

Redemption

Remmy Duchene



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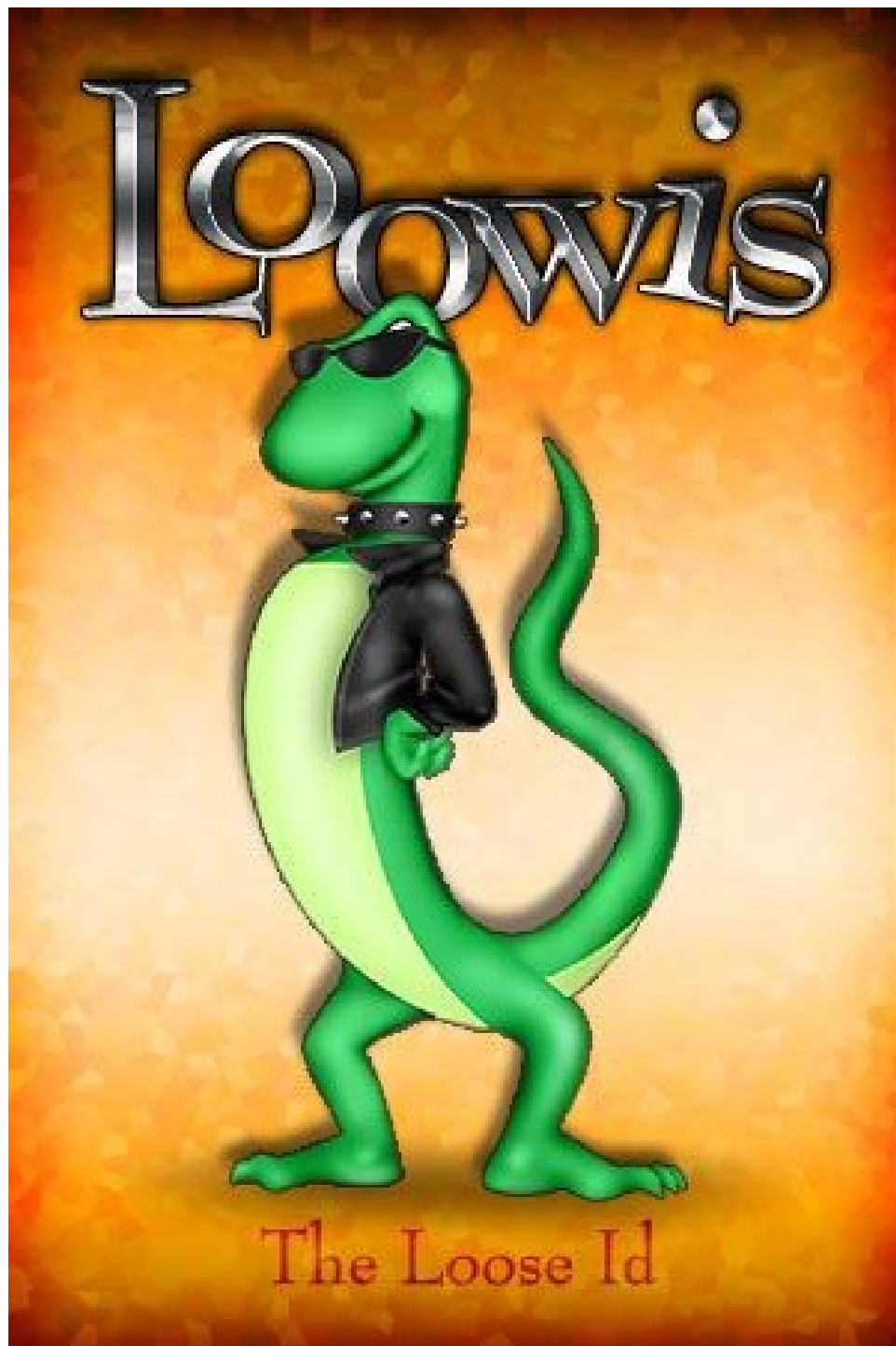
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Chapter One

Thayne, Alberta, 1985

“What does that mean?” Keegan MacLamore leant over and whispered to his lawyer. The grim look on the man's face told him all he needed to know.

He looked up at the judge, who was still speaking, but Keegan couldn't understand what he was saying. All he heard was a warped sound that resembled a voice, but his brain couldn't translate it all. His knees buckled, and he slumped to the ground. He felt arms trying to pick him up, but his world had suddenly slumped into a haze, and he couldn't wrap his mind around anything anymore. He'd thought the last few months had been a nightmare, but he'd been wrong. Nothing had prepared him for this.

He was going to prison for the rest of his life—for something he didn't do. Even though he would have loved to have murdered Mark Mullings, someone had beaten him to it. The hands got him back to his feet, but he wobbled uncontrollably as his knees trembled.

He turned and looked to where his parents had been sitting, but the seats were empty.

He glanced at his grandfather. The old man shook, leaning heavily against his cane. The look in his eyes explained to Keegan what the man was feeling—sheer horror. “Papa,” he whispered, moving towards his grandfather. A short wooden wall separated them. Keegan tried to hug his grandfather, but someone pulled him back. “Papa!”

Keegan had to go back. He had to go back to that horrible cell that wasn't big enough to turn around in. On his way there, the guards led him past Mark's family. He saw the looks of triumph on their faces. For the briefest moment Keegan entertained the thought of killing them all. Guilt set in after that, for the pleasure he'd taken in that thought.

No matter what, he'd never win. That alone caused him to hang his head. At his cell, the guards removed his ankle restraints and his handcuffs. As the gates with the bars slammed shut again behind him, Keegan's body jerked. Indeed, his life was truly over.

* * *

Thayne, Alberta, 2010

Keegan stepped from the truck and stared at the ranch, taking it all in.

"You can smile, Mac." Colter Madison spoke from behind him. "You're home."

Keegan didn't turn around. He continued staring at the Rattlesnake Ranch. The place held a smooth sense of calm for him, of comfort. It was the only place his parents hadn't tainted with their hatred. The Rattlesnake was pure and peaceful, like heaven.

"I bought some groceries for you, stocked the fridge," Colter explained. But Keegan couldn't find the words to reply. He moved on automatic towards the front door and entered. "Oh yeah, I also had the place dusted and cleaned up. Let's just say your parents weren't pleased once your grandfather's will was read, and they left somewhat of a mess. Plus I got you some clothes. I sort of guessed your size. Actually I figured anything that fit me would fit you. They're folded and stacked away in the master bedroom."

"Thanks." It was the first word Keegan had said after being given back his freedom—partial freedom. He walked around the living room, tenderly touching things with his fingertips. He stopped before a picture of his grandfather, and a small prayer flew silently from his lips. He was so thankful to Jones MacLamore. His grandfather was the only family member who had stood by Keegan's side after everything. He was the only family member who had visited him in prison, made sure he was all right, and spent hundreds of thousands of dollars on appeals. After his grandfather's passing, Colter was out of law school and had taken up the appeals; that was five years ago and counting. But Keegan had lost hope with every failure and, after all that time told Colter to give it up.

"You hungry?" Colter asked.

Keegan turned to face his best friend. He reached out and hugged Colter. "Thank you," he said. "And yes, I'll eat something. Right after showering—alone, not a luxury you get in prison. They made us all shower in together—it's disturbing."

Colter laughed. "I'll have something for you to eat by the time you get out."

He walked up the stairs, remembering the layout of the large ranch house perfectly. He peeked in the shower and was delighted to see that Colter had stocked it as well. Keegan stripped and stepped into the tub. By the time the water flowed over his head, Keegan was shaking, shell-shocked from the swiftness with which they had released him. There had been no warning. One day Colter had simply told him he was coming up for a parole hearing.

"I thought I wasn't eligible for another five years."

"Don't question it, Mac." Colter frowned. *"Your name came up, and we're going for this hearing."*

"You know they're just toying with me, right? Ain't nobody want me out of here."

"Man, prison has done more bad for you than good. When did you start talking like someone from a rap video?"

"Look around you, man."

Colter had nodded. *"All right, listen. I'll make sure this isn't a joke. But get a shave and get ready for it."*

Something or someone was looking out for him, and Keegan knew it. Somebody prayed.

Thanks, Papa.

Keegan's grandfather had always been a praying man.

Keegan pushed the wet hair back and lifted his face to the water. A moan left his throat as, for the first time in twenty-five years, he showered alone. It felt a tad strange not to have eyes on him while he showered. It felt strange not to have to watch out for the person stepping in with him. It was so very liberating to be able to let go of his worries for a little while and throw himself into the pleasure of water flowing over his skin. For a brief moment the water was his lover, gently caressing him, massaging his worries away. Keegan pressed his palms against the wall before him and hung his head.

BANG!

"Come on! We have to get out of here!"

"We can't just leave him! He didn't do it!"

"Who cares? I am not going to jail for killing that asshole!"

Sirens.

“Run!”

Keegan's eyes snapped open, and he sprang instantly into the karate stance, ready for a fight. His breathing was hard. But he was alone in the shower with the water pouring over his shoulders. “Damn,” he muttered. His euphoria broken, he stepped from the water and turned it off. He wrapped a towel around his hips, glanced at his face in the mirror, and picked up a razor. It had been a few weeks since he'd shaved. When he looked into the mirror, he didn't recognize the face that glared back at him. Those eyes were so filled with hate and darkness that for a moment, they scared him. He was no longer eighteen, but old—forty-three.

When he blinked, the eyes went away, and he felt a bit of comfort. But when he looked again, the fear returned. His hands shook violently when he lifted the razor. That infuriated him to no end. Keegan dropped the razor in the sink and stared down after it, trying to still his hands.

“Keegan!” Colter banged on the bathroom door. “Are you all right? You've been in there awhile.”

“Fine.” He cleared his throat. “I just can't seem to stop shaking.”

Colter pushed open the door and stepped in. He took Keegan's hands in his and rubbed. “Breathe.”

“I need a shave,” Keegan whispered. This show of fragility would not have gone over well in jail, and that made Keegan wonder how much longer he could have kept up the illusion.

Once again Colter stepped up. He sprayed shaving cream into his own hands and lathered Keegan's face, then proceeded to shave him. Keegan was happy that in high school when he had managed to push everyone else away, Colter saw through his bravado and stuck around. Colter wasn't a man to be scared easily.

“You're full of shit, Mac—you and this whole rebel-without-a-clue bullshit you have going. I'm not going anywhere, so shut the hell up and pass me that textbook.”

“Turn your head.” Colter's voice pulled Keegan from their high school days.

Keegan turned his head. He felt like a feeble child. It was a feeling he would not wish on anyone. He whispered a frustrated thanks to Colter, and after his friend was finished, he grabbed another towel and left Colter in the bathroom.

Chapter Two

Jaxon shoved his gloves into his gym bag. He picked up his jersey and sent it flying into the locker, then gripped the handle of the locker and slammed it shut a few times. They had just lost the fucking World Series.

He was not pleased. He hadn't even stopped to speak with the reporters who crowded outside to find out what happened. He had shoved through them, even knocking one down, but he couldn't help himself. He did not want to talk to them. He knew it would be all over the news the next day, but who cared? He was a free man and could choose to not talk to a bunch of low-life bloodsuckers. He hated reporters.

If another person asked him what happened, he wouldn't be liable for what he would do. It wasn't enough for them that a poor street kid who'd aged out of the foster-care system had made it in the big leagues. It wasn't enough that their team had made it all the way to the World Series. It wasn't enough that every player on that team had done his best. The fans wanted them to win.

He banged his fist into the locker door, leaving a dent. How had they lost? Anger coursed through his veins, even after he stopped to listen to the coach give them the final lecture of the season. No one would be celebrating that night.

He took a moment to bid his teammates a happy off-season, and watched as a few of them tried to smile. They had done their best. Their best—What did that mean?

“Yo, Jaxon, see you later, man,” the centre fielder called with a wave.

“Stay out of trouble now,” Jaxon said.

“No promises...”

Jaxon smiled tightly and nodded his head, as though confirming something to himself.

He tried to shove his way through the reporters outside the locker-room door again. He stopped, muttered the token lines, “We played well, and I guess the other team just wanted it

more. Congrats to them.” Nothing else. When he walked off again, people were grumbling behind him, but he had to behave himself.

The season had been a long one. Through all the injuries and suspensions due to doping, they had barely had a team to carry off the World Series games, but they had done it. They had rallied up to game seven but lost by one in the final moments. Somewhere along the way, they had let the game slip away. Maybe it was fatigue; he didn't know.

Ahead of the reporters chasing him, Jaxon slid into the backseat of his limo with his best friend, and it sped away from the curb.

“I swear to God they are like vultures,” Jaxon muttered. “I gave them a sound bite for their damn reports; why wasn't that enough? I don't know why I keep doing this to myself.”

“You mean playing the game? Or running from the reporters?” business mogul Sammy Sharpe asked with a smirk.

“All of it.” Jaxon tossed his hands up in frustration. “I mean, if the team wins, they find something else to blame me for, and if the team loses, they bitch and blame me! You would think I was the only person on the fucking team!”

Sammy nodded. “You know how things are.”

“Oh yeah. Some people are just dumb as shit.”

“I have my jet ready for you to go wherever you are going. Just make sure I get it back in one piece.”

Jaxon made a face and gave Sammy the same line his teammate had given him. “I make no promises.” He melted into his seat and closed his eyes. Was his love for the sport the same as when he had been playing for free? Did he feel the same searing, hypnotising affection? Something had crept its way in between his heart and baseball: the media, the money, the critics, the drugs. Everything was so much more complicated with a major-league team. He had somehow become the man to carry the lineup; so if the team failed, it was all on him. When had the Cincinnati Coyotes become Jaxon Lesley?

“You heading to Thayne this off-season?”

Jaxon nodded his head. “You know I always head home. I have to go back to make sure the ranch isn't in complete disarray. I promised Jones I would watch over it while his grandson served time.”

“Weren't you friends with him?” Sammy asked.

“Yeah, something like that.”

Silence poured over the limo. Jones MacLamore had approached him a few years back about helping him watch the Rattlesnake during the off-season. He'd claimed he was too old to do it all himself, and that he wanted someone he could trust. That had gotten to Jaxon. For one he didn't know why, out everyone Jones could have chosen, the man chose Jaxon. Maybe it had something to do with the fact that he constantly asked how Keegan was doing whenever he saw Jones. Remorse took hold of Jaxon's heart and twisted. He'd agreed to take care of the Rattlesnake with a handshake and a migraine.

Jaxon closed his eyes. He had planned to leave Cincinnati after the game, win or lose. He felt so tired and overworked that, regardless of the memories, all he wanted to do was head back to the Rattlesnake and stay there. In Thayne he could roam, wear a simple pair of jeans and a shirt without ending up on some damn best-/worst-dressed list. He could walk around at his leisure without ducking into stores to hide from the paparazzi. In Thayne he wasn't dating this person or that, though he had a booty call there. Even though the media knew he was gay, some smut magazine was always questioning his sexuality. He was dating this starlet or that starlet; then he was making sex tapes with this Hollywood hunk or that Hollywood hunk—none of it true, of course, but that didn't bother them.

He was seriously wondering how much longer he wanted to play baseball. How much longer did he really want to get chased by the paparazzi? Because he was gay and in the spotlight, he had been good about only sleeping with one man from his hometown. And it seemed that every time he got injured lately, it took longer to recuperate. Maybe he should quit while he was ahead—start that investigations business he'd always wanted to start. He dragged in a long, deep breath through his nose and pushed it out of his mouth.

“Yo, Jaxon. We're here.”

He opened his eyes and stepped from the limo. The driver handed him his bag, and Jaxon walked around to hug Sammy. “You sure I don't need you with me to take your jet home?”

“I'm sure,” Sammy replied. “I cleared it with the pilot; he's expecting you. Now go home and stay out of trouble.”

“You know me.” Jaxon smiled after a tight hug. “Trouble always finds me.”

He released his friend and watched the limo pull away. Like a broken man, he headed towards the airport.

Jaxon stopped at customs and went through the motions. He answered their questions, opened his bag for them to search, and accepted his papers. Soon he sat strapped into a white leather seat, and the plane taxied away from the airport. He whispered a silent prayer just as the jet shot off into the air. With no problems, he should be in Thayne first thing in the morning. He might as well try to get some sleep.

* * *

His dreams turned to nightmares. It was all happening again.

A gun went off. The sound was so shattering that life around him smashed to pieces. Tears fell from the sky to mingle with the thick richness of blood. Souls were creeping upwards into the sky, some past the angels that stood waiting, dishing out comeuppances. The spirits sent back did not land on the earth and crack their skulls open; they slid through the ground and kept right on falling. He was one of the eerie shadows that was forbidden entrance into heaven. He had betrayed a friend, and that was a sin. He had been a coward, and now he lay on the grounds of hell, twisting in the fire. But it was too late. It was always too late for him.

With a gasp, Jaxon lurched forward in his seat with his heart hammering. He fought desperately for air. His gaze moved to the window. It was dark, no stars, and the moon was somewhere else.

Heroes had been made, and cowards had run away. On the grand spectrum of conquerors and pussies, where did he fall?

“It's too late,” he whispered to the empty cabin.

Chapter Three

Early in the morning, Keegan rolled over on the floor and pushed into a sitting position. It had been three days since his release, and still he could not get himself to sleep on the bed. He had grown accustomed to sleeping on something hard, and the softness of the mattress was uncomfortable. Over the years he had gotten used to the bed in his jail cell, even the way it dug into his back something terrible. He remembered by the third night his back had hurt like crazy and his neck was a mess. His spine had gotten pushed out of whack. And one too many people had drooled on the pillow before him. But he hadn't once complained, for he knew it would only fall on deaf ears. They would call him a spoiled little bitch, and the prison “dons” would be on his ass faster than he could even think. The last thing he wanted to do was fight with someone—anyone—over being a coward.

He glanced around the bedroom. Something had awakened him. His alarm clock hadn't gone off, nor had he automatically sensed it was time to get up for the prison's roll call. Something else had pulled him from his slumber.

He pushed from the floor into standing position and walked to the window. There it was, the reason he was awake at that ungodly hour of the morning. A luxury SUV was parked in the front yard of his property with the lights still on. He knew it had to be just a matter of time before the vultures stirred. A scowl appeared on his face. Why could they not understand that all he wanted was to be left alone? He had done his time, was still doing time on parole, and yet they refused to leave him be. Would they push him to do something he didn't want to, just to get him back in prison? As the years slipped by Keegan's temper had gotten shorter and shorter, until very little would set him off. Then he had to learn to hold it—suppress the rage while it vibrated through him. He shoved his hair from his face and grabbed his baseball bat from behind his bedroom door. He descended the stairs with fire in his veins. Shirtless, barefoot, with dishevelled hair, he hauled open the front door ready for a fight.

