



Patrick Roy and Jayla Marton have been friends since high school. All this time Patrick has been secretly in love with her. For New Year's, he does what he hasn't had the courage to do before. Not only does he plant a kiss on her lips, he professes his love for her. But instead of starting the new year with a new love, will he lose his friend instead?

Chapter 1

New Year's Eve. What a night.

Patrick Roy searched the crowd of party-goers at the Red Lion Bar & Restaurant, co-owned by him and his friend, Jayla Marton. He hadn't seen her in almost an hour, but she was probably in the back where she preferred to be, making sure the food kept coming and the champagne kept flowing.

Patrick made his way across the floor of the restaurant, stopping every so often to smile at a guest and shake hands, making sure they were happy with the night's festivities.

He found Jayla in the kitchen, as he suspected, helping set plates on the line. "Hey, we have people to do that," he chided her.

She looked up and smiled, her brown eyes friendly and sweet. Pure Jayla. He didn't think she had a malicious bone in her body, which was why he'd had no hesitation in going into business with her.

"Almost done," she promised, brushing a lock of chin-length hair from her eye with a forearm. A few weeks ago he'd been surprised when she showed up with much shorter hair. Now that he'd gotten used to it, he liked how the wavy bob haircut framed her face.

"Come on." His fingers circled the soft skin of her upper arm. He would not let her hide out in here and miss out on ringing in the new year. "The countdown starts in a few, and you're going to join in whether or not you want to. Shane, take over." He directed the last comment at one of the servers.

"You're a bully," Jayla said, pouting.

He grinned, but what he really wanted to do was drop a kiss on those luscious lips of hers. They'd been tempting him all night, covered in a neutral gloss that almost matched her peanut complexion and drew his eyes to their shape over and over again.

He propelled her with a hand at her back, out the door and to the perimeter of the dining room floor. From their vantage point, they surveyed the restaurant, filled to capacity. They'd done good, and Patrick couldn't help the swell of pride that filled his chest. Red Lion was Jayla's brain child, and he was honored she'd pulled him in. Both under thirty, and they'd opened a successful restaurant without assistance from their parents.

Located on the second floor of a building in downtown Atlanta, Red Lion gained notoriety through word of mouth and had become a popular spot for people who wanted to eat gourmet food

without the gourmet prices. When the weather was warmer, diners could sit outside at the umbrella-covered tables and people watch while they ate.

Except for a few patrons who'd placed late orders, most everyone had finished eating and lingered over drinks. Those not lucky enough to get a table sat at the bar or on the white leather sofas in the lounge, huddled at the smaller, round tables with friends and dates. Servers looped between the diners, passing out the complimentary champagne for the midnight toast.

"You need to be out here toasting with the guests," Patrick said. He took two flutes of champagne from a passing waitress and handed one to Jayla.

The televisions mounted on the walls displayed the revelers at the local peach drop and the apple drop in New York's Times Square.

"We did it," she said, exposing a set of brilliant white teeth with a happy grin.

Her enthusiasm was contagious. "Can you believe it? Less than a year, and look at us."

Soon enough, the countdown started, and the diners commenced counting with the announcers on the televisions. "Ten...nine...eight..."

Patrick's glance slid to Jayla. It was now or never. For the past fifteen years, he'd watched men come in and out of her life, and because he'd never wanted to rock the boat of their friendship, he'd remained silent. But he couldn't hold back any longer. Working so closely with her had forced him to accept his feelings for her were not going away. No matter how much he wanted them to. No matter how many women he dated and slept with to forget her. His new year's resolution was to win her over, and the mission would start tonight.

"Seven...six...five..."

He stepped closer. She smiled up at him, counting too, completely oblivious to the thoughts that tortured him. The need to hold her in his arms, not as a friend, but as a lover.

"Four...three...two...one...happy new year!"

Jayla lifted her glass toward him, and that's when he leaned in. The smile wavered on her face the minute she realized he wouldn't plant his customary kiss on her cheek. One arm caught her around the waist so he could haul her against his body. He'd hugged her plenty of times, felt her soft, feminine body press against his, but this time his muscles tightened at the contact in a way they hadn't before. Because his lips had covered hers, and her mouth was soft and moist. He refused to let her go, but eased her into it, and then the next thing he knew, she was yielding to him. Her mouth softened and he pulled her closer.

