook his head, but winced in obvious pain. “I knew you would react badly and because I knew that, I put off telling you, and maybe that was wrong of me. I hate that you found out like this. Maybe I should apologize, but I won’t. I’m not sorry for loving Jaylin. As for what happened,” he looked away again, but not before Chad saw the tears that came into his eyes, “I guess you do know everything. I assume you’ve talked to the police and all.”

“I have. And I’m disgusted.”

“They were so vicious, Dad.”

“You gave them a reason to be. All of this is your fault.” When dealing with Jaylin, he had happily laid the blame on his shoulders, but he was playing the same card with Max—and for a reason. He had it all worked out clearly in his mind. “I believe Trent and Greg and the others went too far, but this isn’t completely their fault. I am certain you or Jaylin or both of you have flaunted this so-called relationship and Trent and his cousin were pushed to the edge.”

“Dad....”

“What you have been doing is sick. It’s disgusting. It’s a sickness.”

“No, it’s not.”

“But we will find a cure.”

“A cure?” Max again shook his head, clearly ignoring the pain. “I’m gay. I can’t help it if you do not like that, but the fact remains and I...I am in love with Jaylin. And he loves me. He loves me without any conditions and I.... Dad, I need to see him. I need him with me, because I...I can’t do this alone.” He began to cry, much to Chad’s disgust, The urge to slap his son so hard his neck snapped nearly consumed him, but he resisted.

“Let’s be reasonable, Max.”

“I don’t want to be reasonable. I want Jaylin! I need him.”

Ignoring the frantic tone, the look of sheer panic in Max’s eyes, Chad moved from the foot of the bed, to sit in the chair where Jaylin had sat only hours before. He already had what he wanted to say, worked out carefully. He knew his son, knew his weakness, and given his current state, Chad felt he would have no problem bending Max to his will and getting him to agree to do just as he said, without rebelling or making a scene.

“Have the doctors talked to you at all?”

“What?”

“Focus, Max. Forget Jaylin for a moment. I want to know if the doctors have told you about how badly you are injured.”

“Yeah. I mean, just about an hour ago. I know I’m hurt bad.”



“So you know it will take some time for you to heal?”

“The doctor said it may take months. I won’t play sports again. I might walk with a limp and I’ll likely have scars on my back....” He trailed off and swallowed hard. “I know there was other damage, a lot of it. Doctor said I will have some serious pain for a while.” His eyes lowered again and Chad was glad to see it. If Max couldn’t look at him, that meant he had to be feeling some trace of shame, and Chad would use that to his advantage.

He was a pro at getting what he wanted, regardless of the means or method.

*Jaylin Ryan thinks he will still be a part of my son’s life, but that pretty boy fag has no idea who I am or what I am willing to do to have things my way.*

“It will take you a while to fully recover. College will have to be postponed.”

“Okay. I’ll start late....”

“What about Jaylin?”

“He can still start on time.”

Chad shook his head. “If he loves you as much as you say he does, will he? Will he go off to college and leave you? Or will he want to stay with you? Will he put his own dreams on hold to be with you during your recovery?”

He watched the emotional play in Max's eyes as he considered the questions and he nearly smiled, but forced himself to remain somber.

"You're a mess, son. And you will be for a long time."

"I know. But...."

"But what? If Jaylin loves you, he won't leave you. He'll skip college. Do you really want to see him do that? Jaylin is depending on scholarships to pay for college and if he delays attending, it's likely he will lose those scholarships. And then what? How will he pay for school?"

"Dad, please. Stop."

"I can't. I'm sorry, but you need to face the truth."

"This isn't the truth!" Max nearly shouted. "You're trying to undermine me and make me start doubting my relationship with Jaylin. And don't act like you care about Jaylin going to college. You have already made it clear you hate him and me."

"You're right. I don't give a shit about Jaylin."

"But I do! I love him."

"You think you love him. And since you think that, you need to put him first."

Max sagged back against the pillows and Chad could see he was getting tired, which meant he was getting tired emotionally as well as physically.

The pieces were falling into place just perfectly.

“If Jaylin skips college and ends up missing out on his scholarship, he will resent you. Maybe not right away, but he will. He’ll miss out on something he really wants and once you are well enough, you will go to college and what will Jaylin do?” Chad leaned closer. “And what if you don’t completely heal, Max? What if you need longer to recover than the doctors anticipate? And what happened to you? You do realize Jaylin witnessed all of that. He saw everything. He saw you powerless and weak and that had to upset him. It maybe even disgusted him.”

Max tried to shake his head again, but it was a weak effort. “He loves me.”

“I still think that’s shit. And I refuse to accept you being gay.”

“Dad....”

“But if you truly think you love him, do the right thing.”

“And what is the right thing?”

“You know, Max,” he whispered, trying to appear understanding. “If you love Jaylin, you need to let him go”

“I can’t....”

“That makes you selfish. If you love him, end it. Let him move on.”

“Love doesn’t work like that.”

He gave a bitter laugh, shaking his head. “Let me tell you something. And you might find it a bit hard to believe, son, but I did love your mother a great deal. But she only married me because she was pregnant with you and, with some effort, I convinced her marriage was the right thing to do, for not only us, but mostly for you. So she gave in and married me. And she hated it. She hated being a wife and a mother and in the end, before she left she resented you and she resented me and you notice she hasn’t looked back once since she left.”

“Jaylin’s different.”

“Maybe. Maybe not. But if I had been strong enough, I would have let your mother go. But I held on and she felt she had to run.”

“Dad....”

“Do you want Jaylin to run away from you? Wouldn’t you rather save some pride? Do what’s right, Max, and let Jaylin go and allow him to go on and live his life, because you don’t belong with him and even if you did, at the moment, you are no longer the guy he supposedly loves. And there’s a very good chance you never will be again.”

He reached out and laid a hand on Max’s arm. “I found a place, a rehabilitation facility in Seattle, and you can leave for it tonight.”

“Tonight?”

“A clean break.”

“I need to tell Jaylin....”

“So he can talk you out of it? Make promises he will one day resent? Forget a face-to-face goodbye. You just write him a letter, letting him know it’s over.”

“He’ll try to find me.”

“Make certain he doesn’t. Or you’ll both regret it.”

Max lifted his eyes. “That almost sounds like a threat.”

“It could be.”

“What does that mean?”

“It means Jaylin won’t get to school without a scholarship. And his mother, she depends on her job with that law firm.” He smiled coolly. “I am trying to help you, son, even if you don’t believe it, but you are making it very difficult.”

“I love him. Don’t do anything to hurt him!”

“If you cling to him, you will be the one hurting him.”

He watched, as Max turned away and stared at the wall. Chad waited, feeling confident he had made his point.

*I always win. Max and Jaylin need to realize that and accept it and never forget it.*

“I’ll go.”

“What was that?”

Max turned angry, tear-filled eyes in his direction. “You heard me. I said I’ll go. I’ll go to the place you found and I...I’ll leave Jaylin, because I love him too much to hold him back and that is the one thing you need to understand. I really do love him. If you can’t accept that, fine. But I won’t deny what I feel or who I am, and I am doing this, I’m leaving, for Jaylin’s sake. Not mine and not yours. He’s all that matters to me.”

He turned away again, back toward the wall, and Chad stood, not bothering to offer comfort or even acknowledge Max’s words.

What Max said, what he felt, what he believed, none of that mattered, because he had given in and agreed to do just as Chad wanted him to do.

He had won.

He always did.

AT eight o’clock that evening, Jaylin returned to the hospital, determined to see Max and determined to face down Chad Sydney, if necessary.

He had managed to sleep for a few hours and he had even forced down some food, to keep his mother from worrying. His nerves were still raw, and he felt anxious and on edge. A police officer had called and asked him to come down to the station tomorrow to deal with some follow-up questions and, while he wasn’t looking forward to it, Jaylin

had already decided he was willing to do whatever it took to make certain Greg and Trent paid for their crimes.

Lane and Hank were in jail as well, but it seemed they were willing to testify against Trent and Greg to save themselves and, while Jaylin still hated them for not having stepped in and put a stop to the hell Max had suffered, he knew he owed them, to an extent. In the end, Hank and Lane finally did the right thing in calling for the police and confessing everything, but Jaylin wasn't ready to forgive them and he was honest enough with himself to admit he might never forgive them.

As far as he was concerned, all four men deserved to be punished, but Trent and Greg more so, considering they had actually carried out the violent acts.

Hank and Lane just watched.

*Like I did. All I could do was watch. I couldn't do a damn thing to make them stop.*

Shivering at the memory, he paused outside of Max's door, gathering his emotions and willing himself to be strong.

*Max needs me and I am not going to fall apart on him.*

That thought in mind, he stepped into the room, the smile he had gathered fading when he saw the bed was not only empty but freshly made. The room appeared spotless. He could see not a trace of Max or any sign that Max had ever been there and he was about to panic when a note on the edge of the bed caught his attention.

His name was written on the envelope and with trembling hands he ripped it open and pulled out the letter inside.

*Jaylin,*

*First, I want you to know I love you. Please, don't doubt that. I love you more than I can say, far more than you will ever really know, and it's because I love you so much that I had to do this.*

*I'm leaving tonight for a rehabilitation facility. I won't tell you where. I don't want you to know and I don't want you to try to find me. I have a lot of healing ahead of me and there is a chance that I will never fully heal and I certainly can't think about college or any of the plans we made in the condition I'm in now.*

*I'm letting you go, Jaylin.*

*If you want to hate me for this, I understand. I don't blame you. But things are different now, and the truth is, I'm different.*

*After what happened with Trent and Greg, I don't think I will ever be the same, and there is a good chance the person you loved didn't survive.*

*Go to college and have your life and know I will never forget you. And please, don't look for me or try to find me. I'm letting go and you have to do the same.*

*I'll never forget you.*

*My love always, Max*



He read the letter and then reread it twice more, trying to make it make sense, trying to understand how Max could do this to him. He loved him. And he knew for a fact that Max loved him. He knew what they shared was real, but Max was gone. He was gone and he didn't want Jaylin to try to follow him or find him.

