

## **Love Knows No Boundaries**

Isabelle first fell in love with Sean when she was fifteen years old. Six years her senior, he saw her as a gawky teenager. While at college, Isabelle has found the perfect boyfriend. Justin is patient, kind and a complete gentleman. Sean's feelings for her have changed, and he is tired of sitting by while she is with another man. Driven by desire and love, he does everything within his power to win the woman that he loves.

Justin, the once-perfect boyfriend, begins to fall apart at the idea of losing Isabelle. In a moment of rage and desperation, he does something horrific, effectively changing their future forever.

Will Sean's love be enough to get them through the pain? Or will Isabelle walk away from Sean forever? And does love truly know no boundaries?

Sensuality Rating: SIZZLING

**Genre:** Contemporary **Length:** 63,997 words

# LOVE KNOWS NO BOUNDARIES

# Nicole Morgan

#### **EROTIC ROMANCE**



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# **DEDICATION**

I wrote *Love Knows No Boundaries* because I wanted to tell a story that showed how some love cannot be forced, predicted or chosen. Fate is what brings the gift of love into our life, whether it's for a moment or an eternity. It's what we do with that love that can make the difference between what we want and what we end up with. Finding love does not guarantee a happily ever after, but how you nurture it will help determine whether *Love Knows No Boundaries*.

I dedicate this book to everyone who has found love, fought for it, protected it and cherished it. My wish is that everyone reading this book either has or finds that special love that truly knows no boundaries.

# LOVE KNOWS NO BOUNDARIES

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## **Chapter One**

August 2008

Isabelle walked up the stairs from the basement and quietly opened the door to the kitchen. She had been waiting patiently for hours. Now she scanned the darkened room and alerted her ears for any signs of movement. Whew! He was gone. It sure had taken him long enough. She ran back down to the basement and grabbed the duffle bag that she had stowed away earlier that day. Carrying it up the stairs, she could hardly contain her giggle. He had ignored her for so long, for so many years. Pretending that she wasn't a woman, always seeing her as just a little girl. Well, that was about to change.

She leisurely walked the first floor of the small bungalow and wondered what it would be like when this became her home with Sean. It was a nice home — small, but nice. Eventually, though, they would need to find a place with more room. There was no way they could raise a family in a one-bedroom home. She was about to head up the stairs to put her plan into action when she spotted a picture in a small silver frame perched on top of his television. She knew what it was. She'd seen it before and the sight of it made her angry.

She picked up the picture frame and held it in her hands, wincing at the memory of the day the photo captured. She had just turned sixteen and was barely beginning to develop curves. Looking at the photo now she remembered how awkward she really had looked in her bony body. She unconsciously rubbed a hand down her chest. She had definitely filled out. The girl in this photo was just that: a girl, a child. But now she was a woman. No one could look at her and deny it, not even him. "Was this how he fought his attraction toward me?" she thought. "By keeping a photo around of me at my most awkward stage?" She sighed, refusing to let her thoughts deter her from following through with her plan. Setting down the small frame, she vowed that after today he would have no choice but to see her as a woman.

She proceeded up the stairs and walked into his bedroom. She set the small duffle bag down, opened it, and began to meticulously set the items she had brought on the bed. There was a pair of pink fuzzlined handcuffs; the clerk who sold them to her had assured her that they could only be opened with the key. Next was a white teddy made with satin and lace that she had tried on in the store and fallen in love with. She smiled as she lifted it and held it to her body. It looked like something a virgin bride would wear on her wedding night. At least half of that would be true, anyway. She might not be a bride, but she was definitely a virgin. Sure, she'd had plenty of opportunities in high school, but none of those boys had ever interested her. She only had eyes for Sean since the day she met him.

Their relation by marriage never bothered her. Since the first time she saw him, she knew he was the one she was destined to spend her life with. Unfortunately, he didn't see things the same way, which was why she had been forced to go to such drastic measures. But after the disaster last May, on the night of her senior prom, she was left with no alternative.

It still hurt her to think of how he had turned her away that night. She knew it came from his anger toward her deceit. She had been

desperate, though. She wanted him to take her to her prom so badly that she had gone to him in tears and begged him. She cried as she told him she would be the only girl without a date. He hadn't completely bought the story that she hadn't been asked by even one boy. But she knew he could never stand it when she cried, so she used it to her advantage. After many tears, he reluctantly gave in and agreed to escort her.

Unfortunately, she had underestimated the gossip factor. Once they were at the formal dance, the rumors spread quickly about the older man that she had chosen as her date after turning down nearly two dozen offers. To say he became angry with her was an understatement. No, he had definitely not liked being lied to at all. But she had tried to make him understand. A girl's prom night was an important rite of passage in her life. She hadn't wanted to spend it with some ordinary boy who just wanted to slobber all over her. She had wanted to spend it with *him*, the only man she ever loved. She could still remember the look of shock on his face when she told him. And then she had leaned in and kissed him.

She sighed at the memory of that first kiss. He had kissed her many times in polite friendliness, but never had they kissed like that. She had used his shock to her advantage. When his mouth had dropped open at her declaration of love for him she dove right in. She instantly teased his tongue with hers. It seemed as though he remained frozen in shock for an eternity, but it had only been seconds. She felt something inside him snap. He grabbed onto her, grabbing a handful of her hair, and began kissing her with so much passion it had almost scared her. She hadn't been prepared for the sensations his kiss caused inside her. It overwhelmed her, forcing her to draw away from him.

That had been a disastrous mistake. He had looked at her and she saw the anger in his eyes. He accused her of toying with him, of making him a pawn in her childish games. He berated her for lying to him and then throwing herself at him only to pull away. A real

woman, he had told her, would not have pulled away. A real woman would have taken what he was giving. She had tried to apologize and kiss him again, but his anger exploded into a volcano of fury. He screamed at her and called her a tease, telling her that she was too immature to deal with what she had started.

When he saw the confusion in her eyes, he made her understand. He grabbed her hand and placed it against the hard flesh that stood beneath his trousers.

"Can you handle this, little girl?" he asked her with a mocking tone. Her eyes had widened when she felt the bulge. It was the first time she had ever felt one and she wasn't prepared for the size of it. As she sat there on the stone bench of the hotel courtyard with her hand firmly placed against him, she hadn't said a word. She became frozen, whether from fear of the unknown or just plain fear itself she wasn't sure. But that had been her second mistake. He had stormed off, turning his back to her and tossing her his car keys.

She hadn't seen him since. He was conveniently never home whenever she phoned. He always seemed to have other plans every time there was a family get-together. He had even missed the Fourth of July barbeque that the family held every year. She knew he was hiding from her.

Was he still angry with her? Probably. She knew now that she had acted impulsively and immaturely. But she was more grown up now. She had spent the last three months reading as many books and magazines as she could find about making love. Some of the things she had read shocked her, until she imagined them with Sean. Then they had excited her.

Well, he won't be able to hide from me now, she thought. Not after what she had planned. She had loved him for three long years, since she met him at the rehearsal dinner of their parents' wedding. Three years since his father had married her mother. It was time to take all of the knowledge she had gained in reading about sex and

show Sean just how much of a woman she truly was. And how she wanted nothing more than to make him happy.

She walked to the bathroom, hoping that a quick shower might help relax her nerves. After turning on the nozzle and allowing the water to warm up, she stepped in the old claw-foot bathtub and relished in the feel of the hot, steamy water beating over her skin. She imagined just for a moment that the beads of water pelting her skin were actually the caress of Sean's fingertips. She moaned. She had already tried self-exploration to help prepare herself for him. If she was shaking like a leaf the first time they made love she would just be a child in his eyes all over again. She couldn't allow that to happen. No matter how much the fantasy of Sean touching her naked body excited her, she had to hold herself back. She wasn't alone in her bedroom now, with no hope for release. She was in Sean's house and soon she would be in his bed with him. And that was better than any fantasy she could ever dream up.

\* \* \* \*

Sean walked back into his house, cursing his buddy Jake for canceling at the last minute. He set the basketball on the baker's rack next to the garage door and kicked off his shoes. He had been looking forward to the workout of a good one-on-one basketball game. His frustration had been growing over the past couple of weeks. She had called him again last night. He hadn't answered, of course. She had resorted to using pay phones, thinking that if he didn't know it was her he would answer. But he knew it was always her.

She had to stop this. His father and stepmother had told him they were trying to convince her to go to college in the fall, but she had shown no interest. She had told them there were things she needed to work out that were much more important than an education. He wasn't stupid; he knew that thing was him.

It had been hell on him these past months, trying to keep his distance from her. He hated the fact that one kiss had made him see her in such a different light. She was so damn sweet and sexy. He had a feeling that she was even more desirable than she had realized. Hell, he'd had to blacken the eyes of many of his friends over the past year as her body had blossomed into what it was today. Even though the comments his friends made were innocent jabs, they still made him angry. He didn't want men looking at her like that. It was bad enough that he had spent the past few months thinking of her like that.

He shuddered. He felt utterly disgusted with himself. She was his stepsister, for God's sake. His eighteen-year-old stepsister. He was turning twenty-five next month. Who gets turned on by his eighteen-year-old stepsister? The sick and twisted answer was very simple: He did.

They weren't raised together. They had never lived together. If their parents hadn't fallen in love they wouldn't even be related. But it was still wrong. Wasn't it? Yes. It is wrong. "Don't think about her that way," he chided himself.

He was about to reach into the fridge for a cold beer when he was startled by the sound of pipes rattling overhead. His shower? Someone was in his house. He cautiously walked up the stairs with the intention of surprising the intruder, but he stopped outside of his bedroom.

He looked at his bed and saw the satin teddy and the handcuffs and knew that whoever the intruder was, she couldn't be all that bad. Deciding to wait the person out, he sat on the bed. He picked up the handcuffs and began playing with them. He was wondering who it was. A past fling? Maybe his one night stand from last weekend? But then he heard whistling and he knew exactly who it was. His hands clenched on the handcuffs, turning his knuckles white.

She finished with her shower and was walking back to the bedroom. While she attempted to tuck her towel around her breasts she resumed her whistling, completely oblivious to her surroundings

or to the fact that Sean sat on the bed staring at her, holding her pair of fuzzy handcuffs.

"Isabelle. Care to explain to me what you're doing here?" Sean snapped the words out at her.

She was so startled that she screamed and dropped her towel. Their eyes met then. Neither one of them moved, they both stood frozen. Her face, which had instantly turned pale from her fright, was now turning several shades of pink. She wanted to say something. She knew she should say or do something. Otherwise he would think she was still just a scared little girl who was playing games with him. But the words wouldn't come.

His impatience was evident.

"Izzy? I'm waiting."

Say something. You're standing here naked, for crying out loud. Say something, anything

"Jesus, you just gonna stand there? Say something, damn it!" he shouted at her.

Why was he so angry? Was he still mad about prom night? No, it was something else. Something in his eyes was different. She had never seen them so striking. The chocolate brown of his irises, which normally looked decadent, now glimmered with something else. Something she didn't recognize.

Sean got up from the bed and came toward her, his anger clearly portrayed on his face.

"Why are you doing this to me?" he asked as he raised the handcuffs and dangled them in front of her face. "Do you think this is a game?"

"What? No, no I swear. Sean, please don't be angry with me." Finally. It was about time she said something.

"Don't be angry? Are you kidding me? You're playing games with me, little girl. How am I supposed to react?" His face loomed over hers.

"I am *not* playing games with you. Damn you, Sean. I'm standing here naked, for Christ's sake."

He looked down at her and the arousal that was already building inside of him suddenly burst inside. Every part of him ached to touch every inch of her. He looked at her lean, curvaceous body and involuntarily licked his lips.

She watched him as his eyes studied her body. Heat singed her skin with every second that he stared. She stood still and waited for him to decide what he was going to do next. Her plan had changed by his unexpected arrival home. She was not going to be able to handcuff herself to his bed, wearing only the teddy—after she had hidden the key, of course. He was going to have to choose now. Please let him choose me, she silently prayed.

He muttered a curse and brought his gaze back up to her face.

"Damn you. How much am I supposed to be able to take, Izzy? I'm trying to do the right thing here." He turned away from her. "Please leave."

He wanted her, she could tell. She could see the torture in his eyes. He wanted her just as much as she wanted him. Whether it was the age difference or their unfortunate relationship, he was fighting it with everything that he had. She didn't care what his excuse was. She was not going to let him walk away from her again. She would not be turned away again. She walked up behind him, still naked, wrapped her arms around him and placed her cheek in the shallow valley between his shoulder blades.

His body stiffened. He stood frozen, completely still. It hurt her so badly to feel the tenseness under her embrace. She wanted him to melt for her, just like she did for him. But he was no closer to melting than the damn Alaskan glaciers. Taking a chance, she ran her hands around his waist and up to his chest. She gently repeated the motion several times. His hands stopped her. At first she thought that he was going to pull away, but he simply held her hands where they were. She could

feel his heart beating. No, not beating—pounding. His heart was racing.

"Sean, please. I'm not a kid anymore," she whispered into his ear. He surprised her with a laugh.

"Aren't you?"

Keep going Isabelle, don't give up. He's starting to melt, even if just a little bit, it's working. You can see that it is. Don't back down now.

"No, Sean, I'm not. Can't you see that?" She kept her voice steady and confident, despite the nerves that were clawing at her.

Sean sighed as he held her hands tighter.

"Yes, that's the problem. I can see all too well that you're no longer a kid. But damn it Izzy, I'm a man. You can't keep flaunting yourself and teasing me. You're making me crazy. It's not fair."

"Teasing you?" His accusation made her angry. She was not teasing him. If he would just take what she was offering, he would see she was anything but a tease. She would give him anything that he wanted. Anything.

He laughed again.

"Oh please. First you lie to get me to take you to that damn dance. You wear a dress that was so damn sexy they should have had to check IDs before selling it. You throw yourself at me and kiss me, and now." He laughed even louder. "Now you've come to my place with sexy lingerie, fuzzy handcuffs and you're freaking naked." His last words came out in a whisper. He was quiet, but the agony from wanting her was pounding inside of him.

Deciding not to validate his words, she upped her game plan. Leaning into his ear she whispered.

"Sean, don't you want me?"

He didn't answer her. He remained still, his hands still on hers, and said nothing. The room was so quiet; all she could hear was their ragged breathing. She worried that maybe she had been wrong. Perhaps he didn't want her but he couldn't find the words to let her

down gently. That theory was quickly tossed aside as she felt his hands moving. He kept her hands firmly locked under his, moving them down farther until her hand met with the rigid thickness under his gym shorts.

Sean let out a hiss.

"Izzy. God, don't you feel that? I want you more than you'll ever know. But I'm torn. It's not right. We can't, *I* can't taken advantage of you. You're so young. You're not ready for—"

His words were interrupted by the feel of her hand stroking him. She wouldn't allow him to question it any longer.

"I'm young, yes, but I'm ready. I'm ready for you. I want you, Sean. I want you to make love to me."

Abruptly he turned to face her. There was a glint in his eye as he spoke to her with vehemence.

"Don't do this. There's still time to walk away. You could leave and we could forget this ever happened." His head fell back at the feel of her continuous caresses. "Oh Izzy. God. If you don't stop, if you continue this much longer, there will be no turning back. I won't be capable of stopping myself."

"I don't want to turn back. I don't want to stop. Please look at me, Sean. I mean really look at *me*." She waited for him to do just that. When their gazes met, she continued, "I'm here because I'm ready. I'm here because there is nothing I want, I mean truly *want* more than to make love with you." Feeling her confidence swell, she stood on her tiptoes and started kissing him.

He was still. He wasn't touching her or kissing her back. She felt alone in the wake of a giant storm. Her passion was burning for him and he just stood there. She tried everything she had read about. She was using her tongue to try to entice him, but still he was not fazed. She dug her fingers into his hair and cursed him.

"Damn it, Sean. Please. Kiss me."

He took her hands from his head and held her wrists between their bodies. His eyes, usually a rich milk chocolate color, now looked like

an exotic dark chocolate. He stared at her for what seemed like an eternity. The only sound in the room was of their rapid breathing. Finally he closed his eyes and rested his forehead against hers.

"Izzy, oh Izzy. I can't do this." He pushed her away and started to walk from the room.

He turned back to face her.

"Get dressed. I want you out of here, gone. Don't be here when I get back. I don't want to see you." The words were said with such an icy resolve that she knew she could go her whole life and never again feel the pain she did at that moment, at the sound of those words. She heard him leave the room, but she couldn't see him. Her eyes were clouded with tears.

Sean stalked down the stairs. He was furious. Not with her, but with himself. He wanted her, badly. Why did she have to test his resolve like this? Why was she so determined to break him? He was about to leave when he saw that his hand was shaking as it reached for the door handle. He couldn't drive now. He was a cop, for Christ's sake. A rookie cop, but a cop nonetheless. He couldn't allow himself to drive in the condition he was in. What if he caused an accident? He decided maybe that beer would do him some good. He needed something to cool the fire burning inside of him.

Isabelle blinked, causing tears to fall down her face. How could he hurt her like this? There was no denying that he had wanted her just as much as she had wanted him. If it wasn't apparent in his look, it was definitely evident from what she felt through his shorts. So why did he turn her away? It was just so maddening. She would be angry if she weren't so hurt by his curt dismissal of her. The tone in his voice when he had said he wanted her gone and didn't want to see her cut to her very soul. She had so many hopes, so many dreams. And they were all for nothing. Nothing she did was good enough. He wouldn't take her and make her the woman she was meant to be.

Her hurt started to subside and anger took over as she began picking up her clothes. She threw them on in haste, foregoing the panties and bra. She tossed the handcuffs and teddy into the bag and slung the straps over her shoulder. She stopped and stared at herself in the mirror. What was wrong with her? She wasn't vain, but she had always been told she was pretty. Was she not pretty enough? She noticed she had put her blouse on inside out and she started to laugh. She looked a mess. And she didn't even care.

Those laughs quickly turned to sobs. She loved him so much. She hoped he wouldn't be able to turn her away. All she wanted, all she had ever wanted for the past three years was to make him happy. She had never felt more humiliated and rejected in her entire life. Well, except for that night three months ago. But this was much worse. She had given herself to him in the most vulnerable of ways and he had thrown that gift away.

Sean sat in the recliner, which directly faced the stairs. He had been guzzling his beer and now it was empty. The cold brew had done nothing to turn down the heat of the inferno blazing inside him. He must be cursed, he thought to himself. There was no other explanation. Why else would he be tortured by such a beautiful, sexy creature? And that's exactly what it was, torture. In every moment he was consumed and driven by an absolute necessity to have her. To take her and make her his. To claim her, to possess her. But no matter how much his body argued, his mind told him how wrong it was.

He could hear her upstairs. It sounded like she was laughing. Please God, let her be laughing. Let me be angry with her for thinking this is funny. Don't let her be crying. He wouldn't be able to stand it if she was hurt and crying.

Isabelle left the room after taking a long look at herself in the mirror and wiping her tears away. She knew he hadn't left. She would have heard him if he did. He would not see her cry. She casually walked down the stairs and was startled to see him sitting in his leather recliner, a beer hung loosely in one hand, dangling over the side of the easy chair. He was glaring at her. Did he hate her that much?

Sean watched her. She walked down the stairs so calmly. Like they had been up there playing a game of Monopoly or something. Not like a woman who had just tried to seduce a man and was turned away. She stood at the bottom of the stairs and stared at him for a moment. How could she look so damn calm? Then her gaze turned to the television.

Isabelle looked at the picture. The one that he so obviously used to remind himself that he was an adult and she was a child. She hated that picture. And he set it in the one place of the living room that he was sure to see it from every angle. She walked over to the television, calmly. Then, just as cool and collected, she picked up the photo and turned toward him.

"Is this what you see, Sean?" she asked him with an icy stubbornness in her tone.

He said nothing, just continued to stare at her. Truth be told, he wasn't exactly sure what she meant. But he didn't care for the way she was acting. He was torn up inside.

"Answer me!" she screamed, hating herself for losing her cool. "Do you still see this little girl when I stand in front of you, naked and begging you to make love to me? Do you laugh at the thought of making love to a little girl? Well? Do you, Sean?"

He had never seen her like this before. He thought she was calm, but she was angry and screaming and so—God help him—so damn gorgeous. He got up from the chair and stood in front of her.

"No. No, Izzy. I've tried to remember you as you were in that picture, but I can't." Needing to touch her, forgetting the promises he made to himself he took his hands and framed her face.

"I'm over six years older than you. I'm your stepbrother, for Christ's sake. This is wrong on so many levels. I can't even begin to name all the reasons why we shouldn't be together." He should be glad that she was angry and not crying. But he wasn't. She was still in pain, and he was the cause of it. And he hated himself for that.

The feel of his hands holding her face was only intensifying the pain of his rejection. She blinked and tears escaped. She was angry with herself for allowing her heartache to show, but still aching for more of his touch, praying he wouldn't stop this time. That he would love her the way that she loved him.

"No, don't you do that. Don't cry. Don't you dare do that to me!" he told her. "Damn it, you know I can't stand to see tears in your eyes. You know I can't stand to see you hurting. What do you want me to do, huh? Forget everything my father had ever taught me? Everything I know that is right and just take you and make love to you because I want to?" His hostile words snapped out at her.

"Yes," she said as she closed her eyes on more silent tears. "Please, yes. That's what I want."

"Damn you, Izzy," he muttered as he closed his mouth over hers. It wasn't soft, gentle or tender. It was urgent and demanding. She grabbed onto his forearms and joined him as their tongues danced together. The sensation of his mouth fused against hers caused all of the pain and hurt to melt away. All that was left was a burning desire to submit to him in the most essential way and become his. The kiss seemed to go on forever as their passions intensified and their needs grew more urgent.

He pulled away from her suddenly. She tried to hold him to her, refusing to let the moment end. "No. Damn it, no! Izzy, let go of me. I want you so bad it's killing me. Can't you see that? Don't you know that? Please let me go. Please, before it's too late."

"Why, Sean?" Her eyes were closed as she caressed her cheek over his, feeling the sensations of their faces so close together was only increasing her need for him. "Please, Sean. I love you so much. Why won't you make love to me? It hurts so much every time you turn me away."

Sean wrapped his arms around her and nuzzled into her hair. He drew in the scent of her, the aroma of her femininity, knowing it was torture but not being able to stop himself.

"I swear, I don't want to hurt you. I don't want to cause you one ounce of pain. I lo—," He stopped himself, and then said, "I care about you so much, Izzy." His heart raced as the declaration almost spilled from his lips.

She heard it. He may not have thought she did, but she did. He was about to tell her that he loved her. Why had he stopped? She made no secrets of her love for him. What was it going to take for him to see that they were meant to be together? She was desperate. What more could she do? A light bulb flashed above her head. She had an idea. It was a dirty trick, but she didn't care anymore. All's fair in love in war. She pulled slightly away from him to look into his eyes.

"You don't want to hurt me, but you keep turning me away despite the fact that I know you want me. Maybe I was wrong. Maybe you're not the right one for me. Maybe I should find someone who will take what I am offering. Someone who would not turn me away when I beg him to make love to me." She knew it was wrong, what she was doing. It was deceitful and manipulative. But by the way his hands tensed on her body when she said the words, she knew it was working.

He drew back from the embrace without releasing his hold on her body. "Don't mess with me, Izzy. You and I both know you're not going to do that." His voice was assertive. It was as much of an order as it was a statement.

It was working. She was chipping away at his resistance. "Aren't I? I'm not a kid, Sean. Maybe I have needs." A complete lie. The only need she had was him.

"Damn it, Izzy. I know what you're doing. Trying to make me jealous isn't going to change my mind." How dare she put that image in his mind? The idea of her with another man. He was furious with her for even suggesting it.

"Is either of the two even possible Sean? Could I even make you jealous? Would I ever have any hope of ever changing your mind?"

She was staring into his eyes, praying for some sign, for some small ray of hope that she could hold on to.

His heart clenched and ached, but he knew he had to do the right thing. No matter what his heart or other body parts might want, he knew that he couldn't, they couldn't.

"No, I'm sorry. Yes, you could make me jealous, but it would not change my mind." He pulled away from her completely and turned his back to her. "You really do have to leave, Izzy. I think it would be best if we didn't see each other for a while."

He was startled by her sarcastic laughter. He turned to face her.

"Yeah, right. No, you're absolutely right Sean. We shouldn't see each other for awhile. I mean after all, you hid from me for three months and I just wanted you more, loved you more. So space is obviously the answer. By this time next year I'll be completely insane from what you do to me." She picked up the photo of her as an awkward sixteen-year-old and threw it across the room.

It crashed into the wall after whizzing past Sean's head. He turned to yell at her. To scream at her. But she was already a blur. She was running out of the house. Away from him. He turned away, not wanting to see her leave. Secretly wanting her to stay. Wanting so much more than he knew he could have. Her voice shook him from his thoughts.

"I hate you, Sean! I love you, but damn if I don't hate you just as much." She cried and choked on her last words, "You have ruined me!" Slamming the door behind her, she ran out.

Sean stood there, confusion whirling around inside his body. She would never have any idea what she did to him when she told him that she loved him. But the pain she caused when she said that she hated him was gut wrenching. "I love you too, Izzy. God help me. I love you, too."

## **Chapter Two**

The next morning Isabelle walked downstairs into the kitchen. She knew what she had to do. She was left with no other choice. There was no way she could continue to live so close to Sean. She would die a slow and painful death being this near him, knowing he wanted her as much as she wanted him. And knowing that they would never be together for no other reason than sheer stubbornness.

"Morning, Izzy. Did you sleep well?" Terrance asked her.

No, I slept horribly. Your son is killing me. I love him so much and he won't take me and be happy with all that we could have together.

"Yes, fine. And you?"

"Ah, very well indeed," Terrance said as he winked at his wife.

"Oh, Terrance, hush." Connie blushed.

"Geez, don't you two ever stop being mushy? The honeymoon's been over for like, I don't know, a while now. Aren't you supposed to be getting on each other's nerves or something?" Isabelle asked. She was actually very happy for them. Terrance was a good man and he made her mother so happy. But when your own love life was in shambles it was really hard to be happy for everyone else.

"Oh honey, when you've been given a second chance at love you don't take anything for granted," her mother told her as she poured her daughter a glass of juice and handed it to her.

"Speaking of second chances, I was kind of hoping I might get one," Isabelle stated rather vaguely.

Terrance's brows bunched up.

"Meaning?"

Isabelle shrugged.

"I think maybe I was a bit hasty in deciding that I didn't want to go to school. Do you think there's still time?"

Connie beamed with excitement. "As a matter of fact, I happen to know there are two days until the registration deadline. Oh, Izzy. I'm so happy you've changed your mind. You'll learn so much at college and it will be so convenient. You'll be able to—"

"Actually, Mom, I was hoping I could go up north for school. I would like to stay in a dorm room on a real campus. You know, get the full college experience." She was trying to sound casual. It would only raise questions if she acted desperate.

"Oh. Well I guess that would be okay. I just thought you would want to take classes at the city campus. But I—" Connie hesitated.

"What your mother is trying to say, dear, is that although this is a shock to her 'mother hen' system, we will do whatever we can to help you get settled." Terrance placed his hand over Connie's.

"Really? Oh thanks you guys." She got up to kiss them both on the cheek. "Thank you so much. I'm going to go upstairs and getting online now. I'm sure all of the good classes are picked over but maybe I can find something that interests me." She ran out of the room.

Connie turned to Terrance.

"My baby's leaving home." A small tear trailed down her face.

Terrance took her in an embrace and held her tight.

"I know, honey. It'll be okay. She's a smart girl. She'll be fine."

\* \* \* \*

Sean stood in front of the punching bag, his breath heaving. He had just spent the better part of an hour pounding into the thing, hoping and praying that the pain he felt would diminish. He hadn't slept at all the night before. He was tired and cranky and lonely as all hell.

He missed her. He never had missed her like this. Seeing her last night, naked and begging for him to take her, Jesus, it was almost too much for him to handle. But he had stayed under control. That was the important thing. It didn't matter how much he wanted her. Nor did it matter how beautiful she looked or how much his heart swelled with her words of devotion. All that mattered was that he had done the right thing. He hadn't taken advantage of a young, naïve girl. He was probably going to die a lonely man, but he would die knowing that he had shown her respect and treated her like the young girl that she was.

He had to keep telling himself that. He had to keep thinking of her as a girl. If he thought of her as the woman that she appeared to be, he would surely die from the needs she brought out in him. No, she was a girl, just out of high school. And he was a soon to be twenty-five-year-old cop. There were just too many reasons why it wasn't right.

Sean left his basement, where he kept his workout equipment, and stomped up the stairs. He pulled a water bottle from the refrigerator and stared at the picture on the door. After he had cleaned up the mess that she had made when she threw the frame he kept the photo. It was imperative that he save it and look at it, often. She looked young and innocent in this picture. That was the image that had to be saved in his memory. Not the image of the audacious gorgeous blonde begging for him, with her wavy curls falling around her shoulders and her hazel eyes that looked like they summoned him with every subtle change of color. He could not and would not remember the look of her body. Her sweet curves, her plump breasts, her—damn it!

Sean stalked up the stairs and ripped the tape off of his knuckles. He turned the shower on and, while waiting for it to warm up, went to his bedroom. He hadn't even attempted to sleep in his bed last night. It was too easy to remember the way she looked when she was begging for him, wanting him. It was too easy to recall and it was too much for him to handle. He headed for the shower and decided he'd better make it a cold one.

\* \* \* \*

Isabelle turned off her laptop and began to get ready for bed. It had been a long day, longer than most. The pain and hurt from last night when Sean had turned her away was still very fresh in her mind. She had spent most of the day making plans and to-do lists. She had a lot to get done in the next eight days, before Terrance and her Mom would drive her up to the university's north campus.

She wished she were more excited. She should be. She was sure that all of the other kids her age were probably elated to be going away to school and couldn't wait until they got there. Maybe that was the problem. She didn't feel like a kid. She felt like a woman. A woman who was saying goodbye to her dreams and whose heart had been torn to shreds, but a woman just the same.

She walked in her closet to find some pajamas when she saw the little duffle bag sitting on the floor. She had forgotten she'd thrown it there when she got in last night. Using all the control she could muster, she fought the tears that wanted to come.

She thought of the satin teddy that she had bought last week. It was purchased with the intention of wearing it for Sean. But that hadn't worked. He didn't want her. Maybe his body did, but not like she wanted him. She wanted all of him, forever and ever. He didn't want her enough to forget about the rest of the world and take what was his.

Reaching down, she unzipped the bag and carefully took out the two items that were in it. She walked to the end of her bed and removed a pile of laundry she hadn't yet put away from the top of her hope chest. She opened the chest that had belonged to her mother before she had married her father. In it, here were some family heirloom linens and a few pictures that she vaguely remembered cutting out of magazines when she was younger, depicting what she thought at the time were the most beautiful wedding dresses.

She picked up the clippings and laughed. Some of them were just hideous now. Obviously her fashion sense had been a bit clouded in her younger years. She fanned through the pages quickly and had to stop. She went back a few pages and saw one that was absolutely stunning. It wasn't big and puffy like all of the others. It was simple and elegant. Timeless elegance was what came to mind as she studied it further. Maybe her earlier sense of fashion hadn't been as bad as she thought.

Deciding to throw all of the others away, she carefully placed the one she liked back on top of her grandmother's lace tablecloth. She didn't want her mother to ever find what she had so she opted to put the teddy and the handcuffs underneath all of the linens. She lifted the linens just enough to place the teddy and handcuffs underneath when she felt a thick envelope. Perplexed, she reached to pull it out.

Her heart sank when she saw what it was. How could she have forgotten? It was a letter her father had written to her when she was ten years old. He had been diagnosed with cancer much too late and the disease had already taken over his body. From the time he found out he was sick to the day that he had died they'd only had seven weeks with him.

She started to cry. She wanted to open the letter and read it but knew that she couldn't. Every time she had read his words she hurt so badly. He was such a good father. He used to come to all of her softball games and practices. He was at every school function. He always put her and her mother first. It was unfair that such a decent and loving man had been taken at the young age of thirty five.

For some reason it made her think of Sean. Her father had been Sean's age when she was conceived. If Sean hadn't of pushed her away, they could be starting their life together. But they weren't. Oh, Isabelle, she thought to herself. You need to get a handle on your emotions. How are you going to face him when you come home for Thanksgiving if you are still so hopelessly in love with him? No, you have to let him go. You have to do what's best. Sean was a good man,

just like her father was. She would rather have him in her life as a stepbrother and a friend than not at all.

With a sigh she put the rest of the contents back into the hope chest and closed it, knowing that she was closing the chest on not just mementos, but her dreams. Deciding she was not that tired, she put the laundry away. It was a menial chore, but it kept her busy just the same. It would keep her mind occupied and off of Sean. Maybe going to school was the right thing after all. She had registered for all of her classes earlier and some of them were going to be tough. Yes, if she kept busy maybe she wouldn't miss him so much. Would she?

# **Chapter Three**

"All done then?" Connie asked as they got in the check out line at Target.

"I think so. I mean, there's so much stuff here, but the information packet had said that I'll need it all." Isabelle pushed the cart up further as the line moved.

"Well, don't forget we're only a phone call away if you need anything at all, sweetheart." Connie's eyes started to mist for the hundredth time that week. It was no wonder Isabelle was such a crier herself. She obviously got it from her mother.

"Mom, please don't start crying again. You start and then I start and then we get home and Terrance is a bumbling fool because he has no idea what to do with a couple of emotional women."

"I know, I know. It's not his fault. His first wife, God rest her soul, she was a cop. She was tough and strong, not feminine and whiny like us." She laughed at herself.

"Terrance is a good man, Mom. I'm glad you'll have him with you while I'm gone." She hugged her mom. They had always been close and the past week had been hard on the both of them.

Connie wiped her eyes with a tissue she dug from her pocket. "Yes, he is. He loves you like you were his own, you know." Isabelle nodded.

"I know. I love him too."

