

NEW YORK TIMES & USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

KELLY ELLIOTT



Fighting
FOR
LOVE

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Fighting for Love

Book 2 Boston Love Series Copyright © 2015/2023 by Kelly Elliott

Cover Design by: Elaine York, [Allusion Publishing](#)

Interior Design & Formatting by: Elaine York, [Allusion Publishing](#)

Proofing Editor: Karen Cimms

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For more information on Kelly and her books, please visit her website www.kellyelliottauthor.com.

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About the Book

A larger-than-life firefighter inspires a career-driven woman to live in the moment—and trust in the power of love—in this flirty, emotional novel from the *New York Times* bestselling author of *Searching for Harmony*.

Finn Ward has two passions: being a firefighter and being single. Although his parents are constantly nagging him to settle down, Finn just wants to enjoy himself while he's young. Then, at a union meeting, he meets a gorgeous lawyer with a dazzling smile—and suddenly, settling down doesn't sound so bad.

Rory Adams is fresh out of law school and looking to make a name for herself at her mother's firm. She doesn't have time for silly games anymore. But when she catches the eye of a dashing fireman who makes her body tingle from across the room, something instantly ignites between them. The only problem? Her father is Finn's boss.

Their relationship turns both of their lives upside-down. Rory tames Finn's wild ways, while he shows her that life can't be all work and no play. But it'll take some serious determination to keep their love secret—and real courage to admit the truth.

Fighting for Love is book 2 in the Boston Love series.

Other Books by Kelly Elliott

Love in Montana (Meet Me in Montana Spin Off)

Fearless Enough

Cherished Enough

Brave Enough

Daring Enough - November 21, 2023

Loved Enough - February 6, 2024

Forever Enough - April 30, 2024

Enchanted Enough - July 23, 2024

Perfect Enough - October 15, 2024

Devoted Enough - January 7, 2025

Holidaze in Salem

A Bit of Hocus Pocus

A Bit of Holly Jolly

A Bit of Wee Luck

A Bit of Razzle Dazzle

The Seaside Chronicles

Returning Home

Part of Me

Lost to You

Someone to Love

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*The Journey Home**

*Who We Were**

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Boggy Creek Valley Series

*The Butterfly Effect**
*Playing with Words**
*She's the One**
*Surrender to Me**
*Hearts in Motion**
*Looking for You**
Surprise Novella TBD
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Meet Me in Montana Series

Never Enough
Always Enough
Good Enough
Strong Enough
**Series available on audiobook*

Southern Bride Series

Love at First Sight
Delicate Promises
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Lucky in Love
Feels Like Home
Take Me Away
Fool for You
Fated Hearts
**Series available on audiobook*

Cowboys and Angels Series

Lost Love
Love Profound
Tempting Love
Love Again
Blind Love
This Love
Reckless Love
**Series available on audiobook*

Boston Love Series

Searching for Harmony (New Edition Coming 2023)

Fighting for Love (New Edition Coming 2023)

*Series available on audiobook

Austin Singles Series

Seduce Me

Entice Me

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*Faithful**

Believe

*Cherished**

*A Forever Love**

The Wanted Short Stories

All They Wanted

*Available on audiobook

Love Wanted in Texas Series

Spin-off series to the WANTED Series

Without You

Saving You

Holding You

Finding You

Chasing You

Loving You

Entire series available on audiobook

*Please note *Loving You* combines the last book of the Broken and Love Wanted in Texas series.

Broken Series

*Broken**

*Broken Dreams**

*Broken Promises**

Broken Love

*Available on audiobook

The Journey of Love Series

Unconditional Love

Undeniable Love

Unforgettable Love

*Entire series available on audiobook

With Me Series

Stay With Me

Only With Me

*Series available on audiobook

Speed Series

Ignite

Adrenaline

*Series available on audiobook

COLLABORATIONS

Predestined Hearts (co-written with Kristin Mayer)*

Play Me (co-written with Kristin Mayer)*

Dangerous Temptations (co-written with Kristin Mayer)*

*Available on audiobook



Chapter One

Finn

Same story, different day

“It’s time to settle down. You’re almost twenty-seven.”

My mother’s voice was on repeat while my feet pounded the pavement beneath me. I dragged in a deep breath, the early fall air filling my lungs while I pushed myself harder as I ran through the Fens. I loved running in this park. It was close to my job and my condo. And not that I would ever admit it to anyone, I loved the gardens.

I picked up my speed and headed down Boylston Street. Normally during my runs, I would stop at least once or twice to talk to a pretty girl looking my way, but today I wasn’t in the mood. Not after having dinner with my folks last night. Their constant nagging to settle down had me in a foul mood today.

“Morning, Finn!” Mr. Thomas called out.

I lifted my hand and called back, “Morning, sir!”

“I’ve got fresh berries!”

Laughing, I spun around and ran backward. “I’ll be by when my shift is up!”

I turned around and picked up the pace.

My T-shirt was soaked with sweat as I made my way toward the firehouse. Stopping outside the open door, I rested my hands on my knees and took in a few deep breaths.

“Your birthday is coming up and you’re already feeling it, huh? Old age.”

I glanced up to see my best friend standing there with a smirk on his face. I shot Colton a dirty look. “Go to hell,” I mumbled as I straightened and

walked into the building.

Slapping me on the back, he laughed. "Someone is grumpy. What's wrong? Didn't get laid last night?"

I grabbed a bottle of water and downed it before I tossed it in the trash and replied, "No, I didn't. I haven't in the last week, and therein lies the problem. Well, that and the fact that my mother will not stop talking about me finding a girl and settling down."

A look of horror moved over Colton's face, and I chuckled. "What? Doesn't she know you're in your prime time of life right now? Endless pussy is bountiful."

With a lighthearted laugh, I headed upstairs to shower and called back, "Apparently not. My poor little sister Angela is taking the brunt of it, though. For some reason, my mother is hell-bent on her finding a guy."

"Have I ever told you your sister is hot?"

I stopped and turned to face him. "I don't care how long we've been friends, don't call my sister hot. How many times do I have to tell you that?"

Rob Mason, another firefighter, walked down the stairs past me and added, "Dude, your sister is hot."

"Oh, come on, Rob! Not you, too."

Colton pushed me up the steps. "Come on. Our shift starts soon, and you stink."

24 Hours Later

Walking into the conference room, I took a quick glance around. My eyes were immediately drawn to the curvy woman in the pencil skirt. That ass alone was enough to make my dick jump. Hell, I couldn't take my eyes off her. I chuckled and shook my head.

I need to get laid.

She stood with her back to me talking to our new fire chief, Rick Adams. He was a hard-ass and had already formed his opinion of me and Colton as the station's resident playboys. We were two of the younger guys in our house, even though we had both been in service for almost nine years.

"See something you like?" Colton asked with a slap on the back.

Grinning, I nodded my head. "Who is she?"

We took seats near the back. I had a clear view of the front podium where the speakers sat, and I hoped like hell she'd sit at the end of the table so I could see her. Everyone else quickly found seats.

"Lawyer with Adams, Burks, and Monroe."

I lifted my brow and nodded. Zeb Clark sat next to me as he reached out for my hand for a fist bump. “What’s up, guys?”

Colton and I both gave him a head nod and replied at once. “Not much.”

“All right let’s sit and listen to the same bullshit we always listen to,” Zeb whispered as I let out a halfhearted chuckle.

I appreciated our union, but damn these meetings were the same old shit time and time again.

The meeting had barely even started, and I found myself nodding off to sleep. I forced myself to keep my eyes open as long as I could before my head dropped and I dozed off. I jerked awake when Colton hit my arm, then leaned over and whispered, “The lawyer is watching you, and if you’re not careful, Adams is going see you back here sleeping.”

I lifted my eyes and caught hers. Holy shit. I could see the blue in her eyes from where I was sitting. The left corner of her mouth rose into a smirk while she shook her head. With a shrug, I gave her a wink, which made her blush.

Damn. If winking at her made her blush, what else could I do to make those cheeks turn such a beautiful rose color?

“I think I’m in love,” I whispered as Colton chuckled.

“I’m not gonna lie, she’s good-looking, but I don’t think she’s your type, dude.”

My head snapped over to him. “What makes you say that?” I asked in a hushed voice.

“Dude, look at her. The innocence is dripping off her. What are you going to do? Ask her to join you in a threesome?”

The idea of sharing her with anyone else made my stomach turn, and I didn’t even know her name. But with the way she kept glancing my way, I knew one thing for sure—she was as captivated by me as I was by her.

Colton was right, though. She looked to be about our age, which meant she was fresh out of law school and most likely a workaholic. *But damn, what I wouldn’t do to put my hands on that body.*

When she looked back my way, I smiled bigger. The moment her teeth sank into her lower lip, she grinned wider, and I knew I was fucked. The room suddenly felt like it was spinning, and I lost my breath.

What. In. The. Hell. Just. Happened?

I glanced down as I drew in a deep breath of air. My heart felt like it was sitting on the bottom of my stomach.

“Does it feel hot in here to you guys?” I asked while rubbing the back of my neck.

“No,” Colton and Zeb replied. My gaze moved back to her. I had to find out her name. Ask her out. Ask her to marry me...

No. Shit. Ask her out. Jesus, what is wrong with me?

All right, Ward, it's time to get your game on. Play it cool.

When I glanced back at her, she was leaning over talking to the dick next to her. He was dressed in a suit, and I could tell from first look he was also a lawyer. The way he stared at her pissed me off.

“Ward, you look like you're about to rip someone's head off. What the hell is wrong with you?”

Pulling my stare off them, I tried to get a hold on the crazy-ass feelings racing through my body.

“Um, it's been a rough few days. Plus, I have a damn surprise birthday party my mother is throwing.”

Zeb hit my arm. “She still trying to fix you up?”

With a slight moan, I nodded my head.

It was strange how I felt the sexy lawyer's eyes on me. Glimpsing back over, I couldn't help but smile at her again. When her tongue darted out and quickly licked her lips, my dick jumped. She pressed her mouth together, and I swear those blue eyes of hers shined even brighter.

Over the course of the rest of the meeting, we exchanged a few flirtatious exchanges. When the meeting adjourned, I excused myself from Colton and Zeb and made a beeline toward her.

“Oh hell, Ward. Come on and leave some for the rest of us!” Colton called out.

Ignoring him, I kept my onward push. When I finally reached her, she was talking to the stiff suit. She turned and looked directly into my eyes.

I opened my mouth to swoon her, but the only thing I could manage was, “Hey.”

Oh, for fuck's sake. That's the best I could come up with.

She pursed her lips, and her cheeks blushed. Oh hell. Colton was right: She was probably still a virgin. Then her eyes turned dark, and that tongue ran along the top edge of her teeth. I stumbled back a step and had to adjust my balance, because my entire world rocked.

She finally spoke, and that one word sounded like it was straight from heaven. “Hi.”

Ask her for her name. Her number. Anything. Don't stand here like a fool.

Before I had a chance to ask her anything, the dick next to her took her by the elbow and whispered something in her ear. She nodded and glanced back at me. "I'm sorry—if you'll excuse me."

I nodded. "Yeah. Sure. Sure. No problem."

Standing there like an idiot, I watched her walk across the room with the asshole. She stopped in front of Clint, one of our dispatchers, and Chief Adams. They quickly got lost in conversation.

"Hey, Finn."

Shit. I closed my eyes and took a couple of breaths before turning and seeing Jessica Round standing before me.

"Hey, Jess. How's it going?"

She worked in the administrative building downtown. We had hooked up once and ever since then she'd been trying to make it something more.

"Any plans tonight?"

Taking a quick glance back over to the hot lawyer, I nodded my head. "Spending the evening with family."

There. That should give her the hint.

"Oh, I see. Well, if you ever feel like hanging out, give me a call."

Focusing back on her, I smiled. "Will do, Jess. Have a good evening."

I could see the disappointment in her eyes. It made me feel like shit, but she knew from the get-go it was simply a fuck and go. That's what I did. What I've always done. Sometimes with more than one girl at a time.

She forced a smile. "See ya around, Finn."

"See ya."

Colton walked up with a shit-eating grin. "Damn, dude, once you poke and stoke 'em they're hooked and hard to get rid of."

Rolling my eyes, I shook my head. "You're an asshole."

He held up his hands and laughed. "Just call it like I see it."

I'd had enough of this day. It was time to find out more about the lawyer and get the hell out of here. I turned back to where she had been standing, and my stomach dropped.

She was gone.

"Where did she go?" I asked while frantically looking around the room.

"The chick you were making eyes with?" Colton asked.

"Yeah."

"She left."

My jaw clenched. Son-of-a-bitch. Zeb walked up to me and stopped short; his expression concerned. “You have that look on your face again.”

“What look?” I bit out.

“The one where you want to rip someone’s head off.”

“Fuck. The lawyer left before I even got her damn name.”

Colton and Zeb both laughed. Some friends they were. “Damn, dude, I’ve never seen you this interested in a woman before. Maybe all your mom’s nagging is starting to sink in,” Colton said with a chuckle.

Shaking my head, I looked him in the eyes. “Fuck that. Did you see her ass?”

With a nod, he replied, “Yeah, I saw it all right. She shouldn’t be hard to track down. She works for the Cap’s wife at her law firm. I think I heard someone call her Lori maybe?”

My phone buzzed in my pocket. Pulling it out, I saw my mother’s name.

Mom: When will you be here?

Sighing, I typed back my response.

Me: Leaving the union meeting now and heading that way.

The gloomy expression on my face should have been a sign to my friends that I was not looking forward to this evening. “I’m heading to Preston’s pub. Mom is throwing me a surprise birthday party. You guys want to come?”

Zeb frowned. “If it’s a surprise party, how do you know about it?”

Lifting my brow, I asked, “Have you never met my mother, Zeb?”

He chuckled and said, “Right. Count me in. Colton?”

All of the sudden, my best friend looked nervous as hell. “Ah, I can’t.”

“Why not?” I asked.

“I’ve got plans.”

Widening my stare, I stated, “You’ve got plans. Who the hell with? We’re your only friends.”

He looked away while replying, “I have a date.”

I thought Zeb was going to drop to the floor. “A date date? Like take them out to dinner and all that shit?”

Colton seemed instantly annoyed. “Yeah, a date date. What other kind of date is there?”

“Do you really need me to answer that?” Zeb replied sarcastically. “I mean you’re worse than this one over here when it comes to the poke and go.”

Zeb was newly engaged, and I knew his fiancé, Sissy, hated that his two

best friends were both single and having fun.

Colton gave Zeb a small push. “Fuck off, Zeb. You’re not the only one who can meet someone and explore more.”

I moaned while scrubbing my hands down my face. “First Zeb and now you? You’re both leaving me out to dry.”

The way Colton looked at me, I knew it was coming. First my mother, now my best friend. “I’m tired of the games, Finn. Waking up in someone else’s bed all the time. Shit, half the time I don’t even remember their names. After seeing Preston with Harmony and how happy they are, I don’t know. Something changed. I’m not saying I’m ready to settle down like dipshit here and pop out a kid or two. But meeting someone to spend my time with might be kind of nice.”

“Hey!” Zeb said as he punched Colton in the arm. “You’re just jealous.”

The two of them went back and forth a bit before I held up my hands and stated, “I’m out of here. We still on for basketball in the morning, Colton?”

“Hell yeah,” Colton answered with a light smack on my back.

Walking out of the meeting hall, I felt like I was in a daze. It didn’t get any better on the cab ride over to Flanagan’s, my brother Preston’s pub.

Pulling out my phone, I hit Preston’s number.

“Hey, dude.”

Preston covered the phone and mumbled something to someone.

“Sorry. Harmony tried to reach for something.”

I couldn’t help but smile. I was glad Preston had met Harmony. Things were a little rough for them at first, but now they were expecting their first child and the Irish pub my brother bought from our uncle was thriving. I knew he missed being a firefighter, but he loved what he was doing now even more.

“Hope you got it for her.”

He made a grunting sound. “Of course, I did. Anyway, you’re still coming, right?”

“Yes. And let’s not pretend I don’t know it’s a surprise birthday party Mom is throwing for me.”

Preston laughed. “How’d you figure it out?”

“Wasn’t hard. She asked me at least six times at dinner last night if I was going to the pub tonight. Tell me one thing: She’s not trying to fix me up with someone, is she?”

Preston let out another round of laughter. “Hey, I’ve got to run. See you

in a bit. And for Mom's sake...act surprised."

Rolling my eyes, I let out a frustrated moan. His avoiding the question meant she *was*. "Yeah. Later."

I hit End and dropped my head back against the seat. The sooner I got this day over, the better.



Chapter Two

Rory

Lost in thought

“Rory, are you even listening to me?”

Lifting my head, I forced a smile. “Sorry, Mom. Guess I was lost in thought.”

Her face softened as she grinned. “I’d say. You know, you don’t have to keep taking on all these smaller cases. You don’t have anything to prove.”

Ha! That was a joke if I’d ever heard one. Maybe not to my mother, but to the rest of the firm. My first day I was in the bathroom and heard two lawyers talking about how Chelsea Adams’s daughter was getting a free ride. My goal was to prove those two girls wrong. I thought I didn’t have a life in law school. I really didn’t have a life now. Sixty-plus-hour weeks for the last ten months was beginning to wear me down.

“So, what did you think about the meeting earlier? You ready to jump in on the team that represents the fire department?”

My heart raced, but I kept my calm. The only thing I’d been able to think of since that damn meeting was the overly handsome brown-haired firefighter who flirted nonstop. Then his voice. Oh man, that voice had sent shivers down my spine. “I’m more than ready.”

She flashed me a huge grin. “Good. There’s a case I want you on with Russell McCormick. As you know, he’s been with this firm for a while and is showing great promise. He’s up for junior partner.”

Taking a bite of my burger, I nodded. “I know. He told me about six times tonight.”

Mother laughed and rolled her eyes. “He’s a bit...ambitious. Don’t let

him try and walk all over you, Rory. I have every bit of confidence you're more than qualified to handle the case. He'll be lead attorney, though. You understand why?"

"Completely," I said with another nod.

She lifted her brow. "You do have a bit of an advantage over Russell, though."

I couldn't help the smile that spread across my face. "Knowing my way around a fire station?"

"Yes," she replied with a wink. The phone buzzed. "Yes?"

"Your husband is on the line."

"Perfect timing."

Leaning back in my chair, I chuckled.

"Hey, honey, Rory and I were just talking about you."

I soon zoned out my mother and got lost in those green eyes of my mystery firefighter. In all the years I'd been around them, I'd never even entertained the idea of flirting with one. But there was something about him. When I saw him falling asleep while Daddy talked, I couldn't help but chuckle. It was cute how his friends kept bumping his arm to wake him up.

Then our eyes met. The way my body reacted was like nothing I'd ever experienced before. I was even more shocked when I flirted back with him.

My mother's laugh snapped me out of my daydream. Finishing off my hamburger, I tossed the extra fries and trash in the garbage and stood. I made my way over to the large window that overlooked downtown Boston and took in a deep cleansing breath.

I need to start doing yoga again. Something for me and only me.

It didn't take long for my thoughts to return to my mystery man. *I wonder what his name is. What is he doing tonight? Probably out with someone hot as hell dancing it up at a nightclub.* Something I missed doing and hadn't done since law school. I had no time to even entertain the idea of starting a relationship with someone. Let alone a firefighter. My father would have a heart attack. He was one hundred and fifty percent against me dating a firefighter. He never really gave a specific reason, only made it clear that he would not approve.

With a sigh, I wrapped my arms around my body and stared out the window. A loneliness swept over me as I watched the tree branches sway in the wind. Would this be my life for the next five to ten years? Working nonstop to prove to people I was more than the boss's daughter?

When my mother's hands squeezed my shoulders, she rested her chin on me and said, "Honey, why don't you go out tonight with some friends."

"I'd like to get a head start on the case if you don't mind. Maybe start a bit of research."

She turned me around and searched my face. "No. I'm not even telling you about the case until Monday morning. Go out, sweetheart. Have some fun. When was the last time you even went out?"

Smiling weakly, I wondered if any of my friends would even want me with them. They'd given up calling me to go out a few months ago.

"Maybe I'll give Clare or Autumn a call."

Her smile widened. "Yes! Do that. Now get on out of here. Enjoy a weekend for once."

"Well, I have some notes to add to the Jenner file and—"

She lifted her brow. "Rory Ann Adams."

I knew when I was defeated. Lifting my hands, I giggled. "Okay! Okay! No need to pull out the full name. I'll call the girls now."

"Good. Don't forget dinner with us on Sunday."

I groaned internally. Sunday dinner was a weekly thing we had done since I started Harvard. It was my parents' way of staying in my business.

"I wouldn't think of forgetting dinner."

With a smack on my ass, she smirked. "Don't be a smartass, Rory. It doesn't become you."

Laughing, I grabbed my purse and briefcase and headed back to my office. Once there, I pulled out my cellphone and sent Clare and Autumn a text.

Me: Hey! I need a night out. You guys up for it?

In less than a minute they both responded.

Clare: Who is this?

Autumn: I'm sorry...this number used to belong to my BFF Rory. But she never has time to go out.

Me: Ha. Ha. Seriously. I need a night out in the real world. Will you help a girl out?

Clare: We'll pick you up at eight. Dress sexy.

My heart dropped. "Oh shit," I whispered as I stared at the last text. *Do I even own anything sexy?*

"Everything okay?"

Letting out a small yelp, I dropped my phone onto my desk and looked up at Russell. "Russell? You didn't knock."

The corners of his mouth lifted into a smirk. “Your door was open.”

My cheeks heated. “Oh. Sorry, everything’s fine. Just some friends of mine giving me a hard time about going out tonight.”

His smile faded. “They beat me to it.”

Pulling my head back in surprise, I asked, “Excuse me?”

He waved his hand and sat down in a chair. “Nothing. I was going to see if you wanted to get a drink or two. Maybe even grab dinner, since it looks like we’ll be working together on the assault case.”

My breath caught. He knew about the case. I could get the information from him! No, wait. What would he think if he knew my mother hadn’t given any to me yet?

“Normally, I would, but I promised myself a much-needed weekend off.”

With a nod of his head, he replied, “You have been cranking out the cases. I’m impressed with your work ethic, Rory. It’s rare.”

Feeling my cheeks heat, I glanced at my phone. “Well, thank you, I appreciate that. I’m really looking forward to working alongside of you on the case.”

Something passed over his face, but I couldn’t read it. He stood and gave me a wink. “Enjoy your weekend. Starting Monday, we’ll be too busy for fun times.”

My heart sank. *Ugh.*

Standing, I straightened out my skirt. “Don’t worry, I’ll be ready and able.”

“Let’s hope so.”

With a frown, I watched him turn on his expensive Giacometti shoes and retreat out of my office.

What in the hell did that mean? Does he think I’m not ready for this kind of case? Hell, I don’t even know what the case is!

Whatever.

I wasn’t going to let Russell McCormick ruin my weekend.



By the time we ate dinner and had a couple drinks, it was nearly midnight when we hit Bukowski Tavern. It was a popular bar in Boston and always packed. Clare and Autumn were both still single, which surprised the heck out of me. Clare was tall, blonde, and had the bluest eyes. Every man’s

dream. Whereas Autumn was shorter than me, and I stood at five-three. She had red hair that was pulled up into a crazy ponytail. Kind of matched her spitfire personality.

“It’s packed in here!” I called out over the music.

Clare wiggled her brows. “Perfect for grinding up on some men!”

I rolled my eyes. My two best friends most definitely were more sexually experienced than I was. We were roommates in college, and while I was sitting in my room studying, they were screaming out “*Oh God faster*” almost every night. I’d only ever been with one guy.

Frank.

Yuck. Even his name made my skin crawl. We dated in high school and through our first few years of college. Things ended when I drove to upstate New York to pay him a surprise visit. Needless to say, I was the one who was surprised when I walked in on him and another girl having sex.

“Don’t roll your eyes, Rory. One of these days a guy is going to catch your attention, and you’re going to want to ride his stick.”

Clare laughed. “Yep. What Autumn said.”

I couldn’t even be shocked. That was how Autumn was. Blunt and didn’t give a hoot what came out of her mouth. Clare wasn’t too far behind her, but had a tad bit more control over what she said.

“Whatever, tonight it’s all about having fun!” I yelled out.

With a huge smile, Clare grabbed my hand and pulled me through the crowd and to the bar. We stopped in front of three hot guys. None of them were as hot as my mystery firefighter, though.

Jesus, Rory. Stop thinking about him.

All three guys eye-fucked the hell out of us. I immediately felt a little silly in my short black cocktail dress.

“Hey!” Clare yelled out.

All three said “Hey” back. The one in the middle smiled, and my stomach clenched slightly. It was nice having a guy give me attention.

“My friend here is a lawyer.”

He raised his eyebrows. “Really? So am I.”

“Really?” I replied as I leaned in closer.

He laughed. “You don’t remember me, Rory?”

Holy shit. This guy knows my name.

“Um, I ah. Well.”

All eyes were on me. Including Clare’s, as she stared at me with a

shocked expression.

“We went to Harvard Law at the same time. You were in a few study groups I was in. You spilled coffee on me once.”

It suddenly hit me. “Justin!”

He smiled bigger. “That’s me.”

“Perfect. Now that we got that all taken care of, Rory’s been overworking herself and she just needs a nice dick to grind up on. You up for it, Justin?”

My mouth dropped as I glared at Autumn. “Autumn!” I gasped.

Before I knew what was happening, Justin had my hand, and we were on the dance floor.

He pulled me in close and chuckled in my ear. “Your friends are something else.”

Sighing, I responded, “You have no idea. But honestly, I’m not looking to...well,

um...to you know...grind up on you or anything. I really wanted a night out and away from working.”

Oh. My. God. Did I really just say that? I was going to be single my entire life.

But his smile was nice and made me feel comfortable.

“No worries. My friends dragged me out as well. This will be a nice break from listening to them telling me what girl to tap or who I need to take from behind.”

Laughing, I shook my head. “Sounds like your friends and mine will really like each other.”

Something about the air changed as Justin and I settled into a nice quiet slow song.

Was it because he held me closer?

No.

Maybe I was into him more than I thought?

Nope. That wasn’t it.

My eyes drifted around the dance floor, and that’s when I saw him.

I sucked in a breath so fast I started choking, and Justin pulled back. “Are you okay?”

Nodding, I tried to talk. “Sucked. In. Air. Wrong.”

“Let’s go get you a drink.”

My mystery firefighter was dancing with a girl who was clearly younger than him. Was that purple in her hair?

“No!” I shouted. If I walked off, I’d lose him in this crowd.

“Do you know where the restrooms are?” I asked Justin.

He gave me a sweet grin. “Yeah, back in that corner.”

Perfect! It was in the same direction my mystery firefighter was dancing.

“Great! Meet you back at the bar?” I asked.

“Um, yeah sure.”

As I fought my way through the crowd, I tried to keep an eye on them. *Damn these heels!* I tripped once and landed in the arms of a guy who was more than happy to catch me.

Pushing and shoving people, I forced my way through. “Sorry! Trying to get through! Sorry! Coming through!”

I looked and acted like a complete maniac. *Are the two of them moving away from me? Shit!*

My mystery firefighter pulled back and said something in his dance partner’s ear. She nodded, and they started to head off the dance floor.

“No!” I yelled out. “Wait! Wait! Firefighter dude!”

People dancing near me stopped and shot me a confused look.

Dang it! He’s getting away. I continued onward, ducking and weaving in and out of couples as I tried to keep an eye on the purple streaks in the girl’s hair. But when I reached the end of the dance floor, I’d lost sight of the two of them.

Frantically looking around, I saw an empty chair. I quickly took off my heels, climbed up on the chair, and stood on my tippy toes. It didn’t take long to spot them. They were near the exit. *No! No! No!*

Then he leaned in and hugged her. It was a very friendly hug. She pulled back and looked up at him like she was totally in love with him.

I had to get his attention before he left. Cupping my hands over my mouth, I yelled out, “Firefighter guy!”

That’s when it happened.

“Fire? Oh my God where?” a girl cried out.

I snapped my head around to face her, my eyes widened in horror. “No! No, I didn’t say that!” I yelled out as I flailed my arms about, leading to me becoming unbalanced on the chair.

The girl freaked out and started pushing people out of the way. She bumped into the chair, and all I could do was close my eyes and hold my breath.

I’m going down.

Warm arms caught me, and I peeked through one open eye.

Justin was holding me in his arms with a very confused look on his face.

“Do I want to know why you were standing on a chair?”

Slowly shaking my head, I replied, “Probably not.”

The bouncers finally got everyone to settle down.

“Why do I have a feeling you were the start of all of that?” Justin asked with a wide grin.

Scrunching up my nose, I made a face and replied, “I plead the fifth.”

With a heavy sigh, I shook my head. “This isn’t my scene anymore.”

“Uh-huh. That’s why you were flailing your arms about on top of a chair.”

“Temporary moment of insanity.” With a giggle, I added, “Actually I thought I saw a friend.”

His brow lifted. “A friend?”

With a quick nod, I replied, “Yep. Listen, I think I’m going to let the girls know I’m taking off.”

A look of disappointment washed over his face. “Yeah, if they find out you were the one who yelled out ‘Fire’ you’ll need a good lawyer. Oh wait... I happen to know one.”

“His name wouldn’t happen to be Justin, would it?” I asked with a lighthearted chuckle.

He winked and replied, “Why yes! Yes, it is.”

Catching sight of Clare and Autumn, I said, “I see them. It was really great seeing you again, Justin.”

“Yeah, you too. Um, hey listen, do you want to share a cab, or maybe you’d like someone to escort you home?”

My cheeks heated under his intense stare. Something told me he wanted to do more than escort me home. “I appreciate it, but I’ll manage fine. I have a stop to make before I head home.”

He nodded. “Well, at any rate, it was great seeing you again.” The awkwardness that had formed between us was exactly why I hadn’t dated anyone. If you weren’t into them, you ended up having to be the one to break things off, and then they would stare at you like Justin was right now.

Ugh.

“You too, Justin.”

Quickly slipping my heels back on, I searched out Clare and Autumn again after losing sight of them while talking to Justin. I needed to let them

know I was going home.

Finding them, I made my way over to the bar. “Hey, guys, I think I’m calling it a night.”

“What? So soon? We just got here!” Clare said with a pout.

Kissing them both on the cheek, I made myself smile. “I’ll make it up to you, I promise.”

“Damn straight you will!” Autumn replied. They walked me outside and waited with me for a cab. Once I was safely stowed away, they headed back into the club. It’s not like this wasn’t new for them. It usually went this way when I went out with them. I needed a shirt that read “I’m the party pooper.”

My heart felt heavy as I mumbled my address to the cabdriver. I wasn’t sure if it was from letting down my friends again or seeing my mystery firefighter with another woman.



Chapter Three

Finn

Playing detective

“You wouldn’t happen to know the lawyer that was at the union meeting a few days ago, would you?”

John Penley stared at me with a blank expression. “Why?”

With a shrug, I responded, “Just wondering.”

“I’d stay far away from that, Ward. Far. Far. Away.”

I wasn’t getting anywhere with the guys at the station. No one knew her, and if they did, they kept warning me to stop asking.

Nikki Evans walked by whistling. “Nik! Wait up.”

She kept walking. “Whatever you want, Ward, I’m not interested, I can’t help you, and no, I’m not going to sneak away with you for a quick fuck.”

Laughing, I shook my head. “Oh, come on, Nik. I asked you one time to sneak off. I get that you have a boyfriend, and I haven’t hit on you since, have I?”

She stopped and looked at me. “No. You haven’t. What do you want?”

I slipped my fingers through my hair and asked, “At the union meeting last week, who was the new lawyer?”

“Rory?”

Rory.

“The one sitting on the end, next to the other suit I’ve never seen before.”

“Yeah, Captain introduced them when he was talking. They’re the new counsel who’ll be handling cases for the fire department.”

“Shit. That must have been when I fell asleep.”

Her mouth dropped open while her eyes widened. “Dude, Cap already has

something against you. You're lucky he didn't catch ya sleeping and fire your ass."

With a halfhearted chuckle, I shook my head. "I don't know why he doesn't like me."

Titling her head and giving me a *really* look, she said, "Oh I don't know. It might have something to do with you hooking up with that EMS chick in the back alley. You remember, his first day, when he caught y'all?"

I pointed to her and stated my defense. "Hey! We were off duty when he caught us."

She laughed. "Still, I'd keep your nose as clean as you can."

Starting to walk off, she turned back to me and added, "And I certainly wouldn't let him know you were asking around about his daughter."

Thud.

That had been the sound of my heart falling to the floor.

My mouth instantly went dry. "His...his...*daughter*?"

"Yeah. Rory Adams. She's Captain Adams's daughter."

I nearly stumbled back as I reached for the wall to hold myself up.

With a stunned expression, I looked around. "No wonder everyone was telling me to let it go."

Nikki busted out laughing. "Damn. If you value your life...and your job...I'd steer clear of her."

Once I got my bearings again, I shot Nikki a cocky grin. "Now, Nik, have you ever known me to back down from a challenge?"

She slowly shook her head in disbelief. "When they find your body in the Boston Harbor, I just want you to know...I'll be really sad. You're one of the fun ones to have around."



After cleaning up the dinner dishes, I made my way over to Chuck, our lieutenant. Giving him a slap on the back, I sat down next to him. He was reading the evening paper, his normal daily routine. Some of these guys had routines they never deviated from.

"How's it going, Chuck?"

He lifted his eyes over the paper. Flash, the station dog, was lying at his feet. "It's going, Ward."

I nodded and squatted down to pet the dog. Still a puppy, he was a feisty

son of a bitch. “You need me to take Flash for a walk or anything?”

He lifted a brow. “Are you *wanting* to take Flash for a walk?”

“Sure!” I responded enthusiastically.

“Then by all means, knock yourself out, kid. Speaking of, you run every morning, right?”

I nodded. “Sure do.”

“Good. You have a new running partner.”

Oh fuck. “What?”

Chuck pointed to the six-month-old Dalmatian. “He’s got a lot of energy. Much more than our old girl had.”

Yeah, I’m sure he does. Our old firehouse dog was a ten-year-old golden retriever, and this was a crazy-ass puppy.

Captain Adams walked by, and Chuck called him over. “Cap, get this. Ward here just volunteered to take on Flash. Full time.”

“Wait. What?” I asked in a panicked state.

With a slap on my back, Captain Adams gave me his first real smile since taking over the position of captain. “That’s what I like to see from my guys—stepping up to the plate. I like that you’re not afraid of a challenge, Ward. I like that a lot.”

I forced a laugh. “No, sir. Not afraid at all.”

My eyes swung to Chuck, who lifted his brows, then focused back on Cap. “I think it would be good for Flash to actually bond with one of the guys.”

Captain Adams tried to hide his smile but failed. “I agree. And since Ward here isn’t afraid of a little challenge, take him home with you when your shift ends. Bond with him so he trusts you.”

I swallowed hard. “I thought the station dog stayed at...the station?”

Captain Adams looked at me and frowned. “You not up for the challenge?”

I lifted my hands. “No. I mean I’ll gladly take him home, sir. And...um...bond with the little guy.”

Flash started jumping on me.

Captain Adams pointed to him. “First thing is to get him to stop jumping. I’m tired of the little son of a bitch all over me every day.”

I reached down for Flash and said, “No! Bad dog. Sit.”

Flash did just that. I straightened and looked at the beast. *Hell. This is going to be easy. The dog’s already listening to me.*

“See? He likes you already,” Cap said with a laugh. “Let’s try something new with this one. He’s your partner for the next four months.”

My legs about buckled out from under me. “Four months? Sir?”

“Train up, Ward. This is your special project.”

Once he’d walked off, I turned back to Chuck. “What in the hell was that? You totally set me up for that.”

He laughed. “Please. You don’t think I know about you snooping around asking about Rory Adams? Tell me someone finally told you she’s the captain’s daughter.”

Scrubbing my hands down my face, I gave him a pained expression. “You set me up.”

“Hell yeah, I did. I’ve been doing this shit for too long to be stuck with another fucking puppy. The whole taking-him-home thing was Cap’s idea, and I have to say, his choosing you to do it tells me things don’t look too good for ya, son. I don’t think he likes you all that much.”

Groaning, I dropped my head and silently cursed.

I was fucked. In more ways than one. But not in the way I wanted—or by the *girl* I wanted, and would no doubt never have.



“Flash!” I yelled out as my arm was practically yanked from my body.

“No! Walk! Walk, boy!”

I was two seconds from dropping the damn dog’s leash as he pulled me through the Fens on the way home.

Oh, just take the dog home. Bond with him. What the fuck! I began to hate Captain Adams with a passion as the damn dog made a beeline for a female jogger.

Shit. This is not going to turn out well.

“Stop! Flash, no! Bad dog. Bad boy!”

The girl stopped running and dropped down, right in time for Flash to slam into her, knock her back on her ass, and cover her with sloppy kisses.

“Shit! I’m so sorry, he’s a puppy and I’m trying to train him.”

“Flash! Baby boy, hello!”

The world stopped and my heart jumped to my throat.

My eyes widened as I watched Rory hug the beast. “Oh, I missed you, boy.”

Missed him? What?

She glanced up, and her jaw damn near hit the ground.

“It’s you,” she whispered.

The way she spoke and the intense look in her eyes, I had to fight from dropping down on the ground next to Flash and fight him for licking privileges.

“Hey, Rory.”

She jumped up. “How do you know my name?”

With a wink, I replied, “I asked around.”

She lifted a brow, and her face spread into the cutest damn smile I’d ever seen. “You asked around about me?”

Flash was now lying at my feet chewing on a stick. Content for at least two minutes.

“I did. You slipped out of the meeting before I could ask you to dinner.”

Her cheeks flushed, and my pants grew a bit smaller. “Dinner?”

Laughing, I replied, “Yeah. Lawyers eat too, right?”

It was then I let my eyes roam over her body. She was wearing running shorts and a light blue T-shirt that made her eyes compete with the cloudless sky.

“We do,” she answered with a chuckle. “But not with guys who have girlfriends.”

My smile faded.

Hold up. What?

“I don’t have a girlfriend.”

She rolled her eyes and squatted down, giving Flash the attention I wanted.

“Please. I saw you and the girl with the purple hair leaving together the other night.”

Frowning, I shook my head. “Angela? When did you see me with—”

She smirked and nodded her head like she had caught me in something.

I laughed and asked, “You were at Bukowski Tavern on last night?”

“I was.”

“Damn, I wish I’d seen you. I would have loved to have introduced you to her. She was having a rough night—our mom was pissed about the purple in her hair. It kind of ruined my whole surprise birthday party.”

Rory stared at me while she blinked rapidly. I’d have given anything to pull my phone out and snap a picture of her expression.

“S-sister? That was your sister?”

I nodded. She looked up in thought and then said, “Oh, that explains the kiss on the cheek and not the lips.”

I couldn’t help my smirk. I kind of liked seeing the glimpse of jealousy in her eyes.

“So, you thought Angela was my girlfriend, huh?” I asked as I squatted down next to the dog. I let out a fake-as-hell roar of laughter, which caused Flash to get excited and jump up at me, hitting me under my chin, and causing me to bite down on my tongue and fall back onto my ass.

“Oh no! Um...are you okay?” Rory asked as she fought to hold back her laughter.

Tears filled my eyes as I slowly shook my head. I didn’t know what hurt worse, my tongue or my ass.

Rory gasped and covered her mouth. “Oh my god! You’re...Oh God.”

She covered her mouth and made a god-awful sound in her attempt to not lose it.

When she tried to talk again, she dry-heaved and turned away from me. “It’s coming out of...your...mouth!”

I wiped the back of my hand across my mouth. I’d seen plenty of blood in my time, so the small amount on my hand hadn’t fazed me.

“I’ll be fine; feels like I busted my lip and bit into my tongue.”

She bent over while covering her mouth and holding onto her stomach.

“I take it you don’t like blood.”

Holding up her hand, she shook her head. She spun around, trying not to look at me. “Do you live close by? Do you need—oh God—help getting there?”

I wanted to laugh. She couldn’t even stomach looking at me, and she wanted to help me home?

Wait a minute.

She wanted to help me home. It was almost too good to be true.

“I’m feeling a bit dizzy,” I said as I finally stood up. Flash sat on the ground staring up at me. He was on to me. I could see it in his eyes.

“Okay, don’t get blood on me!” she stated while walking up to me and putting her arm around my waist.

“Give me Flash,” she said between gagging.

She took the dog’s leash. “Easy, boy, let’s head home.”

We started walking toward my condo, and I couldn’t ignore the

scorching-hot sensation I felt where her body was up against mine.

“We’ll get you both home and you can take care of that,” She gagged again before going on. “And I’ll get Flash settled.”

A small hint of a smile spread over my face. Maybe this dog thing would turn out okay after all.



Chapter Four

Rory

Oh no, Flash

After helping Finn into his condo, I quickly asked where his bathroom was before I puked on his very nice floors.

With a laugh, he pointed to a half bath. “I’m going to go wash out my mouth and see the damage this mutt caused.”

All I could do was nod as I rushed into the bathroom. I carefully splashed my face, making sure I didn’t hit my mascara. The last thing I wanted was raccoon eyes. Lifting my head, I stared at myself in the mirror.

“What are you doing?” I whispered.

Clearly Finn was fine. Maybe in a bit of pain, but the second I’d asked him if he needed help home, he’d jumped on it. *Why did I ask in the first place? What did I hope to get out of this?*

Oh, that’s right.

More Finn.

I counted to twenty.

Get a grip on yourself, Rory. My goodness. He’s only a guy.

My blue gaze stared back at me.

Just a guy. Really?

He was hot as hell. A body to die for. A massive chest I wanted pressed to mine.

No! No! No! Stop this mad thinking!

I took in a deep breath, then slowly released it, feeling its calming effects. I’d go out there, make sure he was okay and then I’d go home.

When I walked into the living room, my breath caught.

“Wow!” I mumbled. Clearly this was Flash’s first time here as well, because he was sniffing everywhere.

“What did you say?” Finn called out.

My head turned toward where his voice was coming from.

His bedroom. *I wonder how big his bed is.*

Covering my face, I mentally chastised myself for my thoughts.

“Um, nothing. Your place is amazing!” I called out.

“Thanks!”

Flash was everywhere. Jumping up on the leather sofa, next into the chair, then quickly bounding over the coffee table and making a beeline for the kitchen.

I joined him there and searched for a dog bowl.

Back in the hall again, I peeked into the bedroom. My eyes widened at the sight before me.

A massive king-size bed sat in the middle of the room. I was surprised it was made; I didn’t think guys were neat. The gray walls were masculine, yet very calming. A female had clearly had a hand in decorating it. For some reason, that made me sad and jealous.