*He set me free? What the fuck? I don't want to be fucking set free! I want Max.*

Unaware that he was crying, he felt his strength leave him and he sank slowly to the floor, letter still gripped in his hand. He couldn't make himself believe this was real. He and Max had plans, plans to be together, plans for their future. And he wanted a future with Max. He wanted to build a life with him; nothing that had happened had changed his hopes and dreams and if Max still loved him, as he said he did, Jaylin knew they could make it work.

It would be hard, certainly, and Max had a long road ahead of him, but Jaylin could travel it with him and help him.

He just had to make Max realize that.

He had to find him and make him realize that this wasn't right—being apart wasn't right—when it wasn't what either of them really wanted.

Sitting there, crying, despite the shock and the hurt, Jaylin could clearly see Chad Sydney's devious fingerprints all over this mess.

*He tricked Max. Lied to him and twisted things. He's a manipulative bastard, but no way in hell will he get away with this shit! I will fight him. I'll find Max and get him to open his eyes. I won't allow the lies Chad spun to keep me and Max apart.*

Drawing in a breath, he stood, still holding the letter, heart still breaking, but he was bound and determined to make things right.

He would find Max and get their relationship back on track and that alone would show Chad Sydney that he couldn't control other people's lives.

He couldn't control the future.

Jaylin knew, in his heart and soul, that he and Max were meant to be and he had no doubt at all that Max felt the same.

*We'll be fine. As soon as I find him and see him again, everything will be just fine and we can pick up the pieces and move on together.*

He and Max had true love on their side and no one could destroy that or hinder it for long.

## Chapter Six

### *Seven Years Later*

CASTING a glance over his shoulder, inwardly sighing in relief to see the man he had left in bed was still sleeping soundly, Jaylin Ryan slipped from the bedroom and carefully, quietly, maneuvered through the unfamiliar apartment.

At fifteen minutes after three in the morning, he was tucked in the back of a cab, heading home, satisfied sexually, but still restless emotionally and mentally. He had just gotten back to New York that morning, after nearly three full months on the road, and he hadn't even been to his penthouse yet.

His agent, Marcus, had scheduled several interviews and a dozen appearances, the last one ending shortly after eleven.

Jaylin knew he could have gone home then, to catch up on some much-needed sleep, but he had hit a familiar bar instead, and less than an hour later, he had found just what he was looking for.

Close to it, at least.

Carl was a beauty—tall and tan with dark hair and eyes that weren't the exact shade of brown he preferred, but Jaylin had gotten past that. He always did. He didn't go out and pick up guys that often, but when he did, they were all a certain "type" and he had long ago stopped pretending he wasn't looking for some hint of the man he had lost seven years ago.

Staring out the window, he wondered if he had called out the wrong name again. He had done so more than once. A few guys ended up pretty pissed. Most didn't care. But it still made things just a little awkward, which was one of the many reasons he avoided the morning after at all cost. He rarely saw the same guy twice.

What was the point?

He wasn't looking for a relationship; he just wanted to take the edge off now and then. He didn't screw a different man each night and, really, he didn't want to. But every few months, he liked to have a distraction, some no-strings sex. He never pretended he was interested in anything more and the men he involved himself with understood that.

His mother felt he was denying himself a chance to be happy, to have a relationship that was meaningful, but Jaylin disagreed.

*"You can't close yourself off forever, Jaylin. It's not right."*

*"I'm not closed off. I have a full life."*

*“Career wise? Yes. Personally? No. And you know it. And I don’t want to nag you, but you need someone there.”*

After years alone, his mother had finally found someone. She had married a wonderful man the year before and she and her new husband were now traveling. And Jaylin was happy for her. Harris was a good man and Jaylin wanted his mother to be happy, but he knew his one chance at being happy had passed him by.

He had found and lost the love of his life when he was eighteen years old.

Trying to build a life with anyone other than Max would seem hollow and meaningless.

Shaking the tangled thoughts aside, as the cab stopped in front of his building, Jaylin paid and tipped the driver and then quickly made his way inside. He hoped a hot shower would relax him enough so he could drift off to sleep for a few hours. He needed the rest. Marcus was pushing hard for him to take a few months away from touring, but Jaylin was hesitant. He hated having too much down time on his hands.

It gave him too much time to think.

When he was on the road, he was constantly going, moving quickly from one city to the next. He didn’t have time to get lost in the past or wonder about what might have been and he liked it that way, even if others did believe he would burn himself out if he wasn’t careful.

Reaching the top floor, he let himself into the apartment, smiling to see the cleaning lady had left the lights

on for him. No doubt the kitchen was stocked with anything he might need. Marcus had found someone to handle all the shopping for him. It wasn't a task he had much use for, and he didn't leave himself a lot of time for it.

Besides, he often pointed out, the apartment was just a pit stop. He wasn't there often. Even after three and a half years, he hadn't done much to make the place feel like home: he hadn't bothered to decorate beyond a big-screen television, a stereo system, a sofa, and a bed. And usually, he went out to eat or ordered something, but the woman Marcus had hired made certain the basics were around if he needed them.

Dropping his keys on the coffee table, he looked at the stack of mail and picked it up, moving to the sofa, sitting down with a sigh.

Humming a familiar tune, he sorted through the stack, smiling to find a few postcards from his mother, tossing the routine junk mail aside, finding little of any real interest, until he came across an envelope with the Ruskin DA's Office listed as the return address.

*What the bloody hell?*

Ripping the envelope open, he pulled out the letter, scanning it, and then rereading it to make certain he fully understood, because really, it didn't seem possible.

*...Due to various factors, including good behavior, Mr. Trent Miller is up for possible early release...if you would like*

*to speak to the panel deciding this matter you are allowed that right...please contact this office....*

The words seemed jumbled in his mind, but he understood what they meant—he understood that Trent Miller could be released from prison. He had been sentenced to twenty years, but after only seven years, there was a chance he could be set free. Jaylin was furious and disgusted as he looked at the letter, wondering how anyone could justify allowing Trent to escape his full sentence after what he had done.

He wished, not for the first time, that Trent had met the same fate as Greg, who had died after a vicious prison fight just two years into his sentence.

Lane and Hank had served three years each. They had long ago been released and Jaylin wasn't certain where they were or what they were doing and, truth be told, he didn't care. He didn't hate them as much as he hated Trent, as much as he had hated Greg, but he still felt angry whenever he thought about them.

Whenever he remembered that night.

The night that marked the beginning of the end of the life he had longed for, the life he and Max had wanted to share.

*And now what? Trent gets an early pass? He gets to walk? No chance in hell! He can't walk away. He needs to pay the way I've paid, the way Max paid!*

Tossing the letter onto the sofa, he stood and crossed the room to the mini bar and grabbed the first bottle he saw.

Pouring himself a glass, he tossed the amber liquid down his throat and poured another, well aware of his shaking hands and pounding heart. He felt like he was trapped in a nightmare. It simply hadn't occurred to him that Trent could end up released early, but now, it very much was a possibility and Jaylin wasn't about to stand idly by and allow it to happen.

The letter said he had a right to speak, and he damn well would.

He would go back to Ruskin and do everything in his power to keep Trent in jail, where the son of a bitch belonged.

Taking the glass and bottle back to the sofa, he sat down again, trying to calm himself, trying to be reasonable. He really didn't want to return to Ruskin for any reason. He had avoided it, for the most part, over the years. But this time, he couldn't avoid it. This time, he had to face his fears and return to the town that held so many memories.

Granted, no matter where he was, he had the memories.

The good ones and the bad ones.

Sitting back, he took a drink directly from the bottle, savoring the burn. He didn't drink too often, but tonight was an exception. He needed something to take the edge off, something to dull the anger and, more importantly, more



desperately, he needed something strong enough to ease the pain that had never completely faded.

The pain that never would fade, because he was missing part of himself and had been since the night Max disappeared, leaving only a note, asking Jaylin not to try to find him.

But Jaylin hadn't listened.

He had tried to find Max; he had tried relentlessly to find Max, to track him down. He had even begged Chad Sydney and finally, Maryann Sydney, for some hint of information, but both of them had refused to tell him anything.

*"Max left. I think that should tell you something."*

*"It tells me you somehow forced or tricked him into leaving."*

*"Tell yourself that if you need to, but the fact remains that Max left and he made it clear he doesn't want to be found by you."*

He spent two years and more money than he could calculate trying to find Max, first on his own and eventually by hiring private investigators, but they hit the same dead ends he did. It was as if Max Sydney had disappeared into thin air. And it made Jaylin crazy. He nearly flunked during his first semester of college and eventually, he dropped out completely, focusing on working and looking for Max, before Marcus Logan discovered him and in doing so, he opened up

doors Jaylin thought he would never have a chance to walk through.

Now, a little more than four years after meeting Marcus, he was touring, playing his unique blend of classical and contemporary music, and he was successful doing it. He had a wide fan base, the records he had recorded sold well and, professionally, he was thrilled, but following after his musical dreams had forced him to face one ugly reality.

Max really didn't want to be found.