It was their turn, so they loaded all the items on the conveyor belt at the register. They talked casually and waited for the cashier to give them the total. They were avoiding thinking about what was on both of their minds. Tomorrow they were going to drive Isabelle up north. Well, she was driving too. But they would be following close behind with the intention of helping her settle into her dorm room. One more day and she would be three hours away from Sean. Would it be far enough?

\* \* \* \*

They had just gotten back from the gym and headed inside his house.

"Come on, I'll get the pizza ordered and you get the game on." Sean told his buddy and fellow rookie officer, Jake.

"Yeah, hey make sure you get extra—oh, hi Isabelle." Jake said from the other room.

Sean froze. His fingers hovering over the keypad of the phone. She was here? It had been seven days of agony since that night she stood in his bedroom. Why was she here? It wasn't going to get any easier. It would only get harder and harder every time he had to turn her away.

Sean set the cordless phone back down on the counter and walked toward the living room.

"Hey Sean. Is—oh sorry I didn't see you come in." Jake said, completely oblivious to the tension in the room.

She sat in the leather recliner and stared at him. She didn't say anything; she waited for him to speak first.

"Hi Izzy." His throat was suddenly very, very dry.

She smiled, all too aware of Jake's presence.

"Hi Sean. I was wondering if I could talk to you for a few minutes." She looked over at Jake. "Alone, if it's not too much trouble."

No. I can't be alone with you. There's too much temptation. "Jake and I were going to watch the ball game on TV. Can it wait?"

His curt voice irritated her. He had no right to treat her so coldly. She had done nothing to him except love him with everything that she had.

"I see, well I just wanted to say goodbye. I'll drop you a postcard sometime." She was angry now, and furious with herself for letting him get to her so.

"Leaving?" Sean said confused.

She took a deep breath as she stood at the doorway. She turned to face him.

"Yes, Sean. I'm leaving tomorrow for the north campus of the university. I'll be staying in a dorm room. I won't be home until Thanksgiving. So anyway, goodbye, Sean."

He saw the hurt in her eyes. He knew he was the bastard that put it there.

"Wait!" When she didn't stop he begged. "Izzy *please* wait. Don't leave like this."

She turned around and saw the bewilderment on Jake's face. Poor guy, he didn't know what was going on, although it was pretty obvious that he knew something was up.

"Jake, I'm sorry could we do this another time? I need to talk to Iz—to my sister."

Oh that bastard. He did that on purpose. He got that jab in just because he knew it would hurt. Thinking it would push her away.

"Yeah, no prob. Hey Izzy, have fun up at school. And be safe huh?" He kissed her on the cheek and headed out the front door.

She waited for it to close. Then very calmly and very methodically she walked toward Sean. She was toe-to-toe with him as she reached her hand up and put everything she had into the smack.

Whap! Sean's head flew to the side. He rubbed his cheek as his head slowly came back to face her.

"Watch it, Izzy." It wasn't a threat, but clearly a warning.

Fire swept though her body, and not the good kind. "You watch it, Sean! You know, I didn't think you could possibly hurt me anymore.

But somehow you never cease to amaze me with your insensitive words. Sister, huh!" She turned to storm away, but he grabbed her before she could.

"It's true, isn't it? Your mother married my father. We're related, honey, whether you want to admit it or not."

She let out a mocking laugh.

"Admit it? Oh, you're a fine one to talk about people admitting things, Sean."

Oh, so the gloves were coming off then, huh? Fine, he could handle it. Could she?

"What exactly is it that you want me to admit?"

Oh no, he wasn't going to humiliate her anymore. She might have groveled and begged before, but never again. If he wanted her, he would have to do something about it. But it wouldn't be because she had forced the issue. Never again!

"It doesn't matter, Sean. It did before, but no longer. I merely thought we could have a few parting words. I didn't want my last words to you to be that I hated you." She hung her head for a moment and then looked back up. "Because I don't. I was angry, but I don't hate you."

The look she gave him was killing him. He knew she loved him and he had spent the last week pining over her. God, he wanted her so badly. He ached for her in a way that he didn't know was possible. If he didn't do something tonight, she would be leaving tomorrow. He told himself last week that separation would be good for them. But now, even though she was only going to be a few hours away, it was eating him alive that she was going off to school. There would be young, testosterone-ridden men there just waiting for a chance at her. Had she really meant it when she said she was going to turn to someone else? The thought of another man touching her sent chills down his spine.

She waited for him to say something, but of course he just stared at her. It made her so damn angry.

"Fine then, I'm going. Goodbye, Sean." She said the last words as she turned to go.

She made it to the front door and had barely opened it when a hand reached over her head to slam it shut. She was startled. She could feel his body pressed up against hers and his breath against her ear.

"Don't go."

Was it a question or a demand? She wasn't sure.

"Why?" she asked as she turned her head, making his mouth almost touch hers.

He closed his eyes and dropped his head on her shoulder. Could he do this? Should he do this? He would go to hell for sure. But the idea that she was going off to school with all of those men around was ripping a hole through his heart. He wanted her, but not just her body. He wanted to make her his. He knew it was wrong, he knew he would burn in hell for all eternity for it, but he wanted her love. He wanted to take her until she belonged to only him, until the idea of any other man repulsed her.

"Don't ask me questions I can't answer, Izzy. Just stay." His voice was gentle. "Please."

She shook her head.

"I can't, Sean." She felt her eyes fill and prayed that the tears would remain silent. "I'm sorry. It hurts too badly to be around you. I know I shouldn't have come. I just—"

"It hurts to be around me?" He turned her to face him as he framed her face. "Oh Izzy. I've hurt you. Damn it, don't you know that's what I've been trying to avoid?"

She was forced to look up at him. If he saw the tears maybe he would understand. Because she couldn't find the words to express the anguish that was loving him.

"Oh baby. Izzy, you're crying." He bent down and kissed her tear streaked cheeks. "Baby, please don't cry. I don't want to be the reason you hurt. You don't know what it does to me to see you in pain."

She placed her hand on his chest, gently pushing him away. He held strong, not allowing her to separate them.

"But you do hurt me, Sean." She shook her head. "I know you don't mean to. I know you don't want me to love you. But I can't help what I feel. I hurt so badly, Sean. I just want it to go away. But it won't. I love you so much." Needing his strength and his warmth, she grabbed on to him. Clutching his shirt in her hands she continued, "Will it ever go away? Am I fated to love you for the rest of my life?"

God, he hoped so, although he knew he shouldn't.

"Yes, you are." He had said it without thinking. His unconscious desires mixed with his unplanned response.

She looked up at him, confusion marring her face.

"I don't understand. I thought you—what are you saying Sean?"

God, he was a freaking idiot. He'd already hurt her, so why not go on and toy with her a little bit too. 'You shouldn't be doing this, damn it,' he thought to himself. 'It's wrong, don't do it, walk away.'

"If I told you I wanted you to stay, would you stay?" What the hell are you doing? Let her go!

She nodded. "I would do anything for you, Sean. I love you."

There it was. The final piece of elastic had snapped and his restraint was now broken and as wild as a caged animal released into the jungle. He took possession of her mouth, kissing her. It was fierce and animalistic. He was devouring every part of her. As he ran his tongue down her neck into the deep valley between her breasts, he began ripping at her shirt.

Isabelle's head fell back against the door. Was this happening? Could it be real? Please be real.

"Sean." She whispered his name.

He stopped what he was doing and looked up at her. Her face was flush and her head was thrown back against the door. She was breathing heavily and she looked damn beautiful.

"Izzy, look at me."

She lazily opened her eyes and gazed at him.

"Sean, don't turn me away this time. I can't stand it anymore. I need you so much."

Jesus.

"Izzy, are you one hundred percent absolutely sure that you're ready for this?"

She nodded as she raised a hand to run it through his thick dark hair. She loved his wavy unkempt locks. It drove her wild the way it hung however it wanted to.

"Izzy. If I continue, if we don't stop, things will change between us. Do you understand?" Could she? Would she possibly be able to understand what would happen to her if they continued? She would become his. There could never be anyone else ever again. Did she understand that?

"Sean, I love you. Please make love to me. You're all I've ever wanted." She reached her other hand into his hair and was dragging his mouth to hers, to meet her kiss.

And he did. He met her kiss, her desire and her passion. Had he ever wanted anyone like this before? He didn't think so. He pulled away just barely. His lips brushed against hers as he spoke.

"Not here, Izzy. Let me take you upstairs."

He didn't wait for an answer as he lifted her up and cradled her against his chest and carried her up the stairs. No words were said as they looked into each others' eyes.

He set her down on the bed and brushed her stray wavy blonde curls off of her face.

"Do you know how beautiful you are, Izzy?" He watched her face blush. "I have been dying for you. Do you know that? Do you know that I can't sleep because I dream of you? Just like this."

His declaration surprised her.

"You have? You do?"

He smirked. She was so sweet, still so young. But she was his.

"Yes baby, I have." He watched as her blush deepened. "What? Tell me what's embarrassing you."

She looked up at him looming over her.

"It's when you call me baby."

"You don't like it when I call you that?"

She shook her head.

"No, I do. I–I like it a lot. It makes me feel warm inside and my stomach flutters." She smiled hesitantly.

"Well then, *baby*, I will be sure to call you *baby* many, many times. Okay, *baby*." He leaned over her and kissed her.

She giggled.

"Now you're just teasing me."

Sean brushed the backs of his fingers down her cheek as he looked at her intently.

"No, baby. No more teasing. No more. I won't turn you away and we won't tease each other anymore." He brought his mouth to hers and he heard her moan.

His kisses did things to her. She was feeling things that she only felt for the first time just last week. Now he was making it happen all over again. She wasn't aware it happening but suddenly she found herself lying down and he was on top of her. She could feel every part of his hard, muscled body pressed up against her soft, curvy one. She wrapped her arms around him and slid them up and down the muscles of his back, relishing in the rigid power she felt under her hands. She thought she heard him saying something. Was he talking?

"Izzy, did you hear me?" he said breathlessly.

"No." She could barely breathe from the fire he was causing inside her. "Sorry, I–I've never felt this way before, Sean. I don't know what to do."

He smiled and nipped at her bottom lip.

"It's okay, honey. We'll take it slow okay?"

"Okay. Sean? I'm not—I never thought to—." She closed her eyes on her shame. Why couldn't she just say it? Wasn't she trying to prove to him that she was a woman? Not some stupid kid. And to top things off she could feel her bottom lip start to quiver.

"Ssh. Izzy, its okay. Are you scared?" He was caressing her face with the back of his fingers.

She bit down on her trembling lip and nodded.

"I'm sorry Sean. I wanted it to be so perfect."

She closed her eyes as he kissed her brow.

"Izzy, making love isn't about making things perfect. It's about feeling connected to the other person. I don't want you to be scared honey. Do you want to stop?"

Her eyes widened. He was going to push her away again.

"No. Sean, no. I'm sorry. Please don't do this, don't turn me away."

The fear he saw in her eyes broke his heart.

"No, honey. I promise, I won't turn you away. Whether we make love or not, I will not turn you away. Can you do something for me?"

"Anything Sean. I'll do anything for you." She clutched onto his shirt. She was beyond scared. She was so close to having him, and she was deathly afraid she was going to do something wrong.

"Izzy, honey, I need you to relax. Your fingernails are biting into my skin." She pulled back at his request. Tears filled her eyes. "No, don't do that. You made me promise not to pull away from you. Well, I'm asking the same thing. Don't pull away from me."

He kissed her gently.

"Come on, baby. Just relax. We're not used to each other yet."

Yet. He said "yet." Would they be used to each other? Would all of her dreams come true?

"I-I don't know what to do Sean. I want to make you happy. That's all I've ever wanted. Ever since I was sixteen years—"

"Baby, if we're going to be together you can't make references to you being sixteen years old. This is hard enough for me. I'm going against everything my father taught me about respecting women. Especially young and vulnerable ones." And she was. He knew just how young and vulnerable she was. But he couldn't help himself. He

had reached the point of no turning back. Not physically, but emotionally.

"Okay. I'm sorry, Sean. Will you just kiss me? If you kiss me I'll stop blabbering."

He didn't wait for her to ask him twice. He dove into the kiss with everything that he had. He kissed every part of her face, neck and mouth before he came up for air. "I want to see you, Izzy. Like you were that night. Will you let me?"

She bit down on her lower lip again. Why wouldn't it stop trembling?

"Yes. Can, I–I've never seen you. Can I see you?"

He watched her nervous eyes flicker as she asked the question. "Yeah. Come here." He pulled her up off of the bed and turned her to face his dresser.

"Watch in the mirror, Izzy." He stood behind her and scooped her hair up as he kissed the back of her neck. "Watch as I undress you."

They were such simple words. But when he put them together in that deep voice she could feel her knees weaken. She looked into his eyes through the reflection as he began to unbutton her shirt from behind.

"Uh-uh. Look in the mirror. Don't turn your head to me. Watch us there; watch your body as I pull the layers away." He bent over and kissed her neck.

His tongue slid a sensuous slide up and down her neck, sending tiny fireballs into the deepest part of her. She could feel parts of herself start to throb. She had felt aroused before when she had experimented on herself, but she had never felt this level of it without being touched there. Her head had fallen back against his chest as she moaned with the pleasure of his seduction.

"Look, baby," he whispered in her ear.

She opened her eyes and saw what he was doing. Her shirt was gaping, exposing her swollen breasts. The tiny nubs in the middle, surrounded by darkened pink circles, suddenly seemed much larger

and rigid. She watched him as he brought her shirtsleeves completely back and off of her shoulders and threw her blouse to the floor.

"Do you know what I've wanted? What I've been dying for since that night I found you here?" He licked her neck again.

His voice. What was he doing to his voice? It sounded so, what, erotic?

"Tell me." Her words were barely audible as she struggled to rein in her desire. He hardly touched her and she was on fire.

"This." He cupped them, gently massaging them before rubbing his calloused thumbs over the tender points that jutted out to him in invitation.

"Sean, oh Sean." What was happening to her? It had never felt this good when she had done it to herself.

He watched the image in the mirror as he listened to the sounds of her desire coming from her throat. She could barely breathe. Her chest was heaving and she had, involuntarily he was sure, arched her back and rubbed herself against the agony that he had been forced to contend with all week long.

"Jesus, look at you, Izzy. You look like an angel. A beautiful, sensual angel." He waited for her to comply before he reached his hands down to her jeans. "I want to see you here too. God, you have no idea how badly I want to see you here." He undid the snap and wasted no time pulling her zipper down. He delved his hand into the hot, sweet part of her that was hidden.

"Ooh, Sean." She wrapped her hands around his neck and held on. Her knees felt so week.

She was rocking against his hand. He was just holding her., gently caressing the swollen nub, and she was going insane from it. It was enough to drive him mad.

"You are the very definition of an aphrodisiac, do you know that? My God, I can't— Izzy, look at yourself in the mirror. You're writhing under my touch. Do you know what that does to me?"

She opened her eyes and saw. Was it even her? The woman in the mirror was rocking her hips back and forth and moaning. Her arms were raised up over and behind her head, doing things to her breasts that she hadn't realized they were capable of. She kept watching, wondering. Could that really be her? Her hips were moving of their own accord. His touch felt so good she couldn't stop if she tried.

"What do you think? Does that image drive you crazy, baby? I can feel how hot you are. How ready you are. Are you? Are you ready for me? Do you want me?" Sean asked her, baiting her desire further.

She met his eyes in the mirror and they locked. She wanted him, but she still hadn't told him. She spent all summer planning to seduce him and she neglected to get on birth control. That's why she had frozen up moments ago. What if he was angry with her?

"Sean, oh my God. We can't. I'm so sorry."

His hand stilled from caressing the warm wetness of her. Had she just stopped him? He wouldn't push her if she wasn't ready, but she seemed to really be into it. What had happened?

"Oh, okay." He slid his hand out of her pants and stepped away from her. He had to get his urges under control. He had been about two seconds away from plunging into the deep abyss of her very soul.

She had ruined it. He had been right all along. She was a stupid kid. A woman, a real woman, would have thought of protection ahead of time. She hadn't even bought condoms. Unless. The thought that he might have some made her a tad irritated, but she couldn't pretend that a twenty-four-year old man didn't have sex.

"Sean?"

He wasn't under control yet. If he looked at her, if he touched her, he might lose it. With his back turned to her he spoke. "Yes, Izzy? What is it?"

Just ask him. Don't be such a wimp. You couldn't possibly screw up anymore than you already have.

"Do you-oh geez, I can't believe I'm about to say this. I'm trying to ask you if—"

What the hell was she trying to ask him? She was so nervous she was stumbling over her own words. What, did she need to borrow fifty thousand dollars or something? He turned to face her.

"Just say it, Izzy." He wished he had done a better job of hiding his frustration.

"All right, fine, here goes. Do you have any condoms?"

## **Chapter Four**

His head snapped back and his brows bunched together as he stared at her. Had he heard her correctly? Was she asking him if he had condoms?

"What did you say?"

Great! Make me say it again. As if it wasn't humiliating enough the first time.

"Come on, Sean, you heard me. Don't make me ask it again."

He smiled and turned toward her completely.

"Izzy, why do you need condoms?" he asked her patiently as he laid his hands on her shoulders.

"Sheer mortification" were the only words to describe what she was feeling right now.

"Sean." She bit her lower lip. Why was he making this so hard on her?

Realization donned on him. He now understood.

"Izzy. Baby, why did you stop me before?"

She looked down, afraid to meet his gaze. She felt so foolish.

"I–I didn't prepare for this. I only knew that I wanted you but I–I didn't think about protection." The last word came out in an embarrassed whisper.

He had to bite back the chuckle that was coming up. She was so sweet, so innocent.

"Baby, I have condoms."

Her eyes lifted to his.

"You do?"

He smiled at her as he rubbed his hands up and down her arms.

"Yeah, baby, I do. Was that all that stopped you?"

Her blush returned as she nodded and looked down. He pulled her to him and stroked her back.

"Izzy, is there any thing else we should talk about before things go any further? Because I have to tell you, you about killed me a few minutes ago when you stopped me."

She giggled.

"No, there's no—well, maybe there is something I should talk to you about. I don't want you to be disappointed and—"

He silenced her with a kiss. When he pulled away he lifted her chin with the tip of his finger.

"Izzy, do you trust me?"

She nodded.

"I do. I trust you and I love you so much. That's why I'm afraid."

"What are you afraid of honey?" He was trying to be patient. Trying to control the need pounding inside him. But the constant yoyo of her emotions was maddening.

"I've never—I don't know how or what—I want to make you happy and I don't know how to do that." The words were coming easier now as they spilled from her mouth. "Sure, I've read things. But is it the same? Will I do it right?"

Was she asking him or herself? She seemed to be lost in her own thoughts.

"Izzy, look at me. Look into my eyes. Are you trying to tell me that you're a virgin?"

She nodded.

"I'm sorry, Sean. I'm sure you're used to more exper—whoa." She was interrupted by his swift movement. He had picked her up and swung her around. Was he laughing? This hardly seemed funny.

He set her down and, still laughing, spoke to her.

"Izzy, only you would apologize for being a virgin. Honey, don't you know that being a virgin doesn't make you a bad person? Quite the contrary. It means that you respect yourself. It means that you

were waiting for the right time and the right man to make you a woman." He brushed her cheeks with his thumbs and held her face. "Is that time now, and with me baby?"

"Yes, it's you." She was feeling more confident now. Standing in front of him with her shirt off and her pants undone she came closer.

"Teach me, Sean. Show me what to do, how to love you." She slid her tongue from his mouth to his ear and smiled when he groaned.

If she kept doing that with her tongue, he wasn't going to be able to hold back. He had suspected she was a virgin. But knowing that now, he had to take even more care than he had planned on. But then he felt her nibble on his ear and then all bets were off.

He dropped to the floor in front of her, immediately tugging at her jeans. She was in both shock and awe of his primitive behavior. She wasn't sure what she had done, but something in him had changed. He was wild now. He had the jeans completely down to her ankles when he forced a leg up so that she could step out of them. After one foot was free he turned his attention to the other one.

When she was completely clear of the restraints of her clothing, she suddenly felt very exposed. The only thing covering her body was a thin piece of satin on the front and back of her panties. She looked down at his motionless body and realized that he was staring at those very same panties. His gaze was burning a whole right through her. She felt her body getting hotter while moisture pooled in those satin underwear.

Sean looked at the sight before him. It was heaven. He had seen her with nothing on that night. But seeing her in nothing more than this little piece of fabric was a whole new kind of sexy. It was alluring. Her panties were calling to him, begging him to take them off and explore what was hidden beneath.

He stared at them a moment longer as he weighed his options. He could rip them off of her, but she was a virgin and no matter how erotic that could be, it definitely would not be a romantic memory. He could slowly peel them down her smooth, luscious thighs—although

that almost seemed too boring. Even though Izzy was vulnerable and inexperienced, she was definitely not boring. Then he grinned. He knew exactly what he was going to do.

"Don't move." He said as he looked up at her. "No matter what I do. Do not move." He reached his hands up to her. "Take my hands, baby." She did as he asked and he twined their fingers together. Then with both of their hands occupied he leaned forward.

She thought he was going to kiss her where her panties were getting wetter with every second, but he moved to her outer thigh. What was he doing? Then she felt the warm glide of his tongue. It started at mid thigh and then worked up until he got to the thin piece of satin at her hips. He started to suck the satin into his mouth, causing an arousing sensation on her skin. He opened his mouth and bit down on the fabric. Then he began tugging it down her leg. He brought it down only about six inches before he pulled away.

She watched him, waiting for his next move. Anticipation caused a storm of passion to well up inside of her. With her panties half on and half off, the most private part of her was barely covered. Just a tiny tug and she would be completely exposed to him. He made his way to the other side, their fingers still twined together. Then he repeated the process. The sensation of him sucking on her skin and then his teeth scraping was unlike anything she had ever experienced. He pulled the panties down just as far as he had on the other side. She was fully exposed to him.

Sean stared at the beauty that was lying before his face. She was so sexy and her scent, her scent was driving him crazy. He wanted to bury his face in her right now, but he also wanted to take things slow. He wanted her to enjoy every single part of her first time, of their first time. He bent his head down and showered her with tiny kisses.

He kissed her everywhere, everywhere but where she wanted him the most. She had read about it. And every time she did she found herself getting excited. She wanted to know what it felt like, with Sean. He had managed to kiss the entire perimeter of her aching sex. She wanted more.

"Sean, please." She dug her fingers tighter against his grasp. She heard him laugh but she didn't care. She was too lost in the moment.

"Be patient baby." He darted his tongue out and instead of kisses, he was now licking around the outside.

Did he not know what he was doing to her? She was dying a slow death by the ache he was causing. She had no idea passion could be so painful. The longing she felt for him hurt. She felt an undeniable urge to be filled, filled completely. She felt so empty. Without any thought of pride or embarrassment she lifted her leg and draped it over his shoulder.

He was startled by her sudden brazenness. But he liked it. So, she wanted him to taste her. Well, she would get what she asked for. He would make a damn meal out of her. He got up from the floor as she whimpered a protest.

"Ssh," he told her. "Come here."

She followed him over to the full-length mirror that hung on his closet door. He turned her around to face the mirror and placed her hands on the door. She looked at him in the mirror, confusion etching her face.

One side of his mouth lifted up.

"Keep your hands where they are. Step out of your panties, honey. Here." He reached down to help her. "Now, back your legs way out toward me. And slowly drop to your knees. Good. Now, lean your arms into the door. That's it. That's nice, baby." He placed his hands at her hips as he guided her legs further apart. "Now spread your legs, honey. No, more. Real wide. Yes, that's perfect."

He looked at her reflection. On her knees, outstretched in front of the mirror. He ran his hands down her back and rubbed them all around her perfectly rounded bottom. He pulled his hands away to undress himself. He was making quick work of all of the buttons and

the zipper that his outfit entailed. As he stepped out of the last leg of his pants, he smiled at her.

"What do you want me to do to you, baby?"

His voice made that sound again. How did his voice turn her into a puddle of desire? Knowing that there could be no more hesitation, no more embarrassment, she answered his question.

"I want you to kiss me there and—taste me."

"All you had to do was ask, baby." He dropped to his knees once again, only this time he turned his body and scooted underneath her on his back. At first he just stared up at her. Then she heard him mutter something under his breath and his mouth crushed against her. It was hard and fast. It was intoxicating. His head was lifted up and he was licking parts of her that had never been touched by another human being. He kept saying something, but she couldn't understand. And honestly, she didn't really care. What he was doing felt so good.

Sean was losing himself in her taste, fast. He had never consumed anything so sweet and succulent in all of his life. Her scent was enough to send him to the edge anyway, but her juices on his tongue would make sure he fell completely off the edge—completely and forever.

"Look in the mirror." Sean's words vibrated against her sensitive flesh.

She understood him that time. She looked up and saw his tongue dart out of his mouth and into her wetness. The sight of him licking her and taking her with his mouth was making her crazy.

"Sean. I can feel—oh Sean. Something is happening to me."

She was close. He could sense it from her muscles contracting around his tongue every time he entered her, but her words were his proof. She was moaning and whimpering with every thrust of his tongue. He had never wanted a woman's release more than he did hers right now. He increased his pressure as he grabbed onto her bottom.

Isabelle jolted from the sensation of his rough hands. He was pressing hard. Pressing her body further into his mouth. Her legs were so weak. She could feel her thigh muscles start to shake. What did that mean? But oh, it felt so good. She heard a ragged cry and was surprised that it came from her own throat. It sounded so primal. She was about to beg him to take her now, to not make her wait any longer. But then he did something different, something that stunned her.

Her reactions were guiding his movements. He knew she was close, but he wanted her to experience all of the sensations of oral sex before he let her climax. When he knew that he had licked and tasted every part of her, he went for the sensitive nub that was swollen and engorged with her arousal. First he flicked it with is tongue. He had to fight back a laugh at her response. She probably hadn't realized it but she had screamed a naughty word. Then he pulled the nub into his mouth and began sucking on it.

What was he doing? Oh, yes. Is this normal?

"Sean I—maybe you should stop. I don't know if I should be feeling—oh, oh, oh Sean." She felt a heat wave rip through her at the same time that a million butterflies danced around in her tummy. She suddenly felt euphoric as a warm rush of liquid heat spilled from within her. Sean. Sean was moaning and talking to her. What he was saying she had no idea. She was floating somewhere, hovering outside of her body.

Finally the sensation tapered off until she was left with a warm feeling of peace. And sleepy, she felt so sleepy. Her body became lax. She vaguely felt it when Sean had picked her up and carried her to the bed. She opened her eyes and smiled up at him. Raising her hand to his face she whispered to him.

"That was amazing."

He watched her. She was completely satisfied. When she had finally climaxed and he had tasted all the sweet nectar that had poured out of her, he thought he was going to fall right along with her. But he

held back and concentrated on drinking up every last drop of her. She was sleepy now. No matter how badly he wanted to bury himself in her, she needed a nap. This night would be exhausting for her if he didn't let her rest because there was no way that once was going to be enough with her.

He leaned over her and placed a gentle kiss to her forehead. Before he had a chance to pull away she grabbed onto him in demand of a real kiss. So he did. He kissed her long and hard, with all of the unspent desire that was still making him ache for her.

She drew away from his kiss, stunned. Her eyes were wide.

"Is that me?"

He smiled. She could taste her passion, and if he was a betting man, she liked it.

"It's amazing, isn't it? You're so sweet, honey." He kissed her once more.

She moaned as the kiss deepened. He could feel her arousal returning. He thought she would be too tired, too lax from her orgasm to do anything but rest. But now she was urging him, enticing him.

"Izzy, don't you need to rest?"

She shook her head.

"I need you, Sean. I need you to fill me, I feel so empty. I want to feel whole with you. Make love to me and make me a woman."

Her sleepy voice and the words that she said were turning him on even more.

"Okay, baby. Hold on." He pulled away from the bed and opened the nightstand drawer. He pulled out a condom and sheathed himself as she watched in fascination. He seemed so much larger than she had expected.

He got on top of her, hovering just above her by bracing himself up on his elbows.

"Are you sure, honey?" He had to ask her just once more.

"Yes. Show me, Sean. Love me." She reached for him.

Love her. Such a simple request. He tried to block out the consequence of their actions. He could very easily love her, forever. But could they really be together? Just the idea of it gave him visions of those god-awful talk shows, yet he had a burning desire to make her his for all of eternity. But he wouldn't think of all that. They had tonight. That was all that mattered.

He positioned himself at her entrance and slowly nudged himself inside of her. She was tight. Understandably so, but it was more than that. When he felt the first part of himself enter her he knew that he was lost to her, that no woman would be able to hold him as intimately as she was right at that moment. In that one instance, something in him had changed. He wanted her like no man had ever wanted a woman before. And not just her body. He wanted her soul and everything that she was.

He stared at her, waiting for her to adjust to him. Her muscles tightened and held onto him. He could see the discomfort on her face. He knew he was stretching her in ways that her body was not used to. It took every amount of restraint he had to not just plunge inside her fully until their bodies were fused together as one.

He pulled out of her and repeated the process several times. Each time going a little deeper, staying a little longer.

"Are you okay, honey?" She had gripped onto his shoulders and she nodded.

"This will be it, baby. The next time I will be all the way inside you. Can you handle that? Does it hurt too much?"

She smiled at how gentle and tender he was being with her.

"Yes, Sean. I can handle it. Fill my body with yours."

And he did. He pushed himself all the way inside her and held still. He watched her face. The mild amount of pain he had seen on her just moments ago had disappeared and now there was a look of stunned pleasure. Whatever she was feeling, she liked it. So he did it again. Each time, he released himself from her warmth only to bury himself within her all over again. And every time she uttered a sharp

cry of pleasure. With every thrust her breathing increased and her body shuddered. He was barely hanging on to his sanity. But he had to control himself. The pleasure that was washing over her was too magnificent to be ignored. So he regained in his control, fighting the clawing need to ravage her.

He increased his thrusts, going just as deep, but faster. He wasn't going to last much longer. He needed to feel her fall with him. He reached down and brushed his thumb over her sensitized nub. Her eyes flared open in shock and then she screamed out his name. Then she flew.

He could feel her muscles convulsing around him. When her hot wetness flowed all around him he flew with her as well. His orgasm washed over his entire body. Had he ever felt such intensity with a woman? He didn't think so.

He looked down and saw her. Oh crap. She was crying again. What did he do? Had he hurt her? Why did her tears always break apart a piece of his soul?

"Baby, what's wrong?" he asked as he licked the tears from her cheeks.

"I'm so happy, Sean. It was so wonderful. I can't even begin to put into words how you've made me feel." She reached up and hugged him to her.

He held her to his chest as he rolled until his back met the mattress. "Don't move right now, honey. Stay right here, lying on top of me, and sleep."

"Sleep?" she asked him, confused.

"Izzy, you wiped me out. I need to rest." He opened one eye to look at her. "But I want to feel you against me when I fall asleep."

She kissed him and snuggled into his chest, just like he asked her to. After all, there was nothing she wouldn't do for him. She loved him.

## **Chapter Five**

Isabelle woke the next morning to the sound of birds chirping, the smell of coffee brewing and an unmistakable pang of joy that had swept into her very soul. She was a little sore. Actually, she was a lot sore. Sean had woken her twice during the night and they had made love both times like it had been the first time. And after each time he had held her tight and soothed her trembling body. They gave their bodies to each other in the most essential and tender ways. It was absolute perfection.

She rose up and lazily walked toward his closet. She chose one of his t-shirts and pulled it over her head. Passing the mirror on the way to the door, she caught a glimpse of herself. Her hair was tousled and the makeup that once graced her face had been slept away. Any other time she would have fretted, thinking she looked a mess. But something about the look of her swollen lips and rose-colored cheeks made her think that she had never looked better.

She left the room and headed for the stairs when she heard Sean downstairs talking to someone. He sounded upset. She paused on the stairs and tilted her head as she listened.

"Yeah. No, I know. It was stupid. We should have called you. I'm sorry we worried you." There was a pause. "Yeah. I'll tell her. Okay, you too, bye." Then she heard the unmistakable sound of his phone being slammed to the counter.

Something was wrong. She ran the rest of the way down the stairs and stood in the kitchen doorway. His back was to her. He was wearing an old pair of jeans and nothing else. She could see his back

muscles bunch up and tense with every breath that he took. His hands were gripping the counter and his head hung low.

"Sean?" She said it so quietly.

He turned his head just barely, keeping his back to her.

"I didn't know you were awake."

"I just woke up. I heard you on the phone. Is something wrong?" She didn't like the tension in his voice.

He laughed. A deep tortured laugh that seemed as painful to listen to as it was to make.

"Is something wrong? That's a good one, Izzy."

She went to him and wrapped her arms around him. "Sean, talk to me. Tell me what's bothering you."

He grabbed her hands and removed them from his stomach. He turned around to face her. "That was your mother on the phone. She was worried because you didn't come home last night."

Her mother. Oh no. She had forgotten to call home last night. She had been so lost in Sean's touch that nothing else had mattered. "What did you tell her?"

"What did I tell her?" He walked away from her and turned to face her again. "I lied to her, told her we stayed up late watching television and you fell asleep on the couch. What was I supposed to tell her?"

"Sean. You didn't have to lie to her. I realize that—" She was interrupted by his curt response.

"What? Are you crazy, woman? Of course I had to lie to her. What did you think? I was going to tell your mother that her twenty-four-year-old step son had sex with her eighteen-year-old daughter?" He was yelling at her now.

"Sean, they'll find out eventually. They'll want to know why I've changed my mind about going to school. We'll find a—" He cut her off once again.

"The hell you're not going to school. What's gotten into you? They can't ever know, Izzy. Jesus, you really are young, aren't you?"

The words hurt. He could see it in her eyes. But he had no choice. She obviously was living in some sort of a fantasy world. A world where a brother and sister could be together and no one would see just how big of a sick bastard he was.

"Don't say that. I'm not a child. I'm a woman. I'm your woman, Sean. You made me that last night. I love you." She said the last words as she came up to him and placed a kiss against his mouth.

Damn it! Why did her kisses have to feel so good?