“Where’s Flash’s water bowl?”

Finn popped his head out the door. “Water bowl?”

“Yeah. You know, that thing he drinks water out of?” I said with a chuckle.

He frowned. “Give me a few minutes and I’ll be right there. Could you get a bowl from the cabinet left of the refrigerator?”

Smiling, I replied, “Sure.”

As I walked back into his living room, I wondered why he had Flash, the new pup at my father’s station.

I stopped in my tracks when I saw Flash peeing on the floor.

“No!” I harshly whispered. “Bad boy! No!”

“What?” Finn called out.

“Um...nothing! Everything’s okay!”

I stared down at Flash, who lowered his head. “You are in big trouble if he sees his new roommate peeing on his floor.”

Flash whimpered and lay down. I quickly headed into the kitchen. Opening the cabinet under the sink, I smiled when I saw Pine-Sol. A man after my own heart.

Grabbing some paper towels and the cleaner, I made fast in wiping up the

small amount of pee. I took Flash's face in my hands and looked into his big brown eyes. "I get the need to mark your territory, but I'm pretty sure Finn likes his pad clean, buddy."

The dog reached up and licked me, causing me to giggle. "Let's get you some water. I have a feeling your daddy is going to need to go get you food."

After I tossed the paper towels in the trash and put the cleaner back under the sink, I got out a bowl. Filling it with cold water, I placed it in the corner of the dining area. "Here. This is a perfect spot for you."

"Did you clean something?"

I screamed as I spun around. My eyes were immediately drawn to Finn's lower lip. It was swollen, and dang it if I didn't want to kiss it better.

"I uh...no...I ... Your...your lip."

His fingers lightly ran across it. "Is it still bleeding? My tongue was the thing that wouldn't stop bleeding." He shot Flash a dirty look. "Damn dog."

It was like there was a force of nature that was pulling my eyes to that lip. That soft, plump, kissable lip.

Spinning around, I attempted to get myself under control. *Jesus, am I that horny that a lip is turning me on? A busted lip to top it off!*

My body trembled when he touched my shoulders. "Hey, are you okay?"

I was frozen. There was something about this guy that made me want him—badly. When he turned me, his finger lifted my head to meet his gaze.

"Rory? What's wrong?"

My gaze fell to his lips, and I swear I heard my heart pounding.

"I feel so stupid." Lifting my eyes to his, I let out a nervous bubble of laughter. "I'm never like this. Ever. It's just...I want...I want."

His eyes turned darker, and I had the feeling I wasn't the only girl to turn to jelly around him.

"You want what?"

My gaze drifted past his shoulders to his mantel and landed on a picture of him standing outside his station.

Engine 33.

No!

That's why he has Flash. He's at Daddy's station. Why, cruel world? Why?

Snapping out of my temporary moment of sanity, I looked back at him. "I want to go get Flash dog food. I mean...you should go get him dog food, and I want to come. Well, only if you need me to come. I've had dogs before.

Well, not that you haven't. Have you? Of course you have. Everyone's had a dog at some point in their life. Right? Well, that might be a general assumption that everyone's had a dog in their life. You might have had a cat."

Dear Lord. Someone take the shovel from me.

His brows lifted. "Are you finished?"

Sinking my teeth into my lip, I nodded. "I think so."

When his thumb brushed across my lip, my breath hitched.

"Because I'm almost positive you wanted me to kiss you."

"Kiss me?" I asked as an awkward laugh blurted from my lips.

The left corner of his mouth rose into a half smile, and my heart melted.

"Yes. Kiss you."

What harm would come from one kiss? As long as my father didn't find out I was with Finn...alone in his condo. One little kiss. I deserved it, after all.

"Yes," I barely spoke.

His hand moved to the back of my neck, and he took a step closer to me. Tilting his head and giving me the cutest damn look I'd ever seen, he asked, "Is that a yes to you wanting me to kiss you?"

Slowly nodding, I replied, "That is most certainly a yes."

When his lips pressed to mine, it felt like an explosion. His tongue moved across my lips, prompting me to let him have more. I didn't even have to second-guess it. I opened my mouth to him.

Our tongues mingled together, slowly at first, until Finn's other hand moved to my hip. He dug in and pulled me flush against his body. The moan that slipped from my mouth must have been his sign to pick it up. The kiss intensified. The heat between us was undeniable.

I grabbed onto him and held on tight as things turned more passionate. I'd never in my life been kissed with so much passion.

Does he feel it too or is this my inexperience?

When I couldn't take not having air any longer, I pulled back and stared into his green eyes. My chest rose and fell heavily while I attempted to sear the moment into my memory. I'd never experienced a first like that before and was positive I never would again.

Finn leaned his forehead against mine and softly spoke my name.

"Rory."

Closing my eyes, I fought to ignore the tightness in my chest. It was

almost as if I could hear it in Finn's voice. The doubt. The uncertainty of there ever being an *us*.

He knew who I was. He had to. He'd said he asked around and he knew my name, so that had to mean he knew he worked for my father, and that an *us* could never happen.

Could it?



Finn

Dates and bad dogs

Rory walked next to me in silence. That kiss blew my fucking mind, and I knew it had hers as well. I knew she'd also figured out what engine company I worked for. I saw it the moment she saw the photo.

The one where her father was captain.

"Are you sure you want to help me get all of this stuff?"

She glanced up at me and grinned. "I'm positive. This has been my first weekend off in a few years. I'm having fun."

She thought we were having fun. Poor girl had no idea what fun was. "A few years?" I asked with a horrified expression.

She chuckled. "I know. I know. Classic workaholic here."

"Do you have a dog?"

Laughing, she replied, "No way. I work long hours and am never home; I'd kill the poor thing. You're lucky—you get to take your dog to work."

I sighed as we walked into the little mom-and-pop pet shop.

"Yeah, I'm pretty sure it's the Cap's way of telling me he dislikes me. The station dogs usually stay at the station, not go home with one of us."

She stopped walking, and I wanted to punch myself.

"What? Why doesn't he like you? What did you do?"

Trying to play it off, I shrugged. "It's nothing. He thinks I'm something I'm not."

Following close behind me, she asked, "What does he think? Tell me."

I stopped in front of the bowls. *What in the hell? Why are there so many bowls? Which one do I get?*

“So, it didn’t take me long to find out you’re the daughter of my captain, Rory. And I’m guessing by the way you reacted when you saw what station I’m assigned to, you figured out I worked under your dad.”

She swallowed hard. “You’re with Engine 33.”

Smiling, I nodded in reply. “I am.”

She pointed between us. “So, you understand why this...could never work.”

“Shopping for dog supplies?”

Her smile about blew me off my feet. Hitting me on the chest, she shook her head. “No, Finn. I’m starting to get a bit of a clear picture here. My father’s been bringing Flash home from time to time to let him run around his and my mom’s yard. Flash has a lot of energy, so he needs to be exercised. My dad’s telling you to take him home seems like more of a punishment than anything else. I’m going to guess you’ve gotten on the wrong side of him. Since he already forbids me to date firefighters, imagine his surprise if he finds out I’ve kissed a firefighter I’m attracted to who’s in his company. One he already had a beef with.”

I grinned from ear to ear. “You’re attracted to me?”

She rolled her eyes and punched my arm. “Will you be serious?”

“Rory, I’m not asking you to marry me. We’re shopping for the stupid dog’s supplies.”

With her hands on her hips and a cute pout, she said, “Don’t call him that. He’s a sweetheart.”

“He’s a maniac who tried to pull my arm out of my socket today. And back to you being attracted to me.”

Rory let out a groan. “Ugh! I regret saying that.”

I took her hands in mine and couldn’t help but notice her breathing pick up when I lightly ran my thumbs across the back of them. I hoped like hell she hadn’t seen mine do the same in reaction to simply touching her.

“All I’m asking for is dinner.”

Pondering what I said, she finally answered me. “Let’s see how our doggy shopping trip goes first. Then we’ll take it from there.”

I nodded. “I can live with that. Now what in the hell does that mutt need?”



“Why did I let you talk me into all this shit?” I said as we walked back to my place. Rory giggled. When we got to my door, I juggled the four bags I had in my hands and the large dog bed stuffed under my arm.

Four bags filled with useless stuff, if you asked me.

“Oh, you have to have training treats. He needs a bed. Snacks are a must. That bowl isn’t cute enough. He needs lots of toys. He’s going to love it. Besides, it’s important for him to have chew toys to keep him occupied,” Rory said with a cute smile.

Unlocking the door, I motioned for Rory to go first.

“That way when you leave him alone, he doesn’t—Oh. My. God.”

“What’s wrong?” I asked, coming around to her side.

Sitting in the middle of my brand-new leather sofa sat Flash. Feathers were floating in the air as my eyes scanned the room.

Rory turned to me and put her hands on my chest. “Okay. Take a deep breath, Finn.”

All the bags in my hands dropped to the ground along with the bed.

Flash lay down on the sofa and then flipped over onto his back and stared at me. I could have sworn he was smiling at me.

“Wh...wha...wha...what did he do?”

Rory quickly ran over to him. “I’m going to take him out for a bit. Why don’t you go into the kitchen and grab something to drink. Hard liquor, if you have it.”

I was in a daze as Rory and the evil dog rushed by me and out the door. I stumbled farther into my condo and gasped.

“My sofa,” I whimpered. The arm had been chewed to hell. Turning, I threw my hand over my chest and tried to get some air as I struggled to breathe.

“It’s gone,” I whispered, dropping to my knees.

“No!” I cried out as my chest squeezed in pain.

The autographed football I’d received personally from Tom Brady was chewed to pieces and scattered across the living room.

My eyes caught something strewn about the mess.

Dirt? Is that...dirt? Where the fuck did he get dirt?

Turning, I saw the potted tree my mother had insisted I needed. I stood and walked over to it. Leaning down, I pulled out the chewed-up remote the little bastard had tried to bury.

“I’m going to kill him. He’s dead.”

Stepping over the torn-up sofa pillows, I rubbed the bridge of my nose. I walked around the island, and my eyes nearly popped out of my head.

The kitchen was covered in a white powder. Somehow, that little bastard of a dog had jumped up and knocked over the flour container, then successfully opened it. I walked farther into the kitchen, and something crunched under my shoe. With a whimper, I glanced down at the sugar on the floor. He'd got the sugar open too.

Mixed in with all that was my garbage.

Dragging my feet through the mess, I opened the refrigerator, grabbed a beer, and headed to the balcony. Before stepping onto it, I pulled out my phone and took a video of the damage.

I sat down in a chair and pulled up Colton's number.

Me: We no longer have a firehouse dog.

Colton: Holy fuck. Dude. What did you do with the dog?

Me: I'm going to throw him off my balcony.

Colton: Cap might frown at that.

Throwing my head back, I let out a loud, long yell.

Me: He knew...

Less than thirty seconds later, my phone rang.

"Hello," I bit.

"Yeah, he knew all right. And do you know what he would do if he knew his daughter was out walking said dog and heading into your condo building as we speak? He'd fucking cut your dick off. What in the hell are you doing with her, Finn?"

My hand pushed through my hair. "It's a long story. Nothing happened—she helped me out with the little bastard. Why are you outside my place?"

"That girl Melissa I met a few weeks ago lives in the same building as you."

"Oh, that's right," I mindlessly replied. Taking in a deep breath, I was hit by the smell of the ocean.

Maybe I could take Flash to the beach and throw a ball and then take off running in the opposite direction.

"Dude, you know I never preach to you. But if you value your job, you'll steer clear of her. No pussy is worth risking your job for."

I heard the door to my condo open and close. Flash barked, causing me to curse.

"Oh, Flash boy. You're a bery, bery bad doggy! Yes, you are handsome,

boy. But look at this mess you caused.”

I rolled my eyes and snarled my lip at her baby talk.

“Dude? Is that her?”

Closing my eyes, I answered with a sigh. “Yes. She’s the only thing between me and the dog right now.”

“Look how smart you are! You kept the flour and sugar in the kitchen. Good boy.”

My mouth fell open as I turned to look at her. She had a trash bag in her hand and was cleaning up. When she squatted down and Flash started licking her, she laughed and fell back.

Something hit me hard in the chest. It was a feeling I’d never experienced before in my life. I couldn’t tear my eyes away from her. As angry as I was, seeing her playing with the dog and hearing her laugh made me want to smile.

“I’ve got to go, Colton. Hey, do me a favor—keep this thing with Rory between you and me?”

“I will. But, Finn, please think about what I said.”

With a nod I knew he couldn’t see, I replied, “I will. Later.”

Hitting End on my phone, I stood there and watched for a few seconds as Rory went about picking up the trash. I was stunned to see Flash putting pieces in his mouth and bringing them to her. Bastard was smart.

“See! You’re a smart boy.”

I walked back in through the sliding door. “He’s a dead dog. He ate my autographed Tom Brady football.”

Rory tried and failed to hide her smile. “I’m so sorry, but he’s just a puppy, and this breed is really known for being destructive.”

“And you told me this *after* we left him alone here?”

She shrugged. “He’s been to my parents’ house, and they’ve never had a problem. Oh no.”

Furrowing my brows, I asked, “Oh no what?”

Chewing on her lip, she mumbled something about a crate.

Leaning in closer to her, I asked, “I’m sorry, what was that?”

“A crate. I forgot my folks have a crate they kept him in.”

My shoulders dropped, along with my head. *Idiot!* “We have one at the station we keep the beast in.”

“You’ll probably want to get one. Soon.”

My eyes narrowed as I took a step closer to her. She took a step back and

bumped into the counter. “You don’t say.”

With barely a nod, she swallowed hard. “I’d maybe order one on Amazon Prime, quick.”

She covered her mouth but lost it and started to laugh.

“I’m glad you find this funny. This is *your* fault.”

Her hands dropped, and the way she scrunched up her nose had my heart tripping over itself.

“My fault? How is this my fault?”

“You made us leave to go get all that shit!”

Her mouth dropped open while her eyes turned dark. “You mean the food he needs to survive?”

I turned and walked toward my bedroom. Thank God the door had been closed. “He could have eaten the lunch meat in my refrigerator!”

“Oh, that’s nice. And then have him poop in here like he peed.”

I stopped walking and slowly turned around to face her. Her hands covered her mouth and her eyes widened with fear. It wasn’t lost on me how the damn dog was hiding behind her.

Coward.

Pointing to her, I said, “I knew it! I knew I smelled cleaner!”

She stood there with the cutest damn smile while Flash whimpered and lay down at her feet and stared up at me with his big brown eyes.

I’m so screwed.



Rory

Zero distraction zone

It took everything out of me to hold back how badly I wanted to laugh. Poor Finn. It was obvious he was a neat freak, and to come home with half his house in a mess really wasn't funny.

Dropping the last garbage bag into the Dumpster, I peeked over at him. He still looked pissed. Flash walked alongside him like he didn't have a care in the world. Truth be told, I was a tad bit worried about leaving him here with Finn.

"We worked well as a team. Got your place nice and tidy again," I cheered him.

Finn's eyes twitched as he glared at me. "Yep. Except for my new leather couch that's torn to shit on one arm."

Flash barked and jumped up at Finn.

Is that a vein bulging from his neck? Jeez, I didn't know a vein could engorge that big.

Clearing my throat, I glanced between the two of them. I chewed on my thumbnail as I thought about leaving him with Finn.

"Do you really think I'm going to hurt him?"

Catching his eyes with mine, I nodded. "Yes. I do."

His eyes filled with hurt, and I instantly regretted saying that. "I'm not going to hurt the dog, Rory. I promise."

With a smile, I reached out my hand. "Well, it was fun!"

Finn rolled his eyes and ignored the gesture as he replied, "Loads of fun."

I walked to the street and held my hand up for a cab. I didn't live far from

Finn, but it was dark, and I wasn't about to run home alone.

“Hey, Rory?”

I glanced back at him. “Thanks for helping. We on for dinner tomorrow night?”

My body warmed when he flashed me that adorable smile of his. “You're welcome, and I'll see you around, Finn.”

The cab pulled up and I hopped in. I gave the driver my address, dropped my head against the seat, and took in a few deep breaths. I'd never had as much fun as I had with Finn the last few hours, from shopping at the pet store to cleaning up the terrible mess Flash had made. Covering my mouth, I giggled. “Poor Finn.”



“Your mind seems preoccupied this morning.”

Lifting my gaze to meet Clare's, I grinned. “It's nice to spend some time with you.”

“I agree. You work too hard, Rory. You really need to learn to enjoy time for yourself.”

With a nod, I agreed. “I know. It's just so hard. When I started at the firm, I felt like I had to prove something to everyone. I volunteered for every case I possibly could, even if I wasn't lead counsel on it.”

“Why?” she asked while taking a huge bite of her sourdough toast and fighting to keep her hair out of her mouth.

Chuckling, I watched her struggle as the wind whipped her hair about. The smell of fall floated on the breeze, causing me to take a moment to inhale and enjoy the aroma of cinnamon and musky leaves. I felt relaxed. This was my favorite time of year.

“Hello? Earth to Rory?”

“Sorry. I took them on to prove my worth. You know, with my mom owning the firm and all. Plus, I heard some girls talking when I first came on full time. They mentioned how I would be shown special treatment.”

She wore a thoughtful expression. “So you worked your ass off to prove a bunch of bitches wrong?”

Laughing, I replied, “I guess so. Got a ton of experience, though.”

“That's good at least.”

“Yep.”

She took another bite of her toast. “But work is for sure not on your mind, Rory. Not with that goofy deer-in-the-headlight look on your face. You’re thinking about a guy.”

My mouth dropped. *How in the hell did she know that?* “I am not.”

Lifting her brow, she tilted her head and replied, “Really? Look me directly in the eye and tell me you were not thinking about a guy, and I’ll treat you to a mani-pedi today.”

“Oh, that sounds like fun! I haven’t done that in a long time.”

“Stop avoiding the question, Rory.”

Taking a bite of my parfait, I asked, “What was the question again?”

With a huge smile, Clare pointed her egg-filled fork at me. “I knew it! What’s his name?”

I thought about lying and saying it wasn’t a guy who had my mind so damn preoccupied or blurting everything out and asking Clare for advice. I was positive it would somehow involve his dick.

“It’s Finn, his name is Finn.”

Her mouth formed an O as her eyes widened. “Finn? That sounds sexy as fuck.”

Worrying my lower lip into my mouth, I clamped down on it and nodded. I closed my eyes and sighed. Opening them, I focused on Clare. “Oh, gosh, Clare. He is more than sexy. If you were to look up ‘hot-as-hell guy with the most amazing fit body’ in Webster’s, his picture would be there. He’s funny, has the most adorable smile, and when he’s really happy, his dimples pop out. He has crazy hair that looks like he runs his hand through it all...the...time. His condo is immaculate. Like you thought I was crazy weird about keeping stuff clean, this guy takes it up a level.” I stopped talking and thought about Finn’s eyes. “Those amazing emerald eyes of his are so easy to get lost in. The way he looks at me sometimes is so seductive I feel like I’m going to combust. And his kiss...Good Lord, his kiss left me reeling for hours.”

Clare sat there with her toast frozen at her mouth and stared at me. She dropped it to the plate and let a huge grin take over her face.

“Wow. Please tell me you slept with this guy and that he was the best sex you’ve ever had, ’cause the look on your face right now is almost borderline ___”

She gasped.

Leaning in closer, I asked, “Borderline what?”

“First tell me, did y’all sleep together?”

I shook my head and took a bite of yogurt. “No. He asked me out to dinner, but I turned him down.”

Gripping the table, Clare shook her head. “Whoa...time out. Wait one damn minute. You haven’t even been out on a date with this guy? When did you kiss? You were at his condo? Why? How can you be that head over heels for someone and not have gone on a date?” Pinching the bridge of her nose, she moaned, “I’m so confused.”

She turned and searched for the waiter. “We need two Bloody Marys stat!”

In frustration, I said, “Get back to the whole borderline thing you were saying.”

“I’m just saying for a moment there, if I hadn’t known any better, I’d say you were falling for this guy.”

Laughing, I shook my head. “Impossible. I only found out his name yesterday.”

“What?” she shouted, causing a few people to glare at her.

“Well, I mean I’d talked to him once before. For like, a minute or two. He was at a Boston Firefighters union meeting.”

Her eyes widened in horror. “He’s a firefighter?”

I nodded.

“That explains the turning down his dinner invite. Rory, will you ever be able to stand up to your father and tell him you can date whomever you’d like?”

Shrugging, I responded, “I don’t want to upset him. Besides, I saw what my mother went through having a firefighter for a husband. The worrying she did when she heard his station called out on a fire.”

Clare stared at me with a disbelieving look on her face. “You’ve got to be kidding me. That’s the best you could come up with? Your dad would be upset, and you don’t want to worry about your husband, which, may I just say, you’re only talking about going on a few dates. So you think he’s great now—he might end up being a total dick.”

I sighed. “The only thing my father has ever asked of me was not to date a firefighter. And I didn’t mention this before: Finn works for my father at his new station.” I inhaled a deep breath and blew it out as I kept talking. “And I’m pretty sure my father doesn’t like him. He made him take home the firehouse dog, who is six months old and tore Finn’s house to shreds.”

Covering her mouth to hide her smile, Clare slowly shook her head as she picked up her fork. “Do I want to know why you found yourself at his place?”

“It’s a long story, but nothing happened. Well...besides a mind-blowing kiss.” I waved my hands, dismissing it all. “But whatever. I have to focus on work, and Finn would be nothing but a distraction. I *cannot* have a distraction in my life right now.”

With a wide grin, she stared at me for a second before saying, “Uh-huh. Well, good luck with that.”



Finn

Coffee, crates, and no dates

The light was barely peering through the shade as I rolled over. My arm hit something. Smiling, I mumbled, “Rory.”

Then I remembered she’d climbed into a cab in front of my place last night.

Moving my hand, I felt...fur.

“No. God no.”

Slowly peeking one eye open, I came face-to-face with a wet black nose and big brown eyes staring back at me.

I jumped out of bed and yelled, “What the fuck, Flash? You are *not* allowed in my bed!”

He obeyed. Except he started leaping and barking while chasing his tail. I watched as the idiot went right off my bed, only to hop back up and start the whole process over again.

“Off! Get off my bed, you bastard!”

Flash stopped and stared me down. Daring me to take him on.

“Oh, you think I’m kidding?”

His front legs jetted out as he got into the downward dog position and shook his ass.

“Think you can take me?”

His loud bark was answer enough for me. I lunged, prepared to take his ass down, only he moved at the last minute and somehow, I flew completely over my bed, and landed on the floor with a loud grunt.

Rolling over, I looked up at him peeking over the side of the bed. *Is he...*

smiling at me? “I think I broke my ribs.”

Another answering bark.

“Is that all you know how to say, for fuck’s sake?”

Flash whimpered, then did some weird growl.

I sat up, and Flash took that as a hint to jump off the bed. His back paw landed right on my crotch.

With a grunt, I fell into a fetal position, experiencing the most extreme pain I’d ever felt. “Never. Can. Have. Kids. Now.”

Flash ran out of the bedroom as I slowly got on all fours and crawled out to the living room. Once I felt like I could breathe again, I stood.

The little bastard was standing at his food bowl, wagging his tail.

Shooting him a look that clearly said I hated him, I asked, “You want your breakfast?”

He barked three times.

“Well, tough shit. I’m having coffee first, and then I’ll get your breakfast.”

The doorbell rang, and Flash took off toward it, barking the entire way.

“Go away!” I cried out.

It rang again. I heard a muffled voice say something, and that cued the demon to start jumping on the door like mad.

“Flash—down! Bad dog. Sit!”

He immediately sat. *Wow. Okay, so maybe he is smart...when he wants to be.*

Peeking through the peephole, I jumped back in shock.

Rory.

With a wide smile, I opened the door and got ready to say something flirty, when suddenly Flash took off down the corridor.

“Flash! No!” Rory yelled out as she took off after him. It took me about five seconds to decide if I wanted to let him go or if I wanted to go after him. I decided I liked my job too much to let him go. But just as I was about to chase after them both, Flash came charging around the corner, with Rory hot on his paws.

I stepped out of the way as he raced in and went right to his food bowl. Rory stopped at my door and giggled. “I told him he would get a treat, so he headed back to your place. He’s so smart!”

“Good morning to you too, Rory.”

Her eyes lit up, and I couldn’t help but notice how my chest tightened.

Her gaze roamed over my body. “Looks like you just woke up.”

With a huff, I motioned for her to come in as I headed to the kitchen. “I did. And let me add that I woke up with Flash in bed with me.”

“Aw, you let him sleep with you?”

Contracting my brows, I replied, “No. I put his bed at the bottom of mine. He moved into my bed after I fell asleep.”

She pressed her lips together to keep from laughing. “I think it’s kind of cute he slept with you. You must not have minded him being there if you didn’t even know he was there.”

With a frown, I replied, “His head was on my pillow, Rory. My pillow!”

Rory turned away from me and headed into the kitchen, where she promptly made herself at home while getting the demon dog his breakfast.

“Coffee?” I asked.

“Nope. I had breakfast with my best friend Clare earlier. I had coffee then. I only allow myself one cup a day.”

I lifted my brow and looked at her. She was opening a can of dog food while whistling. Flash was as taken by her as I was, and the two of us just stood there staring at her like she was about to give us both gold. Shaking my head to break the trance, I went back to my coffee making.

“What brings you by?”

“Making sure you didn’t do harm to my dog.”

With a chuckle, I replied, “Such trust you have in me. And last I checked, he belonged to Engine 33.”

Rory emptied the food into Flash’s bowl, then tossed the can in my trash. She leaned against the counter wearing the cutest fucking smile on her face, which made my knees actually tremble.

What kind of power does this woman have over me?

“Considering I don’t even know your last name, or really know you all that much, can you blame me for wanting to check on him?”

I took a sip of my coffee and appeared thoughtful. “You’re right. My last name is Ward.”

“Finn Ward. I like it.”

With a wink, I replied, “I think you’ll like the place we’re going to do dinner tonight too.”

She responded with a slight grin. “I don’t know about you, but I’ll be having dinner with my parents. It’s a Sunday tradition, ever since I started college.”

I took another sip of coffee, then replied, "That's a damn shame."

For some reason, she started to fiddle about, like she was nervous. "Well, do you mind if I take Flash out for a walk?"

"Dog walker. I like that idea."

She threw me a smirk and grabbed Flash's collar.

"Have fun, you two!" I called out.

"Oh, we will. Don't you worry about that."

Once she was out the door, I picked up my phone, found Colton's number, and hit Call.

"Hello?"

"I need you to do me a favor."

Yawning and then moaning, Colton asked, "What's up, dude?"

"You still in my building?"

He paused. "Yeah. Why?"

"Can you puppy-sit for me?"

I heard a female gasp at the same time he replied, "Hell no."

"It's not only my dog, Harris. It's your fucking dog too."

He laughed. "How do you figure that?"

"It's the station's dog. You don't do this for me and I'm sure Cap will be very eager to hear about how you volunteered to pick dog shit up."

"You wouldn't."

"Yes. Yes, I would."

I headed into my bedroom. "Fucking hell. When do you need me? Us! When do you need us?"

"How about two hours? I need to take the demon dog for a run to get some energy out of the little bastard. That way the shithead doesn't act up."

"Damn, dude, that was a lot of name-calling on one small dog. You and Flash not getting along?"

"Just be here in two hours."

Hitting End, I tossed my phone onto my bed and pulled my T-shirt off. I headed into my bathroom, quickly brushed my teeth, took a piss, and stripped out of my sweats. When I walked back into my bedroom, I jumped when I heard Rory's scream.

"Oh my God! You're naked!"

Glancing down, I looked at my boxer briefs. "No I'm not."

"Why? Why don't you have any clothes on?"

Shaking my head, I headed over to my dresser. "Why are you in my

bedroom?”

She sliced her fingers open to peek at me and replied, “I was telling you we were back.”

“Welcome back. I’m going for a run with the hellion.”

Rory stood there staring at me. Well...she was actually staring at my junk. Feeling like I’d just got a confidence boost, I grabbed a T-shirt, sweatpants, and socks. I walked over to Rory and leaned closer to her. She licked her lips, and hell if I didn’t know what she wanted.

Lifting my hand, I used my thumb to wipe the corner of her mouth. “You’ve got a bit of drool there.”

Snapping out of her daydream, she slapped my hand away. When she spun around, she almost lost her balance, but recovered nicely.

“Okay. It looks like you’ve got this covered. I’m out of here.”

I chuckled as I quickly pulled my sweats on. “Should Flash expect you back tomorrow for your morning walk?”

She lifted her hand and gave it a wave, not so much as glancing back at me over her shoulder. “Bye, Finn Ward. Have fun with Flash.”

“I’ll take that as a no.”

I was behind her and opening the door before she even knew I was there. “Well, aren’t you fast,” she gasped.

Lifting the corner of my mouth into a half smile, I replied, “I know when to go fast and when to go slow.”

She swallowed hard and stared into my eyes. “I bet you do.”

“I can show you...if you’d like.”

Her eyes quickly searched my face. “I’ve got to run. See ya around.”

My heart dropped. *Shit, I’ll never get her to go to dinner if I keep saying crap like that.*

Opening the door, I winked as she walked by. “See ya, Rory.”



Rory

Work, pizza, and misunderstandings

I moved my neck from side to side. “You okay over there?”

Lifting my eyes to Russell, I smiled. “Yeah. My neck is stiff.”

“We can call it a night, Rory.”

With a sigh, I glanced at all the papers spread over the table. Russell and I had been combing through the history of a firefighter who was being accused of sexual assault while on duty. Our law firm handled all the cases for the union.

I nodded. “Maybe we should,” I replied as I looked at the clock.

Russell leaned back in his chair and stretched. “Damn, I’m starving. Want to grab a quick bite to eat?”

My stomach took that moment to growl. With a chuckle, I replied, “I think my stomach is saying yes.”

We gathered the papers and put them into the files. I couldn’t shake the feeling that something wasn’t right with this case. We’d spent hours searching through Robert Long’s information, and nothing even hinted at this type of behavior. He was looked upon by his fellow firefighters as a guy who could do no wrong. Then again, being a firefighter, you belonged to a brother and sisterhood whose members would literally die for one another.

Pulling out my pad, I made a note to head over to his firehouse tomorrow and talk to his coworkers and captain. We needed to get to know the more personal side of Mr. Long. Did he have a reputation as a ladies’ man? Did he date a lot of women? What type of a person was he?

I locked the door behind us and turned to Russell. “What are you in the

mood for?”

A strange look crossed over his face before he looked away and headed to the elevator.

“How about pizza?”

“The Upper Crust?” I asked with a hopeful expression.

He laughed and glanced back at me. “I take it that’s one of your favorites.”

“It is. I go there often, so it’s a good thing I also run every day.”

The elevator doors closed, and we made our descent quickly. “Favorite thing to eat there?”

“That’s easy, the Harvard Street pizza. Fresh basil, tomato, mozzarella, and garlic. Yum!”

“So it’s basically a cheese pizza with garlic and basil?” he asked.

I gasped as we walked out of the elevator and exited the building. “Bite your tongue if you’ve never had it before.”

Russell chuckled and whistled for a taxi.

Thirty minutes later we were eating our pizza, and I was laughing over some lame joke Russell had just told me.

“Don’t you look like you’re having fun.”

My heart dropped upon hearing Finn’s voice. Setting my pizza down, I glanced up at him. “Hey, Finn. Where’s Flash?”

He narrowed his brows and stared at me for a second.

“He’s in his crate, safe and sound.”

“My father still making you take him home?”

Finn turned his attention to Russell and nodded his head. Extending his hand, he said, “Finn Ward. Nice to meet you.”

Russell flashed a huge smile. “Russell McCormick, and the pleasure’s mine.”

Damn it. I’m so bad at introducing people. “Oh, sorry!” I was about to explain who Russell was when Finn spoke first.

“Well, y’all enjoy your date night. I’ve gotta run.”

My mouth dropped open and got even wider when I saw Russell sit up a bit more and stick out his chest. He made no attempt to make clear to Finn that he was my coworker.

“No...wait. Russell is—”

The radio on Finn’s belt went off with an alarm. I wasn’t sure why he was wearing it if he was off duty.

Glancing over to me, he gave me what appeared to be a forced smile. “See you around, Rory.” Then he quickly headed to the door and left.

“Firefighter friend?”

I’d been staring at the door. I looked at Russell. “I’m sorry, what did you say?”

“This Finn guy—friend of yours or more?”

With an awkward laugh, I shook my head. “No, we’re just friends.”

“Sounds like he knows your father.”

I nodded. “He works at the same station my father is the captain of.”

“I see.”

Taking a bite of my pizza, I forced myself to chew it and swallow. For some reason I was bothered Finn thought I was on a date. There was no way anything could happen between the two of us. As much as I wanted to feel his lips on mine again. The distraction would not be good at all. Especially starting this new case. But knowing he thought I was seeing someone didn’t sit well with me.

“Wait. Finn Ward. I believe I’ve heard your father mention him and another firefighter from his station.”

Perking up, I leaned in closer. “When did you hear my father mention Finn?”

Russell shook his head and pinched his brows together. “Let me think. His name sounds so familiar.” He snapped his finger and pointed at me, causing me to jump in surprise. “I know! It was at the union meeting. Finn was talking to you, right?”

“For a brief moment.”

“Yes, your dad made an off-the-wall comment about Finn being...well... maybe I shouldn’t repeat what I heard.”

My eyes widened. “Yes, I think you should repeat it. Now that you’ve brought it up and made me curious.”

Russell looked around and leaned in closer. It was like he was about to let me in on some big secret.

“He said Finn was the station player and that he and—I think the other guy’s name was Colton—that they liked their women, that’s all he said.”

Drawing back, I sucked in a breath. “What? Did he say anything else?”

“No. No, that was it. I mean he mumbled something else, but honestly, I wasn’t paying attention to his conversation that much.”

Pressing my lips together, I got lost in thought for a moment. Maybe that

was why Daddy didn't like Finn. Why he gave him Flash to take care of. That didn't make sense, though. My father would never make a comment like.

"Are you sure he was talking about Finn? That doesn't sound like my father to gossip."

Russell shrugged. "I'm simply telling you what I heard. Maybe he didn't like you talking to him. Who knows. Hey, do you want that last piece?"

My eyes drifted down to the slice of pizza. I shook my head. "No. Have at it."

The way my heart ached left me confused. Or maybe I was confused at the idea of my father talking like that about one of his guys. I knew for a fact that most single firefighters had healthy dating lives. That never had my father commenting before, so why would he now?

"Rory? Hey, you in there?" Russell snapped his fingers in front of my face.

"Jesus, sorry. I was thinking about...about um...the case."

"Yeah. Something's not adding up right. This kid seems like an all-around good guy. Catholic schools growing up. Volunteers once a week. But then again, looks can be deceiving."

Leaning back against the booth, I sighed. "I think I'm going to go down to the station and talk to his coworkers. If anyone knows him, they will."

Russell laughed. "Listen, Rory, I know you're fired up about this case and you feel like you have something to prove, but follow my lead on this one. There's a reason I'm up for junior partner."

Oh. No. He. Did. Not.

I tilted my head and took Russell in. "Are you worried I'm going to step on your toes, Russell? I thought we were working on this *together*."

"We are. But I'm lead attorney on this one, and to be honest, people are watching how I handle this case. If I was to let you walk into a fire station all alone, what would your mother or the other partners think? I mean, after all, this is a sexual assault case against a firefighter."

My brow lifted. "So that makes all of them guilty? Besides, are we condemning our client before we have all the facts? I thought we were on his side."

"Don't be daft, Rory. I'm saying for your own safety, it's best if we go together. You can watch how I interview them."

Now my blood was boiling. "I don't mean to sound like a bitch, Russell, but we're going to go ahead and get this all out in the open right now. This is

not my first case. I've worked my ass off the last year taking on the shit cases other people like yourself felt too good to take on. I've won every single one of them. Maybe they weren't huge-profile cases, but I won them nonetheless. I'm damn good at what I do, and I certainly don't need you to *show me how* to do my job. The senior partners thought I was ready to jump in and work with the Boston Firefighters union, and so do I. I certainly will not sit back and let you make me feel like I don't know what I'm doing."

Tossing my napkin onto the table, I grabbed my wallet and threw out some money. "If you'll excuse me, I think I'll head home."

I slid out of the booth, and Russell grabbed me by the arm. "Wait. Rory, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to come off like you didn't know what you were doing. It's just, this case is very important for my career."

"And you don't think it is for mine as well?"

He laughed. "Rory, let's be honest. Your mother is the boss. I think your career is set."

Jerking my arm from his hand, I shook my head. "For someone who thinks I hold such an important role, you certainly seem to have no problem insulting me left and right."

Russell took a step back, his expression horrified.

"Seriously...I can't even believe you right now, Russell. I'm no different in my mother's eyes from the next person. If you think I have it easy, then you've been living with your eyes closed the last year or so. Now, if you'll excuse me, I'm going home to read over the files I didn't get to earlier. Have a good evening."

Spinning on my heels, I headed toward my condo. I didn't live that far away, and the walk in the cool fall air would do me good.

"Rory. Rory wait. I'm really sorry."

"Good night, Russell."



As soon as I got inside my apartment, I kicked off my heels and leaned back against the front door, not sure if I was upset or just really pissed. Slowly, a smile spread over my face. If Russell thought he could do better than me tomorrow, I'd stand back and let him have it.

I pushed off the door and headed to the bathroom, where I stripped out of my clothes, stepped into the hot shower, and let the stress of the day slide off

my body with the water.

Russell's words replayed in my mind. I couldn't believe that even he thought I had it easy. I was never going to be able to prove myself to anyone in that firm. No matter how hard I worked or how many cases I won, there would always be doubt about if I'd earned my way or not.

I took in a deep breath to clear my head. The smell of the lavender scrub calmed me as I ran my hands over my body.

Closing my eyes, I saw Finn's smile. With a slight moan, my hand slipped between my legs. One brush across my clit had me gasping.

Finn.

The way that dimple popped out when he laughed. Or the seductive way he barely lifted the corner of his mouth when he flirted with me.

My hand moved faster.

His kiss.

Those lips.

The way he tasted like pure heaven. What would it feel like to have those lips kiss every inch of my body?

My legs trembled as my orgasm rushed through my body and I whispered out his name.

"Finn."



Chapter Nine

Rory

Married to my job

Russell and I walked into Engine 17, and I couldn't help but notice how he pushed out his chest a tad bit more. It was obvious he was threatened by the men in here.

Rolling my eyes, I shook my head.

Men.

"Now, Rory, let me handle this."

I didn't utter a word. If Russell thought he could do better than I could, he was more than welcome to take the lead.

He walked up to a firefighter and cleared his throat. "Excuse me, is your captain available to speak with us?"

The firefighter looked Russell up and down and frowned. "Who wants to know?" he asked in a thick Boston accent.

Standing behind Russell to his right, I stood there attempting to hide my grin.

"I'm Russell McCormick, and this is Rory Adams. We're with the Adams, Burks, and Monroe law firm."

When the firefighter lifted his brow and shot Russell an I-don't-give-a-damn-who-you-are look, I stepped up closer. I glanced down at his shirt and smiled.

"Good morning, Lieutenant. We really hope that we're not intruding on your morning schedule. Our law firm represents the Boston Firefighters union as well as Mr. Robert Long. We'd like to be able to speak with a few of you about Mr. Long. Is your cap in?"

The guy looked me over. I had purposely dressed in a tight skirt today. Not to mention the fact that my shirt showed a bit more cleavage than usual. I'd been around firefighters my whole life. If there was one thing I knew about them...it was that they could be like putty in a woman's hands, even the married ones. Yet I'd never once had one misbehave, which spoke volumes to me about them.

"No intrusion at all, ma'am. Anybody here to help our boy is welcome. Let me go let Captain Riggs know you're here."

With a bigger smile, I replied, "Thank you so much, Lieutenant..."

"Hendricks, ma'am. Just call me Hendricks."

I nodded. "Thank you, Hendricks."

He turned and took off up the stairs. Trying to contain my smile, I glanced over to Russell. The look on his face alone was priceless.

"How did you know he was a lieutenant? And I thought there were only fire *captains*."

My mouth nearly fell open. And the man called himself a good lawyer. Had he not read up on the fire department? Amazing, since most of his cases would be representing the firefighters' union. "There's a rank structure within the fire department. His T-shirt said, 'I'm in Charge When the Captain's Away.' The lieutenant is under the captain, and if the captain is out, he is acting captain. I simply put two and two together."

"Right. I knew that."

Responding with a half-smile, half-smirk, I glanced around the station. God, how I'd loved spending time with my father at work when I was younger.

"Little Rory Adams. How the hell are you?"

Glancing over my shoulder, I grinned wide. "Captain Riggs. How are you?"

He pulled me into a hug and whispered into my ear, "Jesus, when did you grow up to be a beautiful woman? Does your father know his little girl is here?"

With a chuckle, I squeezed him harder. He pushed me out at arm's length and shook his head. "If any of these guys make one comment to you, you let me know, you hear?"

"Yes sir, but I'm sure they'll all behave."

He rolled his eyes, then turned to Russell while extending his hand. "Captain John Riggs."

“Russell McCormick, sir.”

“Let’s head on up to my office and talk.”

Russell motioned for me to go first as he said, “Sounds great.”

As we walked back to the captain’s office, I couldn’t hide the fire in my cheeks at the stares I received. One guy tripped while mopping as he watched me walk by.

Russell leaned closer to me and whispered, “I’d say you’re making a nice first impression.”

Digging my teeth into my lip, I was now regretting my shirt choice.

As we walked into the captain’s office, I pulled my sweater from my bag and put it on, making sure to pull it together to hide the fact that I had on a low-cut blouse.

“Cold?” Russell asked while smirking.

Asshole.

“A little,” I answered with a sweet smile.

“So, you’re here to talk about Long?”

Russell and I both responded with a “Yes.”

“Well, he’s a great firefighter. A great person. I hate that this is happening to him.”

Taking out a notebook, I went to ask a question, but Russell beat me to it.

“Captain Riggs, was there anything different you noticed about Mr. Long before the alleged incident?”

He pinched his brows together. “No, everything seemed to be normal. He was getting ready to ask his girlfriend, Rochelle, to marry him, and we all knew he was nervous about that.”

I wrote that bit of information down and Russell didn’t.

Russell then asked, “Has anyone ever come to you with any such allegations before regarding Mr. Long? A female firefighter, perhaps?”

“No. Never.”

With a curt laugh, Russell said, “Is that a truthful answer?”