He waited.

The man who stepped from the vehicle looked strangely familiar, but Keegan didn't care. The only thing he wanted was for the man to get off his property and go to hell.

"You're trespassing," Keegan growled. "Get off my property."

"Your property?" the black male asked.

"Did I stutter?"

"Look, I don't know who you are, but I watch over the place for Mr. MacLamore until his grandson comes home. After his death, I just assumed he wanted me to keep doing it. So you're the one trespassing."

"Then your services are no longer needed. His grandson is home." Keegan turned to go back inside, but the man's voice stopped him.

"Hey! Wait a minute," he called. "You're Keegan MacLamore?"

Keegan faced the man. His patience was swiftly wearing thinner.

"I thought you were doing thirty to life. Did they find the real killer, then?"

"No. Good behaviour. Who knew that because there wasn't anyone around for me to murder, it would be called good behaviour?"

"Don't say things like that."

"Go away." Keegan shoved the baseball bat into the house and had the door halfway closed.

"Keegan, it's Jaxon."

Jaxon's heart began hammering inside his chest. How could this be Keegan? Keegan was so full of life. The man who stood before him was tattooed, messy haired, and angry. But even though Keegan looked like someone had beaten him down, the man was still sexy. Black hair with a few traces of grey with large curls hung long down to his shoulders. He had big green eyes, perfect muscles, and a height that Jaxon adored.

"Jaxon?" Keegan whispered. "I thought the streets got you."

"Nah, man."

"Come in."

That shocked Jaxon. Still, he walked into the large house ahead of Keegan. The place had changed a lot. Most of the furniture was changed; the walls were painted a different colour. Now it was the home of the rightful owner. He felt insignificant in the presence of Keegan MacLamore. From somewhere deep, Jaxon found a smile and let it spread across his lips, because that was how it should be.

“Would you like some coffee?”

“Sure.” Jaxon nodded and followed Keegan to the kitchen. “No one told me you were coming home.”

“No one knew I was coming home but Colter.”

“Colter?”

“Yeah. He's my lawyer. I told him to give it up and let it go, but he's still fighting to clear me.” Keegan chuckled bitterly. “He still thinks that someone around here gives a damn if I live or fry.”

Guilt tore through Jaxon, but his smile never faltered. “That's a good friend. That's what he's supposed to do.”

“I guess.”

Jaxon watched as Keegan flipped on the coffeemaker. For the first time he saw the scars across Keegan's back. He didn't know if Keegan was gay, but he couldn't stop himself from walking over. He stopped behind Keegan and slowly lifted a hand. With a tender fingertip, he stroked down one scar. Keegan tensed, but Jaxon didn't stop. He couldn't. Touching those scars hurt him so deeply that a low moan, then a whimper, left his throat. Still he caressed them, a penance for what he'd allowed to happen.

“Jaxon.” Keegan's voice was barely above a whisper, but it resembled the low rumble of a storm. There was warning in that sound, but Jaxon thought he heard a sexual connotation in it.

“What?” he asked. His fingertip moved low to the waist of Keegan's pants and slid over a scar that lay there.

“Please don't touch me like that.”

“Or what?”

Keegan turned and pushed away from him. It was as though Jaxon had suddenly caught the plague. He licked his lips and backed up to his stool. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have assumed—"

"That I would be into that?"

"That you...that you were like me."

He watched the way Keegan's eyes changed at that last answer. "Are you sure you're gay, Mac? Did prison turn you into a fag? When you were younger, you could have simply shrugged it off as experimenting—as something to rebel against. But tell me, are you really?"

"You need to leave now," Keegan growled.

Something inside Jaxon made him want to bait Keegan—to see if he would rise to it. His mind worked ahead to where they were having makeup sex. Which was stupid because he didn't even know if the man was sure he was gay or if he was just confused.

"Why, Keegan? You don't like the tough questions?" he asked as Keegan stormed by him.

Keegan lashed out, wrapped his arm around the back of Jaxon's neck, and pulled hard. At first Jaxon thought he was in for a fight, but instead Keegan's lips slammed over his with a force that pulled an animalistic sound from his throat. Keegan was rough, exactly the way he liked it. He spread his lips and moaned. Keegan's tongue plunged into his mouth, and Jaxon knew that his little game had backfired—royally.

Keegan had only meant to show Jaxon that he was messing with the wrong man. But once Jaxon's mouth opened, Keegan lost his mind. He pushed Jaxon hard into the counter, trapped his body there, and violently drank from his lips. He moaned, gripping the back of Jaxon's neck. He ground his hard cock into Jaxon and sucked on his tongue. Perhaps it was the idea of his not having had a man for so long—twenty-five years, the whole time he was in prison. Maybe he was just starving for some loving. But for some reason Jaxon was doing things to his body that he had never felt before. Finally, when he thought his body had erupted in nothing but fire, he yanked his mouth back with his heart pounding in his chest and his cock rigid against his pants.

"Who's the fag now, Jaxon?"

"I think you should take me into the bedroom—"

"I can't." Keegan released Jaxon and stumbled backwards. His mind thawed out enough for him to ask the question he'd wanted to earlier. "What are you the rest of the time when you're not a caretaker?"

"Nothing really—I just try to spend my off-season preparing for the next season."

"Off-season?"

"I'm a baseball player."

"Not my game. You're welcome to stay here if you have no other place to go, but what just happened cannot happen again."

"But still I'm welcome to stay here? How would that work out? Do you honestly think if I stay here that won't happen again?"

Jaxon reached forward, trailing a finger down Keegan's chest.

"Do whatever you want." With that said, Keegan yanked his body away from Jaxon's touch and staggered from the room in an aroused daze.

Jaxon watched Keegan leave and wondered if he had read too much into that kiss. It was rough, skilful, everything Jaxon yearned for. It communicated pure and raw need. It was the kind of kiss that left him throbbing for more. Still he gathered his things from the rented SUV and climbed the stairs to one of the guest rooms. He dropped his bags on the floor and flopped onto the bed, thinking back to his childhood—his whole life before everyone knew of Jaxon Lesley. He thought back to the road that had led him to betray Keegan in the worst possible way. The fear he had felt back then was enough to send his heart hammering once more. Jaxon sat up and pushed his back into the headboard.

He couldn't remember his life before he was five. Everything before then was an irritating fog. The day was dark and rainy when someone dropped him on the doorstep of the church. He remembered a woman's voice telling him to be a good boy and stay, just before a car door slammed and tires squealed away. Somehow he had ended up at the orphanage, and his nightmares had begun. Every day he would wake up, and after classes he would sit on the front steps and watch the streets. Each time adults came, he would be on his best behaviour, doing homework—though he could barely read—to show what a good boy he could be. But each time his hopes were dashed.

“What you have to do now,” Marva Anderson, the coordinator, had explained to the fifteen-year-old, *“is age out of the system. Then you can do whatever you want.”*

That was the day Jaxon knew that in his life he would have no one to care for him. That day, he stopped expecting to get adopted, stopped expecting anyone to give a damn. A sick feeling rose through Jaxon's body, and he felt as though someone were sitting on his chest and holding his nose closed. He rushed to the window and shoved it open. He gulped in fresh air until he felt himself calming down once more.

Jaxon spent the whole day avoiding Keegan, trying to give the sexy cowboy room to breathe, but by that night he couldn't take it any longer. He had to find someone to scratch the itch that Keegan had left behind.

He took a shower and called up his friend Noah James. The two men had an agreement. Whenever Jaxon visited Thayne during the off-season, they would have no-strings sex. But as the encounters grew, so it seemed did Noah's feelings for him. Deep down Jaxon knew it was time to break it off, but he kept putting it off. Jaxon parked his car in the semidark parking lot and walked into the small diner. Applause and shouts of joy greeted him. He still didn't understand why people did that. Though he smiled, it was only in the name of politeness. He felt like they were lifting him onto a pedestal—one he didn't need or deserve. When he took his seat across from the blond-haired, blue-eyed Noah, Bobby, the owner, wobbled over.

“What will it be, playa?” The morbidly overweight man wheezed. “Anything you want is on the house.”

Jaxon wanted to argue, but at that moment, in his mood, he would have done anything to get rid of the man. “I'll have a beer for now, Bobby.”

With a smile, Bobby walked away.

“You still staying at the Rattlesnake?” Noah asked.

Jaxon didn't want to talk about the Rattlesnake Ranch. He nodded in reply.

“Even with Keegan there?”

“Yeah. What's everyone got against Keegan, anyway?” Jaxon asked, his irritation swiftly rising.

“Are you kidding me? He killed Mark!”

“Supposedly.”

“It was proven in court!”

Jaxon banged his fist into the table. “That don't mean shit!” A few stunned faces turned to look at them, but he couldn't care less. “You're going to sit there and tell me that Keegan got a fair trial?”

It was Noah's turn to frown. “Of course he did.”

“You've got to be fucking kidding me! You're going to sit there with that fucking asinine look on your face and tell me that a kid who every adult in this town—even his own parents—hated with a passion got a fair shot?”

“Are you saying the jury was biased?”

“I'm saying you're all full of shit!” Jaxon shoved from his seat. He almost knocked Bobby over, but he didn't stop to apologise.

“You're fucking him, aren't you?” Noah yelled. Incredulous gasps echoed through the diner. “A convicted felon does it for you, Jaxon? Leave it to a nigger to choose trash.”

Jaxon spun on his heels and stalked back to Noah. He lifted a fist and sent it flying forward into Noah's nose. He heard a *snap*, but Jaxon didn't care. Someone yelled something about calling the sheriff, but Jaxon simply smiled. “Good. He knows where to find me.” He walked into the street, leaving in his wake a bloody Noah and a bewildered crowd.

Heading for his SUV, Jaxon wondered why he thought that with Keegan home the conversation with Noah would have been about anything else. He drove around the small town of Thayne trying to clear his head, but he kept thinking about why he had truly punched Noah. It wasn't because he had called Jaxon a nigger. Jaxon never gave a damn what other people thought or said about him. Then it dawned on him, and he slammed on his brakes. He had punched Noah because he had called Keegan trash.

That realisation left him rigid against his seat. He was used to one-night stands with no emotional attachment whatsoever. But he had felt Keegan's scars, and the searing pain that had vibrated through him was unlike anything he had felt before. To make things harder, he had tasted Keegan's kiss, and for some twisted reason Jaxon craved his touch. Finally, unable to ignore the feelings and thoughts rushing through him, Jaxon wandered back to the Rattlesnake Ranch.

Chapter Four

Jaxon did not see Keegan when he got home, and not for lack of trying. He walked through the kitchen to the den and the living room but didn't even hear a peep out of his host. When he finally decided to give up and crawl into bed, he spent the night tossing and turning. He thought about the kiss he had shared with Keegan and his reaction to Noah's words. It was the best kiss he had ever experienced, to be truthful. Keegan said it could never happen again, but Jaxon needed it to. There was a heat and passion in that one moment that put his previous sex life to shame.

He was probably selfish for feeling that way, but there was no denying it. Though he hadn't seen Keegan in over twenty-five years, the old sensations just came flooding back to him. As a teenager, Keegan had been Jaxon's forbidden fruit. Though he had no family to speak of, Jaxon had had his friends, who would have had a fit if they'd known the thoughts he harboured for the motorcycle-riding, long-haired hottie from the Rattlesnake.

They would have pushed Jaxon from the Brotherhood, and then where would he have been? They were his only family. But after Keegan's conviction, Jaxon realised that his so-called friends were full of shit. They weren't worth his loyalty, but then it was too late to do much of anything—or so he'd thought. He had quietly packed his things and left Thayne under the pretext of following his dream of playing baseball.

Jaxon remembered the first time he saw Keegan. He was seventeen and getting ready to age out of the system. He had always heard about what a “bad influence” the MacLamore kid was, and though he had seen Keegan ride by for almost a year, he had never seen Keegan without his helmet.

He stood on the corner with a few of his friends when he heard the familiar rumble of Keegan's Harley. He turned his head in the direction of the sound and watched as Keegan, dressed in all black, grew from a small dot in the distance to a person on a motorcycle.

Everything turned to slow motion for Jaxon. Keegan pulled up across the street from them and turned the ignition off. He shoved the kickstand down and allowed the cycle to rest against it. Then he removed his helmet, and Jaxon thought he'd swallowed his tongue. Keegan was sexy then. Keegan's muscled thighs held the iron beast perfectly. The moment he removed the helmet, Keegan shook his head, allowing his dark hair to dance in the wind. Keegan climbed off the cycle and stood looking around. He was tall, with wide shoulders, muscular arms, and long fingers. When he turned his gaze to Jaxon, all Jaxon could manage was a strangled gasp. He held Keegan's stare—that intense gaze was downright orgasmic. Finally Jaxon tore himself away and ran to catch up with his friends.

Jaxon shivered at that thought before the memory of their kiss in the kitchen flashed back to him. Keegan was still sexy. A primal feeling had risen in Jaxon's body when Keegan shoved him into the counter and sucked his tongue. But Keegan had made it clear that he didn't want him.

He rolled over and glanced out the window. Even the glow of the moon haunted him, mocked him, and called to him. It called him a wimp, and that tore at Jaxon's soul. With a muttered profanity, he rolled to face the wall. He would never forget what he had done to Keegan, no matter how hard he tried.

“Life in prison, with the eligibility for parole after thirty years,” the judge had called with enough hatred in his voice to destroy a small world. Jaxon had seen the wild rebel inside Keegan die.

“Papa,” Keegan had cried, staring at the old man leaning heavily on his cane and reaching for his grandson. That one word, *papa*, had occupied Jaxon's mind ever since the day Keegan uttered it in the courthouse. Each time he heard that word, Jaxon felt like a piece of shit. From time to time during games, Keegan's face would pop into his mind, tears in his eyes as he cried to his grandfather. That day in the courthouse, Jaxon was tempted to rise to his feet and yell something—anything—but he was just a kid who was terrified of losing the only family he'd ever had, the only family that had ever even pretended to care.

With his trips in and out of foster homes, one thing was constant for Jaxon, and that was his school. It was the only high school in the town which meant all the kids his age were there. There, he, along with a few other foster system kids and a few from the high school formed the

Brotherhood. It wasn't a gang *per se*—just a few boys pissed at the world with too much time on their hands. To get into the group, one had to be able to get his hands on alcohol and swear an oath of loyalty. Their favorite pastime was to speed through the town with one member hanging out the car's window with a baseball bat, smashing mailboxes from their posts. They would sneak cigarettes from the local convenience store since they weren't of legal age yet, then smoke them at the make-out point. The members of the Brotherhood thought they were bad-ass rebels who wouldn't let adults ruin their lives. The Brotherhood thought they would live forever. Back then they could get away with basically anything because all the adults were keeping their eyes on *that MacLamore boy*.

The morning light streamed into the room after a night of sheer torture, but still Jaxon remained on his side, staring at the wall. He stayed that way until the sound of hooves began outside.

“Yaaa!” a voice called, and the galloping got harder, hooves pounding faster. Jaxon drew his body from the bed and moved to the window. Keegan, dressed in tight blue jeans, a black and red plaid shirt with the sleeves rolled up to his elbows, and a black Stetson, looked gorgeous sitting atop a running black stallion. Jaxon's heart skipped a beat, and his breath caught in his throat. He pressed his face against the cool glass like a stalker, drooling. He watched the way Keegan's thighs held the horse's sides, and for the first time Jaxon *ached* to be between a man's legs.

As though Keegan could feel Jaxon's gaze or hear his thoughts, he turned, and their eyes locked. Jaxon couldn't look away, couldn't even blink for fear of disrupting the utter feeling of desire that tore through him.

Out of desperation he tried to will Keegan to him. When Keegan licked his lips, Jaxon wanted to believe he would hop from the stallion and mount him. Instead Keegan ripped his gaze away and rode off.

Jaxon slumped to the floor. He panted for air while his cock jerked in disappointment in his pants. He rubbed his hands over his tender penis and whimpered. After what felt like an eternity, Jaxon pulled himself off the floor, but he couldn't pull himself together. He took a hurried cold shower and found coffee in the kitchen. After pouring himself a mug, he walked from the ranch house and found Keegan bending over his horse's hoof, inspecting a horseshoe.

“Morning,” Jaxon called.

“Morning,” Keegan replied.

“You're up early.”

“Yeah. Prison will do that to you.”

“I'm sorry, Keegan.”

“So am I.”

“Are things going to always be this weird between us? Me asking you questions and you giving me short, one-word answers?”

“Weird between us?” Keegan released the horse's leg he'd been muttering profanities over, and straightened. He turned to grab a length of rope from a nearby post and began wrapping it around his elbow and shoulder. “Do you think things are weird between us?”

“Okay, now you're just being a bloody echo.” Jaxon shook his head. “You probably wouldn't know what to do with a real man.”

Keegan watched as his guest turned and began heading for the house. He couldn't help himself. He unwrapped the rope again, tied a noose to the end, and twirled it above his head. He released it, and the loop flew through the air. It came down around Jaxon's shoulders.

Keegan tugged, and the rope tightened, restraining Jaxon's arms to his sides.

“Mac! The fuck!”

He walked over and tugged at the rope. Jaxon's back slammed into his chest. He tilted his head to Jaxon's shoulder, then up to dance his tongue over the tender spot behind his ear.

Jaxon growled, and Keegan smirked.

“I may not have been with a man for twenty-five years, Jaxon. But unless the rules of dating and fucking have changed, I've been wondering.” Keegan sucked Jaxon's earlobe into his mouth, then released it. “Are you a freak, Jaxon? Do you like being tied up and controlled?”

“That's none of your business.”

“You say that now because you don't know what I can do to you.” Keegan bit against the lobe again, and Jaxon shivered against his chest. He licked at the back of Jaxon's neck. “You don't know what I can make your body feel.”

“You're all talk.”

A smile passed over Keegan's lips, but it faded like a ghost. “Is that why your voice has suddenly gone breathy and husky? Or maybe it's because I'm all talk that your breath just caught in your throat. Maybe it's the reason why your cock is growing right now, just begging for me to pull it down my throat.”

“I don't...don't know what you're talking about.”

“Don't you, Jaxon? There's a bone in your pants, and you want it sucked by a skilful mouth. You want to feel a rough tongue bathing it while you come hard in my mouth. Am I wrong?”