"Izzy, stop it! Look, I'm sorry if you got the wrong impression but what happened last night can never happen again. It was a mistake. I was weak. I shouldn't have caved."

No! No, he hadn't just said that. He hadn't just ripped her heart into a million pieces. He couldn't possible mean it.

"Don't say that. Sean, please." The tears started to fall. "I know people might not understand at first, but we're not related. I'm of legal age. There's nothing wrong with us loving each other."

She wasn't going to make this easy on him. Why did he have to forget who he was last night?

"First of all, I'm a cop. A cop who took an oath to protect and serve. A cop who would look at a man my age and know that there was something seriously wrong with him for taking advantage of an eighteen-year-old child." He held up his hand to stop her. "No. Don't say anymore. Perhaps I should have been clearer with my intentions." Could he do this? Could he break her heart so callously?

"Izzy, last night was my fault. I should have been stronger, and now things are different between us. Things will never be the same again." He took a steadying breath. "You need to go away to school. I don't want to see you again."

No!

"Sean, no! Please don't say that. I love you. I've waited so long for us to be together. Now we finally can. We can be together forever." She was begging him and she didn't care. Her sobs were echoing in the room as she pleaded with him. But no amount of

humiliation could compare to the pain that was slicing through her heart.

"No, Izzy, we can't." Say it. Just say it and get it over with. Tell her. It will be a lie, but it will work. "I don't want to be with you." He deserved to burn in hell for that.

Shock mingled with her pain.

"No." She shook her head at him. "You don't mean that. I thought—you were so— I thought that you loved me."

I do. God help me, I love you so much. I will love you until the day that I die.

"You were wrong. You've let your girlish fantasies intertwine with reality. After all, you are still just a child." He prayed to let lighting strike him dead as he prepared to finish the blow. "I could never love you."

She didn't move. No tears came. No cries flowed freely, just utter and complete stillness was all he saw in front of him.

"I see." Slowly she turned away from him.

He saw the pain in her eyes. Had her heart just stopped beating? Was she even breathing? No, she didn't see. He wanted to scream at her, 'I do love you. Last night was amazing and I don't want to let you go. But I know I have to. I know it's the right thing to do. For you. You deserve so much out of life.'

"Izzy. I care about you." Go ahead and say it, you're already an asshole. "But as a big brother. I'm sorry if—"

She swung around and met his gaze. Her eyes were fierce. She was infuriated with him.

"Like a brother? Huh, well, I guess you were right then." She waited for a moment before continuing, "You are a sick bastard, Sean."

She laughed out loud. He knew she was trying to seem strong, trying to hide the heartache he was sure was tearing her apart. He watched as she began pacing the floor.

"You see me as a little sister, so of course we spend the night making love. You have a really strange outlook on family bonding."

He wanted to say something but knew there was nothing that could be said. Nothing could be done to take away the heartache he had caused. The only solace that he had was knowing he would suffer for all eternity for what he was doing to her right now. If he hadn't had her, hadn't loved her all night long and held her in his arms, he might have gone crazy. Having her and loving her though, he knew that letting her go would be the hardest thing he would ever face. And he deserved it. He should feel pain. He should never be allowed to feel happiness ever again.

"You must think I am pretty stupid, huh? Well, not to worry, Sean. No harm, no foul." She snickered as her tear streaked face and glared at him. "Heck, at least my first time was with someone who cared for me, albeit like a brother."

She shook her head at him. He hated the disgust he saw in her eyes.

"At least now when I go off to school I won't be so, how did you put it last night, immature? Yes, well that won't be a problem. Now I'm all woman. I'll know how to please a man." She started to walk from the room when she stopped and turned back to face him.

"You know, Sean, I'm not so sure that every man would be as regretful after spending the night with me. I'll find out soon enough anyway." She turned and left the room.

Whether she intended to or not, her words hurt. The pain he inflicted on her just came back at him with a bullet.

No. She was not going to go off to school and start sleeping with any man that wanted her. She was his. She belonged to him. He loved—

"Damn it!" He raced up the stairs after her.

He found her sitting on the side of the bed. Holding her jeans in an attempt to put them on, but all she could manage to do was sob. She was fighting the tears, trying to be strong. He could handle her anger,

but not her pain. And if he knew his Izzy, the words she used to try and hurt him, hurt her just as badly.

Could there be anything worse than the misery that was eating away at her? Had anything ever hurt anyone as much as she hurt now? Could any pain be as horrible as the pain she felt inside her chest? She wanted to die from the agony of it. Here she sat, on the same bed that, just hours ago, was the scene of every dream she had ever had. Now she felt like the air had stopped flowing in and out of her lungs and she was suffocating.

He came to her then and kneeled in front of her.

"Ssh. Izzy, don't cry. Baby, please." He placed his hands on top of hers.

Her head snapped up. His spirit looked drained as he spoke to her, but she didn't care. Who was this man that could turn from fire to ice in a heartbeat?

"Don't you dare call me that!" Her words were cold and hard. "Ever! Don't you ever call me that ever again, Sean! The man who made love to me last night, the man who held me and was so tender and gentle, he called me that." She glared at him. The shimmer in her eyes was as much from her tears as it was from anger. "You are not that man! You are nothing like I thought you were."

He dropped his head in her lap and held onto her hips. "Izzy, I'm sorry. I'm so sorry, baby." He was choking on the words as tears welled up in his eyes.

She could feel a wetness hitting her thigh. His voice was hitched, like from a man in pain. Was he crying?

"Sean?"

He looked up at her. Tears were indeed clouding his eyes. She could see the regret, the remorse, the pain. Why? If this was hurting him just as much as it was hurting her, why was he doing it?

"Sean, talk to me. Tell me, why are you doing this?" Her voice was calmer now as she saw the raw emotion he was displaying.

He wrapped his arms around her waist and held her tight. She wished he wasn't doing this. Why couldn't he just be selfish and throw caution to the wind. She wanted him to lay her down and show her what he couldn't form the words to say. He was crying for Christ's sake.

She reached around him, holding on tightly as he held her. She was no longer crying. He was though, a cruel twist of fate, she thought. The irony of it was a very small amount of penance for the pain he was causing her.

She continued to hold onto him, rubbing her hands up and down his back as she listened to his quiet cries. He was hurting. She knew he was torn. He felt guilty, like he'd done something wrong. After everything that happened last night, he still was looking at her age and their relation by their parents' marriage. He wasn't seeing the love or the joy that they could bring to each other's lives. He wasn't allowing himself to see that there was nothing she wouldn't do for him. So she held him and hoped that he would stop fighting it.

"Izzy?" Sean's muffled voice was barely audible.

"Yes, Sean." She stroked his hair.

He drew away from her embrace and stared into her eyes. Those same eyes that she watched just as intently as they made love and they reached their climaxes. She just needed one more kiss. If she could have that he wouldn't be able to let her go; she just needed one more kiss. If she was wrong and it wasn't enough, it would be a memory to keep in their hearts until the day that they died. As if death would even separate her from this ache.

As if he heard her thoughts, Sean took his hands to her face. Gently holding her head and brushing her tear-stained cheeks with his thumbs. Even kneeling in front of her he had to bend his head to join their mouths. He kissed her. It was a tender kiss. It tore her soul apart. How could a kiss give such pleasure while promising so much pain?

She accepted his kiss willingly. The gentle caresses of his tongue as it swept into her mouth melted her into a puddle of desire and need.

"Sean. I love you. Make love to me. Just like last night, make love to me." She leaned back on the bed and tried to drag him with her.

He watched her. He saw the need in her eyes. It would be so easy to take her. To have her again. To imprint one more memory on his brain. But he couldn't. He knew as sure as he drew breath that if he did, he would not be able to turn her away again. He ignored the lust building inside and got up. He walked to the dresser and placed his hands on it while his head hung low.

"Sean, what's wrong? I thought—"

He brought his head up and his eyes met hers in the mirror's reflection. "I need you to go." Tears welled in his eyes again. "Go to school, Izzy. Go, and forget about what happened between us. Please."

She rose from the bed, shaking her head. It was obvious how much he was hurting her. She had to know he cared. The problem was he cared so much. He couldn't let her know how much. If she knew she would fight for him and never give up.

"No, Sean. I won't leave you. I can't leave you. You want me. You may not love me like I love you, but I know there is something between us." She placed a hand to his back.

He swung around and grabbed her by the shoulders, shaking her.

"No! There is nothing between us. I only feel regret for what we've done. Now, please go." He was shaking. His hands were trembling. "Just go and forget me." He saw the disbelief on her face. He knew she wouldn't go. "Damn it, Izzy. I don't want you. Can't you see that?"

Liar.

"You're a liar!" She screamed at him. "A liar and a coward. You want me and you know it. Look at your hands Sean, they're shaking. And your eyes. You've cried. I've never seen you cry before. I won't leave you. Not when I know it's not what you want."

Damn her. Why did she have to be so tenacious? He was doing this for her. He was getting no pleasure from hurting her. "No!" He pushed her away. "I don't want you. I don't love you, not like that. I shake because I'm weak. I cry because I'm a bastard. Don't fool yourself into thinking those tears were for you." Finish it. Make sure she leaves here angry, not hurt. If she hates you it's better than causing her pain. "You might have thought last night was great, but honestly baby, it was just sex and it was mediocre at best."

Whap! She had moved so fast that the few strides she took to get to him and the resulting slap were a blur.

"Take that back!" she screamed at him.

Good, she was angry. An angry woman didn't cry. Did she?

"No. Why else do you think I kept waking you up? I figured it would eventually get better. You kept leaving me unsatisfied." He shrugged. "Wasn't the first time I was wrong about something."

He could see the fury rolling off of her in waves. She stared at him for a moment before hastily throwing on her clothes. It seemed as though only mere seconds passed and she was fully dressed. She marched out of the bedroom and proceeded down the stairs.

He came down behind her to find her searching around the living room for something.

"Izzy?" His voice was low and quiet.

She turned to him, but said nothing. Walking toward the front door she quickly sidestepped his attempt to grab her hand and reached for the door to open it.

"Izzy, please." Stop it. You're a selfish bastard. Let her go. She's only eighteen years old. She has her whole life ahead of her. You have absolutely nothing to offer her.

She didn't turn to face him.

"Sean. I am only going to say this once. Do you understand?"

"Yes, baby. I understand." He hunched his shoulders and winced as the endearment unconsciously fell from his lips, knowing it showed more of his heart than he had intended. He didn't miss her disdain when he said it either.

"I'm leaving today. I'm going to go to school, and I won't look back. I will live my life and enjoy it to the fullest. I will find another man who appreciates all that I have to offer." Turning to face him she continued. "Only one thing could change that. You. You, Sean, can change that. Ask me to stay. Tell me you don't want me to go. That's all it will take. But if you don't stop me then I will be gone. And your chance will be lost forever."

He bit his tongue. He clamped his mouth tightly closed. He couldn't speak. If he opened his mouth in any way he would ask her, beg her to stay. And she would. She would stay and give up her whole life for him. She would live day in and day out trying to make him happy. He was sure of it. Just as he was sure that one day she would live to resent him and all that she gave up to be with him at such a young age.

The relation was only part of their problem. She was young and she deserved to enjoy it. Not to be tied down to a cop who wouldn't allow her to be herself. So he said nothing as she stared at him, slowly dying as he watched her wait for him to tell her what she needed to hear.

"Just as I thought. Goodbye, Sean." She turned and walked out.

Sean watched the door close. He listened to her car start and pull away from his house. Walking over to the window, he saw her car was turning the corner. She was gone.

Three months ago she had told him she loved him. Nine days ago she had tried to seduce him. Last night she had given her soul to him. Somewhere in the craziness of it all he had fallen in love with her. And this morning he had set her free.

He would never feel her soft warm body against his again. He would never taste her sweet kisses or watch her face flush with arousal again. She was gone, more than physically–emotionally as well. He had seen to that. He had made sure she hated him, thinking it would be easier. For her, yes it would be. But for him, it was the beginning of a living hell. Let everlasting purgatory begin.

She got into her car and calmly drove away, gripping the steering wheel. When she rounded the corner, she pulled over to the side of the road. She laid her head against her hands and wept. She was leaving town in two hours. She had to go home and finish packing. She had to shower and wash his scent from her body. She needed to load her car. She needed to do so many things. But she couldn't help her weeping. The pain was too severe. What she really needed was Sean. But she couldn't have him. She had been a fool.

She wouldn't cry. He had seen so many of her tears. But not now, his words had cut too deep. She would give no more of herself to him. He already had her heart. He would not have her pride too. Sean was her past. Somewhere, somehow she would find her future.

## **Chapter Six**

## December 2008

Isabelle walked into her bedroom and plopped her suitcase on her bed. She was exhausted from the amount of hugs and kisses her mother had showered over her since she walked in the door an hour ago. Deciding she was too tired to unpack, she lay down on her bed and curled up on her side.

It had been a long and hard first few months of school. The first days and weeks she was there were a blur brought on by her own tears. She cringed at the memory of what happened the day before she left town. Sean hadn't just broken her heart, he broke her soul. Whatever connection they had that one night was irrevocably broken. There was no going back.

When she first arrived at school she dreamed that he would come to her and tell her how wrong he was, how sorry he was. But it never happened. Perhaps she hadn't really known him at all. The man she thought she loved would have never used such hateful words toward her. Especially after he had taken such care with her and loved her so tenderly.

She hadn't talked to Sean since that morning. He hadn't tried to contact her and she had held to the vow she made him that morning. His chance was lost. He would never have her again. She had given him the opportunity to keep her and he had thrown it in her face. Perhaps love was just as painful as all of the country-western singers depicted it to be. Or perhaps she hadn't really loved him at all. How could she love a man who could be so cruel after being so kind? But if

she hadn't really loved him, why did it still hurt so badly? Why did she still ache for him every minute of every day?

\* \* \* \*

Jake listened to his friend as he asked the favor. He was confused by what was being asking of him and more than a little concerned. Sean hadn't been himself these past few months. He had been distant and withdrawn. It hadn't affected him at work; he was actually doing quite well as a rookie, always going by the book and following proper procedure. He already started to earn the respect of his superiors, as well as some of the more seasoned officers. Something was definitely off with Sean. It was like he had a dark cloud hanging over him at every moment. There was almost always an edge to him that, if he didn't know better, would make him fearful of what his friend would do next.

Jake thought back about that night three months ago when Izzy had shown up at Sean's house. It had been no secret from the tension in the air that there was bound to be an argument between them. It was after that night that he started to notice Sean was changing.

He often wondered what had happened between the two of them. What happened to cause Sean's behavior to change so drastically and almost literally overnight? He barely went out anymore. He didn't get together with any of the guys. He basically just stayed home and went to work. Nothing more. Jake had considered asking Sean what had changed, what set off his rapid personality metamorphosis, but he had a feeling he wouldn't get the truth anyway. One thing he was certain of, though. Jake had a strong feeling that whatever had changed with Sean had everything to do with Izzy.

"So will you do it?" Sean asked.

Jake was startled out of his thoughts.

"Yeah, I guess. I mean, I'm not so sure I understand. But whatever, yeah I'll do it."

\* \* \* \*

The next morning Isabelle awoke early to help her mother prepare the turkey and all of the fixings. It was good being back at home with her mother and Terrance. Obviously Isabelle being gone did nothing to diminish their lovebird attitudes. They were just as happy and giddy as when she left. And she was glad of it.

She held in her sigh as she remembered that last day she had been at home with them. She had been so sad, and they knew that she had been crying. They prodded her for information but she told them she was just a little sad to leave home. Her mother bought the story. But she knew that Terrance hadn't. The look in his eyes told her that he knew she was keeping from them. It was a concerned, dare she say, fatherly look.

She smiled. He really was such a sweet man. She was so glad that her mother had someone like him in her life and that she was finally happy again. The first couple years after her father had passed away she had been so sad and lonely. But Terrance breathed new life into her. And for that Isabelle would always be thankful to him.

Isabelle walked to the sink to wash her hands after stuffing the turkey. It was a gross job, but she never much minded doing it. Her mother, on the other hand, would much rather be baking a pie than stuffing her hand in the orifice of a dead bird. She saw Terrance coming toward the backdoor through the kitchen window holding a grocery sack. Hmm, she hadn't even realized he had gone out.

"Geez, I swear those shoppers are like vultures. I had to wait in line for twenty minutes, in the express lane no less, just to buy this damned brown sugar," Terrance vented while setting the bag on the counter and kissing Connie's cheek.

"That's because they probably don't have a wonderful husband to pick up things that they forgot at the store. They're probably rushing around while calculating in their head how long their dinner will be delayed because they forgot the stuffing," she told him while she gently elbowed his ribs.

Isabelle tried to swallow the emotions welling up inside her. The brown sugar was for Sean. He wouldn't eat his yams without them being topped with the sweet sugar and marshmallows. He was going to be here. It shouldn't be a surprise, it was Thanksgiving after all. But she had unconsciously tried to deny that possibility.

"So ah, what time is Sean coming?" Did she ask casually enough? she wondered as she caught the look she got from Terrance.

"He'll be here at about three o'clock. Have you talked to him since you got back?" Terrance asked.

"No, I haven't had a chance." She smiled at him, not mentioning that she hadn't spoken to Sean for three months.

"Well, I hope he's in a better mood this time. We practically had to force him to come to dinner a couple of weeks ago, and he spent most of the night snapping our heads off. He's been so, I don't know, different lately," Connie said, and then laughed. "Heck, maybe you being gone is too much for his gentle persona to handle!"

Her mother was teasing, she knew. But she didn't miss the stare Terrance threw her way. He was boring his eyes right through her as if his leer would extract some hidden truth. If only he knew how much truth was hidden behind her mother's innocent comment.

"Well, now that things are pretty well under control I think I'll go for a quick run. Unless you need something else." Isabelle turned to her mother.

"No, no honey you go on ahead. I envy you; I wish I had the drive that you do when it comes to physical fitness." Connie patted her rounded hips with a look of disgust.

"A beauty like you needs no fitness regimen. You are a natural goddess." Terrance wrapped his arms around Connie as she rolled her eyes.

"Flattery will get you everywhere."

They all laughed and Isabelle ran up the stairs to change into her track suit. It was a little chilly outside today so shorts were not an option. Once she was changed she jogged down the stairs and headed toward the mud room. Digging around in a basket that held her old shoes, she found a pair of Nikes. Once she was laced up and ready to go she headed outside.

Walking down the driveway, she started to bend her arms back to stretch them. She stopped at the driveway's end, by the sidewalk, and sat to do her leg stretches. Five minutes later and she was on her way.

Her original plan was to just get in a quick run to counteract the massive amount of calories she would be taking in later that day. But once she began and felt the cool air hitting her face, it felt too exhilarating to stop.

Instead of sticking to the surrounding neighborhood she decided to run a little farther. Running down Vine Street, she headed for the little shopping complex that was just a five-minute drive away. It had a little court yard in the center of all of the stores. She could take a few moments to rest there before she headed back.

She was in sight of the supermarket that Terrance had just complained about and smiled at the slew of shoppers entering and exiting the building. They looked like manic cattle rushing in and out in herds. She got to the street crossing and waited for the light to change before continuing on.

Crossing into the complex she passed a coffee shop and headed toward the court yard. She wasn't aware of who she innocently jogged past. Nor was she aware of the look she got when she did.

"Hey, wasn't that Izzy who just ran by?" Jake asked Sean.

Sean heard Jake talking but he couldn't comprehend the words. There she was. She was sweaty and her hair was a mess and she was damn beautiful.

"Yo, Sean. Dude, what is with you?"

"Sorry. Did you just see Izzy go by?" Sean asked still staring at the woman who had all but collapsed on the park bench. "Uh, yeah. Look, I wasn't going to say anything but you leave me with no damn choice." Jake's tone was anything but pleasant.

Sean stared at him, trying to figure out what the problem was.

"What?"

"You tell me. You haven't been the same for months now. You not the same person since that night I left you alone with Izzy." The accusation was evident.

"Excuse me?" Sean was angry.

"You heard me. Spill it. What the hell happened with her? What did you do?" The last sentence was filled with disgust.

"She's my eighteen-year-old stepsister man, watch your mouth."

"I know how old she is, damn it. Do you?"

Sean had to hold himself back from punching Jake in the face. It was no secret. He had changed. No matter how much he was aware of it and no matter how many people he overheard talking about it at the precinct, he couldn't seem to change it. That night he spent with Izzy and their subsequent heart-wrenching goodbye had irrevocably ruined him.

"What the—oh hell!" Sean sat down on a chair outside the café. Jake gauged his response.

"I knew it. I freaking knew it that night. I could feel the tension. What the hell happened?"

Sean couldn't look up, couldn't face his friend, his fellow officer. He already felt like a sick, twisted son of a bitch. He didn't want to see that same look on Jake's face.

"Tell me, damn it!" Jake snapped out the words.

"Shit, fine. You wanna know? Because I got to tell you, man, I don't think you do." His head still hung down.

"Tell me." It wasn't a request, but a demand.

"Jesus, I slept with her. I took a sweet vulnerable girl and I stole her innocence." Sean's head was still hanging down but his voice had changed. Every word he uttered was racked with misery.

"You took—she was a virgin?"

Sean nodded.

"You stupid son of a bitch! What the hell's wrong with you? You're a fucking cop man. What the hell were you thinking? She's a damn child." Jake took a steadying breath before he continued. "Tell me it was only once. That you screwed up and you knew it but you didn't touch her again."

Sean kept his head hung down and said nothing.

"Holy shit! You didn't stop did you? Damn it Sean! I should have never left you two alone. If I had stayed—when did it start, anyway? It was at her prom, wasn't it? You selfish bastard, you were screwing around with her all summer, weren't you?"

Sean's head rose at that. "No, it happened that night you left. Nothing happened before that night, I swear. But not for lack of her trying."

Jake was about to say something when he caught the meaning of the last sentence.

"What? You mean she was pursuing you?"

Sean nodded.

"I tried, man. For months I tried. She would kiss me, tell me she loved me. She even showed up one time at my place with the intent surprising me by handcuffing herself to my bed. I was even able to turn her away then. But then my resistance faltered. I was freaking weak and I gave in. I know it was wrong, I just—" Sean shook his head and ran the fingers of a hand though his hair.

"Sean, I'm sorry man. I just assumed that you had seduced her. I mean, Izzy is so sweet. I never would have thought—well, I'm sorry I said what I did. This changes everything." Jake's tone was friendlier now.

"What could it possibly change? I still did something that I know I shouldn't have."

"She was eighteen, right?" Sean nodded at that. "And she pursued you; you weren't trying to get a seventeen-year-old girl into bed."

"Shit, is that what you thought?"

"I guess. I mean, I guess I always noticed the way she looked up to you, almost like hero worship or something. And she didn't seem like the kind of girl to seduce a man. So I just assumed that it was you who did the seducing." Jake shrugged.

"Yeah, well, it doesn't much matter. I'm going to hell for it and I'll be living in a life of agony until that time comes."

Jake watched Sean and could see the self-loathing in his eyes.

"Dude, it's not as bad as you think it is. You're not *really* related and she was eighteen, not a minor. Give yourself a break. Lord knows that if she had tried to seduce me I wouldn't have been—."

Sean slammed his coffee cup down on the little wrought iron table. Grabbing Jake by his shirt he brought their faces within an inch of one another.

"Don't you even think about it! She's off limits, got it? She belongs to—look, just make the damn call, all right? And don't forget. Five minutes after three, no later."

Jake watched in disbelief as Sean got up from the table and stalked toward his car. That wasn't like him; Sean didn't do things like that. He didn't lose his cool, ever. Jake looked over at the bench and saw Izzy still sitting there. He had the feeling that there was a lot more going on than Sean was letting on.

\* \* \* \*

Isabelle had finished fixing her hair when she heard Sean come in the house. He had been downstairs talking to his father and now he was in the kitchen with her mother. She wanted to go down. She wanted to prove to herself that she could be around him and not want to die from needing him. She took a deep breath and headed out of her bedroom toward the stairs. She had just begun to descend them when she heard the front door close.

She ran down the stairs and was met with her mother.

"Did Sean just leave?" Isabelle asked, hoping she didn't sound too desperate.

Connie nodded.

"Sorry, honey. He wasn't here five minutes and one of the officers he works with called him. They're short for shifts tonight. Some sort of flu bug or something. He had to go in."

"Oh. Well, that's too bad." Don't do it. Don't cry again. It's been months.

"It'll be fine. I'll make a plate for him and take it to him tomorrow. You could come with me, you know. I swear every time I stop by his place it's a disaster. I go over for one thing and spend the rest of the day cleaning and doing laundry." She tried to sound annoyed but instead smiled. Her mother was always the consummate housekeeper, content in doing menial chores, taking care of the ones she loved.

Go to his house? Where they made love, several times. No way. She was trying to be strong, but she wasn't stupid. There was no way her heart could take the memories and the pain that would surround her there.

"We'll see. I was thinking about calling some old friends from school tomorrow. Seeing if any of them wanted to get together."

"That sounds like a good idea. Come now, help me set the table." Connie put her arm around Isabelle's tense shoulders and led her to the dining room. Neither one of them noticed Terrance standing in the doorway to his study. Watching them, and especially watching Izzy.

Terrance walked back into his study and sat in his favorite leather chair. He glanced at the photo of a younger Isabelle standing next to Sean. It had been at her seventeenth birthday party. She was wearing a bracelet than Sean had gotten her and was smiling up at him. Before, it seemed like just a good picture. But now, looking at it, Terrance wondered if it didn't show more. The look in Isabelle's eyes did not look like that of a child. He saw something there that he hadn't noticed in all the times he had looked at it before.

She was in love with his son. She was a child in this photo, but she was in love with an older man. Stranger yet were his son's distance and mood swings in the past months. And they started right around the time that Isabelle had left for school.

Terrance remembered the morning when they realized she hadn't come home from a "friend's" house. She had told Terrance and her mother the night before that she wanted to say goodbye to a friend before she left town. Then the next morning Sean told them that he and Isabelle had fallen asleep watching television.

Why hadn't Isabelle just said she was going to see Sean before she left? It wouldn't have been that odd. But knowing that she lied about it made him wonder. A chill ran down his spine as he pondered the possibility. All of the clues were apparent.

She had stayed out all night. Lied about where she had been going. The red, swollen eyes the next day were an obvious sign that she had cried many tears. And Sean, his son, hadn't been the same person since that night.

"Dear God. Please don't let it be true," he said quietly to himself, although deep in his heart he feared that it was.

## **Chapter Seven**

June 2009

Isabelle hung up the phone and felt guilty all over again. Her mother had been so sad when she heard she wasn't going to come home for her summer break. She had decided to take a job at a local clothing boutique and take some summer classes. She rationalized this to her mother by explaining that if she took a couple extra courses every summer she would probably be able to graduate a year ahead of schedule.

What she hadn't told her mother was the truth. Although she hadn't seen Sean for nine months, she still loved him. The hurt was still just as strong and the pain just as fierce. When she had gone back home during Christmas break Sean had devised every possible scenario he could come up with to cancel at the last minute. He hadn't even been there to open presents with them on Christmas morning.

She was no fool. It was obvious that he was doing everything in his power to avoid her. Even her mother had mentioned to her that it was too bad that his work always seemed to need him the most whenever she was in town. And she still felt the watchful eye of Terrance whenever her mother had mentioned Sean.

She knew that a three-month break from school was more than enough time for fate to play its card, and eventually they would run into each other.

It irritated her that Sean had gone to such lengths to avoid her. But at the same time, she had been thankful she hadn't had to deal with the pain of seeing him, either. The thought of being near him, knowing that she had bared her soul to him and begged him to want her the way she wanted him, cut her too deeply. No matter how many ways she had tried to be strong, she knew that if she saw him for only a moment she would melt.

And Isabelle melting into a puddle of need would be no good for either one of them.

\* \* \* \*

Sean entered his house and was startled to find his father sitting at the kitchen table and he did not look happy as he lifted the beer in his hand to take a giant swig while staring at his son. He was about to say something when his father motioned for him to take a seat.

"Let me put my service revolver away. I'll be right back." Sean left the room and went upstairs to his bedroom. He hated this damn room. He slept most nights on the couch. He could still see Izzy lying underneath him while they made love. He swore he could still smell the scent of her passion.

He reached into the top shelf of his closet and pulled out the electronic fire safe he used to keep his gun in while he was off duty. He entered the combination to open the top and gently placed the revolver inside. Then he closed the safe and placed it back on the shelf.

He should have gone straight back down stairs, but he wanted to change and get comfortable. He reached into his closet for a t-shirt and felt an ache when he saw which one he had grabbed. It was the one Izzy had worn the morning he broke her heart. The same morning he broke his own heart.

He couldn't wear it. He threw it on the top shelf of the closet and hoped that it would stay hidden. He didn't want any more reminders of that horrible morning after when he pushed Izzy away. He had known such happiness and such contentment that night, only to throw

it away the very next morning. He quickly found something else and changed, then headed back down to the kitchen.

Sean walked to the refrigerator and got a beer. He popped the top off and tossed it in the trash before sitting in the chair directly across from his father. He took a pull from his beer and met his father's steely gaze.

"What's up, Dad?" He posed the question casually.

"It's time, Sean," Terrance said simply.

Sean's brows bunched together.

"Time? Time for what?"

"Time for you to tell me what happened between you and Izzy." Sean's beer stopped on its way to his mouth. He looked at his dad and then slowly took a drink to quench his suddenly dry mouth. "What do you mean, Dad?"

Terrance chuckled, but not out of humor, but frustration.

"Okay, is that how you're going to play it? Like when you were a kid and you wouldn't confess to what you've done while you tried to figure out how much I knew?"

Sean shrugged.

"I guess so, because I don't know what—"

Terrance slammed his beer on the table as it splattered.

"Enough, damn it! I am your father, so do not play with me, boy." Terrance released his beer and ran two hands through his hair before continuing. "She's not coming back, you know. She called her mother today and said she was staying at school to take extra courses."

"Good for her. We've always said she was a smart—"

This time Terrance's fist hit the table.

"I said not to play with me. I'm losing patience with you." He hated losing his temper, absolutely hated it. "Look, stop beating around the damn bush all right? I know something happened. I know it just as sure as I know you have avoided her ever since that day she left for school. And I know it just as sure as I know that her bloodshot eyes the day she left for school were because she cried tears over

you. So, while I don't know what happened exactly, I do know that it was something and whatever it was it had to do with you. And now she's running scared. She's staying at school to avoid you, just like you've been avoiding her."

Terrance took a moment, swallowed some beer and continued, "Her mother hasn't caught on yet, but she will if this continues. So what happened? And don't even think about lying to me."

Sean sat there and listened to the vehemence in his father's voice. He couldn't tell him. His father would be disgusted with him, almost as much as Sean was with himself. Probably more so.

"I'm waiting, Sean."

Sean took a giant swig of his beer and expelled a huge breath. Here goes.

"I slept with her. I took her to bed."

Terrance's eyes widened. He hadn't expected that. Well, in a way he did, but he had hoped that it was much simpler, something like they kissed or made out. Maybe some touching. But he never in his wildest dreams imagined that the son he raised could do that.

Sean watched the shock in his father's eyes. It hurt him. He knew now what it was like to be a complete failure in a father's eyes. He had let him down, just as he had let Izzy down.

"You had sex with your stepsister?" Terrance choked on the words, still in disbelief.

"Yes. I did and I regret it every damn day."

"Just once? Was it just one night?"

"No and yes."

"So are you telling me that you didn't even realize what you were doing was wrong? Because I thought I raised you better than that." Terrance was past the shock and now angry with his son.

"No, I'm not going to tell you that. I knew it was wrong. I should have stopped. But damn it, I couldn't. I tried. I stopped the first time she kissed me and told me she loved me. I stopped the second time she came to me, she was naked and tried to seduce me. My resistance

snapped on the third time." Sean's hands were visibly shaking as it held onto the beer.

"She came to you?" Terrance said with doubt in his voice.

"Damn it, Dad. I know I'm a bastard, but I'm not lying about that. I tried. God knows I tried to turn her away, but I lo—." Sean hoped he had stopped himself in time. Hoped his father hadn't caught what he was about to say. "I guess I'm just a man who has no control over his libido. Because that last night she came to me to say goodbye I lost all sense of right and wrong. I couldn't let her leave. I—just forget it. It doesn't matter. Look, I know I'm not the person you thought you raised. I know I will burn in hell for taking something so sweet and innocent. Believe me when I tell you that any disappointment you have in me is nothing compared to the disgust I feel for myself."

He loves her. He was about to say it and he had stopped himself. Terrance had to force his lips to remain still. It suddenly all made sense. He was in love with her and that, the most overwhelming emotion that any man could ever feel, eventually took over. That also explained why he had fought so hard to stay away from her these past months, knowing if he saw her it would kill him.

"Explain the tears," Terrance said matter-of-factly.

Sean looked at his dad and wondered what he wasn't saying.

"I realized what I had done. I realized that I had broken every rule you taught me about respecting a woman. I did the only thing I could do. I had to push her away." Sean took another pull on his beer. "It wasn't easy, though. She's tenacious. I had to—well let's just say I had to use words that I didn't mean."

Terrance nodded.

"So you hurt her with your words in an attempt to drive her away?"

Sean nodded and fought to keep the tears from forming in his eyes. He hated that more than anything. He never cried, but ever since that morning there were times when the pain of wanting her was so severe and the ache so bad that he found tears escaping from his eyes.

Terrance watched his son, watched the emotions cloud over his face. If he had doubted before, he now knew. Sean was very much in love with Izzy and it was killing him.

"Have you talked to her?"

Sean shook his head.

"Not once. Not since that morning."

"I see. You know her birthday is next week, right?"

Hell yeah he knew it. He already picked out her present too. He was going to leave it at the house. Knowing there was no way that he could stand giving it to her himself.

"Yeah."

"Sean, I-I'm sorry."

Sean cocked a brow.

"What are you sorry for?"

Terrance shrugged. "It appears I may have misjudged the situation." He finished his beer and got up from the table. He took his keys out of his pocket and headed for the front door.