My head turned quickly as I gave Russell a dumbfounded look.

“What do you mean is that a truthful answer?” Riggs asked.

“I know you all consider yourself like family around here, so I’m sure if anything like this was brought to your attention in the past, you’d share that with us so that we aren’t caught off guard at the trial. Am I correct?”

Riggs looked at me and then back to Russell. Leaning forward, he pointed to him. “Are you accusing me of something?”

“No,” I responded. “Russell, may I speak with you in private please?”

He didn’t even bother looking at me. “It’s okay, Rory. I’m sorry, Captain Riggs. But you have to know my number-one interest is the client and the Boston Fire Department. This allegation was made while Mr. Long was on duty and here at your fire station. I need to know if there has ever been anything that this woman’s lawyer is going to dig up and hit us with at the last minute.”

Riggs leaned back in his chair and studied Russell. “To my knowledge, there has never been any other such allegation brought forth concerning Robert Long.”

“May I question some of the other firefighters?” Russell asked.

“I have no problem with that.”

“Thank you so much for your time, Captain Riggs.” Russell stood and reached his hand out. Captain Riggs took it and turned to me.

“Rory, you might have a better shot of getting the guys to open to you, since you’re a part of the...family,” he said, glaring back at Russell.

A smile danced on my lips while I nodded my head and shook the captain’s hand. “Thank you, Captain Riggs, for your time.”

We’d turned to leave the captain’s office when he said, “Robert Long is probably one of the most caring guys I’ve ever had the pleasure of meeting and working with. There isn’t a person around he wouldn’t give the shirt off his back for. We’re counting on you to get him out of this.”

I swallowed hard. *What if we can’t do it? What if we lose? An innocent man could be sentenced to jail.*

“We’re going to do our very best, sir,” Russell responded.

The captain walked us to a private office after introducing us to the firefighters. The moment he mentioned who my father was, all eyes were pinned on me.

We spent the next hour and a half asking the firefighters who worked on Robert Long’s shift questions. The more we asked, the more one thing stood out to me.

When a call about an accident came over, everyone quickly dispersed.

“Well, I guess we’re done here,” Russell said with a sigh.

As I glanced down at my notes, one word caught my eye—fiancée. I had a gut feeling something wasn’t right, but I couldn’t put my finger on it.

As we approached Russell’s BMW, he stopped and turned to me. “Well, that didn’t really get us anywhere.”

“What about his fiancée?”

Holding the car door open for me, he pulled his head back and asked, “What about her?”

“I think we should talk to her. Maybe there was something she noticed, or she knew.”

Russell nodded. “She’s on my list. I want to talk to his parents, then her.”

Looking over Russell’s shoulder, I saw Finn.

Russell snapped his fingers in front of my face. “Rory?”

“Finn, what are you doing here?” I asked as I made my way over to him. His eyes were fixed on mine, and when he smiled, he stole my breath. He looked past me and saw Russell.

“I think the better question would be what are *you* doing here?” Finn asked Russell.

I glanced over my shoulder to Russell, then quickly turned back to Finn. “Mr. McCormick and I are working on Robert Long’s case.”

Finn’s eyes moved from Russell back to me, and I thought I saw a look of relief move across his face. “We were talking to some of his coworkers. Do you know Long?” I asked.

“Yeah. I’ve met him a few times. Really nice guy.”

“That’s what everyone says,” I responded.

Finn took me by the elbow and walked me back toward the firehouse. “So if you have time to go out to eat with your...coworker...you surely have time to go out to dinner with me.”

It wasn’t lost on me that a few of the other firefighters were watching us.

“This isn’t the time or place to talk about it, Finn.”

Narrowing his eyes at me, Finn leaned in closer. My heart skittered when I felt his breath against the soft skin under my ear. “Then where is?”

“Rory, we really need to get back to the office,” Russell called out.

Locking my eyes with Finn’s, I smiled. “I have to run. How’s Flash?”

I could see the disappointment on his face. “Come find out for yourself.”

My lips pressed tightly together.

“Rory!”

“Jesus Christ, dude, give us a second, will you?” Finn called out to Russell, the disappointment on his face turning to agitation.

“I really should go. I’ll see you around, Finn.”

He looked like he wanted to kiss me, and Lord help me, I wanted him too as well. “See ya around, Rory.”

And with that, Finn walked into the firehouse while I stood there like an idiot watching his retreating body.

Russell cleared his throat, pulling me out of my temporary daze.

I quickly got into his car. My heart pounded and my head spun. What was it about Finn Ward that made me so crazy and had my body begging for more. More of his smile, his laugh...to be near him.

“Rory, are you even listening to me?”

Snapping my head to the left, I stared at Russell. “I’m sorry, what were you saying?”

“This firefighter. Is he going to be a distraction for you on this case?”

My breath caught. “What? No! Of course not. We’re only friends—why would you think that?”

Lifting his brow, Russell didn’t say anything, but I knew he was referring to the last few minutes, when I’d been totally lost in thought.

“Good. Because the last thing you or I need is for you to be distracted by someone.”

I was instantly pissed off. Even though I knew Russell was right. I couldn’t afford a distraction like Finn Ward, but I didn’t need him telling me.

“You don’t have to worry about me, Russell. I’m married to my job.”

He smiled and hit the gas as we weaved in and out of Boston traffic on the way back to the office. “That’s what I want to hear.”



Chapter Ten

Finn

Confused feelings

It had been a week since I'd seen Rory, and I couldn't get that last encounter out of my head. She'd acted like she wanted me to kiss her. And I was tempted to kiss her, but I didn't want it getting back to her father. Plus, the asshole lawyer coworker of hers was standing there.

I peered down to Flash. "Finally, boy, we get a day off."

Flash barked and attempted to jump up on me. "No! Down."

He didn't listen—surprise, surprise. But I wasn't prepared for his leash to jerk right out of my hand. And I really wasn't prepared for him to take off like he had a jet up his ass. Straight into the middle of the Fens. I knew where the little bastard was heading.

"Flash! Damn it, get back here!" I yelled out.

Running as fast as I could, I watched as he scampered in and out of crowds of people. "Sorry! Shit! Sorry about that, ma'am!"

"Get your damn dog on a leash, asshole!"

Turning around, I shot the bicyclist the finger and yelled back, "Can't you see the leash trailing him, you dickhead?"

When I spun around, I came to an abrupt halt. Flash was licking the face of a lady. A lady who was lying on the ground. With Flash standing over her.

"Please tell me he didn't knock you down."

She laughed and sat up. "Well, I saw you chasing him, so I bent down, but he was coming in hot."

I couldn't help but chuckle. "Well, he is a firehouse dog, and his name is Flash."

Her eyes lit up. “Really? A firefighter, huh?”

“Yes ma’am.”

Damn. It was too easy. Women loved firefighters. It had brought a lot of pussy my way over the years.

Standing, she brushed off her jeans. “Julie Pringle.”

I lifted my brows. “Like the chips?”

She giggled. “Yes!” She glanced down at Flash, then peeked back up at me. “So you know my name, and I know your dog’s name. What about your name?”

My hand extended toward hers. “Finn Ward.”

“Nice to meet you Finn Ward. Do you both run here often?”

Taking a quick glance around, I nodded. “Yes. I’ve only had Flash for a little bit, but he’s managed to make my life a living hell, so we run and play until I basically wear his ass out.”

Julie handed me Flash’s leash. “Dalmatians are full of energy. I’m a vet tech, so I know.”

“Really? So then you would know when they finally grow out of this chewing stage.”

With a pat on the dog’s head, she looked me directly in the eye and said, “It may never end.”

I stepped back in a state of horror. *I can’t live like this. This dog is going to eat everything I own. Everything.*

“Looks like Flash has been causing a bit of drama, huh?”

Rolling my eyes, I mumbled, “You have no idea.”

“Maybe you should talk to someone about it. Like me for instance, over dinner. Tonight.”

Damn, this woman is blunt. I was tired of women throwing themselves at me. It was all meaningless anymore.

My eyes widened at my sudden realization.

“Finn? Are you okay? You look like you’ve seen a ghost.”

I shook my head. “No...sorry. The last few days have been long. Listen, I appreciate the dinner invite, but I’m kind of seeing someone.”

Huh? What in the hell?

Her lips formed into a pout. “Well, I guess that’s my loss, isn’t it?”

The only thing I could do was smile.

I lied. Why in the hell did I lie?

Maybe I thought it was easier to tell her that than to turn her down?

I shook my head to clear my thoughts.

“Thank you so much for catching this little bastard... I mean...for catching Flash.”

She covered her mouth and chuckled. “Well, maybe I’ll see you both out running sometime.”

Nodding, I lifted my hand. “Thanks again, Julie.”

“Sure! Anytime!” she called out as Flash and I took off on a run.



“All right, what’s wrong?” Colton asked as I sat down on my sofa. Flash jumped up next to me and spilled the popcorn everywhere in his attempts to sit on me.

“Damn it, Flash!” I shouted. “Get off the sofa!”

I gave him a hard push, and Flash jumped off and promptly ran across the room and jumped up on Colton.

Sighing in frustration, I got up and started to clean up the popcorn.

“Okay, I know it’s not the dog that has you all uptight.”

Shooting daggers at Colton, I pointed to the sofa arm. “Do you not see the arm half chewed off?”

Colton looked down and attempted to hold back his smile. “He sure did a number on it. How long is Cap making you keep this mutt?”

“Probably until he drives me insane, and I can no longer take it.”

This time he didn’t hold his laughter back. “Seriously, though, it’s not the dog that’s bothering you. I can tell you like him.”

I huffed. “The thing is destroying my place and eating me out of it at the same damn time.”

Plopping back onto the sofa, I scrubbed my hands down my face. “For fuck’s sake. I can’t get her out of my mind.”

“And there it is. It’s finally happened.”

“What’s finally happened?” I asked, dropping my hands to my side.

“*That* girl.”

My brows pinched together as I stared at him. “*That* girl?”

Colton sipped his beer, taking his time responding to me. “Yep. That girl that makes you rethink everything. Like, do I really want to go out tonight and mindlessly flirt with women? Am I really gonna have a one-night stand with the hot chick I met at Subway? Will I ever call the number I got from

the yoga instructor after she went blatantly out of her way to guide me into my poses today?”

Squeezing my eyes shut, I said, “Wait,” as I looked at Colton. “When in the hell did you sign up for yoga and did you really sleep with someone you met at Subway?”

“Dude, are you listening to me, and where have you been? Do you know how many women I’ve messed around with from my yoga class alone?”

“Subway?” I asked, my curiosity getting the better of me.

“You’re not listening, Finn. I’m saying Rory is the one girl who is going to change everything. Your playing days are over. Like Zeb’s is and mine kind of are.”

I laughed. “Kind of? I thought you and...what was her name again?”

“Melissa.”

“Things not going well with you two?”

Colton shrugged. “It’s going.”

“Are you not exclusive?”

“I guess for right now we are.”

Lifting my brow with a questioning look, I replied, “You guess for right now? It sounds like you’re more confused than me.”

Shooting me the finger, Colton called Flash up onto his lap again after the bastard had jumped down to chew on a toy. “We aren’t talking about me right now, though, are we?”

“Oh man, don’t call him up here. Flash, down. Down, boy.”

Colton rubbed Flash between his ears, instantly getting him to lie on his lap.

“You know what’s going to happen? I’m going to take him back to the station this week,” I explained, “and he’s going to jump in Adams’s lap and then I’m fucked because I’ll be blamed for teaching the beast that.”

Flash lifted his head and looked at me. My heart sank. Damn, he really was a cute dog. “You’re not a beast, just a pain in the ass.”

He put his head back down and closed his eyes.

“Let’s get back to Rory. Ask her out.”

“I have! She keeps turning me down. She said her dad wouldn’t be too happy with her dating a firefighter.”

With a roar of laughter, Colton pointed to me. “Or you! Dude, could you imagine if Cap found out you were dating his daughter? Holy shit. You think he doesn’t like you now—he may have you killed.”

I smiled, for about a second. “You don’t think he would...do you?”

Flash didn’t seem to like Colton’s constant moving around. He jumped off him and headed into his crate to lay down. “What, kill you? No, but I think he would find some reason to get rid of you...from the department.”

“No.”

“Hell yeah he would. I mean look, he gave you that crazy-ass dog to keep for no reason other than to torture you. And that’s only because he thinks you’re a player.”

Flash barked, causing both of us to look his way. “Sorry, Flash,” Colton said before finishing off his beer and setting it on the coffee table. “Let me ask you something, Ward. When was the last time you got laid?”

I shrugged. “Shit, I don’t know. Before my birthday, so a few weeks.”

Colton gave me a smug look. “And when did Rory Adams come into the picture?”

“You’re fucking crazy if you think I’m not getting laid because I’m waiting for Rory.”

Leaning forward, Colton rested his arms on his legs. “Have you had the chance to hook up with anyone since you met Rory?”

“Yes,” I answered too quickly.

“And?”

“And what?”

“Why haven’t you?”

My hand pushed through my hair. I instantly knew the reason why.

Rory.

Colton stood up. “Come on. We’re going out.”

With a groan, I shook my head. “No. I’m not in the mood to go out.”

“We’re going to test my theory.”

Standing, I grabbed Flash’s leash. “Oh, Christ. This is not going to turn out well.”

He slapped my back and laughed. “Boys’ night out.”

I put Flash’s collar on and headed to the front door. “Let me take Flash out really quick.”

The second I stepped out of the elevator I grabbed my phone. Pulling up Rory’s number, I smiled. I had gotten her cell number when she’d left her phone sitting on my counter.

“Hello?”

“Evening, beautiful.”

“Um, Finn?”

My heart jumped when she recognized my voice.

“Yep.”

“H-how did you get my number?”

With a lighthearted laugh, I replied, “Wasn’t hard, considering you left your phone sitting right there on my counter.”

With a nervous chuckle, she said, “Oh. I guess that makes sense. Is everything okay?”

“Tell me you’ll have dinner with me tonight.”

“It’s eight-thirty.”

“So? You’ve never eaten dinner late?”

“No. Well I mean, I have. It’s just I can’t. I’m sorry.”

“You got plans with someone else?”

The silence on the other end of the phone bothered the hell out of me.

“Rory?”

“I’m here. No. I don’t have plans with anyone else.”

“Then it’s a date. What time should I pick you up?”

She sighed. “Finn, listen, I’m in the middle of this case and Russell and I will be working long hours and I really can’t afford a distraction right now.”

“A distraction? So that’s what I am?”

“Yes. No, wait. That’s not what I mean exactly. You are, but, well I can’t really talk right now. Russell is waiting on me to get back in the conference room.”

Until this very moment, my heart had never actually felt as if it had been torn in half. “You’re with Russell...working this late, huh?”

“I was about to head out, so maybe we can talk later.”

Closing my eyes, I nodded. “Yeah. Sure.”

Flash barked, and I glanced down at him. “See ya around, Rory.” Hitting End, I let out a frustrated breath.

Fuck it. No woman is worth this shit.



Chapter Eleven

Finn

Time to move on

The second Colton and I walked into the club, women were all over us. We drank, danced, drank some more, and I was pretty sure that at one point, Colton got a girl off while we all sat at the table we were at now.

“Finn Ward! What a small world.”

Glancing up, I tried to focus my half-drunk eyes on the woman standing in front of me. “Do I know you?” I asked.

She laughed. “Julie? I caught your dog Flash in the park earlier today.”

My mouth fell open and I pointed to her. “Julie! Dog-saving Julie. How the hell are you?” I called out.

“I’m good. What about you?”

Grinning just enough to flash her my famous smile, I replied, “I’m doing great, now that you’re here.”

She looked around. “Where’s your girlfriend?”

I jerked my head back, almost a little too fast. “Girlfriend?” Then I remembered my lie. “Oh he...yeah...I’m too much of a distraction for her. She doesn’t want to date me. I’m not good enough like her lawyer friend, Russell.”

Julie licked her lips and the next thing I knew, she was straddling me. “Well, her loss is my gain.”

Her mouth pressed against mine, and I was soon lost in the feel of her hands all over my body. Pushing my hands up under her shirt, she gasped when I pinched her nipple through her bra.

“Yes. Finn, take me home and do what you want with me,” she mumbled

against my lips.

Pushing my hand up into her hair, I grabbed it and pulled her head back, exposing her neck to me.

“You want me to fuck you?”

“God yes!”

Glancing over to Colton, I couldn't help but notice how his head was dropped back and his eyes were closed. Where in the hell was the girl who was just kissing him? It was then I noticed she was under the table. Colton lifted his head and looked directly at me.

I stood and helped Julie off me. “I'm out of here, dude.”

Colton looked over at Julie, then back to me, and smirked. I shot him the finger and said, “You proved me wrong.”

If I hadn't known any better, I'd have sworn his eyes looked sad.

Taking Julie's hand in mine, I gave her a slight tug and said, “Let's go on back to my place. Later, Colt.”

“Have a good time, Finn!” he called out as we walked toward the exit.

Stepping outside the club, I called for a cab. Julie was on the phone talking to her friend. “Hey, I'll give you a call tomorrow. Yes. His name is Finn Ward and I have met him before. I'll check in when we get there. Bye!”

“Jesus Christ, was that your mother?” I asked as I whistled this time for a cab.

“She just worries. You know how it is with moms.”

I nodded. “Yeah. I know how it is.”

The cab pulled up and we crawled inside. I gave him the address to my condo and quickly turned to Julie. “I need to make a call too,” I said as my speech slurred slightly. I was drunker than I thought I was.

Hitting Rory's number, I waited for her to answer.

“Finn? Is everything okay?”

“Oh...you saved my number in your phone, huh? You sure you should have someone like me in your phone...ya know...a distractor?”

“Finn, are you drunk?”

“Hell yes, I'm drunk. But you know what: I only called to tell you that you don't have to worry anymore, Rory. I'll leave you be. Consider this distraction gone.”

I hit End and pushed the phone into my pocket. My stomach felt sick, and I wasn't sure if it was from the alcohol or the call. With a forced smile, I captured Julie's stare. I pressed my lips to hers. The sooner I moved on, the

faster I'd forget Rory.



Rory

We aren't even dating

As I rode up in the elevator to Finn's place, I went over all the reasons why when I got to his floor I should stay in the elevator, push the button for the first floor, and walk away.

My father.

I couldn't afford the distraction.

I didn't have time for a relationship.

Work was my number one priority.

Rolling my eyes, I sighed. Was that all I could come up with?

Then I went through all the reasons I should keep heading to his front door.

His smile.

His laugh.

His kiss.

The way he made me feel when he touched me.

The idea of what it might be like to actually be in a relationship with someone.

With a heavy sigh, I shook my head. Was it worth the risk of my father finding out?

My fingers moved lazily over my lips. I could still feel the tingle from when he kissed me.

Smiling, I knew my answer.

I could keep it a secret. My parents were clueless whether I dated or not. They would ask out of obligation to know what was happening in my life, but

I always gave them a generic answer. On the one hand, they would tell me to focus on my career, but on the other, they would tell me I needed to find someone and start living my life.

The doors to the elevator opened and I stepped out and made my way down the long hall to Finn's. My heartbeat increased with each step. I wasn't sure if it was because of his phone call last night or from finally giving in to the only thing I wanted.

Finn.

As I approached his door, I took in a deep breath. He had been out last night, and clearly he was drunk when he called.

His last words haunted me as I raised my hand to knock.

"I'll leave you be. Consider this distraction gone."

Taking a deep breath, I knocked. The door moved and I stepped back. My gut was telling me something was very wrong. Using the tip of my finger, I pushed the door open and peeked inside.

"Finn?" I barely called out.

Oh God. What if he's hurt?

My eyes scanned everywhere. There were bottles of beer all over the coffee table. My heart dropped. What if he got drunk, then went out? My hand came up to my stomach as a thought occurred to me.

What if he hooked up with someone last night? Russell's comment about Finn ran through my mind. I squeezed my eyes shut, not wanting to even think that was a possibility.

Taking another glance around, I noticed the kennel door was open. But there was no sign of Flash anywhere.

Panic instantly set in. Where's Flash?

Okay. Deep breaths, Rory. In through your nose, out through your mouth.

I covered my nose and my eyes widened as the strong smell of alcohol hit me.

What am I doing? I'm in Finn's apartment without his permission. What if he took Flash out for a walk and here I am snooping around his place? Maybe he thought he shut the door and it hit too hard and opened back up?

Pulling out my phone to call him, I heard moaning coming from down the hall. I instantly froze. This could end very badly if I headed that way.

I chewed on my thumbnail as I silently debated if I should investigate or turn around and leave. Dropping my hands to my side, I drew in a deep breath and slowly made my way down the hall. Finn moaned again right as I

stopped at his bedroom door.

“Finn?” I softly called out.

I reached for the door handle and slowly opened it.

“Oh. My. God,” I whispered as my hand slammed over my mouth. My eyes widened as I took in the sight before me. I wasn’t sure if I should look away or not.

Flash lifted his head and barely wagged his tail as he lay across a naked Finn. A naked Finn with morning wood. My stomach did a serious flip.

“Holy shit!” I whispered. *He. Is. Huge.* I’ve seen a dick or two before in my life, but this was like the dick of all dicks. How does a girl walk after having that thing inside of her?

Finn moaned again. Clearly, he was feeling the pain of his drinking last night.

Smiling, I motioned with my hands for Flash to come to me. “Come on, boy. Flash, come. Let’s go pee-pee!”

He tilted his head and stared at me like he had no intentions of leaving his post.

“Hungry? Want your hungries?”

Again. Nothing. It was like he was protecting his fallen leader.

Oh God. I’m going to have to walk over and get closer.

Taking a deep breath, I closed my eyes and slowly emptied my lungs before glancing back at the dog, who still refused to move.

Wait. Did Flash just smile at me?

I shook my head. “Don’t be silly, Rory. You’re stalling,” I whispered as Flash whimpered slightly.

“I’ll come get you. I’m not scared.”

Flash made another weird whimper sound. Was he daring me to come get him?

Rolling my neck around, I jumped a few times to get loose. “I’ve got this. It’s a naked guy. So what. You’ve seen one, you’ve seen them all.”

I made my way closer, and Flash rested his head over Finn’s chest. “Come! Now, Flash. Let’s go, boy!”

A little closer. “Come on, baby boy, let’s get your yummy yums,” I whispered with as much enthusiasm as I could without waking up Finn.

Flash stared at me through those adorable brown eyes. His tail would wag every so often to show me he was amused by my attempts to take him away from his beloved drunk master.

I took another step closer.

Don't look at it. Stay focused.

I wiped my brow. "My goodness. It's hot in here."

Flash whimpered again in agreement.

"What are you going on about? Look where you're at! You lucky little bastard!" I said as I stared only at the dog's big round eyes.

Then he dropped his head, and my eyes followed. Stopping again, I stared at the giant dick that was now twitching about. *How is he doing that?*

Finn moaned and dropped his hand down and grabbed himself.

Lifting my eyes up to the heavens, I wanted to drop to my knees. "God no. Please don't do this to me. You know how long it's been! I don't think I'm strong enough," I softly pleaded.

When there was no sign from above to get me out of this pickle I was in, I forged on.

I stopped right at the edge of the bed. My heart pounded so loud I was sure it was going to wake Finn's drunk ass up.

Leaning over, I went to grab Flash's collar, but he pulled away from me. It was then Finn wrapped his hand around his dick again and started pumping.

Fast.

"Flash! We have an emergency situation. Get your ass over here, you damn dog!" I whispered shouted.

He sat up.

Is he smiling at me?

The sounds of Finn's hand working himself had my head spinning.

Don't think how long it's been since you've had sex. Who needs sex? It's overrated. Wow, it's really hot in here.

I couldn't help it; I glanced down.

Gasping, I covered my mouth. It was even bigger than I thought. I watched as Finn's hand slowly moved up and down...every now and then letting out a soft moan. It had to have been one of the hottest things I'd ever seen.

My tongue ran across my lips as I fought the urge to slip my own hand down into my panties.

No. No. No. The dog. Focus on the dog.

Glancing up to Flash, I smiled. "Come here, boy. Come on! Let's go for a walk."

He tilted his head and wagged harder. That caused Finn to moan again. For fuck's sake. I leaned over and went to reach for Flash's collar.

"Mmm...Rory."

Stopping mid-motion, I turned and gaped my mouth at him. *Did he just say my name from those plump, soft lips?*

Shaking my head, I leaned in farther for Flash. "Walk. Let's go for a walk!"

Flash stood on all fours and moved closer to me. "That's it, boy! Come on! Jump over his drunk ass."

Just. A little. More.

Grabbing the collar, I cried out, "Yes!"

"Oh God yes, Rory. Ride me faster, baby. Fuck me hard."

"Wait, what am I doing?" I said just as Flash jumped back, pulling me right onto the bed and across Finn's naked body.

Flash barked and jumped off the other side of the bed.

Before I had a chance to react, Finn cried out, "Get off me, Flash!"

My eyes widened in surprise.

I'm so screwed.

I wasn't sure how I did it, but I threw my body back and onto the floor. Flash ran over and started licking me.

Pushing him away, I heard Finn moving around on the bed. I got on all fours and quickly started crawling out the door, with Flash hot on my feet. Of course, he was barking and jumping on me the entire time. Swatting at him with my hand, I shot him magical bolts of shut-the-hell-up power.

"God, Flash. Stop barking. My head is fucking killing me."

The door was within inches of me. I was almost through it when I heard my name.

"Rory?"

I stopped, my head dropped, and I let out a "Shit."

Glancing back, I flashed the still very naked Finn a smile. "Hey! Good morning! Don't mind me, I'm just gonna feed the dog and take him for a walk."

Finn stood up, not even trying to cover his stuff. He was still hard, and I was positive he looked even bigger with his dick up against that amazing, toned stomach of his.

"Lord, please help me," I whispered.

Running his hand through his hair, he walked over to us and looked

down.

“Why are you on the floor acting like a dog?”

“I um...trying to...get dog...the foo...needs water...can't think...you're naked.”

Finn glanced down. “Holy shit!” He quickly grabbed a shirt from the floor and covered himself. “I'm sorry, Rory. Listen, my head is pounding and I've got a massive hangover.”

I jumped up. “Totally okay. I'll just take the dick...no wait the cat...I mean the pussy. No. No I mean *the dog*. I'll take *the dog* for a walk. After I feed him. While you take a shower and get the horrible smell off of you.”

Finn's mouth cracked into a smile. “Are you okay?”

Swallowing hard, I shook my head and asked, “Honestly?”

“Always honesty, Rory.”

“No. I'm not okay, because I came over here to tell you I wanted to go out on that date and then your door was open, and I came in uninvited, which I'm really sorry about. Then I heard you moan and I thought you were sick, or worse yet that there was a girl in here, and I came in here and you were all spread-eagle on your bed.” I used my arms and spread them wide because for some stupid reason I felt like he needed a demonstration. “Then I saw your... your...you know.”

I pointed right at his dick.

This was nice. I was digging myself in deeper.

“My cock?”

That word from his lips. My mind was sent into a frenzy as I thought about all the things I wanted him to do with that...*cock*.

Sweet Jesus, help me.



My heart was still racing when Flash and I stepped into the building after our walk. How was I going to look Finn in the face again? I was beyond embarrassed. Though he played it off like he didn't care, something wasn't right. I couldn't put my finger on it, but he was distant. I was going to have to talk to him about our conversations yesterday and his phone call last night.

Flash sat while the doors on the elevator closed and we made our way up to the twenty-third floor. My mind drifted back to earlier, when Finn was dreaming about me. Feeling my cheeks heat, I let out a giggle and covered

my mouth.

Flash looked up and barked. “Oh stop. You’re smitten with him too. I see it all over your face.”

The doors opened as my phone rang. Glancing at it, I sighed and said, “Hey, Russell.”

“Where are you, Rory? Your mother said you requested the day off?”

How dare he call me and ask where I am.

“Yes I did. Is there an emergency or a reason you called that couldn’t wait until I got back tomorrow?”

“What?”

“The reason you called, Russell. Surely it’s not to see why I took a personal day. I’m sure you’re aware this is the first personal day I’ve taken since I began working at the firm.”

“Um...no, that’s not why. I was calling to make sure you were okay.”

We were almost to Finn’s door. “I’m fine. Thank you for checking up on me. I have some notes from last night. Things I noticed when I got home and read through the files. I’ll send them over this afternoon.”

Russell sighed. “That’s fine. Maybe since you’re taking the day off, I might as well also. Lord knows I could use it.”

I knew he wasn’t being sincere as much as he was being a sarcastic ass. “You should,” I responded. “I need to run. Bye Russell.”

After hitting End, I slipped the phone back into my jacket and knocked lightly on the door before opening it. When I walked into the room, I took in the most beautiful sight I’d ever seen: Finn sitting on the sofa with his hair wet and dressed in a white T-shirt and sweats. My goodness, this man was beyond good-looking.

“Hey, how are you feeling?”

Glancing up at me, he smiled, and my chest fluttered. “Better than I should.”

With a lighthearted laugh I undid Flash’s leash, and he made a beeline to Finn. Holding up his hand, Finn said in a stern voice, “No,” but Flash jumped up on the sofa anyway.

He sat right next to Finn and barked once before dropping down and resting his head on Finn’s knee. “Damn, he doesn’t listen worth a shit.”

“Actually, he really does listen quite well.” I frowned as I stared at the dog resting on Finn’s leg. “Well, I guess he doesn’t listen all the time.”

Flash made a growling sound and closed his eyes as Finn softly ran his

hand over his back.

Lucky dog. What I wouldn't have done to have those fingers running over my bare skin.

"Rory, we need to talk."

I swallowed hard. *Isn't that what guys say when they break up with you? How could he break up with me, though...when we aren't even dating?*

Then it hit me.

Last night. His phone call. He was naked.

Oh no.

"I'll leave you be. Consider this distraction gone."



Chapter Thirteen

Finn

A day to remember

The moment I said we needed to talk, Rory's eyes widened, and her face turned white as a ghost.

"Last night I went out with Colton. I was a good two sheets to the wind."

She rubbed her hands together in a nervous way. "I know—you called me, remember?"

How could I forget? I'd stayed up half the night trying to drink the memory of that call away.

"Yeah, I remember. When I called you, I was in a cab...with a woman."

Her body stiffened, but she kept up her poker face, except for the brief moment a line etched between her brows.

"I was upset about you turning me down for dinner."

There was no way for me to read her face, and that was freaking me the hell out. The only noticeable change was in her breathing: Her chest rose and fell a bit harder.

"Anyway, I left the club with this girl I had met and we headed back here."

Rory's expression hardened before she dropped her head down and stared at the floor.

"Nothing happened, Rory."

Her head lifted, but she avoided my gaze.

"I was drunk, but not stupid enough to do something I knew I would regret the rest of my life."

"What do you mean? Why would you have regretted it?"

Leaning forward, I drew in a long breath before speaking. “I’ve never in my life met anyone like you. Never felt the things I feel for you. We’ve only kissed once, but I cannot stop dreaming of what you would feel like in my arms when I wake up every morning. Or what it would be like to take you in my arms and kiss you any time of the day whenever I wanted.”

Her breath hitched and the corner of her mouth quirked slightly up.

“Colton kept telling me I had it bad for you, and I knew he was trying to prove a point. I wouldn’t admit it until the cab pulled up to the front of my place, and I sat there thinking about you. I told the girl I was with the truth, that I wasn’t the least bit interested in being with her, and I handed the taxi driver a hundred and told him to take her home.”

Rory softly asked, “She didn’t come up? You were alone last night?”

“Well no, not really. Flash was here with me. Watching as I drank myself silly. I’m pretty sure he helped me to bed.”

She covered her mouth and chuckled.

“I’m not asking you to move in with me, Rory. I’m simply asking you give *us* a chance.”

Her eyes blazed with something I’d never seen in them before. They sparkled even brighter when she flashed me that adorable smile of hers.

“I couldn’t stop thinking about you last night, and those last words you said to me about not being a distraction, and I realized something.”

My heart dropped as hope filled my chest. “What’s that?”

She surveyed me as she continued to speak. “I *want* you as a distraction. I want to learn more about you. Your favorite things to eat and the movies you like to watch. What type of music you like to listen to. What it would feel like to fall asleep in your arms.”

My eyebrows shot up, and I wiggled them as she giggled.

“Why did you tell me about that girl if nothing happened?”

I half shrugged. “I guess it’s because I want to be completely honest with you. I’ve never had a serious relationship before, and the last thing I want to do is fuck it up before we even try to get it started. I have a feeling if we do this, it won’t be easy.”

She squeezed her eyes shut. “My father.”

“Yeah.”

When she peered back into my eyes, she wore a concerned look on her face. She walked over and sat down on the sofa. “Finn, I want . . . no, I *need* to be completely honest with you as well. My father and the fact that you’re a

firefighter are my number one concerns about pursuing a relationship with you. The reasons for my father are pretty cut-and-dry, but growing up I watched my mother worry every single day about my father. I've been to more funerals for firefighters than I have my own family. The idea of falling for you and something happening is probably my biggest fear. Then, of course, you have my job, which demands so much of my time. The odds are already stacked against us."

I moved off the couch and kneeled in front of her. "Are those the only reasons you hesitated?"

Chewing on her lip, she slowly shook her head. "No. I'm not very... experienced when it comes to...stuff."

Trying to keep a smile from tugging on my lips, I took her hands in mine. "What kind of stuff?"

Her cheeks turned scarlet. "Sex, boyfriends, relationships. I've only ever seriously dated one guy, and we didn't have a very thrilling sex life. I was in school, and he was in school, and we spent more time together studying than anything."

I lifted my hand and placed it on the side of her face. "Then we'll do this slow."

"And my father?"

"We'll keep this between us."

She grinned. "For now."

My hand slipped behind her neck as I pulled her onto the floor in front of me. "For now," I whispered against her lips before kissing her softly.

Her arms wrapped around my neck while we deepened the kiss. I'd never in my life felt such incredible energy as that kiss generated.

She slowly pulled back and rested her forehead on mine. "What about my job?"

"I'll learn to share you. Plus, I'm gone a lot with mine, so we'll work it out."

When she moved back and gazed into my eyes, hers filled with tears. "And yours?"

My heart ached. This is what my father and Preston had to deal with when they were firefighters. The fear in her eyes about killed me. "I promise nothing will happen to me."

Shaking her head, she replied, "I know damn well you can't make that type of promise, Finn."

I cupped her face in my hands. “Look at me. Nothing is going to happen to me.”

When she closed her eyes and drew in a deep breath, I did the same. I had just made her a promise we both knew I might not be able to keep. I’d do my damndest to make sure I didn’t break it, though.

“Do you have to go in to work today?”

Her eyes snapped open. When she smiled wide, I knew I had my answer. “I took the day off.”

“I have you all day?”

She nodded and giggled. “I’m all yours today. I’ve already talked to Russell, so he knows I’ve taken a personal day.”

Hearing his name made my stomach clench. “Good. Let me make a couple calls, then we’ll be on our way.”

It was in that moment I realized something. Rory Adams was indeed the woman who was going to change me. And I wouldn’t have had it any other way.



“How did Russell take the news of you taking the day off?” I asked while we walked hand in hand along Evans Way. It was a beautiful day, cool enough for a long-sleeve shirt. I was thrilled when Rory agreed to the walk, especially since it would buy me the extra time needed to get our lunch set up and make a quick stop along the way. Rory had asked where we were going, but I managed to keep her in the dark.

“Considering I’ve never missed a day of work before, I don’t think he can say too much.” She peeked over my way. “Are you going to tell me where we’re going?”

I stopped and glanced up at the sign. **Ward Solar**

“I need to check in on something for one quick second.”

Rory glanced up and nodded. “Is this your father’s place?”

“No. My brother Wes and I started it.”

Her mouth fell open. “You have your own business?”

With a slight laugh, I replied, “Don’t be so surprised, Rory. I do know something other than fighting fires.”

“No, I think that’s amazing. What do you do?”

Holding the door open for her, I answered her question. “We install solar

panels. My brother is more of an investment partner, but he'll come down every now and then and help do an install."

"Hey, Joyce. How are you?"

Joyce, our part-time receptionist, shot me a quick smile and a thumbs-up as she continued with her phone call.

Taking Rory by the hand, I led her into my office. "I just need to make sure everything is set for an install, and then we can head out."

Rory took a seat and watched me intently as I talked to Josh, the foreman we used when I wasn't helping with an install.

After making sure everything was set, I looked over at her and winked. "Bored yet?"

She shook her head. "No. I find it fascinating you own your business. Are you very busy?"

"We're getting there. Business is picking up. And I'm doing fewer and fewer of our installs, it seems like."

Standing, she took my hand when I reached out for hers. "Wow. That's really great, Finn."

I drew her up against my body. "I think so too. Now, you ready for our date?"

She giggled. "I'm so ready. Lead the way!"

After staying goodbye to Joyce, we headed back out.

"Are we close? Can I ask that much?"

With a smile, I pointed to the building on our right.

"The Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum?"

"The gardens, to be exact."

Her face lit up. "How did you know this was one of my favorite places?"

I stopped walking and faced her. "Are you serious?"

She responded with an excited "Yes! I'm totally serious. My mother used to bring me here all the time when I was little. Then when I got older, I'd come here to the gardens to study. I love the romantic, peaceful feel of it."

My heart soared, and my fingers itched to touch her body. Every single inch of it. Instead, I leaned in and gently brushed my lips across hers. "Remember that 'romantic' part."

Taking her arm in mine, I headed into the museum. The moment we stepped in, you could hear footsteps echoing on the marble floors. Whispers from a tour group carried across the entrance. I loved this place, and I was over the moon to find out Rory loved it as well.

A younger woman approached us, a grin on her face. “Hello. Are you here for a tour?”

I extended my hand. “Finn Ward. I’m here to see Alex Montell.”

“Oh yes, he informed me he wanted to speak with you and that you’d be visiting.”

She focused on Rory. “I’m so excited you’re visiting. Please follow me.”

Rory’s hand squeezed mine while she tugged on my arm. “Who is Mr. Montell?”

“A good friend of mine. His family has given a lot of money and time to the museum.”

As we walked, I couldn’t help but notice how Rory’s gaze searched everywhere. She’d probably been here often, yet she acted as if she were seeing it for the first time.

“Please head on inside—he’s on the phone but should be wrapping it up.”

I nodded. “Thank you.”

“Enjoy your lunch.”

Rory’s brow furrowed. “Are we eating with your friend?”

I winked at her, and a smile tugged at her lips as she whispered, “Your surprise, I take it.”

Alex grinned from ear to ear when we walked into his office. He held up his finger to indicate he wouldn’t be long, and Rory and I sat down.

“Thank you so much. We look forward to helping with your event. I’ll talk to you soon.”

Alex hung up and quickly stood to make his way around his desk. I followed his lead, and we quickly embraced and gave each other a solid pat on the back. “Son of a bitch: Finn Ward. Man, it’s good to see you.”

“You too, Alex. Congratulations on the engagement.”

His face beamed with happiness. “Thank you. I can’t wait to tell Theresa I saw you.”

“Alex, this is Rory. Rory, this is a good friend of mine I’ve known since elementary school.”

He extended his hand to her, and they shook. “Our parents are good friends. Finn’s dad saved my father’s life in a fire.”

Rory looked at me. “Really?”

Alex nodded. “Yep. Ever since then, I’ve been the best of friends with the infamous Ward brothers.”

Her brow lifted as she repeated, “Infamous, huh?”

With a roar of laughter, Alex slapped his hands together. “Let’s just say the three of them had their fair share of getting into trouble.”

“Dude, I’m on a date! Really?”

Rory giggled and replied, “We may need to talk later, Alex.”

“Speaking of dates,” Alex said with a grin. “I’ve got everything set up—the garden is yours for the next two hours.”

“What?” Rory gasped.

“My father is the head gardener here at the museum. Has been for the last twenty years.”

Rory covered her mouth in surprise. “I’ve spoken with him a number of times! He’s an amazing and talented man.”

I could have sworn Alex’s chest puffed out. “That he is.”

“Do you also work in the garden?”

“Oh hell no. I work in the museum’s financial operations.”

“In other words, he’s a math geek, and always has been.”

Alex punched me in the arm. “If you want to enjoy your lunch, you’ll stop talking.”

I lifted my hands. “Lead the way, oh mighty one.”

“That’s better.”

We talked quietly as we made our way to the gardens. The second we stepped out into the atrium, I knew I had hit a home run. Turning to see Rory’s face, I was overcome with joy at seeing her so happy. These new feelings I was experiencing both freaked me out and gave me a warm fuzzy, all at the same time. I made a mental note to talk to Preston to see if this shit was normal. The one thing I did know for sure was, I wanted to see that look on her face every damn day.

She covered her mouth and slowly shook her head before she whirled around and threw herself into my arms and said, “It’s beyond beautiful.”

My eyes lifted and caught Alex’s. He gave me a thumbs-up and retreated into the museum. When I turned my body, I continued to hold Rory in my arms while I took in the table in the middle of the courtyard.

Holy. Shit. I was going to owe Alex big-time for this one.



Rory

Gardens and surprises

I loved the feeling of being wrapped in Finn's arms. If there hadn't been a beautiful table set up in the middle of one of my favorite gardens, I would have kept my arms locked around his neck. Reluctantly, I let go, and loved that he held on and slowly lowered me down. The feel of our bodies together was enough to almost make me combust.

When I turned to the courtyard, I let out a sigh. "Finn, no one has ever done something so amazing for me!"

"Good. Then I score some extra points."

I hit him lightly on the stomach, and he quickly took my hand in his and led me down to the table.

"I wish I could take the credit for thinking of this on my own, but my baby sister gave me the idea."

"Angela, right?"

His smile widened. You could see the love he held for her swimming in his eyes. "Yeah, Angie. She's the best, but she's going through some hard times right now."

When he pulled out my chair, I stopped and looked at him. "Is she okay?"

He tossed his head back and laughed. "Oh yeah. It's called the wrath of our mother. Angie's getting the whole it's-time-to-start-thinking-about-settling-down thing from our mom."

Constricting my brows, I asked, "How old is she?"

"Nineteen."

I let out a laugh while waving my hand in a dismissive manner. "She's a

baby still. Why is your mom pressuring her to settle down at such a young age?”

Finn sat and looked at me with a serious face. “Because that’s my mother. I don’t think she wants her to get married, just settle down and date one guy. When my brother Preston found Harmony, and then they found out they were having a baby, all hell broke loose because my mother insisted the rest of us follow suit.”

“A baby! How far along is she?”

“She’s due any day.”

“Oh, how exciting!”

Finn let out a halfhearted laugh.

I couldn’t help but watch his face. “Do you not like kids?”

