

Part I

Patrick paced around his room at the economy motel. Mr. Weston had been clear in his concerns about Monica's mental and emotional health. She had crumbled and was struggling to recover. Her father was uneasy enough about her state of mind to have asked Patrick, a man he did not know, to come back to Columbus where he could try to help Monica. He wasn't sure how to accomplish that, but Patrick was absolutely sure it was a task he wanted to tackle.

Monica had always projected a cold façade and quick temper; and at first Patrick wasn't sure he wanted to be involved with someone who had as many issues as she apparently had. Long before she had ever noticed him, he had observed all of her routines. She'd shot down brothers at school so quickly and icily they hadn't even realized they'd been hit until she was well on her way. Several months of watching her in action around campus convinced him that she protected herself by not letting other people get close to her personal life, by quickly discouraging any man who thought of her as sensuous and intriguing, by being stubborn in a way that was designed to drive away all intruders. He, however, knew how to charm himself back into her good graces, how to sidestep her when she was pushing for a fight, how to let her win when arguing over nothing important.

For Patrick, Monica held an energetic beauty that drew him and held him captive. And she was gorgeous in her determined spirit that matched the physical attractiveness of her dark chocolate skin, exotic eyes, and athletic figure.

He was sure she was also attracted to him, but she'd rejected his attempts to be more than just study partners so consistently that he'd told her he was giving up hope of them getting together as a couple. Yet, during the summer, he'd been unable to get her out of his head; and he realized his heart was already too involved to just walk away.

Patrick had spent that following fall semester developing a casual comfort between them. Finally, during the winter break, Monica had agreed to increase their time together. She'd even come to his aunt's house for Christmas dinner.

Over the next year and a half, they'd gone to dinner and movies and shared whatever other moments she would let them squeeze out of two hectic schedules. She had smiled shyly at his compliments or a touch of his hand. He had seen the quickly hidden flashes of passion in her eyes, and felt her relax at the weight of his arm around her shoulders. Did she feel the same tingle as he when he softly kissed her goodnight? Monica was beautiful, and brilliant, and complicated; she was sometimes childlike and confused.

And he wanted her to belong to him.

Of course, until this past May, they'd both been busy working and going to school, so he hadn't been able to see her as much as he'd wanted. And, it bothered him that on special holidays she'd refused to let them be together. Then, he'd graduated with a bachelor's degree in Health Services Administration and been unable to find an immediate job in Columbus. On top of that, family problems had pulled him back to Pennsylvania.

When he'd left he'd also been discouraged and unsure about the status of his relationship with Monica. Now he stood in front of the window in this hotel room looking down at the outdoor swimming pool that had been covered for the fall, not really seeing it. He was where he wanted to be—near Monica. Patrick had returned less at her father's request than because he wanted to be the person she could turn to when she was in need. But, how would he even begin to break through her barriers?

Her mother had recently died, and despite their growing friendship, she had reverted to shutting him out. She was hurting. Alone.

She did not have to be alone. He closed his eyes and reveled in imaginings of them together, her slender five-foot-six body pressed against his own muscular bulk, her beautiful auburn hair loose and wildly soaked with the sweat of their lovemaking, her dark brown almond-shaped eyes reflecting back at him the emotions he knew she was hiding. He wanted her—heart, body, and soul—and he wanted her to want him, to say she would stay with him. Forever.

He shook his head to clear away the fantasies, his black locks swinging with the act. None of that was important. Not right now. First, he must find a way to reach through her suffering and help her find some strength to hold on to.

“Please, Monica, let my love heal you. It’s all I have to offer.”

He closed the curtains, took off his clothes, and slid between the cool sheets. Tomorrow he would phone his aunt to let her know he had arrived and get directions to her new condo. She had agreed that he could stay in her guest room; but he needed tonight to be by himself and think about what he would say to Monica. How would he explain his presence without giving away her father’s involvement? How would he convince her not to shut him out of this painful time in her life? He’d have to be careful.

With his arms folded beneath his head and his knees bent to keep his feet from hanging over a bed that wasn’t compatible with his six-foot-four frame, Patrick played over and over in his head the scene that would likely occur at Monica’s house in the morning. He gazed at the ceiling, letting words and reactions and hopes float in and out of his mind. Then, he said a brief prayer, turned on his side, and dozed into a light sleep.

That next morning, he dressed in jeans and a loose shirt, checked out of the motel, and slid behind the wheel of his 5-year-old car. He was on his way to Monica’s home before 8:00.