Sean got up and followed his dad to see him out.

"Dad, you didn't misjudge anything. I know what I did was wrong. I also know that you're disappointed in me, and I'm sorry."

Terrance hugged his son and then turned to open the door. He stopped and turned back to look his son in the eye.

"Sean, the boy I raised would only do what you did if he had no other choice. Sometimes—" Terrance shrugged. "Well sometimes life can play cruel jokes on us. Love, however... well, that is a special gift. And when you find it, no matter how it comes your way, you should grab onto it with both hands. I learned that from the short time I had with your mother. There are no guarantees in life."

"What are you saying, Dad?"

"Only you can answer that Sean. You were a good kid and now you are a good man. Remember that when you punish yourself for your crimes." He left, saying nothing more.

Sean locked the door behind his father and wondered if he had really understood him. Was he saying what Sean thought he was saying?

\* \* \* \*

Isabelle walked out of class beaming with the news that she had aced the final. It had been her hardest class that year and she was glad to finally be done with it. Suffice it to say that the biology course titled "Humans and Other Animals" kept her up many nights memorizing anatomy that she knew she would never be able to use in a normal conversation, let alone in everyday life. She had just descended the stairs of Clemmings Hall when she heard her name being called. Turning she saw her lab partner, Justin.

"Hi. Geez, you flew out of there so fast I didn't think I was going to be able to catch up with you," Justin said breathlessly.

"Sorry. I was so psyched about my A that I zoned out the rest of the world. How'd you do?" she asked him.

He shrugged.

"I got an A."

She rolled her eyes.

"What a surprise. The star student got an A. As if there was ever any doubt. I should thank you. You seem to have a knack for this sort of thing. If you hadn't of helped me study all those times, I probably wouldn't have even passed."

Go ahead and ask her already.

"Well, that kind of leads me to why I was trying to catch up with you."

"Oh? What's up? Wait, do you have time to walk with me? I'm going to be late for my last class if I don't hurry."

"Oh sure." He stepped into a brisk walk with her at his side. It wasn't like him to be so nervous around girls, but something about her had always made him feel like a sixteen-year-old on his first date.

"Listen I was wondering. I mean I know it's your birthday tomorrow. And—."

"How'd you know that?" She looked up at him and continued the walk.

"Your roommate told me."

"You talked to my roommate about me. I didn't realize you two knew each other."

Geez, she was walking fast. If his nerves weren't making him breathless, the walk sure would. "Well, I went to see you a few nights ago and you were at the library. She just sort of mentioned it." Mentioned it. More like conspired to help him get a date with her. She was really very sweet as she gave him pointers and told him things that girls would normally only tell other girls.

"Oh, sorry. I didn't realize you had stopped by. Did you need anything important?"

Yes. Gosh, I can't do this if I'm practically jogging. He grabbed her arm.

"Can we stop for just a minute?"

Isabelle looked at her watch and nodded.

"That's about all I've got."

"Okay, here goes. I went to your dorm to ask you out to dinner. And now, what with our class over and all, I figured I better ask while I still had the chance." He didn't care for the stunned look on her face. "Come on, Isabelle. Are you really going to tell me that you had no idea that I liked you? I've been pining away after you all semester. Why do you think that girl with the glasses traded lab partners after the second day of class?" He saw the realization hitting her. "I asked her to. I told her I was crazy about you. She said she thought it was romantic so she agreed." He shrugged.

Isabelle stared at Justin. He was definitely good-looking and so nice. She always had a good time when she was with him. And when he made her laugh it always took away the pain of missing Sean. Maybe she should go. If he really liked her maybe it would be good

for her. It wasn't like she ever did any dating in high school. She had always been too busy dreaming of Sean.

"Well? Is it a yes, or should I run away with my tail between my legs?" Sean smiled.

Isabelle watched him grin and realized that he was actually very attractive, more so than she had ever realized.

"Sure, I'd love to. When?"

Really? You actually said yes?

"I was thinking tomorrow night. For your birthday. I thought maybe the little Chinese restaurant in town." He already knew from Darcy, her roommate, that Chinese food was her favorite.

"I love Chinese food! Okay, listen, can you call me later to set things up? I've really got to get going. If I manage to squeak an A out of this class I'll have straight A's. It's a minor accomplishment but one I've been striving for." She ran off and then turned back. "Bye, talk to you soon."

He watched her leave and all but fell to his knees. She had actually said yes. The prettiest girl in the freshman class, the one who dated no one and went to no parties was going to go out on a date with him. Could life get any better? He didn't think so.

\* \* \* \*

Sean had just left his captain's office and was headed to the locker rooms. Jake was standing there changing. Sean strode over to his locker and unlocked it. He pulled his bag out and started to remove his toiletries with the intention of taking a shower before he changed. He could feel Jake's eyes boring a hole through him.

"What already? Why do you keep staring at me?" Sean snapped. Jake's mouth quirked up at the corners.

"Nothing. I was just wondering if you were going to tell me why you need tomorrow off."

"I told you, it's personal."

"Ah, personal. Personal like its Izzy's birthday today."

Sean snapped his head back to glare at Jake.

"Get off me, all right?"

"Look, I don't know what your problem is. You obviously have feelings for her. Even months later, you haven't even seen her and you're still all torn up inside. Why don't you just admit you're already a lost cause? I know you're going to see her and that's why you needed me to cover your shift tomorrow," Jake pointed out smugly.

"I said thanks, what more do you want?" Sean asked as he finished undressing.

"I want you to get your head out of your ass. If you want her then do something about it before some college guy puts the moves on her. Because it's starting to affect every aspect of your life. I'm the only one in this precinct that can even stand to be around you for more than five minutes anymore. And even I'm seriously starting to question that." Jake swung his duffle bag over his shoulder and headed toward the door.

"Jake!" Sean yelled to him. Jake turned around, waiting. "Thanks, man."

"Thanks, man."

Jake nodded and left.

\* \* \* \*

"I'm so stuffed. That sesame chicken was heavenly. Thanks so much for taking me," Isabelle said.

Justin smiled at her, wondering if she knew just how much fun he had just being with her.

"I'm glad. Maybe we could do it again?" Please say yes.

She sighed as they walked up the sidewalk to her dorm. Turning to face Justin she looked at him for a moment while thinking.

"You know, I think I would like that very much."

I am now officially the luckiest man alive.

"Great. I know you're kind of tired tonight, so, I'll call you later and we can figure it out." They resumed their walk and Justin brushed his hand against hers. When he sensed no resistance from her, he took a chance. He placed his palm against hers and held her hand. Finding such warmth in the feeling, he was glad that she hadn't pulled away. They walked the next few yards in silence until they reached the stairs to her dorm.

\* \* \* \*

There she was. He had been waiting for hours for her to return. He couldn't wait to see her, to hold her and tell her how sorry he was. Wait. Who was that guy she was with? Why was he holding her hand? Sean tightened his grip on the small jewelry box he held in his hand as he stood still to listen to what they were talking about.

"Well, thank you again, Justin. It was really a lot of fun. I'm definitely going to have to go for a run in the morning though. I ate way too many crab and cheese wontons," she laughed.

"Want some company? For the run, I mean," he added, hoping she didn't think he was trying to invite himself to her room.

"Sure. I'm probably going to go early though, about seven. I've got to work at the boutique tomorrow."

"Seven it is, then. I'll wait for you out here." Was he going to be able to wait until tomorrow morning to see her again?

"Perfect. Well, thanks again."

"Isabelle, I hope your birthday was fun. I know it sucks when you don't have your family around." He tucked a loose strand of her blonde hair behind one ear.

She shrugged.

"They're going to come up tomorrow and take me to dinner. They were actually going to come up today, but I told them I had plans."

"You put off your family dinner for me?" There was disbelief in his voice.

"Yeah, I—I was really looking forward to tonight." She was actually looking forward to discovering whether or not she could sit through a date without spending the entire night comparing him to Sean. She surprised herself by not thinking about Sean at all, just enjoying Justin's company.

"I don't know what to say. I—" Justin raised his hands to frame her face and slowly leaned his head down to hers. "I want to kiss you, Isabelle. And I plan to do it. So if you want to stop me you have about five seconds."

She said nothing as they stared into each other's eyes. Wondering what it would be like, she closed her eyes.

Justin recognized the invitation and closed his mouth over hers. His kiss was gentle and undemanding. It wasn't filled with passion because he didn't want to scare her. After a minute he drew away from her.

A smile formed her lips.

"That was nice." And it was. It didn't contain a rush of fervor or frenzy, but it was nice just the same.

He smiled at her.

"Is there anyone back home, Isabelle? Any boyfriend that I'll have to duel with for your affections."

She giggled at his comment.

"No. There's no one."

Sean felt the final blow as the dagger pierced his heart. She said there was no one. He had watched as she told this Justin character that she had been looking forward to their date. He had watched in horror as they kissed and he had listened as she told him there was no one at home waiting for her. It wasn't true. He was at home waiting for her and he loved her.

Regretfully he had to admit to himself that it was true after all. He had pushed her away. Nine long months ago he had fallen in love with her and then he pushed her away. And now that he finally realized that he couldn't live without her, it was too late. Just as she

had told him that morning after they made love. If he didn't stop her, if he let her go, then his chance to have her would be lost forever.

He stayed in the shadows of the tree that sheltered him from any light and watched as they said their goodbyes. His grip on the thin velvet jewelry box increased. He couldn't give her this now. It would be too awkward, too painful. He could stay and fight for her. Do everything in his power to make her want him again. But he feared her words were as true as his love for her. He had waited too long.

He watched her enter her dorm and saw the door close behind her. He watched as his whole life walked through that door and away from him. Sean knew as sure as the sun would shine tomorrow that he would never love again the way he loved his Izzy.

## **Chapter Eight**

## December 2009

"Don't be so nervous, Justin. Everything is going to be fine." Isabelle told him as they drove around the corner and her house came into sight.

"How can I not be nervous? I'm meeting your family for the first time. What if they don't like me?" He had been nervous about meeting them since Isabelle had first asked him to spend Christmas with them two weeks ago.

"They will be just as crazy about you as I am. So stop it already. There it is. Just pull in the drive way."

He did as she asked and pulled behind a black SUV. He whistled at the shiny man's toy. "That's nice. Whose is that?"

She shook her head.

"I don't know. It has temporary plates. Maybe my mom or Terrance got a new vehicle."

They barely were able to step out of the car before the front door opened and Isabelle was attacked by her mother's giant bear hug. When her mother had successfully squeezed all of the air out of her lungs, she released her.

"Look at you. I've missed you so much." Turning her head she looked at Justin. "And you must be Justin. I've heard so many things about you."

"All good, I hope," he smiled.

"Of course. She said you are an absolute gentleman." Connie put her arms around him and gave him the same crushing hug. "Come on now, Terrance is dying to meet you."

They went inside and hung their coats on the hall tree. Justin commented on the lovely home and was his usual charming self. One of the things Isabelle enjoyed about his company was his pleasant demeanor.

"Come on, they're in the living room," Connie said as she pulled both Justin and Isabelle's hands.

They're in the living room. Who's here? Her silent question was quickly answered when she walked in and saw Sean. Their eyes met for a moment and she saw a glint in his eye that she wasn't sure she liked. They had managed to avoid each other for over a year. She hadn't come home for Thanksgiving; she had gone out of state to meet Justin's family. But now, seeing Sean, she had to fight all the old feelings that were washing over her. Not seeing him, not being near him had made it easier.

"Hello, Izzy." Sean's voice was deep and quiet. It was almost as if he was caressing her senses with his simple greeting.

"Hi Sean. It's—it's good to see you again. It's been a while," she said hesitantly, suddenly not sure how to act around him.

Terrance watched their reactions. He had heard from his son what happened when Sean had gone to see Isabelle on her birthday last spring. He had seen the pain in his son's eyes when he said he was too late. Personally, Terrance had thought Sean should have gone to her. But it was not his way to interfere. If it was meant to be, it would happen.

Standing up, Terrance shook Justin's hand. "This fine young man must be Justin. How are you?"

Justin was relieved by the pleasant way in which he was greeted—except for the man staring him down in the leather chair. Glaring was more like it. He looked like he was sizing Justin up to see how many pieces he would have to cut him into to fit inside his trunk. To say the

man sitting there, with a look of death in his eyes, made him uncomfortable was a massive understatement.

"Sean, aren't you going to say hello to Justin?" Connie asked rather nervously. She had been worried about Sean for some time now. His moods had become increasingly erratic in the past months. He was almost always angry about something. The littlest things would set him off.

Sean said nothing and stood. He extended his hand out to Justin and shook it.

"Justin."

Ouch. Damn it. Why is he squeezing my hand so damn hard?

"You must be the stepbrother, Sean." Justin wasn't sure what he had said wrong, but the haggard-looking man standing before him squeezed his hand even harder before releasing it.

Sean turned toward Isabelle and leaned in to hug her. He could see the fear in her eyes. Feel the tension in her body. Good. Let her be uncomfortable. Let her suffer the way that I have. Every night for the past year-and-a-half. He wrapped his arms around her and held her just a little too tight, a little too close and a little too long. Before he allowed her to pull away from the embrace he *accidentally* brushed his lips against her ear. He fought back a chuckle when he heard a quiet whimper escape from within her.

Terrance watched his son, disgusted with him at that moment. He knew exactly what Sean was doing. The tension filling the room right now was more than unbearable. And he couldn't be certain but he thought he saw Sean kiss her ear. Jesus, if Connie had seen that she probably would have fainted from the shock.

Connie was the first to break the silence.

"Well, let me show you to your room, Justin."

"Ah sure." He was staring at this stepbrother, wondering why he suddenly disliked him so much. The way the man was staring at him with a predator's gleam in his eye was making him uneasy.

Isabelle stood staring at Sean as her mother led Justin out of the room.

"Well, I guess I should take my bags up to my room. I'll talk to you soon, Terrance." She placed a kiss on his cheek.

Sean watched her leave the room and he turned to his dad.

"What?"

"You know damn well what! You had your chance and you did nothing about it. She's been dating him for months now. Leave it alone!" It was an order, not a request.

"Like hell!" Sean stormed out of the room.

\* \* \* \*

Isabelle had just set her suitcase on her bed. She reached down for her duffle bag and placed it on the bed next to the suitcase. She opened it and took out her toiletry bag. She unzipped it to start unpacking the essentials when she felt a presence behind her. Sean.

She turned slowly and was startled to find him standing close enough to kiss. She fumbled with the small bag as its contents spilled out onto the floor. He said nothing to her as he looked down. His gaze was fixated on something. She bent her head to see what it was and felt a whole new level of humiliation when she saw what he was looking at. Her birth control pills.

Sean bent to pick up the round plastic packet of pills. He held them in his hand for a moment, studying them. She was so nervous. She tried to swallow but suddenly all of the saliva in her mouth had dried up and disappeared. He looked at her and cocked and eyebrow.

"Izzy. Why do you have these?" His voice was a low drone, a methodical caress across her skin.

"I–I don't owe you any explanations Sean." God, why was this so hard? She hadn't seen him in over a year and her need to reach out and touch him was just as strong as ever. She had to stop herself from

thinking that way. She had a boyfriend. Justin. A man who was kind and gentle and oh-so-patient with her.

She hadn't slept with him yet. He kept telling her he would wait as long as it took until she was ready, but every time they were alone and kissed, she could sense his frustration. She knew he wouldn't, couldn't wait much longer. At twenty, he was a year older than her and she was well aware of the fact that he was well liked by the ladies around campus. If she didn't give in to him soon, she knew she would probably lose him.

"Don't you? Hmm, I wonder. I think that you do" Sean said rather smugly.

"I most certainly do not!" Isabelle snapped at him.

Sean threw the package of pills on her bed and pulled her against his body so fast she didn't have time to react.

"Yes, you do." He kissed her forehead. "Or have you forgotten?" He kissed her temples and then her cheeks.

He was making her weak. How could her response to him be just as strong as ever? Even Justin hadn't brought out this aching need in her in all of their make out sessions.

"Sean, stop it."

She tried to pull out of his embrace but he held on tighter.

"No. I don't think you want me to stop. Do you, baby?"

Baby. He called her baby. He knew very well what that endearment did to her, because she had told him. She had a boyfriend just down the hall. She shouldn't do this. She couldn't do this.

"Yes, I do. I want you to stop this right now!" Although she said it with determination, her voice was shaky.

"Uh-uh. You want me to hold you, to kiss you, to make love to you. I can feel it. I know you've missed me." He kissed her. It wasn't gentle. It wasn't tender. It was primitive and erotic and she loved it. "Can you feel how much I want you?"

She could. She could feel the proof of his need for her pressed hard against her stomach. It was making parts of her own body throb

and ache. She had forgotten what it felt like to be in his arms with the need for him coursing through her body. To want him so badly that it hurt.

"Yes," she moaned.

He was trailing kisses along her neck and shoulder.

"God, Izzy. I want you so bad. I've missed you so much. I dream of you every day, every night." He brought his mouth back to hers. "I have to have you."

Without any warning he picked her up and set her on the dresser. He was tearing at her clothes and in an attempt to remove her panties, tore them. He was kissing her feverously as he started ripping his jeans down his waist.

Isabelle was lost. What was she doing? What kind of a person was she? She looked at the door to her bedroom and thought of Justin. Oh God. She was interrupted from her thoughts by the sound of Sean's voice.

"It's locked. Wrap your legs around me, baby." He groaned the words into her ear.

She did as he asked. When every part of her body was telling her to stop, she did exactly what he told her to. Because she knew she had no choice. She wanted him as much as he wanted her. It was as if the past year-plus of staying away from him had done nothing to curb her desire for him.

Sean didn't wait any longer. He plunged into her with such force she had to bite down on his shoulder to keep from screaming.

"Oh Jesus. Izzy you're so tight." He had spent the past year living in hell and now suddenly he was in heaven.

"Sean." Her voice, barely audible, was a whimper.

"Izzy, baby. I'm not going to be able to last." He reached down to her and found the swollen nub of her passion. He used his thumb to caress it as he brought her closer to her release. He heard her moans, heard her breathing increase. She was close. "Oh, Sean. It feels so good." Her cries were of pleasure, not pain. Not like the last time he had seen her.

"That's it, baby. God, you're so sweet, Izzy. Show me how good it feels when we're together." And she did. He heard her strangled cry as she climaxed. He could feel her inner muscles working around him and stroking him. He couldn't hold back anymore. He was lost in the feel of her, in his love for her. He threw his head back and thrust into deep inside her as he fell over the edge.

He was incoherent for a moment as they clung to each other. They were both startled out of their dreamy existence by the knock at the door.

"Isabelle?" Justin asked.

Oh God.

"Yes, Justin. Sorry. I'll ah—I'll be down shortly, just wanted to change." Did she sound normal? Could he sense her rapid breathing?

"Okay. I'll see you down stairs then." She thought he had walked away and then she heard his voice again. "Izzy?"

"Yes." God please go away. Just wait for me down stairs.

"I love you."

She looked at Sean. She saw the scowling look in his eyes. She couldn't say it. She couldn't look into those eyes and tell another man that she loved him. When she had said it before she told herself she wasn't lying. She did love Justin. She just wasn't entirely sure that she was in love with him.

"Justin. I can't really hear you. I'm in the bathroom. I'll see you down stairs, okay?" Please go down stairs.

"Ah, okay." Justin walked down the hall. Sean and Isabelle heard his footsteps fade away.

"I want him gone. Today!" Sean snapped at her.

She was surprised by his order. There was something different about him.

"Sean. I—I can't kick him out. He's my-." Don't say it. The fierce look in his eyes couldn't be good.

"He's your what? Go on, Izzy, your what? Your boyfriend?" He wasn't able to hide his anger. He hated the asshole. Hated the fact that Justin got to hold her and kiss her while Sean was barely able to take a breath from missing her and needing her.

Isabelle was suddenly very aware of their position. They were clinging to each other and he was still inside of her. He hadn't used a condom. She hadn't realized it, but now she was sure of it. Everything had happened so fast that there was no time.

"Sean," she said worried. "You didn't use a condom, did you?"

The horror in her voice aggravated him. "Well, that's just great, Izzy. I can see where I rate now." He pulled away from her. Dragging his pants back up his waist and fastening them, he continued, "So you can take the damn pills to protect you and your lover but with me you want a condom between us?"

What? He didn't know. He thought she'd been sleeping with Justin. "Sean no, I—"

"No, don't even try to talk your way out of it. I thought I knew you. Obviously your pretty boy boyfriend Justin is allowed to fill you with his seed, but not me." He picked up the pills and threw them at her.

She ducked as the little plastic package hit he wall behind her.

"Sean, you don't understand." She started to cry. How could she still love him so much after all this time?

"No, you don't understand. But hear this. You and I, we're not finished." He grabbed onto her half naked body and stared her down. "You are mine. Not his. You'll never belong to anyone but me!" He shouted the last words.

She wanted to touch him, to caress his cheek to tell him just how right he was. But his eyes looked so dark and if she was honest with herself she would admit she was a little bit scared. She had never seen Sean this angry, ever. Before she could form a response he released his grip on her and walked toward the door.

Turning back to face her he said, "Mine. Don't ever forget that, Izzy." He opened the door and walked out.

Isabelle jumped off the dresser and got to the door in a flash. He hadn't even closed it. She sat on her dresser with her pants hanging around one leg, her panties torn on the floor and he just left the door open. She quickly locked it and slid to the floor as the emotions overtook her.

"Why? It's been over a year. He shouldn't still have this kind of control over me." She whispered the words.

She picked up the small package of pills that lay next to her and opened the lid. On the inside lid were the instructions on when to start taking them. The nurse at the clinic had gone to the trouble of writing them down for her since she had never taken them before.

She had never let Justin touch her the way that Sean did. She had thought she was getting to the point where she would be able to give in but now, now she knew that no one would ever be able to touch her. Only Sean. Always Sean.

"Oh, Sean. I love you." She mouthed the silent words.

\* \* \* \*

Sean stormed down the stairs and walked through the living room without saying a word, startling everyone out of their conversation. The anger rolling off of him made everyone in the room uneasy. Sean stopped for just a second with his back to them.

"I'm not staying," he said. Then he walked out.

"Is your car the black SUV?" Justin yelled to him, trying to hide his fear that Sean was going to turn and rip him into pieces.

Sean turned his steely gaze to Justin.

"Yeah. What about it?"

Justin started to get up.

"I'm afraid I'm blocking you."

Sean's temper could only handle so much with this little twerp.

"Well, I suggest you move it then."

Justin didn't respond. He just ran from the room and hurried outside. Connie waited for the door to close before her temper finally got the better of her.

"Sean Nelson Walker. What in God's name is your problem?" she screamed at him.

"Connie." Terrance tried to calm his wife, who was embarrassed by Sean's rudeness.

"No, Terrance. Enough is enough. He has been sulking around and being arrogant for over a year now. Listen here, Sean. I love you like you were my own son. But how you just spoke to that boy was unacceptable. I want you to apologize."

"No way in hell!" he shouted at her. He even surprised himself. Never once had he ever shouted at her.

Terrance stood up, none too happy about the tone of voice that Sean had chosen to take with his wife.

"Now that's enough, damn it. Come on. I'll walk you out. Maybe the cool air will help cool that temper of yours."

\* \* \* \*

Isabelle heard a car start. She walked over to the window and looked out. She saw Justin leaving. Oh no. What had Sean done? Even though she wasn't truly in love Justin, she didn't want to see him hurt. But her fear was assuaged when she realized that he was moving the car.

Justin got out and was walking back up to the house when he looked up and saw Isabelle standing in the window. He waved to her and blew her a kiss. She smiled at him. How could she not; he was so sweet. It was going to break her heart to break his. But after what just happened, she knew she had to break up with him. All that she had done since she started school to try to forget Sean had been for

nothing. He was, quite simply, a part of her. A part she couldn't deny or ignore.

Justin walked out of view and she soon saw Sean and Terrance. They watched the door for a moment. They must have been waiting for Justin to come back inside. Isabelle was startled by the arguing that ensued.

"What the hell is wrong with you? I don't care how messed up you are over Izzy. You do not ever speak to Connie that way. Understand?" Terrance shouted the question at him.

"I know, I know. I'm sorry about that. But damn it, dad. What do you expect me to do? She brought a damn guy home." Sean was pacing the area around the front of the SUV.

"Sean, son, he seems like a good kid. You ask what I want you to do. I want you to let it go, to let her go," Terrance said simply.

"Never!" Sean stalked up to his father and was toe to toe with him. "I will never let her go. She belongs to me!" He said the last word as he thumped his fist to his chest. "You don't understand." He expelled a huge breath and looked up to see Izzy staring down at him. Turning back to his dad he said, "I love her. I don't think I can live without her anymore."

Terrance watched his son as he stalked to his SUV, got behind the wheel and sped away.

Isabelle stared at the altercation in confusion. What had they been arguing about? She knew there was something different about Sean. He seemed darker, edgier. But she had never seen him be anything but respectful to their parents. She couldn't remember one time she had heard Sean raise his voice to his father. But up here on the second story, with the windows closed she could hear his muffled shouts. She couldn't make out the words. But she heard the unmistakable anger in his voice.

After she watched Sean drive away, she turned to go to her bathroom. She needed a shower. She couldn't face Justin with the scent of Sean's fierce love making on her skin.

\* \* \* \*

Connie stood up when Terrance entered the room.

"What on earth has gotten into him?"

Terrance nodded and placed his hands on her shoulders.

"He's not himself right now, honey." He turned to Justin. "My apologies, Justin. Sean is a bit intense and he ah—well let's just say he's a little protective of our Izzy."

Connie looked startled by his excuse.

"He is?"

Terrance shrugged.

"It's not like she's ever brought a boy home before." He looked to Justin. "She didn't even date much in high school. So I guess Sean is taking the role of big brother a bit too far."

"Sure, I understand. Don't worry about it." Terrance was lying to him. There was something in the man's eyes that told Justin there was more to it. But he looked at Isabelle's mother and knew that whatever it was, she was as much in the dark as he.

Terrance let out a breath of relief, thankful that they both bought it.

"So, when do we eat, honey?"

## **Chapter Nine**

It was two days before Christmas and Isabelle's mother had kept her busy with preparations for the big day. Her mother's favorite holiday had always been Christmas. They were supposed to attend a party at a neighbor's house that night and she was mentally going through all of the shopping she still had to do when Justin walked in her bedroom.

"Hello, beautiful." He leaned over and kissed her.

"Hi, Justin." She accepted his kiss with regret. She had been struggling with how to handle this break up since last night. Should she do it now and get it over with so he could still go be with is family? Or would that be cruel? Should she wait until after Christmas? Or would that be even crueler yet? Would it make the hurt worse knowing that she had pretended to be happy with him while she was secretly plotting the demise of their seven-month relationship?

"What's wrong, Isabelle? You were so quiet last night. Is everything all right?"

The genuine concern she saw on his face was making her feel that much worse. How could she tell this sweet man that she thought she loved him but she had been wrong?

She tried a reassuring smile. "Justin, I'm sorry. I'm fine." Give him some sort of an explanation. "I'm just not feeling very well."

He closed his eyes and walked away from her. He shut her bedroom door and turned to her.

"Isabelle. I think I know what's going on here."
Oh no.
"You do?"

"I'm afraid so." He came to her again and placed his hands gently on her shoulders. "I know the last few times that we've come close to making love I've pushed you a little too far."

"Justin I—"

"No, please let me finish." He waited for her to nod in agreement before continuing. "I can't help the way you make me feel. But I do apologize for trying to rush you. I have no excuse. But please know this: I love you." He looked up to the ceiling and smiled. "God, how I love you. But I will wait as long as it takes for you to be ready. No matter how frustrated I get, I promise it won't happen until the time is right." He smiled at her. "So please don't feel that you need to be nervous or act as though you might be getting ill. I won't pressure you. I promise." He hugged her to his body. "I know how important it is for things to be absolutely perfect when you're finally with a man for the first time."

What? He thinks—oh God. I am a horrible person.

"Justin, I—"

"No, honey. It's okay. I know you haven't told me, but I figured it out. I know that's why you've held back so much. Your first time is a big deal. I understand that. And I love the fact that you've waited and that your first time will be with me." He kissed her again, only now with more passion.

Isabelle pulled away from the kiss and made another attempt at a smile.

"Justin. I can't tell you how much your words mean to me. But I truly am not feeling well. Maybe I'm coming down with something."

Justin's pre-med instinct took over.

"Oh, Isabelle, I'm sorry. Do you have a fever?"

"No. I just have a horrible migraine. That's all." He was watching her so closely she involuntarily elaborated on her lie. "And I'm maybe a little achy."

Justin nodded.

"The flu. I heard on the news last night that it was making its way around town."

"Maybe," she shrugged.

There was a knock on the door.

"Come in," Isabelle instructed.

"Oh, hello Justin. Terrance is ready when you are," Connie said with a bright smile on her face.

"Are you going somewhere?" Isabelle asked him.

"I still have shopping to do for a special someone. You know how we men hate to shop. So we figured we'd stick together." He kissed her cheek and walked toward the door. "Try lying down for a while. See if that helps."

She smiled and nodded before he left the room.

"Okay, have fun."

"Is something wrong? Do you not feel well?" Connie asked.

"Just a little achy with a headache. I'll be fine."

"Okay, if you're sure. Well listen, Sean's on the phone waiting to talk to you." Connie's voice was riddled with concern.

"Mom, what is it?"

"Is everything all right dear? I mean, Sean, he's changed in the past year or so and, well, I guess I just don't want him taking his aggression out on you."

So she wasn't the only one that noticed Sean was different. Her mother saw it too.

"No, it's fine. I'll pick up the call. Thank you."

Isabelle waited for her mother to leave the room before she picked up the phone. A moment later she heard her mother hang up the other receiver downstairs.

"Sean?"

"Did you dream about me last night, Izzy?" He was doing that thing with his voice again. Goosebumps ran along her skin at the sound of it.

"Sean. Oh, Sean, I'm so glad you called. I need to talk to you. I need to see you and explain that—"

"We'll talk soon, baby. Listen, I already told my dad that I couldn't attend that party tonight because I had to work. I want you to find a way out of it too."

She listened to his request and knew there was no way she could deny him anything. But didn't know how she could get out of it. "Sean, I don't know if—."

"Stop it, Izzy." His curt tone surprised her. "You will find a way out of it. Then I'm coming over. Do you understand?"

His voice. What was it about his voice that seemed so dark?

"Yes, Sean. I understand."

"Good. Then I'll expect you to be there waiting for me. There are things we need to clear up. Things we need to talk about. Things that we need to make right with one another. Don't disappoint me, Izzy."

The deep voice and the words that flowed from it were causing sensations in her as if he were here, touching her.

"I won't disappoint you, Sean."

"Izzy?"

"Yes?"

"Tell me," he demanded.

"Tell you what?"

"Damn it, Izzy, you know what I mean. It's been too long since I've heard it. Tell me that you love me." He sounded angry again.

"Oh, Sean." She did. She loved him so much it was killing her. "I love you."

He sighed.

"That's my girl. I'll see you later, baby." He hung up.

Isabelle placed the phone back on its cradle and felt confused by the emotions churning inside her. He had managed to excite her and scare her all at the same time. What had happened to Sean to change him so drastically? "Are you sure you can't come?" Connie asked from the bottom of the stairs.

"I'm sure. I'm sorry, but I just feel horrible." She was such a liar. She felt a lot of things right now. But "horrible" was not the word that she would use to describe any of them.

The idea of Sean coming over for their long-awaited discussion was consuming her mind.

Justin stood at the bottom of the stairs with Connie and Terrance, dressed to the nines in a dark suit.

"I still feel like I should stay with you."

Isabelle shook her head.

"No, really. I want you to go and have a good time. The people there are great. I'm just going to take a hot bath and go to bed early." Hopefully with Sean. She knew that she was an awful person for wishing that.

"If you're sure. We'll only be a couple of blocks away. If you need anything at all call my cell okay?"

"I promise. Now go. I'm going to get into the bath." She watched as they left and she heard the click of the lock after they got outside. She waited. Once she heard the car drive away she started her bath. She wanted to feel clean and feminine when Sean got there.

\* \* \* \*

Sean had been waiting down the street to make sure that everyone left for the party, minus Izzy. His knuckles tightened against the steering wheel as he saw Justin. Why hadn't she gotten rid of him yet? He had been certain that he had made himself clear the day before when he took her on her dresser. He should be gone already. What was she thinking keeping that pipsqueak around and meeting with him too? She had to know that after tonight they would be together.

Obviously his little Izzy had changed. Did she think she could keep her pretty boy pre-med boyfriend and have Sean on the side? He didn't think so. He would have to show her just exactly who she belonged to.

\* \* \* \*

Isabelle had only been in the bath for five minutes when she looked up and stifled a scream as she saw Sean standing in the door way. She had turned down the lights and the room was only lit by candle lights. He had that look in his eyes again. What was he so angry about?

"Sean. I didn't hear you come in." Her words were shaky and nervous from the way his eyes looked.

"Get out," he demanded.

"Sean, what's wrong?"

"Now!" he shouted at her. Damn this woman. How dare she look so damn beautiful in that tub while his rage was boiling just below the surface?

She jerked back as if his words had slapped her clear across her face. She hesitated only a second before she stood in the tub. She got out and looked at him.

He watched her. Bubbles were dripping from her swollen breasts. Her body was wet and shimmered in the candle light. He wanted to fight with her, to argue, but seeing her like that broke every amount of resolve that he had left.

"Get on the bed," he ordered her, pointing to the mattress.

"Sean, I'm all wet. I can't—"

"I said get on the bed." He gritted his teeth as he annunciated every word.

She tried to swallow the combination of fear and excitement but she couldn't decide which emotion was stronger. She walked to the bed and lay down, completely aware that she was soaking the blankets and sheets beneath her. She looked up at him.

He looked at her.

"Uh-uh. Turn over."

Her eyes widened in shock at his demand.

"What?"

"You heard me, turn over."