All around them the noise from party horns, cheers, and fireworks on the television blared. Yet the only thing he could really hear was his heart dance, sing, and soar in his chest as she kissed him back. Their connection was even more devastatingly sensual than he'd anticipated.

Reluctantly, Patrick let her go, and they were both clearly stunned by the impact. His heart raced and he swallowed. He half-expected Jayla to slap him, but she didn't. She stared at him for a moment, blinked as if trying to eliminate the shock, and then she rushed back into the kitchen.

Chapter 2

Holy crap! Patrick had kissed her.

Jayla set her glass of champagne on the steel counter top because she was pretty sure she would drop it if she didn't. Her fingers trembled and her knocking knees barely held her upright. How she'd managed to make it to the kitchen without collapsing was a mystery. It had been sheer willpower for sure, because she'd simply had to get away from him.

Patrick had kissed her.

Patrick, her buddy, her friend. They'd known each other since they were fourteen years old, meeting for the first time in English class, freshman year of high school. They'd hit it off right away because they had the same quirky personality, loved to read, and both had dreams of owning a business one day, even at that young age.

Patrick had kissed her, and she'd liked it. *A lot.*

She closed her eyes and relived the moment—the taste of his mouth, the strength of his arm around her waist, the crush of her breasts against his hard chest. Why had he done that? They were business partners. In the fifteen years they'd known each other, they'd never crossed the line.

Now what?

Hours later, the last of the patrons and staff had left. Jayla couldn't stop thinking about the kiss, but she'd decided she would act as if it hadn't happened. Two desks and a five-drawer file cabinet were crammed into the office she shared with Patrick. She stayed there most of the night, barely having said two words to him since the stroke of midnight.

One time he'd come to find her regarding a customer who'd said she promised to comp their meal, which she had. Otherwise, she spent the rest of the night avoiding Patrick, not even looking at him if she could help it.

She balanced the night's receipts while he locked up and made sure all the closing tasks had been completed. They'd had a successful night, their best night since their doors opened in the spring. The restaurant business was an unstable one, but she felt confident about their ability to be in business for a very long time.

As she was wrapping up, Patrick appeared in the doorway. She looked up to find his eyes on her and a frown furrowing his brow. Even with the look of displeasure on his face, he still managed to look as handsome as ever.

"Almost done," Jayla promised.

They had ridden to work together like they often did because they lived in the same apartment complex, and for the first time she regretted the routine. She didn't look at him too long. If she did, she might lose her ability to speak coherently. His trim lanky body was a holdover from his track days in high school and college, and his hair...well, she liked to play in the thick wiry afro, which was as big as his personality.

She entered the data into the computer and then logged out. Patrick continued to stand there not saying a word with his arms folded across his chest. She grabbed her coat from the back of her chair and slipped it on.

"You're not going to say anything?" Patrick asked.

"Say anything? About what?" Jayla licked her dry lips. She ventured a look at him and became caught up in his lips. She didn't mean to stare, but her eyes were eye level with his mouth, and those same lips had made her knock-kneed just hours before.

"The kiss," Patrick answered in a clipped voice.

"Kiss?" she sounded as annoying as a parrot—a paranoid, frightened one, at that.

"Are you going to pretend nothing happened?"

She wanted to, but by the look on his face, he wasn't about to let that happen. "It was obviously a mistake," she said with a careless shrug. "You weren't thinking and I forgive you."

"I don't want forgiveness. I meant to do it."

“Don’t say that.”

“Why not? Jayla, I’m attracted to you.” He cursed, staring down at the tiled floor, a muscle working in his jaw. He straightened and shoved his hands into his pockets. “This feeling won’t go away.”

“It’s the champagne, New Year’s Eve, and the excitement of finishing off a successful year.”

“No, it’s not. It’s you. You’re the last thing I think about before I go to sleep at night, and you’re the first thing I think about in the morning.” He sighed, his eyes and face filled with a weary, pained expression all at once. “Jayla, I’m in love with you. I can’t hide it anymore. I can’t keep it to myself. I’m in love with you, and I think I’ve always been.”

She didn’t know what to say to that.