Jaxon didn't answer.

Keegan pulled at the rope to make it tighter around his prey. “Come on, Jaxon. Cat's got your tongue?”

“Keegan...”

Just as suddenly as he had roped Jaxon, Keegan released him and walked away. He didn't know what had come over him, but the feeling of Jaxon against his chest was enough to give him a hard-on—one he'd welcomed at the time. But when Jaxon growled his name, he couldn't do it. He had to get Jaxon's body away from him. The forbidden fruits always tasted the best: preachers and their secretaries, chocolate cake during a diet, Eve and the apple. Jaxon had become Keegan's apple, and deep down he felt horrible for even thinking of Jaxon sexually. The things that Keegan wanted to do to Jaxon should not be legal. But he knew better than to let his lust cloud his judgement. He was no fool; he knew that if the media caught wind of Jaxon's dating a convicted felon, his career would be over. No team would want that on its back. He yanked a bale of hay from a shelf. He dropped it into a stall and used a pitchfork to scatter it. He was trying his hardest to put his sexual hunger into work, but so far to no avail.

He worked for the rest of the day, pushing himself nonstop. But around lunchtime he had to stop for Colter's visit.

“I hear you have a guest.” Colter shoved a handful of grapes into his mouth and chewed.

Keegan made a face and motioned up the stairs with his head. He was still chewing the piece of chicken he had placed in his mouth before Colter had said anything. “Mrs. Posey?”

“You know it—she's still our beloved gossip.” Colter laughed. “I tell you, some people are so damn nosy.”

“Makes you wonder how no one saw anything the night of my supposed crime.”

“Someone had to have seen something.”

Keegan smiled bitterly. “Of course someone say. I know someone saw what happened. I just don't know who. But they aren't going to say so if it meant helping me. You're going to give yourself a heart attack. Just let it go, all right?”

“So tell me about your guest.”

“Remember Jaxon Lesley?”

Colter nodded; then his eyes widened. “Um, baseball player Jaxon Lesley?”

Keegan frowned. Colter sounded like a starstruck teenager. He got up from his half-eaten lunch and dumped the rest into the garbage. After chucking the plate into the sink, he turned and leant his back against the counter, crossing his ankles. He folded his arms across his chest and lifted his eyes to his friend. “Are you kidding me? He's not the bloody pope!”

It was Colter's turn to frown. “What's got your panties in a twist? Anyway, Noah James is complaining that Jaxon broke his nose, but I thought he was lying as a way to start something. I mean, how often does a celebrity come to town and no one talks about it? Shocked me that no one else said anything—Strange—”

“Jaxon broke Noah's nose? What for?”

“Well, from what I heard, there was an argument.”

“What about?”

“You.”

Keegan's eyes widened, and he tilted his head to the side in confusion. “Jaxon broke Noah's nose over me? Why would he do a thing like that?”

“I'm just the messenger.” Colter popped more grapes into his mouth. “There was some big uproar, Noah called Jaxon the *N* word, called you trash, and apparently Jaxon didn't take too kindly to either or both. Now Noah's sporting a rather badly broken nose.”

Keegan chuckled.

“It's not funny!” Colter exclaimed, but he had a smile on his lips.

"It was going to happen sooner or later." Keegan nodded with his mirth. "I'm just glad it wasn't me who did it. That boy doesn't seem to know when to keep his fucking mouth shut. I don't know about Jaxon, though. Last night...something—" Keegan glanced over one shoulder, then the next to make sure Jaxon wasn't there before moving toward Colter. He bent over the island to be closer to his friend. "Something hot happened between Jaxon and me. It's been decades since I've been with anyone."

"Uh-huh. So?"

"So? So he came, and the same day he showed up, he called me a fag. I just about lost it! I didn't know about him being gay, because let's face it, in prison baseball isn't the sport to watch. I wanted to teach him a lesson. I grabbed him and planted one on him."

"Let me guess." Colter smirked. "It backfired?"

"Royally." Keegan sat on a stool. "I told him it couldn't happen again, but it's so damn hard."

"Amongst other things, I'm sure."

Keegan pushed from his seat. "You're impossible to deal with when you get like this."

"Like what?" Colter followed but stopped behind him when Jaxon came down the stairs. "Jaxon Lesley."

"Hello, Colter." Jaxon smiled and offered a hand. Keegan couldn't help rolling his eyes like an insolent child.

"Sure, him you remember," Keegan grumbled. He pulled his Stetson from where it hung on the rack beside the door and slapped it over his head before exiting. The envy crawled from the tips of his toes to the depths of his soul, and his fingers curled into fists. He pressed his lips into a thin line with the power of the feeling and the realisation that as much as he wanted to walk away from Jaxon, his body wouldn't let him. The thought of Jaxon with another man drove him mad. Even though Colter wasn't gay, just the thought of Jaxon looking at him drove Keegan nuts. He entered the stables and saddled Stajan, the black stallion, and took off north on his property. He might as well give them some privacy.

Chapter Five

Jaxon watched the dust that Keegan's horse kicked up as it galloped off towards the woods. He frowned and cleared his throat before turning to Colter. "I don't know what his problem is," he said, walking by Colter. "I've tried being nice to him. I've tried getting through to him, but I guess it's going to take some time."

"You like him? Mac, I mean," Colter asked, straight to the point.

He swung to face Colter, but he knew that his eyes betrayed him. "I stepped from that car, and before I even knew who he was—" Jaxon walked into the kitchen and grabbed a handful of grapes. He popped one into his mouth. "But prison has left him bitter, and I can't blame him for that."

"You don't think he's guilty?"

Jaxon shook his head and popped in another grape. "No. He couldn't have done anything like that. Keegan may have been moody and rebellious, but murder? No way."

"You know where he's going, right?"

Jaxon nodded. That wouldn't be something Jaxon would have admitted to anyone else, especially Keegan. How he explain basically stalking Keegan from time to time? In their teenage years, Jaxon would sneak off from the rest of his friends and hurry through the woods until he came to his favourite tree. He would climb it and perch high, watching Keegan staring into the water. Those were peaceful moments—moments he could dream and simply indulge in what he truly wanted.

"Then go after him. In the meantime I'm going back to the papers to see if I can find something to clear his name."

Jaxon's eyes widened. "I thought he told you to drop that."

"Yeah, well, my conscience won't let me."

“You feel guilty? Why? You didn't do anything wrong. You were young then.”

“I know. But he was and is my best friend. He's like my brother. He's still hurting, you know? He may act all tough, but it's killing him inside, and if I can get rid of that hurt, I'm not going to stop until I do.” Colter nodded with his lips pressed in a thin line. “I heard what you did to Noah.”

“He's still running his mouth?” That didn't surprise Jaxon in the least. Noah was a motormouth.

“He asked me to represent him in his lawsuit against you.”

Jaxon settled his brown gaze on the young lawyer. “No offense, but I have lawyers who would bury you and him.”

“I don't doubt that.” Colter chuckled. “But you'd have to be a moron to represent Noah without being forced to by a judge. Noah James has always been trouble, and I'm sure he had it coming. You haven't been the first to put him in his place, and I doubt you'll be the last. Anyway, I have to go.”

Jaxon shook Colter's hand and after Colter left, Jaxon began thinking of the suggestion he had made. Should he go after Keegan? After Colter's engine died in the distance, Jaxon rushed into the stable. He saddled the first horse he saw, and took off in the direction Keegan had taken amongst the trees. He rode through the woods for a few minutes without any signs of Keegan. He began getting worried just as he entered a clearing. The horse stopped at the edge of a river. The sound of water falling in the distance came from his left. Jaxon tossed his leg over the horse and released him to drink. He followed the sound until a waterfall stood just ahead. A large rock had managed to wedge its way in between the sides of the mountains. The water rose high behind it and fell over the rock. Across from him, Keegan swam. His body chopped through the water cleanly, perfectly. Without thinking about it, Jaxon stripped, entered the water, and swam into Keegan's path.

“Jaxon, why are you here?” Keegan almost crashed into his chest.

“I want you.” Jaxon moved forward, forcing Keegan to either allow their bodies to meet or move backwards. Keegan floated backwards. “To touch me.” He took Keegan's hand and slipped it beneath the water. He curled Keegan's fingers around his cock. Keegan squeezed, and Jaxon let his head fall back with a moan to the bright afternoon sun. “Stroke me, Mac.”

“Jaxon, you have no idea what you're doing.” Keegan's voice was hard. His breath pulsed in rapid bursts against Jaxon's neck. Even though he told Jaxon to leave, Keegan's fingers danced up and down Jaxon's shaft—daring the throbbing cock to grow bigger, longer, and harder.

“Let me see.” Jaxon smiled. “When two boys want each other—” He stopped when Keegan made a face.

“Don't you like that, Mac?” Jaxon whispered. He could not believe the amazing feelings that pulsed through him by Keegan's simple action. His eyes rolled to the back of his head, and his tongue moved over his lips. “Why don't you want this?”

“Because I don't want to hurt you.” Keegan's mouth feathered hot breath against the tip of Jaxon's chin. Jaxon's body trembled. “I don't want my curse to go to you. I don't want—”

“Forget what you don't want, Mac. What about what you do want? Stop thinking about what everyone else thinks. You said it yourself. You haven't been with anyone since you've been in.”

“But that doesn't mean I should take that out on you. You don't deserve to be used like that.”

Jaxon squeezed his eyes shut and bowed his head. He pressed his forehead into Keegan's chest and inhaled. “Used? I want this—I need this. The moment I saw you, I knew I wanted you to take me. Actually I wanted you to bend me over the hood of my car—”

“Jaxon, don't—”

“Come on, Keegan.”

Keegan's control melted away. He wrapped his free hand around Jaxon's neck and slammed his lips against his. Jaxon moaned, but he didn't let up. He pushed Jaxon's lips apart with his tongue. They floated in the water to a shallow area, but neither man noticed. The kiss got rougher; Keegan tightened his fingers around Jaxon's cock and began jacking. He wrenched his mouth from Jaxon's to suck against his neck and shoulder.

“Let's get out of the water,” Jaxon whispered.

Keegan knew that if they left the water, he would completely lose it. But he did not object. He walked, and Jaxon tackled him as soon as they reached dry land. He tumbled to the ground

with Jaxon on top, and the growls that escaped Jaxon's throat told Keegan he was in trouble. Jaxon kissed and licked down his body, over the eagle tattoo at his belly button, until he came face-to-face with Keegan's cock. Keegan rose on his elbows and watched as his cock disappeared down Jaxon's throat.

The hot wetness of Jaxon's mouth as his tongue swirled around the throbbing pole sent Keegan's body into a flurry of sexual greed.

Keegan caressed Jaxon's head while his body writhed against the ground. Pure, raw pleasure soared through his being, curling his toes and sending electricity charging through him. He bit his lower lip, arched upwards, gyrated his hips—he could barely stand it. His fingers dug into Jaxon's shoulders, pulled at his ears.

“Oh God, Jaxon!” Keegan panted before his body trembled. He ground his teeth to keep from yelling his pleasure, but that didn't last long. A nip against the head of his penis sent Keegan pleading, begging, and losing his mind. Jaxon's voice echoed off the hills around him and floated down to Keegan's dazed mind.

“Jaxon, oh, Jaxon!” Keegan whimpered when he felt as though his body were being sucked inside out. He pushed at Jaxon's shoulders and yanked his hips back. Jaxon released him, and he lay on the ground, on the brink of his orgasm, shaking.

“Too much for you, Mac?” Jaxon teased. He crawled up Keegan's body and nuzzled the cowboy's neck.

Keegan laughed. “Years, remember?”

“I thought prison was supposed to be where gay men can have some fun?”

“Trust me. You don't want to be Bubba's bitch,” Keegan whispered. He turned his mouth to catch Jaxon's. “Before you ask why it's 'cause Bubba doesn't look anything like you.”

Jaxon moaned and stole a kiss from Keegan. Keegan growled and rolled them over. He held Jaxon down against the ground and kissed his nipples. He swirled his wet tongue over them and blew them dry, only to start the torture over again. But he wanted a bigger prize, and soon he made his way down Jaxon's body. When he was between Jaxon's legs, he released Jaxon's arms. “I wish I had my rope,” he joked. He licked at the head of his lover's cock. Jaxon sucked in air through gritted teeth. Instead of laying off, Keegan slid the large ebony shaft down his throat.

“Please, Keegan, fuck me,” Jaxon begged. “I know foreplay is supposed to be a good thing, but I need it bad!”

Keegan released his catch. “On your knees.”

When that beautiful ebony ass pushed up close to his face, Keegan licked his lips. He knew that Jaxon had begged for a good dick in it, but he couldn't just do that. He leant forward, spread the chocolate cheeks, and flicked his tongue over Jaxon's puckered hole. The man shouted in exultation. Keegan made a sound of satisfaction at the taste of his man and buried his face fully. He sucked and licked until Jaxon was yelling things that made no sense. Keegan struggled to get into his pants pocket to remove a condom from his wallet. He slipped into it, and without warning, he reared upwards and buried himself to the hilt in Jaxon.

“Keegan! Damn!”

Once inside the tight crevice of his lover, there was no stopping. Any control he had up until that point vanished. With his eyes closed, he braced his knees against the ground, gripped Jaxon's hips, and slammed in and out of him. Jaxon shouted, gyrated his hips, and begged, but Keegan could not understand. All he felt was the increasing explosion that was coming, and he wanted it. He sought it. Twenty-five years of pent-up frustration threatened to crash through his veins, and he only hoped he was prepared for it.

“Keegan, I'm coming!”

The warning didn't come fast enough. When Jaxon's body erupted, the muscles in his ass tightened around Keegan's dick. That was enough to send his head backwards, his hips thrusting hard forward, and the twenty-five years of drought he had held within him to an end.

With a shout of Jaxon's name, Keegan had the most powerful orgasm he'd ever experienced. It left him feeling drained yet blissfully satisfied. He whispered Jaxon's name and tumbled to the ground beside him.

“Oh God...”

Jaxon kissed Keegan's chest. “Had nothing to do with it.”

* * *

Keegan walked Jaxon and their horses back to the Rattlesnake. Throughout the journey back, he had been silent. He wasn't sure how he felt about what had happened at the river. Jaxon

hadn't spoken either, and Keegan assumed that regrets were tearing through him. He inhaled deeply and turned to Jaxon.

"Don't." Jaxon shook his head. He turned to walk away, but Keegan grabbed his arm and pulled him. Jaxon crashed into Keegan's chest.

"Don't what?" Keegan asked. His lips hovered over Jaxon's.

"I can see it in your eyes," Jaxon replied. "You're about to say how sorry you are and how what happened by the river can't happen again."

Keegan moaned and pressed his arousal to Jaxon body. "You know, I can think of something else other than words for you to put into my mouth."

"Stop teasing me, man."

Keegan chuckled. He removed his hat and placed it on Jaxon's head. "It's not that I don't want you. Dang it, Jaxon. You're fine as hell. But you're in the spotlight—I'm a convicted murderer. How is that conducive to your happiness? I am no good to anyone. You get it?"

Jaxon simply shook his head and pulled from Keegan's arms. He placed the hat back on Keegan's head and walked off. Keegan sighed and hung his head. Why couldn't Jaxon understand? He had no delusions that Jaxon's career could survive him. Keegan would bring Jaxon nothing but pain and bad luck, and the life he would bring to Jaxon wouldn't be a good one. The media would dig into Keegan's past and make Jaxon pay. He shook his head and walked back towards the stables to put the horses up for the day. He glanced at the sky and knew there was a storm brewing. He could smell the rain on the air. With a groan, he lifted his hand, scratched his still-wet hair, and ducked into the stables.

Oh yes, there was a storm brewing, in more ways than one.

"Yo, Mac!"

Keegan had slipped so deep inside his head that he hadn't heard a car pull into his yard. "In the stables!" he called, fussing over a couple of the horses. "You'll never guess what I found." Colter was sweating but beaming happily. Keegan dropped the brush he had been using to smooth the hair against Stajan's body and faced his friend.

"You want something to eat, drink?"

"Forget food. I just got a call from Freeman Marrows. Remember him?"

Keegan nodded. “The kid whose father owned the convenience store where Mark was killed.” He moved the saddle from over the stall's door to the holder and grabbed a pitchfork to settle some fresh hay in the stall. With his teeth gritted, he dragged a bale down and broke it apart with the fork. “What's he got to do with anything?”

Colter walked to the door of the stall. “Well, his father just died, and in his stuff they found a bunch of old videotapes.”

Keegan stopped what he was doing to peer at his friend. “Colter! For fuck's sake. You know I hate it when you do that. Would you get to the point?”

“Well, Freeman said that there was a security tape in there dated the night Mark died. He said it is important that I take a look at it. He said it has something to do with the murder. I don't know why the cops didn't see it before. I mean, the crime practically took place in the man's damn lap. You would think they would ask if he had any security tapes and to see them.”

“Really? You don't know why? Colter, we both know that out of everyone in this town, Freeman's dad hated my guts the most. I still don't know what I did to him.”

“I guess—see why 'don't ask don't tell' doesn't work? I mean, just because the cops probably didn't ask for the videos didn't mean that old man couldn't have opened his fucking mouth and said something! Anyways, to make sure later no one can say I fabricated the tape, I haven't seen it yet. I had Freeman send it to a friend of mine at the FBI in the States. I've called in a favor and asked him to enhance the video, see if he can authenticate it, stick it on a DVD, and send it back. Then we can see what's really on it.”

“Twenty-five years too late, Colter,” Keegan growled.

“You can't mean that.”

“Like hell,” Keegan snapped. “Twenty-five years. I was eighteen—eighteen years old. The only thing I was guilty of was fucking a few of their sons who wanted it. They made it seem as if I had corrupted their sons—that their kids were not gay before they got to me. They sent me away for twenty-five years! I could have done so much, Colter, with the years I was in prison, but it's too late, because my record will always say *convicted murderer*. If my grandfather hadn't left me money and this place, I'd be living beneath an overpass right now, because no one would hire me, banks wouldn't even think about giving me a mortgage, and my life would be over. So don't tell me not to be angry and say it's too late.”

Keegan bit his lower lip to keep from saying any more. Shaking, he swallowed and turned his face away from Colter.

“We can fix that,” Colter whispered. “We can change that. Once we see what's on this tape, we can decide where we'll go from there.”

“Didn't I tell you to let it go?”

“And I told you that I can't,” Colter snapped. “I told you that *I can't*.”

Keegan nodded his head and left.