She swallowed the lump in her throat and turned over. She lay on her stomach, unsure of how she felt about it.

"Lift your bottom. Get on your knees and lift your perfectly round bottom up to me." He was undoing his pants as he gave the orders.

What? Oh god. She didn't know if she should or could do it. She could hear the anger in his voice. Sense the fury inside him. But she couldn't refuse him. She loved him so much; she would just have to trust him. So she did as he asked. Suddenly aware of just how vulnerable she was.

"That's my girl. Spread your legs. There just like that." He nudged himself against her and continued, "I have to tell you, Izzy. I'm very upset with you."

She turned her head to see him and saw their reflection in the mirror. He turned too and looked at her eyes in the mirror. For the first time with Sean she was actually afraid.

"Sean, why? What did I do?"

He laughed at her almost mockingly. Then he suddenly stopped and gritted his teeth.

"I told you that you were mine. I told you I wanted that little shit Justin gone. Imagine my surprise, Izzy, when I saw him leave the house tonight dressed for the party."

Isabelle shook her head and tried to fight the fear clawing its way out of her.

"No, Sean, you don't understand. I haven't found a way to tell him yet. It's Christmas in two days. I feel horrible about having to hurt him."

"Nice try, Izzy. Meanwhile you get two for the price of one, huh?" he said disgustedly.

"What? Sean, I don't know what you mean."

"Oh, so innocent. Did you think I would be okay with sharing you with him? You're mine, damn it. Don't you think it disgusts me to know that you let him touch you?" he screamed at her as he stayed positioned at the ready. "Don't you think I've been living in agony with out you all of this time? Damn you for destroying me." He thrust into her hard and without mercy.

Isabelle screamed, from pleasure or pain she wasn't sure. He hadn't hurt her body, but his words had sliced through her heart. She began to weep as he thrust into her. She wanted to explain. She wanted to tell him how wrong he was. But she couldn't find the words. She was choking on the heartache while overwhelmed with the glorious sensation of him being inside of her.

"Don't you do that! Don't you freaking cry while I'm inside you, damn it!"

"Sean, please. Stop!" Her cries were coming too fast for her to control.

Sean stilled himself. He was still inside of her, but he heard her plea. His heart broke when he realized what he was doing to her. "Rough" and "violent" were the only words to describe how he was taking her. He looked at her in the mirror and saw the tears streaking down her face.

He stopped what he was doing and got up and off of the bed.

"Jesus. Oh shit. Oh God, Izzy." Sean was cursing himself and pacing the floor.

Isabelle watched him. She had rolled to her back and had pulled the blanket up over her.

"Sean?" she said between sobs.

He turned to face her.

"Izzy. Baby. I'm so sorry. I have no excuse for what I just did to you."

"Why?" she asked, barely able to get the words out. "Why are you so angry with me? What did I do wrong?"

He sat on the bed next to her. What was happening to him? He had turned into an animal at the thought of Justin touching her.

"I'm sorry. It doesn't matter why I did it. Just know that I know I was wrong. Oh God, Izzy, I don't want to hurt you. Ever." He touched his hand to her face and was surprised when she didn't pull away. "Will you let me hold you?"

She didn't say anything. But she went to him. She snuggled against him and sobbed, her tears spilling against his chest.

"Izzy, oh God, baby. I'm so sorry. I was wrong. Please believe that I know that." He felt tears sting his eyes. "But why, Izzy? Why is he still here? The thought of him touching you is—."

Isabelle placed her fingers to his mouth.

"He's never touched me, Sean. Never. Not like you have."

He let the words sink in, hoping he was hearing her correctly. Could she be telling the truth?

"But your birth control pills."

She hung her head down.

"Those pills are not what you think. I've been dating Justin for seven months now. He has been very patient with me. I thought that I might love him, so I decided that soon I would finally let him." She quieted when she felt the rigid tension in his body. "But, I wasn't *in* love with him. I was fooling myself. I didn't even realize it until I walked into the living room yesterday and saw you. My heart ached when I saw you. You're the one I'm in love with. Still in love with. The one that I'll always be in love with. You are why I couldn't let him have me. Because you were right, Sean. I am yours. Always yours."

His body relaxed and his eyes closed at the sound of her voice telling him everything he wanted and needed to hear. "I'm so sorry for what I did, for how I—I'm sorry. Izzy, I was dying thinking that he had touched you, that you let him have you."

"Never. That's why I was so worried about the condom. I hadn't even started the pills yet. I just got them three days ago," she said as she caressed his cheek.

His eyes snapped back to hers at that.

"You mean—oh, Izzy, I'm sorry. I wouldn't have done that if I thought you weren't protected."

"It's okay, Sean. If I got pregnant with your child I would be overjoyed." She kissed him.

"What about school? If you got pregnant, it would stand in your way."

"Sean, school is important. But school is not you," she said as she kissed him again.

"Izzy, ah baby. I don't deserve you. I don't deserve your love. You're so good, so sweet." He was melting for her. This was his woman. She belonged to him and she hadn't let any one else touch her. "I'm so sorry for how I just treated you. That isn't what I wanted. It isn't what I planned."

She nodded.

"I know. Sean, I need you to tell me what happened. I know you were upset about Justin. But you seem, I don't know, it seems like you've changed."

Sean looked away from her, not sure how to respond to such a loaded question.

"Izzy. I have changed, and not for the better." He turned to face her again. "I became bitter and angry. I hated my life, or the lack of it. I hated waking up in the morning. I hated—oh god, for a while I hated you."

Tears welled in her eyes at his confession.

"You—you hated me?"

Sean took his hands to frame her delicate face.

"I was being unfair, selfish and I blamed you for my pain."

She shook her head, trying to understand what he meant.

"Your pain? I don't understand."

Sean took a steadying breath and closed his eyes. He had caused them both so much hurt. How did he tell her that it was all for nothing? That he shouldn't have wasted over a year of their lives, time that they could have had together.

"Izzy, I love you." His heart warmed at the way her face lit up when he said it. "I have loved you this whole time." He held up his fingers to her lips to stop her from interrupting him. He needed to get this out. He needed to atone for his mistakes. "I think I'll just start at the beginning. Can you be patient with me while I try and get it all out?"

She nodded at him, still stunned to hear that he loved her. She had been waiting to hear those words for years now.

"That night, at your prom, when you kissed me. Oh, Izzy, I swear my heart almost exploded with emotion that night. That kiss did something to me that I hadn't ever experienced before." He shook his head at the memory. "I tried to ignore it. I tried to tell myself that it wasn't real. That's why I avoided you that whole summer. But then," he sighed. "Then you came to my house that night and—God, you have no idea how hard it was for me to turn you away."

Needing to touch, him she reached her hands up and twined them behind his neck.

"I knew it. I told myself that you felt something."

He smirked.

"You were right, baby. God, you were tenacious. It took every ounce of strength I had to push you away. But I did because I thought that was the right thing to do." He shook his head. "Then you came to say goodbye to me. Izzy, you have no idea how much it hurt me to hear you say goodbye. To consider the possibility that you would find someone else. I knew then that I couldn't let you leave."

"I didn't, I stayed. I stayed and it was wonderful." She hated the tormented look in his eyes.

"Yes. But then your mother called and I freaked. I kept thinking of your age and our parents and I was sure that I had taken advantage of you."

"You didn't. I told you that I loved you, that I wanted you," she insisted.

He smiled at her sweetness, her unwillingness to allow him to feel any remorse.

"I know, baby. I just was all muddled up inside. I was so damn confused. I should have never let you go that morning. I hid from you and fought my feelings for you until I knew I was dying a slow and painful death. Then your birthday came and—" he stopped and turned away from her.

"Sean, what is it? What happened on my birthday?" she asked, not knowing what he meant.

"I talked to my dad and he made me realize—"

"Your dad? Does he know about us?"

He nodded, realizing that she must be shocked by that news.

"Yeah, sorry. I should have told you sooner."

"No wonder I would catch him giving me these looks, it was like he knew something. I'm sorry, finish telling me. You said he made you realize?"

"Right, well he told me that he understood after losing my mom that you don't get many chances in life. He told me in a roundabout sort of way that if I loved you I should get off my ass and do something about it." He smirked. "Granted, it wasn't quite that crystal clear when he said it, but I got the point. Your birthday was coming up the following weekend so I decided to come see you, to tell you that I loved you and to beg you for another chance."

Her eyes were wide with surprise.

"Why didn't you? Sean, my heart broke for you every day."

He looked at her, the memory of that night washed over him.

"It didn't look that way."

Isabelle's brows bunched together and she shook her head.

"What do you mean? You never even—oh no. Sean, were you there? You *were* there, outside when I got back from my date with Justin, weren't you?"

He said nothing, just nodded.

"Sean, you have to understand. That was the first date I went on. I finally had decided to try and move on with my life. I thought that you didn't want me. I just wanted to forget the heartache. I was so tired of being sad."

He gave her a sarcastic laugh. "I wish I knew that then. I stood only yards away from you and listened to you tell him that there was no one at home waiting for you. But I was, Izzy. I was at home. And I loved you so much."

"Sean, I wish I knew. I swear to you, as much as I might care about Justin, he could never hold a candle to how you make me feel. Please tell me that you believe that. Please tell me that we can finally be together." She blinked and tears fell from her eyes. "Sean, I don't think I can live without you anymore. I go on, I try every day. But I'm not whole. There's something missing. I need you. I need us to be together."

Sean felt contentment and peace wrap around his heart like a warm, fuzzy blanket from her speech.

"Yes, Izzy. We are going to be together. Nothing and no one will stand in our way." He brought her close to him and held onto her tight. "I'm so sorry for everything, baby. I love you. And I will spend the rest of my life showing you just how much."

Snuggling into his warmth, she wondered if she could be dreaming. Had she fallen asleep in the bathtub? Was dreaming her fantasies to life? If she was, she prayed that she never woke up. She started at the feel of wetness hitting her shoulder.

"Sean?"

He was crying. He hated to cry.

"I'm sorry, baby. I just never thought I would get a second chance with you. But when I saw you yesterday..." He laughed. "You know,

I wasn't even supposed to be here. I had planned to leave before you arrived. I thank God that you were early."

"So the way you've changed, it was because—"

He silenced her with a kiss, then finished the sentence for her.

"I changed because I was dying inside. I hated everything. I loved you and needed you so much that I hated the world that I lived in because I couldn't hold you and love you every day of my life." He grinned at her. "But no more. I'm not angry or bitter. I'm happy Izzy." He bent his head to kiss her.

His kiss was setting her on fire.

"Sean, make love to me." She grinned at her memories of their first night together. "Like that night. That first night when you stopped thinking and you just felt. Show me again everything you showed me that night."

She had looked away from him. She seemed embarrassed. He lifted her chin with his finger.

"Baby, are you sure? I was so rough with you. I don't want to ever hurt you, ever again."

She looked at him and bit her bottom lip, a habit she had whenever she was nervous.

"Yes. I want you, Sean. I want you and I want you to show me how much you want me. Make love to me and make me yours all over again."

"Then what's wrong? Why do you seem so scared?" he asked.

Izzy swallowed nervously.

"I, um, nothing. Just make love to me Sean."

"Izzy, tell me." He demanded.

She expelled a breath and dug deep within herself for the courage to ask him.

"You know that thing. I mean, how we did it a little while ago." Sean grinned.

"Yeah, baby. I remember. Did you like it?"

She nodded as she bit down even harder on her lower lip.

"Okay, baby. But stop doing that to your lip. They're for kissing, by me. Maybe we'll try that again. But right now I need to show you how much I love you."

## **Chapter Ten**

Sean kissed her; he kissed her with the passion and the love that he had been holding in for over a year. Leaning her back, he loomed over her and took those kisses to new heights. Their bodies molded together as they began to move as one. There were no words said as they stared into each others eyes and made love with one another like the act in itself could sustain them for as long as they lived.

Sean held her afterwards. Hugged her tightly against his body as they lay there stroking each other's heated flesh. They were in harmony with one another. They were perfect together. They were so much in love that he wanted to scream it from the highest mountain top. He was about to say something when he heard a sound. He looked over to the doorway and cocked his head to see better from the position in which he lay. It was too late. Justin came barreling at Sean with the ferocity of a starving caged lion.

Isabelle screamed as Sean pushed her off of the bed and away from him before she could be hurt. Justin jumped on top of Sean and tried to hit him, but it was no use. While Justin was fit physically, he did not have the power or the strength that Sean did. Overpowering him, Sean pushed Justin off of the bed and rose from it, facing to stare at the man with murderous intention in his eyes. Sean reached behind him to make sure that Isabelle was safely tucked out of harms way.

"You whore!" Justin hurled the words at her.

"Watch it," Sean snapped.

"Justin. God, Justin, I'm so sorry. I—let me explain." Isabelle felt horrible for the betrayal she saw in his eyes.

"Explain? Explain what exactly, Isabelle?" He stepped closer as he hollered at her. "Explain how you feel so horrible that you can't go to a party with me, but then I find you like this? Or are you going to explain how you can't sleep with me, but you can sleep with your brother?" Justin let out a tortured laugh. "Your freaking brother, Isabelle. What is wrong with you?"

"Justin please, I-"

"No! I don't want to hear your excuses. God, do you have any idea how much I loved you? How much I still love you?" Justin's anger began to subside as sadness washed over him.

"Sean, would you give me and Justin some time alone please?" She reached to her hope chest and grabbed the robe she had taken off before the bath.

"What? Hell no. There is no way—"

"Sean, please. I owe him an explanation," Izzy implored.

Sean shook his head in disbelief.

"Izzy, I don't want to leave you alone with him."

Justin quickly interrupted, "You're a fine one to pass judgment. I would never do anything to hurt her."

Sean winced at his statement. Less than an hour ago he had done that exact thing. Out of his feelings of hurt and betrayal he had been rough with his Izzy. It still tore him up to know that he had treated her so carelessly. Turning back to Izzy he said, "I don't know, Izzy."

Securely tying the robe closed, Izzy placed a hand to Sean's arm.

"It's the right thing to do, Sean. He deserves at least that."

Begrudgingly, Sean nodded.

"Fine." Turning to Justin he said, "I'll be right down stairs in the living room, you got me?"

Justin said nothing. He just stared coldly at Sean. He hadn't liked this guy when they had shown up yesterday. But now, now he hated him with an intensity that seemed almost inhuman.

Making quick work of his jeans, Sean finished buttoning them and strode out of the room as he threw a warning look toward Justin.

Isabelle waited for the door to close to speak, but once she opened her mouth she was interrupted by Justin.

"Why? Isabelle, I love you. I think I fell in love with you the first time I kissed you. How could you do this to me?" He came to her, needing to touch her, hold her.

At the feel of Justin's hands on her shoulders, she cringed at the guilt that became all the more intense.

"I'm sorry. I wish I could say something to make it right, but I can't. I'm so sorry, Justin."

"You can." Justin looked at her with anguished eyes.

"What—I can what, Justin?"

"You can make it right." His fingers tensed on her shoulders before he continued. "You can leave here with me right now. No, let me finish." Justin dropped down to his knees and pulled a small box from the inside of his jacket pocket. He looked up at her with tears in his eyes.

"Justin."

"No, just listen. Isabelle, I love you. I was going to wait until Christmas morning. I—well, Terrance helped he pick it out today. I didn't leave it here. I didn't want you to find it." He opened the lid and showed her the shiny round solitaire ring.

"Isabelle, will you marry me? Please, we can forget about what you did. Of course I would forbid you to ever see him again. But it won't matter because I will make you so happy. I swear to you I will. Whatever you want, whatever you need, I will move heaven and earth to see that you get it."

If God struck her with lightning at this very moment she didn't think she could possibly feel any more pain. He was such a good person and he treated her so well. He was willing to forgive her for sleeping with another man. She knew she did not deserve his devotion. And the worst part was, she didn't want it. She wanted Sean.

"Isabelle. My sweet, beautiful Isabelle." He kissed her hand. "I see you thinking, wondering. But I swear to you honey. I swear with all that I have, with all that I am, that I will make you happy. Please, please, Isabelle, just tell me you'll marry me."

"Oh, Justin." She hated this. "I can't, I'm so sorry."

The shock crept across his face at her decline.

"But you love me. You told me—Isabelle you told me that you loved me."

She squeezed her eyes tight as she wished the tears away.

"Justin, I do. I care for you and I do love you. I just—," she took a steadying breath, "I just don't think that I'm in love with you. I'm sorry."

Justin saw hope in her words.

"You don't think? Maybe you are, though. Maybe you—."

Isabelle placed her hands to his face.

"No, Justin. I care about you. But I don't think I could ever be in love with another man."

"Him?" He got up from his knees and the anger swept back over him. "You're in love with him, your brother?"

"No, Justin. He's not my brother. His father only married my mother a few years ago. I've been in love with him ever since. I am truly sorry that I've hurt you." She went to place a hand on his shoulder and he jerked away from her.

"You think you've hurt me? You're a bigger fool than I thought, then. You didn't hurt me Isabelle. You destroyed me!" He shouted the last words before storming from the room.

Isabelle was startled to see Sean standing on the other side of the door. She went after Justin but not before turning to Sean.

"Please, go downstairs. It's not fair to him to have you lurking out here."

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"Izzy I—"
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<sup>&</sup>quot;No, Sean. Look at it from his perspective."

"Damn it! Fine, I'll be downstairs." He stalked off toward the stairs.

Isabelle took a deep breath and followed the sound of banging coming from the guest room were Justin was staying. She walked in to find him slamming drawers and haphazardly throwing his things into his suitcase. He turned to her when she walked back into the room.

"You can find your own damn ride back to school."

She nodded. What else could she say? What she had done was wrong. She knew it. But that hadn't stopped her. This man had waited for her, been patient with her and had done nothing but love her for the past seven months. And what did she do? She took his heart and squashed it. She only hoped and prayed that he didn't love her as much as he claimed. That she hadn't inflicted upon him the same pain that Sean had given her when he had turned her away.

"What, got nothing to say?" He laughed. "God how I want to hate you. I want to hurl obscenities and scream at you. I want you to feel the same pain that I do right now." He turned away from her for a moment, then suddenly without warning he went to her, grabbing her in an embrace that held their bodies close. Their mouths were almost touching when he spoke to her quietly.

"Isabelle, please. I'll do anything. You'll learn to love me. I'll make you so happy that you'll fall hopelessly in love with me." He leaned in and kissed her.

Pleading with her he said, "Please, Isabelle, just leave with me now. We'll forget any of this ever happened. I love you so much." He started to cry.

Oh God. She couldn't stand to see the torment she was causing him. She was a coward for what she was about to do and she knew it, but she couldn't help it.

"I'm sorry, Justin. I can't." And she ran from the room.

Justin stood there, stunned, crying and heartbroken.

"Isabelle," he whispered.

\* \* \* \*

Isabelle went to her bedroom and quickly threw on a t-shirt and sweat pants. What she really wanted to do was crawl into her bed and cry against her pillow, but Justin was leaving and he deserved, if nothing else, for her to see him off. She wished she hadn't hurt him. She wished she had never gone out on that date with him. Then Sean wouldn't have left and...

"Oh, stop it, Isabelle. You're being selfish," she chided herself.

Moments later, Isabelle came barreling down the stairs. She needed to talk to Sean before Justin came down. The last thing any of them needed, especially Justin, was a scene. She could still hear him packing, but she knew he wouldn't be much longer.

She was so lost in her thoughts that she ran into Sean at the bottom of the stairs.

"Sean. I didn't even see you there."

"Is he leaving, Izzy?" His tone wasn't pleasant.

Her shoulders slumped and she sighed.

"Yes, Sean. But please don't say anything to him. I've hurt him. Just leave him alone, for me. Please."

"Izzy, I don't care what—"

"Sean," she snapped at him. "Stop it. I feel horrible for the way I've led him on. Deep down I always knew that I could only ever love you. But I still let him think that we could have a future together. I wasn't fair to him, Sean. I feel awful. Please just leave him alone."

He listened to her pleading with him. He knew she was right. But he couldn't shake his jealous possessiveness over his Izzy. Maybe he did feel sorry for the poor schmuck. But that didn't mean that he had to like him.

"Fine, you're right. I won't say anything." They both turned as they heard the front door.

"Honey, really, I'm sure she's fine. And besides, Justin came by to check on—" Terrance quieted. He stared at the same thing that had gotten his wife's attention. Clad in only a pair of jeans was Sean, Izzy standing next to him. And at the top of the stairs stood a grief-stricken Justin with his suitcase in hand.

"What on earth? Justin, are you okay? And Sean, I thought you had to work tonight." She turned to her daughter. "Isabelle have you been crying?" Connie asked them all in complete and utter confusion.

Terrance took one look at the situation and knew. He stared at his son, furious with him for what he had clearly done. He closed his eyes and took a deep breath. He shook his head and opened them up. Justin had come further down the stairs. He now stood directly in front of them, obviously waiting for them to move out of the way of the door so that he could leave whatever nightmare he had stumbled upon.

"Justin. I'm sorry. I don't know what to say to—" Terrance told him. He felt horrible for the boy. He spent the day with him and listened to him tell of how much he loved Isabelle. How he wanted nothing more than to marry her. His heart broke for the jaded person in front of him.

"Don't, Terrance. I don't blame you. I don't think you would have helped me today if you had known," Justin said sincerely.

"Known what?" Connie turned to her husband. "Terrance, what on heavens name is going on?" When she was met with silence she became angry. "Someone better tell me something right now!"

Justin smiled the best smile he could muster. She was really a very sweet lady.

"Thank you, Connie. Your hospitality has made me feel very—welcome. But I have to go spend Christmas with my family, if you'll please excuse me."

"But why? Isabelle, are you leaving too?" But Connie saw her answer on her daughter's face. It was obviously over between the two of them. "Why, what happened?"

Justin took a breath.

"I'll let Isabelle explain things to you. Now please, if you'll—yes, thank you I really must be going." He kissed her on the cheek as he moved his way past her and out the door. Without looking back, he closed the door.

Isabelle's heart sank. He could have screamed and yelled. He could have caused a big scene. But he wouldn't, he was too good of a man for something so petty. Although he had every right to throw things and behave like a child, he left with his head held high, causing Isabelle's heart to break just a little more for the man that left.

Connie turned to all of them. Clearly, she was upset.

"Someone better start talking? And you? Why are you even here?" She pointed her finger toward Sean. "You have been horrible to this family for over a year now. And words can't begin to describe the awful way in which you treated that sweet boy."

Terrance came up behind her and placed his hands on her shoulder.

"Connie, I think that—"

"No. I will not hear any more excuses for his rudeness. You have turned into a different person, Sean. I love you like my own son. But sometimes I don't even like you. So go ahead, spill it. I know you're behind this. What did you do to that boy? What could be so bad that he would leave Isabelle? He is so clearly in love with her."

"So am I." It was a simple statement. But really, the situation was already so complicated, why should he make it any worse?

"You're—what? I don't understand." Realization all but smacked Connie in the head. Her body became tense and rigid and her eyes widened as she truly took in Sean's half naked appearance. She walked right over to him and with everything that she had she slapped him hard across the face.

"Mom!" Isabelle screamed. "Stop that." Instantly Isabelle reached up to touch Sean's red face as he winced from the sting.

"I want you out of this house!" Connie was past anger. She was livid.

"If I leave, Izzy's coming with me." Sean looked at Connie, stared deep into her eyes. "Connie, don't do this. Don't make her choose."

"Honey," Terrance said quietly. "Let's not be rash. Perhaps we should sit down and talk about this calmly."

She spun around to meet her husband's calm demeanor.

"How can you be so cool about this? And why aren't you—oh my God. You're not surprised. *You knew*? You knew and you never told me?" She turned her anger on her husband, not sure which of them she was the angriest with. "How could you not have told me? I'm your wife. I'm her mother. Doesn't that mean anything to you?"

"Honey, please. You mean everything to me. I—I know I should have. I just couldn't tell you. I was worried that you would—I don't know what. It's just that, honey, you have to try and understand. Sean truly does love her. Why do you think he's been such a mess? Think about it. When did he start to change?" He hoped and prayed his wife could get past this. He couldn't stand it if the price of his son's happiness was him losing her.

She looked at her husband and then looked upward, clearly thinking. She turned then and faced Sean.

"It was right after Isabelle left for school, you got so angry; you never wanted to be around here." She turned to her daughter then. "And whenever you came home he wouldn't come within a mile of the house."

Connie turned to Sean and gently touched his face where she had slapped him.

"You loved her then. You did, and you let her go. Why?"

"I thought I had to. I thought that giving her up was the right thing for Izzy. But when she came home yesterday, oh God Connie. I'm sorry. I love you. But I love Izzy more. If we can't have your blessing, it won't stop me. We'll be together. But Izzy needs it. She needs your blessing and truth be told, it would mean a lot to me." He shrugged. "Whether I deserve it or not."

"Sean, oh my. You love her? I mean truly, do you love her enough to cherish her, and love her no matter what life throws your way?" She asked him, wishing that she could stay angry. But she saw the truth in his eyes. She saw the pain he had suffered without Isabelle.

"I promise you Connie. With every breath that I take, with every ounce of my soul, that I will love your daughter like no man has ever loved a woman before. Nothing could stop me from doing everything in my power to see to her happiness." He touched her hand that cradled his cheek and whispered, "I swear."

Tiny tears escaped Connie's eyes. She smiled and hugged Sean tightly.

"I'm sorry I hit you, Sean."

"It's okay. Believe me, when I started to fight my feelings for Izzy I wanted to kick my own ass for the things I was feeling."

They all laughed at his little joke.

"Well, it looks like it is going to be a merry Christmas after all" Terrance said from behind his wife as he hesitantly placed an arm around her.

Connie glared at her husband.

"You have some explaining to do, Terrance."

"I know, honey. I'm sorry. If I profess my undying love for you, will you forgive me as well?" He winked at her.

"I'll consider it. Perhaps there are ways you may be able to persuade me." She winked right back.

"Oh God." Izzy rolled her eyes, taking Sean's hand she pulled him to the kitchen. She turned back to yell at them. "I mean really. It's been over three years, the honeymoon is over already."

Terrance and Connie snickered at her comment as they went upstairs to their bedroom.

## **Chapter Eleven**

Izzy awoke with a sadness in her heart. The past two weeks had been so wonderful. All of her dreams were finally coming true. She was with Sean. Their parents had dealt with it. There was nothing standing in there way of being together, but she groaned, knowing that there was one thing that would keep her apart from Sean.

She and Sean had discussed it. And since she had already registered for her classes and it was too late to transfer any of her courses to the city campus, she begrudgingly agreed with him that she should at least finish this semester at the north campus. Then she would be able to transfer to the city campus for next semester and she could move into his house permanently.

Oh, but the thought of not seeing him and not being held by him made her so sad. But in light of what she had gone through over the past year, it was mild. She still couldn't believe it. They were together. They had talked about getting married, although Sean had been adamant that they wait until after she graduated. Terrance and her mother agreed, which really left her with no argument. She supposed they were right. She just wanted it all right now. But she couldn't be selfish. She would take their lives together and cherish every day that she had with him.

"Izzy? Are you gonna sleep all day? We've got a long drive ahead of us, baby," Sean yelled from down stairs.

She smiled. Oh, how she loved waking up in this bed.

"I'll be down in a few, I'm gonna jump in the shower," she shouted back down to him.

She rose from the bed and removed the bracelet he had gotten her for her last birthday, but just gave to her on Christmas morning. She loved it.

She had just finished rinsing her hair when she reached for the nozzle to turn it off. She jumped and laughed all at the same time when her hand came in contact with Sean's. She looked over her shoulder.

"What are you doing in here?"

Sean stepped in the shower and closed the curtain.

"Did you really think that I could resist joining you in here when you all but invited me?"

She laughed.

"I hardly think that telling you I was going to take a shower was inviting you to join me."

He quirked a brow at her.

"Oh, I don't know. It's the way you said it. I heard the underlying meaning there."

"Underlying meaning?"

"Yeah, you know. You might have said, 'I'm gonna jump in the shower' but what I heard was 'Sean, come jump in the shower with me and ravish me with all of your masculine wildness.' After all, baby, I told you I would do whatever it took to make you happy, so I'm merely in this shower with you out of the kindness and love of my heart." He winked at her and waggled his brows.

She wrapped her arms around him and giggled.

"Oh Sean, I love you." She kissed his neck and whispered in his ear, "Sean, ravish me with your masculine wildness."

"If you insist, baby." Grabbing her and pulling her close he ravished and loved her until they both were exhausted.

Sean groaned when they were drying off and she muttered the time to him.

"Oh, come on, baby, we have time for just a little nap." He tried to convince her while giving his best puppy dog face.

"Don't give me that. I'm tired too, but we've got to get going. Come on. I'll be back on Friday night and you can ravish me all over again." Isabelle got up from the bed and walked to the closet to get dressed.

Sean watched her.

"God you're beautiful, Izzy. I swear I love you more and more every day."

Four hours later, Sean walked her into her dorm room. Carrying her suitcase and setting it down next to her bed, he fell on the bed with a thud.

"Oh, Izzy. I'm gonna miss you."

She lay down next to him and propped her head up with her hand.

"You are the one that insisted that I finish the school year here."

"I know, but you neglected to mention how stupid I was." He traced a line along her jaw with his index finger. "Remember? I don't have the best track record when it comes to making important decisions."

Leaning over to kiss him, Isabelle prayed that this semester would go by quickly. Their kisses intensified. They were on the verge of making love when they heard someone cough.

"Ahem. Uh, sorry. I'm Anne, are you," she looked down and read from a piece of paper in her hand, "Isabelle Morley?"

"Yes, that's me." She sat up on the bed and adjusted her rumpled clothing.

"I have a note here for you." She extended her hand out and waited until Isabelle reached for the paper. "All right then, uh, carry on." The strange girl left without a backward glance.

Sean and Isabelle both laughed.

"Well, who's it from?" he asked.

"Let's see." Isabelle opened the note and briefly skimmed the note. "Oh my gosh. I can't believe it." She laughed, turning to Sean to show him the note. "My roommate Darcy, she eloped with her boyfriend over break. He's been away in the military. She's moving

to Mississippi with him. Oh, she must be so happy." She leaned over and kissed Sean fervently. "You know, Sean. All I would have to do is lock that door and we would be all alone."

"And?"

She laughed.

"And what? I thought the rest was pretty self-explanatory."

"And, what are you waiting for? Go lock that door! I want to give you some real nice memories to tide you over until you come home to me on Friday night." Sean watched her as she walked to the door. He was mesmerized by the gentle sway of her hips and her lean, luscious legs. He loved her so much. And when he said she would be coming home to him, he meant it in more ways than one. Because when Izzy was with him, he was whole. There was no ache, no need left unmet. Yes, his Izzy made his life worth living.

\* \* \* \*

It was Friday, only five days into the new semester and already Isabelle felt frazzled. She had taken a couple of harder courses this time around, wanting a bit more of a challenge. Now all she hoped for was less homework and more time with Sean. She was running to class when she felt her cell phone vibrate in her back pocket.

Reaching for it she answered.

"Hello."

"What are you wearing?" the deep voice whispered.

She laughed.

"Well, seeing as how I am jogging to class and there are about a hundred people in my direct line of sight, what do you think I'm wearing?"

"You better be dressed in baggy jeans and a big old frumpy sweater that makes you look horrible," Sean teased.

"How'd you know? It just so happens that's exactly what I'm wearing."

"That's my girl. Listen, I only have a minute but I just wanted to tell you that I miss you." His tone was more serious now, sincere.

She stopped her jog for a moment.

"Sean. I miss you too. I love you."

"I love you too, baby. I'll see you tonight, okay?"

"All right. Bye." And they hung up.

She was placing her phone back in her pocket when she heard a familiar voice call her name. She looked up and realized she had only been standing a few feet from Justin when she told Sean she loved him. God, could she feel any worse?

Sean hung up the phone and turned to Jake.

"What?"

Jake laughed as he patted his buddy on the shoulder.

"You, man. You are so whipped."

Not realizing they had an audience in the locker room, Sean was surprised when he heard a bunch of laughter.

"Haha. Laugh all you want. I could care less."

"Hey man, we're just giving you a hard time. Lord knows your sister, oops sorry, I mean your girlfriend is hot," Officer Cowley taunted him.

"Make fun all you want boys, but my Izzy is more than just a pretty face. There is nothing you could say to bring me down. So taunt all you like, it isn't working," Sean told them smugly.

"Come on, man, ignore them. Let's get to work." Jake led the way to the garage to get into their patrol car.

"Justin, hi." *He looks horrible*, she thought. Which was exactly why she didn't ask how he was.

"Hi. How are you?" he asked in a shaky voice.

Oh Justin. I'm so sorry.

"I'm fine. How—ah how are you?" He shrugged.

"Are you heading to class?"

"Yeah. You?" What could she say?

"Yeah. Isabelle, can I—can I be honest with you?"

"Oh Justin, of course you can." She sat down next to him on the park bench where he was seated.

He looked at her and gave her a half smile.

"I miss you."

"Justin, I-."

"I do. I miss you so much. I still love you. Do you—have you thought about what I said that night?" he asked, hope shining in his eyes.

"Justin, I'm sorry. I can't. It wouldn't be fair to you."

He snickered as his eyes glared at her.

"I wish you would have thought of that last spring. Before I—before I fell in love with you."

Isabelle closed her eyes on the pain she knew she was causing him. She knew all too well what it felt like to love someone and be pushed away.

"Justin, I'm sorry. I truly am. I wish there was something I could do or say to make you feel better, I—."

"I told you there is." He turned to her and took her face in his hands. "Give us another chance. I swear I could make you love me. I'll be so good to you, honey. Please." He leaned in to kiss her.

Isabelle hated the rejection he would feel but she was forced to push away from him and get up from the bench.

"I'm sorry, Justin. I can't. I care about you and I am deeply sorry for what I've done to hurt you, but it just won't work. I'm sorry." She turned away from him and walked away, refusing to turn back and see the hurt in his eyes for one more second. She couldn't bear it. She absolutely hated herself for what she did to him.