*"I don't know the circumstances, Jaylin, but you said you've been looking for the guy for over two years and you haven't found him. But he's always known how to find you. So maybe you need to realize that he doesn't want to be found."*

*"It's not that simple, Marcus."*

*"I think it is. And I think you're holding on when you need to let go."*

The words were more blunt than the ones his mother had used, but the message was there: he had to leave the past.

He had to leave Max behind; he had to accept that he would have to build his life without the man he loved.

Four years later, he still wondered if he had done the right thing, but when those thoughts came, he reminded himself that Marcus was right. If Max wanted to be found he wouldn't have made it impossible to find him and if Max

wanted to find him, he could have done so with little to no effort. The fact that he hadn't said it all.

*He really moved on. He forgot me. Or he just stopped loving me. Maybe he blames me for what happened. Maybe I am to blame.*

Aware of a dull headache building, he set the bottle on the coffee table and picked up the letter again.

He might have lost Max, but it didn't change his need to see Trent Miller pay for everything he had done. And seven years in prison wasn't enough. Not nearly. He would go back to Ruskin, he would be at that hearing and he would make his thoughts known, because someone had to speak out and remind anyone who would listen just what Trent Miller was capable of doing.

He willed himself to ignore the voice that wondered if he would be the only one speaking out against Trent's release.

*What if Max is there? What then? What do I say? Do I say anything?*

Deciding he would deal with that occurrence if and when it happened, and telling himself it likely wouldn't happen, he stood and walked to his bedroom.

He would call the DA in Ruskin tomorrow and let him know he would be there and yes, he wanted to speak. After that, he would call Marcus. It seemed they would be getting some down time after all and he wanted Marcus to know where to find him in case of emergency. And he wanted Marcus to reassure him, he could admit that to himself, that

he could and would handle this and if by some chance he did see Max, he wouldn't fall apart.

He had come too far for that; he had a life and it was a good one.

It just wasn't the life he had wanted.

*We don't always get what we want. I learned that lesson seven years ago and I can't afford to forget it for a second.*

AFTER her marriage, his mother decided to keep her home in Ruskin, but Jaylin couldn't bring himself to stay there.

He had too many Max-related memories there, and they were overpowering. After Max left, all those years ago, he couldn't even sleep in his bedroom. He ended up moving into the guest room. It was the only thing he could do to keep himself from going insane. He couldn't sleep in the room where he and Max had spent most of their time together.

With his mother and her new husband out of town, being in the house by himself would be even more depressing.

The Roadside Rose Garden was decent enough, for a few days in town. It wasn't nearly as fancy as the hotels Marcus usually booked, but Jaylin didn't care. He didn't need much—just a bed, a bathroom, a television and Internet access and, really, he had no intentions of sticking around for longer than necessary.

He would attend the hearing, say what he needed to say, stick around long enough to hear the outcome, and then go back to New York. Back to the life he had there. He had nothing to hold him in his hometown, not with his mother spending most of her time traveling, and his career pretty much required that he do the same.

New York was his home now.

Ruskin was the past.

*Just like Max.*

Looking around the room, Jaylin sighed, not surprised to realize there was nothing all that spectacular about the white and blue décor, but the room was clean, the bed looked comfortable, and the Internet connection worked.

Logging on to his computer, he checked his e-mail, finding one from his mother, one from Marcus, and another from an e-mail address he didn't recognize. He didn't give many people his private address; he had another listed on his official Web site for fans, which he tried to answer as frequently as he could.

Frowning, he decided to open the e-mail, mostly because he was curious and happy for any distraction he could find, even if said distraction was nothing more than stray spam mail.

It turned out to be much more.

Jaylin,

Once you realize this is from me, you might delete it, and God knows I can't blame you if you do, after all this time.

I have no doubt you hate me. I understand. Sometimes, I'm not so fond of myself. I made some serious mistakes and I made decisions when I really wasn't in the state of mind to make decisions that ended up being life changing.

I have a lot to explain, if you're willing to hear it.

I'm back in Ruskin, thanks to Trent's early-release hearing. I know from the DA that you got the same letter I did, but I don't know if you're in town or not, but either way, I would really like the chance to talk.

If you are in town, I'd like to do it face-to-face.

I'm not really on speaking terms with my dad or my stepmother so I've got a room at the bed-and-breakfast in town. If you can stand the idea of seeing me, you can call me there or come by. And if you don't, believe me when I say I understand.

For what it's worth, I never forgot you, Jay. I've kept up with you from a distance. I even saw one of your concerts last year.

You were amazing, but no surprise there.

You were always amazing.

You were and you still are the best thing that has ever happened to me.

No matter what, please know that.

Max

The room seemed to be spinning and it felt as if someone had sucked the air from Jaylin's lungs, leaving him struggling for air as his heart raced. He felt almost sick. For a moment, he told himself this was it: after all this time, he had finally lost his mind. But when he looked back at the computer screen, the e-mail was still there.

The e-mail Max had sent him. After seven fucking years, Max had contacted him. Max wanted to see him. Jaylin laughed out loud even as he shook his head.

*Fuck him! After all this time he picks now. Now! He said he has been keeping up with me; he could have come to me. But he didn't. And now that we're back in this damn town, he wants me to see him again, and I won't do it!*

Even as he railed to himself, he knew he was lying.

He would see Max, because he couldn't not see him. He was finally getting a chance to get the answers he wanted, the answers he needed. It was all seven years too late. And he was angry and hurt, but maybe if he saw Max, if he heard some sort of explanation, he would finally be able to really let go and move on.

*And that's all this is. A chance to get answers. I'm not stupid. I know there's no hope left, no chance that Max and I could ever get back what we lost.*

Hands shaking, he sent an e-mail back, quick and simple, telling Max he would see him, but asking that he come to his motel room.

Plain or not, for the time being, the motel room was his turf, and for the sake of emotional and mental stability, he needed very much to be on his turf.

Maybe it would help him maintain control of his turbulent feelings.

Maybe it would help him save what was left of his heart from breaking all over again.

*Maybe I'm a dumbass and this might be nothing more than me ripping open an old wound and pouring salt into it, but I can't hurt more than I've already hurt so I have nothing left to lose.*



## Chapter Seven

AT fifteen before seven, Max stood outside of room 127 of The Roadside Rose Garden, wondering if he was making a huge mistake.

*Maybe I shouldn't have contacted Jaylin. Being here could blow up in my face. I hate being in this town and, odds are, Jaylin hates me and he has every right. But I owe it to him, to what we had, to finally tell him the truth.*

He could have done this before now. He could have contacted Jaylin any time during the past seven years, but somehow, he always found a reason not to. He was good at that. It was easy to come up with excuses and certainly, some of them had been legitimate, but not all of them. A great many had only served to justify his fears.

*Fear is why I came back here. I'm here to face my fears. I told my story via video, so I never had to face Trent during the trial, but I will now, and even more importantly, I need to face Jaylin and make him understand.*

He couldn't hope for more than that—understanding—and really, he knew he didn't deserve that.

And he didn't want to disrupt the life Jaylin had. He had worked hard, made his dreams come true, and was living the life he had always wanted. His talent and his natural drive had carried him a great way and Max was deeply proud of him.

*I still love him as much as I ever did, if not more.*

Reminding himself that the last thing Jaylin wanted from him was love, Max drew in a breath and finally knocked on the door.

Seconds later, it opened, and after seven long, agonizing years, he found himself face-to-face with the man who had haunted his dreams, the man he loved still and always would. Not surprisingly, he looked incredible.

Dressed in well-worn jeans and a T-shirt that hugged his remarkable chest, his hair was a mess and his eyes, those remarkable blues, were cool and guarded.

Aside from that, he really hadn't changed in the physical sense. He was still beautiful, still a vision, and Max wanted almost desperately to reach out and touch him, just to make himself believe this was real, but he resisted the urge.

"Jaylin...."

"Come in."

He stepped back, opening the door and allowing Max into the room that he quickly scanned, seeing it was the standard motel room. A little bland, with no personality. It

felt almost clinical, which was likely why Jaylin had wanted to meet him here.

*He sees this is a safe place with no emotional ties and he wants that. He doesn't want to feel even a little connected to me. He might hate me even more than I realized.*

Listing to the door close, he turned again, to find Jaylin watching him, his eyes still impossible to read, and that bothered Max most. He had always loved how everything Jaylin felt could be seen, clear and vivid in his eyes, but now, he was so distant and so reserved and it made Max ache to turn back the hands of time.

Back to the night that had changed everything.

"You look great, Jaylin."

"Thanks. So do you."

Max nodded, shifting slightly. He didn't want to say anything, but his leg was killing him. He had spent too much time walking around town today, seeing how things had changed, but he hadn't taken anything for the pain.

"Do you mind if I sit down?"

"Go ahead."

Opting for a chair that set beside a small desk, he lowered himself carefully, making an effort not to wince.

"Thank you."

"For what?"

“Agreeing to see me.” Max looked up to see Jaylin hadn’t moved. “I know.... Well, I know it was sudden and unexpected and I...I’m sorry. I should have....” He shook his head. He wasn’t certain what needed to be said first, now that he was here, facing Jaylin, loving him as much as ever and wanting to touch him so badly he burned with the need.

As he wavered silently, Jaylin pushed from the door, crossing the room, his back to Max, his shoulder tense.

“If you want me to leave, I will.”

“Why? Do you want to leave? Again?”

“Jaylin....”

“Don’t.” He turned and when he did, his eyes weren’t blank; they were filled with emotion and that emotion was burning anger. “I looked for you. Do you know that? You told me not to. But I did, I looked for you. For years. I tried to find you and I paid people to find you, but it was like you didn’t exist and I...damn it, Max, you ripped my heart out when you left me and now, here you are and seven fucking years later it hurts just to look at you.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Fuck sorry! I want answers. I want to know why you stopped loving me!”