Chapter Six

It wasn't easy to fall asleep that night. Jaxon tossed and turned in bed because images of making love to Keegan were stuck on replay in his mind. Each time he closed his eyes, Keegan was above him, pinning his arms above his head and feasting from his lips. He didn't fight it; in fact he enjoyed every second of being dominated. Keegan's mouth trailed to his chin, sucking and nipping at it. His body lifted, not because he wanted it to, but because Keegan's ministrations demanded it. He whispered Keegan's name, not certain if he was begging for more or for sanity. Even then Keegan didn't stop.

How could he be angry at Keegan? He had no right to be. After all, he had teased Keegan into it. With a sigh, Jaxon sat up and peered out the window into the darkness. He knew he wasn't going to get any sleep, and with that thought, he got dressed in a pair of jogging pants and a sweatshirt and exited the house in silence. Jaxon had no idea where he was going, but he had to get out. The urgency in his steps surprised him as he made his way through the darkness of the trees and exited on the banks of the river. Moonlight flowed over everything like magic. The simplicity in such beauty took Jaxon's breath away.

He climbed onto a stone and sat down. With his legs pulled up so he could wrap his arms around them, he watched the moon until he got a crick in his neck. He lay back against the large rock and stretched his body out to its full length. At that moment his mind wandered to Keegan MacLamore.

Keegan was beautiful with his sleek body, and he was an amazing lover. He had caused Jaxon to come in mere seconds, and that hadn't happened before. Keegan had him begging for it hard and fast, and that too was new to Jaxon.

The wind changed into Keegan's hands—his mouth. The feeling grew so intense that Jaxon's body arched upwards from the rock. His lips parted, and a hoarse sound erupted to the skies.

His lover's hands moved down over his chest and stopped at the waist of his pants. The heat that followed the hands amazed him. It left Jaxon's heart hammering and his cock stiff and fighting to break through the materials that enclosed it.

"Keegan." He sighed.

"I'm right here."

Jaxon hadn't expected a reply. His eyes sprang open, and he shoved away from the voice. He stood shaking, staring at Keegan.

"When—What are you doing here?" Jaxon asked.

"I saw you leaving and wanted to make sure you were all right." Keegan's voice remained a low drawl. "Let me make you better, Jaxon."

"No." Jaxon stepped back and held up his hands in surrender. "Don't...don't touch me."

Keegan bowed his head, but Jaxon walked away with his arms wrapped around himself, trembling weakly. With every blow of the wind against him, he sucked air through his teeth. He stripped and dunked his body into the frigid night water. A hiss left his lips, but it didn't do anything for his heightened arousal.

"Jaxon," Keegan called. "We need to talk."

"No, we don't. Go back to bed."

"You know, you really shouldn't be swimming in the dark." Keegan pushed. "Come out of the water."

When he didn't answer, Keegan moved from the rock and bent to pick something up. He whirled the rope around his head and let it fly towards the water. In a flash the rope fell around Jaxon's shoulders, but instead of giving up, he struggled against his restraint.

"Don't fight it," Keegan growled. "The more you thrash about, the tighter it gets."

"What the hell is wrong with you!" Jaxon demanded, right before he flopped against dry land like a captured calf. "Let me go."

"Not until you're willing to sit and listen to logical conversation."

"I am going to kick your ass!" Jaxon twisted, still trying to get free. He yelped in pain after a bit, and Keegan shook his head. He went down on his haunches beside Jaxon.

"I told you. Stop fighting."

Jaxon locked eyes with his captor, and finally he gave up his fight. But as soon as Keegan released him, Jaxon tackled him. Keegan reacted and grabbed Jaxon's shoulder, then rolled him over. Keegan wound up on top of him, holding him down against the dirt.

Keegan felt as though he had just committed the gravest sin. He was fighting with the one man he shouldn't fight with. He shoved hard against Jaxon's shoulders and heard him groan in pain. Fear gripped Keegan's inside, and he was instantly feeling Jaxon's body.

"Did I hurt you?"

"Don't worry about it." Jaxon's voice was hard.

"Please," Keegan pleaded. That wasn't like him. He'd begged or pleaded for nothing since that day in the courthouse.

Jaxon turned his head away, and Keegan rolled away. He lay on his back panting, staring at the sky while trying to gather his thoughts.

"You will never understand," Keegan finally whispered. "I can never make you understand."

"Try anyways," Jaxon demanded.

"I'm no good for you, Jaxon," Keegan said. "I have a record—not just any record. I went away for murdering someone. I am still on parole and will be for the rest of my life—only God knows what will happen now. Colter thinks he can save me, but we all know that's not going to happen, because no one gives a damn what happens to me. If you keep hanging around, they'll want your head on a pike too. I can't let that happen."

"That's not your decision."

"You are so damn wrong! It is my decision! Baseball is important to you. I know it has to be. I know that if your team finds out that you're knocking boots with a convicted felon, the media will have a field day. I can't do that to you. I have so much guilt on my shoulders, Jaxon. I have so much that I'm going to burn for, and I don't want to take you down with me. Can't you see that this is killing me? I am barely holding on right now, and adding more guilt to that would destroy me. I want so much to take you in my arms and make love to you right here under the moonlight. Do you think the first time we fucked, I wanted to do it in the dirt on the bank of a

river? You deserved better. It should have been special, in a bed. Not some hard and fast, onetime thing that feels like—Look, everything I touch goes to hell, Jaxon.”

“So in other words you want me to pick up and run.” It was more of a statement than a question. “Similar to how you can't let me go, Mac, I can't let you go.”

Pain danced through Keegan's soul, and he pressed his eyes shut. “I'm going to get up, Jaxon.” He wrapped his fingers tighter around the rope in his palm. “And I'm going to go back to the Rattlesnake. I'm going to pack some things, and I'm going to head into the hills. When I get back, you can't be here.”

“Or what?” Jaxon pushed.

Keegan turned his pain-filled eyes to Jaxon. “Or I'm going to have to escort you off my property.”

With that, Keegan pushed to his feet and disappeared again into the night.

Chapter Seven

Keegan's soul died with each step he took into the darkness. He knew the woods behind the Rattlesnake Ranch very well. With the bare necessities in a bag slung over his shoulder, he felt as though he were walking off into oblivion. He had turned his back on Jaxon, even though it was the hardest thing he had ever done—harder than spending twenty-five years in prison. Jaxon brought out the softness in him. He made Keegan feel as though happily ever after were possible, but Keegan knew he couldn't be pulled into that. If he allowed himself the happiness of Jaxon's arms, his life could destroy Jaxon. He stumbled over a root and fell face-first into the dirt. His chest throbbed with pain while he coughed from a nose full of dust.

He chunked the bag away from him, then rolled over and stared into the night sky. “What's this supposed to mean?” he whispered up at the sky. Wide awake, he lay there all night. He didn't think moving again would be a good idea, because every step he took turned into something else to bring him low. If he just stayed there the way he was on the hard ground, nothing else could possibly go wrong. That was where the sun found him.

His shirt was a little damp, and his face was still partially covered in dirt. When the sun rose all the way and blinded him, Keegan pushed from the ground and left his bag where it had landed against a nearby tree. He staggered forward, bracing against trees to stay on his feet as he went. Finally he stopped and fell against a large tree—panting for air.

“Keegan!” a voice shouted. “Mac!”

His head snapped up. A frown crossed his lips, but he made no move to go towards Colter's voice. If he remained silent, Colter wouldn't be able to find him. His hair fell down into his face when he bowed his head. A clump of dirt fell from his face, and he watched it as, in slow motion, it slumped back against the ground. Keegan pressed his eyes shut.

“Mac! Where are you?”

“Goddamn it!” Keegan growled. “Let go, Colter. Let go.”

The voice came closer and closer. “Jesus, Mac! Didn't you hear me calling you?”

“And you would think you'd get the message and leave.” Keegan walked to where his bag lay and picked it up. “Is Jaxon gone?”

“Is that what you want?”

“It doesn't matter what I want, Colter. We both know that. The media is going to rip him to shreds if they ever find out he's with a convicted felon. I can't—”

“I get it. But what does he want?”

“It doesn't matter.”

“You want to know what I think?” Colter frowned.

Keegan started to walk off, but Colter grabbed his arm and slammed him into a tree. Keegan grunted as his back connected with the hardness of the trunk.

“I know you don't want to know, Mac, but I'm going to tell you anyways. You're a pussy. You see a fight coming, and you walk away from it. Jesus, you love this man. Even when we were younger and you slept with those other boys, you wanted sex and only sex. But with Jaxon, you care what happens to him. You care, Mac. So be a fucking martyr if you want to, but don't sit there and lie to yourself.”

“You don't have to be here, remember?” Keegan growled. “I told you to drop this—to leave it all alone. But you can't leave well enough alone.” Keegan shoved hard at Colter's chest and walked away from him. “You insist on digging and digging, and what did that get you? A fucking old tape with nothing on it. I want there to be something on it so bad but I'm not going to hold my breath. For a second there I thought for sure this would save me. But you want to know what I realised?”

“And what's that?”

“God don't forgive faggots and murderers, Colter. I'm already on my way to hell.”

“Don't be trite!” Colter snapped. “You didn't kill anyone.”

“But do you think anyone gives a fuck? Let's, for argument's sake, say something is on that tape. Do you seriously think that because it shows something, anyone in this craphole of a town is going to care? I was a kid when I got the label of a murderer—a kid! I didn't stand a chance

because they hated my guts, and they got what they wanted. They are not going to spend years thinking something and then change, no matter what that video says.”

“When did this become about the video? This is about you running from the only man who believes in you—from the only man who loves you more than I do. Don't you want that, Keegan? Don't you want to be able to wake up in someone's arms knowing they want to be there and that there's nowhere else that person wished they were? I want that for you, even if you don't want it for yourself. I want to look in your eyes, Keegan, and see that same rebellious happiness you had when you were fifteen, sixteen, seventeen—I'm just talking to myself here, aren't I?”

Keegan couldn't answer. His voice and breath were stuck in his throat. He wanted a fight. He needed to get his frustration out. He knew brawling wasn't the answer, but he knew it would make him feel better. Instead of picking a fight, he turned his back to Colter and pressed his forehead to the tree.

“Go to him, Mac,” Colter whispered in the early-morning light. “If he knows everything and he wants to go, then don't stop him. But if he wants to stay—wants to be your lover, let him. You deserve something good.”

Without a word, Keegan turned and walked into Colter's arms. He bowed his head against Colter's shoulder and pressed his eyes shut. His eyes stung, but he couldn't cry. He hadn't cried in years. When Colter's arms wrapped around him, Keegan sighed and relaxed against his best friend. There were times when all he wanted to do was let it all go, but Colter always managed to bring him back.

* * *

Jaxon darted down the front steps as Colter walked a dirty Keegan into the yard and towards the door. Without thinking, he tossed himself into the cowboy's chest and wrapped his arms around his neck.

“I thought you were gone.” Keegan hugged him back.

“I told you I couldn't let you go.” Jaxon kissed Keegan's neck, then lips, then looked up into his eyes. “You're still angry. You still want me to go.”

Jaxon took a deep breath, released his catch, and turned for the house. “You're hopeless,” he said over his shoulder. He slammed a fist into the open front door and stormed past it. The fact that his hand didn't hurt scared him more than the anger that vibrated through him.

Somewhere along the way he had lost all feeling, except for the love that ached in his heart. He had become numb to all else but Keegan MacLamore.

Upstairs, he walked his room and hauled his suitcase from beneath the bed. It had barely landed on the bed before he began chucking things into it. Everything around him became a blur as he grabbed his belongings.

"Jaxon," Keegan called.

Jaxon couldn't stop. He was angry, bitter, brokenhearted. He couldn't stop to face the man who had rejected him, sent him packing in every sense of the word.

"Jaxon, stop—"

"What the hell do you want from me, Mac?" He spun around. "Go. Now stop! What is it going to be? You have been pushing and pushing, and now you're getting what you want, and you've changed your mind?"

"Don't be like that."

"Like what, huh?"

Keegan didn't answer.

"Cat's got your tongue, Mac? Answer me. Like what?"

"Like I rejected you."

"Then what would you call it?"

"Protecting you."

"Oh...you're full of shit!" Jaxon continued packing. Keegan's footsteps left the room, and he relaxed a little. With his mind in a fog, he charged into the bathroom. He grabbed his toiletries and started pushing them into his carry-on.

Someone grabbed him from behind. His feet left the ground, his suitcase hit the floor with a loud *crash*, and his back slammed into the bed. Keegan grabbed his arms and restrained them over his head.

"What are you doing?" Jaxon asked. He didn't fight it, but he had gotten tired of getting roped for sex and having nothing come of it.

"No questions." Keegan used his rope to tie Jaxon up. He watched in shock as Keegan climbed from the bed and tied both his legs apart against the footboard.

“Okay, this isn't going to keep me here. This is just going to piss me off even more.”

Keegan didn't answer him. Jaxon began to struggle. The bed jerked and creaked, but nothing gave way.

Keegan left the room.

“Mac! Fuck, man! Untie me!”

Keegan returned with a deadly looking survival knife. Fear curled the inside of Jaxon's stomach. All kinds of thoughts flowed through his head, and he swallowed a lump in his throat as Keegan climbed over him with a smile on his face.

“Keegan?”

“Not Mac anymore? I love it when you call me Mac. It makes me feel sexy—irresistible. I see fear in your eyes, why?”

“Why?” Jaxon pushed his body up slightly, trying to buck Keegan off. “You have a frigging knife!”

“You think I would hurt you?”

“I don't know anymore, and that's the truth. Put the knife down, Keegan.”

Keegan lowered the knife. Jaxon squeezed his eyes shut, knowing the end had come. He waited for it with his heart crashing into his chest, making him ache. But instead of the sharp feeling of the blade, Jaxon heard the sound of material ripping, and soon afterwards cool air danced across his skin. He kept his eyes closed, even after he felt Keegan moving away from his body. There was another sharp sound of material being cut. This time Jaxon couldn't stand it. He opened his eyes as Keegan cut the clothes from his body. In that one moment Jaxon went from feeling fear to heightened arousal.

Chapter Eight

Keegan smiled at the change in Jaxon's eyes. He glanced down at the suddenly semihard cock that lifted from its cradle between Jaxon's legs. He watched in silence as the cock moved and hardened. He could see the veins throbbing. Tying Jaxon up had turned Keegan on so much, he was tempted to abandon his quest for foreplay. But he knew Jaxon deserved it. He hadn't gotten it by the river.

"I haven't even touched you yet, and already you're hard." Keegan stripped off his shirt and let it pool to the ground. When he climbed back onto the bed, he covered Jaxon's lips with his. The kiss was rough but necessary. It was primal, out of control. Keegan pulled his mouth away and sucked his lover's chin. He licked it and continued his path down Jaxon's body. He stopped to lick the tight buds of Jaxon's nipples—licking, nipping, and sucking at them. He would take his time to enjoy the rigidity of the athlete's body.

When he finally reached Jaxon's penis, Keegan looked up and locked eyes with him. Slowly he opened his mouth and sucked only the head in. He alternated between bathing it with his tongue and sucking the head. Jaxon's body arched below him, and he loved the soft sounds that escaped the man's mouth.

"Mac—"

Keegan pulled the hard cock down his throat, squeezing his eyes shut and pushing his mouth down. He felt the hard ebony pole sliding down his throat, stretching him.

"Oh—" Jaxon's body shook beneath his, and Keegan loved that. He loved the way Jaxon's legs stiffened. The cock elongated and began expanding, and Keegan knew Jaxon was on the brink of coming. Keegan pulled back to breathe. He looked into his lover's eyes to see a dazed heat there.

"Mac," Jaxon whispered, his breath escaping his body in quick, short bursts.

"Do you want more, Jaxon?"

Jaxon nodded, and Keegan went down on him again. This time he bobbed up and down over the hardened pole in his hands. He licked it, sucked it, kissed it—he wanted to make it explode. He braced his palms against Jaxon's legs and pushed his head down over the arousal. He held it there until Jaxon went completely still.

Intense feelings surged through him. His grandfather had been right—sex with someone he loved was better than sex with just anyone. Sex with Jaxon was blowing his mind, and he hadn't even touched himself yet.

To regain his control, Keegan turned his face away and kissed the insides of Jaxon's thighs. With each kiss, the ebony Adonis sucked in air through his teeth in a slight *hiss*, but that didn't stop Keegan. He licked his captive's flesh as he traveled down Jaxon's body. He stopped briefly to release Jaxon's legs from the restraints before diving right back into sweetly torturing him. He lifted one leg and kissed behind the athlete's knee before running his tongue over it.

“Keegan.”

He did the same to the other leg, then lifted both Jaxon's legs to spread the man's ass cheeks. With a growl, Keegan bowed forward and allowed his tongue to taste the hotness of Jaxon. He let his tongue move over the puckered hole that trembled against him, and Keegan felt as if he were master of his domain.

Jaxon's eyes rolled into his head as the rough tongue plunged in and out of his hole. He ached to be free, to touch Keegan, but being restrained was the hottest thing he'd ever experienced with a lover. The thought of being helpless for the man he loved caused him to grit his teeth in order to keep from exploding all over Keegan's face. He grunted for Keegan, tugged at his ropes, and tried pushing his ass against the cowboy's tongue.

His body was on fire, slowly burning him alive, and he loved it. He was wild, out of control. With each kiss, touch, Jaxon felt himself losing his mind, but he embraced the madness. He yelled for Keegan, begged, pleaded for more. Keegan was ravishing him now, roughly feeding from him.

“Please,” Jaxon begged. “In me—”

He felt his legs being hiked higher and apart and opened his eyes in time to see Keegan rearing over him. There was a sound of a zipper lowering, plastic ripping, and the movement of

clothes before a hard cock brushed over his ass. He bit down against his lower lip and waited for it with anticipation.

“Give it to me,” he demanded.

“You want it, baby?” Keegan asked. “How much? Tell me how much you want my hard cock inside you.”

“Stop teasing and fuck me!”

“You're in no position to demand, Jaxon.” Keegan reached in to kiss his lover's nose. Jaxon licked at Keegan's neck.

No more words passed between them, for that one lick made Keegan reach into the bedside table for lube. He slathered his dick and slammed his hips forward.

“Oh yes!” Jaxon said. That was exactly what he wanted. He began rutting against Keegan as much as the rope allowed, but that wasn't enough for him. “Keegan, let me go.”

“Not...yet...” Over and over, Keegan slammed into him. With each push of Keegan's hips, Jaxon gritted his teeth to keep his shouts of pleasure inside of him.