\* \* \* \*

Hours later, Isabelle was exhausted. She had met with some other students from her psychology class to discuss a project that they would begin work on next week and what should have been a thirty

minute meeting had turned into an hour and a half, thanks to the ramblings of that strange girl Anne that had brought her the note from Darcy. It was slightly amusing that she turned up in one of her classes, but having to be partnered up with her in a group project was going to be possibly more than Isabelle's patience could handle. The girl jumped from topic to topic like she was literally afraid to stay focused on one thing at one time. It was mind-boggling the way her thoughts would scatter. Isabelle laughed to herself on the way to her room, realizing that really they should be studying Anne for their project. That would surely get them an A.

Here it was, 7:30 on a Friday night; she still needed to throw her dirty clothes together so she could wash them at Sean's. She had to gather all of her text books and get whatever she needed to get her assignments done over the weekend. Not to mention she was exhausted and, while she hadn't looked in a mirror lately, she was sure that she probably looked like hell. The dorm was already starting to clear out. Being the first weekend of the semester, people were in prime party mode.

Finally she got to her door. She opened it and all but threw her stuff on the bed. Hurriedly she reached for her cell phone to call Sean and let him know she was going to be late getting home. While she listened to his phone ring she started getting her dirty laundry together. Sean hadn't answered, so she was forced to leave him a quick message telling him she would be late, while she stripped off her clothes and jumped into the shower. She winced when she realized she hadn't let the water warm up. Well, she was awake now, she thought, as the ice-cold water pelted over her skin.

\* \* \* \*

"Nicely done, Walker." Sgt. Barnes patted Sean on the back.

"Thanks, but really it was simply a matter of being in the right place at the right time." Sean was trying to be modest but he was screaming inside with excitement.

"Yeah, don't go giving him all the credit," Jake piped in. "If I hadn't eaten that chili dog, which by the way is still wreaking havoc on my digestive system, he wouldn't have been sitting out there to see the suspect drive by." Jake grinned from ear to ear.

Sgt. Barnes chuckled.

"Yes, well, I suppose you're right. So we'll thank chili dog man for his fine police work and you're ah, what did you call it, digestive system, for providing the means necessary for Sean to do such a fine job."

"Sure, make fun." Jake turned to Sean. "Seriously, though. You did good, buddy." Jake rolled his eyes. "Oh hell, answer it already. You know it's her, you're only late getting off of your shift thirty minutes and she's already calling."

Sean turned to his sergeant as if asking permission. When he got the nod of approval, he reached to pick up his phone, but it had already gone to voice mail. He dialed his messaging system and waited. After punching in the numbers he listened to Izzy's jumbled message about being late. She was so out of breath, he could only make out half of what she said. Deciding to wait until he had a little more privacy, he held off on calling her back.

\* \* \* \*

Ten minutes later Isabelle turned off the shower and reached for her cell phone, which was on the bathroom counter.

"Hello."

"Hey, babe. You're gonna be late?"

His soothing voice sounded so good.

"Yes. It's been a hectic afternoon. I just got out of the shower, I need about a half hour and then I'll be on my way."

"All right, but drive careful. It's Friday night. I'm actually gonna be a little late myself. I did some mighty fine civil service duty tonight, if I do say so myself. As a matter of fact I think it's your duty as a citizen to give me my just rewards." A smile spread across his face as he thought of just how he would like to be rewarded.

She laughed.

"Oh, I suppose if you've been a good officer then I have no choice. Look, let me get dressed and out of here. I should be there," she glanced at her watch on the counter, "no later than midnight. Bye, I love you."

"I love you too, Izzy. Drive carefully." He hung up.

Izzy made quick work of drying off and haphazardly throwing lotion on her body. With a brush in hand she ran into the main room. She dropped the brush.

"Justin. What are you doing here?" she said, stunned, as she stood there naked, trying to conceal her body.

## **Chapter Twelve**

"Hi, Isabelle." He sat on her bed. He was leering at her body with a look of hunger in his eyes.

"Justin, I—." She glanced at the pile of clothes across the room. There was nothing within her reach. "I'm not dressed, Justin. You'll have to leave—." She told him as she frantically searched for something to cover herself.

"No!" Justin jumped up from the bed and went to her. His eyes glinted in the dark room and she caught the flash of something shiny in the corner of her eye. "Don't."

Isabelle looked down, she saw the small knife that he held in his hand. She recognized it as the one that he had shown her at his home when she went there for Thanksgiving. His father had given it to him on his sixteenth birthday. It was his favorite hunting knife.

"Justin, why do you have that knife?" Fear crawled up her spine, because she was afraid she knew all too well why he had it.

\* \* \* \*

Sean had remained calm until about ten minutes ago. He was now pacing as he dialed Izzy's phone over and over again. Every time it just went to voice mail. It was only 12:30 and she really wasn't that late, but something kept gnawing at him. She should have been here by now. And why wasn't she answering her cell phone?

He scribbled a note to Izzy in case she showed up and he ran for his SUV. Placing a call to his dispatch, he asked them to check for

any accidents between here and the college. He hung up when he was told they would call him back.

He slid behind the wheel and nervously gripped it. After he was on his way, he dialed information for campus security. Using his influence as a police officer, he was able to get them to agree to do a drive by of her dorm and check for her car.

He drove impatiently down the highway, speeding recklessly as he anxiously waited for any word. Finally his phone rang and he snapped out the word, "Yeah."

He sighed in relief when he heard that there were no accidents reported along Izzy's route. He was about to set his phone down when it rang once more.

"Yeah," he said again, almost breathless with fear.

Sean's knuckles tightened even harder on the steering wheel as he heard the security officer tell him that Isabelle's car was still in the parking lot. His knuckles turned a stark white and were close to crushing the wheel beneath them when the officer then refused his request to go up to her room and check on her, saying they were short staffed and he had several calls that he was backed up on.

Sean slammed the phone down and pushed the accelerator all the way to the floor. He was driving way too fast, dangerously fast. And he didn't care. Something was wrong. If something happened to Izzy to cause her to stay behind, she would have called him. He was sure of it. But then it hit him, and he knew it. Something *had* happened to Izzy. He hated that he knew it was true. His stomach roiled and he fought the nausea. Dear God, let her be okay. Please.

Two hours later, Sean screeched into the parking lot. Students were scattered about the grassy lawn as they were returning from parties and bars. He took the steps three at a time as he ran to her floor.

Finally he was in front of her room. He reached for the handle without even knocking. It was locked. Damn it!

"Izzy?" He waited, but she didn't answer. "Izzy, baby, are you in there?"

He quieted his breathing and leaned his ear against the door.

"Izzy, baby, please, if you're in there just answer me." He still didn't hear anything. He was about to walk away, to start asking around to see if anyone had seen her when he heard a small sound. It sounded like a muffled cry. No. It didn't just *sound* like a muffled cry, it was a muffled cry.

"Izzy. Baby, open up. Please." He started pounding on the door.

He was about to break down the door when finally he heard her speak.

"Sean. Please go away. I'm not feeling well. I—I got sick. I don't want you to catch it."

He heard her shaky voice, heard the cries she was trying to conceal as they ripped from her throat. There was no way in hell she was sick. Something was horribly wrong. Not waiting any longer for her to unlock the door, he slammed into it with everything that he had. The cheap door went flying off of the hinges.

Isabelle sat up in bed, startled by the sudden burst of noise and light. Squinting she said, "Sean. I—I said I don't—." She couldn't do it. She brought her knees up to her chest and cried. She couldn't even look him in the eye, so she looked down at her body, which she now found utterly disgusting, and prayed that he would just leave.

Sean stood there for a moment. He saw her, before she curled up, he saw all of her. She was bleeding and naked and she had a bruise by her mouth. And, *Oh my God*, *Izzy*! He went to her, careful to sit on the bed gently. He reached his hand out to her. He had to fight the tears when she jerked and pulled away from his touch.

"Baby. Are you okay?" He could barely speak. His eyes stung from the tears he was holding back.

She said nothing as she shook her head, still facing downward.

"Baby, Izzy. Can you tell me what happened?" Please let me be wrong. Please don't let it be what I think it is. God in heaven, do not let me be right.

She looked up at him. She was shaking uncontrollably.

"I'm sorry Sean. I tried. I tried to stop him. I-."

*No!* He screamed inside his head.

"Izzy, baby, oh God. I—baby, we need to call someone. Have you done that yet?" Sean used every amount of strength that he had to keep his voice calm and soothing, hiding the tormented emotions just barely below the surface.

She shook her head again.

"I couldn't. I didn't want you to find out. I'm so sorry, Sean. I tried, I swear I did. I was just so scared and he had a knife and—."

His heart broke. Why did the victims always blame themselves? He never could understand that. But now, as he saw the shame in Izzy's eyes, he knew it wasn't about understanding why. It was about making sure she knew how wrong she was to blame herself.

He went against everything he had been taught in the police academy. He reached for her and grabbed on to her, pulling her to him. The cop in him knew that he was never to touch a rape victim, but the man in him had no choice. He had to show her how precious she was. How loved she was. How it wasn't her fault. And while she didn't fight him as he held her and cradled her in his lap, he could feel her body become tense and rigid as she continued to shake from the constant tears streaming down her face.

Sean slowly reached for his phone, but he stilled when she jerked up to see what he was doing.

"It's okay. I'm just going to call them now, okay, baby?" She nodded and buried her head back against his chest. Sean quickly relayed the information to the 911 operator. When he hung up he wrapped his arms around her tighter.

"Izzy, they're gonna be here soon. Have you—baby, did you wash yourself?" He hated asking her. He hated the anguished look in her

eyes. But he couldn't forget that there was a rapist out there. Someone who needed to be punished.

She looked at him.

"Oh Sean, no. I'm sorry. I should have. I feel so dirty, I should make myself clean. I'll go and—." She started to pull off of him and push him away.

"No, no Izzy. Listen to me, baby. You did everything right. Okay? You did good." He forced her face up with his fingertips. "Baby, you are *not* dirty. The man who did this is. You did nothing wrong. I need you to know that."

She shook her head. "I should have been stronger; I should have been able to stop him. But I couldn't. And now, now I've ruined everything." She turned away, not wanting to see his eyes. Those eyes that she loved so very much. The ones that she knew would never look at her the same again.

God, he wanted to scream. Not only was she in shock but she was blaming herself for what some bastard did to her. What was wrong with this world?

"Izzy, you didn't ruin anything. You did nothing wrong. You have to believe that." Sean turned his head at the sound of sirens. "Baby, they're here. I need you to get up so we can get something on you okay? Good. It's okay, honey, I've got you."

"Don't call me that!" she snapped at him. "Don't ever call me that again!"

Honey? Jesus, had her attacker called her that?

"Okay, Izzy, okay, I'm sorry. Listen, baby. They're gonna be up here any second. Let's go in your bathroom and get your robe, okay?" He walked with her in the room and with the bright lights shining overhead he saw more bruising on her body. He gritted his teeth and his jaw tensed. It took everything he had to not scream at the heavens for allowing this to happen to her.

Isabelle looked up at him in the mirror's reflection. Tears continued to spill down her cheeks.

"Sean, I'm sorry. I know that I've let you down." She looked down, the guilt too strong to meet his gaze, knowing that she would lose him forever. There was no way he could love her now.

Dear God why? Sean placed his hands on her shoulders and brought her closer to lean against his chest.

"Izzy, you *did not* let me down. You are going to be fine. We're going to talk to the police, get you to the hospital and you are going to be fine. I promise you."

She didn't ask aloud what she was thinking. Would they be fine? How could they be? How would he ever be able to look at her the same way again? He wouldn't be able to still love her. There's no way. How could any man love a woman after—?

"In here officer." Sean called out from the bathroom. Slowly he guided Izzy to sit on the bed as another officer ushered curious onlookers who appeared at the sight of police away from the door.

"Ma'am, I am Officer Pitney. First I need to ask you if you knew your attacker." His relaxed voice did nothing to hide the fact that he felt uneasy dealing with a rape victim.

Isabelle looked up at the officer, and then she turned her gaze to Sean. She nodded her head yes. Sean's arm tightened around her and she felt his support. Looking back up, Sean spoke to her.

"Izzy. You need to tell the officer who hurt you." A frown washed over his face at the fear that he saw in her eyes. "It's okay, he can't hurt you anymore. But we don't want him to hurt anyone else either. Please, Izzy, tell him who it was."

She hesitated before quietly murmuring, "It was—oh God, I still can't believe—." She dropped her head in her hands and started to cry. Although it didn't seem possible, the cries seemed deeper, sadder.

Sean held her closer.

"Izzy, please. Would it be easier if you spoke to a woman? Or maybe would you like me to leave the room?"

Her head snapped up at his question.

"You want to leave?" Her voice shook with every word.

Sean had to bite back a curse. He should have known better than to ask that. Surely she would think that he wanted to leave, the guilt of her attack being too strong for her to rationalize her shame and anger and where it should be directed.

"No, baby. I don't want to leave you. Ever. But I want you to feel comfortable. And safe. Whatever that takes."

"I feel safe with you. I don't want you to go, Sean. Please, will you stay?" She held onto him as he tightened his embrace and he didn't miss the sympathetic gaze that he got from the other officer standing in the doorway.

Sean took a steadying breath.

"Izzy, do you trust me?" He waited for a response, but she only nodded against his chest. "Then you have to tell them who hurt you, baby. Please, will you please tell them?" He heard her whisper a name but he couldn't make it out. "Who? I didn't hear you. Who hurt you?"

She looked up; with her face pointed toward the ceiling she screamed a horrific cry of agony as she yelled his name.

"Justin! It was Justin. He raped me." She turned to Sean. "I'm sorry. I love you. I'm so sorry." She collapsed against Sean as he held onto her.

Justin! That son of a bitch. Sean held onto her with everything that he had. Her whole body was shaking at the gut-wrenching screams and sobs that tore from her throat. He wanted to kill him. He wanted to hunt the bastard down and torture him for every tear that she shed. But he couldn't. There was no way he could leave her. Just the fact that she was leaning on him was a good sign. So many rape victims closed themselves off from men and the world. If she would allow it, he would be here. She was all that mattered.

Quietly, Sean gave the officer standing in the doorway Justin's information. He watched as the officer radioed the information in.

"Sir, we need to get her to the hospital. Should we have a gurney come and get her?" the uneasy officer sitting across from them asked, obviously taking note of Isabelle's frail and emotional condition.

"No. No, I'll carry her. I'll ride in the back of the ambulance with her." Sean got up with Izzy still cradled against his chest. "It's okay, baby. I've got you. I won't let you go." He walked past the officer in the doorway and headed toward the hall, disgusted with the people standing around gawking at her.

Sean carried her out of her room, down the hall and descended the stairs. Once outside he took a giant step up into the back of the ambulance. Without saying a word to either of the paramedics, he sat on the gurney and held on tighter as he felt her body relax against his. Was she falling asleep? He hoped so. Maybe she could have some small amount of peace while she slept.

It's okay, baby. I've got you, you rest now. I won't let you go.

## **Chapter Thirteen**

Sean paced the small waiting room of the hospital. He hadn't called his dad or Connie yet. He knew he should have, but he could barely control his own emotions, let alone trying to calm someone else's. His heart felt like it had been crushed. The only thing that mattered right now was Izzy. What she wanted and what she needed. He wanted to hate himself for not being there for her, for not protecting her, and for even allowing her to come back to school. But he knew he couldn't give in to that self pity. He had to be strong for her. He knew from all of his training that she was going to be blaming herself enough. She didn't need the added stress of dealing with his macho bullshit.

"You can see her now. I've given her a sedative, so she'll be out in a couple of minutes," the short and balding doctor told him.

"Thank you. Is she—will she be okay? I mean physically." Sean couldn't even organize his thoughts to form a sentence. His head hurt and his eyes burned from holding back the tears that were dying to burst free.

"Yes, physically she'll be fine. Emotional scars will be her biggest obstacle. You better go on in there before she falls asleep." The doctor gave Sean a reassuring pat on his shoulder before walking away.

Sean walked into her hospital room. The bruises that had barely shown themselves back at her dorm room were now clearly visible. And the purplish black hue of them had him fighting the urge to run out of this hospital and track down Justin and beat him until he bled dry.

Isabelle turned and saw him standing in the door.

"Sean." She reached her hand out to him.

He went to her quickly. Taking her hand, he sat in a chair next to her bed. He placed her hand to his mouth.

"I'm so sorry, Izzy. I love you so much. You know that, don't you?"

She let yet another tear fall from her eye.

"Still?" She closed her eyes on the pain of the question she knew she needed an answer to. But was still afraid to ask. "Do you still love me? Even though—."

Sean instantly got to his feet and brushed a gentle kiss across her forehead.

"Baby. Of course I still love you. That could never change. I could only love you more every day. Izzy, please don't think that I would ever stop loving you. I can't, baby. You're a part of me." He brought her hand to rest against his heart. "Do you feel that? My heart beats for you, baby. I am nothing without you. Of course I still love you."

She cried, although the tears were slowing. She was starting to drift off into sleep. "I'm sorry, Sean. I love you. Please—Sean please don't leave—." Her voice trailed off as she gave in to the veil of unconsciousness.

Sean watched her eyes close and finally allowed his own tears to fall.

"Never, baby. I will never leave you." He kissed her forehead before sitting back down in the chair. He sat there, holding her hand and waiting for her to wake up. He would not leave her. He would sit here as long as it took. There was no way he would allow what had happened to her to destroy the spirit of who she was. She was his Izzy. And he would make sure that she was okay again. Come hell or high water, she would be whole again.

Half an hour later Sean awoke to Izzy's screams.

"Izzy, baby, wake up." She was asleep but having a nightmare. "Help, we need a doctor in here!" Sean yelled toward the door.

The doctor ran in the room with two nurses in tow. Sean was forced to release her hand as they worked on her.

"What's wrong with her? Why won't she wake up?"

"Please wait outside," the doctor snapped at Sean.

He was ushered out by an orderly and forced to stand outside and watch and listen as Izzy screamed for him to stop. Reliving the rape within her nightmare. Then his name. *Oh God, baby*! She screamed Sean's name. She was begging him to save her, to stop him. Izzy. Open your eyes, baby. Please, see me. I'm right here!

The turmoil of the past several hours finally won over. His stomach roiled with the hatred he felt for the man that hurt her, for the agony she was in and for the fact that he was helpless to make things better for her. He turned to a trash can that was a few feet away and threw up. As he wretched he could swear that he was vomiting his very soul. Hunched over the can, his body shook and he screamed.

Why? Why in God's name did this have to happen to Izzy? He jumped when he felt the doctor's hand on his shoulder. He got to his feet and wiped sweat from his brow.

"Are you all right, son?" the doctor asked with complete sincerity.

"Forget about me. What about her, is she all right?"

The doctor nodded, understanding the man's urgency. "She is small and she was already so tired, I'm afraid we only gave her a tiny bit of her sedative earlier. It was a bad choice on my part. She hadn't fallen completely under the influence of the drug and she had a nightmare." The doctor held out his hand before Sean could interrupt him. "Don't worry. I have given her a bit more. She should be able to truly rest now."

Sean breathed a sigh of relief.

"Good. Thank you so much, doctor."

"Of course. Listen, I normally try to separate myself from my patients. You know, what with being a cop, you can't really get emotionally involved either."

"Yeah, I do. Is there something you want to tell me?" He prayed she was okay. That there wasn't more bad news.

"No, there's something I *need* to tell you. Not as a doctor, but as a man. I have a wife, I know what it is to love someone more than you love yourself. I can see that in you."

"I do love her, more than I could ever begin to describe," Sean confirmed.

"Yes, well. I've seen rape victims before. But your Isabelle seems to be suffering in the worst kind of way. She said some things in there, while she was dreaming. She—she not only blames herself. But, oh, I don't know how to tell you this." The doctor said, obviously torn.

"Just say it please."

"Okay. When she was screaming your name, she kept muttering over and over again that you wouldn't love her anymore, wouldn't want her. She said she let you down. She blames herself more than I think you may realize." The doctor placed his hand to Sean's shoulder and before walking away said, "I'm sorry, I just thought you should know."

Sean stood there stunned. What could he say? How could he make her see how wrong she was? The woman whom he loves more than anything in this entire world was raped and now, not only was dealing with shame, guilt and pain, but somehow she managed to convince herself that she wasn't worthy of his love. After the doctor left him Sean went back into her room and sat down.

He took her hand in his and pressed his lips to her knuckles.

"Izzy. I love you." Shutting his eyes tightly to stop the rush of tears that were fighting their way to the surface again, he repeated his vow. "I love you, Izzy. I will always love you. Always. Remember that, baby. I love you so much." Slowly Sean gave in to his fatigue and he floated off to sleep beside her, his head resting on her bed.

\* \* \* \*

"Sean." Isabelle's shaky voice was barely heard.

He opened his eyes and squinted at the bright sunshine coming through the window. "Izzy? Hi, baby. How are you feeling?" He got up from his chair and placed a gentle kiss to her forehead.

"Sean. I need to talk to you." She bit her bottom lip, fighting her nerves.

"Okay, I'm listening. What is it?" Sean massaged her knuckles with his thumb, trying to soothe her.

"I love you, Sean. I want you to know that I love you so very much."

"Baby, I know that. And I love you, too."

She swallowed the lump in her throat.

"Sean. I know that we had talked about our future, and made plans. But, I—."

"No. No, don't even think about saying it. Nothing has changed, Izzy. We are going to have a future together, a good one. I love you, baby." Sean got up to place a kiss to her lips and she turned away. A part of his heart broke off from her withdrawal. "Izzy. Don't do this. I love you. I know it took me too long to figure it out, but I do. Baby, please don't do this."

Looking back up at him she continued, "Sean don't you see? That's just it. *I* love *you*. I love you so much that I can't allow you to give your life, your future to me when I know I've hurt you."

"Izzy. I want you to listen to me. And listen good. *You*—do you hear me—*you* did not hurt me. None of what happened was your fault. You are still my beautiful and sweet Izzy. Nothing and no one could ever change that. You are my whole world, baby." Sean loomed over her, gently caressing her face with his fingers.

"Sean, don't you understand? I let him touch me. I didn't fight hard enough. I was yours, only yours and now—now I'm..." She shook her head, not wanting to continue saying the words that hurt so bad.

Sean slowed his speech, gritted his teeth and annunciated every word.

"You are not to blame, Izzy. You did not *let* him touch you. He had a knife. You have bruises. You didn't let this happen. He took what wasn't his. What didn't belong to him. That is not, nor will it ever be anyone's fault but Justin's. Please tell me that you understand that?"

"But I belonged to you, I loved knowing that I belonged to you and no one else and now everything has changed."

"Nothing has changed, baby. You have to believe that. Please look at me." He waited for her to comply before continuing. "Izzy, do you love me? Do you want me to be hurt?"

She instantly shook her head. "No. Sean, I love you. I don't ever want you to be hurt."

"Good. Because if you try to pull away from me, I'll die, Izzy. I need you. Just as I need food, water and air, I need you. Baby, oh baby, please. Just let me help you. Let me take care of you. Let me love you." Not allowing her to turn away from him again, he placed her face in his hands and gave her the gentle kiss he had been dying for.

She cried as he kissed her lips so tenderly.

"Sean. Oh, Sean. I'm so glad you're not angry with me. I need you. I need you to—Sean, will you hold me? Just hold me."

He climbed into bed with her and waited for her to make room. When they were situated and she was tucked safely in the crook of his arm, he silently thanked God for allowing him to get through to her. For her allowing him to help her.

The door to the room opened. A nurse stood in the doorway with a chart. She took one look at the couple, saw the woman sleeping so tenderly in his arms, and nodded. Then she quietly began to leave the room. Sean mouthed the words "thank you" before she was gone, which earned him a small smile.

\* \* \* \*

Later that night, Sean hung up the phone after talking with his chief and saw Officer Pitney standing outside of Izzy's room. He hated to admit it, even to himself, but he had been so focused on Izzy that he hadn't even thought about whether or not they had arrested Justin.

Approaching the man, he said, "Officer Pitney, did you get him? Is he in custody?" Anxiety riddled every word he spoke.

"We ah—maybe we should go talk in the waiting room." The man said after looking toward Isabelle's sleeping figure.

Hesitantly Sean followed. He had a bad feeling and he didn't like the way the officer looked.

"All right, we're away from her room. Now tell me what's wrong. Did he get away, resist arrest, deny it? What?" Sean demanded.

Shaking his head the officer looked morose. "No, he didn't deny it. We found him at his apartment. He let us in, and confessed. He made it very easy on us. It would have been an open and shut case."

"Would have been? What, did he get off on a technicality? Did you guys freaking screw up?" Anger was rolling off of Sean in tidal waves as he bit out each and every word.

"No." He exhaled a large breathe and then said, "He managed to fashion a makeshift noose out of his pants. He hung himself three hours ago in his cell. He left a note. A note of apology that he wanted her to have." The officer hesitated before continuing. "I know what you're gonna say, but his parents asked me to try. They want her to read it. They said that he really loved her."

"Loved her? He freaking raped her!" Sean came toe to toe with the officer and screamed even louder. "He cut her, he bruised her and he hurt her, in the worst way a man could hurt a woman. You tell his parents they can take his note and shove it up their—."

"I got it! Jesus, I was just doing what I was asked. They lost their son; I wouldn't feel right if I didn't ask. I'm sorry. Obviously, I see

your point. I will tell them that they are to leave her alone." The officer walked away and turned back to face Sean once more. "I don't know if you'll care. But for whatever small consolation this may be, but I just wanted you to know that he completely cooperated from the moment we picked him up. He didn't deny anything and he waived his right to an attorney. He just wanted to plead guilty and receive his punishment. I think he actually hated himself for what he did."

"You're right. I don't care; it is hardly a consolation to hear that he was sorry. I hope he burns in hell for what he did to her." With that, Sean stalked back to Izzy's room. He needed to hold her. The fury inside him was tearing him up. How dare the asshole take the selfish way out? He should have had to pay for his crimes, just like everyone else. Damn him!

\* \* \* \*

The next day Sean had finished packing up Izzy's things in her dorm and had sent them on with his father and Connie. While he had to force the issue with her, eventually Izzy gave in and allowed him to call home to tell their parents what had happened.

Now as he walked from the elevator to her hospital room, he had to take a deep breath and get his nerves under control. It had been such an emotional couple of days. And when Connie had come to see Izzy, it had only gotten worse. He understood all too well why she was so upset, but her tears and pain had only made Izzy hurt worse. He hated that he had to get stern with Connie, but as he made it abundantly clear to both his father and his stepmother, Izzy was all that mattered. Their feelings didn't. If they were going to help her through this, they needed to be strong for her, not fall apart in front of her.

He knocked once and waited for Izzy to acknowledge that he could enter. Once she did, he came in the room and saw her staring

out the window. She turned to look at him briefly and then turned away.

"I have your clothes. Are you all ready to go?" He placed the bag on the bed and after walking to her, he rubbed a hand up and down her back.

She nodded. While she was still allowing him to be there and hold her, he could feel her withdrawing from him. Pulling back. She barely spoke in the past twenty four hours. It hadn't helped when Justin's parents had called her room the night before begging for her to forgive Justin so he could rest in peace. He shuddered at the thought that he hadn't been in the room when she got that call. Why had he picked that exact moment to step out and grab a cup of coffee?

He had made the mistake of not telling her what had happened. Needless to say, when she found out from his parents she was angry with Sean. He hated that she felt guilty for what had happened, to both her and Justin. It seemed like she was holding herself responsible for everything. All he wanted to do was help her, make the bad memories go away. He wanted her to be okay again.

Placing a gentle kiss to her temple. He said, "I love you, baby. Let's get you changed so we can get out of here, okay?" Not waiting for her to respond, he began getting her things out of the small bag that he brought. He placed her clothes on the bed and stilled when he realized she was standing there staring at him.

"Izzy? What's wrong?" He came to her, rubbing his hands up and down her arms in a soothing fashion, then asked, "Do you feel all right? Do you need to sit down?"

"No, I'm fine Sean. I just—I would like to be alone, if that's all right."

He watched her. She was biting on her bottom lip again. He knew she only did that when she was nervous.

"Izzy, I'll leave you alone if that's what you want, but will you tell me what's upset you?"

She shook her head and turned away from him. Fighting the tears that had been falling for days she answered him.

"I can't. I'm scared."

He went to her. Wrapping his arms around her waist and pulling her to lean into, his chest he whispered, "Baby, please don't be scared. You can tell me anything."

"No, Sean. You don't understand. That's not what I'm afraid of. I can't get changed in front of you. I'm afraid for you to see me, all of me, with my clothes off." Losing the battle she gave into the tears, feeling the entire weight of her shame.

Sean's heart squeezed unbearably tight. The trembling of her voice, the fear that he heard, was killing him. He couldn't push her. He knew that. But every part of him wanted to shake her and make her see that she was still Izzy. That she was beautiful and vibrant and had nothing to be afraid of. That he would never let anything hurt her ever again. But instead of doing that, he placed a kiss to the top of her head and gently pulled away from her.

"Okay, baby. Take your time. I'll just wait outside okay?"

She turned to him, then with trembling lips she called to him before he left.

"Sean. Thank you."

"Sure, Izzy. I love you."

She conjured up the best smile she could and looked down to the floor.

"I love you too."

\* \* \* \*

Four hours later, Sean tucked Izzy into bed. She had taken a sedative that the doctor had prescribed to her and it only took minutes before she started to fall under its spell.

"Do you need anything, baby?" he asked as he tenderly stroked his index finger down the side of her cheek. "No, thank you. I just want to sleep for a while. Will you—never mind." She hesitated.

"Izzy, what? Ask me, please."

"Will you be here when I wake up?"

"Oh, baby. Of course I will be here. I took some time off of work. I'm not going anywhere. So I don't want you to worry about anything. Okay?" He kissed her on her forehead and wished he could take away her pain.

"Okay. Thank you. Sean, I—I love you." She squeezed her eyes tightly shut before the tears could fall for the millionth time. She was so tired of crying, of not being able to stop herself.

"I love you, Izzy. I love you so much. You're going to be okay, baby. I promise. We're going to get through this together." He watched her closed eyes. "Izzy?" She had fallen asleep.

That's it, baby. Rest. I'll be right here when you wake up. He leaned over and kissed her mouth. Not wanting her to catch a chill, he brought the covers up to surround her. He stared at her sleeping form, the covers pulled up to her chin. She looked like she was wrapped in a cocoon. If only, he thought. If only there were a magical cocoon that he could put her in to protect her from all the pain and misery of this world.

"Sleep well, baby. I love you." Sean turned and left the room.

He walked down the stairs, numb from everything that had happened. He felt a hole burning through his heart. It was unlike any pain he had ever experienced. He felt so helpless, so completely worthless. If only there was something he could do to ease her pain. If only there was—he was startled out of his thoughts at the sight of his dad standing in his living room.

"Dad. I didn't hear you come in." Sean went to sit in his recliner.

"I just got here. I waited until I had Connie down for the night. I wanted to see if you needed anything." His dad came to him and placed a beer in his son's hand.

Sean unconsciously grabbed onto the frosty bottle.

"No, she's sleeping now, so I just have to wait until she gets up so that I can—what?" Sean didn't miss his dad's somber expression.

"I didn't mean with Izzy, son. I meant do you need anything?"

"Me? No I—I'm fine." Sean's voice shook and his hand began to tremble. "Oh God, Dad. That's not true. I'm not fine. I'm angry, I'm so damn angry!" He shouted. The onslaught of agony he had gone through and subsequently kept buried beneath the surface came out into the open. "Why?" Tears poured from Sean's eyes and sobs began to tear from deep within him.

Terrance sat on the arm of the chair and wrapped an arm around his son.

"I know, son. It's horrible what has happened. I know how strong you are, though. I know how much you want to help her. That's why I'm here. You need to let it out. Whatever you're feeling, get it out now. While she's asleep, while she can't hear you."

Sean nodded.

"I love her so much. I can't stand the pain I see in her eyes. It hurts so bad knowing that I can't take it away."

"No, Sean, that's where you're wrong. You can. If anyone can take that pain away, it's you," Terrance assured him.

"God, I hope you're right. I pray you're right. Because I can't stand to see her hurting. It makes me feels so useless." Sean let out a guttural sound, half cry and half scream. "Why, Dad? I just want to know why this had to happen to her."

"No. There are no reasons why. And it wouldn't matter son. It wouldn't change what happened. Just be thankful that she has you, that she is letting you help her. As long as you're here with her, then there is hope. Don't give up on her, Sean. Don't let her down. You have to fight for her. You have to be strong enough for the both of you. She needs you now, probably even more than she realizes."

Sniffling and clearing his throat, Sean agreed.

"You're right. I know. Thanks, Dad. I really needed someone to unload on. More than I thought."

"I know, son, I know. Now you lie down and close your eyes. I'll stay here. When Izzy wakes up, I'll let you know." Terrance held up a hand to silence him. "She never even needs to know that I was here."

Sean saw the meaning in his eyes and was thankful for his father's astuteness. It was apparent from their visit with Izzy earlier that morning that she didn't feel comfortable being around either of their parents yet. And his dad understood that.

"Thanks, Dad," Sean said as he closed his eyes.

"Go to sleep, son." Terrance sat on the couch and had to fight his own tears. Izzy had been as much his daughter as if she were his own for the past several years. And as much as he hated to see her in pain, it was doubly worse from having his son suffer as well. Dear God. Please let them get through this, he silently prayed.

## **Chapter Fourteen**

Sean clutched his cup of coffee tighter than usual. His nerves were on edge. These last three days had been agonizing. Izzy seemed more withdrawn now than she was when he first found her after her attack. She was building a wall around herself. Hardly eating and barely speaking, it seemed as though she was merely a shell of the person she once was. All she wanted to do was lie in her, well, their bedroom and sleep. Which would be fine, except every time she fell asleep she had dreadful nightmares. She would scream and beg for Sean to help her, at which point he would wake her, hold her and soothe her—but that would be it. Once her tears had subsided she would once again ask to be alone.