Snapping his eyes up to mine, he replied, “I love kids. Why would you ask me that?”

“I don’t know—you just didn’t seem very thrilled for your brother.”

He laughed. “Hell yes, I’m thrilled. Been giving him hell about it for weeks. He was a little freaked about becoming a dad. I finally had to stop teasing him when he threw up and tried to hide it from Harmony.”

“Oh no! Poor guy. ‘Harmony is a beautiful name.’”

Finn’s face softened. “Yeah, it matches her personality. She had it rough, though. Lost her husband and young son in a car accident. Preston was one of the firefighters who responded to the wreck. Tried to save Harmony’s son but couldn’t.”

My hands covered my mouth. “That’s terrible. To lose both your husband and your son at the same time. That poor woman.”

“Yeah. She was pretty young also. Only twenty.”

A feeling of heartache hit my chest for this poor woman I’d never met.

“But then she and Preston became good friends and fell in love. He says she saved him, and she says the same about him. They were meant to be together. I have no doubt about that.”

I was caught off guard by how tenderly Finn spoke about his brother and sister-in-law. I had a feeling there were many layers to the man sitting opposite me. I looked forward to peeling each one back.

“Anyway, you’ll love Harmony when you meet her.”

A warmth spread over my body at the idea of meeting Finn’s family.

“Mr. Ward, Ms. Adams, may I get you something to drink while we wait for your rosemary roasted chicken?”

My stomach picked that moment to growl, and my cheeks heated. Finn winked and answered the young lady. "I'll have a water, please."

"Water for me as well, thank you."

Tilting my head, I said, "May I ask you something?"

"Of course," Finn responded with a knock-me-off-my-chair smile. That dimple. Lord, that dimple had goosebumps erupting across my skin.

With a warm smile, I questioned him. "Why did you do all of this for me?"

"It's our first date. I wanted it to be special for you, because you're special to me."

That saying "melted your heart"? Yep. It's true. His words wrapped around my heart and completely melted it.

"Why?" It was the only thing I could think of to say.

"Because the first time I ever saw you, I knew you were different. Sure, it was a physical attraction at first, no doubt. But the moment you opened your mouth and spoke...I knew. My mother used to tell us, when someone special is in your life, you do things to make them happy. I wanted to do something to make you happy."

Speechless. I was rendered speechless.

He smiled weakly. "Are you happy, Rory?"

My voice cracked as I replied, "Very happy. Thank you."

We spent the rest of lunch talking and getting to know each other. I told Finn my favorite all-time movie was *Steel Magnolias* and he told me his was the first Jason Bourne movie. I liked country and pop, and so did he, with a bit of rock thrown in the mix for the fun of it.

The sweet girl who was taking care of us brought out a dessert of fresh strawberries and whipped cream. Finn and I both thanked her, then dug in.

Letting out a moan, I gushed, "Oh wow. I don't think I've ever had such fresh strawberries before."

"Alex's dad grows them. They have land outside the city with a massive five-acre garden."

"That would be a dream of mine."

His brows lifted. "To have a five-acre garden?"

I laughed. "No. To live outside of the city and have land."

Finn smiled wide. From his reaction, I was going to safely assume living outside of the city was something he wanted someday as well.

"My folks live outside of the city. So do Preston and Harmony. They just

finished building their new house.”

“Perfect timing for the baby,” I replied with a grin.

Finn leaned back and took me in as he balanced the chair on two legs. “Tell me more about yourself.”

“Like what?”

“Tell me something that would surprise me.”

I dabbed the corners of my mouth, then placed my napkin on the table and lifted my eyes in thought. “Something that would surprise you?”

I wasn’t sure why in the hell I said it, but it slipped out before I could stop it. “I haven’t had sex in five years.”

Finn did something with his body that caused the chair to go back farther, and before I knew it, he was on the ground.

I jumped up, ran over to him, and kneeled. “Oh my gosh...are you okay?”

He looked up at me with a look of sheer panic. He opened his mouth to say something, then snapped it shut.

“Oh my! What happened?” the young server cried out as she ran up and kneeled beside us.

“He um, he fell back. I think he’s okay. Maybe just in shock.”

Yeah, totally in shock. From you telling him you haven’t had sex in forever and a day. Stupid! Stupid! Stupid!

Finn shook his head and sat up. “I need a moment, ladies.”

We both stood and took a few steps back.

The girl leaned over and whispered, “Why is he in shock?”

I cringed. “I might have said something he wasn’t prepared for.”

“Oh,” she whispered, and looked directly at me. “You told him you loved him?”

“What? No! I told him I hadn’t had sex in a while.”

I cringed internally. *For the love of all things holy. What was wrong with me.*

Her mouth dropped open.

“Oh God. I did it again.”

She nodded. “Yeah, ya did.” Turning back to Finn, who was still sitting on the ground and was now mumbling to himself, she stated, “Poor guy.”

“Why him the poor guy? What about me?”

She took me by the arm and led me away. “Now you’ve put pressure on him to perform well.”

My lips pressed together. “You think?”

She pinched her brows. “Oh yeah. It’s probably like being with a virgin all over again. Guys freak out about stuff like that.”

“I’m not a virgin!” I practically shouted. Finn moaned, and I slapped my hand over my mouth before dropping it and giving the young woman a dumbfounded look. “Why are we even talking about this?”

She shrugged. “I don’t know. You brought it up.”

I let out a huff and walked back over to Finn. “For Pete’s sake, stand up already.”

Alex came walking up. “What happened?”

Pressing my lips together, I made sure I didn’t blurt out anything to him. “Nothing. Finn was leaning back in his chair and slipped.”

The girl giggled, but quickly stopped when I shot her a dirty look. I pointed to her and then made a motion of zipping my lips. She nodded and mimicked throwing the key away. “If that will be all, I’ll start cleaning up, Mr. Montell.”

Alex directed his attention to her and replied, “Yes, Nancy, thank you.”

“Nancy! I’ve been meaning to ask your name. Thank you for the lovely lunch,” I stated while shaking her hand.

Her face turned red as she watched Finn stand up and come over to my side. “Yes,” he said. “Thanks, Nancy. It was...delicious.”

With a quick nod of her head, she answered. “It was my pleasure and um, good luck.” Her eyes darted down to Finn’s pants, then over to me. “With everything.”

My mouth fell open as she gathered up the plates and headed off into the museum.

Finn’s breath hit my neck and caused me to shiver. “I think that was a compliment in my direction.”

I nudged him in the stomach with my elbow, then spun around and faced him. His green eyes sparkled. Even if I’d wanted to, I didn’t think I could ever truly be upset with Finn. “You’re bad, Mr. Ward.”

He wagged his brows, “Oh, you haven’t seen nothing yet, Ms. Adams.”

My lower stomach clenched, and I fought to hold back a moan.

“Okay, well, I feel like I’m a part of a private conversation,” Alex cut in, “so I think I’ll walk the two of you out and you can continue this somewhere else.”

“The library,” Finn said with a smile, guiding me with his hand on the small of my back.

As Alex walked on ahead of us, he mumbled, “Whatever floats your boat, Ward.”



Chapter Fifteen

Rory

Books and first times

“The library? You’re bringing me to the library as part of our first date?”

Finn took my hand as we climbed the stairs. “You have a thing against libraries, Rory?”

“No, not at all. I love to read.”

“Good. You can help me then.”

Before I had a chance to ask what he needed help with, we were walking into the library. The smell of the books hit me, and I couldn’t help but smile. Reading was one of my favorite hobbies. Unfortunately, I never had the time to read anymore. I made a note to myself to change that and make the time.

As we walked deeper into the library, I could hear the flip of pages and a few people coughing. I also couldn’t help but notice how many women’s mouths fell open as Finn walked by. It felt kind of nice knowing he was holding my hand as we passed them...giving them a clear picture he was mine.

Mine. Ugh. He wasn’t mine. We were only on our first date.

Then again, so far it had been amazing.

It didn’t take me long to realize we were headed to the children’s area of the library.

When we walked in, the librarian looked up. She was probably about my age, maybe a year or two older. Her face lit up like the Fourth of July when she saw Finn. Her eyes drifted down to our clasped hands and her smile faltered, though only for a moment.

Oh great...even the librarian has a thing for him. Clearly this was

something I was going to have to get used to.

“Finn! It’s so great to see you. The kids are super excited about your reading today.”

My eyes widened in surprise when I realized what was going on.

“Awesome. Did the book I requested come in?”

“It did! *The Little Fire Engine* by Lois Lenski.”

My heartbeat must have increased ten times as my stomach fluttered.

I want to have this man’s babies.

“Perfect.” Finn glanced at me and then back to the librarian. “Oh, I’m sorry. Jessie, this is Rory. Rory, this is Jessie, the children’s librarian.”

She reached for my hand, causing me to snap out of my daydream of birthing Finn’s children.

“It’s a pleasure to meet one of Finn’s friends.”

Oh, okay...wow. She’d really stressed “friends.” She was clearly jealous.

Plastering on a fake smile, I replied, “The pleasure is all mine.”

It wasn’t lost on me that Finn wrapped his arm around my waist and drew me closer to him. As if to tell her that in his eyes we were more than friends.

“You’re a few minutes early, so if you’d like to show...Rory, was it?”

“Yes, Rory,” I answered, suppressing an eye roll.

“If you’d like to show Rory around, please feel free to. We’ve got about twenty minutes or so.”

Finn turned away from her, and my breath hitched at the way he looked at me. “I think I can find something to show her.”

Before I knew it, we were heading back downstairs. “You read to the kids here?”

“Yep.”

“That’s very sweet, Finn. I have to say, I’m kind of surprised.”

“Good, then that makes two of us caught off guard today by the other.”

I couldn’t help but softly laugh at his comment. It was so true.

He led me through the library and toward a corner that was empty. “Are we getting a book?” I asked, glancing around. All the books looked and smelled old in this area of the library.

Weaving in and out of the bookshelves, we soon found ourselves in the very back corner. Finn stopped and pushed me up against the shelf.

His lips were soon on my neck, moving ever so lightly across my skin. My entire body became inflamed.

“Tell me, Rory,” he whispered. “Have you ever had sex in a library?”

My eyes widened in shock. “W-what?”

“I’ll take that as a no.”

I swallowed hard and tried to get my mind to think straight. But it was so difficult with the way he was kissing me. His hand moved up my body and cupped my breast. “Do you have any idea of how much I want you?”

“N-n-no,” I panted. “I mean yes. No. Wait. I don’t know what’s happening right now, Finn. I can’t breathe.”

The idea of being in a public place and making out was doing something to me. It was turning me on even more than I already was.

He moved back and gazed into my eyes. “I want our first time together to be magical, Rory, but five years is way too long for you to be deprived of having someone give you an orgasm.”

My eyes drifted to the back of my head as he kissed up the side of my neck and nipped on my earlobe.

I gasped. “I’ve *never*...had a man make me...orgasm.”

Finn came to a stop. “What?” he whispered. “You’ve never had an orgasm?”

“I have...but by my own hand.”

He slowly took another step back, and I felt completely vulnerable. I had no idea why I felt the need to blurt every honest-to-God truth to Finn, but I did. I was batting a thousand today.

When he smiled, my legs went weak. “You just made me the happiest man on the planet, Rory.”

Swallowing hard, I asked, “I did? How?”

He grinned wider, and my world was knocked off its axis. Then his hand moved to my jeans, and he began to unbutton them.

Oh. My. God.

My libido kicked in big-time. The sound of my jeans unzipping had my panties instantly wet, and my desire to have him touch me spiked through the roof.

“F-Finn...what are you doing?”

“Relax, sweetheart.”

The calmness of his voice helped me do just that. I was positive I slumped against his body, especially when his hand slipped into my pants and found its way into my panties.

“You have to be quiet, baby. I really like this library, and I don’t want to get kicked out when they find you falling apart at my touch.”

“What?” I gasped as his finger slipped between my wet lips.

“Jesus Christ, you’re soaking wet already.”

My hands grabbed onto his shoulders to hold myself up. He lifted my right leg and slipped another finger inside of me, pulling out a long, deep moan.

“Goddamn, I want you, Rory,” he panted in my ear while his thumb massaged my swollen bundle of nerves.

“Finn, wait, oh God.” *What am I doing? I’m a lawyer, for goodness’ sakes. I’m letting a man get me off in a public library...and I like it. Hell if I don’t like it a lot.*

He buried his face in my neck while he worked his fingers in and out. My body quickly came alive, my orgasm building fast.

I gasped when he applied more pressure with his thumb.

“So tight. Jesus, you’re so tight, Rory.”

My fingers dug into his shoulders while my hips began to grind harder into his hand. I was close. So close.

“Oh God,” I softly whispered as a feeling of utter bliss began to build in my body.

Finn pushed harder on my clit, causing me to drop my head back against the bookshelf and cover my mouth with my hand. I was about to have what I could already tell would be the most amazing orgasm of my life. In the middle of the public library!

“That’s it, baby. Look at me.”

Jerking my head up, I looked at him and captured his eyes. “Finn!”

His mouth was over mine, swallowing my cries of utter joy as my body trembled from the orgasm.

Between the taste of his mouth and the feel of his fingers moving inside of me, I was adrift in a sea of feelings I’d never experienced before. Lost in a moment I never wanted to forget. Shared with a man I knew I had given a piece of myself to.

When I finally started to see daylight again, I realized Finn was now holding me up.

My breathing was fast and hard. Finn held on to me and smiled. “How was that?”

The only thing I could do was smile. I was feeling so many different emotions. High from the orgasm, a rush from having had it in a public place, and something else I’d never experienced before and wasn’t so sure I wanted

to evaluate at that moment.

I gazed into Finn's eyes and moaned, "The most...amazing...orgasm... ever."

The corners of his mouth rose, and his dimples popped out on both sides.

"That's only the beginning, sweetheart. Only the beginning."



My body was still humming as I leaned against the checkout counter and listened to Finn read a story to the kids. How he'd simply morphed into the zone of reading to a bunch of four- and five- year-olds was beyond me. I was a mess, though a good mess. He on the other hand was as cool as a cucumber. I was sure my face was still flushed, and the way Jessie looked at me, I swear she knew what we had snuck off and done. If looks could kill, I would have been flat on the floor here in the kids' section of the library.

When I heard clapping, I jumped and glanced over to Finn. He was high fiving each of the kids. A few of the boys told him they were going to be firefighters like him when they grew up. My heart swelled with pride as I stood there and took it all in. Then I thought about Robert Long, and how much he loved volunteering with kids.

An idea popped into my head as I walked over to Jessie. "Jessie, may I ask you a question about volunteering to read here?"

She grinned, but I knew it was fake and that she was only attempting to be nice for Finn's sake. "Sure you can. Are you interested?"

"Um, yes, I would love to, but my problem is finding the spare time. I'm a lawyer, and a new one at that, so I put in long hours trying to work my way up the ladder, so to speak."

She flashed me a smirk.

"Anyway, I was wondering, do other firefighters come and volunteer to read here?"

"Oh yeah. Several of them do, but only a small handful do it each week like Finn does." She turned to him, and a dreamy expression covered her face. "Finn's an amazing guy."

Oh brother. She has a serious crush.

"Yeah, he is. I'm a lucky girl."

I pressed my lips together, not really sure where that had come from.

She inhaled a deep breath and slowly blew it out. I reminded myself I

wasn't going to get anywhere if I pissed her off.

"Do you know if a Robert Long has volunteered here?"

Her eyes lit up. Okay, clearly the librarian had a thing for firefighters. "He did, yes. But he had to stop coming when one of the moms started to get a little too...*attached* to him."

My brows lifted. "Attached? What do you mean?"

She looked around and motioned for me to step farther away from the kids. "There was a mom who used to bring her son in here. Mark was his name. He adored Robert and always told him he wanted to be a firefighter like he was. Kind of like what you saw today with Finn. Everything was fine at first. Then Mark's mother started asking Robert for things."

Leaning in closer to her, I asked, "What kind of things?"

"Like would he be able to take a look at her car, it wasn't starting very well. Then she asked him if he would like to join her and Mark for dinner one night. Robert turned her down and told her he had a girlfriend. She wouldn't take no for an answer. He finally approached me and said he felt like she was stalking him and that he would be going to a different library to volunteer. When she asked me where he was, I didn't tell her. I'm not sure if she ever found out which library he went to."

I chewed on the corner of my mouth and glanced over to see Finn still talking to the kids.

"Jessie, you wouldn't happen to remember her name, would you?"

She shook her head. "No. I'm sorry. I talk to so many parents it's hard to keep track of them all."

With a warm smile, I nodded. "That's okay. Have she and her son been in lately?"

Tilting her head, she thought about my question. "No. She hasn't. Not for a few months. Do you know Robert?"

"Yes. I'm his lawyer."

She gasped. "Is everything okay? Oh gosh, he didn't get in an accident, did he?"

Before I had to chance to say no and change the subject, Finn walked up and took my hand. Bringing it up to his lips, he grinned, kissed me softly, and asked, "Ready?"

Turning back to Jessie, I said, "Thank you again. It was nice meeting you."

She lifted her hand and replied, "You too. See ya next week, Finn."

His only reply was, “See ya around.”

We walked out of the children’s library and to the main stairs.

“You ready to continue with our date?”

My face heated. “It depends. How many more surprises can I expect?”

He threw his head back and laughed. “Only one more. I promise. Then we need to go check on the beast.”

My chest squeezed and I instantly became a bundle of nerves. Back to his condo. Together. Alone.

As we made our way through the library, I couldn’t help but wonder if anyone had heard us earlier when Finn had me falling apart on his fingers.

Covering my mouth, I forced my silly giggle down as Finn squeezed my hand and urged me to walk faster.



Chapter Sixteen

Finn

Nuts, lies, and pigeons

My dick had been hard since Rory had told me how long it had been since she had sex. Not to mention that was all I could think about. Sex on the sofa with her. Sex on the beach. Sex in the tree house at my parents' place. Sex in a cab. Sex on the kitchen floor. Sex in the shower. Sex in an elevator.

Fucking hell. I wanted to have sex with her everywhere.

"Finn? Are you even listening to me?"

My head jerked to the side. Rory was staring at me with a lost expression on her face.

"I'm sorry. What did you say?"

She chuckled. "We're standing in the middle of the park. I thought we were heading back to your place."

Shit. Could I take her back to my place and keep my hands off her?

"Right. Sorry. I was lost in thought for a second."

"I'd say so. Sheesh, what were you thinking about?"

My dick jumped in my pants. "How much I want to kiss you."

She grinned, and a beautiful rose color moved across her cheeks. Glancing over my shoulder, her face dropped and she turned white as a ghost. "Oh my God. My father."

"What?" I spun around and saw him running toward us. He hadn't looked our way yet.

"Hide!" Rory said as she pushed me away. Quickly looking around, I dove into a group of bushes. When I landed, I made a grunting sound.

"Oh my gosh! Are you okay?" she called out. I pulled out a bag, opened

it, and chuckled.

“Yeah, the nuts broke my fall.”

“Your nuts broke the fall?” she called out, then said, “Shh! Don’t talk! He’s coming. Oh my God...why am I here? What am I doing in the park?”

Pushing my arm through the bushes, I threw the bag of nuts at her and said, “Feeding the birds!”

I heard her rustling with the bag.

“Rory? Sweetheart, what are you doing here? Why aren’t you at the office?”

I slid farther down and prayed like hell he hadn’t seen or heard me.

“Daddy, I um...well I ah...wasn’t feeling good. I decided to work from home. Then I um...decided to get out and go for a walk. In the park. For fresh air, because that’s where you go when you need fresh air.”

The bag rustled again. “Feeding birds. I was feeding the birds.”

I closed my eyes. She was a terrible liar. How could she be a good lawyer when she couldn’t lie?

“Sweetheart, what’s wrong? Sore throat? Fever?”

“No, nothing like that. I think I was tired. I’ve been working a lot.”

“I know. Your mother tells me about all the hours you put in. Rory, honey, you need a private life. What about a boy?”

Rory halfheartedly laughed. “A *boy*? Daddy, I’m almost twenty-seven years old. I’ve moved on from boys.”

Captain Adams chuckled. “Well, you’ll always be my little girl.”

My head dropped into my hands. *He will kill me if he finds out what I did to his little girl today. Or what I plan on doing to her in my bed.*

“Listen, how about you come over for dinner this week. I met a nice young man at the bank the other day.”

Rory groaned, and anger instantly flowed through my entire body. “Dad, no. I’m not interested in meeting the guy who works at your bank.”

“Why? You seeing someone?”

I held my breath and closed my eyes. “No, I’m not seeing anyone.”

Opening my eyes, I stared at the bush in front of me. A part of me ached that she’d lied about us. How long would we have to go on hiding?

“Good, because I heard you were hanging around a few firefighters the other day.”

“Dad. I was at the station interviewing them for my job. You know... where I’m the lawyer for a firefighter who’s been accused of sexual assault. I

wasn't 'hanging around' them, I was working."

"Good. I hear about you snooping around any of those guys and you know what will happen."

I turned and leaned closer to the bush to hear him.

"I'll break every bone in their goddamn body, that's what I'll do. I especially don't want you at my station. There are a few guys there that I don't want getting their eyes on you."

"Like who?" Rory asked.

My body tensed.

"No firefighters, baby. You know my rules. Now, I've got to run. Should I tell your mother dinner on Thursday?"

"I'll check my schedule and call one of you guys."

"Sounds good, sweetheart."

Captain Adams's voice grew distant as he kept talking. "Get home and rest!"

"I will," Rory called out. "Bye, Daddy!"

Waiting in silence, I thought back to what Rory's dad had said seconds ago. How long would we have to keep this a secret from him? If he found out about us, what would it do to their relationship, with him knowing his daughter had done the exact opposite of what he wanted?

I was too damn greedy to care. I had a taste of Rory Adams, and I wanted more.

So. Much. More.

"He's gone, Finn. You can come out now."

I stood and pushed my way through the bushes. I stopped when I saw her standing there, staring in the direction her father had run. Her normally confident posture was slumped over as she dragged in a long breath and forced it out. "He's never going to accept the fact that I'm dating a firefighter. Ever."

My heart slammed against my chest. I dropped my head and sighed. Looking back up at her, I went to say something, but my eyes were drawn to all the ants coming out of the bag.

"Hey, Rory. You might want to drop that bag."

She lifted it and asked, "Why?"

That's when she screamed. And then threw the bag up in the air, letting all the peanuts escape and fall everywhere around her.

"Are they in my hair! Ohmygod! Are they in my hair?"

Her arms flailed in every direction. I wouldn't have thought arms could move like that. "Get them off! I feel them crawling on me."

The cries for help and the movement of her arms must have been a bird call, because before I could even take a step to help her, pigeons swarmed in and started going after the peanuts. Even the ones in her hair were fair game.

Short bursts of screams came forth from her mouth as she ran in every possible direction to get away from the pigeons.

"Pigeons! They're trying to eat me! Help!"

It only took about thirty seconds for the shock of what was happening to wear off and for me to rush in to save her. I picked her up in my arms and started off toward my condo. Rory had a death grip around my neck as she continued to scream for help. In my ear.

"Rory! You're going to call your dad back, or worse yet, someone is going to think I'm trying to eat you!"

Burying her face in my chest, she started crying. "I feel ants on me, and I think a bird pooped in my hair! Pigeons hate me, Finn. They always have!" she sobbed.

Laughing, I picked up the pace, leaving the ants and the pigeons behind with the peanuts.

My chest squeezed as she sobbed into my neck, holding on to me like I was the only thing that could protect her. I cherished every second of it. "I promise I won't let them get you."



Rory slowly walked into the kitchen and flashed me a shy smile.

"I think I got all the ants off of me."

I lifted a brow. "Bird poop?"

She shook her head. "I didn't see any."

Her body shuddered.

Suppressing a chuckle, I asked, "What was that all about back there? The whole pigeons-hate-me thing."

Her face turned white, and I really had to work hard at not laughing. "They do. All birds hate me. It's like I have some weird energy field that they don't like. They tend to leave me alone, but if I have any food in my hand, they are all over me trying to take what's theirs. It all started when I was five. All I wanted to do was feed the pigeons some bread. They swarmed me and

separated me from my mom. I was pretty sure if there had been enough of them, they would have picked me up and taken me back to their lair.”

I chuckled. “I believe that’s where dragons live, not pigeons.”

“Well, they would have taken me to wherever pigeons live and lived off of my flesh for days.”

Was it possible to fall even harder for the woman standing in front of me?

Sitting down at the counter, she rested her hand on her chin. “Is our date over?”

“Do you want it to be over?”

“No.”

“Then it’s not. How do you feel about roller skating?”

She laughed and then looked at me with a serious face. “Wait. You’re serious?”

“Hell yes, I’m serious.”

With a wrinkled-up nose, she answered, “Well, I haven’t done it since I was probably ten or so. I probably forgot how.”

Making my way over to her, I lifted her off the stool and brought her flush against my body.

“It’s like riding a bike, baby. Once you’ve done it, you pick it right back up.”

I watched as she swallowed hard. “Why do I get the feeling you’re not talking about skating anymore?”

Smiling, I leaned over and kissed the tip of her nose. “Let me put Flash in his crate and we’ll leave.”

My phone started ringing as we made our way out the door. Turning once more to Flash, I pointed to him and said, “Behave, beast!”

He barked from his crate, circled twice, and lay down while I pulled my phone out and closed the door behind Rory and me.

“It’s Preston,” I stated. “Hey, man, what’s up?”

“It’s time.”

“For?”

With a frustrated groan, he practically screamed at me. “The baby! We’re on our way to the hospital. Finn, the baby is coming.”

“The baby is coming?” I repeated.

“Did I stutter?”

“Holy shit. Okay. Wait. I have a job. What’s my job again?”

“The phone calls, Finn. You make the calls so I can concentrate on

Harmony.”

“Right! I’m on it.”

I heard a muffled sound, then Harmony’s voice. “It’s okay. We’ve got time. It’s all good.”

“Harmony sounds pretty calm,” I said as Rory jumped and clapped. “Harmony’s in labor,” I confirmed to her.

“Who is with you?”

I winked at Rory and replied, “Rory.”

“Rory who?”

“Adams. We’re on our first date.”

Silence.

“You still there, Preston?”

He laughed, then stated, “Finn’s on a date.”

“Oh! My! God! Like a real date? With a girl?” Harmony cried out.

I rolled my eyes. Clearly Preston had put me on speakerphone. I hit the elevator button to take us down, glanced over to Rory, and put my phone on speaker. “Yes, Harmony. A date. With a girl.”

“What does she look like? How did you meet? What does she do for a living?”

Rory covered her mouth to keep from laughing.

“I’m stepping on the elevator, so I might lose you.”

“No! Finn! Wait! I’m going into labor. I need to meet her. Bring her to the hos—”

The signal dropped as we descended.

I blew out a soft breath and turned to Rory. “So. How do you feel about meeting my entire family on our first date?”

All the color drained from Rory’s face and for a hot second, I thought she was going to pass out.



Chapter Seventeen

Rory

Meeting the whole family

My eyes widened in horror and I felt like I was about to hurl my lunch. “What? Your *whole* family?”

Finn nodded. “I mean, unless you want me to take you home, but I was really wanting to continue with our date. The plans simply changed a little bit.”

“Your family? You want me to meet your family?”

Instead of getting off at the lobby, we went to the garage. “Honestly, Rory, I can drop you off on the way to the hospital. Depending on how late it is, maybe I can swing by to say good night.”

He wiggled his eyebrows, and I couldn’t help but smile.

He took my hand and led me into the garage. My head swam. It was way too fast. Meeting his family. Was that something I was ready for?

My whole life I’d always played everything safe. For once I wanted to be daring. I’d already played hooky, I lied to my father about not dating anyone. Maybe I should meet Finn’s family. The guy I’d officially dated for not even a full day. The man who’d already given me an orgasm in a library and saved me from near death by pigeons. Since I was living on the edge today, I decided I might as well keep going.

“If you don’t think your family would mind, I’d love to come along.”

Finn stopped walking and faced me. “Are you kidding? My family won’t mind at all. I was hoping you’d say yes. I really didn’t want our day to end yet.”

With a smile, I replied, “Looks like we’ll be finishing up our first date

with a bang.”

He leaned in and kissed me quickly on the cheeks. “There’s just one thing.”

I swallowed hard. “What?”

Winking, he said, “Don’t let my mother freak you out. Hang close to my sister and you’ll be safe.”

As he tugged me along, my heart dropped.

“Safe?”

He laughed and stopped at a red sports car and opened the door for me.

I lifted my brow. “A sports car?”

He grinned like a little boy. “I like to drive fast.”

I slid into the car and looked around the gray leather interior. It looked brand-new.

Finn got in and started the car and quickly backed out. He handled it like he drove it all the time.

“What kind of car is this?”

“Porsche Cayman.”

“Wow. It’s nice. New?” I asked.

“It was Wes’s car. He bought it eight months ago and decided he didn’t need a car in New York, so I bought it off him. I like driving it out to where my folks live and hitting the gas.”

I chewed on my lip. “I take it you like to do dangerous things as hobbies?”

He pulled out into traffic and laughed. “I wouldn’t say ‘dangerous.’ But I do like to have fun and live life to the fullest. Not you?”

Laughing, I glanced out the window. “No. I’ve always been on the cautious side. I think I got it from my mother. She was always so worried about my dad, she never really let me do things where I might get hurt.”

Finn peeked over at me, then back at the road. “How did you ever have any fun?”

“I had fun. In a controlled environment kind of way.”

He chuckled. “Sounds like a boring childhood, Éan.”

Pinching my brows together, I was about to ask what he’d called me when his phone rang.

Finn hit a button on his steering wheel.

“Hey, kiddo.”

“Hey, Finn, what’s up?”

It was a young female voice, and I was guessing it was Angela, Finn's sister.

"Harmony's in labor."

She screamed and Finn chuckled.

"No way! Oh. My. God! I just finished the baby blanket I was knitting for her! Okay, who's calling the parents and who's calling Wes?"

"If you do one thing for me, I'll call Mom."

"Anything! If it saves me from one of her speeches, I'll do anything."

Finn looked at me and winked. "I was in the middle of a date. One I really didn't want to end, so Rory will be with me. Keep Mom at a distance, will you?"

She gasped. "A date? With one girl? Like not two, right?"

An uneasiness moved across my body. *Two?*

"Angie, I have you on speaker, and Rory's sitting next to me."

"Shit. Oh um... Hi, Rory!"

I forced myself to speak, praying my voice wouldn't crack. "Hi there."

"I was totally kidding! Ignore me. It's not every day Finn goes on a date. Well, I mean he goes out with women, but usually it's more of a—"

"Angie, can you please stop talking?" Finn asked in a frustrated voice.

"Yes! I will stop right now. I'm hanging up and calling Wes."

"Bye, sis."

"Bye, Rory!" she called out.

"Goodbye, Angela."

"Call me Angie!"

I chuckled. "Angie it is."

Finn waited a few seconds before taking my hand in his. "I'm not going to lie and tell you this is normal. It's not. I've never brought anyone home to meet my family before."

Sickness quickly hit my throat. How many women had Finn been with? Clearly my father had some idea, if he'd already formed his own opinion of him. Even Russell made mention of Finn's reputation.

Was I in over my head? Could a guy like Finn really settle down with a girl like me? One with hardly any sexual experience? He was probably used to women doing all sorts of things with him. Maybe I was a challenge for him?

My chest heaved up and down, and I was ready to ask Finn to bring me home when I jumped at the sound of a phone ringing.

“Well, if it isn’t my baby boy.”

I hid my grin while Finn groaned. “That would be Preston, Ma.”

“Nonsense. Each of you is my baby boy. How are you doing, sweetheart? Are you eating well? How is that puppy dog you’re taking care of? Did you figure out why the captain is punishing you?”

I turned to look at him. “No, Ma. I haven’t.”

“Well, hang in there. Your father knows Captain Adams and said he’s a good guy and takes care of his men.”

My heart swelled with pride.

“Hey, Ma. I’ve got news.”

She gasped. “You met a girl?”

I pressed my lips together and felt my face heat as I waited for his response. Would he tell her?

“I did, but you can’t say anything to anyone.”

She covered the phone and yelled, “Mike! Finn met a girl! Oh, Finn, tell me all about her! Is she pretty? What does she do for a living? Does she have good birthing hips?”

My mouth dropped open, and Finn laughed. “She’s sitting next to me in my car, Ma. I’ll fill you in later, but I need to let you and Dad know something.”

“Oh Lord. Let me sit down.” She covered the phone but we could still hear her. “He’s gone off and done it. He got a girl pregnant. Get me the scotch out of the cabinet, Mike. The good stuff!”

I was positive a look of horror moved across my face, but Finn acted like it was no big deal his mother thought he had gotten a girl pregnant. “No, Ma, I didn’t get anyone pregnant. Harmony’s in labor. They’re on the way to the hospital now.”

Screams and muffled noises came across the car speakers. I could hear a man in the background crying out in joy.

“Finn, I’ve got to go, sweetheart! Meet you at the hospital.”

“Tell Dad to drive safe.”

“Will do!”

The line went dead and Finn took my hand in his again. Butterflies flittered about in my stomach, causing me to place my other hand over it.

“I’m sorry about that.”

I shrugged. “I take it your family is used to you dating a lot of women?”

He didn’t respond, and that made me even more nervous. Maybe he was

regretting bringing me—like I was slowly regretting coming.
His. Whole. Family.



Rory

What just happened?

Was I ready for this? Was Finn ready for this? We were moving too fast.

Panic started to settle in my chest as I glanced out the window.

My phone beeped, and I pulled it out to see it was Russell.

Russell: Will you be in the office tomorrow?

I quickly replied.

Me: Yes. I got a bit of information I want to go over with you.

Russell: Can you meet for a late dinner? I stumbled across something today as well.

Chewing on my lip, I turned to Finn. I couldn't help but smile. He looked beyond thrilled, and a part of me really wanted to be with him for this.

Me: Sorry, I can't tonight, but I'll see you first thing in the morning.

I was proud of myself for putting what I wanted ahead of my job. But it wouldn't become a normal thing. I couldn't afford to be taking days off and having fun. I needed to focus on this case and build my career at the firm. I couldn't do that hanging out at libraries while I watched a hot firefighter read to kids. No matter how freaking much it turned me on.

"We're here!" Finn called out with excitement.

After parking his car, he insisted I let him open the car door for me. It was sweet and not something I was used to. As we walked up to the hospital my heart started beating faster and harder.

The closer we got to the maternity floor, the more panic set in.

The elevator doors closed, and Finn pinned me up against the wall. His lips pressed to mine. I instinctively moaned into his mouth as he kissed me

like I'd never been kissed before.

He stepped back when the elevator came to a stop and the doors opened. Reaching for my hand, he gave me a slight tug to snap me out of my daze.

My lips tingled. My body was on fire. I'd never in my life had a man kiss me like that before. It was almost like he was afraid it would be our last one.

"Ready?" he asked with the cutest smile on his face. You could see how excited he was, and that melted my heart on the spot.

Quickly nodding, I replied, "I think so."

With my hand in his, we walked toward the waiting room.

It was empty.

I silently said a prayer of thanks.

"Finn!"

We both spun around, and my jaw dropped to the ground. The guy walking toward us looked almost exactly like Finn.

"Preston, how is she?"

Preston glanced over to me and shot me a megawatt grin. "Excuse my rude brother. Preston Ward."

"Rory Adams. Pleasure to meet you."

You could see the happiness on Preston's face. "Come on, Harmony is dying to meet you."

My face fell. "What? Right now? She's in labor!"

Preston laughed. "It's not every day Finn has a girl on his arm. Harmony's been sending me out here looking for you guys."

He motioned for us to follow him and we did. When he opened the door, Preston almost hit the nurse with it.

"Mr. Ward, we were just coming for you."

My eyes scanned the room and landed on a beautiful young woman with blond hair. She was breathing heavily but wore a huge smile. Her hair was pulled up in a slobby bun that bounced around as she let out a small yelp.

"Oh. My. Goodness! You're beautiful!" she said, pointing to me.

My face instantly warmed as Finn pushed me farther into the room. "She doesn't bite," he whispered.

Too fast.

Holy mother of angelic hosts...I'm meeting the in-labor sister-in-law.

Harmony reached her hand out for me, and I quickly walked up and took it. "Rory, is it?"

I nodded. "Yes. It's a pleasure meeting you and my goodness..."

congratulations on the um...well for being...ahh...your baby! How exciting.”

She giggled and then squeezed the living hell out of my hand, about dropping me to my knees.

“Oh...what in the hell!” she yelled out.

Squeezing my eyes shut, I counted to ten. I was pretty sure if she gripped any harder my fingers would break.

The nurse quickly looked at her, and then popped her head up and said to the other nurse, “Page the doctor. She’s crowning.”

“What?” four voices cried out at once.

“Oh, my God! The baby is coming right this second?” Harmony said as she started to cry. That totally explained the death grip.

Preston quickly went to the end of the bed and looked, and I instantly felt out of place. “Do you see him, Preston?” Harmony asked as she let go of my hand, and I quickly pulled it away.

I glanced over to Finn, trying to get his attention so that we could leave the room. The door opened and the doctor and two more nurses walked in.

I turned back to Preston, knowing what was about to happen. You could see it on his face.

“Oh God! Another contraction!” Harmony called out, and two seconds later, Preston was on the floor. Finn ran over and tried to help him up but caught a glimpse of the same thing that had taken Preston down.

“Oh no,” I whispered as I watched Finn’s knees give out. The nurse called out for help, and the doctor spun around in time to catch Finn, but Preston slipped from Finn’s arms and went down again.

“Get some help to get these guys over to the sofa,” the doctor said, and a nurse left the room.

Focusing in on me, the doctor smiled. “Sister?” My mouth opened, but not a damn thing came out.

Harmony started breathing heavily again. “The baby wants out! Now!” she yelled.

I pressed my lips together and shook my head. The doctor laughed. “Well, you are now. Stand over there and help her.”

It felt like I had walked into a brick wall. *What did he say? He can’t possibly think I can... No. I don’t even know Harmony!*

The nurse came in with two guys who helped to bring Preston and Finn over to the sofa. “Why...why aren’t they waking up?” I asked.

The nurse walked over to me and guided me back to Harmony’s side.

“Sweetie, I know you just met her, but you’re all she has.”

All the air in the room vanished. “Rory?”

I quickly turned and looked at Harmony. Her hand was reached out to mine as the doctor said, “Get ready to push, Harmony.”

With a smile on my face, I took her hand and wiped her damp hair away from her forehead. My own forehead was covered in sweat as I took in a deep breath. Never in a million years would I have ever pictured myself helping a stranger during childbirth.

Squeezing her hand lightly, I helped her sit up as we looked into each other’s eyes. I saw the excitement, but also the fear: Her husband was passed out, and she was about to bring a baby into the world.

“You ready?” I asked.

She smiled and nodded her head as she said, “I’m going to kill him.”

“I’ll help you!”

“Harmony,” the doctor said, “one good push. On three.”

Holding her hand and rubbing her back, I softly whispered, “You’ve got this, Harmony. Your baby is almost here.”

Harmony grunted and pushed with everything she had. I wasn’t even aware of how hard she was squeezing my hand as I watched the doctor.

“There she is!” the doctor called out as Harmony and I both started crying. Harmony dropped back against the bed in exhaustion.

The doctor asked, “Are you cutting the cord?”

“What?” I asked in a panicked voice.

When I looked up, Preston was standing there, tears streaming down his face. He took the scissors and cut the cord as I covered my mouth and cried harder.

He’d woken up! Just in time.

I took a step back and watched everything play out. The nurse placed the baby directly onto Harmony’s chest, and the newborn instantly stopped crying and gazed up into her mother’s eyes. It was one of the most beautiful and amazing things I’d ever seen in my life.

“What’s her name, Mom and Dad?” the nurse asked.

With tears rolling down her cheeks, Harmony whispered, “Presley.”

I couldn’t take my eyes off them. Preston covered both Harmony and Presley in kisses and promised them both the moon and stars. My chest grew tight as I realized I wanted this. Maybe not right now...but I wanted it. The love between the three of them was so strong you could feel it in the room. A

part of me was jealous to see the happiness that flowed around this tiny little family. It was a dream I always knew I wanted, but never imagined I'd want this much.

My eyes drifted over to the sofa, where I saw Finn crying while he watched the exchange. It took everything I had to stay standing. My chest felt heavy as a burning desire I'd never experienced before filled my entire body.

I needed air.

Quickly making my way out of the room, I rushed to the elevator and hit the button. With a peek over my shoulder, I sighed in relief when I didn't see Finn. The doors opened and I practically ran in. The second the doors closed, I took in a long, deep breath. My eyes closed, and the only thing I saw was Finn. His smile. The way his eyes seemed to go dark right before he kissed me. The feel of his hands on my body.

Too fast.

It was all happening too fast.



Chapter Nineteen

Finn

She just left

It didn't take me long to realize Rory had left the room. I quietly slipped out and headed to the waiting room, expecting her to be there. When my mother, sister, and father all got off the elevator, they made a beeline straight to me.

I smiled, and my mother instantly started crying.

"It's a beautiful, healthy baby girl. They're spending some time alone together. If you guys let the nurse know you're here, I'm sure it won't be long before you can pop in and see her and Harmony."

Angela did a little jump and covered her mouth. My mother turned to my father and cried into his chest, and my dad looked up and mouthed the words, "Thank you."

"Finn, have you seen her?"

I chuckled. "Yeah. Things moved a bit fast, and Rory and I were in the room when the baby started to crown."

My mother sprung her head up and looked at me. Her crying instantly stopped. "Rory? Where is she?"

I glanced around. "I'm not sure. She snuck out of the room while Preston and Harmony were holding Presley."

"Wait...you saw the baby being born? Gross!" Angela said, then made a gagging sound.

I felt my cheeks heat. "Well, I didn't really see Presley being born. Preston kind of passed out and—"

"Passed out?" my mother and father said at once.

"Yeah. He saw the head and, bam, he was out. Then I went to help him

up, and I saw the same thing. Even though I've delivered a few babies... It took me by surprise, and I was out."

My father let out a roar of laughter. "Good Lord. I've raised pansy-ass boys."

Rolling my eyes, I pulled out my phone and sent Rory a message.

Me: Hey, are you okay? Where are you?

It wasn't two seconds later she replied.

Rory: I needed some fresh air and came outside.

Me: Are you out front? I'll come get you.

Rory: That's okay. I'm really tired, and I need to do some work. I'll catch a taxi.

I widened my eyes at her reply, and my chest felt like someone was sitting on it.

Me: Is everything okay? I'm really sorry about what happened.