Chapter 3

Patrick's hand tightened on the steering wheel.

Nothing. She'd said absolutely nothing after he'd professed his love for her, leaving him feeling like the world's biggest idiot. Maybe there was a category for it in the Guinness World Book of Records. He could site tonight's conversation as proof he deserved the title and they could list his name and face on the appropriate page.

An awkward silence filled the car, but he didn't regret what he'd said. Telling her he loved her had been long overdue. He'd get her home and then walk to his place, where he'd douse his sorrows in a gin and tonic.

From the corner of his eye he could see her staring out the window, looking everywhere but at his pathetic face.

"Why do you love me?" She spoke softly, but because he'd been in deep thought, the sound of her voice disturbed the quiet, like a bomb going off in a library.

Patrick swallowed. She hadn't turned in his direction, which strangely enough made it harder for him to formulate his thoughts. Hesitant to bare his soul to someone who, up until that moment, hadn't even acknowledged his feelings. But he'd determined to be honest and upfront this year, and the potential rejection would not deter him.

"Your sense of humor," he replied. "It helps that we have exactly the same type of humor. We're both sarcastic, and I love that we can be standing in the same room talking to the same people, and without a word, through telepathy or some shit—know exactly what the other is thinking."

He thought he saw the hint of a smile grace her lips, so he continued.

"I love your caring nature. You volunteer for all these projects. Working with kids, helping the homeless, preparing care packages for soldiers overseas. It's always something. I don't know where you find the time, but you do, and I think it's wonderful."

He shifted, settling into the seat and the one-sided conversation. He could talk about her positive attributes all day, comfortable because he'd thought long and hard about her many fine qualities before.

"You're adventurous," he continued. "If I suggest something you're always game for it. Like that time I suggested we learn to scuba dive, I thought for sure you'd think I was crazy, but the next thing I knew you were emailing me research you'd done on where we could take classes and how

much they were. By the summer we'd booked a scuba trip to Bonaire." Their trip had been amazing. The coral reefs and high concentration of tropical fish had made them feel like they were in an aquarium.

She finally looked at him. "Once we cross that line we can't go back."

"I know." That was the very reason he hadn't broached the topic of them getting into a relationship before. He'd wanted to preserve their long-standing friendship, too, but he no longer had any concerns. "But I don't plan to go back."

They didn't speak again for the duration of the ride home.

They parted ways at her apartment door. "I'll see you tomorrow," Jayla said, ducking her head as she entered. When the door closed behind her, it felt as if she'd closed the door on their friendship, too.

Patrick stood there with his heart heavy and filled with sadness. They'd been close and gone through a lot together. Had he changed all that with his declaration of love?

He took the stairs up to his apartment and fixed that drink he'd promised himself. He swirled the liquid in the glass and took a swallow, walking slowly back to his bedroom. In an effort to be more than friends, he may have lost his friend in the process, and the sobering thought weighed heavy on his mind.

They had to work together, and he didn't know how he'd get through each day. It would be especially difficult now that he knew the taste of her because the desire to make her his woman was especially acute.

Patrick drained the glass and set it on the bedside table. He stripped out of his clothes and discarded them to a corner of the bedroom. A cold shower and nap were in order because before long, the sun would creep through the slats in his blinds and force him awake.

When he'd finished his shower, he slid under the cool sheets and rolled onto his back, folding his hands behind his head and staring up at the ceiling in the dark. As he laid there, he heard the door quietly close. He stayed in position but strained to hear. Soft footsteps came toward him on the carpeted floor.

The door to his bedroom opened and Jayla came in, wearing her coat. She'd used her key to come in, and even though he was excited, he tamped down on the excitement because he didn't really know why she was there. She didn't say a word, just stood in the doorway looking at him.

"What are you doing here?" Patrick asked.

That's when she moved, slipping the coat from her shoulders to reveal a black satin bra and matching panties. His nostrils flared as desire overtook his body, and he couldn't move. He'd seen her in a bathing suit plenty of times, but the intimate lingerie created tension in him that kept him immobile.

Jayla walked over to the bed and climbed in the other side. His eyes followed the movement, his heart beating at an erratic rate that couldn't at all be healthy.