“Stopped loving you? Jaylin, please believe me when I say I never stopped loving you.”

“You left!”

“Because I thought it was the best thing. I thought I was doing you a favor. My father came, and he told me that if I loved you, I should let you go. He said all I would do was hold you back. I was a mess, physically and emotionally, and I admit, it was easy for him to twist me up inside, and once I got my head on straight, I knew he had played me into doing what he wanted and that was give you up. I was a fool and I was weak and stupid.”

Despite the pain, he stood. “I went to a rehab in Seattle. I was there under an assumed name and I...it took a long time for me to get better. I needed more surgery and I still have problems with my leg, and I always will. I had to finish high school by getting my GED. I didn’t finish college until just a year ago. My life got put on hold, just like my father told me it would and he...he said you would skip college to help me and....”

“He manipulated you.”

“Yeah. And I let him. I was weak.”

“You were vulnerable and I can understand that. But....” He raked a hand through his hair and Max wanted to go to him, but he didn’t. “Once you realized he lied to you, once you realized he made all your fears seem like more than we could handle, why didn’t you contact me?”

“I was afraid.”

“Of what?”

“Being rejected. Finding out you had someone.”

Jaylin shook his head. “Is that it? Was it just your father’s lies? Or did you leave, did you not reach out because you blame me?”

“Blame you?”

“Your father made it clear that he blamed me for what happened that night.”

“He blamed me for it too. And for a while I think I blamed myself. But I never blamed you.”

Agitated, Jaylin sat down on the edge of the bed, staring down at the floor. “I always wanted to know why. I mean, I figured a great deal of why you left had to do with your father, but part of me wondered if you hated me.”

“I could never hate you.”

“Do you regret it? Coming out to me?”

“Never. Not for a second.”

Jaylin looked at him again and Max saw some of the ice thaw from his eyes. “I finally made myself stop looking for you. Someone said you didn’t want me to find you.”

“For a while, I didn’t want you to. I was such a mess.”

“I know how badly you were hurt, Max. I was there.”

“That’s the other thing. You saw....”

“And you resented me for it.”

“No. I felt weak. I felt dirty. I didn’t deserve you....” His voice broke and he shook his head. He didn’t want to break down or fall apart. “In my nightmares about that night, I hear you crying.”

“Max....”

“I hear you crying and I can’t stop them to get to you and make it okay.”

“I’m the one who wanted to make it okay. I wanted to be there, to help you face it all.”

Crossing to the bed, Max sat down, careful to leave a space between them. “I knew you tried to find me and sometimes, I wanted you to. But I...I believed I would just be a burden, the way my father said I would be, and then you started going places. I followed your career. And I meant it when I said I am so proud of you.”

“I wanted you to be there.”

“I wanted to be there, but I couldn’t.”

“I hate your father.”

Max laughed—he couldn’t help it, sitting there in the bland little motel room with the man he loved more than anything.

“I hate him too. He and I haven’t spoken in over four years.”

“Why?”

“Turns out I really am gay. He doesn’t like it. And I don’t care.”

Jaylin looked at him, and again, their eyes held and Max felt the cold inside him ease. He felt warm inside for the first time in years. He knew there were still things he needed to say, things Jaylin needed to hear. And he would say those things, but for now, he was sitting beside Jaylin, looking at him, and it felt so right, he could almost make himself believe the past seven years had been nothing more than a very bad dream.

“You know about my life, but what about yours, Max?”

“What about it?”

“I don’t know. How about what have you been doing for the past seven years?”

Considering the question, he shrugged. “I spent a lot of time in rehab. A lot of time facing pain and doctors and when it finally got as good as it will get, I went to college in Seattle. Since I’m not going to have some great career in sports, I decided to try my hand at teaching.”

“Teaching?”

“High school English.”

“Not Biology?”

He laughed again, surprised by the sound, because it had been so long since he had allowed himself to really laugh. “No. Not Biology.” It felt so right, sitting there actually



joking around, and he didn't want the moment to end, but he knew eventually, it would.

Jaylin had a life to return to and as completely empty as it felt, he had a life as well.

*But it's not the life I want! Damn it, I want my life with Jaylin. I want the past seven years and I want to go back and make better choices without letting my son of a bitch father push me.*

"Are you going to speak, at the hearing?"

The question pulled him from his thoughts and he nodded. "I feel like I need to. I don't want to see him out of jail, Jaylin."

"Neither do I. If I can say anything to keep him there, I will."

"Have you ever—aside from the police and during the trial—have you ever talked to anyone, about what happened that night?"

"You mean professionally?"

"Yeah."

"I tried. Once. And I bolted." He shrugged. "What about you?"

"It was all part of my rehab."

"They made you talk about it?"

“Kind of.” He didn’t explain that a therapist had been called in after he tried to kill himself, because he didn’t want that guilt laid on Jaylin and, knowing Jaylin, he would find a way to feel guilty for something that hadn’t been his fault. “I resented it at first, but in the end, it turned out to be good for me. I had a lot of emotions and anger that I needed to deal with and I finally did. Not to say that it doesn’t still bother me, because it does.”

It always would. He had come to accept that some lingering pain would always be with him, and not just in the physical sense. He would have emotional pain. But like the physical pain, he knew he could live with it and find ways not to allow it to hinder his life and his plans for his future.

*The future? No matter what the future holds, it won’t be what I want. All I want is the man sitting beside me and that’s the one thing I can never have.*

“It nearly killed me, watching how they hurt you.”

“Jaylin....”

“I thought you were going to die. I thought I would lose you and I...in the end, I did.”

Clearly uncomfortable with the emotions that were close to reaching the surface, Jaylin started to stand, but Max reached out and caught him by the wrist and Jaylin looked at him with eyes filled with pain and longing.

“We haven’t been together during the past seven years, that’s true. But you have never, and I mean never, lost me, Jaylin.”

“Max....”

“I’m yours, Jay. I always have been. I gave you my heart when I was eighteen and my heart always will belong to you.”

Jaylin looked from him to the hand on his wrist and back again and once more, their eyes held and Max could hear the sound of his own heart thundering. He hadn’t come here for this. He had even allowed himself to consider he would be saying such a thing to Jaylin, even if it was completely true and he was more than a little afraid he would be rejected. And maybe he deserved to be. Maybe this was karma and Jaylin would laugh right in his face and tell him to go straight to hell, and if he did, Max knew he couldn’t blame him.

But still, he hoped, prayed, waited, afraid to breathe or move as Jaylin finally slipped from the bed to kneel on the floor in front of Max, resting his hands gently on jean-clad thighs. Even through his jeans, Max could easily feel the heat from Jaylin’s hands.

And it was thrilling and intoxicating and it made him a little dizzy.

His right hand moved, almost with its own will, to tangle in Jaylin’s hair as Jaylin looked up at him. Max tried to find his voice, but couldn’t. He had no idea what to say. He had no idea what he needed to say, or what he could possibly say, to remove the shadows of hurt and fear he saw so very clearly in Jaylin’s eyes.

Instinctively, his fingers tightened, massaged, and the tension seemed to bleed from Jaylin, and he leaned closer, laying his head in Max's lap as Max continued to play with his hair. He was too afraid to do anything else, almost too afraid to breathe. The gesture wasn't sexual; it just seemed as if Jaylin needed comfort and Max could provide it. And he wanted to provide it. He wanted to do anything and everything possible to heal the pain and hurt the man he loved had suffered when he foolishly walked away from him, believing it was the right thing to do.

He knew now that it hadn't been right, and he regretted it more than he could ever say.

Content for the moment just to be able to touch Jaylin in whatever way possible, he slowly stroked his other hand up and down Jaylin's back. He could feel the taut muscles, the warm skin. He could recall so clearly and vividly what it felt like to touch Jaylin without any barrier between them, and the memory alone was enough to make his cock stir.

For the first time in years, he felt undeniable desire, and it made every nerve ending in his body hum with energy.

As if sensing something, sensing the energy that nearly consumed Max, Jaylin lifted his head and Max could see tears drying on his face. It was a sight that broke his heart and he moved the hand in his hair to cup his cheek, thumb brushing away a tear trail, before stroking his bottom lip, and at the intimate contact, Jaylin shivered.

Wordlessly, he caught Max's hand, pressing a kiss to the palm, before dropping his lips to his wrist. Max tensed

when Jaylin looked at the faint white lines, the fading scars that told a story all their own, and fresh tears were in Jaylin's eyes when their gaze locked again.

"When did you...?"

"About eight months after that night. I was tired. And in pain all the time. I thought not being able to feel anything would be far better than hurting."

"Max...."

"A nurse found me, before it was too late. After that, my doctors called in a therapist for me to talk to and, truth be told, she saved my life."

"Thank God." Jaylin kissed his wrist again. "I wish I had been there. I think I understand now, why you left. I always knew your father had a hand in it, but...God, Max, please know, I would have never left your side. I would have been there for you night and day and I would have loved you through it all, every step of the way."

"I know. Now. It took some time, but I got my head clear."

"I wish you would have contacted me sooner."

"You have such a remarkable life, Jay. I didn't want to disrupt that."

"You could never disrupt my life, because you add something wonderful to it."

Emotions rushed over him and Max smiled despite the urge to cry as Jaylin looked at him, and he fought not to get lost in those remarkable blue eyes.

“What do you want, Max?”

“What do you mean?”

Jaylin laced their fingers together, his eyes thoughtful. “It’s been seven years, but I can tell you I love you now as much as ever. And maybe some of my dreams have come true, but the thing that I wanted most in life is you. So I guess I’m asking if all you wanted was the chance to tell me why you left the way you did, or do you want something more?”