Rory: It's fine. I don't think I can take any more big events tonight. Thank you for a beautiful day, though. I really enjoyed myself. In more ways than one. Tell Harmony and Preston congrats for me. Their daughter is beautiful.

I was stunned. *What in the hell happened?*

"Finn honey, is everything okay?"

I didn't bother to even look at my mother when I said, "Rory's heading home. She um...she's leaving."

Her hand on my arm felt warm. "I'm sure she was a bit overwhelmed if the two of you passed out and left her to fend for Harmony. Give her some space, sweetheart. That had to have been an overwhelming experience for her...and then to try and throw all of us on top of that? I don't blame her for wanting to leave."

I knew my mother was right, but it didn't feel right to let her go. Holding my phone in my hand, I typed out my reply.

Me: I had a great day too. Please let me take you home. I'm on my way down.

Turning, I quickly headed to the elevator. I hit the down button and waited impatiently for it to arrive. Once it reached the lobby floor, I took off toward the front door. My heart sank when I saw a taxi driving off.

"Rory," I whispered as I watched the brake lights fade into the distance. Suddenly my phone buzzed in my hand.

Rory: Please stay and enjoy your new baby niece. Good night, Finn.

I'd never in my life been so disappointed to see a date end.



“Finn? Earth to Finn?”

The pillow hit me square in the face, pulling me out of my daydream.

“What?”

“Jesus, dude, what in the hell are you thinking about?”

Rory.

“Nothing. I guess maybe Preston and Harmony. Wondering how they’re doing.”

Zeb pulled his head back in surprise but didn’t say anything.

“Ward, get your ass in here!”

My heart jumped to my throat—Captain Adams was calling me into his office.

As I walked that way, I glanced over to Colton. He shook his head, and I shrugged my shoulders. The only people who knew about me and Rory were Colton and my family. And I knew none of them would have uttered a word.

Walking into his office, I plastered on a smile.

“Take a seat, son.”

Son?

I did as he asked and sat. “How is the training of Flash going?”

My eyes narrowed, and I could tell he was trying to keep his smile hidden. “He’s doing great.”

“Good. I heard you had some trouble in the beginning.”

“Is that so?”

He leaned back and made a steeple with his fingers while nodding. “John Penley said Flash got a little too excited in your place.”

“Nothing I couldn’t handle, sir.”

He studied me with an intense stare. *Does he know? Shit.*

“Is that all you needed, sir? To find out about Flash?”

He dropped his hands and drew in closer. “Why do you think I had you bring Flash home, Ward?”

Clenching my jaw tight, I looked directly into his eyes. “I’m not sure, Captain Adams.”

“I worked alongside your father. Mike Ward is a good guy. Loves his wife and his family. I remember seeing you and your brothers running around the firehouse from time to time. You even met my daughter Rory once when she was around five.”

My heart dropped, and I was positive he saw the way I reacted.

“Really?” I casually replied.

“You see, I value family, Ward. I think it is one of the most important things in a man’s life.”

I swallowed hard. “As do I, sir.”

“I heard your younger brother, Preston, and his wife had a baby.”

With a nod, I answered, “Yes, sir. A baby girl named Presley.” Pulling out my phone, I pulled up the picture of her. Turning it to him, I smiled. “Most beautiful girl in the world next to my ma and sister.”

He looked at the photo, then shot his eyes up to mine. He seemed a little stunned, but soon wore a smile as he looked back at my phone.

“She is indeed a beautiful little thing. I don’t get to see your father much anymore. Hell, I don’t remember the last time I saw him. Will you let him know I send my congratulations? Tell him to stop by our old stomping grounds once in a while if he can.”

Is that the reason he called me in here? Preston’s daughter?

“Um...yes, sir, I’ll pass that along to him.”

“Sounds good, Ward. Thank you.”

I stood and took him in as he looked down and read something on his desk. Turning, I headed to the door.

“Ward?”

Glancing back at him, I asked, “Yes, sir?”

“Do you know why I had you take Flash home?”

I shook my head. “Not really, sir.”

“Rumor has it you think I don’t like you.”

Lifting my brow, I asked, “Is the rumor true?”

He smiled as he stared into my eyes. “Flash has a vet appointment next week that I need to take him to.”

That bastard. He was going to just leave me hanging. “No worries on that, sir. I already planned to take him. I’m off that day.”

His brow lifted. “You’ll take him?”

“Yes, sir.”

I pulled the door open and went to walk out. “You’re not even the least bit curious what my answer to your question is?”

“I’m here to do a job, sir. There isn’t a man here I wouldn’t risk my own life for, and that includes you, Cap. If I’m doing the job you need me to do, it doesn’t really matter if you like me or not.”

He laughed and shook his head. “Apple doesn’t fall far from the tree.”

I had no idea what he meant, and I didn't care. I wasn't in the mood to play games with the man who could possibly destroy my future, in more than one way.

I left his office, shut the door, and headed outside.

The second the fall air hit me, I drew in a deep breath.

"What did he want?" Colton asked.

"He asked about Preston's baby."

"Huh."

"I think he knows about Rory and me."

Colton chuckled. "If he knew, he'd have cut your dick off. Trust me. He doesn't know a damn thing."

My stomach felt sick. Was this any way to start a relationship? With lies and hiding? I hadn't heard from Rory since her last text to me four days ago, and it was driving me fucking crazy. I'd never dealt with these kinds of feelings. I needed to talk to someone before I went mad with wondering why she'd left and why I hadn't heard from her.

Pulling my phone out, I sent Angela a text. If anyone could help me figure this shit out, it was my baby sister.



Rory

Go with your gut

I watched as a cloud took on different shapes in a matter of seconds. A dog. A mouse. The letter M. My mind spun around in a million different directions. I hadn't been this unfocused in a long time. The idea that I had walked out on Finn bothered me more than I thought it would.

I'd freaked out and acted on emotion. My first instinct had been to push Finn away, and I wasn't sure why.

The knock on my office door pulled me from my thoughts. "Come in."

Russell walked in with the file I'd asked to see. He had been out golfing with a few of the senior partners and a potential client they were hoping to land. Yesterday he spent the entire day in court, so this was the first I'd seen of him since before I took that day off. "You enjoy your day off?"

I lifted my brow. "You enjoy your morning golf game?"

"Touché."

He dropped the file on my desk and then sat down. "I thought you looked at this information."

"I did. But I want to make sure I look at it again. The other day when I was at the library, I was talking to the children's librarian. On a hunch, I asked if Robert had ever volunteered there, and she said he had. Then she told me about a little boy who adored him. The mom became very obsessed with Robert. So much so, he had to change the library he volunteered at."

"Why didn't Long tell us this?"

I shrugged. "Not sure, but it's something we need to ask him."

"His accuser doesn't have kids, though."

Flipping through the pages, I read over them quickly. I had no idea what I was looking for. "I know."

"But yet you think there might be a connection?"

I glanced up at him. "I do."

He nodded. "Then go with your gut."

Smiling, I refocused on the paperwork in front of me. For once it felt like Russell had confidence in me.

"Why were you at the children's library?"

I said it without even thinking. "Finn was volunteer reading there."

My head snapped up and my eyes widened in horror when I realized what I had let slip.

"Finn Ward. The firefighter?"

Oh. Shit.

Act casual.

"Yes."

"Are you dating him?"

I let out a fake chuckle. "No. We ran into each other there."

Lies. Oh my gosh how easily I spit that out! My mother would be so disappointed in me.

The way he was looking at me made me uncomfortable.

"Really? Huh."

I wanted to ask what he meant by that, but decided the best thing to do would be to change the direction this conversation was headed.

"Back to what I was saying, I have a feeling there is a connection, and I'd like to investigate it a bit more."

He nodded. "We have Robert coming in next week to go over questions he'll be asked on the stand."

"Okay. I think I'll pay him a visit before then and see if he remembers this lady."

Russell stood up. "Perfect. Shall we meet later and discuss what he said?"

My heart stopped.

Finn.

I had hoped to see him tonight, but I knew he was working, so there wouldn't be a chance of us having dinner anyway. With a forced grin, I replied, "Sure. I'll text you when I'm through and on my way back."

"I have the perfect spot to meet. We can talk shop and grab a bite."

Trying like hell not to roll my eyes, I lifted the corner of my mouth into a

slight grin. Working long hours and having dinner with my coworkers wasn't anything new for me. But we usually just grabbed takeout or had it delivered. Russell insisted on eating out all the time. It only wasted time, in my opinion. I made a mental note to discuss this with him tonight.

"I'll let you know when I've finished talking to Robert."

He shot me a smile and then a wink before heading out of my office and shutting the door behind him. I couldn't help but feel a bit stunned. He didn't even offer to go with me to talk to Robert. It wasn't like him to let me take on something on my own.

He thinks I'm wasting my time. That bastard. Go with your gut. Hah! He's humoring me is all.

Narrowing my eyes, I glared at my door. *Yeah, he didn't offer to go because he doesn't think I'll get anything out of Robert.* With a shake of my head, I looked through the file and found Robert's phone number.

Dialing, I cleared my throat.

"Hello?"

"Hello, Mr. Long, this is Rory Adams."

"Yes, hello, Ms. Adams. How are you?"

"I'm doing well, thank you. I was wondering if you might be available for lunch today? I was wanting to go over some things with you and ask a few questions."

He sighed, and I knew this guy was over being asked questions. "I promise I won't take up much of your time, and I'll even pay for lunch."

"I don't know what more I can tell you. Between the police and your law firm asking me a million questions, I doubt I have anything new for you."

Reaching for my purse, I stood. "I know it's frustrating, and if I thought it could wait until next week, I wouldn't be bothering you. But this is rather important."

"Okay, well, I'll need to cancel lunch with my fiancée."

"There's no need to do that. Tell me where you guys are meeting and I'll meet you there, if you're comfortable talking in front of her."

"Yes, totally."

Robert gave me the address. They were meeting in less than thirty minutes, which meant I needed to hustle. As I made my way out of the building, I couldn't help but notice Russell standing at the security desk flirting with one of the interns. I rolled my eyes and kept walking.

Hailing a cab, I ducked inside and said, "Dillon's restaurant, please."

It wouldn't dawn on me until the taxi driver pulled up that I was next to Engine 33. My father's and Finn's station.

When I stepped out of the taxi, I glanced down to the firehouse and took in a deep breath. What I wouldn't do to be able to walk in and see him. Tell him how sorry I was for leaving like I did.

Pulling my phone out of my purse, I pulled up Finn's name while walking toward the restaurant.

Me: Hey. I'm really sorry for taking off like I did. I kind of got a bit freaked out.

I held my breath as I waited for his response. When nothing came after two minutes, I walked into Dillon's and looked for Robert and his fiancée.

"Excuse me, are you Rory Adams?"

I turned to see a young blonde grinning at me. "I am, yes."

"Your party is up on the patio. Please follow me."

Taking one more look at my phone, I sighed when I didn't see a response from Finn. My heart hurt a little as I followed her up the stairs, and each step felt a bit heavier.

When we got to the top of the stairs, I heard a familiar voice.

My eyes widened when I saw my father sitting at Robert's table.

"I see them, thank you," I said to the hostess as she nodded her head and headed back down the stairs.

Lifting his head, my father brightened when he saw me. "Rory, sweetheart."

He stood, as did Robert. "Hey, Dad. What are you doing here?"

"Came in to grab a quick lunch and saw Robert and his beautiful girl, Rochelle, waiting on a table. He told me he was meeting you, and I thought I would hang out for a bit to say hi and to catch up with Long here."

I knew my smile was forced. I wanted to get this lunch over with and get away from the station. The risk of running into Finn was growing by the minute.

"It's great seeing you, Dad." Turning to Robert, I reached for his hand. "Mr. Long, it's a pleasure seeing you again."

"Please, call me Robert." His face lit up as he pointed to his fiancée. "This is Rochelle."

Reaching for her hand, I gave her a warm smile. "It's a pleasure."

"Same here. Thank you so much for helping to clear Robert's name."

A sinking feeling hit me in the chest. She was counting on us to keep her future husband from going to jail.

My father pulled out a chair for me. “Here you go, sweetheart.”

I thanked him and took a seat. “Dad? Are you staying here during lunch?”

“I invited him, if that’s all right? Captain Adams was one of the first captains I worked under.”

I shrugged. “If you don’t mind him being here while I ask questions, then neither do I.”

Pulling out my notebook and the few files I had, I’d just started to talk when the waitress showed up. “Hey, Captain Adams! How’s it going down at the station? Haven’t seen your guys in here in a while.”

With a huge grin, he replied, “It’s going well. Yeah, the boys have been keeping busy.”

She chuckled. “Well, tell Colton and Finn that Kate said hi.”

Instantly I froze.

“Colton and Finn, huh?” my father stated. “Them boys hang out here a lot?”

The waitress shrugged. “They’ll usually come in when their shift is over, either to grab a drink or some food. They haven’t been in here in a few weeks, though.”

Swallowing hard, I cleared my throat, getting her attention. “May I please have a Diet Coke?”

“Sure. Are you going to eat?”

I knew with my father sitting here I had no choice but to eat. So much for a getting in and out.

“Sure. I’ll take a bowl of clam chowder, please.”

Her eyebrows wiggled. “Great choice. Captain Adams?”

“I’ll have the chowder and the lobster roll.”

Robert and Rochelle each ordered a bowl of chowder and a salad.

After writing our order down, the waitress glanced around the table. “I’ll get this put in.”

Once she walked off, I got back to where I left off.

“Robert, I understand you volunteered at the Boston Public Library during reading time.”

He nodded. “Yeah. How did you know?”

“The children’s librarian told me.”

“Do you volunteer there too?”

Oh shit. Here we go again.



Chapter Twenty-One

Rory

One crazy lady and one suspicious father

All eyes were on me, waiting for me to answer how I knew about Robert volunteering at the library. Why, oh why, did my father have to show up?

Before I blurted it out like I had earlier, I stopped and took in a deep breath. “No. A friend of mine does, and I noticed another firefighter volunteering. I asked the librarian on a hunch if you volunteered there as well.”

Robert’s expression softened as he spoke. “Yeah, it’s kind of a tradition for us to go and spend some time with the kids. I really enjoyed it.”

“She said you had somewhat of a stalker there and that you had to leave the main branch and transfer.”

Rochelle grunted. “That woman was insane.”

I asked Rochelle, “Did you meet her?”

She shook her head. “No. I never met her, but Robert told me about how she started asking him to do all this stuff for her. Then she was following him to his car and found out what station he worked out of and called up there a few times. I thought he should call the police about her.”

With my eyes back on Robert, I asked, “Did you ever call the police on her? Why didn’t you mention her to Russell or me?”

“No, I never called the police, and to be honest I didn’t think she was relevant.” He let out a frustrated sigh. “I think she made Rochelle more uncomfortable than she did me. She had a crush on me, that was obvious. I made it clear to her I wasn’t available and asked her to not call me when I was at the station. She did what I asked.”

“So you never heard from her after that?”

Robert moved about uneasily in his seat.

“Oh. My. God. You did, didn’t you?” Rochelle asked.

Robert’s hand went through his hair as my father leaned over to me and said, “I think you just made a bad situation even worse.”

Glaring at him, I replied, “Dad. Please be quiet.”

He lifted his hands in surrender.

“Um, Rochelle, I don’t mean to be rude, but if I could ask Robert the questions and have him answer them without interruption, that would make this a lot easier and faster. That or we can plan to do this in the office, in private.”

Rochelle shot me a dirty look. “Fine. Ask away.”

“There’s no need to be rude to my lawyer, Rochelle.”

She turned away and crossed her arms over her chest.

“Robert, did she contact you again?”

“Not really. Every now and then I would see her and her son walking by the station. Or they would be in the same store as me. Little encounters every now and then. She lived close to the station, she said, so I wasn’t surprised when I would see her at the grocery store, ya know. Half the time she wouldn’t see me, so I didn’t even think anything of it...until the night at the club.”

“What night at the club?” I asked.

“Me and a few other firefighters went out to celebrate one of the guys getting married. I saw her at the bar and at first, didn’t think anything about it. Then she came up to me. Started asking me to dance, telling me how much she liked me and that her kid liked me. She said she wanted to marry a firefighter. I laughed it off at first and told her I was there with the guys and that my fiancée would be joining me soon.”

I looked at Rochelle. “Did you join him?”

She nodded, and said, “After I got there, she started hanging on a few other firefighters. Flirting big-time with them. Even tried to get one of them to...you know...take her home.”

“Do you remember who the firefighter was? Did he take her home?” *Why did I ask that?* A part of me feared it was Finn.

Robert laughed. “Hell no. As much as people think we’re out for one thing, that ain’t the truth. Some of the guys like to have fun, but they’re not stupid. Colton told her she needed to take a cab home.”

“Colton Harris?” my father asked.

Robert nodded. “Yeah. She was pretty much trying to get Colton and Finn Ward’s attention.”

“Finn Ward’s?” I asked before I was able to stop myself.

“Yeah. You know him?”

I could feel the heat from my father’s stare. “Um, yes, I’ve met him. So, none of the guys left with her. Do you know who she left with?”

“No one. She got pretty wasted. I had the bartender call her a taxi, and I walked her out to it, made sure she got in, and that was the last time I saw her.”

I quickly jotted down a few notes before looking up at Robert. “Did anything happen before she got in the cab?”

He looked down and tapped nervously on the table. Rochelle was staring at him, and I could tell she was about to unleash on him. Clearly, something happened he didn’t tell his fiancée about.

Leaning in, I took Robert’s hand in mine. “I can’t help you if you don’t tell me everything.”

He glanced up and looked directly into my eyes. “What does this have to do with Casey Stevens accusing me of assaulting her?”

“It depends on if my hunch is right, and the only way I’ll know is if you tell me what happened between you and...what is her name?”

“Bryn Derks. Her name is Bryn Derks.”

I wrote down the name before piercing his eyes with mine again.

“Before she got into the cab, she begged me to kiss her. I told her no, that I was very happily in love with Rochelle. She got pissed off. I mean really pissed off. Started going on and on about how all men were the same. Then she just started crying. I couldn’t figure out what in the hell was going on. She finally told me her husband was a firefighter and that he had died in a car accident a few months before she started bringing her son to the library. When Mark—that’s her son’s name—started showing an interest in me, she thought it was a sign. I gave her a hug. I was only trying to be kind to her. When I went to pull away, she kissed me. I broke off the kiss immediately. Opened the cab door, told the driver to make sure she got home, and then started to walk off.”

“She kissed you! You didn’t tell me that,” Rochelle said.

“I didn’t want to upset you over something that didn’t seem to matter.”

I cleared my throat, getting Robert’s attention again and giving Rochelle

a look to cool it. “Did she say anything to you?”

He shook his head. “No. Well, wait. She did.”

My father and I both leaned forward. “What did she say?” my father asked.

I glanced over to him, my mouth ajar. “Dad! I’m the one asking the questions!”

He blushed. “Sorry, sweetheart.”

Focusing back on Robert, I asked, “What did she say?”

He narrowed his eyes as he brought the memory back up. “She said something about how I’d regret walking away an...um...something about getting what was due to me.”

I sighed in frustration. “Robert, how could you not think something like that was important to tell the police or us?”

He shrugged. “I don’t know. I figured at the time that she was just pissed. I didn’t think anything of it after that.”

Rochelle gasped and asked me, “You think she has something to do with this, don’t you?”

I shook my head. “I’m not sure, but I am going to see if there is some sort of connection.”

Slowly shaking her head, Rochelle turned to Robert. “I knew she was crazy. I told you she was crazy!”

Robert looked back at me. “How in the hell did you piece that together?”

With a slow smile, I shrugged. “Just doing my job.”



After finishing lunch, we all walked out together. Rochelle had quickly forgiven Robert for not telling her everything about Bryn.

“Don’t worry about anything, Robert. We’re going to do our best to prove you didn’t do this.”

His face was covered in worry. “I hope so, Ms. Adams. I really hope so.”

The cab door shut, and I watched as it drove off.

“Why don’t you come on down to the station for a few minutes,” my father said.

My eyes widened in surprise. “What?”

He motioned with his thumb toward the station. “The station. You know, come see my office, meet some of my men. They’re a great group of guys.”

“Well, I um, should probably, you know. Head on back. I’ve got to let Russell know what I found out.”

He lifted a brow. “You don’t have ten extra minutes? Is there something wrong, Rory? You seem like you’re hiding something.”

Oh God.

“Me? Oh gosh no. If it means that much to you, sure I’ll come down.”

He grinned. “That’s my girl. You used to love coming to see me at the station.”

When he took my arm and started walking, I silently said a prayer. I’d checked my phone twice during lunch and had yet to hear from Finn.

“Well, it’s more fun when you’re ten, Dad.”

He laughed as we rounded the corner. The second Flash saw me, he started barking and ran right to me. “Hey there, Flash,” I said as I tried to keep him from knocking me over.

Grabbing his leash, my father told Flash to sit. “Finn isn’t doing such a good job training this dog.”

My heart rate tripled as I quickly glanced around. “Oh, Finn’s training him?”

“Yes. And speaking of. How do you know him?”

“Know him?”

If there was one thing my father knew about me, it was how bad of a liar I was. “Finn. How do you know Ward?”

“Oh, I met him at the union meeting and then Russell and I ran into him at a pizza place once. I remembered him from the meeting.”

Staring into my eyes like they were some kind of lie detector, my father slowly nodded. “Union meeting, huh?”

I tried to brush it off as nothing. “Yep.”

“So where is your office, Dad? I’m dying to see it.”

Another firefighter walked up and took Flash. He smiled at me, and my father grunted, and the guy backed off fast. “Upstairs, down the hall to the left.”

I quickly started up the steps. My eyes darted around quickly as I tried like hell not to look like I was searching for someone. Then I heard his laugh, and I stopped.

“What’s wrong?” my father asked.

“Nothing. I thought you were farther behind me, but you’re not! Hah!”

He jerked his head with a motion for me to keep moving. My body started

to tingle more with each step I took.

He was close by. I could feel it in the air.

I turned to go down the hall, holding my breath. Glancing to my left as I walked, I saw four guys standing around a pool table laughing. Finn's eyes instantly caught mine, and his smile grew bigger when he saw it was me. I tried to look away but couldn't. Then he saw my father, and his expression dropped. I instantly missed those beautiful emerald eyes of his when he returned his attention to the guys.

We were trying to act like normal when we both knew damn well nothing about this was normal. The way he looked at me with that smile made my knees weak and my heart trip all over itself.

I continued to walk toward the door marked with my father's name. Once inside, I let out the breath I had been holding.

"Take a seat, sweetheart."

I sat, glanced around his office, and smiled. "It's like I'm sitting in your other office. It looks the same, Dad."

He chuckled and leaned against the windowsill. "I like consistency; you should know that by now."

With a grin, I nodded. "You happy here, Dad?"

"I am. What about you? You happy with what you're doing?"

Shrugging, I replied, "I think so."

His brows lifted. "You think so?"

My stomach twisted in knots.

"I am...happy. I enjoy my job and what I do. It's just—" Glancing down at the hands folded in my lap, I let out a gruff laugh. How could I tell my father I was tired of being a slave to my job—tired of fighting to find my place in a world I never wanted to be a part of? "It's nothing. Everything is great with me."

He moved to the chair next to me and took my hand in his. "Rory, you're saying one thing, but your eyes are speaking a different truth."

Lifting my gaze to meet his, I forced a weak grin. "Sometimes I feel like I have to work a little bit more than other people to prove I deserve my job."

"Because of your mother?"

"Yes. Everyone thinks I have it easy, even though I've taken on more cases since I started there than probably anyone else. Then you have Russell. The lead counsel on Robert's case. He thinks I don't know what I'm doing. It drives me insane."

“I know it’s frustrating, honey. I’ve seen your mother go through the same thing. Hang in there—it gets better. You were born to be a lawyer.”

There was a brief moment when I wanted to tell him all the things I had heard people say about me, but I dropped it. I wanted to tell him I wasn’t so sure I was born to be a lawyer...that it was more like my parents had guided me there. “When you and Mom decided to start a family, how did Mom do it with the hours she works?”

He pulled his head back and grimaced. “Why?”

Shrugging, I replied, “I don’t know. I’m trying to figure it out. With the way I’m working, I have no idea how I’m supposed to date, let alone think about a family.”

He frowned. “Are you seeing someone?”

Yes.

“No. But I wouldn’t mind having a life outside of being a lawyer.”

My father stood and rubbed the back of his neck like he was worried. “Well, this is coming out of left field, Rory. I thought you were dedicated to your career.”

I was positive my jaw was on the floor. “You’re saying I can’t have a career *and* a social life?”

He chuckled. “That’s not what I’m saying, but do you really want that distraction now? You need to focus on your career and not worry about men.”

Great. Not only would he disapprove of Finn, but he would also disapprove of me dating in general.

Standing, I brushed off imaginary lint from my dress pants. “I better get back to work. Thanks for showing me your office. Next time a tour of the station. I love this old historical building.”

There was no hiding the fact that I was not going to have this conversation now.

He frowned, knowing I had just sidestepped our conversation. “Stop by anytime and I’ll show you around.”

I wiggled my eyebrows and teased, “Or one of the guys can.”

He grunted while I laughed.

After opening the door for me, he led me toward the stairs. I snuck a quick peek over to the pool table, and my chest tightened.

They were gone.

Finn was gone.

Staring down the stairs, I heard my father yell out as I hit the second-to-last stair.

“Flash, no!”

The dog jumped up on me and pushed me forward. Closing my eyes, I prepared to hit the ground.

I knew it the moment I was in his arms, because my body erupted in a wave of tingling. Opening my eyes, I smiled.

“I got you,” Finn said with a crooked smile. Those dimples and emerald eyes made my heart flutter like I was a silly schoolgirl.

Opening my mouth to speak, I saw my father standing next to us, asking if I was okay.

Finn let me go once I got settled on my feet, and I was pretty sure I moaned in protest.

“I’m fine. Thank you, Finn.”

He seemed to be caught off guard by me using his name.

“Yes, thank you, Ward, for being so quick on your feet. Rory told me how the two of you know each other.”

Finn turned his attention to my father and gave him a blank stare. “The union meeting?” my father stated.

“Yes. We’ve bumped into each other a couple of times since,” I quickly added.

My father grunted and had begun to say something when the alarm went off and my heart dropped to the floor.

“Engine 33 respond to motor vehicle accident, nine-nine-one St. James. Closest box is St. James and Berkeley.”

My father took off, but Finn took a moment to gaze into my eyes and smile before turning to leave. Grabbing his arm, I quickly spoke to him in a hushed voice. “I’m so sorry I left like that.”

He winked and replied, “Make it up to me on Friday.”

I blushed as I stepped out of the way and watched Finn quickly pull on his gear. From growing up around firefighters, I knew how they always kept their gear a certain way. Some put their suspenders on one side of their boots, some inside them. For a moment, I wondered if Finn did anything like that. My father never cleaned his helmet, I remembered him telling my mother.

Finn jumped into the truck and took off. Even though it was a car accident, my heart was pounding.

Once the truck pulled all the way out of the building, I followed and

watched while it took off toward its call. When I could no longer see it, I walked out to the street and hailed a cab. Once in, I gave the address to work and leaned back against the seat, taking in a deep breath.

My phone buzzed in my purse. Reaching in, I grabbed it. I couldn't help the immediate grin that spread across my face when I saw his name.

Finn: Don't worry about the other day. By the way, you looked beautiful today.

I sighed as I reread his text. Closing my eyes, I clutched the phone against my body. My father would never understand my feelings for Finn. The way he touches my body and I feel like I'm seeing the light for the first time—the life I've secretly wanted, but never had the courage to go after.

Finn Ward was my weakness.

A desire burning so deep inside of me it was hard to ignore.

He was the wrong I knew deep in my heart was my right.



Chapter Twenty-Two

Finn

She's not a distraction

I lay in bed staring at the ceiling. Sleep clearly wasn't coming to me anytime soon. I wasn't sure if I was more upset about Rory being at dinner with that asshole again or by her not texting me when she got home like she said she would.

Rolling over, I checked my phone again. This time, there was a message I had somehow missed.

With a wide grin, I opened it.

Rory: Home and exhausted and frustrated. Wish I could see you.

It was late, but I was responding back.

Me: I wish I could see you. Better yet, I wish I could hold you.

I was stunned when she replied.

Rory: How is Flash?

With a soft chuckle, I glanced down at the damn dog in my bed, snoring.

Me: At my feet. Damn thing won't stop following me everywhere I go. He chewed up my shoe earlier. A station full of shoes and he finds mine to chew.

Rory: LOL! Means he loves you. How are Presley and Harmony doing?

Me: They're great! Preston sent me a picture of them earlier. I'll show you the next time I see you.

Rory: I can't see now?

Me: Nope. I'm giving you something to look forward to.

Rory: Trust me...that is not what I'm looking forward to.

My dick jumped, and I sat up quickly. Taking in a deep breath, I blew it out slowly before I typed my response.

Me: What are you looking forward to?

I was playing with fire, but goddamnit, I liked playing with it.

Rory: Your lips on mine. Your hands on my body. Being in your arms again.

She was going to kill me.

Me: When can I see you?

Rory: Is it wrong I want to say now?☺

Me: No, Éan, it's not wrong at all.

The tone rang out for a fire—*damn!*—and I quickly typed a goodbye to her.

Me: Alarm. Have to run. Later, babe.

She instantly replied.

Rory: Stay safe, Finn. Please.



“Fire alarm, Engine 33 on site. Smoke coming from two-story brick,” I transmitted back to dispatch.

A car pulled up and I saw Captain Adams get out. He quickly called in as fire commander. A lady ran up to me, crying incoherently.

“Ma’am, I can’t understand what you’re saying.”

She started screaming and hitting me on the chest, then quickly turned and raced back into the building.

“Engine 33, resident ran back inside.”

Colton was next to me in less than two seconds as we took the fire hose and headed into the building.

This was my life. The rush I lived for. The one thing I needed.

My heart rate spiked like it always did and I hit my helmet three times. It was a habit I’d started with the very first fire I went into.

Heading in first, Colton motioned with his hand to move forward. The second I stepped into the building, Rory popped into my head, and I came to a stop. Frozen in my tracks.

Colton turned and hit me on the arm. “Dude, you all right?”

The memory of the fear in Rory’s eyes when she had talked about being with a firefighter hit me full force. My feet suddenly felt like they were melted into the spot I was standing in. What in the hell was wrong with me?

“Ward? Finn!” Colton shouted. I shook my head to clear it. Realizing I was standing there like an idiot. “Yeah. Yeah, let’s do this.”



Walking out of the shower, I stopped and looked at Colton. He was standing there with his arms folded across his chest.

“What in the hell happened tonight, Ward?”

I knew what he was talking about but played dumb. “What do you mean?”

He shook his head. “When you froze walking into a damn burning building. Dude, you stood there for at least thirty seconds before I snapped you out of it.”

With a shrug, I replied, “Not sure, but it won’t happen again.”

I knew that not only did my life hang in the balance, but so did the lives of all my brothers. The last thing I would ever want to do is put them in danger.

“You’re damn right it won’t.” He stepped closer to me. “It’s Rory, isn’t it? Seeing her earlier today messed with your head. I saw you texting someone right before the tone went off. It was her...wasn’t it?”

My jaw clinched tight as I narrowed my eyes at him. Nothing ever distracted me on the job.

Nothing.

But today, it had. I’d been brought to a halt by the fear of a woman I hardly knew but whom I craved nonstop. And it wasn’t even to sleep with her. It was her touch. See her smile. The sound of her laugh that haunted my thoughts every fucking minute of the day.

Focusing back on Colton, I responded, “Fuck you, Harris. I haven’t been sleeping well with that damn dog. Hell, I couldn’t sleep *before* the tone went off, and who I was talking to is none of your damn business. It’s not like you’ve never froze up before. It was one moment—it won’t happen again.”

He stared at me, knowing the line of bullshit I was feeding him was far from the truth. “I sure as hell *hope* it won’t ever happen again. That one second might cost you your life, Finn. Or someone else’s.”



To celebrate Rory and I going out for a month, I made plans to take her on a canoe ride on the Charles River. Trying to coordinate when we were both off

proved to be the hardest part of planning dates with Rory. This would be a late afternoon date.

We walked hand in hand up to the canoe rental while Rory told me about her day.

She stopped walking and turned to me. “A picnic *and* a canoe ride?” Rory asked with excitement in her voice.

“I told you we weren’t just going on a picnic. I had another surprise.”

Her smile made my knees wobble. “I love your surprises!”

After getting the canoe and helping Rory in, I handed her the basket, pushed off, and jumped in.

I started paddling and noticed how relaxed she was. Her head dropped back as the evening sun hit her face. “That feels so good.”

“Are you cold?” I asked.

Focusing her gaze on mine, she slowly shook her head. “No. Not at all.”

I picked up the pace some. Even though Rory had left work a bit early, the sun would still be going down on us quickly. I’d made arrangements with Chuck, the owner of the canoe rental, to pick us and the canoe up.

“Finn, this is so beautiful. It’s not often I get to experience such peace.”

“I’m glad it was a nice surprise for you.”

She pulled her legs in and rested her chin on her knees. “So, do you read romance books or something?”

Laughing, I shook my head. “No! Why would you ask that?”

“I don’t know. You’re so...romantic. I’ve never had a guy do the things you do for me.”

“That’s because you hadn’t met the right guy.”

Her brow lifted. “Are you the right guy?”

The corners of my mouth lifted. “I hope so, Éan.”

Her eyes lit up, and she was about to say something when her phone rang. Reaching for it, she sighed. “It’s my mother.”

“Hello?”

I managed to turn the canoe and head over to the area where Chuck told me he would pick us up, a small park tucked along the side of the Charles River.

“Sorry, Mom. I can’t do dinner tonight. I’ve made other plans.”

She frowned and pushed out an exasperated breath. “No, everything is fine. Listen, I have to run, I’m late. I’ll talk to you tomorrow.”

Not saying a word, she put her phone on Silent and replaced it in her

purse. Looking up, she gasped.

“Finn!” she said, pointing. “Is this where we’re eating?”

Glancing over my shoulder, I smiled. “Yep.”

It was perfect. Picnic tables were randomly placed throughout the park, but there wasn’t a single other person there. I hit the shore and jumped out, pulling the canoe up. Rory grabbed the basket, and I helped her out.

Sweeping my hand wide, I said, “Pick.”

With a chuckle, Rory walked over to a table. “This one. It’s perfect.”

We opened the basket and laid out the tablecloth. After I removed the fruit, wine, and cheese, I pulled out a single pink rose and handed it to her.

Gasping, she took it and buried her nose in the flower, inhaling a deep breath.

“Finn, this is amazing.”

“Happy one-month anniversary...ish.”

“Ish?”

“I honestly can’t remember what day we went to the museum on our first date,” I admitted as I poured us each a glass of wine.

Giggling, she replied, “Neither can I!”

We lifted our glasses. “To one month.”

She winked, “To one month-*ish*.”



Chapter Twenty-Three

Finn

The Sox, Irish pubs, and my parents

I stood at the mirror and took a good look at myself. “Looking damn good, Ward,” I mumbled. Flash sat next to me and let out a bark. Glancing down, I asked, “Do you disagree?”

He barked again. I looked back into the mirror. “What? I bathed, put cologne on, shaved yesterday so I’d have a bit of stubble today. The girls like that look.”

The damn dog barked again, this time jumping up on me. “Get the hell off me, you damn mutt. I already took your ass for a four-mile run. You should be knocked out, sleeping on the sofa.”

Jumping and twisting in circles, he barked, then ran out of the room and down the hall. He barked from the kitchen, then ran back to me. I was stunned my neighbors hadn’t complained about him yet. Of course, it probably helped I’d slept with Regina, who lived to the right of me, as well as Casey on the other side. Both currently had boyfriends, but I must have made some kind of impression for them to ignore the constant barking of this mutt.

Flash jumped and barked again. “Yeah. Yeah. I hear you, Flash.” This dog lived for two things: eating and making my life as difficult as possible.

The second I headed into the kitchen he made a beeline to his dish. In a bad attempt to hide my smile, I shook my head and decided to treat Flash to some canned food tonight.

My doorbell rang as I spooned the last of the food out and tossed the can in the trash. Jogging to the door, I opened it, and nearly had my knees buckle.

“Dear God. It’s an angel from up above.”

Rory rolled her eyes and pushed past me. “Don’t tease me. I take my Sox very seriously. This is their last home game of the regular season—precautions had to be made.”

My chest swelled with a feeling I wasn’t familiar with.

“Marry me right now. Because any woman who loves the Sox as much as you do is going to make an incredible wife and baby maker.”

She lifted a brow. “Baby maker? Seriously, Finn? How is it you can take me on one of the most romantic dates of my life, a wonderful canoe ride with wine and cheese, then turn around the next day and call me a ‘baby maker’?”

Flashing her the smile I’d quickly learned she liked, I answered, “It’s a gift I’ve been blessed with.”

“I swear, if you weren’t the holder of the tickets, I would have just turned and walked out of here.”

Placing my hand over my heart, I pretended to gasp. “Why, Rory Adams, are you using me for my extra Red Sox ticket?”

She didn’t even flinch. “Yes. And dinner. You also promised me dinner.”

I slowly walked up to her and placed my hands on the sides of her face. “And a kiss.”

“Ah, yes. How in the world could I forget the kiss?”

Lightly brushing my lips across hers, I ran my tongue along her bottom lip. A small moan slipped from her mouth while my gaze searched her face. Then she closed her eyes and waited patiently for me to deliver that kiss. The woman was like crack. There wasn’t a second that didn’t go by where I wasn’t thinking of her in some way. She was also the only woman I’d gone out with in a very long time, and the first woman I hadn’t slept with after the second date.

Rory was worth the wait, and something told me she would let me know when she was ready. For now, I would enjoy having her fall apart on my fingers, and my dick hardened just thinking of making her come with my mouth.

I let my intense stare roam her face. The way her cheeks blushed made me smile. Her hair was pulled up into a ponytail and pulled through a Red Sox baseball cap. It was the sexiest thing I’d ever seen. To hell with fancy underwear and bras. All this girl needed was jeans, a T-shirt, ball cap, and hardly any makeup. I was so turned on I had to force myself not to throw her over my shoulder and take her to my bed.

“Finn,” she whispered as her patience ran out.

“Rory,” I answered back before pressing my lips to hers and drawing her body up against mine. We were soon lost in each other. I walked Rory backward, and she bumped the sofa before slowly lying down on it. Flash jumped up and barked, causing us both to jump and break the kiss.

“You damn dog!” I shouted as my heart practically pounded out of my chest.

Rory giggled and turned to Flash. Giving him a huge hug and kiss, she glanced over her shoulder. “Does he need taking out before we leave?”

“No,” I mumbled, adjusting my cock in my pants and sighing. “A dog sitter is coming to stay with him, since we’ll be gone most of the day and evening.”

She stood and looked at me, a concerned look on her face. “A dog sitter? Who?”

I headed into the kitchen, where I grabbed the pitcher of water and filled Flash’s bowl. “My neighbor, Regina.”

“Oh,” was all she said.

I took a quick look at the clock. “We probably should get going. Let me text her we’re leaving.”

While I typed out my message to Regina, I asked, “How did you manage to leave work early?”

She remained silent, so I lifted my gaze, and saw her standing there chewing on her lip.

Damn if she isn’t the cutest fucking thing ever. “Well, I kind of snuck out of the office. I’m sure Russell has texted trying to figure out where I am.”

Flash started drinking the water from his bowl. “I’m sure he has.”

She tilted her head, the left side of her mouth rising slightly. “Are you jealous of Russell, Mr. Ward?”

“No, I am not.”

Her brow raised. “No?”

“No.” I stated matter-of-factly.

The doorbell rang, and Flash started barking. “That’s Regina.”

Rory adjusted her hair and baseball cap and put on a smile. Grabbing Flash’s collar, I opened the door and let Regina in.

“Hey, Finn. Hi there, handsome Flash! Yes, look at the cute puppy. Oh, he’s so cute. Yes, he is!”

Rolling my eyes, I sighed. “Regina, this is Rory. Rory...Regina.”

“Hey there. It’s nice to meet the girl who appears to have settled Finn

down.”

Rory’s face blushed. Kissing her on the forehead, I whispered, “Be right back.”

I headed into my bedroom, took one last look in the mirror, grabbed the small box, and slipped it into my pocket. Inhaling a deep breath, I thought about how I wanted the afternoon and evening to go. Barring another birth, I was positive Rory wouldn’t be doing any running away this time.

Heading back into the living room, I slowed my pace when I saw Rory standing there with a stunned look on her face. “Everything okay?” I asked.

Rory jumped slightly before nodding her head and forcing a smile.

“You know where all his food is, and his leash?”

Regina laughed. “Yes, Finn. This isn’t my first time.” She and her boyfriend, Paul, had watched Flash for me a few times before. He behaved with them, that little bastard.

“Ready?” I asked Rory as I extended my hand out for hers. I wasn’t sure if it was in my head or not, but it almost seemed like she hesitated in taking it.

Nodding, she answered, “Yep. Ready.”



“I don’t think I have ever had that much fun in my life,” Rory said while chuckling.

Holding my side, I shook my head. “Damn. My side hurts from laughing.”

I gave the taxi driver the name of Preston’s pub and leaned back against the seat. “So you feel better? You seemed like you were in a funk on the way to the game.”

She worried her bottom lip while she turned her body to face me. “I’ve been wanting to ask you something.”

“Go for it.”

“Two things really. You went out with Regina?”

My breath stalled. “What?”

“Regina mentioned you and her having a...fling.”

I searched her face. “Why, Ms. Adams, are you jealous?”

I’d just given her a taste of her own medicine, and her cheeks instantly blushed.

Glancing down, she grinned. "I guess I deserved that."

With my finger on her chin, I gently lifted her eyes to mine. "I'm not going to lie to you, Éan. I've slept with my fair share of women."

She swallowed hard. "Was she one of them?"

"Yes. But she is happy with her boyfriend, and we were both drunk, and it was a couple years ago. There's nothing there."

Her smile was weak. "Why do you call me Éan? You've been doing it for a few weeks now."

I slid my hand behind her neck, pulling her a little closer to me. "That day in the park."

She groaned. "The great pigeon attack!"

With a chuckle, I dropped my gaze to her soft pink lips. "You looked so damn cute flailing your arms all around screaming. It popped into my head, and it fits you."

"So you're calling me by the name of my nemesis?"

My head dropped back with a roar of laughter. I laced my fingers through her hair. "'Éan' means 'bird' in Irish. It fit you."

She grinned. "It's so beautiful. I love it."

"I've never been this happy before, Rory. I need you to know that."