“I want to hear you scream,” Keegan said. “I get off on it.”

“Fuck me!”

Keegan laughed. Jaxon felt him pulling back and thought for sure Keegan was going to stop. But instead Keegan spread him wider, aimed his penis for the entrance, and surged back in with such force that Jaxon didn't have a choice. The feelings that flew through him at that moment made his toes curl, his eyes roll back into his head, and his back arch from the bed. That was when it happened—a shout filled with an utter lack of sanity. A sound riddled with pure exultation that only intensified when Keegan grabbed Jaxon's cock in a tight fist and began jerking.

“Come for me, Jaxon,” he whispered. “I want to see you explode for me.”

His head dug backwards into the pillow, and he tried to hold off, to make Keegan work even harder for it, but that was not to be. Keegan's hips picked up speed, and his fist tightened around Jaxon's penis.

“Keegan!” Jaxon's orgasm rushed through him. It rose from the tips of his toes, surged through his veins, and exploded behind his eyes. His body jerked over and over, but Keegan

didn't let go. His eyes sprang open, but he saw nothing but a white light. His chest heaved hard, and his lips went dry.

“Don't let me go,” Jaxon pleaded. “Keegan, please—”

Keegan heard this plea and slid from inside Jaxon. He untied his lover and pulled him into his arms. He rained kisses over the sides of Jaxon's face, neck, and ears, trying desperately to soothe him.

“I won't,” Keegan promised. He caressed the man's head. “I'll never let you go.”

Long after Jaxon had drifted off to sleep with his face against Keegan's neck, the rancher still lay awake. Colter was right—Keegan did love Jaxon. He had fallen in love with Jaxon that first night, when he'd wanted to teach Jaxon a lesson. Keegan had kissed Jaxon, and fire had torn through him like an out-of-control train. He had thought it was because he hadn't had sex, or even kissed a man, in over twenty-five years, but that wasn't it. Fear sent Keegan's heart throbbing something terrible, and he ached to run, to push Jaxon away and take off to where no one could find him. But he had given his word. He had promised not to let Jaxon go—and he meant that.

Chapter Nine

The sun shining through the window woke Keegan the next morning. He didn't move because he felt so comfortable the way he was. Jaxon had his head against his chest, over his heart, and Keegan knew he could learn to get used to that. It had been so long since he had woken up beside someone he had feelings for. He heard Jaxon moan, then pressed a kiss to his shoulder.

"Keegan," Jaxon called.

Keegan moaned and winced. "Are you all right?" Keegan asked.

"What's wrong? You okay?" Jaxon countered. "You winced."

"I'm not used to sleeping on a bed," Keegan replied. "What time is it?"

"I don't know. But there's something I need to talk to you about."

The sound of that scared him. He could guess what was racing through Jaxon's mind: he'd seen what Keegan had to offer, and he didn't want it.

Keegan sighed and rubbed his eyes. "Jaxon, you don't—"

"No, Keegan. This is something you have to know. Afterwards you may—what am I saying?—you *will* be mad as hell and you may not want anything to do with me, but I have to tell you—"The phone rang. He tried to ignore it so he could focus on Jaxon, but the bloody thing wouldn't stop ringing. He felt his heart break when Jaxon rolled away from him.

With an angry sigh, he grabbed the phone and pressed it to his ear. He held Jaxon's gaze for a second before the athlete closed the bathroom door.

"What?" he called into the receiver.

"Mac, it's Colter. I got some bad news."

Keegan used his free hand to massage his temple. Could Colter's news be worse than what he had just interrupted? Could it be worse than seeing disappointment in Jaxon's eyes? How

could it possibly be worse? Taking a deep breath, he pushed into sitting position with his back against the headboard and raked his fingers through his hair then covered his eyes. “All right, let me have it.”

“It's about Jaxon.”

“Colter! For crying out loud, just tell me what's going on already!”

“He knew, Mac. He had to have known what happened that night, and he didn't come forward.”

Keegan sat, stiff as a board, and his hand fell from his eyes. He pulled the phone from his ear for a moment to try to wrap his mind around the conversation.

“He knew what?” Keegan asked. He didn't want to believe what Colter was insinuating. Jaxon couldn't have known anything about that night.

“Mac, Jaxon's friends were *there* the night it all went down. They knew who committed the murder, so it's only logical that they told him.”

Anger coursed through him.

“Keegan, I'm so sorry.”

“You're sorry?” The cordless phone slipped from Keegan's hands and clattered to the floor. He heard Colter yelling his name from the other end of the line, but he couldn't make himself pick up the phone. Jaxon had betrayed him? How could...? But Jaxon loved him.

Keegan tried standing up, but his knees wobbled, and he slumped onto the bed. He didn't dare try it again.

While Keegan got the phone, Jaxon entered the bathroom and closed the door. He'd been about to confess everything to Keegan—to tell him the secret that had plagued him for so long. He splashed water over his skin, then stared at his lying eyes in the mirror. He could hardly face himself. Frustration brought him back into the bedroom to see Keegan sitting with his face in his hands.

“Bad news?” he asked.

“When I asked you to leave”—Keegan's voice was cold, heartless—“why did you stay?”

“Because I love you,” he confessed.

Keegan flew from where he sat and reached for the half-packed suitcase on the ground. Jaxon watched in shock as the suitcase flew through the window. The glass shattered, and clothes flew through the air. Outside, suitcase made a loud *thud* as it hit the ground, and Keegan swung to face him.

“Don't lie to me! I am so fucking over your bullshit.”

“What is your problem?”

“My problem, Jaxon, is that you knew what happened that night. Your friends were all there—and you let me go to prison. You and your friends hung me out to dry. Jesus! What a moron I've been!”

The sound of Jaxon's world crashing in on him was deafening. He realized then that Keegan knew, and there was probably nothing he could do. He felt it the moment his heart broke, and the pain of it all caused him to wince. But he ignored the hurt as best he could and reached for Keegan.

“Keegan, I didn't mean to—”

“Shove it!” Keegan stalked, naked, towards the bedroom door. He stopped suddenly and turned to face Jaxon. “Did it make you happy? Did it make you happy that someone else was paying for that crime rather than one of your friends? Better me than him, right?”

“Kee—No! I'm sorry.”

“I don't believe a word that comes out of your mouth anymore. You love me? I spent so many years in that hellhole—decades. I missed my graduation, my grandfather's funeral—I missed it all, and all you can say is you're sorry. That isn't good enough, Jaxon. You need to leave. Now.”

Jaxon stepped forward, and desperation surged through him. He reached out for Keegan, but the man who had caressed him the night before stepped back with curled fists.

“Don't!” Keegan warned in a tight voice.

The chill in the air caused Jaxon to tremble. “Keegan, I found out later that they were the ones whodid it. I wasn't there. I couldn't say anything. I was scared.”

“Scared?” Keegan laughed bitterly. He rushed over to the smashed window and stuck his head out. “Did you hear that?” he shouted. His voice echoed off everything outside. “Jaxon Lesley was scared!”

“Mac, don't—”

Keegan whirled around. “You were scared? I was barely eighteen years old and heading for prison. I had never been arrested before then. I was shackled, pushed down stairs, locked away in solitary confinement because I defended myself. They threatened to add years to my *life* sentence because I beat one inmate so bad, he almost died. You don't think I was scared?”

Jaxon wanted to hold him, to plead with him, but the rage in Keegan's eyes was worse than that first day they had met again.

“I couldn't say anything. That was the nature of the streets. Those kids were all I had back then. My own family didn't want me, but they did. I promised I would be loyal to them. I couldn't—”

“That's a lame-ass excuse, and you know it!”

“Please, you have to understand—They were my family.”

“And what about my family? Huh? They were a pain in the ass, but they were mine. They hated me, but they were mine! They...were...mine! You could have stopped it, and it wouldn't have cost you anything. All you had to do was tell everyone what you heard—tell them what your friends told you—” Keegan stepped forward and jabbed a finger into Jaxon's chest. “You could have saved me a world of hurt! But you sat there like a fucking mute, and you watched that lawyer rip into me day after day. And then you watched them drag me away—screaming, begging—and you said nothing. Get out.”

“Keegan—”

“Get the fuck out!”

Jaxon literally jerked when Keegan stormed from the room and slammed the door.

* * *

“Stupid! Stupid! Stupid!” Keegan groaned while hauling on a pair of jeans. He shoved his arms into a fresh shirt, grabbed his hat, and tore from the house. He began doing yard work, and everything that was out of place irritated him even more. He dragged on a pair of gloves and

picked up bales of hay and tossed them to the shelf in the barn. When he was finished with that, he brushed down Stajan, Sunset, and Bullet. Then he looked for something else to do.

A door slammed from the yard, followed by another door, and then an engine started. His body froze. It was as though he stopped breathing until the vehicle drove away and the sound of the engine faded. His knees gave out, and he slumped to the ground as if the life had been knocked from him. But then he heard another car pulling up in the front yard.

He hauled himself from the ground and made his way out to see who it was. Colter hopped from the vehicle and jogged to him.

“Still think he's good for me?” Keegan asked.

“Yes,” was Colter's simple answer. “Where is he?”

“Damned if I care.” Keegan turned to walk away.

Colter inhaled. “All right. What do you want me to do now?”

Keegan stopped at Colter's question. He thought about it but came to only one conclusion—he wanted to be left alone.

“If I say let it go and go away, would you listen?” He turned then to look at his childhood friend.

Colter shook his head. “Not a chance.”

“All right.” Keegan let out a breath. “Come in.”

Chapter Ten

Just down the road from the Rattlesnake Ranch, Jaxon slammed his fist over and over against the steering wheel. Keegan had a right to be angry, but Jaxon had fallen so hard for him that leaving was tearing him apart. When he saw the hurt and pain and just downright hatred that filled Keegan's eyes, he'd have walked across the sun to take it all back. He would have gone back in time and taken Keegan's place in that courtroom—he would have leapt to his feet and told everything he was told back then. But hindsight was twenty-twenty and didn't help him or Keegan. He pushed back in his seat, pressed his head against the headrest, and stared at the roof of the SUV.

He felt around in his pocket and pulled out his cell phone. When he flipped it open, he realised it was off. When he turned it on, it wouldn't power up. The phone was dead. With a growl, he hurled it out the window with such force that it crashed into a pole and smashed to pieces. He took some sick comfort in that.

The drive into town didn't take long since he floored it. He couldn't slow down; his mind was going a mile a minute. He felt that if he stopped before he got to where he was going, or eased up off the gas, something bad would happen. He blew past the diner where he had the altercation with Noah and past the sheriff's office. He sped across the old Mulligan Bridge, then screeched to a stop in front of the only pay phone in the small town and hoped to God it was working.

He pushed from the vehicle, stuffed a quarter into the phone, and smiled. He dialled the number and waited. Finally he added his long-distance-card number from memory.

“Sammy! I need a favor.”

“Jaxon? What's wrong?”

“There's no time to explain. Listen, I need you to get ahold of my lawyer, Marlon Simmons, and have him fly to Thayne. I want him to work on a case that means a lot to me.”

A slight silence seeped from the other end of the line. “What the hell kind of trouble are you in? And why can't you call him?”

“Sammy, for God's sake, just—do this for me, okay?”

“All right. But where do I tell him he's going? Where in Thayne—the ranch?”

“I don't know...”

“Aren't you at the ranch?”

Jaxon rubbed his tired eyes. “No. Let's just say my past has come back to bite me in the ass, and that's left me homeless for the time being. There's a bed-and-breakfast in Thayne. I'm going to go there.”

“Great. So I should tell Marlon Simmons, drama king extraordinaire, that he's going to butt-fuck nowhere, and I'm not sure where he'll be staying. All right. This should go over well.”

“Son of a bitch, Sammy, just...” Jaxon shook his head. Instead of arguing, he hung up the phone. He leant against the vehicle with his head pressing hard against it. His head had suddenly gone light. He gripped the vehicle's mirror so tightly, his knuckles changed colours. Finally he hauled his weakened body back into the vehicle and drove off towards the bed-and-breakfast.

* * *

Keegan sat at the island in the kitchen and lifted a forkful of rice to his lips. The smell of food turned his stomach. He let the fork clatter to the plate and shoved the plate away. Just the thought of eating made him sick. It was Colter's push that had even got him sitting down to eat anything.

“I'm not hungry,” he muttered for what had to be the millionth time.

“Fine. Starve.”

“What did I do now?” Keegan asked.

“I'm trying to help, and you're not even meeting me a quarter of the way. I'm trying to save what's left of your miserable life.”

“You see? That's what you people keep forgetting! It's *my* life.” Keegan forced his voice to remain calm and cold. “I'm taking control of it, but it seems like no matter what I try doing, I fuck it up. Jaxon let me go to jail. You keep trying to save me from jail and from the hate of

other people. Colter, you can't fix everything. This"—Keegan motioned around him—"all of this? You can't fix."

"Keegan, you've been trying for years to tell me that and I haven't listened. What makes you think I'm going to start now?"

Keegan laughed. He rose and walked his plate to the counter. When he turned around, he braced his back against it and folded his arms across his chest. "Even after what happened before, you're going to use the same judge?"

"I found out we don't have a choice. We have to go to the appeals court we used last. Those are the rules. Then if that court denies us then we work on something else."

"And what do I do until then? I still can't move from Thayne. Colter...?"

"Yeah?"

"I loved him."

"I know, Mac."

"I still love him."

"I know that too, Mac."

"All he had to do was tell me," Keegan continued. "Just tell me."

"And what would you have done differently?"

That question tugged at Keegan's nerves, and he turned to look out the window. He stared at the late-dying sun with confused dread surging through him. He felt his fingers tighten against the edge of the counter, but he couldn't stop them. He didn't even realise he had moved his arms from their folded position across his chest.

Colter's voice pushed through his pain. "Would you have forgiven him for something a scared little boy did years ago?"

"You're supposed to be on my side."

"That's not how friendship works."

Keegan felt him move from his seat and come up close behind him. "How it works is like this. You are in trouble, and you tell me. I assess the situation, and then I tell you what I think can help you, not what you want to hear."

Keegan frowned. "What do I do now, Mr. Know-It-All?"

Colter wrapped an arm through Keegan's from behind and pressed the palm against Keegan's heart. "What does this tell you to do?"

He bowed his head and looked at Colter's hand, then pressed his eyes shut. There was no way he could listen to his heart. It told him to find Jaxon, no matter where he was, and hold him. His heart told him to go to Jaxon and make love to him, promising never to let him go.

"Don't let me go, Keegan. Please—"

"I won't. I promise."

He had broken his word.

That night he had a new reason to sleep on the floor, aside from comfort. Though he hadn't made love to Jaxon in his bed, but in the guest room, just the thought of being on a bed drove him insane. He pushed into a sitting position; the sheets slipped to his bare waist. He buried his face in his hands, exhausted. The only night he'd had a good sleep was with Jaxon spent curled up against his body. That was the heaven he craved—the simplicity of his lover's body against him. Feeling the arms tossed across him and legs tangled with his had been perfect. He allowed his mind to go back to what he had felt when Jaxon had touched him. Each pass of the athlete's mouth, stroke of a hand, the look of pleasure that completely engulfed the man's face. That look was the most beautiful thing Keegan had ever seen. How could someone fake that?

Chapter Eleven

First thing in the morning a knock came at Jaxon's door. He hauled on a pair of jeans, yanked the door open, and came face-to-face with a flustered Marlon Simmons.

"Where in the hell have you brought me?" Marlon stood in his designer suit, panting for air. "And what kind of trouble are you in? And why couldn't you call me yourself?"

"Good morning to you too." Jaxon frowned. "Come on in. I couldn't remember your numbers, and my cell phone died. We live in a technological age where I just scroll to your name and press Send—no number memorization required."

He closed the door and turned to face his friend and lawyer. "You want something to eat?"

"Not in this joint." Marlon crinkled his nose. "I told the pilot to keep the motor running. Now what's going on?"

"You remember me mentioning the Keegan MacLamore case?"

Marlon had a confused look in his eyes as he shook his head.

"I told you about it, man," Jaxon pushed. "A few years ago we went to Ottawa and we stopped to see that flame thing in front of Parliament?"

"Oh! You mean that *hypothetical* case you asked my opinion on a few years ago? The one with the rancher? That was a real case?"

Jaxon nodded.

"Ugh. Just the thought of a sexy rancher in jail makes me cringe. What a waste!"

"Well, technically he wasn't really a rancher then—and when I told you the story, I left out a few key details. Anyways, he's not in jail anymore." Jaxon felt jealousy vibrate through him at another man calling Keegan sexy. The feeling was so strong that it took everything in him to reach for a shirt rather than Marlon's throat. "He was released the other day—good behaviour, I

guess. But I don't care what the reason is. I need to get him a new trial or something so I can take the stand.”

“Okay.” Marlon nodded his head. “O—kay. Well, the key details you left out with me? Tell them to his lawyer. I'm sure his lawyer could handle that. What do you need from me?”

“Well, I want you to work with Keegan's lawyer, find something to help him.”

“What? You can't trust him?”

“That's not it. Keegan trusts this man with his life, and so do I. The problem is, we need someone with big-city tactics to shock these people into letting Keegan go. He didn't get a fair trial to begin with because everyone in this town hated his guts. I think they didn't want him corrupting their kids, so they got rid of him.”

“How do you know all this?” Marlon fell against the bed.

Jaxon sat down beside him. “When I was seventeen, I was told something that could have helped Keegan avoid jail. I found out who really committed the murder.”

“Well?”

“Well, what?”

“Who was it?”

“Henry Tillman.”

Jaxon listened while Marlon sucked in a surprised breath. “Tillman, Tillman... Where have I heard that name before?”

“Judge Augustus Tillman?” Jaxon offered. “He was the judge.”

“Holy shit! The judge who sat on Keegan's case—you mean Henry Tillman's his son? But that means if you guys were all friends—oh wow! Weren't you guys part of this gang called the Brotherhood or something like that? Whoa! You guys had a judge's son in your gang?”

Jaxon rolled his eyes at Marlon's rapidly fired questions. “It wasn't a gang! Jesus! We were just a bunch of kids who wore black and did stupid shit!”

“Whatever! Either way, Henry was one of your friends.”

“Something like that.”

“Jaxon, why didn't you say something back then?”

"I was selfish, all right? I was scared of losing the only family I ever had!" It was the second time he had ever said it aloud, and it still made him sick. "They were all I had. The foster homes were torture; they were cold and just...just torture. In the Brotherhood, they had my back, man! I couldn't just up and rat one of them out. I figured, I wasn't there. I really didn't see what happened. One of the guys told me later."