“I’ve never stopped loving you, Jaylin. Not for a second.”

“Do you love me enough...?”

“If there is room for me in your life, there is nowhere else I would rather be.”

“Be sure about that. Because I don’t know if I could survive losing you again.”

“You will never lose me again if you....” He shook his head. “Can we do this, Jay? Can we pick up the pieces and start over? Can we make it work?” He wanted nothing more, but after seven years he was afraid to even hope it was possible. Jaylin smiled and kissed his palm again.

“We can do anything, if we really want to.”

“I want to.”

“So do I.”

Smiling, he pulled Jaylin up into his arms, and just as they had all those years ago, their lips came together almost hesitantly, but it only took brief contact before the hesitation faded and they were clinging to each other. He could feel Jaylin’s hands on his shoulders and he again tangled his hand in Jaylin’s hair, pressing him as close as possible as their tongues brushed together and danced in hungry, needy desperation.

Easing back, he laid down on the bed, pulling Jaylin with him, loving the feel of having Jaylin wrapped tightly in his arms, surrounding him with his warm and incredible strength. His kisses felt so right, so familiar. Kissing Jaylin was like coming home, home to a place he never wanted to leave again. He knew where he belonged, as Jaylin slid a hand under his shirt and Max moaned his delight when teasing fingers brushed over his nipples.

With a chuckle, Jaylin broke the kiss to look down at him, and Max felt all the cold inside of him fade away, leaving him warm, safe, wishing with all his heart this moment would last forever.

“I love you, Max.”

“I love you too, Jaylin. Always.”

In answer, Jaylin kissed him again, neither of them holding back their desire, their need. Max could feel Jaylin’s erection straining hard and throbbing against his jeans and he wanted all barriers between them gone.

He wanted Jaylin naked, wanton, completely his in every possible way.

Shifting slightly, he winced and Jaylin pulled back, concerned. “What’s wrong?”

“It’s nothing....”

“Max?”

“It’s just my leg. I pushed myself today. It’s not a big deal.”

“You in pain is a big deal to me.” Jaylin untangled himself from his arms and stood. “Scoot back on the bed and make yourself comfortable, baby.” He smiled, taking a moment to pull off his shirt, and Max did as he said, scooting up farther to lie back against the pillow stack, but he didn’t take his eyes off Jaylin.

He was as beautiful as ever, maybe more so. His chest was smooth, the skin sun-kissed and golden and the muscles beneath defined. He still had a runner’s body, lean and firm, and Max looked him over greedily, eyes widening a bit when he saw a tattoo low on his flat stomach, directly above his right hip bone.

It was simple: a numeric sign and the number eight.

“That was my jersey number.”

To his surprise, Jaylin actually blushed. “Yeah. I know. I...I got it about a year after we lost each other. I know it seems silly, but I...well, I just wanted....”



“Wanted?”

“Something that marked me as yours.”

The words were fuel thrown onto an already raging fire and Max started to sit up, but Jaylin shook his head.

“Stay right where you are, babe. Let me take care of you.”

“What do you have in mind?”

Jaylin smiled, but said nothing as he tugged off his shoes. Max sat up long enough to pull off his own shirt, which he quickly tossed to the floor. He wanted to touch Jaylin again. He wanted the years to melt away with each eager touch, but Jaylin didn’t rush. He just took his time and easily slipped from his jeans, leaving his underwear on.

Leaning close, he brushed his fingers down Max’s stomach and he sucked in a breath, skin ablaze, as Jaylin hesitated at the snap on his jeans.

“May I?”

“Please.”

“I don’t want to rush you, Max.”

“Jaylin, get me naked. Now!”

Laughing, Jaylin obeyed the demand, unfastening the jeans and tugging them down, lifting a surprised eyebrow to find no underwear. Max realized it was his turn to blush.

“Guess that means I should finish stripping down myself?”

“For the love of God, please!”

“If you insist.”

With a reckless grin, he pushed his underwear down his hips, kicking them aside, and Max sat up on his elbows, admiring what he considered the most incredible sight he had ever seen. Nothing, no one, could be as beautiful as Jaylin. He was perfection, and Max drank in the remarkable beauty, from head to toe, moaning when his full attention settled on Jaylin’s cock, hard, nestled in pale blond curls that Max longed to touch.

Lying back down, Max extended a hand that Jaylin accepted, crawling onto the bed, to stretch out beside him.

“This reminds me of being in the room at my house, fumbling our way through first kisses and touches, both of us so nervous.”

“We were more than nervous. More like terrified.”

“And now?”

Max picked up the hand that rested on his chest and lifted it to his lips, kissing it. “And now, I feel like I am back where I belong. And I’ve got to say, I didn’t expect this, Jay. When I asked to meet with you, I wasn’t even certain you would and I...well, I never allowed myself to even hope we could actually find our way back together.”

“I had given up hope of this ever happening, but now that it has, I know I never want to be without you again.”

Caught up in the emotional current, Jaylin kissed him again and Max eagerly responded, tangling his hands in Jaylin’s hair as Jaylin slid a hand slowly down his chest. He arched into the feel, into the touch. He had missed this so much, missed Jaylin, missed being this close to him, and he knew he couldn’t get close enough. The desire was all-consuming and he wanted everything at once, but he also wanted to take his time.

He wanted to savor this, cherish it. This moment had been seven years in the making and it shouldn’t be rushed.

Desire becoming more and more intense, he carefully shifted their position, pinning Jaylin beneath him, his naturally dominant nature taking control.

“Now this is familiar.” Jaylin smiled, arching his hips, pressing their cocks together. Max gasped, grinding against the man beneath him, gleefully adding to the friction. “Love the way you feel against me.” He arched again, moving his eager hands down Max’s shoulders to his back, where they paused briefly before moving again, and his eyes darkened.

The blue eyes closed and Max watched as Jaylin drew in a breath, holding it a moment, before looking at him again.

“You have scars.”

“A few. Some worse than others.”

“Max....”

“The scars are reminders of the past. I can’t deny that. But it’s up to us to not allow what we left in the past to touch us now.”

Swallowing, he nodded, and Max kissed him again, a quick kiss before moving his lips to the sensitive skin beneath his ear, and Jaylin moaned and tilted his head, allowing Max the access he sought, and Max smiled. He remembered exactly what Jaylin liked, where he liked to be touched and how, kisses, nips, bites, Jaylin’s body.... Every inch of it was still familiar to Max because he had seen it in countless dreams during the past seven years.

Sliding a hand between them, he shifted again, allowing enough room for his hand to wrap around Jaylin’s cock. Jaylin shuddered in anticipation, before groaning and opening his eyes to look up at Max’s.

“I just realized something.”

“That you want me to fuck you senseless?”

“Oh, I already knew that, and believe me, I want that, but it just occurred to me that I don’t actually have condoms or lube here.”

“Seriously?”

Jaylin shook his head. “I didn’t think I would need them.”

“I actually didn’t think I would need them, but....”

“You have some?”

“Yeah. Only I didn’t bring them. I left them in my room at the B and B.” Max grinned. “Just think: if you had agreed to meet me at my room....”

“Oh, shut up. And get up and get dressed.”

“Why? Someplace you want to go?”

“I want to go back to your room and spend the entire night in bed.”

Still grinning, Max slipped from the bed and Jaylin followed, both of them dressing quickly, forcing themselves not to touch. If they did, Max knew they would never make it from the room, and he wasn’t certain he would be able to care if they didn’t. He was a breath away from finally being inside of Jaylin, finally getting lost in the man he loved, the man he had wanted to make love with since he was eighteen years old.

“We’ll come back for your stuff tomorrow. For now....”

“I know. Let’s go.”

Grabbing his keys in one hand, Jaylin held out his other hand to Max, who happily accepted it, needing what contact he could get as they left the room and fell into Jaylin’s rental car.

Exchanging a look that said far more than mere words could, Max knew everything really would be okay, once and for all.

He had Jaylin back and as long as he had that, he could face anything.

## Chapter Eight

THEY made it to the bed-and-breakfast where Max was staying in less than ten minutes and they went directly to Max's room.

Later, Jaylin would notice how much nicer the B and B was than the motel, but in the frantic moment, he didn't care about the white and yellow wallpaper and the pretty spread and fresh flowers, because all he cared about was Max. Finally being close to Max. Having him wrapped in his arms, in his bed, he had given up hope but in less than an hour, not only did he have hope again, he had Max and it was a dream come true.

Once in the room, the door locked, they undressed quickly, trembling. Jaylin couldn't recall the last time he had ever felt so consumed with desire. A small part of him was still afraid this wasn't real. He was afraid he would wake up and find himself all alone, in some cold hotel room, but the way Max smiled chased that fear away.

The impossible had become possible.

He had the answers he had never thought he would get, but even more important, he had Max and he wouldn't lose him again.

Naked, they came together, the kiss desperate, demanding, hands roaming and exploring. It was eager and hungry, but Jaylin restrained himself as much as he could. He only had to feel the rise of scars on Max's back to remember the trauma he had suffered and, even if seven years had passed, he was afraid of doing something that would bring back the memories.

And that was the last thing he ever wanted to do.

Moving to the bed, they sat down together and to Jaylin's surprise, Max caught his hands by the wrist, stilling them, and he pulled back, confused.

"I won't break, Jaylin."

"What do you...?"

"You know what I mean." Max's eyes held his. "It took a long time for me to be able to be this close to anyone. And there haven't been many lovers in my life and part of me was always nervous, to an extent, but I'm not nervous with you. I know you. I love you. So don't think you have to hold back, because you don't."