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It was Thursday. Monica sat at the kitchen table drinking a cup of coffee and ignoring the bowl of half-eaten grits that had been her breakfast. She was still dressed in her cotton nightgown and terry cloth bathrobe; a habit she was enjoying now that her momma was no longer there to insist that a decent person did not wear bedclothes around the house. A small smile touched the corners of her mouth. Monica could make her own decisions about her behavior now; and, as insignificant as this choice seemed, it was an option that would not have been previously tolerated. Yes, she was enjoying her freedom.

In fact, once she was done with all of the packing and moving, cotton nightgowns would be the first casualty on her list of many things to change. She was 24 years old, had a decent shape,

and wanted to feel satin and silk sliding across her skin. Monica wanted to feel grown and sexy. The money from her momma's insurance policy would help her to do exactly that.

Sexy. She smiled. Patrick was the only person who had ever made her feel sexy. He had returned to Philadelphia after graduation but assured her that the move was only temporary. Perhaps when he returned, she would allow him to get beyond holding hands and an occasional peck on the lips—if he still wanted her. She might just be willing to explore the fire that warmed her every time they were together. Maybe she could really relax and see where it took them.

With the house to herself, she could now do as she pleased. What was stopping her? No, she could never relax here. She still felt Olivia's presence, as if her eyes would always be watching whatever Monica did. This house held too many memories—too many degrading words and sneered insults for Monica to ever feel comfortable entertaining.

Olivia had said that no man would want her, except to sleep with her; that Monica's almond shaped eyes, full lips, and slightly full hips were only enticements to the wrong kind of attention. Monica shook her head. She wouldn't believe Patrick saw her that way. Yes, she had seen the hunger in the brother's eyes; it assured her that he found her body attractive. But those looks were accompanied by another emotion she couldn't describe, a tenderness that always kept him from doing anything she might interpret as improper or disrespectful.

So, again Olivia Weston had lied—had been very good at it. Dreams had been crushed by her words, so many false images formed because of her poison. Monica had absorbed it all, even while not wanting to believe any of it.

The words of each lie echoed in Monica's brain; words that had made her hesitate, doubt, withdraw, and reject. She had been silent in the face of Olivia's brutality because part of her believed the words were always the truth. This was her momma. She wouldn't say these things if they weren't true, the child had always reasoned. Monica had turned those words inward, always looking for the evidence her momma so quickly saw, and being totally confused that she wasn't smart enough to see it for herself. Even as a child, Monica feared others would see the same awful things her momma saw and would reject her the same way her daddy had.

Yet, now she knew the truth about her father's disappearance. Although she still hated him for leaving, he had not deserted his children out of a lack of love.

Those letters. Her father had written many letters while he was away. Why had her momma kept them? They told the truth. Too late—no one could undo the doubt and insecurity or give her back the lost years. The person she had become was based on nothing.

Monica now suspected that every harsh word out of her momma's mouth was a deception, but how was she going to sort the truth from the fabrications? Hot bitter tears ran down her cheeks. She had put her life on hold, sacrificed fun and friendships, avoided dating and romance—partly because she had believed those destructive words and partly because she had feared her momma's treatment. Her years in this house had been miserable. And, on top of the cruelty she and her siblings had endured, Monica had been forced (by default) to take care of Olivia during her sickness. Resentment and anger burned inside her.

Pain. The pain was unbearable. Monica knew people thought she was grieving over her momma's death. That was no longer true; she had let go of Olivia within a few weeks after putting that lifeless body in the ground. Monica was grieving over different losses—her childhood, the daddy she had needed who had not been there, the momma's love that was nonexistent, siblings that rejected her. Deep within, she had been carrying the pain of aloneness even before Olivia's death and before last night when she had commanded her remaining family members to get out of her life.

Monica could not prevent the sobs that shook her body. She wanted the pain to go away, but two months after the funeral, it was still her most constant companion. If only she hadn't found those letters. Deceived—her entire life. This other level of grief was what consumed her, kept her from sleeping and eating, caused her to cry uncontrollably, made her feel empty and afraid. Had anyone ever loved her? How could her momma have done this? If her family hadn't been able to love her, who would?

She thought again of the fantasies she entertained of one day having a more substantial relationship with Patrick. Poof. Gone. She couldn't allow him full access. What would he see if he got too close? Would it cause him to leave her as well? Monica shook her head sadly and

took her dishes to the sink. Olivia had succeeded in robbing her of yet another opportunity for happiness. Silent tears slid down her face and dripped into the dishwasher.