"That why you're fighting so hard for this man now?"

He turned to face Marlon. "What is that supposed to mean?"

"It means you're fighting like hell for a man you betrayed. Why is that?"

"He's changed, Marlon. He's become bitter and hateful, and...I love him."

"Then why are you here in an old B and B that's falling apart? Why aren't you with him right now telling him all this? Wait a minute. I'm going to go out on a limb here and say you didn't tell him that you knew, and he found out."

"He hates me, and I can't say I blame him. Look, just help Colter get his name cleared."

"Colter?"

"Keegan's lawyer."

"You know this could get Judge Tillman kicked off the bench. This whole thing could cause a huge riot—you ready for that? I mean, sooner or later the media is going to find out. And you know how they love turning the knife on Jaxon Lesley."

"Will it get Keegan cleared?"

"It could."

"Then it's a chance I'm willing to take. Let me borrow your cell."

Marlon handed the phone over, and Jaxon walked over to the window. "Could you give me the number for Colter Madison, please?"

"Certainly, sir," the operator replied in one of those sickeningly polite voices. "Would you like me to dial it for you? There will be a—"

"Yes, please," Jaxon interrupted her.

"One moment, please..."

It didn't take long for Colter's voice to come on the line. "Madison."

“Colter, it's Jaxon. I know you're probably angry at me, and I don't blame you, but I have someone who I think can help you with Keegan's case. Now I have to explain that I'm not trying to tell you how to do your job or saying you can't do your job. I just think, with an outsider—”

“That the judge would think twice about giving us a hard time because of word getting out! The last thing he would want down here is a media circus. Jaxon, you're brilliant!”

Jaxon released a pent-up breath and nodded. “I have Marlon Simmons—”

“Marlon Simmons? Damn! How did you score that?”

“I'm kind of stuck with him,” Jaxon joked. “I'll run him over. Where's your office?”

“I'll come to you.”

“I'm sure you know where I am by now.” Jaxon chuckled.

“Yeah. All I did was stop for a sandwich, and the gossip mill was spinning like mad.”

Jaxon shook his head. “I figured as much.”

“All right, then. Give me about an hour. What do I tell Keegan about where the high-priced lawyer came from?”

“I don't care what you tell him, just as long as my name doesn't come up. We both know that if he hears that I had anything to do with this, he would rather go back to jail.”

“That's not true,” Colter whispered.

“Are you lying to me or to yourself?”

“This case has been riddled with lies for years; what's another?”

After hanging up, Jaxon turned to Marlon and handed back the phone. “Well, you have one hour before your partner gets here. Now do you want something to eat?”

“I'm in for the long haul. I might as well.”

* * *

With gloved hands, Keegan wrapped a piece of wire around his palm. When he had all the wire wrapped completely, he pulled his hand out and stuck the rolled-up wire around a long pole. He had spent the day just trying to be as busy as possible. He had run the horses, brushed and fed them, and cleaned out the whole stable. That was before he rearranged his bedroom, living room, and den. His body was too tired to do much of anything else, and reluctantly he walked up the front steps and fell into leather sofa in the living room.

He couldn't stop wondering what would happen. He was afraid to hope, but he couldn't help himself—what would he do if he were exonerated? He could travel—he'd always wanted to see the Great Wall of China, the Eiffel Tower, and the Taj Mahal. He'd wanted to cliff dive in Jamaica, bungee jump in Africa. He'd wanted to open his own business—he wasn't sure what kind, but it was a thought. Once the floodgates opened, he couldn't close them, and all his life's dreams that had been killed the day he was sentenced came surging back to him.

He wanted to move from a *shodan* black belt to the highest level he could. He wanted love...

Why couldn't he forgive Jaxon? Keegan's grandfather had told him once, "*Life is extremely short, Mac. Forgive, forgive, forgive, and love fiercely. Do not take the man you love for granted.*" The old man hadn't liked the fact that Keegan was gay, but after a while love won out.

Keegan stood up and rushed for the phone. He dialled frantically and waited.

"Madison."

"Colter, it's Mac. Where is he?"

"Who?"

"Damn it! Why do you make things so complicated?"

"You can't even say his name. Why would you think I know where he is? Why do you want to know where he is? What if he left town?"

Keegan bowed his head and pressed his eyes shut to hold on to his anger. Jealousy crawled through him like a poison, and though he knew Colter wasn't attracted to Jaxon Keegan still wanted a brawl. "Look, are you going to tell me where he is or not?"

"You know what?" Colter sounded pissed, but Keegan didn't care. "You're right. I can't fix all your troubles, so this one, Keegan MacLamore, you're going to have to fight for. Find him your damn self!"

"Colter! Don't you hang up the—" Keegan shouted in the phone, but the only reply he received was the dial tone. "Damn it!"

In his anger, he slammed the phone down against the small table over and over until the phone snapped in his hand. There was a dent in the table before Keegan pushed himself back in

the sofa. Temper gave way to fatigue, and his eyes drifted shut. He tried to fight his weariness. His heavy eyelids fluttered open, but it was no use. He had overdone it on the ranch that day, and before he knew it, he was sound asleep.

Chapter Twelve

“For fuck's sake, Jaxon!”

He jerked and dropped the mug he was holding, which smashed to the ground into tiny pieces.

“Pay attention,” Colter implored him.

“I'm sorry,” Jaxon said. “What were you saying?”

“Why don't you get some sleep?” Marlon added. “You won't be any good to us dazed.”

Jaxon shook his head. “I can't.”

“You're not going to go all martyr on me too, are you?” Colter asked. “You look like shit. Marlon is right. Go get some sleep.”

Jaxon shook his head, ignoring the broken glass, and rubbed his eyes. He took a seat at the table covered with legal documents, court transcripts, and lists of witnesses. “I wouldn't be able to sleep, anyway. I've had one really good night of sleep in a long while, and that was—” He bowed his head in shame. When he lifted it again, his back was straight. He took a deep breath.

Colter rolled his eyes. “You two deserve each other. Keegan is just as stubborn as you are. Look, you might as well sleep, because there isn't really anything you can do now but wait and drive yourself crazy.”

Even though he was tired, Jaxon was scared to close his eyes. Every time he tried sleeping, Keegan would pop into his mind. Then there would be pain—searing pain. His heart would pound, and he would toss and turn until he gave up and climbed from the bed. He would then spend the rest of the night alone, standing by the window and staring out.

“I was so scared of losing my family,” Jaxon confessed out of the blue. “I never *really* thought about him back then, and now all I can think about is him.”

“Seems to me the two of you really need to sit down and talk,” Marlon advised. “See if you can work through this, because if what you two have is real, you’d be dumb to just let it go without at least trying.”

“I am so sick and tired of trying to push the two of them together.” Colter sighed while grabbing his empty coffee cup. Jaxon watched as the blond-haired man dumped the cup into a nearby garbage can and walked back to the table. “You two are stubborn as shit and twice as dumb.”

“I would go to him. But Thayne is a small place. If he wanted to see me, he would come to me. I’m sure by now he knows where I am.”

“It’s not like you’ve left the place in days.” Marlon lifted a piece of paper and peered at it.

A knock came at the door, but Jaxon was too tired to care. He didn’t even look up from the document he was trying to read. *Trying* because the lines blurred together. A chair scraped backwards, followed by muffled speaking; then the door closed.

“Who was that?” Colter asked.

“He looked like a rancher—he looked familiar,” Marlon replied. “But I haven’t slept in a while, so who’s to tell. He looked at me like he had seen a ghost, asked me who I was, but then told me he didn’t want to know.”

Jaxon’s haze lifted instantly, and both he and Colter bolted for the door.

“What?” Marlon yelled. “What did I do?”

But when they made it out the door, Keegan’s truck was speeding off down the street.

Colter stomped his foot in angry frustration. “Fuck!”

Jaxon gritted his teeth and darted into the room. He grabbed Marlon by the front of the shirt and shoved hard. “You moron!” he shouted. “Who have we been talking about for the last two fucking days? You know what he looks like! Good lord in heaven, you cannot be that fucking stupid!”

“Jaxon, let him go!” Colter shouted.

The fire burning through his veins didn’t subside, and his fingers didn’t release their catch.

“Come on, Jaxon,” Colter pleaded. “Let him go.”

Though he wanted to smack the crap out of Marlon, Jaxon released him and staggered backwards. “That was Keegan. That was my last chance, and you blew it. You blew it.”

“Now, Jaxon, that's not entirely fair.” Colter spoke. “Keegan doesn't look the same as he did back then—he doesn't even look the same way he did last year.”

Jaxon didn't say another word. He looked around, suddenly lost and scared. Rational thought left him, and there was nothing he could do. He grabbed his keys and moved for the door in a trance.

“I should've gotten the door. Why didn't I get the door?”

“Jaxon!” Colter called but then muttered, “I'm going to grow old before my time. These two men are going to give me a heart attack!”

“Stop overreacting. He's just going to get some air—I hope.”

Jaxon's feet carried him through the room and out the front door. Without even realising what was happening, he found himself in his SUV, tearing through town. His mind was no longer his own, and he had no idea where he was going.

A loud *bang* snapped him from his daze. He jerked back against the seat hard as the seat belt tightened. Everything moved in slow motion. His neck snapped backwards into the headrest.

A loud *whoosh* told him his air bag had deployed. A grunt left his body. His fingers fell away from the steering wheel.

He was breathing hard. A sharp pain stabbed through his chest, and he thought for sure he was going to die. Reluctantly, with fear coursing through his veins, Jaxon opened his eyes and looked down. His hands flew to his chest, feeling frantically for injuries, but it was just his heart slamming against his rib cage.

Jaxon scrambled from the SUV and almost swallowed his tongue. To his horror, he realised that he was at Keegan's and had crashed into the side of Keegan's truck.

“Jaxon? Jaxon!”

He turned slowly, only to be tackled by Keegan.

Keegan frantically touched his face, his shoulders, his chest. “Are you all right? Did you get hurt?”

Confused, he tilted his head to look into Keegan's face and saw deep concern there.

"I'll pay to get it fixed," Jaxon said, trying to pull from Keegan's arms.

Keegan pulled Jaxon into his arms and held on tight. Relief throbbed through him, even as he pressed his lips against Jaxon's neck. "I don't care about the damn truck. Are you okay?"

Then he remembered—Jaxon had someone—the man who answered the door had said so.

He fought not to think about the man. With a heavy heart, Keegan released him and stepped back. "Why'd you run off?" Jaxon asked.

"I didn't want to start anything. I wasn't in the mood for a fight," Keegan shrugged. He didn't add anything from the conversation at the bed-and-breakfast's room door.

"Is this how things are going to be between us now?" Jaxon called. "Are you going to love me one second and hate me the next? Or are you going to be civil to me just because you thought I was going to die?"

Keegan swallowed a lump in his throat and froze. "I came to you, remember? But you've moved on. I have to be a man and let you go. If this deal with Colter goes through, I'm going to have a new life. I don't need to bring anything with me that's going to hurt me."

"Is that what you think I would do? Hurt you?"

"Your track record isn't very good at the moment! Damn it, Jaxon! What do you want from me?"

"I want you to let me make up for what I did!" Jaxon stepped towards Keegan. "I want you to let me love you. I want you to touch me like you did down by the river, in my room—" Jaxon stopped to toss his hands up as though surrendering. "I can never take back what happened. All I can say is that I was a coward and I am sorry, and I'm asking you to forgive me."

Keegan remained silent.

"I had to choose, Mac," Jaxon continued. "I had to choose."

Keegan turned to leave again.

"Keegan."

He stopped. He didn't turn to look at Jaxon when he spoke. "Come inside. You're bleeding."

Chapter Thirteen

Keegan took Jaxon's hand and led him down the hall to the bathroom. He silently and gently pushed Jaxon backwards to sit on the toilet seat while he reached for a first-aid kit. He opened it and began tending to the scrapes on Jaxon's face. Being this close to Jaxon again was like standing in fire, letting it burn him alive. He felt Jaxon's chocolate-coloured stare on him, and he knew if he were to meet it, he would lose the control he held. And he couldn't risk that. He had to be angry—needed to be angry at that moment.

Jaxon has a man.

Jaxon has a man.

It was his excuse for not simply reaching forward and taking Jaxon's thick, full lips.

“Kiss me, Keegan,” Jaxon whispered.

“I can't.”

“Why not?”

“You have a man.” The words hurt Keegan like a dagger, but they had to be said.

“I don't have a man—”

“He was in your room, Jaxon. No more lies. He told me so.”

Silence tore between them. He finished cleaning the wounds on Jaxon's face and looked at Jaxon's hands, then pulled away from him and snapped the kit shut. He replaced it on the shelf and left the bathroom.

He was sitting in the kitchen with a beer when Jaxon walked in. He didn't look up. He simply stared ahead.

“Okay.” Jaxon sat down beside Keegan. “Let's start at the beginning. All right?”

Keegan nodded and drank from the bottle.

“Okay, the night Mark died, we were all out screwing around. Mark, myself, Henry, Cole, Jason—all of us. I was tired—I mean really tired—because I had track that day at school and we had spent the night before out, so I hadn't slept. I left them at the make-out point and headed back to the orphanage. Everyone kept quiet about it for a while, until Jason's conscience, I guess, started bothering him. He took me aside one night and told me that the night Mark was killed, Henry had a gun to show off. As I sat there through the whole story, I kept living this horrid thought in my head of the gun going off and shooting me. Every time that happened, I would watch myself die, and I got jittery. But anyways, I sat through the story because I wanted to look cool. Apparently, one thing led to another, and they began saying 'yo' mama' jokes. You know 'Yo' mama is so fat, every time she falls, it measures a seven point five on the Richter scale.' That kind of thing. It was harmless fun; I mean, we'd done it before lots of times. According to Jason, Mark pulled out the big guns and told Henry, 'Yo' mama is so fat, she thought Kuala Lumpur was an all-you-can-eat buffet.' The jokes changed after that. I don't remember what Jason said they changed to but things got out of hand. The next thing they knew, Mark was lying on the ground with a bullet between the eyes, and you had the gun in your hands. They never told me how you got it, but you were there and you ended up with said gun.”

“I shouldn't have been out that night.” Keegan spoke up. “My grandfather told me not to leave the house, but I had a date and didn't want to miss it because of his superstitions. Back then I always had condoms with me—Papa always told me, *Mac if you can't behave be careful*. That night I was out so I was just heading into the store to get some. That was when this thing came flying towards me, so out of instinct I caught it. When I saw it was a gun, I freaked, and that's when I found Mark lying there. Then all of a sudden I was surrounded by bright lights, cops screaming and telling me to get down on my face. I don't remember even see your friends. One minute I was thinking about my date, and the next the cops were arresting me for murder.”

“I couldn't have come forward, Keegan. I had no one, and it was either that family or none. I didn't want to be alone. I don't expect you to believe me, but please forgive me.”

“I've been thinking about it, and the truth is, I wouldn't have chosen loneliness either.”

“No. You wouldn't have.” Jaxon inhaled. “I've watched you over the years, Mac—when we were younger, before you got, arrested. You were tough, but you always did what was right. Look Keegan, the man at my door earlier—he's not my man, I swear. He's been cooped up in a place that isn't a five-star hotel, so he was just being an idiot. I never even thought of him

sexually. He's a lawyer who I brought in to work with Colter. The truth is, you're it for me, Mac. No other man could ever be what you are to me.”

Keegan sighed and pressed his eyes closed. “All I'm trying to say is I've been lonely, Jaxon. I know what it feels like to roll over at night and wish someone were here to hold you, but all you feel is a hard, cold wall.” He looked at Jaxon then. “To want someone there to whisper to you; you want to hear someone's voice comforting you, but all you hear is the crazy blabbering of the guy in the next cell. But most importantly I know what it means to be completely alone. To be put in a place where not even the sun can rest on you. The truth is I wouldn't have wanted you to get into any kind of trouble—I wouldn't have wanted any of what I went through to happen to you.”

Silence fell around them. He basked in it and suddenly felt like a virgin on his first date. “Can I kiss you now?” Keegan said softly. “I don't want to fight no more.”

Jaxon reached over, wrapped his fingers behind Keegan's neck, and kissed him greedily. Keegan pulled away for a brief moment to search Jaxon's eyes but couldn't stay away. He leant in, and this time he gently kissed Jaxon back.

The kiss soothed his soul and caused his skin to tingle and his toes to curl. He moaned, taking Jaxon's hand and blindly leading him into the living room. There, he pushed Jaxon backwards into the sofa and crawled over him. As he stripped his lover naked and caught the ebony cock in his fist, Keegan watched Jaxon's face. The chocolate eyes were closed, and the emotion that danced over his face was the sexiest thing he'd ever seen. Keegan bowed forward and rained kisses over Jaxon's nose and cheekbones and between his eyes. He licked at Jaxon's lips, and they both growled. Between their bodies, Keegan stroked the large, throbbing penis.

“I want to fuck you,” Jaxon whispered. “Do you—”

“Yes. Anything you want—”

The two men rolled off the sofa. Keegan's back took the brunt of the fall, and he grunted, then laughed.

“I love that sound.” Jaxon smiled against Keegan's lips, then moved lower. “I've missed you.”

Jaxon released Keegan so Keegan could get condoms, and once he returned, he got Keegan on all fours. This time, as Jaxon entered him from behind, it was making love. His head fell backwards at the tight heat that engulfed him. He grabbed ahold of Keegan's hips and rode him from behind.

"Jaxon, faster," Keegan pleaded. "It has been so long..."

The telephone rang, but Jaxon didn't care. He'd often wondered what it would feel like to be deep inside Keegan "Mac" MacLamore. Now he knew. It felt like everything good that had ever happened in his life, multiplied. He wrapped his arms around Keegan and pulled upwards. With Keegan against his chest, Jaxon turned his lover's neck sideways and took his lips. While his hips slammed forward and Keegan grunted in pleasure, Jaxon sucked Keegan's tongue into his mouth. One of Jaxon's hands snaked down between Keegan's legs and took ahold of him. He stroked him in rhythm with his hips, until Keegan pulled his mouth away roughly and growled.

Jaxon dragged his hand up Keegan's chest and braced it against his neck. He added a bit of pressure to his hand, and Keegan made a sound in his throat that rumbled from deep within his chest, "Oh yes," Keegan shouted as his body shook beyond his control.

"Do you like it when I choke you, Keegan?" Jaxon bit against Keegan's earlobe.

But Keegan didn't answer. All he did was bow his head and jerk against Jaxon's body.