He winced as he drank the last of his bitter coffee. How could he leave? Damn his chief for calling and demanding that he come in tonight. Sean didn't care one damn bit how many officers were out with this flu bug that was going around. Nor did he care how understaffed they were for the night shift. He just wanted to stay here with Izzy. He knew she was awake upstairs. She hadn't fallen asleep yet. He could hear her tossing and turning. Earlier he had gone up to talk to her, to tell her how sorry he was that he was going to have to leave tonight.

His eyes shut on the pain of that memory. As if in a trance, she had just stared at him, or right through him it was more like it, and shrugged, telling him it was fine.

"It doesn't matter" she had said. She didn't even care that he was leaving. And as much as he knew it made him seem like a jerk, he hated that she could care less if he was there or not. Damn it, he hated this!

He got up from the table to rinse his cup in the sink. He needed to be out of there in the next five minutes and no matter how much she said she wanted to be alone, he was not going to leave without talking to her. He needed to tell her, to remind her how much he loved her. If not for her, than for himself.

Sean took the steps two at a time, hoping it would relieve some of his anxious energy. He rounded the corner to the room and would have knocked but the door was only halfway closed. He opened it and froze in uncertainty. Izzy stood in front of the mirror staring at her naked self. Silent tears ran down her face as she stared at herself with a look of, was that disgust he saw? Dear God!

"Izzy? Baby, what—."

Isabelle swung around and reached for her nightshirt on the bed.

"Sean, oh, I thought you had left." She hurriedly put her shirt back on and got back under the covers. "I was just going to bed. Have a good night at work tonight. I'll see you in—."

"Izzy, stop it!" Sean shouted the words. Damn, why had he done that? "Baby, I'm sorry. It's just, God, Izzy, why won't you let me help you?" He went to her, despite the fact that he knew he would probably be rejected. He sat on the bed next to her.

"Sean, I'm really tired. I'm going to go to sleep now." She told him as she turned away from him and proceeded to snuggle into a ball.

God, how he wanted to scream. He wanted to rage and yell and take away the nightmare of this past week and erase it from history. But instead he gently placed a hand to her shoulder, careful not to startle her.

"Izzy. I'm sorry I shouted at you. I'm torn up, baby. I don't know what to do. I see you; I see what you're doing. You're pulling away. I know you hurt. But I don't want to lose you." He sighed and took a

moment before continuing, "I know that makes me sound like a selfish bastard. But I can't help it. I love you."

"Sean, please." She whispered without turning to face him. "I'm tired."

Sean shook his head.

"No, Izzy, you're not tired." He strengthened his grip on her shoulder slightly. "Izzy, don't lie to me anymore, it's true. That's all you do, is lay up here. If I wasn't here you wouldn't be holed up in here, you're doing it to avoid me. And I hate it. I'm sorry, but I do. I love you so much and it's killing me how much you can't stand to be around me."

Suddenly and so quickly that she caused Sean to jump off the bed, she turned to him.

"Is that what you think?"

Stunned, he wasn't sure how to respond. She showed more energy in that one movement than he had seen out of her in the past five days.

"Yeah. I mean, I understand that you're feeling—things, but I want to help you. I don't know what to do, what to say and—oh damn, I wish I could just take it all away. Like it never happened."

"I'm sorry, Sean." She sat up in bed. Turning to face him, she hesitated before saying, "I wish I could make it all go away too, but I don't know what to do. I just hurt so much. My heart, it—it aches."

He closed his eyes on a sigh. Why? He'd asked himself that a million times since that night. Why had it happened? If he had done just one thing different would it have changed the outcome? He hated the self-imposed questions, because it forced him to think that if he hadn't have given into his love for her it might have stopped Justin from going over the edge. Would she be okay now? Without him, but okay?

"Izzy, what can I do?" He went to her and knelt in front of her. "I sense this wall, the one you're putting up around yourself, and it's so

big. I'm worried, baby. I'm scared that if I don't stop you it will get so tall that I'll never be able to get to the other side again."

"Sean. I wish I could say that—I don't even know. I just can't seem to make any sense of what I'm feeling from one minute to the next." Reaching out for him, she touched his shoulder.

At the feel of her touch Sean looked up at her. He wanted to reach for her hand, to hold it and squeeze it tight, making sure she knew that he'd never let her go. Anymore, though, he had no idea what he should do. What was right? What was wrong? His training as a police officer conflicted with the emotions of the man that he was.

"Maybe you should consider talking to that counselor. Or maybe even your mother."

She knew he was right. After days of avoiding her mother's phone calls, she knew it was only a matter of time before her mother would show up insisting to see her. The truth was, she just wasn't ready to deal with her mother. The hysterics that she showed in the hospital, no matter how justified, were too much for Isabelle to handle. How was she supposed to deal with her mother's tears when she couldn't even control her own?

"I know. I need to speak to her. I'm not sure what to say, though. I know how upset she is. I hate that it's because of me."

"I wish you would stop saying things like that. It is not because of you, but because of what someone did to you. It still seems like you blame yourself."

She nodded, understanding his rationalization but not quite sure on how to convince her brain to agree with him.

"Sean, aren't you going to be late?"

And there it was. The wall, it was being built higher. That was the most they had talked to each other, truly talked to each other, in days and now she was pulling away again. What could he do? Deciding to be thankful for the small step they had taken, he stood up.

"Yeah, I need to get going. Are you sure you're going to be okay? I mean, if you think there's any chance at all that—."

"Sean, no. Thank you, but I'll be fine." She gave him the best smile she could manage. "Be careful. You know I worry about you."

Talk about reading minds. He was more worried about her than he could even begin to explain. "I will, baby. Try and get some sleep." Yeah right, she slept all day to avoid him. She would probably lie awake all night long.

"Okay. Bye."

"Bye. I love you."

Smiling again, she lay back down and pulled the covers up.

"Good night," she said before closing her eyes.

If a wrecking ball had slammed through his chest he wouldn't have felt even close to the amount of pain that consumed him right at that moment. The horror of his greatest fear came to life at the lack of her words. This is what he had been afraid of. She was going to pull away from him so far that he would lose her forever. She had spent the past several years loving him with such intensity that it was unreal. But now, the woman who told him she loved him with the same consistency of breathing air hadn't said those three little words back.

After locking up the house, he got behind the wheel of his SUV. He started the engine and slowly backed out of the driveway. He glanced up and saw the bedroom light turn back on. Pulling to the side of the street just a few doors down, he looked back up at the house. And as if confirming his accusation of earlier, he watched as the lights illuminated in the downstairs windows. She was now in the living room. He had been right. It wasn't just his paranoid fears. She stayed in that bedroom all day to avoid being around him. She wasn't just slipping away. She was almost gone completely. If he couldn't get through to her soon he truly would lose her forever. And not just her love and their future, but he would lose Izzy. Izzy. The beautiful, tenacious and vibrant woman that he had come to love as a person as much as a woman.

"Dear God, tell me what to do."

\* \* \* \*

Isabelle walked through the downstairs, wondering what to do. She had been going stir crazy up in that bedroom. She hated that she was glad that Sean was gone. She shouldn't want to be alone and away from him. But she did. No matter how horrible it made her feel, she was so happy to finally be alone.

She loved him, truly she did. But she felt—smothered. Like she couldn't breathe from the care and attention he was showering her with. It was horrible. She knew that it was. "Thankful" is what she should be feeling. Glad that he still loved her. How many women would delight in the devotion that Sean showed her?

Giving up on her questions, she walked toward the kitchen. Opening the refrigerator, she stared at the contents for several moments. When she didn't see anything that interested her she closed it and opened the freezer. She smiled. Vanilla fudge swirl, her favorite. Oh, Sean. He always was thinking of her. She knew he hated anything with vanilla in it. She knew it was bought solely for her.

She took the pint out of the freezer and closed the door. She reached in the cutlery drawer and grabbed a spoon and headed toward the living room. How is it that for days she had barely an appetite and now just the picture on the small container made her mouth water? Plopping herself down on Sean's recliner and getting comfy, she dug in.

"Mmm." Heaven.

After she got through half of it she was already getting stuffed. That only reminded her of how little she had eaten in the past few days, and how much Sean had pestered her to eat more.

"You've barely touched it," he told her earlier after he took her soup bowl when she claimed she was full.

"I'm worried about you, you need to eat more," he had said when she swore to him that she couldn't eat another bite.

But how could she explain to him that it wasn't that she was full? It was more like a feeling of extreme emptiness. And no matter how much she ate or didn't eat, she didn't believe that the hollow feeling inside of her would ever go away.

She recalled Sean's words when they spoke upstairs just a little while ago. He had told her he was worried and scared. She hated that he felt that way. But worried and scared were exactly how she felt, as well. She loved Sean so much, with everything that she had, and now she questioned whether she would be able to continue to love him the same way.

It wasn't him. It wasn't even her. It was—well, it was her. It was what had changed inside of her when Justin had raped her. That was what she had been thinking about earlier when Sean had walked in on her. Immediately following her rape, she had felt dirty and somehow broken. But now she wasn't even sure if there were any words to describe the way she felt when she saw herself.

It wasn't shame or guilt. And no matter how many tears she had cried she couldn't even say it was sadness. She felt—despair. Yes, complete and utter despair. Despair for the woman that she no longer felt that she was and despair for the future she would have had with Sean. Because no matter how much she loved him and how much he told her that he loved her, she was uncertain about the possibility of their happily ever after.

If she were to truly be honest with herself, she would admit that she didn't believe there was anyway that she would be able to be the woman Sean once loved ever again.

## **Chapter Fifteen**

Sean slammed the door open to the locker room, furious with himself for screwing up. How could he have been so stupid?

"You get suspended?" Jake asked him.

"No. I should have been though. Damn it!" Sean punched his fist against his locker, causing an oblong shaped dent. "Shit!"

Jake looked at his friend, his partner, and hated what he saw. For a short time after Sean and Izzy had finally found a way to be together, they had gotten Sean back. The real Sean. But now, he was changed —perhaps more so than ever before. And the worst part was that Jake feared there was no chance the Sean he loved and respected like a brother would ever return.

"Are you all right?" What else was he gonna say?

Sean looked up at his partner while rubbing his hand. How Jake wasn't furious with him, he had no idea. His blatant disregard for proper procedure in that vehicle search could have caused Jake a lot of trouble.

"I'm sorry for screwing up. I'll try to—I will be more diligent next time."

Jake shook his head.

"Will you?"

Truly hurt by the question but knowing it was completely justified, Sean looked at him.

"Look, I know I haven't exactly been myself lately, but I'll get back into the swing of things. I promise. I just haven't been sleeping very well, that's all."

"Sleeping? Are you serious man? Come on. It's me, Jake," he told him incredulously.

"Yeah, sleeping. Look, I said I was sorry. I can't take it back, so just drop it." Sean's anger was slowly returning. He hated that he had been nothing but an incompetent screw-up lately.

"No. No, you can't take it back, Sean. And nothing you do can take back what happened to Izzy, either."

Sean's head snapped to Jake. With fury in his eyes he bellowed, "How dare you! You don't think I know that. You don't think I'm reminded of that every god damn day!"

People scattered out of the locker room at the ensuing shouts. Jake waited for the last of them to clear before he turned his somber expression back to Sean.

"I know. Unfortunately I think that's the problem." Jake slapped his hand in the air, forcing Sean to be quiet. "No, listen, damn it! Enough already. Look, it's been over a month since the rape."

"A month since I lost her! It's been over a month since a selfish bastard took something from my Izzy that I can't give back to her!" Sean, although screaming the words, was doing everything in his power to fight the tears. The goddamn tears that came to him every damn night as he cried with such pain he thought he would die from it.

Jake closed his eyes and hung his head. Trying desperately to find the right words, he waited. He wanted to help, not make things worse.

"I know. I know she's changed. And I know that you're hurting. But you've got to get a hold of yourself. You aren't just difficult to be around anymore. You're making mistakes, big ones. Ones that could cause a lot of problems for the city and for your fellow officers."

Sean dropped to the wooden locker room benches. Jake was right. He knew it.

"I'm sorry. I don't know what to do, Jake. I'm losing her." He shook his head. "No. Who am I kidding? I've already lost her."

Placing a hand to his shoulder and sitting next to him, Jake continued. "No, Sean. She may be hurting and trying to heal, but she loves you. You know that."

Sean let a tortured laugh escape. "Do I? It's been over a month since she's told me." He looked to his friend. "Did you know that? I tell her every day that I love her. And every day she doesn't say it back." Giving into the anguish, regardless of where he was, he began to sob.

"Jesus, Sean. I had no idea. I—I gotta be honest. I don't know what to say." Damn, no wonder Sean seemed so destroyed. He wasn't just dealing with the pain of Izzy's rape, but that of the end of their relationship. After all they went through to be together. How freaking unfair could fate be?

"There's nothing you can say. I've tried everything I can think of. She finally started talking to that counselor a couple of weeks ago and her mom comes over pretty regularly now, but it still hasn't changed. I love her so much, but it's like she's gone."

"But she's still there with you right? I mean, she is living with you. She hasn't gone back home. That has to be a good sign. Right?"

Although it was strange, Sean truly hadn't thought of it that way. He suddenly felt calmer. Jake was right. Izzy was still with him. She just needed more time. As long as they were together, he would and could be patient with her. How could he not have seen it? As long as she was at home waiting for him they stood a chance. That was a chance he was definitely not going to let slip through his fingers.

\* \* \* \*

Izzy froze at the sound of the front door closing. He was home. She had been dreading this moment for the past three hours, ever since her mother had left. But she had been right. She needed to be honest with Sean. She owed him at least that.

"Izzy. Are you awake? I brought home your favorite," she heard him yell from downstairs. Her favorite. Chinese. She could already smell it. Oh, she wished there was someone there to help her with what she was about to do. She walked toward the stairs and then descended them. One at a time, step after step, she replayed in her mind everything she was going to say to him. Finally, after the sixty-second walk to the kitchen, there he was, standing there, looking at her with love in his eyes. Love that she knew she couldn't return.

"Hi. Did you have a good day today?" Did he sound pleasant enough? The quiet tension that been looming between them needed to be exorcised.

"Um, yeah. I met with Clarice this morning." The sweet older lady who had been her rape counselor for the past two weeks had truly been a godsend. Isabelle hardly cried anymore and she was beginning to make sense of some of her conflicting emotions.

"Good. Listen, sit down. I'll get some plates and then I would like to talk to you."

Without waiting, he turned to reach for the plates in the cupboard and brought them to the table.

He reached over and took her hand.

"Izzy, I wanted to—."

"Sean, I want to move back home." Oh God. She had rehearsed the heartfelt speech she had intended to give him for the past three hours and now she just blurts it out like an insensitive shrew.

Stunned, Sean dropped Izzy's hand from his.

"What?"

"Oh, Sean, I'm sorry. I didn't want to say it like that. I was just so nervous and it slipped out."

Sean swallowed the uncomfortable lump of distress that had lodged in his throat.

"You want to leave?" Please say no. Say I misunderstood.

Nodding, she reached for his hand, which was quickly jerked away.

"I'm sorry, Sean." She choked on a bitter laugh. "It's funny, isn't it? I have been apologizing to you for one thing or another ever since—well, I'm sorry. I plan to move out tomorrow."

His lungs burned. He couldn't breathe. And he was fairly certain that his heart had stopped beating. She was leaving. The one ray of hope that he had was dim as all hell.

"No!" Sean got up from his chair, which effectively slammed it against the wall. "I won't let you go!"

"Sean, please. I'm sorry. I know you're upset, I wish I could change the way—."

"You can! Right now you can change it. Just say you didn't mean it." Kneeling in front of her he took her hands. "Please, Izzy. I'll do anything, just don't leave."

Not able to handle the anguish she saw in his eyes, she looked away.

"I'm sorry. I can't. I can't live with you anymore, Sean."

"Why? Baby, I love you. I know it's been hard. I know I haven't done everything right. I'll change though. I'll fix things. I'll do whatever it takes. Just say you'll stay."

Still refusing to meet his eyes, she shook her head and felt the tears escape.

"No. I have to leave, Sean. Please say you understand. Please. I wouldn't be able to stand it if I thought you were angry with me."

Sean took his hands to her face, forcing her to look at him.

"I will, though. If you leave I will be so angry with you."

Although the words were painful to hear they lost their effectiveness with the sorrow in his voice.

"Don't do that to me. Please don't do that. I can't stay here anymore. It's too painful."

He was sincerely shocked by her statement.

"It's painful to be here? With me?"

She had been afraid of this.

"It's not you, Sean. It's me. Well, really it's us. It's what we once were. What we no longer are."

He was shaking his head.

"No. No, you were hurt and it was horrible but it's over and with time you'll see that—."

"It won't work. I've tried, I swear I have. But we can't be together anymore."

"Wait a minute. Before you just said you were moving out. Now you're ending things? Permanently?" For the love of God please say no. Tell me that isn't what you're saying.

"Ending what, Sean?" She exhaled a big breath, angry with herself for her sarcastic tone. "I'm sorry. It's just that—don't you see? Ever since that night we have really been nothing more than roommates and it's only gotten more tense between us with every day that passes."

"But I thought that was what you needed. I was trying to give you space. I didn't want to hurt you."

"I know. Sean, you have been so completely wonderful. You have been compassionate and patient. But that's just the problem; no amount of patience can handle what your future with me could hold."

"What do you mean?"

"I've thought about it, Sean. I have analyzed it and struggled over it. I've talked to Clarice and my mom." Tell him. Explain it to him. You owe it to him. "Sean, you deserve a woman, a complete and whole woman who can give you the things that you need and deserve. I can't give you those things."

"No, that's where you're wrong. You're the only one who can give me what I need. *You* are what I need." He would not lose her.

Needing to be away from him she rose from her chair. She started to walk away from him but he grabbed her and spun her around.

"Listen to me. You can't leave our home. I love you. I will do whatever it takes to make things okay again. Let me help you."

His grip on her arms was intensifying.

"Sean, you're hurting me."

He loosened his fingers but refused to let go.

"I love you. Do you understand that? I hate what happened to you, but it doesn't change who you are or what you are. You are my Izzy." He began to cry as he framed her face and brought his mouth close to hers. "My sweet Izzy. Baby, please. Please don't this."

It had been so long and he ached so severely. He had to; he couldn't have stopped himself if his life depended on it. He placed his lips against hers and kissed her. He kissed her with everything that he was, to show her, so she would see where she belonged.

The feel of his mouth against hers felt so wonderful, so perfect. But she knew she had to stop it. She knew it couldn't continue; it wasn't fair to him. She pulled away.

"Stop."

"Don't you see, baby? I know you felt it too. That's how good we are together. We can have that again. That and so much more. Just don't go."

"That's just it, Sean. That's it period, that's all we can ever have. Can you really honestly tell me that you would be satisfied with a life of kisses and nothing more?" There, she'd told him. Well, not exactly, but she was getting there.

Not fully understanding his brows bunched together in confusion.

"I don't understand. Izzy, if you're worried that I would rush you I wouldn't. I swear. I would never do anything that you weren't ready for."

He still didn't understand.

"Would you wait forever, Sean? Because that's how long it would be." She jerked out of his arms. He didn't get it. He just couldn't see what she was saying. "I don't want it, Sean. Ever. I can't explain it, but I know, as sure as I stand here in front of you I know I never want to—."

"Izzy, we have time. It doesn't matter to me if it is two days, two weeks, two months, it just doesn't matter." He wondered how she

could actually believe he would care about the sex, after everything they had been through.

"No. God, why can't you hear what I'm telling you?" Frustrated with him but mostly with herself, she began to pace. After several silent moments she turned to face him.

"Sean. Listen to me, because I don't think I'll be able to say it more than once."

He nodded in agreement.

"Okay."

"The idea of sex disgusts me. I know that it is a normal response for my mind and body after the rape. That's what all the articles say, that's even what Clarice says. But I know, I know for certain that it won't change. I love you. God, Sean, I love you more than I could ever begin to explain."

"Oh, Izzy." He had waited over a month to hear those words. His heart squeezed unbearably tight every time she didn't return his endearments.

"Sean, you promised you'd listen." She waited for him to be silent. "It's because I love you that I can't be with you anymore. The best way I can think of to describe it is that of a young girl in puppy love. I know, it may seem strange but it's true. I want your kisses and I want you to hold me. But that's where it stops. I don't want anything more. And I know for certain that it would break my heart to see the pain in your eyes when my body tensed up under your touch."

"Then I won't touch you. I'll just kiss you and—."

"Damn it, Sean! Listen to me!" Trying to calm her already frazzled nerves, she took a slow and steadying breath as she prayed for the strength to continue. "I don't want you to touch me like that, ever! Never, Sean. Something in me changed that night. I have tried to deal with it, but I can't. There is no way that I ever want to feel my body being touched intimately again. I'm sorry."

Seeing the look in his eyes, knowing that there was also anger there, she chose to walk away. It was the only option. She could never give him what he needed. Yes, he would be patient. She believed that. But it's only patience if you're waiting for something to happen. He would be waiting forever. He would be miserable, unhappy and he would never have children. No, that was not an option, so she was doing the right thing. She was sure of it.

"Don't you dare walk out that door, Izzy." Sean's voice had an edge to it.

She threw her head back and closed her eyes.

"Sean, I'm trying to do what's right."

"What's right?" He grabbed her wrist and spun her around. "How can leaving the man you claim to love be what's right? Damn it, Izzy. Look at me, look in my eyes. I don't care about the damn sex! I love you. I disagree with you. I think that in time, even if it's ten years from now, you might change your mind. But that doesn't matter. You seem convinced that you never will. So who cares? I sure as hell don't." He grabbed her and kissed her. Just like he had before. Proving to her how much she wanted to stay.

She wanted to fight him. Desperately she wanted to push him away. Oh, but she couldn't, the way he kissed her was so sweet. She wasn't as sad when he kissed her like this.

Sean broke the kiss first.

"See, we don't need anything else, Izzy. I love you. And you love me. That earns us a second chance. Please let us have it." Frustrated from the situation, he pulled away this time. When he got to the kitchen sink he turned to face her. "You say no sex. Fine. No sex. All right. Now, we're going to sit down and eat our dinner and we're going to forget this whole ridiculous argument ever happened, because you're staying."

She wanted to. She wished she could believe that any man would be okay with never making love to the woman he loved, but she knew it was a fallacy. No way would he be happy with kisses alone. And she knew from the disgust she felt at the idea of being touched that she would never, ever change her mind.

"No, I'm not staying Sean. I wanted this to be easier. I wanted you to understand. I'm sorry." She walked from the room, but not before reaching for her keys.

Panic clawed at him.

"Izzy, where are you going?" He followed her in the living room and panic turned to hysteria as she headed for the door with her purse in hand. If she left now she wouldn't be back. He couldn't let her go. "Izzy, wait."

A sad memory washed over her at the sound of his words as she reached for the door handle. That night before she first left for college he had said those exact words to her.

"Sean." She turned to face him. "There's nothing left to say that—" He was desperate, he dropped to his knees and grabbed onto her.

"Don't." His emotions were choking the words before they were able to come out.

"Sean?" She couldn't understand what he was trying to say.

He looked up at her.

"Izzy, please. I am on my knees begging you. Don't leave, don't leave me. I will die without you."

If it was possible for a heart to combust, shatter, disintegrate and harden all at the same time, it had just happened to her. The look in his eyes—until the day she died she would never forget that look.

"Sean I can't give you what—"

"Yes you can. I told you." His cries were gut wrenching. "You're all I need. Just you. Just my beautiful and sweet Izzy." Squeezing her tighter, he planted a small kiss to her stomach. "You're everything to me, baby. Look what happened to me when we weren't together. I was lost. Please don't let me get lost again. I need you. I need you to breathe, to live, I need you to survive."

Framing his tear soaked face in her hands, she couldn't form the words she needed to say. She hated herself for hurting him.

"Izzy, what can I say? What can I do? God, you're my soul, can't you see that?" She couldn't leave. She couldn't leave.

"Sean, if you love me, truly love me, then please let me go." Her voice, calm and determined, didn't waver.

Sean stared at her, not believing what he was hearing. How could this be happening?

"Izzy."

"No, enough. It is over, Sean. Please let me go."

Her eyes. They suddenly seemed so detached. There wasn't even pain in them. She was just so resolved in her decision. She meant it. It was over. She was leaving him. Nothing he said or did would change that.

He released his hold on her, the shock in his face painting a gruesome picture that she would have to carry with her the rest of her life. 'Stay strong,' she told herself. She walked toward the door and reached for the handle. She turned it, opened the door and was about to tell him goodbye but stopped herself. If she said just one more word to him, spoke to him in any way, she would stay. And he deserved better than that.

Sean stayed kneeling on the floor. He watched her with horrorfilled eyes as she walked out the door and closed it. He heard her car start, listened to it while it drove away. She was gone. Izzy was gone. It was over. Less than two months ago they had finally found a way to be together. Just weeks after that, their world was destroyed. She had been raped and their lives had shattered.

Collapsing back on the floor, Sean stared at the ceiling. There were no more tears as he lay there in shock. No feeling, no pain, no ache of any kind. There was absolutely nothing. He felt nothing. His life was over. Surely when you died you were void of any feeling, any pain, any aches as you were left with nothing.

Izzy was gone and his words had come true. His life truly was over. The sunshine that brightened his day, the reason for everything that he did was gone. He let out a guttural scream. Who was he kidding? He was filled with so much damn pain he simply wanted to die.

"Izzy! Damn it, Izzy! Come back! Just come back!" Sean shouted into the empty house.

## **Chapter Sixteen**

Izzy watched Terrance as he told Sean once again that she couldn't come to the phone. She had heard him yell. She knew it was killing him, but she also knew that it would be easier this way. It had only been two days. Once he got used to not having her around, he would be able to start moving on with his life. It was for the best.

"How long are you going to keep this up, Izzy?" Terrance had had just about enough of this whole situation. He understood her confusion and her pain. But damn it, to push Sean away like this was just plain wrong.

"Terrance, I know that you're upset with me. Whether you believe it or not, I am doing this for Sean. I don't feel comfortable discussing it with you, but suffice it to say that in the long run Sean will be better off with out me." Oh, how she wished he would understand. She truly hated how everyone was hurting.

"Really? Hmm, interesting." Terrance walked away from her and headed toward his study.

She needed him to understand. She needed someone, anyone to understand. She walked into his study and stood before him at his desk.

"What's interesting?"

"Your theory. The one that states that Sean would be better off without you. I think it makes you a bit of a hypocrite, wouldn't you say?" He was angry. He knew she had been raped and he felt badly for her, he honestly did. But she was making such a horrible mistake. He knew what it was like to love someone and have them taken away from you with no warning. And here they had a chance to start over,

to work together and make a life and she was just throwing it away, relying solely on her fears and indecision.

"I hardly see how my wanting to do what's best for Sean makes me a hypocrite. I would think, what with him being your son and all, that you would be glad that I love him enough to let him go."

"Glad?" He laughed at her words. "You think I should be glad? You have destroyed him!" Shouting now, Terrance no longer cared. "He would do anything in this world to help you through this. He would walk on broken glass with bare feet through an inferno if he thought it would take away even a minute amount of your pain. And you just—damn it, Izzy. You just throw that away."

When her mouth opened to defend her actions she found no words would come.

"See. You can't even say anything. You know it's wrong. You fought tooth and nail to get Sean. You pursued him and loved him for years. Now that you have him you're just going to throw it away because of what a selfish man did. Oh, I know you're hurting and I know you believe that you are doing what's best for him. But you're not. Think about his career, his life. He's a cop, Izzy. He's torn apart. How can he stay focused if he consumed with heartache?"

"I don't want anything to happen to him, Terrance. You have to believe me. I just want him to be happy. I want him to have a life. A life that I am certain that I will never be able to give him." She sat in the chair in front of him. As strongly as she felt about her decision, she hadn't once thought about his job. About what could happen to him if he was too upset to stay focused on his duties?

"I didn't want to bring this up, but as much as I love you, I love my son too. And I can't just sit idly by and watch while you throw away the only chance you have of moving past this and on with your life."

Izzy waited for him to explain what he meant, wondering how no one could see what she saw. Her mother didn't understand. Sean certainly didn't and Terrance was making it abundantly clear his opinion on the matter.

"Remember your father, Izzy?" He knew he would hate himself for this later but someone had to do something.

"Of course I remember my father. What on earth does my father have to do with any of this?"

Terrance took two slow breaths. "I love your mother. More than I ever thought I would love anyone ever again. But, and this is where I really need you to pay attention, I loved my first wife too, Sean's mother. Just as your mother loved your father. We lost them, way too soon. They were taken from us when they still had so much life left to live."

Isabelle sighed.

"Terrance, I know. I understand what you're saying."

"No, you don't. Because if you truly understood and if you honestly loved Sean, there is no way that you wouldn't take every day, every minute and every second that you had with him and relish it. Stop taking what you two have for granted, Izzy. You two have your whole lives ahead of you. And as far as the sex goes," he stopped, realizing he probably shouldn't have let on that Connie had told him about that. "I'm sorry. Your mother told me. She had to. You left your home with Sean and came back here, causing much more pain than there needed to be. There's already too much. There's no reason for any more."

Isabelle let her head fall back as she tried to blink tears away. God! She was so freaking tired of crying.

"Izzy. Isabelle. He loves you. My son needs you. With or without sex, whether you are ever intimate with him ever again, he still needs you. His love for you is too strong to die because of a physical need."

She looked at him, wondering if he could be right. Wondering if she could be wrong. But what if she wasn't? How could she ask Sean to give up his life for so many uncertainties?

"Jesus, Izzy. Would you stop thinking? Stop analyzing. What do you want? Right now, if you could have anything in the world, what would it be?" See it damn it! Open your eyes and see what a horrible mistake you are making.

She looked at him and before she realized it her mouth had opened and the word had slipped out in a whisper.

"Sean." Her eyes widened at her admission, surprised she had said it aloud.

Terrance walked toward the French doors leading from the room. Once in the doorway he turned to face her.

"Leave, Izzy. Don't stop and don't think. Get in your car and drive back to your home with Sean. Go back to where you belong and fight. Fight for the chances in life that you have and for the chances that were stolen from your father and my deceased wife." He left the room.

Fight? How? Could she be that selfish? What if she only hurt Sean more? But she wanted to. She wanted to drive to him right now and run into his arms, holding on tightly and sinking into the safe warm sensation that his embrace brought her.

Driven by a will unbeknownst to her, she got up from the chair. In a haze, like being pulled by an imaginary force, Isabelle took her keys from the peg in the kitchen and grabbed her purse from the mudroom. What was she doing? This was wrong. Sean deserved to be happy. What if she couldn't make him happy ever again? The thought that she would bring him any misery tore at her very soul.

She waved at her mother as she pulled out of the driveway and came along side her. Rolling down her window, she turned to Connie, who had a look of worry on her face.

"Isabelle, honey, are you okay? Where are you going?"

She expelled a huge breath and shrugged.

"Home, I think."

Connie looked at her daughter. Saw the uncertainty in her eyes and knew that she was torn between what she wanted and what she thought she should do. She reached her hand out of the window to her daughter.

"Be happy, honey. Let Sean help you. It will be okay. You'll see." Isabelle's eyes shimmered with unshed tears.

"Can I come back? I mean, if he doesn't want me anymore." Connie laughed at her.

"Oh, Izzy. You are so foolish sometimes. Yes, if the heavens crash to earth and the world ends, you can come home." She watched her daughter's brows bunch with confusion at her odd choice of words. "Honey, it would take a disaster of biblical proportions before Sean would ever turn you away. Now go. Go and be happy. Take what life has given you and hold onto it with everything that you have."

Isabelle smiled. For the first time in the longest time, she truly smiled.

"I love you, Mom." She rolled up her window and drove away. No longer caring whether it was right or wrong, she drove to Sean's place, no *their* place, and prayed that she could find a way to tell him how sorry she was.

Fifteen minutes later Isabelle shut off the engine. It was dusk and she had just seen a light turn on in the front room. She pocketed her keys in her purse and made her way up the short sidewalk, which suddenly seemed to be about three miles long. She thought about just walking in. If it was locked she could use her key. But she had left. The key truly didn't belong to her anymore. Not until Sean let her back in. Not until they talked and worked things out. As she reached her hand up to knock on the door, she prayed that there would be a way for them to get past all of this.

Sean had just sat down in front of the television with a beer. He didn't really want it, but he hadn't been shopping and aside from tap water there was nothing else to drink in the house. After his workout he had tried to call Izzy again, for the thousandth time in the past two days. Of course she hadn't come to the phone. Big surprise. She

would do anything to avoid dealing with him. He was about to turn on the television when he heard the knock at the door.

He set the beer down on the side table and went to open the door. Annoyed thinking it was that kid that came to the door every two weeks selling something new for his school, he tried to place a smile on his face as he reached to turn the knob. How any kid could have so much fundraising to do was absolutely beyond—Izzy.

"Hi." Great. What a unique way to apologize to him, she chided herself. "Sean, I—."

He interrupted her; he placed his hands on her shoulders and shook his head.

"Don't say anything that's going to ruin this moment." He pulled her into an embrace and his body trembled at the feel of her in his arms again.

"I'm sorry," she whispered against his chest.

Sean looked down at her. "What are you saying, Izzy?"

"I can't promise anything. I don't know what will happen with us, but I love you. And I—I want to come home." Please let me stay. When he didn't say anything she got worried. "Sean, I was confused, I—."

"Shh. Come on, baby. Come inside." Sean took her purse from her and set it down. Wrapping his arms around her, he held her tightly. "It's okay, Izzy. You're home now and I've got you."

## **Chapter Seventeen**

"You look happy," Connie said to her daughter as she sipped her large mocha with extra whipped cream, causing it to hit the tip of her nose. She giggled as she swiped it off. "So, it's been okay then?"

Isabelle nodded.

"It really has. I don't know how, but I'm not as worried as I once was. And as much as I don't want to get ahead of myself, I can't help but feel hopeful."