"I just...I'd rather die than hurt you."

"You could never hurt me."



Before he could protest, Max released his hands, kissing him again, and Jaylin melted into the embrace. Max was warm and solid and strong. Being close to him was incredible and, with just a bit of effort, Jaylin decided to take Max's words to heart and he didn't hold back. He responded with a growing hunger when Max dipped his tongue deep into the heat of his mouth, tasting and teasing until they were both breathless and nearly out of control.

Pulling away, Jaylin stood, trembling with the force of his desire. "You get comfortable. Just tell me where the condoms are."

"My duffel bag. Second compartment on the right. Lube is there too."

Jaylin nodded and quickly went to retrieve the items, aware that Max was watching him, and knowing those brown eyes took in every move he made only aroused him more. He and Max were, at long last, finally going to have their first time, but it would only be the first of many and that reality made the past seven years seem like a bad dream.

Crossing back to the bed, he set the condoms and lube on the nightstand before crawling onto the bed and falling into Max's open arms.

Their lips came together again and Jaylin's hands were everywhere. He wanted to touch, to remember. He wanted desperately to take away all the bad memories and replace them with good ones, good memories that would mark the beginning of their life together.

Moaning as he was pushed to his back, he smiled, seeing the desire he felt mirrored in Max's brown eyes that were still the most beautiful he had ever seen. He wanted to spend a lifetime looking into those eyes and, knowing that after all this time he could get what he most wanted made the fire inside of him burn even hotter.

There were still questions to answer, decisions to make, but they would come in time. For now, this was what they needed.

"I love the way you kiss," Max whispered, nuzzling his neck. "I love the way you taste. So very sweet and hot. Gonna spend a lot of time kissing you, Jay." His lips trailed a teasing, wet path down Jaylin's neck to his chest, and an electric-like jolt shattered Jaylin's senses when Max sucked his left nipple into his mouth.

Back arched, he tangled his hands in Max's hair, gasping his name, needing more, his senses on fire, the idea of rational thought shattered.

"Max...."

"Just getting started, baby."

Moving lower, he took obvious delight in teasing Jaylin with kisses, licks, biting gently from time to time until Jaylin was withering and begging for more. His cock was so hard it ached, but Max was careful not to touch him as he kissed the inside of his trembling thighs, slowly sliding one hand beneath Jaylin, gently cupping his balls.

A strangled cry ripped itself from Jaylin's throat, shattering around the room, and he felt Max smile against his skin.

"Oh, I remember how much you like this, sweetheart."

Before Jaylin could fully process those words through the foggy haze of desire, Max's tongue was lapping at his flesh mischievously. His eyes almost rolled back in his head, the pleasure was so intense, so incredible, and it became even more overwhelming when Max went from licking to eagerly sucking his balls.

He heard Max chuckle and when he did, it created the most delicious vibrations, and Jaylin wildly tangled his hands in the sheets.

"Damn it, Max...."

The wonderfully wet heat left him and Max lifted his head with a smile. "Yes, love?"

"Stop teasing and fuck me already!"

Laughing, Max moved up his body again, kissing him long and hard, before reaching to the nightstand to grab the lube.

Coating his fingers, he kissed Jaylin again, and as he did, his hand slipped between the legs that eagerly opened for him and slowly, he inserted first one finger, and then another, when Jaylin lifted his hips in a silent plea for more. Nothing felt as wonderful as Max stretching him slowly, finally preparing him. He couldn't restrain himself, couldn't

keep himself from moving and crying out when Max curled his fingers, hitting sensitive nerves, igniting pleasure.

“Max, please! Please, I need you buried inside of me.”

“I am inside of you.”

As if to prove that point, his fingers curled again and Jaylin gasped his name, hips lifting and thrusting against Max’s hand.

“Not enough. Need you. Need your cock inside of me. Finally inside of me.”

“That’s exactly where I want to be.”

Carefully withdrawing his fingers, Max grabbed the condom, ripped it open, and slipped it on as quickly as he could, before rolling into his back.

“Ride me, baby. Let me watch you. I want to see your face.”

Again, mere words were nearly enough to send him over the edge, but he struggled, managing, just barely, to hold on to his control. His greatest dream was about to come true at last and he knew the memory would stay with him forever as he leaned down, claiming a kiss, while slowly straddling Max’s body.

Carefully positioning himself, he braced his weight on his legs, holding Max’s cock in one hand, their eyes locked as he slowly lowered himself. A wanton moan escaped him at the feel of Max finally stretching him, moving into his body.

The emotions, the feelings, were as intense and wonderful as the actual, physical act and Jaylin never wanted it to end.

He had been waiting and wanting this to become a reality for so long, he had given up hope that it would ever happen.

“Feels so good, baby. So good. So tight.” Max’s fingers dug into his hips, adding to the wild host of sensations. “Let go, Jaylin. Don’t hold back. Please.” His hips arched and Jaylin cried out. Any control he had worked to maintain shattered, at the feel of the man he loved completely inside of him, exactly where he belonged.

Looking down, he could see the passion, the need, in Max’s eyes. He relished the sight of his own cock brushing against Max’s stomach, leaving a damp trail.

When Max wrapped a firm hand around him, Jaylin moved instinctively and Max moved with him, setting a steady, deep, powerful rhythm.

One that would last forever.

AFTERWARD, once their hearts slowed to a normal rate they lay curled together, the energy still humming between them.

His head on Max’s chest, Jaylin was content to lie there, knowing this was real. It wasn’t a vivid dream that would end with him alone. He knew what it was, to feel truly and completely happy. It was a feeling he had thought he would never experience again and he didn’t want it to end, he didn’t

want anything to invade or disrupt the little haven he and Max had found.

*But we still have to face the hearing tomorrow. It's unavoidable. And it will bring back all the bad memories and the pain.*

Just the thought of Max having to relive everything he had suffered made Jaylin ache inside and he held on just a little tighter, wishing he could somehow spare him. He was still furious knowing Trent could possibly be released early. The man didn't deserve any time shaved off a sentence that had always seemed too light to Jaylin in the first place.

"You're thinking about tomorrow."

Not surprised that Max had easily picked up on the direction his thoughts had taken, Jaylin didn't bother with a denial. "I can't help it. He doesn't deserve a chance to get out early."

"I agree. But I'm kinda glad this all came up."

Jaylin lifted his head. "Why?"

"It brought us both back here and gave us this chance to set things right."

"I have to admit, I am grateful for that, but I still don't want Trent released early and I really don't like the idea of you having to face him."

"I can't say I look forward to seeing him again, but I think it might be good for me. I was never actually in the

room with him during the first trial and, at the time, believe me when I say I was grateful to avoid that, but I'm a lot stronger now."

"You think seeing him face-to-face will give you closure?"

"Maybe." Max brushed a lock of hair from Jaylin's face, his eyes thoughtful. "I just know I've already lost far too much because of that night and me allowing my father to twist me up inside, and I finally want it all left in the past."

"Have plans for the future?"

"That depends on you and how much you're willing to allow me into your life."

Sitting up, Jaylin caught Max's hand and held it. "I want you in my life in every possible way you are willing to be in it. I don't care where we live. Seattle or New York, it doesn't matter. As for touring, I figure I can do most of that during the summer, when you can come with me. I'm sure there's a lot of gigs closer to home that Marcus can arrange for me."

"Marcus?"

"My agent."

"You've put a lot of thought into this," Max teased and Jaylin shrugged and smiled.

"Like I said, we can work out everything. I just want to be with you."

Sitting up, Max kissed him soundly. “I want that too. And right now, I want to put that tub in the bathroom to good use. And I don’t want to do it alone, babe.” Bouncing from the bed, he raced ahead to the bathroom and Jaylin followed, laughing, but the laughter stopped when he stepped into the room, finding Max’s back was to him as he adjusted the water.

He had felt the scars on Max’s back while they made love, but seeing them was like a sucker punch right to the gut.

“Max....”

Turning, Max winced, seeing the look on his face, and Jaylin found himself hauled into warm, strong arms that held him close. He held back tightly. His face was buried against Max’s neck, and he was aware that he was shivering, but it took longer to realize he was crying, nearly sobbing, emotions he thought long hidden boiling to the surface. He felt almost consumed by them, the anger and pain, the fear. His mind pulled him swiftly back in time, to that night, trapping him there and forcing him to relive each agonizing memory.

“It’s okay, baby. I’m here. I’m here and we’re both okay.”

Max’s voice called out to him, and he tried to nod, tried to pull himself together, but the long closed door was finally open and try as he might, he couldn’t slam it shut again.

“I...I couldn’t get to you. I couldn’t stop them.... I couldn’t...I couldn’t make it stop....” He pulled back slightly.



“I knew you were hurting. And you worked so hard not to show it. But I knew. I saw just what they did to you. I saw all of it and I...I couldn’t stop it! I couldn’t protect you.... I wanted to make it stop, but I couldn’t and I am so sorry, Max. I’m sorry....”

“Baby, listen to me....”

“I thought you were going to die. I saw all the blood and....”

“I know. I know. I know you wanted to help me, baby. I know you would have stopped it if you could have.” Max cupped his face, forcing Jaylin to look at him through the tears that still burned his eyes and blurred his vision. “None of it was your fault! I want you to understand, Jay. I never, not for one second, blamed you and I know you would have stopped them, if you could have, but Trent had a gun and he knew I would do anything to keep you safe.”

“You suffered so much.”

“I did. I won’t deny that. But I would suffer all of that again, if it meant keeping you safe.”

Jaylin managed to shake his head. “But you....”

“I survived, Jaylin.”