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Monica didn't hear the doorbell, but she certainly heard the pounding on the front door. She used a dishtowel to wipe the tears from her face, tried to smooth back her disheveled ponytail, and pulled the belt of her robe tighter around her slim waist. It was barely 8:30.

She set her face in a cold mask, prepared to quickly get rid of the intruder. It was probably Valerie or Jason, not willing to honor her request to be left alone, even though they had each chosen their own times of solitude.

Monica froze halfway through the living room. She didn't even have to open the door to know whose body was on the other side of the etched glass window that was in the door's center. That body, that height, those dreadlocks. Patrick. A sense of panic flared inside of her, mingling with her already jumbled emotions. He couldn't see her like this: weak, distraught, unattractive.

But how was he here? She had told him to give her some time, to let her finish up her momma's business.

"Monica, I see you standing there," his deep voice called out. "Come on, baby, open the door. I'm not going away, so you might as well let me in." He leaned an arm and his forehead against the doorpost, wondering whether she would obey or run.

She ran. Up the stairs and out of his sight. Patrick's shoulders slumped as he sighed and shook his head. What would it take for her to let him into her pain? He crossed the porch to sit on the wide banister, determined not to leave until he at least had a chance to see her.

Monica snatched an ankle length, tee-shirt dress from her closet and tossed it across the bed. If he truly wasn't going away, then he could wait while she got herself together. How dare he just show up on her doorstep! Why did that thought make her smile as she ran down the hall to

take a quick shower? Fifteen minutes later, she reemerged; bathed, dressed in a respectable outfit, and her ponytail neatly brushed.

Patrick jumped up as the front door swung open. Monica stood there; breathtaking in a casual dress that clung just slightly to her body, her chocolate skin radiant, and the red tones of her hair highlighted by the morning sunlight. She stepped back into the living room, allowing him to enter the house. Shyly, she looked away as he closed the door and turned to face her. How could she be so uncomfortable with his presence and completely unaware of her importance to him? He wanted to pull her into his arms and kiss away the sadness in those gorgeous, exotic eyes, to give her whatever reassurance she needed. Instead, he caressed her shoulders with a feather-light touch.

“What’s up?” he smiled down at her.

“Nothing.” Old habits die hard. Monica could only shrug her shoulder, not sure what to do or say and ill at ease at having invited him into the house.

Patrick slid his hands down her arms and let his fingers close around hers. Not commenting on the tears that welled in her eyes and were quickly pushed away, he led her over to the sofa where they both sat.

“I know you told me to stay away,” he said after a few moments, “but I didn’t want to. Monica, grief isn’t something any person needs to go through alone. You might be tough, but even a strong person has to lean on someone every once in a while.” He was leery of saying anything more passionate, not wanting to add to her obvious discomfort.

She wiped a finger across her cheek. He would have loved for her to fall against his chest, letting go of those tears, allowing his strength to absorb a small portion of her misery. But he knew her too well.

Wanting to give her a chance to regain the composure she always felt compelled to maintain, Patrick took an opportunity to look around the room. All of the decorations and photographs had been removed and carefully labeled in the boxes stacked against one wall. At one point, the mantle must have been filled with family photographs; possibly albums holding

other pictures or floral centerpieces had adorned the coffee table and end tables. Now, only the dark furniture and brown hardwood floor hinted of the previous décor. They told him nothing.

Turning his attention back to Monica, he offered, “Let me at least help you finish packing, or moving boxes into storage. I’m sure you could use the help.” Well, that was true. He watched the series of emotions continue to parade across her face as she tried to decide whether she was happy or angry at his arrival. Her confusion was evident. He tilted her chin and looked down at her face.

“We’re friends, remember? Friends help each other, Monica. Just tell me what you need.”

She studied him, looking for signs of sincerity. Ha, she scoffed silently. What would she know about sincerity? Hadn’t she believed all the wrong things said by all the right people? Monica wanted to say that she needed him to hold her, to help her discover her own identity, to show her what it felt like to be treated with affection and respect—but the words wouldn’t come. It was too much to ask of him. What if he didn’t want to be involved in that way? Too frightening. Everything she dared to hope was sliding away.

“Almost all of my momma’s belongings have been packed,” she finally responded, “except for some kitchen items. My room is nearly done. I won’t need your help.” She stood as a way of breaking the dizzying warmth of the fingers and thumb that were absently stoking the side of her neck and edge of her jaw. She crossed the room and stood in front of the now barren mantle. “I’ve found an apartment, but I’m only taking the personal items that will fit in my car. Everything else is being donated to The Salvation Army.” She saw what she thought was disappointment in his eyes.