"Me either. It kind of scares me. I'm not used to these feelings. And wanting to play hooky from work."

Her eyes seemed to sparkle every time a headlight lit her face. "Go camping with me, Éan."

She laughed. "Camping?"

"Yes!"

Her smile faded some. "When?"

"I've got to work the next few weekends. The weekend of Halloween."

"The benefit gala for the fire department is that Friday."

I tugged her hair, exposing her neck to me. Placing my lips on it, I ran them softly over her skin, causing her to squirm in my lap.

"We'll go after the gala."

"That sounds like it could be fun."

I breathed in her heavenly scent. "How is this going to work?"

She dragged in a shaky breath. "What?"

"Well, a guy wants to be able to dance with his date, but that's difficult when they're kind of keeping their relationship a secret."

Jetting her lower lip out into a pout, she replied, "That's so sad."

“I know. I have a feeling she is going to be dressed in a smoking-hot dress, too.”

A wicked gleam hit her eyes. “I happen to know that’s a true statement. And I also have it on good word that she’ll have some red lace under said dress.”

“Red. I like that color. Reminds me of fire.”

The corners of her mouth lifted into a wide grin. “Rumor has it that’s why she’s wearing red.” Then, in a slightly more serious tone, she said, “I heard it was your favorite color.”

Lifting my hand, I traced a finger along her jaw. “I’m falling hard for you, Éan.”

Her beautiful blue eyes searched my face before catching my stare. “And I’m falling hard for you, Finn.”

I drew her lips to mine, and we kissed like it was our first time. It started off slow and quickly turned more passionate. I was positive if we had been alone, I’d have taken her as mine.

I’m not sure how long the kiss lasted. All I know is that while we were kissing the cab pulled up to Preston’s pub, I heard my father clearing his throat, and Rory broke our bond.

Giving her a sexy smirk, I asked, “You ready to meet the rest of the family?”

Her face turned white as a ghost. “W-what?”

She quickly got off me and turned to see my father leaning down and staring into the cab. “Oh my! You look like...you’re a...oh goodness.”

“Dad, do you remember Rory Adams?”

He nodded. “Little Rory. You do know your dad would kick my son’s ass if he saw what I just saw?”

Trying to speak, Rory cleared her throat three times. “Y-yes sir. I mean, he wouldn’t. No wait. Yes he would.”

Reaching for her hand, my father helped Rory out of the taxi and pulled her into a hug. “You’ve grown into a beautiful young woman.”

Even with the sun setting in the sky, I could see her cheeks stain with a beautiful rose blush. It matched the color of the clouds.

“All right, Michael Ward, you step aside and let me see the woman who has captured my Finn’s heart.”

Rory peeked over at me while pressing her lips tightly together. My mother walked up and took Rory by the arms and held her back to examine

her. “Rory Adams, I remember braiding your hair when you were five years old!”

Rory giggled and replied, “Really?”

“Yes! Oh, my goodness. Haven’t you grown into such a beautiful young woman!”

Rory’s head dropped in embarrassment. “Thank you, ma’am.”

“You will call me Jenn. Now, let me give you a hug and tell you thank you for being there for our Harmony when she needed you.”

Once they were wrapped up in an embrace, my mother whispered something into Rory’s ear. Glancing back at me, Rory smiled, and my breath was taken. I never in my life would have imagined feeling this way. I had a new understanding of what Preston felt for Harmony.

“Looks like you found yourself a catch there, little brother.”

My head turned to see Wes standing there. “What in the hell? Mom didn’t say you were coming up from New York.”

Wes chuckled, then shrugged. “I have a few weeks off. Thought I would hang out with the family and get to know our little niece. Maybe even help with a few installs of some solar systems.”

“That would be awesome, Wes.” I’d been asking Wes to come and do just that. Really see what this business was all about. I didn’t want him to think he was simply a silent partner and the one who’d written the checks to get us started. He had long since been paid back, but he still handled all the books and the spending.

“The girlfriend is adorable—and I’m pretty impressed Mom is behaving!” Angela said as she walked up and gave me a hug. “Nice going, big brother.”

I chuckled and replied, “Thanks, Angie. As fun as this is playing catch-up, I need a damn beer to celebrate the Sox’s winning!”

Wes slapped my back. “Hell to the yes.”

When we walked into Flanagan’s, the Irish pub Preston owned, I almost bumped into Rory. She was standing there, frozen.

“What’s wrong?”

She slowly shook her head. “She’s...I can’t even say it...she’s wearing... N-new...York...Yankees!”

My gaze followed hers to see Harmony rocking Presley. She was decked out in her normal New York Yankee attire. The only Sox item she had on was a baseball cap that Preston insisted she had to wear if she was going to be in the pub on a game day.

Wrapping my arms around Rory, I kissed right under her ear. “If I didn’t love Harmony so much, I would have insisted my brother never marry a Yankee fan. But trust me, she’ll win you over and you’ll learn to ignore it. Especially when she starts talking about how great the Yankees are.”

Rory gasped. “That’s blasphemy!”

I laughed and spun her around. Leaning down, I quickly kissed her. “That’s why I love you.”



Chapter Twenty-Four

Rory

Waiting for the perfect moment

My heart dropped and I was pretty sure I stopped breathing when Finn uttered the L word. I prayed like hell he hadn't seen my reaction. Although I was positive it was more of a slip of the tongue than anything. It still rocked my world. In a good way.

A very good way.

"Rory!" Harmony called out. With a smile I made my way over to her, trying not to be put off by the Yankee garbage she had on.

"What are you wearing, Harmony?"

She glanced down and giggled. "I'm a Yankees fan."

The entire bar erupted in boos as Harmony rolled her eyes. "It's a good thing Presley sleeps through all of this noise."

I gazed down at the sleeping baby. "She's beautiful, Harmony."

"Thank you! Do you want to hold her?"

My head snapped up in a state of shock. "W-what?"

The look on Harmony's face was one of amusement. She could tell I was freaked out by the idea of holding Presley. "Rory! Have you never held a baby before?"

My head shook as I glanced back down to the tiny little angel. "She looks so...peaceful."

Harmony sighed. "Trust me, you wouldn't think that at two in the morning when she's screaming at the top of her lungs to eat."

With a chuckle, I looked back at Harmony and chewed on my lip. "What if I drop her?"

She rolled her eyes. “You won’t. Trust me. Besides, my arms could really use the break.”

“Oh! Well yes, let me take her so you can stretch your arms.”

I reached out and took in a deep breath as Harmony gently and expertly placed Presley in my arms. A rush of some unknown desire raced through my body. My chest squeezed as I leaned down and took in a deep breath. “She smells like heaven.”

Harmony grinned from ear to ear. “Isn’t she perfect? I love her so much. And the way Preston is with her, it’s such a turn-on to watch him when he’s holding or changing her, and the way he talks to her when she’s feeding.” Harmony fanned herself. “Is it getting hot in here?”

My cheeks heated, and I couldn’t help but glance over at Preston. I wasn’t sure what their mother ate and drank while pregnant, but she’d turned out some drop-dead gorgeous guys, with hearts of gold. And Angela was beyond breathtaking. Besides that, it was clear there wasn’t anything she wouldn’t do for her brothers.

Scanning the area, my eyes landed on Finn’s across the room. He was watching me intently. When he smiled, my heart skittered. Heat pooled in my lower stomach the moment he winked at me.

“Be careful—I see the way you’re looking at Finn. Of course, unless you want to practice for baby making.”

Dragging my eyes off Finn, I turned to Harmony and laughed. “That would be hard to do, since we haven’t slept together yet.”

Her mouth fell and she shook her head quickly. “Wait. Come again?”

I shrugged.

“You guys haven’t slept together yet?” Harmony asked.

“Nope.”

Harmony’s eyes widened in surprise before she quickly searched the room. “Angie! Meeting in the office. Right away!”

Angie came rushing over. “What? What’s wrong?”

The next thing I knew, I was being rushed into the office and told to sit down in the chair. I did, and quickly got lost in the beautiful moment of holding Presley. Harmony and Angie were babbling on about something, but I was too busy admiring the angel in my arms to pay any attention to them.

“What?” Angie cried out, causing me to jump and Presley to make a few little noises and stretch before she settled back into her slumber.

I glanced up, and my head pulled back in surprise as the two of them

stared at me with stunned expressions.

“Am...am I holding her wrong?” I asked.

Angie sat on the desk and flashed me a huge smile. “You haven’t done the deed with Finn yet? How long have y’all been dating?”

I shrugged. “A few weeks, about a month.”

Covering her mouth, she spun and looked at Harmony, who was smiling like a fool. “I know! You know what this means, right, Angie?”

“Oh. My. Goodness. Holy. Shit,” Angie said while turning back to me. Both stared at me in a creepy kind of way, their smiles so big I wondered if they were planning something I should be worried about.

“What? What does that mean? What are we evening talking about?” I asked.

Harmony walked up and motioned for Angie to slide over, and in a moment they were both sitting on the desk and looking at me with goofy grins. “You’re the one,” Angie purred while covering her heart with her hands and batting her lashes.

Harmony leaned closer to me and said, “Oh, Rory, no woman has ever managed to do what you have.”

My eyes drifted between the two nutcases. “What have I managed to do?”

They looked at each other and then back to me. “Cause Finn to fall in love.”

I nearly choked. “What!? Finn is not in love with me. We’ve hardly been dating for that long.”

“He hasn’t slept with you. Unless he finds you physically unattractive, he’s falling in love with you.”

My eyes narrowed as I let Angela’s words sink in. “Do you think he finds me unattractive? Is that why he hasn’t even *attempted* to make love to me?”

Harmony shook her head. “No! Okay, let’s backtrack. Has he done... other things?” She wiggled her eyebrows, and I instantly flushed.

“Oh, look at her cheeks turning red. I’ll take that as I yes!” Angela said with a laugh. “What has he done? No, wait, I don’t want to know, ’cause he *is* still my brother. Does he make you happy, though?”

Pressing my lips together, I nodded. “Very happy.”

Both women started acting like middle school girls as they jumped up and danced with excitement. I couldn’t help but giggle at the two of them. “He also scares me. Thrills me. Makes me feel things I’ve never felt before. I’m so confused.”

Harmony instantly sat again. “Scares you? Why does he scare you?”

I chewed on my lower lip as I fought to keep the tears from my eyes. *Jesus, does holding a baby make you more emotional?*

“I...I think I’m...”

Angela and Harmony leaned in closer to me and both asked, “Yes?”

“Well, I think I’m falling in love with him, and that scares me.”

Harmony tilted her head and gave me the sweetest smile. “Oh, honey, why does that scare you?”

Glancing back down at Presley, I finally let out everything I had pent up inside. “Because I want things with him that I’ve never even entertained before.”

Angela dropped to her knees to look me in the eyes. “Such as?”

I swallowed hard, then blew out a breath. “My whole adult life I’ve been working toward one goal: becoming a lawyer and making my parents proud of me. There are so many things I have given up to make that happen. Relationships, friendships, fun. Hell, even my dream to be a teacher. Then Finn blew into my life like a tornado and turned it upside down. I don’t wake up in the morning and think about my schedule and what I have to do at work—I wake up thinking about him. Longing to be in his bed with him, wrapped in his arms.”

Both women sighed.

“I count down the hours until I can see him again. Hell, I even play hooky at work, and I have a huge case I should be focusing on. I’ve never wanted more, but with Finn...” I closed my eyes and whispered, “...I want so much more.”

“And that scares you? Rory, you can have a career and have Finn in your life as well,” Harmony said as I opened my eyes.

“I know. But it’s being able to separate the two—and then you have my father, who forbids me to date firefighters and has some kind of beef with Finn. If he found out we were dating...”

“Whoa. Wait a second—you’re hiding your relationship from your family?” Angela asked.

With a nod, I frowned and replied, “Yes. It’s been so stressful lying to them. And Finn’s job. Every day he goes to work...” My voice trailed off as I tried to keep it steady. “...I worry. I grew up watching my mother fear for my father’s life, and I’m not sure I can do that.”

Angela reached for Presley and placed her in the small bassinet next to

the desk. Then she took my hands and pulled me up.

“Okay, I’m not buying that. I’ve grown up with a father and two brothers as firefighters, and do I worry? Hell yes, I do, but the risk is part of their job.”

I nodded in agreement. “I know.”

Harmony put her arm around me and smiled. “I’ve had some pretty terrible things happen in my life that I’m sure Finn has told you about.”

“He has,” I whispered.

“Did he tell you I ran from Preston? I packed up one day and took off. He had almost been trapped in a house during a fire. I was there on the scene and watched it all play out. I don’t think I have ever been so scared in my entire life. I freaked and ran, but Preston eventually found me. I’m not going to lie and say I wasn’t happy when he told me he bought the pub and quit his job at the station. I was beyond happy, but I also know I loved him too much to have walked away from a life with him because of the risks of his job. It took me a month to figure that out.”

A tear slipped from my eye, and I felt incredibly weak. “I’m not like you, Harmony. I’m not sure I could ever be that strong. The way I feel about Finn, it keeps growing, and at times I feel like I’ll die if I don’t get to see him. I can only imagine that feeling will grow, and if something were to happen to him...I’m not sure I could be that strong.”

She grinned and wiped my tear away. “Wouldn’t you rather live your life with him and treasure each and every day than spend the rest of your life wondering what it would have been like to be with him?”

Angela sighed again. “Oh, how I love love. It’s so flipping amazing.”

I laughed, then dragged in a deep breath. “My goodness. Where in the world did all this come from?” I asked while wiping my face and getting my composure back.

“The baby. It’s weird; it brings out weird emotions when you hold her.”

Angela and I both laughed at Harmony’s words.

Holding up her hands, Angela said, “Okay, but wait. We still need to talk about this no-sex thing.”

My face blushed. “I did mention to Finn how I was very...inexperienced. I think I might have scared him.”

With a huge grin spreading across her face, Angela shook her head. “That’s not it; I can promise you that. If there is one thing my mother did right with my brothers, it was how she raised them to treat women. Now, Finn might have liked his playboy ways at one time, but I can guarantee you

he is simply waiting for the right moment. He wants your first time together to be perfect.”

I lifted my brows. “You think? Because right now, if he said he wanted me in the middle of the bar, I’d say yes!”

We all laughed, quietly, since Presley was still sleeping soundly. Angela looked at me and grinned. “Trust me when I say Finn wants you too, Rory. I see it written all over his face. He’s waiting for the right moment.”

I let out a sigh and rolled my eyes. “Well, I sure hope he finds it soon.”



Chapter Twenty-Five

Finn

Off the market

I stared at the back-office door of the bar, waiting for the three of them to emerge.

“You’ve been staring at that door for a while now, bro. What’s going on?”

Not bothering to look at Wes, I responded, “Angie and Harmony took Rory in the back office, and they’ve been in there for some time now. What do you think they’re doing to her?”

“Probably some kind of sacrifice. Something to welcome her into the family, since it’s clear that thanks to her you’ve taken yourself off the market.”

My head snapped as I stared at him. “Sacrifice? What the fuck are you talking about?”

Wes tossed his head back and laughed. “I love how you picked up on that, but not the part of me saying you took yourself off the market. Have you?”

I didn’t even have to think twice about it. “Yes. Rory’s different from any other girl I’ve ever met. I don’t want to fuck things up with her.”

He lifted his brows and replied, “Wow. Finn Ward a one-woman man. Who would have thought? You truly think you’ll be happy with one woman for the rest of your life?”

“Let’s not get carried away. I’m not asking her to marry me...yet. We just started dating, for fuck’s sake. Hell, we haven’t even made love yet.”

Wes choked on the beer he had just gulped. Smiling, I hit his back and

asked, “You okay there, bro?”

Once he got his coughing under control, he leaned in closer and asked, “You haven’t fucked her yet?”

I hit him on the shoulder and pushed him away. “Don’t talk about Rory like that.”

His eyes widened in shock. “Holy shit. Are you in love with this girl?”

Glancing back at the door, I thought about earlier when I had slipped and said the L word to Rory. She hadn’t even flinched. She must have taken it as slip of the tongue. Thank God. I wasn’t ready to drop that word on anyone yet.

“No, but I am falling in love with her.”

“Isn’t that the same thing?”

I shrugged. “Maybe, I don’t know.”

The door opened and all three girls stepped out. Rory was still carrying Presley in her arms. My breath caught as I watched her gaze down at the baby. When she looked up, our eyes instantly met. The way she smiled had me fighting to keep my knees from giving out on me. I returned the gesture, then watched as she rocked back and forth, talking to a sleeping Presley.

Wes hit me on the back, drawing me out of my moment.

“Oh hell, yeah. You love her, Finn.”

I didn’t even bother to argue with him, because I knew he was right. Still, I had questions. Could you fall in love with someone that quickly? Was I capable of falling in love and being with one woman only? Yes, if it was the right woman and everything in me screamed Rory was the right woman.

My mother walked up and took Presley from Rory’s arms. Harmony said something that made Rory laugh, and heat coursed through my body.

Yes. I could fall in love—I already had. Seeing Rory holding my niece, I knew exactly what I wanted, and knew I would fight tooth and nail to get it.



Three hours later and I was beat. Rory had met everyone and they had all fallen in love with her. I hated that we had to keep our relationship a secret from her parents and hated that it was causing Rory so much stress.

“Hey, you,” I whispered against her ear while wrapping my arms around her. “You having fun?”

She leaned her body into mine, and I felt her heat instantly warm me. “I

am. But I'm exhausted."

Turning her to me, I placed my hand on the side of her face and gazed into her eyes. "Will you stay with me tonight?"

Her teeth sank into her lip. "Tonight?"

My heart pounded so hard in my chest I swore the whole damn bar could hear it. "Yes. Since we can't go camping next weekend, I have an idea."

Her face lit up, then she frowned. "I have work tomorrow."

"I'll make sure you're at work on time."

Her eyes searched my face as she thought about it. "Okay. I'll stay with you tonight."

I fist-pumped and pulled out my phone. "I need to call in a favor, so give me a couple minutes and we'll leave."

She nodded. "Can we stop by my place so I can grab stuff for work tomorrow?"

I winked. "Sure."

The phone started ringing, so I quickly kissed her lips and walked outside.

"Your dog is fine, Finn. Stop calling to check up on him." Regina stated.

Feeling my cheeks heat, I glanced back toward the bar. I would never admit to anyone how much I liked that damn dog. "I'm not calling to check up on him. I need a favor from you, Regina."

"Because watching your dog while you're at a Sox game wasn't enough."

I rolled my eyes. "I'm bringing Rory back to my place tonight."

"O-kay. And should this be like some kind of news flash? I've seen you bring plenty of girls home before. I am surprised that you're in a relationship this long, though. Then again, I really liked her from the little I spoke with her earlier today."

"No, listen to me, Regina: She's staying with me tonight. For the first time...our *first* time."

Silence.

"You know, our first time being together."

Then she laughed and said, "Good one, Finn. For a second there you had me believing you were bringing her home to sleep with her for the first time."

"I am."

More silence.

Regina cleared her throat. "No, seriously. You haven't slept with her yet?"

“No. I’ve been waiting for the right time.”

Then it happened.

She screamed.

Loudly in my ear. “Oh my God! Finn! Do you mean to tell me you have been dating this girl for a month and you haven’t slept with her?”

“That’s what I’m telling you. Now, will you help me make it special for her?”

“Hell yes, I will! What did you have in mind?”



Chapter Twenty-Six

Rory

First time for everything

My hands were sweating as I rubbed them over my jeans again as we sat in the cab.

When Finn spoke, I jumped. “Did you get everything you needed?”

I nodded and forced out a “Yep.”

Oh gosh. Stop this, Rory. It’s not like you’ve never had sex before.

Peeking over to Finn, I watched his jaw muscles flex as he looked out the window. *Is he nervous too? Maybe that’s why he waited so long to do this. No. That’s crazy. Why would a man like Finn be nervous about sex?*

“You’re spinning your wheels over there, Éan.”

I loved his nickname for me. I’d never had one before, and him calling me Éan made me feel special. Especially knowing he’d picked it for a reason. A sweet reason.

The cab pulled up to Finn’s condo building. Handing the driver money, he said, “Keep the change, buddy.”

The taxi driver grinned big and replied, “Hey, thanks. Enjoy your evening.”

“Oh, we will.”

My face heated instantly while I quickly climbed out of the taxi and Finn grabbed my bag. He reached for my hand and headed into the building. The security guards had all figured out that I was Finn’s girlfriend. Even though I now had keys to the building entrance and Finn’s apartment, I never used them. It didn’t feel right. Anytime a guard saw me walking up, he would just buzz me in and tell me to tell Finn “Hey.”

“Good evening, Mr. Ward, Ms. Adams.”

Finn kept walking to the elevator while lifting his hand and saying, “Hey, Charles! Enjoy your night.”

I waved and smiled as Finn practically pulled me into the elevator. The moment the doors shut, his mouth was on mine and I was a goner. My body melted into his while my hands pushed through his hair. We both moaned, and I could feel his hard length pressing into my stomach. It’s not like I hadn’t felt it before—I had. Plenty of times. But in a few minutes, he was going to try to stick that huge-ass thing *inside* of me.

Finn pushed me against the elevator wall and lifted my leg, pushing himself against me more.

Lord, I’m rusty. Cobwebs have probably formed inside my va-jay-jay, it’s been so long since she has seen action.

“Rory,” Finn whispered as he nipped at my lower lip. “I want you so fucking bad I can’t stand it.”

My heart dropped to my stomach. I wanted him too...but I was so nervous I was going to suck.

Lacing my fingers through his hair again, I pulled on it as he groaned. “I want you too, Finn.”

The doors to the elevator opened and he lifted me up while I wrapped my legs around his body. Never once did we stop kissing. He stopped at his door and leaned me against it.

“What about Regina?” I panted between kisses.

“She’s gone. I sent her a text that we were on our way up.”

My eyes widened in shock. I hadn’t even noticed he was on his phone. Slowly sliding me down his body, he flashed me a panty-melting smile that caused me to grab onto his T-shirt to hold myself up.

When he gazed down at me, I felt the heat between us like I’d never felt it before. Lifting his hand, he gently brushed a piece of my hair from my face and tucked it behind my ear. “I wanted to make our first time together special. It was important for me that you know how much you mean to me. It’s never been about the sex with you, Éan. It’s been so much more.”

A tear slipped from my eye and slowly ran down my face. Finn reached up and gently wiped it away. “Say you’re gonna stay, Rory.”

Pressing my lips together, I fought to hold back my tears. I knew what he was asking of me. “I’m not going anywhere.”

“Promise me,” he whispered against my neck. “Because I need your

touch like the desert needs water.”

My head dropped back against the door and I was taken to a euphoria I’d never experienced before...and he hadn’t even made love to me yet.

“I promise you,” I whispered from my lips as he swept me up into his arms. The moment the door opened I smelled the roses. Glancing around the room, I gasped. “Finn!”

The entire living room was filled with lit candles. Roses were everywhere. Flash barked from his crate. “Awe, he wants out,” I said with a pout.

Finn had yet to put me down. “Fuck that. The little bastard will knock over the candles and burn the place down.”

My lower stomach pulled. “I know a firefighter who could help if that happens.”

His eyes turned dark and a slow smile appeared across his face. “You do?”

I nodded. “He’s really cute, too,” I replied as I wiggled my eyebrows.

He slowly let my body slide down his. When my toes touched the ground, he asked, “Should I be jealous?”

Staring into his breathtaking emerald eyes, I barely was able to speak. “Well, I am really attracted to him. He has a cute dog, too, who is hell on four paws, but I know he really loves the dog. Matter of fact, I’m pretty sure he called the dog sitter more than once to check on him.”

Finn laughed. “How did you know?”

With a wink, I answered him. “I didn’t. It was a guess.”

Grabbing me, he pulled me into his arms, he said, “You little stinker!”

Flash barked more as we both turned to look at him. “We should really let him out or he’s going to get jealous.”

Finn nodded in agreement. “The candles, though.”

“Let’s move them to the bedroom.”

Stopping where he was, Finn turned to me. We had been so caught up in the moment, both of us had forgotten what the candles and roses were here for.

“Fuck the dog,” he said as he made his way back over to me and pulled my mouth to his. His kiss was filled with so much passion the only thing I could do was whimper in delight. He stepped back and looked at me...and my chest heaved up and down. My stomach fluttered, and I wasn’t sure if it was from the kiss, the way he was looking at me, or knowing I was seconds

from this man filling me completely.



Chapter Twenty-Seven

Rory

Magical and amazing

When we both needed air, Finn stepped back. My lips were tingling as I ran my fingertips over them. Finn winked and took my hand in his. He walked around the room and blew out the candles. I attempted to hide my smile. I'd had a feeling the firefighter in him was not going to leave them unattended.

Glancing over at the crate, Finn pointed to Flash. "Sorry, buddy."

Flash whimpered and lay down. Finn slowly walked backward while holding both my hands. I don't think I'd ever heard my heartbeat so loudly in my ears before.

Once we were in his room, I sucked in a breath. The bedroom was covered in white lights. "How?" I asked in awe.

Finn looked up and smiled. "I have no clue, but I have a feeling I owe Regina and her boyfriend more than a six-pack of beer."

Covering my mouth, I giggled. "For sure more than a six-pack."

Finn dropped my hand and gazed into my eyes. I'd never had a man look at me the way he was now. If I hadn't known any better, I'd have sworn I saw love in his eyes.

"I want to make this a night you'll never forget."

Oh, dear. My panties were instantly soaked.

When he pulled his shirt over his head and tossed it to the floor, I bit down on my lip to keep from moaning like the crazy horndog I felt like. If I'd had the nerve, I'd have ripped his clothes off and climbed on top of him.

He started to take off his jeans, and I had to place my hand over my stomach. I felt like a high school girl about to get her first kiss. My stomach

was flipping around, my heart was pounding, and the pulse between my legs was begging for relief.

“Get undressed, Éan. I want to take a shower first.”

My eyes about bulged out of my head. A shower? He wanted to take a shower...together? “W-what?”

His dimples were full-blown. “Do you need help getting undressed?”

I nodded my head. I didn’t need help, but if it meant his hands on my body, I would agree to anything.

He walked up to me, and my body shivered when he reached for my shirt and lifted it over my head. Then goosebumps raced across my skin when his finger ran from my neck down to my cleavage.

“Do you like when I touch you?”

I quickly licked my dry lips and said with a scratchy voice, “Y-yes.”

He smiled and leaned down, his mouth inches from mine. When he licked my lips, I groaned. It had to have been one of the hottest things I’d ever experienced, and I had a feeling there would be a hell of a lot more of those tonight.

“Better?”

The only thing I could do was nod.

His right hand went behind my back and in a flash, my bra was undone and falling down my arms. I lifted a brow and smirked.

“Wes taught me on the mannequins our mother used for sewing. Scarred me for months when he told me it was one of Angie’s bras we’d used.”

With a smile, I shook my head and whispered, “Naughty boys.”

He winked. “You haven’t seen anything yet.”

Everything seemed to have come to a standstill. The only thing I noticed was Finn. His smile. The heat coming from his body. The soft kisses he peppered over my skin while making his way to my breast.

“You’re so fucking beautiful. I’m not going to last five seconds inside of you.”

Swallowing hard, I closed my eyes while he took a nipple into his mouth. “Oh God,” I gasped. I wasn’t going to last a second more if he kept this up. The moment he’d touched me I’d begun to fear I was going to come.

Finn moved over to my other nipple. I forced myself to look at him. His eyes were closed and he wore a look of pure pleasure on his face as he sucked, bit, and pulled. Teasing me with what was going to come.

He dropped to the floor and grabbed my ass, squeezing it while he kissed

my stomach. “Your body is so perfect. I’ve never seen such a beautiful body.”

I wanted to believe him, but doubt pushed its ugly head into my thoughts. Given all the women Finn had been with, I was positive I was nothing special.

Slowly pulling my jeans down, he stopped and took one of my shoes off, tossing it to the side and then doing the same thing with the other foot. “My heart is racing, Finn.”

Glancing up at me, he flashed me a megawatt smile, his dimples making my stomach drop. “So is mine, Éan.”

“Really?” I asked in a surprised voice. He nodded and helped me out of my jeans. I stood there dressed in nothing but my boy short panties. Had I known we would be making love tonight I would have worn something sexier. Especially with the way Finn was staring at me.

His finger traced the edge of my panties. “Do you have any idea how damn sexy you are, Rory?”

“I am?” I asked in a shaky voice.

My body trembled as he ever so slowly pulled my panties down. A deep growl came from the back of his throat as I stepped out of them and Finn stood. “I’m having a hard time controlling myself. Come on.”

He took my hand and led me to his bathroom, where he reached into his large walk-in shower and turned the water on. It cascaded down from the ceiling like rain. My eyes scanned the inside of the shower to see it had six showerheads pointing from every direction possible. I chomped on my lip as I stood there and wondered how many women Finn had had sex with in this shower. Panic quickly filled my chest.

Or maybe it was jealousy.

Either way, I needed to get a grip.

Looking away, I took in a deep breath, only to have Finn place his hands on the sides of my face and turn me to him. “Talk to me, Éan.”

I searched his face, hoping to find the answer in his eyes.

“How many women have you had sex with in there?”

His face turned white, and he dropped his hands. Then he shut off the water, grabbed a towel, and wrapped my body in it.

I instantly hated myself for bringing it up and ruining the mood. Finn had worked so hard on making this night special, and I had to go and open my big mouth with my silly insecurities.

“Rory, I don’t want this night to be a comparison in your mind.”

Pinching my brows together, I asked, “What do you mean?”

“If everything I do you’re going to wonder in your mind how many other women I did it for also, then this is not going to be the night I want it to be.”

My eyes fell to the floor as my face heated. “I’m sorry. It’s just...I’ve only been with one man, and it was so long ago and I know you’ve been with...um...a number of women. I’m feeling insecure and hate myself for it. Especially when you went out of your way for everything to be perfect.”

His hands were still on my face as he squatted down and flashed me the sweetest smile I’d ever seen. My heart hammered in my chest. “Look at me, Éan, and listen to what I’m about to say.”

I did as he asked. His eyes looked sad, and I felt guilty knowing I was the cause of it. “I’ve never had a girl in my bed or even in this bathroom. Anytime I ever brought someone home we had sex on the sofa or in the guest bedroom. I’ve never made love to a woman before—I’ve fucked them. No emotions, no attachments. It was always about one thing...sex.”

Swallowing hard, I tried to not let what he said get into my head. I knew he’d been with other women. It’s not like it was a news flash, but what I wasn’t expecting was how honest he was about it.

“Rory, you are so different from any other woman I’ve been with. You make me want things I never wanted before.”

A smile tugged at the corners of my mouth.

“I want to fall asleep with you in my arms and wake up to your beautiful smile. I don’t want to fuck you... Well, that’s not really true. I do want to fuck you and do things to you that make you scream out my name.”

My mouth parted open with a small intake of air. My chest squeezed and I instantly started to fantasize about what he would do to me. His voice pulled me from my thoughts.

“The first time we’re together, I want to make love to you. I want to hear the moan from your lips as I push slowly into you. Memorize every little thing that turns you on. Know your body from head to toe.”

Oh God. He’s trying to kill me.

My hand landed on his chest, and the jolt of electricity took me by surprise. Finn jumped as well, and I wondered if he had felt it too. He closed his eyes then opened them and looked directly into mine as he said, “I didn’t know I was this hungry until I tasted you. I crave you like you cannot even begin to imagine. I’m scared shitless that once I make you mine, I’ll never be

the same again.”

I brought my other hand up to his chest and let the towel pool at my feet. I'd never had someone say such amazing things to me, nor had my heart ever felt like this ever before. “I already know *I'll* never be the same. Ever.”

When he smiled, I couldn't help but do the same. He cupped my face and brought my lips to his. It didn't take long for the soft sweet kiss to turn into something much more passionate. Finn's hands moved down my arms lightly, leaving a path of goosebumps in his wake. Sliding his hands around my hips, he grabbed onto my ass and drew me in closer to his body. His erection pressed against my stomach fueled my desire.

Finn broke our kiss and groaned. “If I don't stop now I'll bury my cock inside you, and I don't want to fuck you in the shower. Let's get cleaned up.” He reached in and turned the shower back on.

My stomach fluttered at his dirty talk. Taking my hand in his, he pulled me under the hot stream of water with him. I groaned as the hot water rushed over my body. Dropping my head back, I let the warmth engulf me. I jumped when I felt Finn's hands on my body. He slowly moved them down from my neck to my chest. I watched intently as he cupped a breast and brought his mouth to my nipple, causing me to gasp at the heavenly feeling of the hot water and his tongue flicking around my hard nub.

He drew back and repeated the action with my other breast before dropping to his knees. My fingers laced into his hair, and I fought the urge to push his face where I needed relief. Grabbing my hips, he ran his tongue along my belly button, making my body shiver even though I was standing under a stream of hot water.

“Jesus, you're so fucking perfect.”

The only thing I could do was whisper out his name.

“Finn.”

Taking the soap again, he rolled it around in his hand and then started to clean my legs, slowly moving up to my thighs while cleaning and massaging.

“Spread your legs, Rory.”

The way my teeth bit into my lip, I was sure I would draw blood. I did as he asked and moved my legs farther apart. My face heated as he cleaned me, intimately. He reached up and pulled the showerhead off and placed it between my legs. Sucking in a breath when the hot water hit me, I saw him grin wide and slowly shake his head.

“When was the last time you came, baby?”

Everything started to go blurry as the pulsing water hit my clit in that oh-so-right way.

“The library.”

“I want to make you come with my mouth. Will you let me do that, Rory?”

Where was the shower wall? I needed something to help me stand up. “Yes! God yes, Finn! Please.”

The warm water disappeared, and Finn’s mouth was on mine as he slowly slipped a finger inside of me. He moved it in and out as I gripped his arms. It felt like I was floating, and I hadn’t even come yet.

With his lips against mine, he softly spoke. “Tell me what you want. Let me hear you.”

My head fell back as his soft lips moved across my neck.

“You. Oh God. Make me come. Please make me come.”

He kissed my lips again before making his way down. “How do you want me to make you come?”

“Finn, I want you desperately.”

The bastard chuckled as he slowly worked his way down my body.



Chapter Twenty-Eight

Finn

My forever

My heart crashed against my chest. I'd had plenty of women whisper to me that they wanted me. But nothing could have prepared me for the moment I heard Rory Adams say it.

"I want you too, baby. So fucking much. I need you to tell me what you want me to do."

Her chest heaved as she barely got out, "Your mouth. Please, Finn."

Before I did something stupid and sink my cock deep inside of her with no condom, I dropped to my knees. I lifted her leg and put it over my shoulder. Her hands gripped my hair as she prepared for my mouth to give her the relief she needed.

I slipped a finger inside of her, and she hissed and bucked her hips. I couldn't help the smile that hit my face. Another finger inside and I was the one groaning. "So damn tight."

When I looked up, I was surprised to see her looking down at me. With a wink, I moved closer to her and licked up between her lips and flicked her clit.

She inhaled deeply. I could feel her pulling slightly on my hair, slowly trying to guide me where she needed me to go. It was so fucking hot.

Picking up the speed of my fingers, I buried my mouth on her clit, sucking and licking each whimper and moan out of her.

"Feels. So. Good. Oh God! Finn, I'm so close," she cried out while grinding her pussy harder into my face. My dick had never been so damn hard.

I moved my fingers slightly and flicked her clit faster. It didn't take her long to start squeezing my fingers and crying out my name. When her leg started to give out, I pushed against the shower wall and held her there. Her body shook while I licked up every ounce of her sweet juices.

When I looked at her, she was staring down at me with a huge smile on her face, her breathing labored. Standing, I dipped my face in the water and rinsed out my mouth. I wasn't sure how she would feel about me trying to kiss her after I'd gone down on her.

"I think we're clean enough. I need to be inside of you, Éan."

Her mouth opened into an O shape as I turned off the water and pulled her out of the shower. I lifted her up and she wrapped her legs around my body. "We're still wet," she giggled.

With a shake of my head, I headed into my bedroom and gently laid her on the bed. "I don't care. I can't wait another second."

Her eyes dark with passion, she kept her focus on me as I reached into the drawer for a condom. I loved how she chewed on her lip while watching me roll it over my dick.

"Are you sure?" I asked her when I noticed the look of fear in her eyes.

She nodded. "I just...you're bigger than he was and...."

With a laugh, I crawled over and settled my body on hers. "It'll fit; I promise."

Rory hit my chest. "I know you will. It feels like my first time all over again."

I pressed my lips to hers as she wrapped her arms around my neck and I pushed my cock against her, causing her to gasp.

The kiss was slow and steady. Rory had a way of making it seem like she'd opened herself completely to me with one kiss. When she sucked my lip into her mouth, I groaned, and that seemed to fuel her even more as she gently nibbled on it. My cock teased her entrance just a bit while I moved my mouth down to her neck. I needed her to talk to me. Tell me if I was doing anything to hurt her. Just with my two fingers inside of her, I could tell how tight she was.

"Tell me if I hurt you, Rory. I'll go slow."

Her legs wrapped around me and pulled me closer. "Finn, I'm going crazy. Please!"

Fucking hell if her pleading didn't make me want to push my cock inside of her and fuck her until she couldn't move.

No.

It was Rory.

My Éan.

She deserved more than a hard fucking. She deserved to be loved slowly and passionately.

I pushed in a little further and her whole body went rigid. I pulled back and looked into her beautiful blue eyes. “Are you okay, baby?”

With a nod, she replied, “It’s been a while, and like I said...you’re huge!”

With a grin, I drew out some and pushed back in. “Shit, you’re so tight.”

“Feels so good. Finn, I need more.”

She was breaking my resolve to take things slow.

“I’m trying not to hurt you, Rory. You begging for more is not helping.”

Pulling out, I was covered in her juices, making it easy to slide right back in, this time pushing in harder and faster. She jumped as I filled her completely.

Not moving, I buried my face in her neck, waiting for her to tell me she was ready.

Her fingers moved lazily over my back while she wrapped her legs around me tighter, attempting to pull me in farther. With a smile, I drew back and caught her gaze. “I’m all the way in, baby.”

When the left side of her mouth rose into a sexier-than-hell smile, I felt my heart give way. The last wall was down. Rory Adams completely owned me.

“Make love to me, Finn.”

I did what she asked. Our mouths crushed together as I moved in and out of her body. Each whimper, moan, and whisper of my name fueled me more and more. I was fighting like hell to not come. Especially with the way her pussy was locked onto me. Sex had always been about one thing. Or two, actually. Making my partner feel good and myself. That was it. But with Rory, it was about so much more. I felt connected to her in a way I’d never felt with anyone else. She was mine and I was hers. Forever.

“Faster, Finn. Please go harder.”

It was like she had unleashed the gates. I pulled out and slammed back into her, causing her to gasp, then cry out my name.

“Finn yes! God yes!”

Harder. Faster. I was moving in and out of her like she was the very thing I needed to keep breathing.

“There. Oh, God, Finn! I’m going to come!”

She bore down on my cock, and I came so hard I swore the room turned black. “Fucking hell, Rory! I’m coming!” My body trembled as we both came at the same time.

Nothing from that point on would ever be the same. My life had been forever changed by this woman.

When we finally stopped moving, I stayed inside of her. Not wanting to leave the warmth of her body.

“Finn?” she gently asked.

When I drew back and looked into her eyes, I took in a deep breath. Something had changed in them. Something had changed between us.

“Are you okay? Did I hurt you?” I asked.

Her hand came up and rested on my cheek. “I’m more than okay.”

Leaning down, I kissed her gently on the forehead and whispered, “Tell me what you’re thinking.”

“I want to stay like this forever. The two of us.”

My chest squeezed tight. I’d never known my heart was lost until Rory found it and wrapped herself around it.

“So do I, Éan. So do I.”

This woman in my arms was my new reason to breathe.

She was my everything.

My forever.



Chapter Twenty-Nine

Rory

Nothing is the same

The feel of Finn's body against mine was pure heaven. I knew I was going to be sore. Especially when Finn woke me up at three in the morning and took me again. I thought our first time was amazing. The second time was ten times more incredible and flipping hot as hell. The things the man could do with his mouth was sinful.

I didn't want to open my eyes for fear I'd only have five minutes until the alarm went off. I rolled over and faced him. Slowly opening my eyes, I watched as he slept. A smile crept over my face. He was so damn handsome. I almost reached over and pinched myself to see if I was dreaming.

Lifting my hand, I gently ran my finger over his soft lips. They'd been all over my body last night, and if I hadn't known better, I would have sworn my skin still tingled everywhere he'd kissed.

"Finn, what have you done to me?" I said in a hush as I stared at his lips. The feelings he brought out in me excited me and scared me to death.

Leaning in closer, I kissed him softly. He moaned slightly and drew me nearer to him.

He deepened the kiss and I melted completely into him. "Éan," he whispered against my lips while turning us over. My fingers ran lazily over his skin as he peppered my neck with kisses. "I can't get enough of you."

With a smile, I replied, "Then take more of me."

Drawing back and resting on his elbows, he flashed me those dimples with a wide grin. "Are you sure? You're not too sore?"

I shook my head. "You being inside of me is the most amazing feeling in

the world.”

He kissed the tip of my nose as he said, “I feel the same way.”

Finn reached over to his side table and grabbed a condom. I watched as he rolled it over his already hard shaft. Licking my lips, I quivered as I anticipated the feel of him slipping inside of me. If I wasn’t careful, Finn Ward would quickly become an addiction.

Over my body again, Finn used both hands to brush my hair to the side before he kissed my forehead. “This has been the best twenty-four hours of my life, Rory.”

I surveyed his face, and my breath caught. Every word he spoke I knew was true, because it was written on his face. Unspoken in his eyes.

Finn Ward had given himself to me...and I had given him my whole heart and soul.

When he slowly pushed inside of me, I hissed from the pain. He quickly stopped and stared at me with a concerned look. Wrapping my legs around him, I drew him in deeper. I needed him to fill me with every ounce he had to give.

“Don’t stop, Finn. Please don’t stop.”

I can’t imagine how making love to Finn could have been any more wonderful than it was this first time. He rolled us over and I was on top.

“I’m yours, Éan.”

Smiling, I rocked against him and gasped at the feel of it. Placing my hands on his chest, I rose up and down slowly then rubbed against him. I gasped when I felt the pressure against my clit.

“Feel good?” he asked.

I dropped my head back and moved body against his, feeling that delicious build up.

“That’s it, Éan. Fuck me.”

And that had been my undoing. I screamed out his name in pleasure. Finn grabbed my hips and pumped into me fast and hard until it was his turn. I swore I felt it the moment he came.