“But I still lost you,” Jaylin whispered. “And I’m not trying to make you feel guilty. I get why you left the way you did and I understand your father twisted everything around, but I...I don’t know if I will ever forgive myself for being powerless when you needed me most.”

“You weren’t powerless, baby.”

“I felt that way. I wish I could have taken your place.”

“I told you, I would suffer everything again before I would let you hurt like that.” Max gently brushed a kiss over his lips. “I love you. More than anything, I love you, and yeah, I wish that night, all of it, had never happened but it did and we survived it. And I hate that we missed the past seven years we could’ve had together, but we’ve got our future waiting for us.”

“I want that. I do. And I’m sorry I broke down....”

“Don’t. Never be sorry about letting me close, Jaylin.”

Jaylin leaned in again, hugging him, and Max held back, his warmth and strength soothing away the lingering pain and fear.

“The same goes to you, Max. If you want to talk, please know I’ll listen.”

“I know that.”

Max eased back again, taking his hand, and Jaylin sighed, feeling oddly lighter, as if some hidden weight had been removed from him.

“Come on, babe. Let’s soak in that tub for a while and then fall back in bed.”

“Sleepy?” Jaylin grinned.

“Not at all. Sleep is the last thing I’ve got in mind.”

“I do so love the way you think.”

As he climbed into the tub, he laughed, and Jaylin decided no sound could possibly be sweeter than the sound of Max’s laughter.

He was looking forward to a lifetime filled with that laughter.

## Chapter Nine

THE last thing Max wanted was to crawl out of bed the next morning, but with the hearing scheduled for ten promptly, he didn't have any choice.

Neither he nor Jaylin had slept much during the night. They were too eager to make love, to reconnect, and every moment was incredible. It seemed as if the seven-year separation faded away and they were still in tune with each other, still caught up in the passion and need, and Max didn't doubt they could build a life together.

There was certainly nothing he wanted more.

Being around Jaylin again made him feel alive, it made him feel free, and he had a hard time taking his eyes off the blond when they returned to Jaylin's motel room long enough for Jaylin to change and pack his belongings. He had already agreed to return to the B and B with Max and as soon as the hearing was over and once they knew the outcome, they would move on to the next step, deciding how to merge their lives.

*It won't be hard. We both want this. We should already have a life together and we would if I hadn't allowed my father to manipulate me.*

He would never cease to regret the time they had lost and while Jaylin had forgiven him, Max wasn't certain he would ever forgive himself and he was certain forgiving his father would never be a possibility. Not that his father cared. Four years of silence proved Chad Sydney couldn't accept a son who had dared to forge his own path and Max had already come to terms with that, though he had to admit it made him sad.

He was grateful Jaylin had never endured that kind of rejection from a parent.

At nine-thirty, he and Jaylin walked into the courthouse, hand in hand, and they quickly located the room where the hearing was being held.

As they were about to step inside, Max heard a familiar voice call his name and tensed, turning slowly to face his father, making no effort to release Jaylin's hand.

"I wasn't certain you would actually be here." Chad looked from Max to Jaylin and back, his eyes guarded and distant. "I certainly had no idea you two...." He waved a hand, clearly unable to say the words, and Max hated him for that alone.

"Jaylin and I just found our way back to each other."

"No thanks to you." Jaylin glared. "I know now exactly why Max left. I know how you twisted his fears, made him

believe he would somehow be a burden to me and I...I have no idea how you could do that to your own son."

"I was trying to help him."

"You didn't," Max snapped. "But I'm to blame too. I fell for the lies. But I'm lucky enough to be with Jaylin again and even if I don't deserve it, he loves me and he's willing to give me another chance and I won't blow it this time."

"Max...."

"If you are about to put him down, or try and make him feel badly about himself, just turn around and walk away."

Max watched as his father turned his full attention to Jaylin. "You have no say in how I speak to my son or what I say."

"Actually, Mr. Sydney, I do. Because I love your son. And I won't allow you to hurt him."

"I only want what is best for my son."

"If you really meant that, you wouldn't try and change him. If you love him, accept him for who he is and respect what he wants."

To his credit, Chad looked away, and Max knew Jaylin had hit a nerve, which was something of a surprise.

"I will admit, I have made mistakes."

It was a start, Max supposed, but it wasn't enough. "What does that mean exactly?"

“It means I should never have interfered with your relationship with Jaylin.”

“Is that an apology?”

Chad drew in a breath, looking at Max again. “I suppose it is.”

“Dad....”

“I made mistakes. I’m sorry for them. But I can’t lie and say I support your lifestyle.”

Despite everything that had come before, hearing his father say that still hurt and Max sighed, nodding, accepting reality for what it was.

“I guess there’s nothing left to say.”

“Max....”

“I’m gay. And I love Jaylin. He and I intend to be together. And we won’t hide it. If you can’t accept me, if you can’t support me unconditionally...well, I guess that’s your problem.” He glanced at Jaylin, who squeezed his hand in silent support and Max was grateful for it, as he turned his eyes to his father once more. “For four years, you haven’t reached out to me and, despite your apology, I can tell you’re not really reaching out to me now and that’s fine. I’ve accepted that unconditional love is a concept you can’t grasp. And that’s fine. I have a family now and I will never allow anyone or anything to come between us again, so unless you can somehow accept me and Jaylin both, there is nothing left for us to say, Dad.”

Chad nodded slowly, but his eyes remained cool. "I'm sorry you feel that way."

"Is that your way of saying you can't accept me?"

"It's just not possible."

Jaylin squeezed his hand again and Max shook his head. "Goodbye." He knew it was final. He wouldn't see his father again after today, but there was nothing he could do to change how Chad felt or how he looked at the world, and he was fine with that.

He had Jaylin and that was enough.

Turning, they walked into the courtroom, taking a seat in the front row, by Max's choice. He wanted Trent Miller to know he was there, ready and willing to face him. He felt empowered by the confrontation with his father, and knowing Jaylin was at his side calmed any and all fears. He felt he could face anything or anyone.

Once they were seated, Jaylin turned and looked at him, concern in his eyes. "I'm sorry about that, Max. I really didn't expect to see him here."

"Neither did I, truth be told."

"You okay?"

"Yeah. I'm good. I meant what I told him. I have all I need."

"I'm glad. Because I love you."



Max smiled. “I love you too.” It felt so natural saying that, even after seven years, and Max knew they would be okay. They were back together and once this ordeal was behind them, they could build the life they wanted.

Glancing up, he watched as three people—two women and a man—entered from a side door to the left. They quietly sat down together at a table facing the room. It was a little surreal to realize in just a short amount of time they would decide if Trent Miller deserved an early release from prison and Max wondered about them.

He wondered what, if anything, he could say to make them realize Trent should be forced to serve every day of his sentence.

Another door, one to the right, opened and Max tensed as Trent Miller was guided into the room, with two armed guards on either side of him.

He wore an orange jumpsuit, his hands were cuffed in front of him, and his hair was longer, almost to his shoulders. It was obvious the nearly seven years in prison hadn’t been easy. He looked at least ten years older than his actual age, but Max didn’t feel any compassion or pity for him, and when he glanced at Jaylin, he could sense the anger burning in his lover.

“Jaylin?”

He pulled his eyes from Trent and Max could see the raging emotions. “Sorry. I know it has to be even harder for you, seeing him....”

“It’s not easy for either of us, but we can handle it.”

“I just...I feel bad. I fell apart last night and you pulled me back together. But you’re the one he hurt and I just want you to know, I can be strong for you, Max.”

“The fact that I have you here, sitting beside me, makes this easier for me.”

“Max....”

“We’re going to be fine. I don’t doubt that.”

Jaylin smiled, sighing, and Max could feel some of the tension leave him and he was glad. He knew this wasn’t going to be pleasant and he just wanted it over and done with. He wanted the past settled once and for all.

Leaning close, he let his lips linger close to Jaylin’s ear.

“When we get back to our room, I want you to do something for me.”

“Anything.”

“I want you to fuck me.” He whispered the words, knowing the impact they would have on Jaylin, knowing his nearness, the feel of his breath only added more fuel to the fire. “I need it. I need you to make me yours completely.”

“Max....”

“As soon as this bullshit is over, I’m dragging you back to the B and B.”

“You won’t have to drag me.”

Pulling back, Max faced the front of the room again and Jaylin reached for his hand and Max smiled, knowing Jaylin needed the contact as much as he did. He needed something to keep him tied to the present, because it would be all too easy to get lost in the past, in those dark memories that he wanted to leave in the past once and for all. And he knew Jaylin wanted and needed to do the same. He had held so much in for so long and Max suspected Jaylin breaking down last night was something he had needed to do for a while.

*It was cathartic. He never really faced what happened. He never got the help I did.*

He was back in Jaylin's life and he would help him now; now, they could truly help each other heal and move on to something better.

The room filled quickly and ten minutes after Trent was walked into the room, one of the women on the panel called the hearing to order. She introduced herself and the others, explained the docket and reviewed the crimes for which Trent had been convinced and Max tried to detach himself as he listened. But it wasn't possible. He knew, firsthand, exactly what Trent and Greg had done, while Lane and Hank stood back and watched, and he felt slightly ill as he listened to the details. Jaylin stared down at the floor, clearly struggling for control.

The review finally ended and the woman leading the hearing called on Trent's lawyer to explain why Trent was eligible for early release.

For nearly fifteen minutes, he recited Trent's supposed attributes, his good behavior. He had been a model citizen in prison and not only had he finished high school and college, he helped other inmates with their education.