"I'm so glad. Terrance and I were so worried about you, both of you." Smiling as she waved her hand to gesture at their surroundings, she continued, "I mean look at you. You're out here, in a coffee shop and enjoying an afternoon snack with your mother."

"It's just coffee, Mom. It's not like I've scaled Mount Everest." She rolled her eyes.

"You never were able to give yourself enough credit when credit was due. Two weeks ago you were broken. You were shattered and you left Sean. The despair I saw on your face was dreadful, but now you are smiling, your cheeks are rosy and I can tell that you are truly becoming happy again." Raising her mug to Isabelle she continued her speech, "To love, and all that it gets us through in this crazy and sometimes unfair life."

Clinking their mugs together, Isabelle smiled in agreement. As much as she hadn't thought it was possible, she could sense herself changing. She was no longer repulsed by the idea of intimacy. She was uneasy of the idea of it, yes. Uncomfortable, perhaps. But there was no disgust, no desire to go running for the hills.

"You know, as much as I appreciate you and Sean, I can't help but feel that Terrance is responsible for where I am right now."

"Oh?"

"Yeah, I mean don't get me wrong. You and Sean have been wonderful, and so understanding of my feelings, but if Terrance hadn't of pushed me and said the things that he did, I would probably still be living with you two, even more depressed than I was then." Raising her mug to her mother she said, "So I toast to Terrance. Love might get you through things, but a good shove in the right direction doesn't hurt either."

They both laughed and Connie had to do everything in her power to fight the tears of joy that wanted to spill down her face. She truly looked happy. She was smiling, laughing and joking. The real Isabelle was finally coming back around.

"Oh geez, look at the time Mom." Isabelle grimaced as she glanced at her watch. "I've got to go." She got up and reached for the bill when her mother grabbed it from her hand.

"No, I insist. I have been pestering you to come out with me for weeks now. It was my invitation, therefore my treat. Now run along."

Kissing her mother's cheek Isabelle thanked her and said, "I love you, Mom."

"I love you too, sweetheart. Call me tomorrow, okay?"

"Sure thing. Bye." And she was heading for the door. Connie's heart felt a little lighter and a whole lot fuller at the thought that her daughter really was going to be okay.

"Isabelle?"

"Yeah Mom?" She said from the doorway.

"Love knows no boundaries, remember that okay?"

She smiled, "I will. Bye." And she left.

\* \* \* \*

<sup>&</sup>quot;Surprise."

Sean had just walked in the kitchen door and Isabelle surprised him.

"What's all this?" he asked with a grin on his face.

"Well, I know how hard you've been working lately and I just wanted to do something to show you how much I appreciate it." She shrugged. "I mean, I know I'm not bringing in any money and—."

Sean went to her and placed his hands on her shoulders.

"Which I told you doesn't matter. I was able to afford things just fine when I lived here alone. You don't need to work."

"Well, I'll have to do something soon so I don't go stir crazy." She took his jacket and hung it on the hook behind the door.

"Just take your time, Izzy. I don't want you to rush into anything. I enjoy seeing you smile." He placed a light kiss to her mouth before turning back to the table. "So, what's all this?"

She smiled at him mischievously. "Maybe I like to see you smile too. So, I picked up that new action flick you've been wanting to see at the video store and made spaghetti with meatballs."

A huge smile spread across his face.

"You got me a movie and made my favorite meal?"

"Yeah. I love you, Sean. You're always so worried about taking care of me that we never do anything for you." She wrapped her arms around his waist and snuggled into his chest. "You deserve for someone to do nice things for you."

Sean placed a kiss on top of her head.

"I love you, Izzy. Thank you."

"Why don't you go get changed and comfortable. I'll dish up our dinner and then afterwards we'll watch the movie." She turned from him to reach for the plates and was surprised when he spun her around.

Framing her face in his hands, he brought his mouth down to meet hers. The kiss was ardent but he was careful not to be too aggressive. Knowing he should stop and wanting to stop were too very different things. He dragged his mouth away from hers and slid his tongue

across her jaw and down to the small shallow dip of where her shoulder met with her neck.

He heard her moan. She actually moaned. He couldn't believe it. They had kissed and hugged in the past two weeks but never had it ever gotten this far. But the taste of her skin was so sweet. As much as he had promised her that he wouldn't push her, he wasn't sure he could pull himself away from her. If he went too far, though, and she panicked and ran, they could be right back where they were two weeks ago. That was a chance that he wasn't willing to risk, so reluctantly he pulled away.

Her eyes were closed and her face was flushed. God, she looked beautiful. He stared at her a moment longer before resting his forehead against hers.

"I'm going to go change now."

Her eyes flew open. She had been lost in the moment, completely unaware of anything except Sean and his glorious mouth.

"Huh? Oh, okay." She watched as Sean walked from the room. She felt confused, disoriented and most surprisingly, aroused. If only for a moment, she had wanted Sean the way that she used to. But now, even seconds later, it had passed. In that moment though, it had been wonderful.

Placing the last dish in the dishwasher, she dried her hands and headed to the living room. She stopped in the doorway when she saw Sean sitting in his recliner. Normally when they watched television together they always sat on the couch together. Had she done something wrong? They had such a fun time together during dinner.

Sean watched her standing there. He was concerned by the apprehension he saw on her face.

"Izzy, is something wrong?"

"No, no, I um, are you ready to start the movie?" She walked toward the couch and sat down.

Her body language was sending out waves of discomfort. Then it hit him. He had been so tired and full from the great dinner that she made that he just sat here without thinking. Crap. Now she was feeling uneasy.

"Izzy, I sat down in my chair out of habit. I didn't think that—."

"What? Oh don't be silly. You can sit wherever you like. As long as you're comfortable. I know how hard you've been working lately."

"You know, you could sit here with me too. You know, like we used to." Should he have said that? Was it too much contact too soon? Would she think he was asking for more than what he was? He just wanted to hold her, to cuddle her against him. God, he was a guy. Guys weren't supposed to want to cuddle. But he missed it more than he ever thought possible.

"You mean like on your lap?" She was looking down, not at him.

"Yeah. I mean, that is, if you want to." Please say yes. Say yes and come over here so I can hold you close to me. She could never understand the ache that he lived with in his heart at his need to hold her so close to him. Not just in a sexual way, but in an intimate way, when he felt like their hearts clasped onto the other and held on with the gentlest loving embrace.

Picking at her jeans she shrugged.

"That would be okay, I guess."

"Come here, Izzy." Sean held out his hand to her and waited for her to come.

Grasping his hand, she sat down and situated herself on his lap. Snuggling against him and resting against his shoulder, she sighed. She had missed this. He held her sometimes, they hugged and they kissed. But the contact was never this cozy and comforting. God, it felt good.

"You ready?" he asked while he held the remote up to press play.

"Yeah." She smiled at him. He was so handsome. How had she ever gotten so lucky to have him in her life this way? Then she remembered, and had to force her laugh to stay down. She had pursued him like the love-crazed teenager that she was. And she got him. Thank God.

It was not quite an hour into the movie when Sean sensed that watching this movie hadn't been the best idea. With a movie title like *Final Destruction*, who would have thought that it would be laced with so much sexual tension? And now, as he watched the scene play out in front of him he had a feeling he knew exactly what was going to happen next.

Izzy had lain so still against him. Maybe she had fallen asleep. He considered turning it off and carrying her upstairs when he realized the scene had already escalated while he was lost in thought. Crap, he couldn't watch this with her. Not while he knew that she felt so uncomfortable about it. And how in the hell did this movie get an R rating with a scene like this? It should be XXX, if not at least one X. I mean, geez, it was getting really—all right that's it. It's going off. He reached for the remote and was startled when Izzy grabbed onto his wrist.

"Don't." She looked up at him. "Leave it on."

Not quite sure what to say, Sean set the remote back down on the small end table. What should he say? Why did she want to watch it? She had made no secret of the fact that the idea of ever having sex again scared her. Why would she want—unless?

"Izzy, are you sure? We don't have to watch it."

She raised her hand and brushed her fingertips across his jaw.

"Sean, it's okay. It's not gratuitous. I mean, they love each other, so it's normal that they would, well you know."

What had he done with that magic decoder ring he had gotten from a cereal box in the second grade? Because try as he might, he had absolutely no idea what she was trying to tell him. Sure, he had a small idea. But that very small idea held very big ramifications. Deciding to play it casually he said, "No, you're right. It is normal." He pulled her a little closer to him and snuggled her against his chest. "We'll watch it, then."

And so they did. For the next few minutes they cuddled close together as they watched the couple on the screen make love. And not

just any love, but wild, aggressive, sweaty and animalistic love. The scene was over and Sean was suddenly very aware of how close Izzy's hand was to his groin. As if reading his thoughts and feeling his gaze, she looked up at him.

He had been watching her and it brought a smile to her face when she looked at him.

"That was pretty intense."

Snap out of it! Don't just stare at her like she is a piece of raw meat and you're a starving lion.

"Yeah, intense." What could he say? That it looked damned awesome and they should try it themselves. That would hardly be a good idea. "Um, are you thirsty, I could—umph." He was quickly and abruptly silenced by Izzy's mouth crushed against his.

She wasn't sure what had come over her. But for some reason she needed his mouth against hers, his tongue touching hers as much as she needed air. She was devouring him, she knew it. But she didn't care. Kissing Sean was so amazing. She didn't know what she wanted, what would happen next but—oh the hell she didn't. She knew exactly what she wanted. Sean. It had been so long and she thought she may never feel this way again, but right now she wanted him.

"Sean." She whispered his name against his lips.

"Oh, Izzy." He was breathless and he grabbed onto her and took more. He didn't want it to end. He could kiss her like this forever. And Jesus, God, he was so damn turned on right now. If she moved her hand just a few inches she would know all too well just how turned on he was. Her tongue was doing maddening things inside of his mouth. He jolted and pulled back from her. Had she? He looked down, and she most certainly had.

"Is, is this, should I stop?" She asked, biting down on her lower lip.

Should she stop? Hell, how was he supposed to answer that? Her hand was holding the evidence of his need for her and there was no

way that he wanted her to stop. But should he make her? This was like deciding between whether to be shot by a .357 magnum or a .38 special. Neither one would kill you, but they were both likely to hurt like hell and cause some serious damage.

"Sean?"

Crap! Say something.

"Do you, I mean, what do you want?"

She turned her gaze downward and away from him, embarrassed for not knowing how to tell him what was on her mind.

"I guess I thought maybe, I don't know. What do you want me to do?"

This could go on all freaking night long. One of them had to make the first move. And there was no way that Izzy would, even if she wanted to. Sean used his thumb and forefinger to force her chin up.

"I love you, Izzy. You know that. And I want you, but I also know that you're scared. So I don't want to rush you into something you may not be ready for."

"I know. I'm sorry. I probably shouldn't have started this."

"Yes, you should have. Izzy, come on. You need to feel comfortable with me. If you felt like doing that, then you should have done it. I just don't want you to ever do anything that you *don't* want to do. That's all." He brushed his fingers down her cheek and rubbed them along her lower lip.

Her eyes closed as the sensation tickled her. She sighed and then smiled.

"Did you mean it when you said you wanted me? I mean, still, even after, you know, that night."

"Oh, baby. Of course I do. I know that night changed you, in a lot of ways, but it didn't change how I felt about you. No, I mean *feel*. I still feel the same way. I want you all the time. Don't doubt that, Izzy. Don't ever doubt what you do to me. Okay?" Kissing her forehead, he wished that they could stay this way forever. In each others' arms. Opening up to one another and loving each other.

"What if we, I don't know, like tried or something, you know to see if—oh, I'm really bad at this." She let out an embarrassed laugh.

"You're doing fine, baby. Are you talking about making love? Is that what you're saying?" He hoped he hadn't gone too far, said too much.

"Yes." She said it quietly.

"Are you sure?"

"Honestly? No. But I feel like I am." She blew out a puff of air. "What if we try and I'm not sure, I mean. What if I want to stop?"

Very firmly he placed his hands to her face, holding her, forcing her to stare into her eyes.

"Then we stop. Because I love you and I would never do anything that you weren't comfortable with. Okay?"

She nodded. Tears welled in her eyes just barely as she giggled.

"What's so funny?"

She shook her head.

"I just feel so stupid. I haven't cried in over a week and now I'm crying again, but its okay, these are happy tears."

"Good. Do you want to finish the movie?"

Shaking her head again she said, "No." This was it. Do or die time. She had to try, not just for Sean but for herself.

Sean waited as she got off of his lap and watched her as she crossed to the television to turn it off. He got up and came behind her. Wrapping his arms around her, he kissed her neck. "Go on upstairs, Izzy. I'll lock up and be up in a couple of minutes."

"Okay." She left his arms and walked slowly to the stairs. Turning back to face him, she wondered if she was doing the right thing. She smiled at him before heading up the stairs. "Nervous" didn't even come close to describing the feeling that was consuming her right now. Maybe she wasn't ready. Why was she suddenly so scared?

She must have gotten lost in her thoughts because suddenly she was in the bedroom and staring at the bed. Oh God! Who was she kidding? She was not ready for this. She suddenly felt sick. Running

to the bathroom, she hunched over the toilet and wretched all of her dinner up.

Sean stood in the bathroom doorway and watched her. His heart felt a small crack run down the middle of it at the sight of her. She wasn't ready. The realization hurt a little. His pride was hurt more than anything, but still he wished things could be different. He wished she could forget the past and remember how wonderful they were together. How amazing it was when they took each other to such heights of ecstasy.

She wiped her mouth and flushed the toilet. When she turned she saw him standing there. She hadn't even realized that he had come up.

"Sean, I'm sorry. I just can't."

He didn't say anything. He just went to her and wrapped his arms around her. After kissing the top of her head he told her, "It doesn't matter. We're here together and that's all that *does* matter."

She pulled away, if only slightly and looked up at him.

"Are you sure you're not angry?"

He chuckled.

"No, baby. I'm not angry. I was angry when you were hurt and I was angry when you left me. But I could never be angry with you for being honest with me. I love you." He grinned and whispered in her ear. "Now, go brush your teeth. Your dinner smelled much better going in than it did coming out."

They both laughed.

"So does that mean you don't want to kiss me?" She teased him as she rose to her toes to plant a big wet one on him.

He placed a hand in front of her mouth.

"That, is exactly what that means. Now go on, use that mouthwash too. Ew, that's nasty."

She threw a towel at him as he left the room. Smiling, she looked in the mirror as she placed toothpaste on the brush. Strange that she could never remember feeling this happy right after throwing up before.

## **Chapter Eighteen**

Isabelle had been worried that what had happened that night would cause tension in their relationship. But Sean, true to his word, had dropped it. Not once in the past month had he brought up making love. He hadn't pushed her or tried anything. He was caring, compassionate, gentle, tender and everything she could ever want in a man. Almost. He was perfect, too perfect.

A part of her, the woman who hid underneath her fears and uncertainties, wanted him to push her. She wanted him to take charge and make her at least try. But he promised her that he could go the rest of his life without ever making love to her again, as long as they were together. And damn if he wasn't keeping his word.

These stupid soap operas during the day were doing nothing to curb her desires, either. I mean, geez. Everyone was sleeping with everyone. It seemed like every scene was filled with sex. It was PG sure, but still, she would sit there and watch a couple, with such love in their eyes for one another and their passion would almost melt the television. She knew they were actors, but they were pretty damn good ones, because they sure had her buying it.

"Aaah!" she screamed in frustration as she folded the last pair of Sean's briefs. Sean's briefs, the little cotton things that held his—stop it. 'My God, is that all you ever think about anymore, Isabelle?' She silently questioned herself as she headed upstairs with the laundry basket and proceeded to put the clean clothes away.

She glanced at herself in the mirror as she closed the top drawer to the dresser. Oh my! She saw her hardened nipples making themselves known under her thin cotton t-shirt. This was getting out of hand. She

needed to do something about the way she had been feeling lately, but no matter how many times she told herself that when Sean came home tonight would be the night, she always chickened out.

She wasn't even sure why anymore. It wasn't like she didn't love him or feel safe with him. She knew Sean would never hurt her. And they had made love before, and she definitely could vouch for how great that was. Even though she only had met with Clarice a few times in the past month, she still tried to analyze it with her. Even Clarice seemed baffled. It was no secret that a rape victim would be frightened about the idea of being intimate with a man again. It was understandable. But what Clarice didn't understand and what Isabelle couldn't seem to make sense of either is that she truly wanted to and it wasn't fear that was stopping her but something else. What that thing was, though, she had absolutely no idea. And that uncertainty was what was driving her insane.

She wanted her life back. She didn't want the rape to control their future any longer. She had been raped. It was horrible and now a man was dead because he couldn't deal with the pain of what he had done. And now she was miserable because she wanted Sean so badly that she ached for him every single day. But something kept stopping her.

She knew that once it finally happened, she would be over whatever was stopping her. She was sure of it. But how could she ever get there? It's not like there was any way that Sean was ever going to make love to her as long as he knew she was still apprehensive.

No, she firmly believed that he truly would go his entire life without ever having sex again if he thought that would keep them together. Why couldn't he be more demanding, more dominant? Why couldn't he just take her and make her his all over again? If only there was a way to—hmm. Maybe there is. Her lips quirked up and she unconsciously licked her lips at her idea.

She could do this. She would do this. Would it work? It had to, because if she didn't make love with Sean soon she was probably

going to die. Well, not literally, but she really wanted to make love to Sean and she was tired of all of the subconscious hang ups keeping her from doing it.

Isabelle ran down the stairs and grabbed her purse on her way out the door. This would work! She got into her car and sped out of the driveway. This has to work. All she needed to do was go to her mom's to pick up a few things, maybe stop at—

"Oh shit."

Isabelle pulled to the curb at the sight of the red and blue lights flashing behind her. She glanced in the mirror and was no longer upset about her minor traffic violation. As the officer walked up to the car, her mind was suddenly filled with all sorts of fantasies regarding cops and their naughty little prisoners. She laughed at the thoughts that were going through her head while rolling down her window. She looked up and gave him her best smile.

"Well, ma'am, I would ask for license and registration. But since you're so pretty I think I'll ask for a kiss instead." He winked at her.

"Why, officer, do I look like that kind of a woman?" she asked as she held her hand to her heart in feigned shock.

Sean's gaze dropped to her hand, causing his smile to leave his face. He saw the dark pinkish hue seeping through her t-shirt and the little erect points jutting outward in invitation. Jesus, it had been forever since he had seen them look so delectable.

She saw what he was looking at and should have tried to hide her embarrassment. But instead she relished it, loving the fact that he was noticing her once again as a woman. Not the Izzy that he needed to protect. With a twinkle in her eye she said, "Is there a problem, officer?"

His eyes finally left her breasts and slowly trailed up to her face.

<sup>&</sup>quot;Izzy, are you okay?"

<sup>&</sup>quot;Yeah, I am. I was just heading over to my mom's for a bit."

<sup>&</sup>quot;Dressed like that?"

She glanced down and was suddenly very aware that she was merely wearing her pajama shorts and top. She had, after all been lounging around the house doing laundry. It's not like she had plans to go anywhere. Now she was embarrassed. Like she could just march into her mother's home in her pajamas with her shirt showing off so clearly what was going on in her mind.

"I guess I hadn't really thought it through."

Her statement intrigued him.

"Thought what through? Izzy, what's going on? And why are you, I mean, are you?"

Oh hell. Just tell him.

"Fine, do you want the truth?"

He rolled his eyes.

"No Izzy, lie to me. Yes, I want the truth. What's going on?"

"All right, fine. But you have to promise me—wait, no. I'm doing this all wrong. Do you love me?"

Sean crouched down next to the car and made a motion with his hand to Jake in the car to hold on.

"I love you more than anything, you know that."

"Okay, well, would you, you know, like, do anything for me?" God, why was she so nervous?

Sean's brows bunched together in confusion. "Yeah, of course I would. Izzy, you're really starting to freak me out. What in the hell is going on?"

"Is the big bad officer getting angry with me?" What? She had thought it would come across as flirty, but instead she sounded ridiculous. She rolled her eyes.

He would have laughed if he wasn't so damn confused.

"Izzy, are you going to tell me what's going on?"

She exhaled a very big breath and said it quickly, before her mind had a chance to catch up with her mouth.

"I want you to make love to me. I'm nervous, but I don't care. So I want you to handcuff me to the bed and take me. I want you to love me like you used to. I want to feel you inside of me. I want all of you." She could finally breathe.

Sean's jaw dropped open.

"You—you—did I hear you right?"

She looked at him.

"Yes. You did." She reached her hand to touch his cheek. "I want you, Sean. And I feel like I've waited so long that I have built up all these nerves that are getting in the way. I need you to take charge. I need you to make love to me and make me yours in the most essential way."

Jesus, Mary and Joseph.

"Are you sure?"

"I am. Please, Sean. Do this for me, for us. I want our lives back. What we had before. I want it all. I'm tired of being scared and I'm tired of analyzing it. So, are you going to give me a ticket or not?"

"A ticket? Is that some sort of euphemism for—oh, you mean for the speeding." He laughed. "No, baby. I'll let you slide, just um, don't go to your mother's like that, okay?"

"Okay. So, are we, do we, I mean will you—."

"Izzy, stop. If that is what you want, I'll give it to you. But I want you to make sure. I love you too much to risk our future together by hurting you."

She threw her head back against the head rest and groaned.

"Yes, Sean. Look, if you don't hear from me by 4:00 when you get off, then assume that I have not changed my mind. And come home and make love to me like your freaking life depends on it."

He shook his head and his eyes widened at her aggressive tone.

"Okay, babe. If I don't hear from you by four then I'll ah, make love you to like my life depended on it." He leaned into the window to give her a kiss. He had meant for it to be a simple peck but she had grabbed onto him and slid her tongue inside his mouth. When the kiss ended and he pulled back slightly he whispered, "Izzy, it won't be *like* my life depended on it. I truly need you."

She smiled at him and watched in the mirror as he walked back to his vehicle. It was going to happen, finally! She needed to go home, she needed a bath and her legs needed to be shaved. And she would try that new body butter her mother had gotten her last week.

Sean and Jake pulled up beside her and she rolled down her window.

"Forget something, officer?"

Jake grinned.

"Ma'am, was this officer making inappropriate advances toward you?"

"Shut up, Jake." Sean laughed anyway.

"Why, as a matter of fact, he did proposition me to get out of my ticket." She threw right back, enjoying the teasing.

"Izzy, I did not." Sean laughed even harder. "Now go home." His eyes emphasized his smile with the last words he spoke.

"You know, ma'am," Jake said, "if you would like to file a complaint I would be happy to—."

"Oh, that won't be necessary, officer. If you noticed, he didn't give me the ticket. It's only fair I hold up my end of the bargain." She reached for the button to roll up her window and said, "Bye now, officers." And she drove away feeling triumphant.

Tonight she would finally belong to Sean again. Maybe that had been what was missing. No matter how close they still were she didn't truly feel like his woman. But no more. Tonight she would be his woman and he would be her man, and finally they would be together in every way that mattered.

## **Chapter Nineteen**

Sean pulled into the driveway. He had spent the rest of the day in a state of arousal. He had also spent that same amount of time trying to convince himself to talk to her first and make sure at least once more that she was really okay with this. But it was now 4:30 and she hadn't called. She had seemed determined earlier. And if he was completely honest with himself, he would have to admit that he wanted to do exactly what she had asked, desperately!

He took the key out of the ignition and walked to the front door. He slid the key in the door and took a steadying breath. He had showered and changed at work. Leaving his uniform in his locker, he did remember to bring one very essential piece of his officer's attire with him. They were in his back pocket and their intended use was burning a whole through his jeans onto his skin.

God, handcuffing Izzy. Making love to her again. He could die from the thought alone. He finished opening the door and walked inside. Although the light was on in the kitchen, she wasn't there. But a note was. He walked over to it and read it.

Dear Sean,

I thought about making you dinner, but then thought better of it. That will just give us both time to think about what's going to happen. And thinking only leads to doubts. I have none, and I hope to God you don't either. So get upstairs right now and make

love to me, just like you promised to.

Love,

*Izzy* 

Sean dropped the note and headed for the stairs. Climbing them two at a time, he made it to the top in a split second. He saw the faint glow of candle light in the room as he came down the hall. He reached in his back pocket and pulled out his handcuffs as he walked in the room. Then instantly dropped them on the floor.

"Hi." Her voice was low and sweet.

"My God. You're beautiful. Is that...?"

She nodded. "I never got to wear it for you that first night I came to your place. But I thought it was appropriate to wear it now."

Sean walked to her and ran his hand along the pretty little satin and lace number.

"It's perfect. You're perfect. I love you so much, Izzy."

"Sean." She whispered as his mouth brushed against hers. "I don't want to wait anymore. Please make love to me."

The angel on his right shoulder made him ask it, "Are you sure?" While the devil on his left shoulder wanted to kick his ass.

"Stop asking, just take me. I want to be yours again. I want to belong to only you." That was it.

Suddenly like the greatest epiphany anyone had ever had it seemed so very clear to her. She didn't feel like she was his. She felt like the rape had taken that away from them, causing her to feel like maybe it would be different now, not as good. Like he wouldn't enjoy making love to her. Like the desire he felt for her would somehow be less. But as she watched the leering of Sean's eyes she knew how silly that was. She was Sean's, always Sean's and forever Sean's. Nothing, not the rape or anything else life threw their way could take that away.

Sean couldn't think of a reason to not do exactly what she was asking. So, while the little devil on his left shoulder threw his pitchfork at the angel on his right, he brought his mouth down to Izzy's and took possession of her the way he had been wanting to do for months.

She was drowning in his kiss. There was no oxygen to breathe as he ravished her mouth with his tongue and lips. Oh, this was good! She tilted her head up more, trying to get closer. She let out a startled squeal as Sean's urgent hands grabbed onto her hips and brought their bodies closer together.

Sean's hands began to roam her body. When he should have shown finesse, he found himself cupping her breast with all the urgency of a teenage boy. God, she felt so good in his hands. He had spent so many nights praying for this. Wanting her and needing her so desperately. He nuzzled her neck and slid his tongue all along up to her ear.

"Oh, Izzy. God, I want you."

She knew exactly how he felt, but her mouth was temporarily paralyzed from the wonderful sensations his tongue was causing. She brought her hands to his t-shirt and swiftly tugged the shirt out of his jeans. Needing to feel her hands against his warm solid chest, she jerked the shirt up and the contact with his tongue broke as he helped her yank the shirt over his head.

Yes! This was what she needed. Sean. In all of his masculine and muscled glory. She ran her fingertips along his abdomen and let them settle for a moment before they trailed down to his jeans. She hesitated for a second, but only a second, before she began to unbutton them. She heard Sean moan, but he still hadn't stopped the wonderful things he was doing with his mouth.

She was going to touch him. And if she did he would surely lose it right then. He had to refocus. To stop her before he lost all control and effectively ended things before they even started. He pulled away and stopped her just as she got to the last button.

They stared at each other and neither one of them missed the desire that was reflected in each of their eyes. Sean took his fingers and caressed her shoulders and arms.

"Do you have any idea how much I love you?"

She smiled, not with her mouth but with her eyes.

"Show me," she said as she continued to stare at him, hoping her eyes properly translated the emotions that were swirling around inside of her.

"Oh, baby. I am going to love you." A smile quirked before he said, "Like my life depended on it."

She grinned at him, thankful for the understanding that had come before them. There was no turning back now. They would finally be together.

Sean placed both hands on her shoulders and slowly moved the straps of the white satin teddy down her arms.

"I love this, baby. But I need you out of it. I need to see you."

Her breasts were now exposed, as were the hard rigid centers that he had seen earlier through her t-shirt.

"You are so damn beautiful. You make my mouth water." He bowed his head and took one of the sweet plump nipples in his mouth. He laved it with his tongue and nipped on the hard tip with his teeth, causing her to moan his name.

His jeans were killing him. Despite the fact that she had undone the buttons, they were now unbearably tight. He switched sides and took the other breast in his mouth as he felt her hands grab onto his hair and hold him close. He reached down without releasing her from his suckling and started to pull his jeans down. The relief he felt when he was finally free was like heaven.

Sean kicked his jeans off and dropped to his knees in front of her.

"I need to see *all* of you," he said as he pulled the teddy the rest of the way down her body. Kissing her stomach and splaying his hands along her rib cage, he wished this could go on forever. Holding her

and loving her like this was all he had wanted for so long. He was afraid to let it end.

"Sean, touch me." The words escaped her mouth before checking with her brain. But at the feel of his hands reaching in between her thighs she no longer cared about anything that might accidentally spill from her mouth. "Yes."

Oh Jesus. Izzy was always a beautiful and amazing lover, but she had never once told him what to do. He was not ashamed to admit that he liked it, either. Hell, he loved it. As he gently stroked her, he had to fight back the urge to plunge into her right now. She was so hot and wet. Her passion was just dripping from her. He remembered her request of earlier today. He reached behind his back on the floor, trying to find the handcuffs without taking his mouth from her stomach and his hand from her sweet center.

"Sean."

She said it so quietly he had to look up. Was she becoming afraid? "What's wrong baby?"

"Nothing. But let's save the handcuffs for later. Right now I just want you. I need to wrap my arms around you. Make love to me now, Sean." Her imploring words cut through his last threads of restraint. He got up from the floor and picked her up, carrying her to the bed.

After setting her down, he reached into the bedside drawer and quickly grabbed a condom and covered himself. He looked down at her as she spread her legs and raised her arms. She was ready. She wanted him and there would be no turning back this time.

The bed dipped with the weight of him as he got on top of her. He brought his mouth down to hers and kissed her, making sure she felt the levels of his love for her.

After he pulled away he looked into her eyes.

"Now?"

She nodded.

"Now."

Sean entered her and he swore at that very moment that every amount of pain and anguish they had felt in the past months had suddenly vanished. He was whole. He was buried inside of the woman who meant more to him than life itself. Filling her with him, he began to slowly take her, relishing in the feel of their bodies working so in tune with one another.

It was amazing. Nothing had changed. It was wonderful just like it always was. She was Sean's, only Sean's. Nothing that happened in the past mattered anymore.

"I love you," she whispered as she met his thrusts.

Sean had to reach for her. He had to massage her, coax her into release. He was dying. They had just begun and he could already feel his orgasm clawing at the base of his spine. Threatening to explode at any moment.

Izzy's eyes, which had drifted shut in the ecstasy of his body inside of hers, suddenly jolted open at the feel of his thumb rubbing a magical circle on her most sensitive body part.

"Oh Sean. Oh, yes. Oh God. I'm—oooh."

The monster clawing at the base of his spine attacked him with ferocity at the feel of her orgasm. He lost himself in the sweet liquidy warmth of her release and fell to that beautiful place of euphoria right along with her. He screamed her name before collapsing on top of her.

Moments later Sean rolled over, taking her with him. Holding her close and waiting for his pulse to return to a normal pace, he kissed the top of her head and stroked her back.

"My beautiful Izzy. Have I told you how much I love you?" She looked up at him and smiled.

"I think you might have mentioned it a time or two." She bit her bottom lip and fought the tiny tears that tried to fight their way out.

He knew that look; he'd seen it a thousand times.

"What's wrong, baby? Did I—was I too rough?"

"What? No, it was wonderful. I—I mean at least I thought it was." She let her fingers play with the tiny curls of hair on his chest and quietly asked, "Did you think so?"

He was surprised by the question. Had it not been obvious how good it was? But it had been so long for them. And she had already admitted to him earlier that day that she was nervous. Obviously he needed to reassure her just how good it was.

"Baby, it was wonderful, yeah. But it was so much more than that. It was—." He hesitated for a minute while he thought.

She looked up at him, waiting for his response. Hoping he could put into words for her what she was feeling right now.

"I guess you could say it was," and suddenly his voice changed from quiet to loud and boisterous, "so freaking amazing I thought I might explode. Oh, but wait, I did explode, didn't I?"

She laughed.

"Really? That good, huh?"

"Oh yeah. My only question is why we're just lying here rather than doing it all over again." He waggled his brows at her.

She shrugged, trying to hide her giggle.

"I don't know. I'm not sure I want to do that again."

"Really?" He didn't buy it for a minute. She loved every second of it and he had a sneaking suspicion his sweet little Izzy was being playful.

"Yeah, really. I mean, we've already done that. So I don't know. I thought maybe we could do, something—um else." Her eyes twinkled.

His mouth quirked up into a devilish smile.

"Something else, huh? Have you got something else in mind?"

She raised her brows and remained serious in her expression.

"Oh, I don't know." She glanced over at the handcuffs lying on the floor. "But I heard an expression once that sort of caught my attention."

"An expression? What, do you want to play a game of sexual Scrabble?"

Not being able to help herself, she laughed.

"Not exactly. Let's see, how did it go again? Oh yeah, I think it goes something like 'variety is the spice of life."

"The spice of life." He said the words slowly as if trying to absorb their meaning. He looked down and flashed her a genuinely sexy smile. "I'll tell you what. If you promise to love me, marry me, have children with me and stay with me forever, then I will promise to spice up your life every day"

"Marry you?" She hesitated. She would love nothing more, but he had told her in the past that they should wait a few years. "Do you mean now, or later?"

Sean took his hand and cupped her cheek.

"I mean, the sooner I have you legally bound to me the better. Marry me, Izzy. I love you so much and I swear we'll have a good life together."

Everything, every one of her dreams was going to come true. She was going to be Mrs. Sean Walker. And what's better, he was going to *spice up her life* every single day.

"Yes, Sean, I will most definitely marry you." He kissed her, or rather they kissed each other in celebration of the promise they had just made to the other. After they came up for air she said, "Now, about those handcuffs..."

## THE END

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## **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

Nicole Morgan is an avid reader who kept having one recurring problem. Ideas of stories kept popping into her head. She ignored her desire to write until her curiosity got the better of her and she decided to research what steps she would have to take if she truly wanted to take a chance and write.

Nicole took a chance and followed her dream. She has been blessed with some fabulous opportunities and has met some wonderful people along the way. Writing is a true love to her and has brought her a new and profound happiness with every step she's taken along the way.

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