Finn turned us again and hovered over my body, resting on his elbows, while dragging in one deep breath after another. My body still hummed from the orgasm. It felt like euphoria every time I came with him.

His head lifted and our eyes met. I forced myself not to utter the three words my heart longed to say to him. The dark flecks in his emerald eyes flickered in the sunlight as he gazed at me with so much love. My stomach

fluttered. It was then I noticed how light it was outside.

The light feeling in my chest was replaced with panic. “Ohmygod! What time is it?” I asked.

Finn’s eyes cast to the side of the bed. When his face drained of color, I knew I was in trouble.

“Fuck, we’re late!”

He pulled out of me quickly, but not before kissing me on the lips one last time. “It’s almost nine.”

I flew up and yelled, “Nine!”

That’s when we heard the scratching at the bedroom door. Finn had been rushing to the bathroom when he stopped in his tracks.

“Oh no. He’s out of his crate,” he mumbled before making his way to the bedroom door. I, on the other hand, was running around like a madwoman. I was late for work. I’d never been late for anything in my entire life.

The door opened and Flash came running in and over to me in the closet, where I’d hung up my work clothes last night so they wouldn’t wrinkle. I slipped on my black skirt and covered my mouth. “You’re not in your crate, buddy?”

Finn looked sick to his stomach over being so late. He shook his head and turned back toward the bathroom. “I can’t deal with Flash right now. Not right now.”

Attempting to hide my giggle, I finished getting dressed and picked up the overnight bag I’d packed. My toothbrush caught my eye, and I grabbed it.

Flash was barking at my side. “I know, Flash, “ I said. “But you have to wait another few minutes and then we will eat and go potty.”

He whined and rushed ahead of me and into the bathroom. Finn was finished brushing his teeth and was running his hands through his hair. I had to stop and catch my breath. My lower stomach pulled with desire and my eyes widened in surprise.

Holy hell, Rory. Get it together! I’d literally just had sex with him, and here I was wanting him again.

Finn turned and started out of the bathroom and into his room. I licked my lips as I gave him a once-over.

“Keep looking at me like that and we’re going to be even more late.”

My mouth formed an O while my eyes dropped to his semihard erection. I wanted him again. Desperately. Was it simply because it was Finn? Or was it because I had gone so long without sex that I was now a sex addict?

I'm going with number one.

It's Finn.

Still trained in on his dick, I felt his hands on my face. He lifted my mouth to his and kissed me. My knees went weak and my senses left me.

"Finn," I whimpered against his lips. My free hand moved down his bare chest until I reached what I longed for. Wrapping my hand around his now totally hard dick, I slowly moved up and down.

"Fucking hell, Rory. We can't."

I didn't care about anything right now but feeling him in my mouth. Dropping to my knees, I quickly took him before he could argue.

The hiss from his mouth caused me to smile. "Jesus! Oh God."

Knowing I was making him feel good, I worked my mouth and hand over him. I'd never in my life given a man a blow job, and I was pretty sure I was doing something wrong, but Finn didn't seem to mind. His hands grabbed my hair and he held my head still as I sucked and licked along his shaft.

"Oh fuck yes. Baby, that feels...Oh fuck."

I moaned while moving my hand down to play with his balls. I remembered Clare mentioning once that most guys liked it when you played with their balls while giving them head. My only concern, as I rolled them in my hand, was hurting him.

"Motherfucker...Rory...oh fuuuck!"

Whatever I was doing, it was working. His balls pulled up, and I knew he was close.

"Baby, pull back and finish with your hand if you don't want me coming in..."

oh God...in your...holy shit. In your mouth!"

Hell, no way was I pulling out. I wanted to take every ounce of him. What was it Clare had said to do? Oh yeah.

Reaching my hand around, I hesitated for a moment before lightly applying pressure to his backside.

"Fuck!" Finn cried out as hot cum hit the back of my throat. *I'm doing it! I'm making him come with my mouth.*

My glee quickly dissipated.

Oh my God. It's thick. It tastes disgusting. I'm going to gag!

Finn's hands were on my head as he slowly pumped into my mouth. More squirts of cum filled my mouth.

I'm going to choke to death on cum! This is not how I want to die!

Pulling my head back, I started to gag and spit out the nastiness in my mouth.

“Yuck! Oh God!” I attempted to say between bouts of gagging. “Water! I need water!”

Flash decided that was his cue. He ran over and jumped on me, knocking me to the floor.

“Flash! No! Bad dog!” Finn cried out in between his snorting and laughing. He grabbed Flash by the collar and quickly carried him from the room. I jumped up and ran to the sink, where I promptly placed my mouth under the faucet to get the taste out.

“I’m starting to think that you don’t like cum in your mouth.”

Turning and shooting him a glare, I spit the water out toward him as he laughed. “That was gross. It was thick and tasted...not good.” I pointed to my mouth. “This is now a no-fly zone.”

His brows shot up. “A no-fly zone?”

“Yes. That was my first and last blow job.”

When his eyes turned dark, I felt my cheeks heat. He slowly walked up and grabbed the hand towel and started to wipe off my face. “That was your first time doing that?”

My lower lip jetted out into a pout while I nodded. “Yes.”

“Fucking hell. You were damn good at it for being your first time.”

My cheeks grew hotter. “I had whores for friends in college. They used to talk about giving them all the time. Gave me tips for when I decided to try it.”

His brows pinched together in confusion. “Your friends were whores?”

Scrunching my nose, I grinned. “Okay, they weren’t, but they slept with a fair amount of guys. Like the pressure on the back door.”

Finn laughed. “That was a first for me. Gotta say, I liked the little tease.”

“Really?”

Finn had begun to say something when his phone rang. He quickly picked it up. “What’s up? Yes, I know I’m late. I overslept. I know, Colton. I’m leaving in five.”

I pulled my hair up into a ponytail and leaned in toward the mirror. I looked like I had been thoroughly fucked, but makeup would have to wait. Quickly brushing my teeth, I took one last look at myself before turning to head into the bedroom. Finn was still on the phone with Colton. He looked stressed, especially when he pushed that hand through his brown hair. The

area between my legs pulsed, and I quickly glanced away.

With a sigh, I headed over to my purse and bag and slipped on my heels.

“I’ll deal with it when I get there,” I heard Finn say.

Turning, I stared at him. He had somehow gotten dressed in that short amount of time. He stood before me in his uniform, and I was positive the earth shook some.

“Oh my,” I whispered as I watched him put his radio onto his belt. I’d never seen a man so handsome in my entire life, and I’d just spent the most amazing night of my life with him. He glanced up and smiled. There went my heart.

I was in more than deep shit.

I was in love with Finn Ward.



Finn

Who knows?

I rushed into the station and let Flash off his leash. He quickly made the rounds to everyone and greeted them. Colton and Zeb stared at me from across the room. I was almost positive Zeb knew what was going on.

“Cap wants to see you, Ward,” someone called out.

Fuck. I’d never been late for work before. Not once.

With a loud sigh, I headed to the captain’s office as I took a look back at Colton and Zeb. Both gave me a weak smile, which I returned with a head pop.

I inhaled a deep breath and knocked.

“Come in.”

Is it just me, or does his voice seem angry? Jesus, Ward. Be a man and walk in.

I opened the door and walked in. Captain Adams looked up and frowned before motioning for me to sit.

“You’re late for your shift.”

I cleared my throat and sat. “I know, sir. I’m sorry. The alarm on my phone didn’t go off. I normally have a backup alarm, but I...I um...I didn’t turn it on last night. I’ve never been late before. Ever.”

His brow lifted. “Huh. Crazy this is your first time being late for work, and the same thing happened to my daughter Rory this morning. She’s never been late for anything, and today of all days...she’s late.”

Not moving an inch, I simply smiled and replied, “Crazy coincidence.”

The smile that moved across his face made me nervous. “Sure is.”

“I’m sorry, Captain Adams. I won’t let it happen again. This is the first and last time I will ever be late for my shift.”

He nodded while leaning back in his chair. “You know, Ward, I have to say, I was wrong about you.”

Lifting my brow, I asked, “Why is that, sir?”

“You probably don’t remember me from when you were younger.”

With a grin, I nodded. “I don’t. sir. I’m sorry.”

He laughed. “You were young. Had a thing for my daughter Rory, though.”

I swallowed hard and prayed he didn’t see the sweat forming on my forehead. “R-really?”

“You would follow her everywhere. My wife and your mother thought it was cute.”

With a forced laugh, I spoke when I should have kept my mouth shut. “And you didn’t?”

His eyes turned dark and he leaned forward. “Someday, Ward. Someday you’ll have a daughter, and you’ll want to protect her from guys like you.”

My blood boiled. “From guys like me? I’m sorry, sir, but what is that supposed to mean?”

“Players. Love them and leave them. I know...I was once that man.”

I leaned forward to show him he was not intimidating me. “May I ask you a question, sir?”

He chuckled. “Sure, Ward.”

“What made you change?”

“I met Chelsea and fell in love. She changed my entire world.”

I nodded. “So if it happened for you, why couldn’t the same thing happen to ‘a guy like me’?”

Captain Adams’s eyes turned dark. “I guess it could.”

We sat in silence for a few moments before he spoke again. “You know, if you want to keep Flash here at the station, you can.”

“Is my lesson over then?”

His jaw clenched and he remained silent.

“I’d actually like to continue bringing him home, sir. I’ve been working on training him.”

Before he could answer, an alarm went off. I stood and said, “Good talking to you, Cap.”

Before he could respond, I headed out of his office and down to the truck,

my heart pounding in my chest so loud I could hardly hear what was going on around me.

Quickly getting dressed, I glanced up and saw Captain Adams staring at me.

He knew. He fucking knew.



The weights dropped to the floor as I dragged in a deep breath.

“Jesus, Ward. You all right today?”

Glancing over to Colton, I replied, “No. I’m not. Did you say something to Cap?”

“Fuck no I didn’t. You know me better than that.”

“What are we talking about?” Zeb asked.

We turned and looked at him and replied in unison, “Nothing.”

Holding up his hands, Zeb took a step back. “Damn. I don’t think I’ve ever seen the two of you so uptight before.”

I scrubbed my hands down my face, then dropped them to my side and took a quick glance around. “I’m dating Captain Adams’s daughter. He doesn’t know it. At least I don’t think he knows.”

Zeb’s eyes widened in surprise. “Hold on...I’m still trying to process that you said you were dating someone.”

I rolled my eyes. “Fuck you.”

He let out a chuckle, then dropped his smile and turned serious. “Ward, you do know that if he finds out you’re dating his daughter he is either going to kill you, make your life miserable, or fire you.”

With a laugh, I shook my head. “Fire me why? Because I’m dating his daughter? There aren’t any rules that say I can’t.”

“No, but he’ll be hell-bent to find something you do wrong and use it to get you out.”

I reached down and picked the weight bar up again. “Well, he won’t find anything.”

“You were late today, dude. Since I’ve known you, you have never been late for a shift.”

Letting out a huff, I started to pump the iron for ten reps before dropping it on the floor again. “Well, there’s a first time for everything. I overslept. It’s not the end of the world.”

“Were you with Rory last night?” Colton asked.

Not wanting to lie to my best friends, I swallowed and looked down at nothing on the floor. “Yes. We were together last night and she was also late. Cap brought up how she was late today as well. Almost like he was fishing for something.”

“Do you think he suspects?” Zeb asked.

I shook my head. “I’m not sure. Unless he’s seen us together. Otherwise, he couldn’t know unless someone in my family or Colton here told him.”

Colton shot me a dirty look. “I didn’t say a word to anyone, asshole.”

“Listen, Finn,” Zeb said. “You know I’m not one to preach shit to you. But this doesn’t feel right. You’re starting your relationship with her in a lie.”

“We aren’t lying to anyone.”

He arched his brows. “You’re carrying a pretty damn big secret. Has she told anyone about you guys?”

“No. At least not her parents. I think one of her best friends knows.”

Zeb looked at me with a concerned look before turning away for a moment. “It’s going to implode on you, Finn. You’re better to just come out in the open and let the chips fall where they may.”

Colton laughed. “Or let the fists land, because when Cap finds out I can promise you...he is not going to be happy.”

Right on cue, the door to the gym opened and Captain Adams walked in. “Hey there, fellas.”

“Hey, Cap,” we each said while going back to our workouts.

When Cap glanced over to me, I attempted to not let the empty look he shot my way bother me. If he knew, he was taking it well. If he just suspected, he was trying to piece it together. If he didn’t know, then I had no idea how to read the blank stare.

I made a mental note to talk to the one man who would have the answer.
My father.



Chapter Thirty-One

Rory

Looking for answers

The air in my office turned cold, causing me to look up. I saw Russell standing in the doorway. “Did you get caught up on the meeting you missed this morning?”

I would have rolled my eyes if I thought it wouldn’t make me look like a child. “I did. Thank you.”

“So why were you late?”

Stunned by his direct question, I sat back and stared at him. “I overslept. Haven’t you ever overslept, Russell?”

He laughed and walked up to my desk and sat on the edge of it. “Oh, I have. I also know what it means when a woman walks in with that look on her face.”

My veins were pulsing with venom. “What *look* is that, Russell?”

When he raked his eyes across my body, I felt exposed. “Excuse my frankness, but that just-fucked look. You had it all over your face this morning, Rory.”

Heat flushed my cheeks. “Excuse me?” I said as I stared at him in utter shock.

Holding up his hands, he laughed. “Hey, you asked so I gave you my answer. It was pretty obvious the firefighter got to you finally. I hope he was worth the heartache he’ll surely bring.”

The room started to spin, and I had to take a deep breath in to focus back on what he was saying to me. “W-what are you talking about?”

His laugh was dark and hit me like a flash of cold. “Oh, don’t try to

pretend like you're not seeing that firefighter, Finn Ward. I've seen the way the two of you look at each other. I can see why you would hide it from your parents, though, considering his reputation and the fact that he works for your father."

Standing, I glared at him. "You don't have any idea of what you're talking about, Russell. And quite honestly, it's none of your business who I'm dating, or who I'm fucking for that matter. What I do in my private life is just that. Private."

I could have sworn his eyes turned black. "Not when it starts affecting my cases. You snuck out early yesterday, then came in late today. I've alerted your mother."

My mouth fell open as I let out a gruff laugh. "You ran to my mother and told on me?"

As I expected, Russell didn't like the fact that I was standing up to him. "You may be the boss's daughter, Rory, but that doesn't excuse your jumping ship whenever you want. I happen to want to win this case, and I can't if I have to worry about what you're doing in your...*private* time."

My fists balled up and my lower lip quivered. Not because I was upset, but because I had never been so angry in my entire life. "How dare you accuse me of slacking off on this case. I'll be sure to remember this when you head out to play golf during the workday. I happen to be one hundred and ten percent on top of this case, and I have every intention of seeing the accusations against Robert Long dismissed."

He laughed. "Dismissed? And how are you going to do that, Rory?"

Reaching for my purse, I pushed past him as I mumbled, "Just watch me."



My eyes scanned the crowd as I took a sip of tea. When I saw her, I jumped up. "Regina! Over here!" I called out. Finn's neighbor approached my table with a huge smile on her face. The guy on her arm immediately caught my eye.

Man oh man. Regina certainly had good taste in men.

I stood and gave her a quick hug and then shot my hand out to shake her boyfriend's.

"Paul, this is Rory Adams. Finn's girlfriend."

His smile grew bigger. “Aw, the one we decorated Finn’s place for last night.”

My cheeks heated and I looked away. “You’re embarrassing her, you jackass.”

With a chuckle, I waved it off. “Thank you, by the way. Everything was perfect.”

Regina’s face beamed with happiness. “I’m so happy for you, Rory. You really do have a great guy there. I wasn’t sure if he would ever find the one woman who would settle him down. I can certainly tell you filled that role, simply by the way he looks and talks about you.”

There went my face, heating up again. “He’s very special to me, there is no doubt about that.”

“So, if things are going great with Finn, why do you need a PI?” Paul asked.

“I’m working on a case, and I have a gut feeling. My father always told me to never ignore those feelings.”

Paul nodded his head and replied, “I agree with him. Tell me, what do you need from me?”

“I need to prove that these two women know each other.” I slid a file over to Paul, which he took and opened.

“Okay. Shouldn’t be hard to figure out. Digging into their pasts and following them around for a few days should get you your answer pretty quick.”

“Good. The trial is in a few months. They keep pushing it back, and I’m pretty sure they’re doing it on purpose. If we can get this woman to drop the charges, my client can move on with his life and get back to the job he loves so much.”

Paul pulled out a small laptop from Regina’s oversized bag and opened it as she ordered two coffees and chicken salad sandwiches.

She leaned forward and winked. “So, how was last night?”

My eyes drifted over to Paul, who was deep in concentration while typing away on his laptop.

“Ignore him. He’s already started his search; he won’t pay attention to us.”

Keeping my voice low, I replied, “It was...amazing.”

She wiggled her eyebrows. “We’re running to the restroom, babe.”

Paul grunted, which caused me to giggle. Regina and I stood and made

our way to the ladies' room. The second we walked in, she grabbed my arms and flashed me a huge smile.

"Tell me everything! Was he sweet? He better have been sweet. He told me it was your first time together—which let me tell you, blew my mind. Well, don't just stand there. Tell me!"

I glanced down to hide my embarrassment. I hardly knew Regina enough to share what happened between Finn and me last night. I had tried to call Autumn and Clare this morning, but neither of them answered. Then I called Harmony, and she couldn't talk. I wanted to shout from the rooftops how amazing I felt today and I had no one to tell. No one but Finn's ex-fling.

"Um...he was very sweet and last night was amazing."

She pursed her lips and stared at me. "Okay. I get it. I'm the neighbor he slept with; it could be awkward, but let me assure you, it's not. We slept together, Rory. There were no emotions there. Nothing." She flashed me a wicked grin. "He's big, isn't he?"

I covered my mouth and laughed while looking away.

Regina pushed me lightly on the shoulder and said, "Yes! See? Come on, I've been dying to know how it was."

"Wonderful. Incredible. I experienced things last night I never knew I could. Physically and emotionally. Which scares me."

Her smile faded some. "Why does that scare you?"

I shrugged. "I feel so weird talking to you about this. We hardly know each other."

Regina took a step back and spit on the palm of her hand. "Come on. Do it and we'll be spit sisters."

Widening my eyes, I glanced down to her hand. "You want me to spit in my hand and shake yours? We aren't in grade school anymore."

"Do you want to exchange blood and be blood sisters? I'm down for that, too."

I quickly spit in my hand and pressed it to hers.

"I do solemnly swear to be a faithful and honest spit sister to Rory..."

"Adams."

"...to Rory Adams." She jerked her head for me to repeat what she had said.

"Oh. My last name is Hall."

I nodded and licked my lips nervously. *For Pete's sake, Rory. It's only spit!*

“I do solemnly swear to be a...”

“Faithful and honest spit sister. Sheesh, have you never done this before?”

Frowning, I answered, “No! I do solemnly swear to be a faithful and honest spit sister to Regina Hall.”

When I removed my hand I turned and washed it, but Regina simply wiped her hand on her jeans.

I was never eating popcorn from the same bag with her after this.

“Okay, spill it.”

Turning, I leaned against the sink. “Well, we made love four times.”

“Four? Jesus. Did you give him some kind of magical pill?”

Chuckling, I shook my head. “No.”

“Sweet. But you ‘made love’ four times? Or did he bang the hell out of you and cause stars to dance behind your eyes? That’s the kind of lover Paul is.”

I believed it. He was built, and looked like he enjoyed a good roll in the hay. “Um...both.”

She waggled her eyebrows. “Do you feel it today? I’d think, after four times?”

“Oh yes. It’s also been a while since I was with a guy, so I’m extra sore today.”

“Take a hot bath tonight. You’ll feel much better.”

I nodded.

“He really cares about you, Rory. I hope you can see that.”

My chest squeezed. “I care about him also. He’s brought out a side of me I didn’t know I had.”

“That’s a good thing!”

I looked into her blue eyes and took in a deep breath. “Do you think Finn is the type of guy who will be happy with just one woman in his life?”

She didn’t even hesitate. “Yes. I really do. Please don’t let his past pave the way for your future. He’s a good guy, Rory. And I see why he is so attracted to you. You’re smart, beautiful, and the perfect normal for his crazy.”

I laughed and shook my head. “Thanks for getting me to open up. It’s been hard keeping my relationship with Finn a secret.”

Her smile faded. “A secret from who?”

I pulled the corner of my lip into my mouth. “My parents.”

She'd started to respond when someone walked into the ladies' room. She took my arm in hers and we headed back to our table.

"Lord, that conversation needs wine and chocolate."

I giggled and looked at the woman next to me. I would have never dreamed we would be friends, especially after I'd found out she slept with Finn. But Regina reminded me of Autumn and Clare. I made a mental note to introduce them all.

As we walked up to the table, Paul looked up. "I got your answer."

My heart jumped to my throat, making it hard to talk. "Al...already?"

He smiled and stuck his chest out some. "Yes."

I sank into my chair and stared at him. "And?"

"Well, hang on to your seat, darlin', because I think this is going to blow your mind."

Taking in a deep breath, I nodded for him to tell me.

"The two women you wanted to find a connection to are for certain connected."

The excitement rushed over my body. *I knew it! I knew they were connected.*

Pulling out my notebook, I got ready to start taking notes. "How are they connected?" I asked.

Paul grinned from ear to ear. "They're sisters."

My pen dropped and I fell back against my seat. It took me five seconds to process what he'd just said.

"Sisters?" I asked in a stunned voice.

He turned the computer to show me a picture, and my mouth gaped open as I internally fist-pumped.

We'd just won the case, before it even went to trial.



Chapter Thirty-Two

Rory

The truth comes out

Rushing into the building of the law firm, I glanced at my watch. My mother would still be in her office. I had no idea if idiot Russell was still here or not. I made my way to the elevator and pulled out my phone.

Nothing from Finn. My heart sank, but I tried not to read into it much. When the doors dinged and opened, I was pulled from my daydreams of last night. As I made my way toward my office, my assistant, Krista, rushed up to me. “Rory, your mother is in your office. With Mr. McCormick.”

With a smile, I said, “Is that so?”

“Yes,” she said while attempting to keep up with my fast pace. “If you don’t mind me speaking frank...”

I stopped. “Please do. Always, Krista.”

She glanced around before leaning in closer and whispering, “I think he is trying to get you off the Long case.”

Standing a bit taller, I threw my shoulders back and took in a deep breath. “Well then, I say bring it on, Mr. McCormick.”

Krista giggled and followed behind me. “Do you need anything, Ms. Adams?”

“No, Krista, thank you.”

I stopped at my office door and drew in a deep breath before turning the handle and walking in. I stopped and surveyed the scene. My mother sat on my side of the desk, while Russell sat in one of the chairs opposite my mother.

“Rory, so nice of you to join us,” my mother said with a grin.

“I had a business meeting I needed to attend. May I ask why everyone is camped out in my office?”

My eyes drifted between my mother and Russell, but then immediately moved to the dozen red roses on my desk.

Russell must have noticed my reaction. “Looks like your boyfriend sent you flowers, Rory.”

Jerking my eyes back to him, I pierced him with my eyes. If I’d had the power to shoot daggers I’d have launched them at this asshole.

“Boyfriend? Rory, are you seeing someone?”

Shifting my attention to my mother, I walked into the room and set my purse and briefcase on my desk. I leaned down and smelled the flowers while closing my eyes. When I opened them, I shot a dirty look at Russell before smiling and turning to my mother. “Mom, what brings you into my office?”

“Mr. McCormick has brought up a few issues which concern him.”

“I see,” I said as I sat down on the sofa next to my desk. “Would this be me leaving early yesterday and perhaps me coming in late this morning? Which I might say was the first time I have ever been late?”

“That, and he feels as if you are not...focused.”

Oh, that dirty rat bastard. He sat there with a smug, victorious smile on his face. I couldn’t wait to slap it the hell off.

“Is that so?” I asked with a fake smile.

“I tried to speak to you about this earlier, Rory, but you stormed out of here before I could.”

Standing, I walked up to my desk and reached into my bag for my laptop. Paul had sent me the pictures of Bryn Dierks and her sister, Casey Stevens, as well as some information on both of them. It had been so easy for him I had to wonder how our investigators here at the firm hadn’t found the connection after I’d brought up Bryn Dierks name.

Opening my laptop, I glanced over to Russell. “Did you try to speak with me before or after you said I walked in this morning with a just-fucked look on my face.”

My mother jumped up. “What?”

Russell looked between both of us with a stunned expression. *That’s right, Mr. McCormick, I have claws and know how to use them when needed.*

“You did not say that to my daughter.”

His mouth fell open. “I...she...Let me explain.”

Holding up my hand, I started talking. “We have more important things to

discuss than Mr. McCormick's wildly inappropriate remarks. While Mr. McCormick thought I was out playing hooky, I was meeting with a private investigator I hired because I had a gut feeling there was a connection between Bryn Dierks and Mr. Long's accuser, Casey Stevens."

Russell rolled his eyes. "Rory, I'm not sure why you insist on this. There is no connection. You're reaching."

My mother slowly turned and glared at Russell. I imagined if she could have, she would've shot fire from her eyes. "Go on, Rory," she said, clenching her jaw. I knew she was still angry about Russell's "just-fucked" remark.

"Well, Russell, it turns out you're wrong and my hunch was right."

Spinning the laptop around, I showed them a picture of Bryn Dierks at her wedding with her maid of honor standing by her side.

"Is that Ms. Stevens next to her?" my mother asked.

"Yes," I said with a nod. "It's from Bryn's wedding blog, which is still up on the Internet. She has Casey tagged in the picture, which warmly reads, 'My best friend and little sister.' The investigator was able to find school records that has the two of them living in the same house, with the same parents listed and same address. Bryn's maiden name also happens to be..." I looked over at Russell. "...Stevens. Bryn Stevens.

"I interviewed an old neighbor of theirs before I headed back to the office and was told Casey idolizes the ground her older sister Bryn walks on. Casey was very sick when she was younger, and Bryn's the one who saved her. Donated a kidney to her. My best guess is Casey feels like she owes her very life to Bryn, so when Bryn wanted to get revenge for Robert Long turning her down, she went to Casey and came up with this plan to take him down. She probably figured with different last names, no one would put two and two together."

Pride washed across my mother's face. "And they wouldn't have, if you hadn't made the connection, Rory."

Russell stood there staring at the picture. He finally looked up and said, "Yes. Thank goodness Finn Ward and you were at that library that day."

From the corner of my eye, I saw my mother look at me. "Finn? Why were you with Finn?"

My heart started racing as my newfound confidence quickly came tumbling down.

"Well, isn't it obvious from the flowers, Mrs. Adams? They're dating.

Even though I strongly urged her against it.”

“That’s enough, Russell,” I said. “Now, if you’ll please excuse us, I have some things to discuss with my mother. I suggest since you’re lead counsel on this, you might want to start drawing something up for Ms. Stevens’s attorney to look over.”

Russell drew in a breath. “You’re right. I’ll get to work on that immediately. Mrs. Adams, Ms. Adams, enjoy your evening.”

He spun on his expensive-ass heels and retreated from my office. Once the door shut, I walked up to it and locked it, not at all certain that he wouldn’t have attempted to come back in.

I slowly turned around and leaned against the door. My mother was staring at me with a look of disbelief.

“Rory, is what Russell said true? Are you and Finn dating?”

I swallowed hard and glanced back at the flowers. She followed my stare and reached for the card. “Excuse me! Those are mine and you have no right to read that.”

She stopped herself from opening the card and thrust her hand out toward me. “Then you read it and tell me who they are from.”

Shit. Shit. Shit.

Jiggling the card in her hand, she motioned for me to come take it. “Well, come on. I’m waiting with bated breath to see who sent you these beautiful flowers.”

My hand pressed to my throat as I attempted to breathe. I hated Russell for putting me in this spot. Hated him with a passion.

“Rory!” she snapped while I jumped practically out of my skin. I forced myself to put one foot in front of the other until I stopped on the far side of the desk. She still had the card thrust out. Slowly, I reached up for it and opened the card and read it to myself. Heat crept up my face while my heart danced in delight.

I can’t stop thinking about last night and how amazing it felt to be connected as one with you. I’m looking forward to Friday night. Love, Finn.

I drew in a sharp breath when I saw the word “love.”

“Who are they from, Rory?”

Lifting my gaze to meet hers, I replied, “You do realize I’m a grown woman and you have no right to demand this of me.”

Her features softened, and she took a step back and walked to the window. “I’m sorry. But the idea of you seeing someone and keeping it a

secret...” She let out a harsh breath as she turned to face me.

“Why, Rory? Why keep it a secret?”

With a bitter laugh, I shook my head. “Are you serious, Mom? If Dad found out I was dating a firefighter, let alone Finn Ward, he’d fly off the handle. Kind of like what just happened here a second ago. I’m not a child. I have the right to decide who I’m going to date and who I’m not.”

She smiled, and I frowned. Was she upset? Why was she smiling?

“Oh, Rory honey, I don’t care who you date. I just want him to make you happy.”

Relief swept across my body as my shoulders relaxed. “He makes me so happy, Mom.” I glanced down to the flowers. “He makes me feel so alive. I didn’t realize I was lost until I found him.”

She opened her arms, and I walked into them. When she engulfed me in a hug, I started to cry. “I know Daddy isn’t going to understand, but I think I love him.”

“Oh, Rory! Are you sure? It might just be an infatuation. Or maybe the fact that this is the first man you’ve dated since college. You might be feeling things because they’re so new to you.”

Drawing back, I looked into her eyes. “They are new feelings. Feelings I’ve never experienced before. I’ve been on dates, Mom. I know the difference between a crush and what real love feels like.”

She closed her eyes and nodded before looking back at me. “I know. I’m sorry—this just all seems so sudden to me.”

“Well, probably because I’ve been keeping our relationship a secret.”

“For how long?”

I shrugged. “I don’t know. A month or maybe close to two.”

“Two months? Oh Lord. You’ve been lying to us for two months?”

I took a step back. “I haven’t been lying, and I said *close to* two months!”

“Really? All those times we asked you over for dinner, were you with Finn?”

“Maybe once or twice.”

She rolled her eyes while tossing her hands up in the air. “Rory Adams. You’re going to have to tell your father now.”

“What? Why?”

“Why in the world not?”

“Please don’t tell Daddy. I’m not ready yet for his reaction.”

She brushed me off with a wave of her hand, and anxiety instantly took

ahold of me. “That’s silly. He’s going to be happy for you.”

“Mom. Look at me.”

She did, and I took her hands in mine. “Dad is not going to be happy I’m dating a firefighter. Nor is he going to be happy I’m dating a firefighter from his station.”

She frowned. “And it’s Finn.”

“What does he have against Finn?”

In a poor attempt to hide her smile, she looked over at the flowers and then back at me. “When you kids were little, maybe five or so, Finn would follow you everywhere when we would visit his parents. It was the cutest thing. Of course, Jenn and I thought it was adorable. Finn even pushed Wes down once for standing too close to you.”

I smiled. “Really? I don’t even remember Finn.”

Her smile faded some. “No, you wouldn’t. You were so young.” She released a breath and looked out the window. “One day Finn announced to your father that he loved you. Of course, your father told him he was too little to know what love was and that Finn couldn’t have you because you belonged to *him*.”

My stomach flipped. *Maybe Finn and I were meant to be together. Destined from the very beginning.*

With a giggle, I asked, “What did Finn say?”

She peeked back over at me and grinned. “Told your father he didn’t know what he was talking about and that someday he would marry you. Well, you know your father. He didn’t take that very well. He told Finn it would be a cold day in h. e. l. l.”

My head pulled back in question. “Why are you spelling it?”

My mother laughed. “Because your father spelled it. Jenn and Mike thought it was funny, but your father didn’t. Of course, I thought at the time that he was just being overprotective and silly. Then, when you kids started getting older, your father stopped wanting to go to the Wards. He would meet Mike all the time at their normal hangout, but we never did get together again as families.”

“That’s so sad,” I said, wrapping my arms around my body. “All because Finn told Daddy he liked me?”

She lifted a brow. “He told him he loved you and was going to marry you.”

I rolled my eyes and sat at my chair. “Mom, you do see how silly that is,

right?”

With a shrug, my mother blew out her cheeks. “I do. But when your father found out Finn was at his new station, I thought he was going to have a heart attack. He came home that first day and told me Finn was like his old man. A lady magnet. Mentioned something about him making out with an EMT or something behind the station.”

My heart dropped to my stomach at the idea of Finn kissing another woman. Trying not to let it bother me, I stood up and gathered my things.

“Well, I can’t help that Daddy had his feelings hurt by a five-year-old. Or that Finn happens to be a firefighter.”

“With a reputation.”

My eyes lifted and caught hers. “If I remember right, didn’t Daddy have a bit of a reputation before he met you?”

“Touché.”

“It doesn’t matter. I’m dating him, and I’m going to keep dating him.”

“And your father, Rory? How long am I supposed to pretend like I don’t know about this?”

Twirling a lock of my hair, I pondered her question. “I’ll tell Daddy at the firefighters’ gala.”

Her expression turned to one of horror. “If you think by telling him in a public place it will lighten the blow, you are sadly mistaken, my child.”

If I wanted to be Finn’s date for the gala, I knew I was going to have to come clean. “I’ll think of something.”

My mother walked up and placed her finger on my chin. “I hope so, because if he finds out from someone other than you...he’s going to be even more upset.”



Chapter Thirty-Three

Finn

I'll fight for her

I took a deep inhale of air and blew it out, trying to dispel my frustration. Damn Zeb for making that damn pasta dish. The cheese was burnt on the casserole dish and I was having a hell of a time getting it off.

It had been my rotation to clean up after dinner. Well, mine and Colton's. He was summoned off by the captain, though, and I knew the cap had done it on purpose to leave me stuck with the mess.

Flash lay at my feet, waiting for some crumbs of food to fall. Suddenly, he jumped up and started wagging. When I glanced over my shoulder, I sucked in a breath. Captain Adams's wife was standing in front of me.

"Mrs. Adams, is there something I can help you with?"

Her smile was tender. "No, but I need a moment of your time, Finn. If you don't mind."

My gaze moved toward Cap's office.

"He's occupied for the time being. I only need five minutes."

I nodded and tossed the dishrag into the water. "Of course."

She turned and headed into the one and only conference room we had. Wiping my hands on my pants, I took in a slow deep breath.

She knew. And if she knew, did Captain Adams know?

I walked in and took a seat at the table as she shut the door and walked around to the other side.

"Yesterday I discovered something pretty interesting that involves my daughter and you."

Fuck. My. Life.

“Rory?”

She nodded. “Would you like to tell me yourself?”

I lifted my brow. “Um, not really, ma’am. Honestly, I think I’m more scared of you than I am of Cap.”

With a lighthearted laugh, she shook her head and sat. “Finn, I’m going to be direct with you. My daughter seems to think she is falling in love with you.”

I couldn’t help the smile that spread across my face, nor could I deny the warmth that spread through my chest.

“By that reaction, I’m going to safely assume you feel the same way.”

“Yes ma’am, I do.”

Her grin appeared to grow bigger, yet it didn’t reach her eyes. “I’ve been asked by Rory to keep this information to myself, and I have agreed to until Saturday morning. At that time, if she has not told her father, I will. Now, I know what you’re thinking—she’s an adult and deserves to be treated as such. And I partly agree with you. I also agree with my husband. I remember sitting and listening to the calls come in and panicking because I was scared to death my husband wouldn’t come out of that burning building alive. I don’t want that for my daughter. That worry and stress.”

I moved about in my seat some when she looked at me with sadness in her eyes.

“Do you understand how I worry for my daughter? I see the way her eyes light up when your name is mentioned. I hate the idea of her holding her breath and worrying every time you go out on a call.”

“Forgive me, Mrs. Adams, but may I speak openly with you.”

She motioned for me to speak.

“I don’t see what the difference is if I was a cop, a banker, a bartender, a pilot, or a teacher. None of us is guaranteed anything. Does my job contain more risk? Yes, but did that make you love your husband any less? Would you have stepped back and let Captain Adams walk away merely to keep from worrying about him, or do you cherish every day you wake up next to him?”

She narrowed her eyes at me, as if I was calling her bluff. “I did walk away from him. Once. But, yes, it only took me a few weeks to realize he was my everything.”

My brow lifted. How could she sit here and preach to me about me and Rory when she knew what it felt like to be in love?

Letting out a frustrated sigh, she looked out the window again before focusing back on me. “Finn, a couple of months is not a very long time to date someone and think you’re in love.”

“Why not?” I asked.

“Excuse me?”

“Why isn’t it? Why is it so strange for me to know that when Rory touches me, I know in the depths of my soul I will never long for anyone else to do so. Or that when she smiles at me I’d give my life to see that smile every single day. When she laughs, I experience a high so unbelievable I often think I’m addicted to it. The rush I get when I go into a burning building used to be my adrenaline rush. Now *she* is. Rory makes me want things I’ve never desired before in my life. I have dreams of her walking down the aisle toward me. The thought of her carrying my child...”

I stopped talking to regain a bit of my composure. This was the first time I had admitted these feelings out loud to anyone, including myself. “It’s something I never thought about before, until she first looked into my eyes. This is not a crush, Mrs. Adams. This is not about lust. This is about a woman I long to have in my life...forever.”

Mrs. Adams sat across the table with tears building in her eyes. Glancing away and out the window, she nodded her head. I was hoping that meant she understood, and that when the time came for her husband to find out, she’d be on my side.

Someone knocked on the door and she quickly stood. “It was good seeing you again, Finn.”

I stood too, and asked, “That’s it?”

With sadness in her eyes, she moved around the table and walked toward the door but stopped next to me on her way.

“He’s not going to give her up that easy.”

I stood taller. “Then I’ll fight that much harder for her.”

With the first real smile I’d seen since she’d approached me, she placed her hand on my shoulder and gave it a squeeze.

“That’s what I wanted to hear.”

And just like that...she was gone.

I stepped out of the conference room right in time to see Colton and another firefighter emerge from the captain’s office. Turning, I headed back to the sink to finish this evening’s dishes. Zeb grabbed my arm and pulled me to a stop. “What in the hell are you doing, man?”

“What do you mean?”

“You’re still fucking the captain’s daughter.”

Rage instantly filled my body. “Don’t you talk about her that way, Zeb, or I’ll pound your damn face in.”

He laughed and shook his head. “Did this start with a bet between you and Colton? To conquer the one thing you couldn’t have?”

Flash growled at my feet until I reached down and scratched the top of his head. “Who is this guy standing in front of me? Because it sure as hell doesn’t sound like one of my best friends.”

Zeb sighed while pushing both hands through his hair in frustration. “Finn, if he finds out, you’re gone. He’ll either transfer you or make it so miserable you’ll quit. I don’t want to see you lose the one thing you love.”

With a wide grin, I slapped him on the arm. “I appreciate you trying the tough-love approach, dude, but what I have with her is so much more than sex. And trust me, I have no intentions of losing Rory.”

His face constricted as confusion swept over it. “Dude, I was talking about your

Job...Oh, holy shit. Ward. Are you saying you love Rory?”

With a wink, I gave him a nod and got back to my chores.



“How was dinner?”

Rory rubbed her stomach. “Amazing! I love Italian food.”

My thumb gently ran over hers as we walked toward Christopher Columbus Park. She turned and walked backward. “Are we going to the trellis?”

With a wink, I nodded. “We are.”

A full-blown smile erupted on her face. “I love that place. I’ve seen so many proposals there.”

“I’ve seen a couple.”

She ran her tongue along her lip. Damn, she looked adorable. The blue knit hat she wore made her eyes stand out even more than they normally did.

I stopped walking and cupped her face within my hands. “Do you have any idea how you make me feel?”

Rory giggled. “Warm and fuzzy?”

My brows pinched together. “Um...no. I was going to say my body ached

for you always.”

“Oh. Well, that’s a lot more romantic than my ‘warm and fuzzy.’”

Laughing, I kissed her on the forehead.

Soon, Rory and I were walking hand and hand through the lighted trellis. She talked about Flash, how the case she was working on kept getting delayed, and how much fun it would be to go ice skating. I made a mental note to take her ice skating this winter at Frog Pond.

When we reached the end of the trellis, we stopped and faced each other. Her eyes were dancing with desire.

“Finn,” she whispered as I drew her body against mine and kissed her.

“Get a hotel!” some kids yelled as we both laughed.

I lifted my brows. “That sounds like a good idea.”

She tilted her head and gave me a questioning look. “A hotel?”

Nodding, I took her hand and headed toward a taxi.

“Finn! Where are we going?”

“I have to be inside you. Now.”

Twenty minutes later I was opening the door to the hotel room and pulling her in. It was like we couldn’t move fast enough. Our hunger for each other was growing each time we were together. Which was every chance we got.

Rory took her jacket off while I pulled my sweater and the shirt I had under it over my head and tossed them to the floor.

I watched as she stripped herself completely naked.

“Fucking hell, I want you.”

“Then take me, Finn. I’m yours.”

I picked her up and she wrapped her legs around my body. My hard dick pressed against her entrance, and it was then I remembered I didn’t have any condoms.

“Shit. I don’t have any condoms.”

Her fingers laced through my hair. “Do you have to wear one?”

My eyes widened in shock. “You want to make love with no protection?”

“I’m on the pill.”

I stared at her in stunned silence.

“It’s okay, if you’re not comfortable with it.”

I smiled. “Do you have any idea how desperately I want to make love to you without a fucking condom separating us?”

A small grin tugged at her lips. “You’re not angry I suggested it?”

I grabbed her hands and pushed them over her head against the wall.

“I could never be angry about that, Rory. You mean everything to me, and for you to want this to? I feel something for you I’ve never felt for anyone before.”

As a tear slipped out and rolled down the side of her face, she said, “I believe that feeling is love.”

I searched her eyes as I slowly pushed inside of her and said, “I believe you’re right, Éan. It’s love.”

I made love to her against the wall, then carried her to the bed, laid her on it, and made love to her again, pouring everything I had, everything I felt, into her.



My body was craving to touch Rory as we texted back and forth. Tonight was my last night on shift and then I’d be off for the entire weekend. She didn’t know about the camping trip I had planned for after the ball on Friday. I was tempted to tell her, but I kind of liked how she kept trying to guess.

Rory: So you won’t even give me a hint?

Me: No. Stop asking.

Rory: What if I promise you things?

That got my attention.

Me: What kind of things?

Rory: Are you busy?

Me: Never too busy for you...

My phone rang less than thirty seconds later.

“Hey,” I softly spoke into the phone. I had been standing outside of the firehouse enjoying the crisp fall evening.