*Isn't he fucking noble. I can't believe anyone could buy into this shit!*

"Mr. Miller has paid for his crime. And he regrets his actions. He is not the same man he was when he committed those crimes and he should be judged based on the man he has become, and I ask that this panel please keep that in mind."

He sat down and the chairwoman scanned the room slowly.

"Is there anyone here who wishes to speak out against Mr. Miller's release?"

Drawing in a breath, Max stood. "I would like to speak."

"And you are?"

"Max Sydney. I'm the man Trent Miller nearly killed."

The woman nodded and waved him forward and Max walked to the podium in the center of the room, not casting a look in Trent's direction.

"Thank you for being here today, Mr. Sydney. Please make your statement."

He drew in another breath, pushing past the memories and the old fears. "I don't have to tell you what Trent Miller

and his cousin did, because you know. All the details have already been made public today and not for the first time. And I think anyone who possesses a soul can easily agree that it was horrible, but hearing all the details read out loud isn't the same as living through it, or being handcuffed to a bed and forced to witness it."

A quick glance over his shoulder calmed him a bit. Seeing Jaylin there gave him the strength and the courage he needed.

"I get that Trent has so-called behaved himself since he went to prison, but so what?" Max looked forward again. "It doesn't erase what he did. And I don't believe for a second he has changed, because he...he was filled with hate that doesn't just go away because he helped a few people learn how to read and write."

"It's taken me years to get my life back. I nearly died. At one point, I wished I had. And I've got to live with the scars and memories for the rest of my life, so, no, I don't think Trent needs to be released early. He doesn't deserve a chance like that. Giving him one would be an insult to me and to the people that care about me and frankly, we've suffered enough."

He thanked the panel for listening and turned, ready to get back to his seat, back to Jaylin, who nodded at him, before glancing at Trent and when he did, he tensed and everything seemed to fast forward and stand still all at once.

He heard Jaylin scream, shouting his name, and suddenly, he was out of his seat, shoving Max down as

someone else shouted and Max heard the unmistakable sound of a gunshot and then more screams erupted. People were running from the room and someone was throwing Trent to the floor. A host of police officers seemed to spill in from the hall, shouting demands, and Max realized Jaylin was on top of him.

And he was unconscious.

Frantic, he sat up, carefully rolling Jaylin onto his back, calling his name, nearly passing out when he saw blood pouring from a wound on his head.

“Jay...Jay, please! Please....” Hands shaking, he felt for a pulse, gasping in relief when he found one. “Oh God, Jaylin, you can’t leave me. Please, baby.” Looking up toward the army of police officers, he called for help, and several rushed forward, one calling for an ambulance as another pushed Max out of the way.

Stumbling back, he looked at his hands, at the blood there, hearing Trent screaming insults as he was pulled from the room, but Max didn’t care what the bastard said, what horrible names he called him in his rage.

He cared about only one thing and that was Jaylin, the man he had already lost once, the man he realized he could lose again.

Forever this time.

## Chapter Ten

Two hours after Trent managed to get a gun ripped from one of the armed guards, Jaylin sat on a gurney in the emergency room, listening to a doctor explain to him how lucky he was.

The bullet had only grazed the left side of his head, very close to his temple. He required just a few stitches to close the wound. Most head wounds tended to bleed a great deal, which made the injury initially seem worse than it actually was.

The doctor saw no need to keep him in the hospital, which Max insisted was insane and he voiced as much as he stood in the corner of the exam room. He had refused to leave Jaylin for more than the five minutes it had taken him to give his statement to the police and Jaylin could easily sense how on edge he was.

All things considered, Jaylin couldn't blame him.

"Luckily, you don't have a concussion. But I will give you something for the pain. Keep those stitches clean and see your regular doctor in a few days."

“Thanks, Doc.”

He handed Jaylin a prescription slip for the painkillers, casting a glance at Max. “He really will be fine.” He nodded one more time at Jaylin and slipped from the room and as soon as he was out of the way, Max was there, reaching for his hands, but the contact wasn’t enough for Jaylin, who pulled his lover into his arms.

Max trembled slightly against him, holding him tight, and Jaylin closed his eyes, allowing Max’s warmth to surround him.

“What the hell were you thinking?”

“Max....”

“You could have been killed!” Max pulled back, just far enough to glare at him. “The bullet just grazed you, but God...do you realize you could have died? If your head had been angled slightly different or.... There are a dozen different, tiny little factors and you would be dead now....” He shook his head, tears coming to his eyes, and Jaylin pulled him close once again, needing to feel him, needing the reassurance that they were both safe and alive.

“I saw him get the gun away from that guard and I knew he would kill you. I knew he was just as insane as always and I wasn’t going to let him hurt you again.” Jaylin whispered, but the conviction in his voice was undeniable. “I couldn’t stop the bastard last time, but I...I had to stop him this time and I am not sorry I knocked you out of the way,



because if I hadn't, you would be dead. And I didn't finally get you back just to lose you."

"Jaylin...."

"I won't say I'm sorry, Max. I'm not. But I am sorry I scared you."

Max pulled back again, sighing heavily. "Don't do anything like that again!"

"I doubt pushing you out of the way of a bullet will be a daily happening." He smiled. "Come on, baby. I'm okay. Let's not worry about what could have happened. I did what I did because I won't ever allow anyone to hurt you again. If I could get my hands on Trent..." He didn't have to say it. Max knew he would happily kill the bastard, but that wasn't an option and, knowing Max, he was likely relieved it wasn't.

"The officer I talked to seems to believe Trent will be facing additional attempted murder charges for his little stunt."

"I guess that's a 'no' to his early release."

"I'm pretty sure he's proven he hasn't changed."

Jaylin nodded, lifting a hand to caress Max's cheek. "I'm pretty proud of you, by the way."

"Why is that?"

"You did a hell of a job with that speech you gave. I know it wasn't easy."

“It wasn’t easy, but one thing got me through it.”

“And what was that?”

“Knowing you were there, Jay. Knowing I would be with you when it was over.”

Smiling, Jaylin pulled him close, eagerly kissing him. Max kissed back, holding on, the passion and need instantly sparking to life. He slipped an eager hand down, cupping Max’s firm ass, squeezing, as he slid from the bed, and Max moaned, breaking the kiss with obvious reluctance. Jaylin grinned up at him.

“I’m finished with the doctor and the police said I could talk to them later....”

“So we really should get you to bed.”

“Plan on being in that bed with me?”

“Baby, you are stuck with me. Any bed you’re in, I intend to be in it too.” Max grabbed his hand and they walked from the room, down the hall toward the exit. “As soon as everything here’s finally settled, I need to go back to Seattle long enough to close out my loft and then, if you want me, I’m ready to move to New York.”

“Are you sure? If you don’t want to live in New York....”

“New York’s fine. I can get a job there, I’m sure.”

“In that case, I’ll go with you to Seattle while you settle everything.” Jaylin squeezed his hand gently. “I intend to hold you to that promise that I’ll never be in bed without you

again.” He hated the idea of being away from Max for any amount of time. He didn’t want to miss a minute of the life they could have.

They had already lost seven years, but Jaylin was determined to make up for that time, by loving Max with all his heart.

As they approached the exit, through the double-glass doors, they could see a small crowd gathered, made up mostly of local media and a few from other outlets throughout the state. It seemed a near shooting during a parole hearing was a newsworthy event and Jaylin sighed, glancing at Max, who just rolled his eyes.

“Do you want to give them a statement?” Jaylin asked and Max shook his head.

“I don’t have anything I need to say to them.”

“Me neither. I guess we just ignore them.”

Max pushed open the door, seeing several security guards were trying to keep the reporters at bay and he stopped suddenly, grinning as he turned to look at Jaylin.

“Remember that day in the music room, when I made you a promise about graduation?”

“Um, yeah. I remember. You said....” He trailed off, recalling the exact promise.

“I said that once we had our diplomas in hand, once we were finally free from high school and my father’s control, I

was going to kiss you in front of God and everyone.” Max stepped closer, easily resting his hands on Jaylin’s hips. “I didn’t get that chance. I’ve always regretted that. It was supposed to be my way of telling the world that I love you more than anything.”

“I know you love me. And I know we’re going to be fine.”

“I do love you and I agree, we will be just fine, but I didn’t get to keep that promise, and I kinda want to make it up to you now.”

Jaylin glanced at the crowd. “So you want to kiss me now?”

“In front of God and everyone.”

“What’s stopping you?”

Jaylin intended it to be an invitation and Max understood it as that, pulling Jaylin into his arms and claiming his lips in a heated kiss. He held nothing back and Jaylin responded eagerly, one hand in Max’s hair, the other resting on his back, as their tongues clashed and stroked and Jaylin was only vaguely aware of cameras flashing and voices sounding around them.

When the kiss finally ended, Max grinned, a carefree grin that made his eyes dance, just as they had all those years ago, after they had kissed for the first time.

“I think that said it all, don’t you?”

Jaylin nodded, smiling, amazed by how completely free and happy he felt. He and Max had come full circle, it seemed, and they had suffered some hurts and hits along the way, but they were finally together again and nothing could come between them.

They were going to make it, Jaylin was certain.

“Since we’re remembering things, do you remember what you said in the courtroom, about what you want me to do when we get back to the B and B?”

“Oh, I remember very clearly.”

“Still want that?”

The desire that flared in Max’s eyes made it clear that he did and Jaylin held out a hand that Max happily accepted as they walked together through the crowd, away from the past, and toward their future.

LISA MARIE DAVIS is a Florida girl, born and raised, who had been writing for as long as she can remember. There's nothing she loves more than writing. Her mind is always wondering, creating characters and plots. She's been accused of daydreaming too much but doesn't see it as a fault.



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