“Are you sure there’s nothing I can do?”

“You should have stayed in Pennsylvania,” she stated harshly. “I didn’t ask you to come. In fact, I told you *not* to come.” Monica wasn’t sure why she was suddenly so angry with him. Patrick’s eyes narrowed for a moment, and then he looked away. Finally, he stood and walked to the front window. Then, he came to stand in front of her.

“You didn’t have to ask,” was all he said. He stared her down until she had to turn her head. But intimidation is not what had made her break eye contact. Anger was not what she saw in his brown eyes. It was warmth that bore straight into her.

“Maybe you can help me fixed up my new apartment,” she conceded quietly as she moved away to, again, put some distance between them.

Patrick nodded. If he wasn’t so concerned about what was going on in that pretty head of hers, he might be amused at this game of cat and mouse. He might have pulled her into his arms instead of letting her get away. Instead, he reminded himself of the purpose for this visit.

“Are you going to keep biting my head off every time I show up?” he teased.

Monica was caught off guard and about to snap at him until she saw the slight smile at the corners of his mouth. Such a sexy mouth. It wasn’t the first time she had thought that.

“Maybe,” she replied defiantly and was rewarded with a full smile. And dimples.

“Just wanted to know,” he assured her.

The tension between them melted. She walked over to the picture window and stared out. “You might not want to be around me right now,” she tested. “My momma’s death and other family issues are sometimes more than I can handle.”

“Then, let me handle them with you.” Patrick stood so close behind her that he could smell the fragrance of her hair and feel the heat off her body. That familiar electrical current still existed and crackled in the air between them. He knew Monica felt it too, saw her stiffen as she realized its presence. He backed away.

When Monica was comfortable, again, she turned to face him with a penetrating gaze. “My momma died two months ago, Patrick. I told you to give me some space, and you did. Thank you. But, two months is long enough to pack up her house and move on with my life. What made you think I still needed help?” Was it just coincidence that she had confronted her family only the night before and today Patrick showed up on her doorstep? The observation made her suspicious. “Why did you come back *now*, Patrick?”

It was the question he had been awaiting.

“For that first month, you kept telling me that you could handle your own business,” he explained. “But even after that, every time I spoke with you, you sounded worse and I got worried. It was obvious that your grief wasn’t getting better and that you couldn’t possibly be handling everything as well as you were telling me. When I couldn’t stand it any longer, it was time for me to check you out for myself. So, here I am.” He deliberately left out the parts where her father had called and been feeding him updates on her circumstances. Instead, he shrugged and flashed his most charming smile.

Again, Monica struggled with her own feelings over what this really meant. They had met because they were both studying the same major, possessed similar career goal; but Patrick had graduated in May. He had no reason to return to Columbus, yet he had come back because of her. He cared about her.

Maybe it wouldn’t matter to him that the rest of her family didn’t love her, Monica prayed. Olivia’s words that no man would want her except for her body echoed in Monica’s head. Lies. All lies. *Please, let them be lies*, she silently pleaded. *Let the truth be that this man cares for me as a woman, as a person.*

Patrick silently watched. He saw her force away tears and pull herself together, undoubtedly for his sake. What would happen to her when he left and she closed that door behind him? Suddenly, he didn’t want to go, afraid that she would collapse after expending so much energy to keep up this façade for him. He wanted to stay in her presence forever if it meant she would be better able to handle the emotions that were always just below the surface. He wanted to know what haunted her and how he could help her to put those ghosts to rest.

The shrill ring of the telephone caught them both by surprise. Monica jumped and then put her hand over her heart as she took a deep breath to steady herself.

“Excuse me,” she said quietly as she hurried out of the room.

Monica returned and announced that she needed to sign some papers. She’d have to see Patrick later.

“That’s cool,” he agreed, happy that she hadn’t told him to stay away. “Let me take you to dinner,” he suggested. Monica nodded. Patrick let his arm rest around her shoulders as she walked him to the door; he resisted a strong impulse to kiss her.

As he headed down the steps to the car, Patrick breathed a sigh of relief. The hardest part of this day was over. He hadn’t needed to camp out on the porch or beg forever and a day through a closed door in order for Monica to let him in. Around this roughneck neighborhood, a gang was liable to stroll down the street at any minute and give an unfamiliar brother a hard time. He didn’t want any trouble that might make Monica see the rougher side of him—he just needed her to depend upon his strength, to use him as a crutch while she got through the shock and pain of what had happened within her family.

He glanced at the dashboard clock. Just past ten. Patrick would go to his aunt’s condo first and then call Mr. Weston.