She straddled him on the bed and he lifted his hands to her thighs. Her skin was soft and smooth.

"I was afraid," she's aid. "I screw up all my relationships. I can't seem to keep a man interested, and they always leave me."

"Those other guys are jokes. They didn't realize what they had."

She gently shook her head. "No, they weren't jokes. They just weren't you." She kissed him, and his hand moved to cup her bottom.

"Jayla," he groaned.

"I love you, too."

Chapter 4

It was freeing to finally tell him how she felt and no longer hide her feelings. Freeing, but scary. Yet Jayla knew deep down she had nothing to fear. This was her friend, and she fully believed he would take care of her heart.

Patrick had always been there, supporting her and she couldn't have asked for a better companion. Now they would simply add another layer to their relationship.

Patrick cupped her head in his hands and rolled them so he was now on top. Crushing his mouth over hers, he took control of the seduction she'd initiated. She welcomed the bulk of his hard body, wrapping her arms around his torso and parting her lips. His tongue swirled in and fanned the flames of sexual hunger.

When he rubbed his erection between her legs, blistering heat filled her core and she moaned. Before she even had time to think, he'd removed her bra and panties and sat back for a moment to just look at her with adoration in his eyes.

"You're gorgeous, Jayla," he murmured in a low, husky voice.

She dragged him down to her and kissed his mouth, his chin, and his neck. Her tongue swept up his Adam's apple in a sensual stroke, dragging a growl from him. He returned the kisses, down her throat, and along her collarbone, leaving a streak of heat over her skin everywhere they touched.

The hand between her legs fondled the wet folds, priming her, and Jayla trembled. She could barely breathe from the deep desire he'd initiated with each flick of his finger.

"Damn, Jayla," he muttered. "You're so wet."

His mouth trailed down her neck to her breasts, and he sucked one nipple into his hot mouth. Heat flamed across her breast, and she cried out from the pleasure-giving tug.

He continued lower, down her ribs to her stomach, her skin quivering everywhere he touched. Nowhere was off limits—her hips, her thighs, the damp folds between her legs. By the time he reached for a condom, she was panting and begging.

Before he entered her, Patrick took one more look, his eyes questioning. He wanted her to be sure, because once their bodies joined, they couldn't go back to being just friends and business partners.

In answer, she placed her hands on his taut buttocks and urged him in. He moaned in relief and buried his face in her neck, his hips surging forward. He sank in, and a shudder swept his frame. She enveloped him in her arms, legs tightening around his hips.

He began to move, each exhaled breath keeping time with the thrusting motion.

“Jayla...” Her name was torn from him in a shaky breath.

She tightened even more around him, filled to capacity with each downward stroke, her face pressed to his.

“Oh...yeah...” Her voice cracked on the last word when he shifted position and angled his pelvis to hit a different spot, causing her fingers to spasm into clenched fists.

He lifted one leg over his shoulder, opening her up for deeper penetration. He pumped harder, frantic in his movements, as if he’d unleashed fifteen years of pent-up sexual frustration all at once.

“I love you, Jayla. I love you so damn much,” he growled. His lips found her breasts again, sucking hard on the erect nipples, sending her back into a deep arch and her nails to dig hard into his shoulder blades.

“I love you, too,” she whispered brokenly. “I’ll always love you.”

Their bodies ground against each other, sweat dampened and slick.

An earth-shattering orgasm tore through her with the speed of a tornado. Her body pulsed and quaked beneath his. Sobbing, she held on tight, her fingers clutching his thick hair, sinking into the soft curls. He muttered her name again, followed by a curse as his body grew taut as he emptied into the condom.

In the quiet after the storm, they lay wrapped together in the sheets, their limbs intertwined. She didn’t want to let him go. She didn’t want to lose this euphoric feeling.

With a sigh, she kissed the corner of his mouth, and he smiled. “Incredible,” she whispered.

“I can’t think of a better way to start the new year than being here like this with you.” He turned to face her, his eyes intense. She couldn’t miss the love shining there. Perhaps it had been there all along, but she’d been too afraid to acknowledge it because she didn’t want to lose him.

“I can’t think of a better way, either,” she said. “Happy new year.”

Then she rested her head on his shoulder, slid her leg between both of his, and fell into a comfortable sleep.

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