Slowly Jaxon moved his mouth over Keegan's neck. When he couldn't hold it anymore, he bit down into Keegan's shoulder, and his orgasm rocked his body.

* * *

During the night Jaxon managed to get Keegan up the stairs and into bed. But at some point when he woke up again, Keegan was gone. He glanced around frantically, his heart breaking.

"Mac?" He didn't even put clothes on. He was too busy searching the large ranch house to find Keegan. Had Keegan changed his mind and wanted nothing to do with him? It was still dark outside; where could he be? He skidded to a stop in the kitchen when he saw Keegan sitting on a stool in nothing but a pair of jeans watching television with a sandwich in his hands.

"Mac?"

"Hmm?"

When Keegan turned to face him, Jaxon licked his lips. He realised for the first time just how handsome Keegan *really* was. His hair was pushed back from his face, his eyes were intense, and his body was perfectly sculpted.

“Changed your mind about me? Is that why you left the bed?”

“Come here.” Keegan opened his arms.

Jaxon took a deep breath. He walked over and yelped when Keegan pulled him forward to crash against his chest. “I didn't change my mind.” He stopped to nibble at Jaxon's neck. “I needed something to eat and decided to watch a little TV while I ate. There was report about you on. I have to say, Jaxon Lesley, you look ravishing in those baseball pants, but the way you are right now is even better.”

Jaxon chuckled. “Well, I don't think it's fair. You need to strip for *me*...”

Chapter Fourteen

It took five different tries before Keegan pulled himself from the comfortable warmth of Jaxon's body. He had lain there and stroked his fingers up and down Jaxon's body, over each nipple, down his abs. He stroked Jaxon's throat. Even though he wanted to stay where he was, he had things to do, things such as figuring out what to do about the two wrecked vehicles in his front yard, for one. Then he had to tend to the horses and other things around the Rattlesnake. For a few minutes more he lay there gently stroking Jaxon's arms until finally he uncurled his body from Jaxon's and pushed from the bed. He hauled on a pair of jeans and a shirt and rushed out the door as though someone had set his pants on fire. If he stayed around staring at the beautiful, dark body that now lay wrapped in white sheets, Keegan would have crawled back in. He spent his first few minutes outside caring for the horses and releasing them into the corral for their run.

Keegan stood at the corral and watched Stajan frolic. The sound of a car pulling into the front yard caught his attention.

"Oh my God!" Colter said. "What happened?"

Keegan turned around and headed to where Colter was walking around the two damaged vehicles. Colter peeked inside the windows of each car. "Stop yelling. You're going to wake Jaxon."

"Is everyone all right?"

A smile danced across Keegan's lips, and he nodded. He walked Colter into the ranch house and offered his friend a seat. Before he spoke to a shocked Colter, Keegan glanced over one shoulder, then the other and leant forward. "Jaxon is upstairs."

"I heard you the first time when you said he was sleeping. But what's with the junkyard out front?"

“He crashed into the truck yesterday. I was waiting for him to wake up before we get some people out there to tow them to see if we can get them fixed. The SUV might be a write-off, though.”

“He crashed into your truck?”

Keegan glanced around again and leant in closer. “He wasn't doing so well when he got here. It was like he didn't even know he had driven here. I was in the house, and I heard this loud bang. He didn't mean to.”

Colter nodded. “You two are going to give me an ulcer. All right, listen. I got some help. And we're making progress so this could be over soon. We have the tape. It shows what happened, and we had it transferred to a DVD. And we have Henry Tillman. They picked him up over in Addison at the airport trying to board a plane—Can you believe that? The little weasel was trying to run! Well, we don't know why he was leaving, but still. Apparently he's saying we're full of shit. If I hear that from him, I think I'm liable to wring his damn neck.”

Keegan chuckled. “All right. I can do this, right? I just can't believe that I have to go back to court. What are you going to do about Judge Tillman?”

“Well, there's nothing we *can* do. We'd have to prove that he knew his son was involved. If he knowingly sat on this case and he knew that his son was the actual murderer, he's in some deep shit. Let's just focus on the most important thing person now—you.”

Keegan nodded. He wanted it all to be over, but he had to be patient. He had waited so long.

* * *

The moment his eyes opened, Jaxon remembered the crash. The rental company was going to kick his ass for wrecking their vehicle. Insurance would cover it, but he just knew they were going to give him a hard time somehow. After he managed to crawl out of the bed that smelt so much like Keegan, he hauled himself into the shower and bowed his head to allow the water to flow over him. It felt wonderful. His muscles ached, and he suspected he'd need a chiropractor for his neck. The last thing he needed was to be hurt for training season.

He didn't tarry beneath the water, however. He finished his shower and got dressed in a pair of Keegan's jeans. His still had bloodstains on them. After that he rummaged through Keegan's closet for a shirt, pulled it on, and hurried down the stairs.

“Keegan, I have to get to the rental—Oh hi, Colter. Didn't know you were here.”

“Obviously.” Colter tilted his head. “I just came over to give Keegan some good news. We're ready to face the judge again.”

“That's good news.” Jaxon walked straight to Keegan and kissed him before seeking coffee. “Is Marlon being helpful or a pain?”

“Helpful—”

“Who's Marlon?” Keegan asked.

Jaxon shrugged. “I told you, he's a lawyer friend of mine helping out on your case. You know? The guy you thought was my man. He's not going to be in court; he's just fresh eyes and muscle really. Besides, we've been friends for years and I...er...hypothetically asked him about your case before.” When Keegan didn't speak, Jaxon turned from the coffeemaker to see him smiling. Heat caressed Jaxon's cheeks, and he tilted his head. “What?” he asked.

“You did that for me? Even after I was angry as hell at you?” Keegan asked.

“Of course.” Jaxon spoke without thinking. “I would have done anything for you, Mac—I love you...”

The confession hung in the air. The last thing he thought Keegan wanted to hear was some brainless prattle of love. He turned back to his coffee, praying that Keegan hadn't heard that.

“Okay...um, I'm going to go back and spend some time with Marlon,” Colter said, pushing from his seat. “We're going out tonight for a few drinks. You two are welcome to come along.”

“Uh-huh,” Keegan replied.

Jaxon didn't feel much like partying, but, he would do anything just to thank Colter for the years of work he'd done for Keegan. “Yeah.”

The door closed, and Jaxon gripped the counter. “There's no chance that you didn't hear that, is there?”

“Nope.”

“You heard.”

“Oh yeah.”

“Oh God.”

The rich sound of Keegan's laughter rippled from his chest and into the air. It was a sexy, welcome sound that Jaxon loved and wanted to hear more of. But this wasn't the moment for Keegan to be laughing. Jaxon had just made a confession he hadn't meant to make. Why hadn't he thought before he opened his mouth? Why hadn't he just smiled politely at Keegan's comment?

He turned around and folded his arms across his chest.

Keegan got up and walked over to him. "Don't be such a jerk," Keegan teased while reaching in for a kiss. "Kiss the cowboy."

Jaxon didn't kiss him. "I love you, Keegan."

Keegan smiled even as his eyes drifted shut in anticipation of a kiss. "And I love you too. Ever since I roped you that first time."

Then and only then did Jaxon kiss him.

Chapter Fifteen

Jaxon stood beside Keegan while the two tow trucks loaded the busted-up vehicles. The tow-truck driver had said the rental was a write-off, and Keegan's truck wasn't in much better condition. "This is nuts," Jaxon muttered. "I didn't mean for it to go like that."

"I know."

"Such unnecessary spending, though. All I had to do was sit back and calm the fuck down. I'll buy you a new truck."

Keegan gripped Jaxon's shoulders and turned the baseball player to face him fully. "Would you chill the fuck out? I'm happy I'm sending the truck to graveyard instead of you. Do you understand how insignificant a vehicle is in comparison?"

He looked into Keegan's eyes. "You love me that much?"

"How can you even ask that?"

Jaxon bowed his head. "I'm sorry. I just—I'm not used to someone loving me back this much. Bear with me?"

"Anything." Keegan smiled, and Jaxon couldn't resist kissing him.

One of the tow-truck drivers cleared his throat. Irritated, Jaxon inhaled deeply and pulled away.

"Okay, we're going to tow them into town. Any of you need a ride?" the driver who had interrupted their moment asked. It was clear he wasn't very comfortable.

"Yes, please," Jaxon accepted. "We should take the ride, go into town, and get stuff done. See about getting new vehicles."

Keegan nodded.

They rode into town in silence. Jaxon sat beside Keegan in the front of one of the trucks with the driver. Jaxon buried himself deep within his head, wondering what the future held. He

untangled his thoughts from what was to come to focus on their surroundings. The sun shone over everything in Thayne. It was warm burning in through the windshield of the tow truck. The sky was a clear blue with not a cloud in sight. The windows were rolled down, and the wind kissed Jaxon's flesh. He suppressed a moan and pulled tighter against Keegan's side.

The tow truck bounced from time to time on the dirt road. He wondered when the people of Thayne would join the times and put in some asphalt. The tow-truck driver dropped them off in the centre of the town, and instantly eyes turned to them and whispers started. Jaxon didn't need to be a mind reader to know what they said.

He walked into the rental agency with Keegan by his side. Leaning against the counter, he hit the bell and waited. A teenager who looked to be just passing puberty stepped out, and Jaxon could not avoid shaking his head. How old was this kid?

"Can I help you, sir?" the boy with the name tag that said *Sam* asked.

"Yeah. I wrecked my rental car." Jaxon went right to the point.

"Subtle." Keegan chuckled. "Real subtle."

"You wrecked it?" The kid arched a brow. "What do you mean *wrecked*?"

"How old are you, kid?" Jaxon leant in. "Aren't you old enough to know what *wrecked* means? Look, I slammed it into a truck—that clear enough?"

The boy stepped back as though Jaxon were ready to deck him. But he still had confusion in his eyes. "Wow. We...ah...we've never had that before."

The kid had to call the owner, but eventually Jaxon took his receipt, thanked the kid, and walked out the door once more with Keegan.

"Now what?" Jaxon questioned.

"Now we see to my money and get me something to drive."

* * *

Keegan stepped through the doors of Colter's small law office with Jaxon and looked around. The secretary looked at him and tilted her head. He didn't recognize her, so he assumed she was either new to town or too young to remember him.

She smiled beautifully at him. "Can I help you, sir?"

Keegan smiled back. "Yeah. Is Colter in?"

“Do you have an appointment?”

“No. But tell him Jaxon and Keegan are—”

“Oh! Mr. MacLamore!” The girl gasped excitedly. “Right away. I’ll let him know you’re here.”

Keegan exchanged a glance with Jaxon, who shook his head. He watched as Jaxon fell into a nearby chair and picked up a magazine.

While they waited, Keegan stared out the glass window that reached from the ground all the way up to the ceiling. He inhaled. The town looked so much different than he remembered. Big Al’s Pizza was gone, and in its place stood a porn store. Next to it, the old church was boarded up. Just a slight distance down used to be a beauty shop, which was now the car-rental store. Even the office he stood in used to be a fast-food restaurant owned by a lovely old couple. They were always wonderful to Keegan, even when everyone else treated him like crap. They would give him discounts when he went in to get food and didn’t have enough money. Then he would go back and help them haul out their garbage or wash dishes to make up for the discount.

Keegan frowned and folded his arms over his chest. He moved closer to the glass and squinted as the sun hit him in the eyes. Even the street signs were different.

His gaze shifted to one particular sign that he remembered. He was barely of age when he had taken Andrew Jamison, Pastor Jamison’s son, against that street sign. It was late one night, and since there wasn’t a streetlight close by, they thought they were safe. But they were wrong, and the town’s gossip, Mrs. Posey, caught them zipping up their pants. Soon the news was all over town. The pastor’s son was sent off to a gay camp—that was their way of trying to teach him not to be gay. After that the people in the town only hated Keegan more. They never liked him to begin with because he was a MacLamore. His father had managed to rub everyone in the small town the wrong way, so they had never given Keegan a fair chance. In return he became a miserable little shit to all of them. He got his first tattoo at sixteen, got his ear pierced, grew his hair out, and as soon as he managed to get his license, he bought a motorcycle with his birthday money from his grandfather instead of a car like he was supposed to. That further irritated his parents.

A chair scraped on the ground, and Keegan turned to see that the secretary was back and was speaking to Jaxon as they walked to her desk in a small area off to the side of the waiting room. Keegan turned his attention back to the glass wall.

“All right,” Colter called walking from his office into the waiting area. “Ready for you.”

“Remember, Colter? I used to park my motorcycle right over there”—he pointed—“and come into this restaurant to get some food. Then I would sit on the bike, eat, drive by a garbage can that used to be right there, and dump my garbage in a ride-by.”

Keegan turned then to see that Jaxon was in deep conversation with the secretary, and he smirked. He knew they had to be talking about baseball, because Jaxon made a pitch motion, then a swing. Keegan waved him over from his conversation with the secretary.

In the office Jaxon took a seat, and Keegan stood by the window wanting to get out. He felt like a caged cat. The office was a tad bigger than his cell, but he still felt as if the walls were closing in on him.

Inhaling, he turned to Colter. “Can we hurry this up?” Keegan questioned. “I hate small spaces.”

“What do you need?” Colter asked.

“I need to know where my grandfather was buried and what my grandfather left me, so I can buy a new truck.”

“He's at Onehill in the family tomb. As for what he left—” Colter stopped and reached for a file folder. He flipped it open. “Okay. Let's see here. He left you Purgatory.”

“The nightclub in New York?” Keegan arched a brow. “I never understood why he bought that place.”

“I asked him that when he asked my opinion on his will—it seemed a tad strange that a man his age would have bought a night club, then paid someone else to run it. He bought it for you. Anyways, the Rattlesnake is yours. Plus he sold his ownership of a winery in Italy and left the money to you—seventeen point five million dollars. And congratulations, you are now the proud owner of the Toronto Astros.”

“The *who*?”

"You are now the proud owner of a baseball team," Jaxon said.

Keegan shook his head. "I don't know anything about nightclubs and baseball." He rubbed his suddenly tired eyes. "I guess my father must be miffed about not getting anything."

"Keegan, don't," Colter said. "I know what you're thinking, and I'm telling you now, it's not right."

He tossed his hands up in surrender. "But I don't know anything about baseball!" Keegan growled. "Why would Papa leave me these things? He had no idea if I would ever see daylight again as a free man."

"Well, I guess it's a good thing he had more faith in you than you had in yourself, isn't it?"

Keegan walked out of the office. The walls were scaring him something fierce, and suddenly he couldn't breathe. His head began to throb. Outside, he stooped down on the sidewalk and bowed his head. When he looked up, he saw that a few people had stuck their heads out of stores to watch him. He wanted to ask them if they thought he was going murder someone, but he kept his mouth shut. He stood up again, and a strange feeling of defiance rushed through him.

"You all right?" Jaxon asked from behind him. When Jaxon's arms went around his waist, Keegan moaned and relaxed.

"Just overwhelmed," he explained. "All of a sudden I'm a millionaire. I own some baseball team I've never heard of and a club I never wanted. I can't give any of it to my father, because Papa wouldn't approve, and I don't have any kids to give it to."

"You want children." Jaxon stepped around Keegan to look into his face. "That's good, because you could leave it to them—pass it on."

"I *do* want children. I've always wanted children. Now if I have them I can actually leave them something because it doesn't make any sense to have all this and not have anyone to give it to afterwards. We can't take it with us." Keegan stopped to smirk as more eyes appeared to be watching them. "Want to be my baby's daddy?"

Jaxon laughed and pressed a kiss to Keegan's neck. "Why not? There have to be tons of kids looking for love...but right now we need to fix things so that you can get a new truck, some suits—"

“Whoa! Suits?” Keegan drawled.

Jaxon beamed. “I’ll have you know that you look sexy in those jeans, but I don’t think you want to walk into the courthouse looking sexy.”

Keegan kissed him. “Well, I guess you need to shop for me.”

Chapter Sixteen

Keegan, Marlon, Jaxon, and Colter sat around the tiny table in Jaxon's room at the bed-and-breakfast, prepping Keegan for the upcoming showdown in the courthouse. Marlon rambled on and on about different law terms that Keegan couldn't keep straight. He had to fight to concentrate, for his mind kept drifting to what would happen to him if they tossed out the case.

"It would only be fair. I mean, he lost twenty-five years of his life," Marlon was saying by the time Keegan pulled his head out of the fog. He turned to look at Jaxon's big-city lawyer. Marlon had dark-chocolate skin, beady brown eyes, a low haircut, and was immaculately dressed. The man was sexy in a creepy, lawyer kind of way, but he was too tiny for Keegan's taste. "Colter's buddy has authenticated the video, so now it's full steam ahead."

"That's right." Colter shuffled some papers. He picked one up and handed it to Marlon. "So what we want, in the simplest of terms, is to have the previous judgement basically be overturned. The papers have already been filed, and for some reason they're trying to push it through as fast as they can. I think it has something to do with a potential scandal from the whole Tillman issue. Then we have to see about clearing your record."

Keegan cleared his throat. He shifted in the chair, then leaned in.

"Ah, guys," he said, and all eyes turned to him. "What exactly are they going to ask me?"

"Not much," Colter replied. "This hearing is just to look at the new evidence. If all goes well, it won't take long, because Henry is in custody and on his way back. Since he was seen on the video committing the crime, there isn't much more anyone can debate."

"And if they still don't believe," Jaxon added. "I can back up the tape with what I heard."

"Maybe." Colter inhaled. "If the person who told you were here. Otherwise it would be hearsay."

Keegan nodded, but he wasn't feeling so assured. If he was convicted before based on a judge's prejudice, a town full of bigots, and his prints facing the wrong way on a gun, then throwing out a video with the actual murder on it didn't seem so far-fetched.

Jaxon must have felt what he was thinking, for beneath the table, Jaxon rested a hand on Keegan's thigh. He lowered one of his hands to hold Jaxon's in search for comfort, and once he felt the warmth of his lover's hand, Keegan smiled.

"What will happen to me?" Jaxon asked.

Keegan jerked around to face him. "I knew about it, Keegan."

Keegan tightened his fingers around Jaxon's before turning to look at Colter and Marlon.

"Who told you about what happened that night?" Colter questioned.

"His name was Jason Emerson," Jaxon explained. "He died last year after his snowmobile fell through the ice on Lake Nipissing in North Bay."

"Well, as horrible as that is, this is good." Marlon shrugged, glancing over at Colter.

"Marlon is right." Colter shifted in his seat. "How did he tell you?"

Jaxon arched a brow. "What do you mean how did he tell me?"

"Were you two alone? Were others there?" Marlon pushed.

"Alone." Jaxon looked from one lawyer to the next. "Jason wasn't really cut out for the Brotherhood really—he was a little apologetic for the stunts we pulled. He was a good kid. For some reason he trusted me to explain things to him from time to time. The other guys wouldn't have understood."

"That works." Colter nodded.

Keegan was confused as to what was happening. "Okay, talk so that the rest of us who didn't go to law school can understand."

"It's just that—there's is no way to prove that Jaxon really knew what happened that night," Marlon replied. "Jason told Jaxon about it, but without Jason here to corroborate that, there's no way to prove it! It just boils down to hearsay."

"And Jaxon wasn't on the tape," Colter added. "Take a look."

Keegan pulled even closer to Jaxon while Colter slid the new DVD into the player. They all sat back and watched. Colter was right. All the guys were perfectly visible on the tape, and

there was no Jaxon. Keegan stopped breathing when the gun lifted and discharged. He jerked slightly, and Jaxon's squeezing his hand eased him.

"I've seen people die in prison," Keegan whispered. "After some moron shanked them. But never like this. I never imagined it would be anything like this. I mean sure I saw him on the ground but not when he was getting shot."

Silence shrouded the room.

"Well," Marlon interrupted the quiet. "We'll get Keegan freed, and then this crime will be Henry's problem."

Keegan kissed Jaxon's worried frown from his lips. "Don't worry. All the parts that have anything to do with me, ends with me," he whispered. "After this it's Henry's problem."

Jaxon nodded, but Keegan could still see fear in his eyes when he spoke. "Unless the media finds out that my lover was convicted of murder. Overturned verdict or not, they'll love that."

"I thought you weren't worried about that." Keegan arched a brow.

"I'm not, but it would be annoying."

* * *

Jaxon allowed Keegan to move him back into the Rattlesnake. He cooked some dinner while Keegan saw to the horses. It felt good to be there, until he began thinking of his job. He loved baseball, but he hated being hounded by the media, having the team's wins and losses on his shoulders. He hated the stress. He adored having a man to care for him and to care for in return. When he began setting the table, he couldn't help laughing.

"What's so funny?" Keegan's arms snaked around his waist. Jaxon placed the last fork down against a napkin and pushed into Keegan's warmth.

"I feel so domesticated."

"And?" Keegan kissed Jaxon's neck.

"It feels good," Jaxon whispered. He turned in Keegan's arms. For a while he stared into Keegan's eyes, reading him. "I've been thinking of baseball."

"What about it?"

“If I go back to the team for the next season, I'll be gone a lot. I want to be with you, but I can't if you can't understand. But in the same breath, even before I came here for the end of season, I've been rethinking this whole career.”

“I can handle you going away,” Keegan assured him. “And if everything goes well with this overturning thing, I'll be able to travel.”

Jaxon chuckled. “But what if I wanted to get some booty? I couldn't get it with you hanging around.”

Keegan bit his shoulder, and Jaxon couldn't help but yelp. He burst out laughing, then moaned when Keegan's tongue slid over the wounded flesh. “I'm playing!” Jaxon grinned. Keegan released him.

“I mean it, Jaxon.” Keegan pushed. “I don't want you quitting your job—something you love—for me.”

“What if I love you more? And besides, I'm way past the age where I should be thinking of retiring. I'm older than most of the men on my team, you know.”

Silence flowed over the kitchen. Jaxon continued dishing up dinner, and when he walked to place the plates on the table, Keegan took them from his fingers. He watched, almost helplessly, while Keegan put the plates down, then took his hands.

“Listen to me. Why don't we wait until the outcome of this case before we make a decision on that? Right now I don't want you giving your game up. Promise.”

Jaxon smiled. “I promise. But seriously, I'm getting older, and I really don't know how much longer my body will be able to take playing sports for a living. My contract runs out after next season, anyways.”

Chapter Seventeen

The black jacket lay beside Keegan on the seat, and Jaxon sat across from him, holding his hands. He was shaking. His stomach flip-flopped, and his head was throbbing. Walking back into a courthouse had scared the hell out of him.

“Come on, baby,” Jaxon whispered. He lifted Keegan's fingers to his mouth and kissed them. “You need to breathe. I hear judges and lawyers are like wild animals—they smell fear.”

Keegan chuckled. “You're trying to make me feel better.”

“Did it work?”

“Truthfully?”

“Always.”

Keegan sighed. “It didn't work.”

“I'm sorry.”

“I just hate having to go back in there. What if this doesn't go like we planned?”

Jaxon shook his head. There was defiance in his dark eyes. “This is going to go well. Think positive.”

“I just want you to be prepared for the worst. I want you to be prepared to go back to Cincinnati without me, without ever coming back.”

“I don't want to hear it.” Jaxon dropped Keegan's hands, and Keegan suddenly felt alone, abandoned. He bowed his head and dragged his fingers through his hair before looking up.

“Do you think this is easy for me?” Keegan stood up. He touched Jaxon's shoulder. “Letting you go? But it could happen. Think logically, Jaxon.”

He saw that Jaxon wanted to say something else, but at that very moment the door opened, and a guard stuck his head in. Before he spoke, Keegan was already walking for his jacket. He

had been through this before, except this time he wasn't shackled and cuffed. He shrugged into his jacket, and Jaxon walked over to fix his tie and his collar.

Keegan said nothing, but his heart was breaking.

"There." Jaxon's voice cracked.

Without a word, Keegan took Jaxon's lips with his. He kissed him as though it would be the last time he would taste his lover. The guard cleared his throat, and Keegan pulled back, then followed.

Walking into the room, Keegan looked around. Colter was already at his table. He passed the audience—a couple of people he didn't recognize, but others he did. They were Mark's family. Keegan knew they all wanted to see him crash and burn again. Perhaps they didn't know about Henry and the tape, but they were about to. In that one moment, he wished them all to hell. But guilt set in, and he lifted his chin, adjusted his suit, and walked to his seat beside Colter.

He could hear the whispers behind him. He wondered if they thought he was deaf.

"Relax," Colter whispered. "Let me handle this."

"Where's Marlon?" Keegan inquired.

"He's over at the lockup, looking in on Henry."

"He's here?"

"All rise!" a voice boomed, and Keegan jerked from his seat. The normal formalities of introducing the judge took place, and soon they were told to sit down. The hearing began, and a whole slew of law terms were tossed back and forth. Finally it was time for the tape. The judge confirmed that it had been authenticated, and it was set up for play. When Mark took the bullet between his eyes, Mark's family gasped and began whispering and sobbing.

The judge banged his gavel. "One more outburst like that and I will clear this courtroom!"

Keegan glanced over his shoulder, and Jaxon smiled at him. That was all he needed.

Keegan said nothing.

"Mr. MacLamore." The judge spoke. "Normally in cases like this I would take a brief recess to think over everything to come up with my decision. But I do not think I need to do that, and you have been tortured enough as is. I have had a chance to look over the reports from your last trial, and I must say that your lawyer back then was asleep at the wheel. But that is not why

we are here today. We are here today because your new lawyer has petitioned the courts for your previous verdict to be overturned. After reviewing the sloppy way in which the last case was handled, and more so, from viewing this new evidence, I hereby order your verdict be overturned. You are a free man, Mr. MacLamore.”

“What?” Keegan whispered.

“We did it.” Colter laughed and hugged him tightly. “You’re free!”

He dared not hope. He looked to the judge. “Does this mean I can travel? I get all my rights back? My name—”

“Your record will be cleared, Mr. MacLamore.” The judge smiled. “You will be a free man in every sense of the word.”

Keegan hugged his best friend and lawyer. “Thank you,” he whispered huskily. “Thank you.”

There was a rising feeling within him as he stood up. He thanked the judge, but he was looking for Jaxon. He pushed his way through the small crowd and fell against Jaxon's chest, holding on tight and pressing his face to Jaxon's neck.

“Congrats, Mac,” Jaxon said.

Keegan couldn't speak, for he was using all his strength to remain standing. He clung to Jaxon's neck, shaking slightly. His eyes stung, and for the first time in almost twenty-five years, tears rolled from his eyes. Jaxon's hand caressed his back, but Keegan couldn't let go. He needed Jaxon's strength.

“You're a free man, Keegan,” Jaxon whispered.

A free man.

“Still want me to be your baby's daddy?”

Keegan couldn't help himself then. He lifted his face from Jaxon and smiled.

“This is the first time since I've been back.” Jaxon spoke softly. “Since all of this began, that I saw you *really* smile. You are beautiful when you smile.”

Chapter Eighteen

Jaxon hadn't wanted to leave the courthouse yet, but he had plans for that night. He left Keegan and Colter doing some last-minute things. He stopped by the rental agency and with some difficulty and a promise he wouldn't hit any more trucks he had a new car. Jaxon sped away from the centre of town with a smile on his face.

By dark everything was set, and none too soon, for a car pulled into the front yard of the Rattlesnake. He had taken care of Keegan's horses for the night and was waiting. Jaxon rushed out the door and stopped before Keegan as Colter drove away.

He took Keegan's hand. "This is your first night at home as a free man—not as a man on parole, but as a truly free man. We must celebrate."

He walked Keegan up the steps and into the lobby of the ranch house that was now bathed in candlelight.

"I have to feed the horses—"

"Already took care of it," Jaxon interrupted. "Tonight is all about you. No worrying about the future, babies, or me. All right?"

The smile that Keegan gave him took his breath away. He took that as an affirmative and walked his lover up the stairs. In the large master bathroom, he sat down in one of the plush chairs that formed a small sitting area. Candles cast a romantic glow over the room, making it warm and inviting, and that was exactly what Jaxon wanted. He watched Keegan look around and soak everything in.

"Is this what it feels like to be free?" Keegan smiled.

"Yes," Jaxon whispered. Jaxon undid his belt buckle, unzipped, and shrugged from his shirt. He stretched his long legs out before him.

"Now, Mr. MacLamore. Strip for Daddy."

He thought for a moment that Keegan wouldn't do it. The sexy stud of a rancher in the designer suit stood still for too long, his face serious. But then he grinned and began unbuttoning his jacket. He pushed it from his wide shoulders, and it pooled to the ground behind him. Jaxon's penis jerked in his pants at the thought of Keegan's hard, tanned skin, bare for his eyes. Piece by piece, Keegan's clothes ended up on the ground, and soon he wore nothing but his tie.

"Touch yourself," Jaxon whispered.

"Jaxon?"

"You're not self-conscious are you?" Jaxon teased. "We're the only ones here. You're doing it for the man you love."

That must have been what Keegan wanted to hear, for he stepped back, sat down in the chair across from Jaxon, and did what Jaxon asked.

Jaxon licked his lips while Keegan began stroking his cock. For the first time Jaxon really saw the cock that had given him such great pleasures so many times before. It was thick and long—perfect. He wanted to take the head in his mouth and allow his tongue to lap up the precum that dripped from the tip. But tonight was for Keegan, not Jaxon.

Slowly Keegan's body writhed against the seat. His legs stretched out before him, his head hanging over the back of the seat with his chest heaving and his fist pumping. Jaxon allowed his gaze to trace his lover's body. He memorised every curve, every muscle, every perfection and imperfection. He memorised the routes he would trail his tongue, leave kisses. He saw every change in Keegan's nipples as they hardened.

Keegan's free hand caressed up his body to one nipple, and when he tweaked it, Jaxon's body throbbed. Every pass of Keegan's fingers over his nipples sent ripples through Jaxon. Keegan's breathing was loud now, and Jaxon smiled. Jaxon's hips began gyrating on the seat.

"Keegan," Jaxon whispered, slipping from his seat to his knees.

Keegan didn't move when Jaxon called his name. He was in heaven—past it. He was masturbating before the eyes of his lover, and it was the biggest turn-on he'd ever experienced. Then he lifted his head and saw Jaxon, on all fours, crawling to him. His breathing was out of control, and his heart raced at top speed. His vision blurred, and he blinked to clear it. But not quickly enough. He felt Jaxon's tongue lash the head of this tender penis, and his body jerked.

“Want me to suck it for you, Mac?” Jaxon asked.

Keegan couldn't speak. He nodded.

“Use words, Mac,” Jaxon teased.

Instead of speaking, Keegan gripped the sides of Jaxon's face and surged his hips forward. “Oh yes!” he shouted to the night.

Jaxon moaned, and the candlelight flickered. He released Jaxon's face, thinking he would pull back. But Jaxon didn't—he pushed down, pulling Keegan's swollen member deeper to the back of his throat.

Keegan's eyes rolled back, his toes curled, and his hands tightened against the arms of the seat. He heard a ripping sound but didn't care what it was. He pushed his hips forward once more. His knees trembled when Jaxon's tongue washed over the head of his cock.

“Jaxon, again. Give me your tongue.” Keegan whimpered. When Jaxon's tongue passed over Keegan's penis, he couldn't take it anymore. He pushed Jaxon away and slumped back into the seat, on the brink of an orgasm. His chest rose and fell rapidly.

“Do you want more, Keegan?” Jaxon asked. He kissed Keegan's abs, licked at each nipple, and finally swooped in for the kiss. For some reason the kiss felt different. It was better for Keegan to kiss Jaxon when he knew he didn't have to worry about ruining Jaxon's life. He let his hand caress Jaxon's side, up one arm, then the next, then down his back. He sucked against Jaxon's tongue, moaning, willing Jaxon to kiss him roughly.

Soon he was so overwhelmed with the feelings rushing through him, he had to pull back from the kiss. He looked into Jaxon's eyes and smiled. “This is it, Jaxon.” Keegan spoke. “No turning back now.”

“No turning back,” Jaxon agreed.

“Good.” Keegan got up and walked around Jaxon. “Come with me.”

He led Jaxon into the bedroom with a smile on his lips. “Get on your stomach. I have something to show you.”

Jaxon chuckled then climbed onto the bed as Keegan asked. Keegan moved up between his legs, knelt down against the bed, and licked from the tip of Jaxon's cock, which lay hard between his legs. He trailed his tongue up over Jaxon's balls and his crack and up his spine. Jaxon

growled, and Keegan took that as a good sign. He repeated his ministrations, leaving a wet trail. He then returned and blew against it. Jaxon arched his back.

“Oh, Keegan.”

He bent his head to the side and took Jaxon's cock into his mouth. Keegan wanted to show him the same pleasure that Jaxon had showed him earlier.

It would be the most beautiful kind of revenge imaginable.

“Get on your knees.”

Jaxon did it without shame and with great haste. The smoothness of lube slid over Jaxon's hole, and he moaned. Keegan slid slowly into him. Once more he was filled to the brink, and he loved it. He rode backwards against his lover. The pleasure numbed his mind to all forms of thinking, and his head slumped backwards against Keegan's shoulder. Keegan's arms wrapped around him; one hand took ahold of Jaxon's cock, and the other tweaked his nipple. Jaxon groaned, pleaded, swore, but Keegan didn't let up. He added more to Jaxon's sweet torment by taking Jaxon's earlobe between his teeth. When he bit the lobe, Jaxon's body tensed, and Keegan released Jaxon's cock.

“Oh God, I'm so close,” Jaxon whispered.

Keegan licked at Jaxon's neck. “Then let go. Come for me, baby...”

Jaxon pressed his eyes shut and gyrated his hips to get Keegan deeper. Over and over, Keegan delved deep within him. No other man had caused Jaxon to bite his lips in pleasure, but Keegan had. Keegan slammed against him with each drive of those powerful hips, and soon Jaxon exploded all over the bed before him. An animalistic sound rippled from his throat, and his whole body felt weak, as though it were being blissfully sucked dry.

“Oh, Keegan.” Jaxon whimpered and slumped forward on his elbows.

“Going to sleep now, Jaxon? Don't you think I want to get fucked?” Keegan pressed a kiss to one of Jaxon's dark cheeks, then the other.

Jaxon laughed. “Well then. On your back, baby.”

Keegan watched as Jaxon caressed some lube against his entrance. He then rolled over, giving Jaxon his ass, and banged his fist against the bed in silent jubilation as Jaxon drove into him from behind. He braced himself on his shoulders and the side of his face to give Jaxon full control of his puckered hole. Jaxon knew exactly what to do with it. Soon Keegan was begging for mercy. When Jaxon pulled out of him and flipped him onto his back, Keegan lay against the bed, writhing and moaning without being touched. A gentle look swam into Jaxon's eyes, and their lovemaking switched from rough and needy to desperate and necessary.

Jaxon stretched his body along Keegan's and directed his cock to Keegan's entrance. Gently he pushed forward, and Keegan lifted his mouth to take Jaxon's lips.

He felt his cock being crushed between their bodies, and that friction mixed with the sensation of Jaxon's driving into him with long, slow strokes. Keegan sighed as his orgasm drew close, and dug his fingers into Jaxon's back.

"Does that mean you want to come, baby?" Jaxon asked and buried himself fully into Keegan.

"Jaxon!"

He felt the wet heat of his cum between their bodies, but he couldn't care less. He clung to Jaxon's shoulders, pulling him even closer. Jaxon continued kissing his face, his shoulders, and that was something Keegan needed.

He allowed Jaxon to pull him into his arms. With a satisfied smile on his face, Keegan drifted off to sleep.

For the second time in as many years, Keegan MacLamore had dreams instead of nightmares when he closed his eyes.

Epilogue

Keegan tapped the horse in the sides, and Stajan took off after Jaxon and his horse. They raced across the open fields of the Rattlesnake and then across a shallow area in the water before he pulled Stajan to a stop beside Jaxon.

“Why are we here?” Keegan asked.

He glanced around, and Stajan stamped and sidestepped beneath him. He slid from the horse's back, and Stajan made for the water and began drinking. Keegan shook his head and turned to look at Jaxon again.

“I wanted to ask you something.” Jaxon spoke. He climbed off his horse. He walked up to Keegan and took his hand. They walked back to the water, and Jaxon hunched down. He pointed into the water. Something shiny caught Keegan's eyes. He looked over at Jaxon and reached into the water. Wrapping his fingers around the object, he pulled it out. His eyes widened. It was a silver necklace, and on it was a silver ring.

“Jaxon?”

“You wanted me to be with you, be your kids' father; but in order to do that, Keegan, you have to be my husband.”

“That means forever, Jaxon. I can't take a few years.”

“Then take forever...”

 THE END 

Remmy Duchene

Remmy Duchene is a hockey watching, baseball playing Canadian who when not writing, loves to spend time with family, cooking (especially baking), trying to stay sane from the characters, and enjoying a nice glass of XOXO wine.