“I miss you,” she whispered.

My chest squeezed. “Fuck I miss you.”

“Do you want to hear about my dress for the gala?”

The firefighters’ gala had been held for over 130 years. It had always been a big deal for my mother and sister. My brothers and I, on the other hand, could not have cared less. This year, though, I was on pins and needles for some reason. Maybe knowing I’d be in the same room with both Rory and her father had something to do with it. Plus, the idea of dressing up for an entire evening was not my idea of fun. The last six years I had volunteered to

work so others could go. “I thought you were going to tell me about it only if I told you about our weekend plans.”

“Then I would be teasing you...and it wouldn’t be very nice of me to tease you.”

There was no doubt I could hear the smile in her voice. “I’m a big boy—I think I can handle a bit of teasing.”

“Okay...if you insist. Well, for starters, I’d make you sit while I slowly took off my red dress—did I mention my dress was red?”

My heart pounded in my chest. “I believe you’ve mentioned it was red.”

“Hmm, what about my lingerie? Have I mentioned anything about that yet?”

Swallowing hard, I shook my head. “That it was red as well, but that’s it.”

Her silence had me anticipating her response. “Truth be told, I haven’t decided if I’m going to wear any or not.”

My dick pressed against my pants. “Jesus, Rory,” I whispered.

“After I get undressed, my hands may wander over my body.”

The thought of seeing Rory get herself off was tantalizing. “Keep going.”

“My hands will slowly move down to my—”

An alarm suddenly went off, for a two-alarm. Rory instantly stopped speaking. “Finn,” she whispered.

“I’ve got to go, Éan. I’ll text you in a bit.”

Her voice cracked as she replied, “Stay safe, okay?”

“Always, baby. Always.”

“See ya later—right?”

I swallowed hard. Knowing she would be sitting and worrying about me did something to my chest. It felt as if a weight was sitting on it.

“See ya later,” I replied before hitting End and hustling to the truck.



Chapter Thirty-Four

Rory

A letter and dancing

With a smile on my face, I stood in front of the mirror. If this didn't make Finn's mouth drop open, nothing would. The plunging neckline showed enough cleavage my father would likely tell me to cover up. The thigh-high slit added the perfect amount of sexy. Turning, I giggled when I saw the open back.

My eyes closed as I thought about Finn's hands softly moving against my bare skin. Trembling, I opened my eyes and bit down on my lip. My heartbeat increased, and I knew there was a look of anticipation on my face.

The knock startled me. I quickly made my way over and opened my bedroom door. My mother stood before me with a huge smile on her face. "Well, now I see why you asked if you could get ready *here*. You were trying to give your father time to recover from his heart attack when he sees you in this dress."

Heat swept across my cheeks. "Very funny," I replied with a fake laugh.

She lifted a brow. "You know I'm being somewhat serious."

With a nod, I turned and headed over to the dresser, where I grabbed a pair of silver Kendra Scott earrings to adorn my ears. I wore them often and loved the way they looked against the red dress. They didn't draw too much attention yet added just the right amount of shimmer.

"Less is always best," my mother whispered as she looked at my reflection in the mirror.

My eyes roamed my body before they met my mother's. "Do you think he'll like the dress?"

Her smile grew bigger. “Oh, my darling, I think he is going to *love* your dress. He won’t be able to take his eyes off you all night. Which is another reason you need to talk to your father.”

A tightness in my chest took hold of me, and I pulled in a deep breath of air. “I will. I promise you.”

Her smile faded some. “You know what he is going to do, don’t you?”

“Freak out?” I answered with a halfhearted laugh.

“That’s one thing he’ll do. Then he’ll probably curse some and forbid you to see him. Then he’ll tell you Finn is not the right guy for you and remind you what being with a firefighter is like.”

My eyes filled with tears, and I desperately tried to keep them contained. “I love him, Mom. And that scares me. A call came through when I was talking to him on the phone, and I was a basket case until he sent me a text saying they were heading back to the station. But the idea of not having Finn in my life...I can’t even imagine it. My feelings for him grow stronger by the day. That’s not my biggest fear right now, though. My biggest fear is Daddy telling me he won’t give me his blessing.”

Resting her chin on my shoulder, my mother reached around and handed me a small envelope as she gently smiled at me. “Then you need to decide what’s worth fighting for.”

“I know,” I softly replied as I took the envelope.

The only thing it said on it was:

To: you
From: me

“What is this?”

She grabbed my shoulders and gave them a tight squeeze. “It was delivered to your office today right after you left, along with a dozen roses. I had them leave the flowers on your desk and I brought this home to you.”

I ran my fingers along the front and whispered, “Finn.”

“Don’t be too long. Your father won’t want to be late.”

Absentmindedly nodding to her, I walked over to the chair in the corner and carefully sat down. I turned the envelope over and read what was typed on the front.

When we first met...

My hands shook as I opened the letter.

Dear Rory,

I'll never forget the moment when our eyes first met across that room. The way it made me feel was something I had never experienced before. That day changed my life forever.

Thank you for waking up my heart.

Love,

Finn

My hand covered my mouth as I fought to hold back my tears. Clutching the letter to my chest, I closed my eyes and let them free.

Four simple sentences. That was all it took for me to fall even more completely and utterly head over heels in love with Finn Ward than I already was.

I dropped onto my bed and dreamed about the first time we ever made love under the lights in his bedroom.

My father's voice on the other side of the door jerked me from my daydream.

"Leaving in five minutes, with or without you, Rory."



I inhaled deeply as I made my way into the giant ballroom. My parents had ended up leaving before me. My little crying jag forced me to redo my makeup, and my father refused to be late.

Our eyes met and cut a path across the room. Heat instantly swept over my body, yet I shivered when he smiled. I'd never had a man look at me the way Finn did.

He slowly made his way across the room before stopping directly in front of me.

"My God," he whispered as he let his eyes roam my entire body. "You look beautiful, Rory."

Butterflies took flight in my stomach, and I'm pretty sure I had to force myself to breathe while I gazed at him in his formal dress uniform. With a slight grin, I replied, "And you, Mr. Ward, look devilishly handsome."

He laughed as he clasped my hand and led me to the dance floor. "An

appropriate use of words.”

He took me in his arms, and we started dancing. I lifted my brows and asked, “Why is that?”

His tongue swept across his lips, causing my lower stomach to tug with desire. “The things I’m thinking I’m going to do to you tonight would have me on the naughty list for sure.”

With a chuckle, I wrapped my arms around his neck. “Care to share?”

“Yes, care to share my daughter with me, Ward?”

Finn immediately dropped his hold on me and took a step back. Little did I know this moment was going to shape the coming days.



Chapter Thirty-Five

Finn

No more hiding

My heart jumped the moment I heard Captain Adams's voice. Then it sank in: I realized Rory hadn't told him about us yet.

With a quick glance over my shoulder to look back at Rory and her dad, I made my way to the bar.

"Hey there, handsome, what can I get ya?"

I forced a smile and answered the blonde bartender. "Jack and Coke please."

Turning, she quickly got to making my drink, set it in front of me, then laughed. "You look like your dog just died."

With a fake chuckle, I shook my head. "Nah. Just my girlfriend's father hates me."

Her left brow raised. "Really? Seems to me like you need to convince him to like you."

"I left out a part. He's my boss."

She crinkled her nose and said, "Yikes. That's gotta suck."

This time the laugh was real. "Yeah, it does."

Her eyes lifted and she glanced over my shoulder. "I'm going to guess your girlfriend is the drop-dead-gorgeous lady in red."

Smiling, I turned and looked at Rory on the dance floor. She was staring over at me, and I instantly knew what she was thinking. I smiled back and lifted my hand to her. She barely raised hers from her father's back.

"You know what I think you should do?"

Without taking my eyes off Rory, I asked, "What?"

“Go cut in.”

“He just cut in on me,” I responded with a gruff laugh.

“Here, take another shot and then go take what you and she both clearly want.”

Spinning back around, I gazed at the bartender with a stunned expression. If a complete stranger could see what I felt for Rory, clearly so could her father. I reached for the shot glass and swallowed the whiskey she had set down a second before. “Fuck it. What do I have to lose?”

“That’s right!” she cheered. “Go get her, because I can guarantee a woman that beautiful won’t be left alone for too long.”

Gathering up my nerve, I got up and headed back over to Rory and Captain Adams. Someone grabbed my arm, bringing me to a halt.

“Dude, don’t do it.”

Looking down at the hand on my arm, I lifted my eyes to Colton’s. “I’m tired of hiding it.”

Colton shook his head. “Finn, I think this is a mistake. Don’t do this here.”

I jerked my head back and laughed. “What better place to do it. Cap won’t want to make a scene. Not here.”

With a quick yank of my arm, I loosened Colton’s hold on me. “Finn!” he said in warning before I headed back to Rory and her father where they stood off to the side talking to a few people.

My heart hammered in my chest when her eyes met mine. Rascal Flatts’s “I Melt” started playing right as I stopped in front of her. I reached my hand out for hers, which she placed gently in mine as I led her to the dance floor. Drawing her in to me, I quickly got lost in her eyes.

“Do you know what you do to me when you look at me like that?” I asked.

Rory smiled, and my knees went weak. “Like what?”

I lifted my hand and ran the back of it down the side of her soft face. “Like you can’t get close enough to me.”

Her eyes closed as she leaned into my touch. Gazing back up at me, she replied, “Hm... That’s funny, because you were looking at me the same way.”

“I can’t.”

She stopped dancing. “You can’t what?”

With a smile, I leaned down and pressed my lips to her ear. “Get close

enough to you...deep enough inside of you. I can't tell the world I love you."

Rory gasped and grabbed onto my jacket. "Finn," she whispered as I gazed into her tear-filled eyes. "I'll tell him, I swear to you. If you want me to do it right now, I will."

When I looked over her shoulder, I caught Captain Adams glaring our way. "I'm pretty sure he already knows, Éan."

Glancing to look behind her, Rory sighed. Mrs. Adams was standing next to her husband and gave me a soft smile. I was praying like hell Rory couldn't hear the pounding of my heart. The way Cap was looking at me had me just about fearing for my life.

"I should go talk to him."

My hand wrapped around her waist tighter, drawing her attention back to me. "After our dance. Besides, I'm pretty sure once you speak to him I'll be running for my life."

Rory laughed and nuzzled her face against me. "Finn?"

"Yeah?"

"I love you too."



The air in the ballroom felt so heavy it was an effort to breathe. I glanced around and watched as everyone went about their business. Not one of them knowing that any minute a deranged man was going to come after me.

I lifted the beer to my lips and took a long drink.

"Looks like your evening is going well."

Colton stood next to me, but I didn't bother to look at him. He had seen the way Captain Adams was watching Rory and me dance. I was taking a risk by holding her so close...touching her the way I was, but damn it if I didn't care. I was in love with her, and I'd never felt this way about a woman before. I didn't give a shit who her father was.

I drew in a deep breath and pushed it out. "It's going fine. Where's Melissa?"

"Said she needed to use the ladies' room."

My eyes scanned the room for Rory. She and her parents had walked off together and I'd lost sight of them when a few fellow firefighters walked up to me to shoot the shit. I hated how controlling Rory's parents were, and I fought to keep my mouth shut on it all.

“Are you two official now?” I asked.

Colton laughed. “By ‘official.’ what do you mean?”

Turning my head to look at him, I watched for a few seconds as he glanced around the room. “I mean is she your girlfriend? Are you exclusive? That kind of official.”

He shrugged. “Maybe. I don’t really know. Melissa thinks we are.”

“And you don’t?”

Pressing the beer bottle to his lips, he drained it. “I don’t know, Finn. Maybe.”

His eyes lit up, and I followed his gaze. Melissa was walking back, with Rory next to her. One looked happy as hell, the other looked like she was on the verge of tears.

I walked up to Rory and took her hands in mine. “What’s wrong?”

A single tear rolled down her cheek, and my world came to a crashing halt. I wanted to hurt the person who’d caused her to cry.

“Take me out of here.”

Jerking my head back in surprise, I looked behind her to see her father glaring at me. “What happened, Rory?”

She shook her head and attempted to not fall apart. “Please, Finn. I need you to take me out of here.” Our eyes locked, and I’d never felt so helpless in my life. But if leaving with her would help, I’d do it. No matter how wrong it felt.

Wrapping my arm around her waist, I turned to Colton. “I’ll see ya Monday.”

He nodded and flashed Rory a smile. “It’s going to be okay.”

I couldn’t help but notice how sad her eyes got before she forced a smile. “I know it will.”

With a quick nod of my head to Colton, I ushered Rory out of the room and the hotel. The moment we hit the cold fall air, Rory drew in a deep breath.

“Éan, tell me what happened.”

She shook her head. “Not here,” she whispered, and covered her mouth to keep from crying.

I handed the valet my ticket. “If you could hustle and get me that car as soon as you can, I’ll make it worth your while.”

He took one look at Rory and sprinted off. I couldn’t help but keep checking over my shoulder for Captain Adams to come walking out. It was

fucking obvious that things hadn't gone well.

Rory grabbed my hand and turned to me. "Where are we going?"

I had planned on taking her camping. Wes was in town for a few days and had set everything up for me.

"Um, I was going to take you camping, but if you want me to bring you home..."

A look of horror washed over her face. "No! I want to be with you. I *need* to be with you, I don't care where. Should I change?"

Reaching my hand to her face, I gently brushed a strand of hair behind her ear and smiled. "If you want to stop by your place first and change... All I really know is I want to slowly take that dress off you."

Her eyes lit up and she gave me a real smile that caused my damn stomach to drop. "I want that too, but I want it where you were planning on surprising me."

The valet pulled up and jumped out of the car. I quickly opened the passenger door and helped Rory in. I shut the door, pulled a hundred out of my wallet, and handed it to the kid.

"Dang, dude, thanks a million, but this is too much."

A quick slap on his back, one more "Thank you," and I jogged around the front of my car. When I got in, I turned to see Rory full-on crying.

Putting the car in drive, I headed to my parents' place. I hadn't wanted to risk the chance of being at a campground and a storm blowing in. It was the end of October; a cold front would have made camping miserable. Besides, what better place to camp out than the woods I grew up in? I reached for Rory's hand and kissed the back of it.

"Everything's going to be okay, Éan."

She turned to me and smiled, but it didn't reach her eyes. "I know," she whispered.

My chest ached knowing I couldn't take the pain away. I'd have done anything to keep her from crying.

When I pulled out onto the highway, a strange feeling washed over me.

Nothing was okay.



Chapter Thirty-Six

Rory

Difficult choices

An hour earlier

I followed my parents out of the ballroom and into another room. Holding my breath, I heard the door shut and my father inhale deeply, then somberly speak.

“You knew?”

Spinning around, I saw he was glaring at my mother. I instantly regretted asking her to keep my secret from my father. She lifted her chin and replied, “I did.”

My stomach dropped when I saw my father’s face turn red. Swallowing hard, I took a step toward him. “I told her and asked her to not say anything. I promised her I would tell you, and I was going to tell you earlier, but I didn’t get the chance to.”

His hands rubbed at his face as he let out a frustrated laugh. “That’s great. You know how I feel about this, Chelsea, and you kept it from me.”

“Rick, you are being stupid about this.”

“Stupid!” my father shouted, causing us both to jump. I don’t think I’d ever heard him raise his voice to either of us. “My daughter is not only dating a firefighter—which, I might add, I specifically told her she was *not* allowed to date—but she’s dating *him!*”

Anger rushed through my veins, igniting my rage. I balled my fists and walked up to my father. “I’m not sixteen years old! You cannot tell me who I can and can’t date, Dad. It’s my choice.”

His face softened for one moment before going cold again. “But Finn Ward? I knew it. I knew this was going to happen, that it was a matter of time. He’s not good enough for you.”

My heart raced so fast the room felt like it was spinning. What was my father rambling on about? “You don’t even know him! How can you say that, and how did you know this was going to happen?”

“I know enough about him, Rory. He’s a player. He won’t be faithful to you.”

“Rick!” my mother said as she stepped between us. “What in the world do you have against that boy? You’ve always looked at him like he was an ant that needed to be stepped on and taken out. He’s Mike’s son, for goodness’ sakes.”

Shaking his head, he stared at a space between us. “He knew she was my daughter. That’s why he went after her—to get back at me. And that’s the *only* reason.”

“He had no idea I was your daughter!” I shouted. “You’re making excuses because you don’t have a reason *to* dislike him.”

Tossing his head back in laughter, my father turned away and quickly paced across the floor. “Oh, you want a reason?”

My hands went to my hips. “Yes, Dad. I’d like a reason, if you don’t mind.”

“He has a reputation, for one thing. I personally saw him sucking the face off an EMT tech like he couldn’t get enough of her. He flirts with women; you saw him at the bar earlier talking to the blonde. He has no intentions of ever being anything serious with you.”

My eyes filled with tears. “You don’t know what he was doing at the bar any more than I do.”

Pointing to me, he smiled. “Exactly. That boy has had his eyes on you since he was five damn years old. Claiming he was going to marry you and take you from me. Not on my watch.”

All the air left the room, and I had to grab ahold of my mother to keep from falling. I shook my head to try and work out what my father had just said. “Is that it? You don’t like him because when he was a little boy he told you he liked me? Is that what this is all about? You don’t like him because of something he said to you years ago! For Christ’s sake, Dad, neither one of us even remember each other back then. How in the world can you hold something he said when he was so young over his head?”

Moving closer, my father reached out for me. I quickly stepped away from him. I could see the hurt in his eyes, and it about killed me. But there was no way I was backing down from this fight.

“Rory, the life of a firefighter’s wife is hard. The worry you’ll have when he goes out on calls.”

I shook my head and held up my hands to stop him from talking. “Save it, Dad. This is my choice! If I want to take on that worry, then it’s on me, not you.”

He grew frustrated. “They’re gone for days at a time, and when they’re not at work they’re usually working another job, or in training. Is that what you want? A guy who is never there? Look at your job and the hours you keep. You’ll grow apart, Rory. And when that happens, he will search out comfort from another woman. He will break your heart, and then you’ll come running back to us.”

I glared at the man I called my father. “So, what you’re telling me, Dad, is that you speak from experience.”

“Rory Adams,” my mother hissed.

Turning to her, I replied, “No. Listen to him, Mom. He sounds like he knows from experience. So you grew lonely at one point and cheated on Mom.”

“Rory,” my mother pleaded.

“Is that it, Dad. Is that why you think all firefighters are bad, because you’re all nothing but cheaters?”

“Rory!” my mother cried out.

He stood there with his mouth hanging open in shock. “Am I right, Dad? Isn’t that why you’re so afraid of Finn hurting me, because you fear he’s going to do the thing you did to Mom?”

My mother walked up to me and grabbed me by the shoulders. “Rory Ann Adams. You stop this right now.”

“Yes.”

My eyes opened wide in horror, and so did my mother’s. She dropped her hold on me and spun around and asked, “What did you say?”

“Yes. I’m afraid he is going to do the very thing I did to your mother.”

My hands came up to my mouth as my mother whispered, “What?” This was not happening. None of this was happening. I wanted to go back into the ballroom and let Finn hold me in his arms while we danced. I wanted to feel his warm breath on my lips as he whispered how much he loved me.

This is not what I wanted.

A tear rolled down my father's cheek. "It only happened once, and I've lived with the guilt ever since."

I reached for my mother as she stumbled backward. If I hadn't thought she needed to be held up, I'd have probably stumbled myself.

She pressed her lips together to get her emotions under control. "When?"

He dropped his head, and we could barely hear him say, "It was before we got married."

My mother pushed my father's shoulder. "Look at me, damn it!"

He did as she asked. "You were working crazy hours and we had gotten into a fight. You told me you were taking a few days to yourself and needed to think about us and if we had a future. You left me, Chelsea. I was pissed and hurt. I went to a bar after my shift and ran into someone."

"Who?" my mother demanded.

My head was spinning, my heart breaking. I wanted to cover my ears and pretend I was not hearing what I was.

"Renee Marsh. I got drunk, she flirted, I flirted back, and the next thing I knew we were... I hated myself afterward. I wanted desperately to tell you. But then you came back to me a few weeks later, and I didn't want to risk losing you again."

Squaring her shoulders, she took in a deep breath. "We'll deal with that later—but you cannot hold what you did over Finn's head."

"When I look at him, I see me, Chelsea. That scares the piss out of me."

I moved closer to him. "That's a *good* thing, Daddy! Why can't you see that? He's like you! If you'd only give him a chance, you'd see how much I love him, and he loves me."

He shook his head and slammed his hand against the wall. "No! I forbid you to see him."

My mouth fell open and my mother sucked in a breath. I had no idea why my father was acting the way he was. It pissed me off, and more than that it scared me.

Now it was my turn to square my shoulders. "And if I ignore you?"

"I'll fire him, and I can promise you he will never work for the Boston Fire Department again."

My mother jumped in front of me. "Rick! He's the son of one of your best friends. You can't do that."

I stood in silence, staring at my father in utter shock. A million things ran through my mind. Why was he doing this? Did he hate Finn that much? Was there another reason he wanted to keep Finn from me that he wasn't admitting to?

"Why, Daddy? Why would you do that? Don't you want me to be happy?" I asked between deep breaths. I tried like hell to keep from crying, but it was bubbling up inside of me and I was on the verge of breaking down. I wanted my parents' blessings. Needed them.

"Because that boy is going to hurt you. I see the writing on the wall, and you need to also."

I shook my head. "No. I love him, and I won't walk away from him." My promise to Finn before we'd made love flashed through my memory. I'd sworn to never leave him.

"You don't love him. He's showing you a good time and you're having fun. If you ask me, he has been nothing but bad for you. You've been late for work, missing days so you can probably spend them with him. He's a bad influence on you."

Walking up to my father, my mother placed her hand on his arm. "Rick, I think you need to step away from this right now, before you say or do something you regret."

I'd never been disrespectful to my parents. Ever. But there was no way I was going to let my father tell me who I could see. "I'm not leaving him," I said defiantly.

He reached for his phone and hit a number. "We'll see about that."

The cold look in his eyes scared me. I'd never seen it before. My father hated the man I loved, had admitted to cheating on my mother, and was now threatening me. My world was slowly falling apart.

"Chuck, Rick Adams. Yeah, I'm fine; everything here is fine. I want to put in a transfer. Finn Ward."

My hands crashed over my mouth as a small gasp escaped. *How could he? Why is he doing this?*

"Rick!" my mother pleaded.

Turning away from her, he stared directly at me. My chest was heaving as I tried to breathe. "Yes, you heard me right. Finn Ward. I might recommend he be let go from the—"

A tear rolled down my cheek as I cried out, "I'll do it!" I'd never felt so defeated in my life.

A slow smile spread over his face, and my heart broke in two. “You know what, let’s hold off on that right now, Chuck. Yeah, I’ve got to look into something a bit further before I make that call.”

Hitting End, he put his phone in his pocket and looked at me with an emotion I’d never seen in his eyes before.

“Let me at least spend this weekend with him.”

Before he had a chance to argue, my mother spoke up. “It’s the least you could do, since you’re being a complete and utter asshole right now.”

He held his head up, but I saw it in his eyes. There was a small bit of regret over what he was doing. “Fine. You have until Monday or I call Chuck back. I’m sure I can come up with a good reason for Finn Ward to be let go from the department.”

My hands balled into fists as I walked up to my father. “I don’t know why you’re doing this. But what I do know is I hate you, and I will *never* forgive you for this.”

He sucked in a breath and his eyes filled with tears. He swallowed hard before saying, “Someday, you’ll thank me, Rory.”

Staring at my father with a nothing but a broken heart and a defeated frame of mind, I whispered, “Never.”



Chapter Thirty-Seven

Rory

The beginning of the end

The feel of his hand on my leg caused me to jump. “Hey, you fell asleep.”

I rolled my neck to try and get the crick out. “I’m sorry,” I said, looking through the window. My hands came up to my mouth as I gasped. A variety of lights and beautiful white lanterns were hanging from the trees. A table was set up outside of a huge tent. From where I was sitting in the car, I could see flowers and what looked to be food.

“Finn, it’s beautiful. Wes did all of this?”

With a smile, he unbuckled my seatbelt and helped me out of the car. “I’m going to safely say someone helped him. I couldn’t have your first camping experience be a bad one.”

I stepped out of his car and wrapped my arms around my body, the cold air sending shivers down my spine.

Finn frowned and rushed over to me. “Damn, you’re cold.”

The second his arms wrapped around my body, I warmed up. “Not when I’m in your arms.” His eyes pierced mine, and I fought to keep the tears away. “Make love to me, Finn. Please.”

He leaned in and gently brushed his lips over mine. “Rory, please tell me what has you so upset. What happened with your father?”

Closing my eyes, I shook my head. “None of that matters. The only thing that matters is us. Together right now.”

Before I knew what was happening, I was in Finn’s arms as he carried me to the tent. He gently set me down while he unzipped the door. We slipped in, and I gaped at the sight before me. “This is like a room! A beautiful magical

room!” I said as I took everything in. Twinkle lights ran along each side of the tent from one end to the other, creating one of the most beautiful effects I’d ever seen. Rose petals covered a blow-up mattress that was on the opposite side of the giant tent. A small stove contained a fire that heated the tent to the perfect temperature.

Finn walked up to the stove and checked the fire. “I’m going to owe Wes big-time.”

I forced a smile and tried not to think about how these were the last hours we’d ever be spending together.

“It’s all so beautiful. If this is what camping is like, sign me up!”

Finn walked over to me and cupped my face. “There’s that laugh I love so much.

Needing to snap out of my state, I gave him a sincere smile. “I want you.”

His eyes searched my face. “Your dress.”

“I don’t care about it. The only thing I care about is you. Forever.”

The feeling of his lips on mine sent a jolt of lightning through my body, instantly filling me with his love. My arms wrapped around his neck, deepening the kiss. The low growl from the back of his throat fueled my desire. I wanted to rip his jacket off, but I also wanted to savor every single second of this.

His hand wrapped around my back and he slowly unzipped my dress. Drawing back from my lips, he whispered, “You’re so beautiful, Éan. I couldn’t pull my eyes off you tonight.”

I dropped my head back as his lips moved softly over my neck. I pushed everything from my mind. The only thing that mattered was this moment. Finn loving me like only he could.

I jumped when his hands gently touched my shoulders. “Look at me, baby.”

My head lifted and our eyes met. He pushed the dress from my shoulders, and it pooled at my feet. The left side of his mouth rose in a smile as he slowly shook his head. “No bra, Ms. Adams?”

Feeling the heat in my cheeks, I sheepishly grinned. His lips were back on my skin while his hands explored my body. The fire inside of me was building with each kiss. Every touch.

“Finn,” I whispered when he cupped my breasts and took one nipple into his warm mouth. He was the only one who would ever be able to take me to a dreamland I never wanted to leave.

Dropping to his knees, he ran his finger lightly along my red lace panties. “You’re so perfect. Beautiful in every single way.”

My hands came up and ran over my breasts. There was something Finn brought out in me that made me feel like I was the sexiest woman alive.

“Watching you touch yourself drives me crazy.”

Dropping my head, I smiled. “The feeling’s mutual.”

Goosebumps raced across my skin as he slowly lowered my panties. Taking my hand, he held it while I stepped out of my panties and they fell along with the red dress onto the floor. He took me in with greedy eyes.

“Fucking perfect.”

My heart raced as he took my heels off and gently set them to the side before standing. With a smile, I reached my hands out and pushed his jacket off his shoulders.

“It’s my turn to undress you.”

Winking, he replied, “Be my guest.”

I tried desperately to keep my hands from shaking while I unbuttoned his dress shirt. My biggest fear was not pleasing him as much as he pleased me.

“You’re not going fast enough,” he whispered as he unbuckled his belt and pushed his dress pants down. He kicked them off to the side, and I watched as he took himself in his hand and stroked ever so slowly. The pull in my lower stomach was so intense I was positive I would come with one touch.

“I’ve been wishing for this night to happen for the last few days.”

His words forced my eyes to leave his hand and meet his gaze. “I have too,” I softly spoke. “More than you know.”

He moved closer, lifting me into his arms again and carrying me to our little makeshift bed. He gently placed me down, and I moved across the mattress while he crawled over me.

“I can’t wait any longer, Finn. I need to feel you deep inside of me.”

His mouth was on my neck again, moving up to the sensitive skin under my ear. One of his hands held him barely above my body while the other slowly ran over my body.

Arching my back, I silently begged him for more.

“I can’t get enough of you, Rory.”

My eyes closed while I let his words settle into my memory. I needed to remember every moment. “Don’t make me beg, Finn.”

He chuckled before he ran his tongue along my neck and down to my

nipple. Taking it into his mouth, he gently bit down, and I moaned in pleasure. When he slipped his fingers inside of me, I nearly jumped off the bed.

“Finn! I can’t take it.”

“Do you want me inside of you, Éan?”

“Yes,” I hissed out as he moved his fingers faster, taking me right to the very edge of orgasm.

“Yes. Please...I need you now.”

His eyes searched my face while his knee spread me open to him. The tip of his erection pressed between my legs, where he teased me for a few seconds before he slowly pushed inside of me as he pinned my hands over my head.

A long, soft moan slipped from my lips while he moved ever so slowly in and out of me and his mouth explored my body.

“Oh God, Rory. Feels so perfect. So amazingly perfect.”

If my head hadn’t been spinning in pure delight, I might have been able to speak. The only thing I could do was revel in the feeling of Finn buried so deep inside of me I was sure we would stay like that forever.

The familiar buildup slowly moved through my body before it settled between my legs. Wrapping my legs tightly around him, I called out his name. He let go of my hands and cupped my face. His eyes captured mine as he pushed in and his whole body trembled against mine.

I burned the moment into my memory. Forever remembering him whispering my name against my lips.



Chapter Thirty-Eight

Finn

Camping, Finn style

The sound of Rory's soft breathing should have lulled me to sleep, but instead it kept me awake. My mind raced over the last few hours. Something wasn't right; I could feel it in my bones. She refused to talk about what her father had said, even though she'd cried herself to fucking sleep in my car on the way here.

A small whimper escaped her lips. I drew her in closer to me and held her tight. She immediately settled back into the rhythmic breathing pattern.

Burying my face in her hair, I took in a deep breath and slowly exhaled. "I love you, Rory. I'll always love you."

She grabbed my arm and softly replied, "Finn."

My mind raced for another hour before it finally settled, and I drifted off to sleep with Rory safely in my arms.



My eyes snapped open, and I was greeted with the most stunning blue eyes staring back at me.

"Good morning, Éan."

With a smile, she leaned in and kissed my lips. "Do you have any idea how cute you are when you're sleeping?"

Pinching my brows, I asked, "Cute? You describe Flash as being cute. Not the man who made passionate love to you last night in a tent."

With a giggle, she nodded. "That's true. How about if I say handsome?"

“Handsome I’ll take. Cute not so much.”

Her smile grew bigger. Leaning closer to her, I kissed her. “Morning breath,” she mumbled against my lips.

Rolling her onto her back, I pressed my cock to her entrance, then slowly worked my way inside of her. She moaned when I kissed her again. Her hands laced through my hair and her legs wrapped tightly around my waist. Arching her back, she took me in deeper. The feel of being inside of Rory was one I would never get used to. It was like a drug. The more I experienced it, the more I had to have it.

We reached our orgasms together, silently whispering each other’s name. Every time with her felt like the first time.

Once I stopped moving, I leaned my forehead against hers. “My new favorite place to be is inside of you.”

Her eyes glassed over with tears. “That’s *my* favorite place for you to be too.”

With a smile, she asked, “You didn’t happen to stash me a change of clothes, did you?”

“I did. I wasn’t sure what to bring, so I brought everything you had at my place.” I winked and slowly pulled out of her. Reaching for a towel, I quickly cleaned myself before I gently took care of her.

“Finn, last night was one of the most magical nights of my life. Nothing will ever top it.”

“Hell, I hope that’s not true. I have a few things up my sleeve yet.”

Her smile faded for a quick second before she wiggled her eyebrows. “Will they involve me starting off my morning like I just did?”

Slipping a pair of jeans on, I crawled onto the mattress. It caved in a little, so I made a note to myself to fill it up with more air. “You better believe they will, Éan. Now come on, get dressed—we’re late for breakfast.”

With a quick kiss on her lips, I jumped off the bed and handed her the small bag I had packed and given to Wes to bring.

She climbed off the bed, the whole time smiling the most beautiful smile I’d ever seen. It looked like her skin was glowing.

I pulled a long sleeve T-shirt over my head and looked for the pump to fill up the mattress.

When I glanced over my shoulder, my dick jumped as I watched Rory slip into her jeans—no panties at all—and pull them over that perfect ass of hers. “I hope we’re not planning on doing any hiking.”

“Why’s that?” I asked while I finished off filling up the mattress. Turning to face her, I saw her attempting to hide a grin.

“You didn’t pack me any shoes.”

I was puzzled. “Shoes?”

Rory busted out laughing as she reached down and held up the heels she had worn last night. “This is all I have! I don’t have any other shoes.”

My heart dropped. “Fuck me.”

“I’m up for that again!”

She covered her mouth to stifle a laugh but lost the battle. I let out a string of curse words. “I can’t believe I forgot fucking shoes!”

“Well, at least you remembered my toothbrush!”

“What size do you wear?”

With a shrug, she replied, “Seven, seven and a half. Depends on the shoe.”

“Perfect! Angie wears a seven and a half.”

She laughed and put her heels back in the bag.

Damn, I love this girl.

Walking up to her, I turned and glanced back over my shoulder. “Hop on.”

Her brows lifted. “Come again?”

“Jump on. I’ll give you a piggyback ride.”

“Where to?” she asked with a chuckle.

“The house.”

A look of horror spread over her face. “How close are we to your parents’ house?” Her hands slammed against her mouth. “Oh. My. God. They’re going to know we had sex!”

I stared at her with a look of disbelief. “Um, I’m pretty sure my parents know we’re doing the deed already.”

She slapped my chest, then quickly wrapped her hair around and twisted a piece of something in some magical way that kept it up in a ponytail. “I haven’t even brushed my teeth! Or washed my face! You want me to just wander up to your parents’ house on your back...with no shoes?”

With a shrug, I answered, “Yeah. What’s the problem?”

She glared at me for a good minute before she burst out in a laughing fit. I had no idea what was so damn funny. All I knew was I loved the sound of Rory’s laughter and the way it rushed over my body and wrapped around my heart.

It didn't take long for me to start laughing right along with her, until I finally asked, "Why are we laughing?"

Wiping her tears away, she shook her head slightly. She placed her hands on my chest and grabbed my T-shirt. "Finn Ward, I need you to know I've never loved like this before. And it's not just me loving you. It's the way you've made me love *life*. The stolen moments that only the two of us will ever know about. The memories I'll cherish for the rest of my life."

I lifted my hand and tucked a strand of her brown hair that she had missed behind her ear. "We're going to make so many more memories, Éan."

Her eyes searched my face, and she swallowed hard. "I love you, Finn. Thank you for bringing me to life."

My chest warmed as I gazed into the eyes of the only woman I'd ever loved. The only woman I *would* ever love. Cupping her face in my hands, I softly brushed my lips against hers. "You're my whole world, Rory."

A single tear rolled down her cheek. I gently kissed it away and drew her in closer to me. Lifting her chin so that our mouths met. "My everything."



Chapter Thirty-Nine

Rory

Breakfast with the family

The beat of my heart was so loud in my ears I could hardly hear myself think. The second his lips touched mine, I attempted to sear the moment into my memory. Finn's whispered words caused my heart to soar and ache at the same time. I wanted desperately to tell him what my father had said, how he'd used Finn's career as a bargaining tool for me to give him up. But I knew that if I told Finn, he would simply walk away from being a firefighter. And I knew that that was something I wouldn't be able to live with.

"Damn, I love your kisses," Finn said as he gazed into my eyes.

"I love yours."

He winked and turned around again. "Jump on—I'm starving!"

I hopped onto his back and ducked when he slipped out of the large tent.

"Oh wow!" I gasped as I took in the site around me. "It's beautiful here."

"It wasn't a bad place to grow up, that's for sure."

"I wish I could remember when we were little. My mother said you had a crush on me."

Finn tickled my foot, and I let out a scream. "*I had the crush? I'm pretty sure it was the other way around.*"

Leaning in closer, I placed my mouth near his ear. "Aren't you the one who declared to my father you were going to marry me?"

With a laugh, Finn nodded. "Yeah, I guess you're right. But hey, I was a smart kid. Knew something special when I saw it."

My heart felt like it tore a bit as I held on to him a little tighter. *How am I ever going to be able to let him go?*

The sound of a dog barking caught my attention. “Flash!” I cried out when I saw the Dalmatian running toward us.

“No!” Finn shouted. “Flash! No!”

Before I knew what was happening, I was on the ground and Flash was licking me like he hadn’t seen me in weeks. “I take it my father said you can keep taking Flash home with you?” I asked, laughing.

“Well, he hasn’t told me to stop yet.”

Finn pulled Flash off me, reached down, and picked me up. Our eyes met. My chest ached as I saw the concern in his. “Are you hurt?” he asked worriedly?

Yes. But not in the way you think.

“No, I’m okay.”

The tenderness in his voice was unmistakable. He loved me, and I knew deep in my heart Finn would never hurt me like my father insisted he would.

I almost blurted out for Finn to run away with me. We could go live on an island somewhere, just the two of us.

Together.

Forever.

“Let’s get some breakfast, Éan.”

Smiling, I wrapped my arms around his neck as he walked toward the house. Flash was barking and running back and forth, too excited to hold it in.

“He loves it here,” I said.

Finn let out a loud laugh. “Hell yeah he does. He has room to run and isn’t locked up in a crate. Bastard hasn’t done one thing to the house. Nothing.”

With a giggle, I leaned my head into him. “I could get used to you carrying me everywhere. I may have to forget my shoes all the time.”

“I don’t need an excuse to hold you in my arms.”

Thud. There went my heart. I was convinced only Finn would ever make me feel so loved and cherished. Like I was his entire world.

“They have emerged from their lovers’ quarters.”

My cheeks instantly heated.

“Rory, you remember my older pain-in-the-ass brother Wes.”

With a smile, I nodded and held my left hand out while still hanging on to Finn’s neck. “It’s great seeing you again, Wes. Thank you so much for doing everything with the...um...tent.”

Wes threw his head back and laughed, then motioned for us to follow him into the house.

The moment Finn walked up onto the porch, the front door flew open. “Rory!”

Finn’s mother, Jenn, came rushing over to us. Then she stopped on a dime.

“Are you hurt? Did that dog knock you over? Where are your shoes?”

Setting me down, Finn walked up to his mother and gave her a kiss on the cheek before drawing her in for a hug.

“Ma, catch your breath, will you? I forgot to pack her shoes, and yes, the damn dog knocked us over, but no one is hurt.”

Jenn wore a wide grin as she kissed Finn back, pushed him out of the way, and walked up to me. Taking my hands in hers, she slowly shook her head. “My goodness. I still can’t get over how beautiful you’ve grown up to be, Rory.”

“Thank you, Mrs. Ward.”

“There will be none of that ‘Mrs. Ward’ crap! I told you to call me Jenn,” she said as she waved her hand about. “Now, let’s get you some breakfast. I’m sure you worked up an appetite.”

“Ma!” Finn said as I stared at her with a horrified expression.

“What? All that dancing last night at the gala? Then making the poor girl sleep in a tent? She probably didn’t get a wink of sleep.”

Jenn turned and headed into the house as I covered my mouth to contain my laughter. Wes chuckled and hit Finn on the back while tossing me a wink. “What she doesn’t know won’t hurt her.”



Breakfast was a mix of chaos and pure fun. Wes talked about his life in New York City while everyone was glued to his every word. I was pretty sure I was the only who caught the sadness in his eyes. He even hinted at moving back to Boston, at which Jenn perked up, though she didn’t push the matter. I honestly couldn’t imagine having parents who weren’t pushy or in my business every second of the day.

“What’s it like being a lawyer, Rory?” Mike asked as he took a drink of coffee.

I shrugged. “Long hours and lots of research and questioning.”

Mike lifted his brow and gave me a discerning look. “You don’t like being a lawyer?”

“I do.” My eyes drifted across the room to Finn. “At one point in my life I wanted to do something different, but that all changed when I decided to pursue law. I committed to becoming an attorney and went after it a hundred and ten percent.”

“You sound like your mother,” Jenn stated as she sat down on the armrest of the chair Mike was sitting in.

With a warm smile, I replied, “That’s a compliment. Thank you.”

Angela, or Angie as she insisted I called her, walked up to me with a huge smile on her face and she handed me a pair of sneakers. “You’re lucky we’re the same shoe size!”

With a light chuckle, I took the sneakers and thanked her. “You have no idea how much you’ve saved my feet.”

She waved me off. “It’s nothing. Now that I know we’re the same shoe size, though, I may be raiding your closet.”

I quickly pulled on the socks she’d given me, followed by the sneakers, all the while trying to keep a fake smile on my face. “Anytime. You’re more than welcome to any of my shoes. I will warn you, though: I have a bit of an obsession with them.”

Angie smiled. “Did we just become besties? Seriously.”

My chest pained, knowing that unless I came up with a plan to get around my father’s ultimatum, this would probably be the last time I’d ever see Angie. *If I break her brother’s heart, she won’t want anything to do with me.*

The door flew open, and Preston came dashing in. “Make sure you tell Harmony she’s beautiful!”

Everyone looked around the room, confused. “What in the hell are you talking about?” Wes asked right as an exhausted Harmony came walking through the door holding Presley.

Jenn jumped up and immediately took the baby from her. “My little angel is here. Harmony darling, you’re looking rather beautiful this morning.”

Harmony flashed Preston a death glare, and I couldn’t help but try to cover my smile with my hand.

Preston shrugged as if he had no idea where that had come from.

“Hey, Harmony! Look who’s here,” Angie said, walking over to me and wrapping her arm around my shoulder.

Harmony’s eyes lit up. “Rory!”

Again, the guilt hit me like a brick wall. Fake-grinning, I replied, “It’s great seeing you, Harmony.”

She walked up to Angie and me and took our hands, then dragged us to the front door. “We need to talk.”

My heart rate increased as I glanced back at Finn, who stood there with a goofy smile on his face.

Once we got to the front porch, Harmony took off down the path. Angie followed, so I did as well.

“Harmony? Is everything okay?” I asked.

She spun around and walked backward. “I needed a break and some one-on-one with women!”

Angie and I chuckled. “Where are we going?”

“To the swings!” Harmony said with a little bit more pep in her step. We didn’t have to walk far before we came upon a set of swings. Harmony sat down and pushed off, dropping her head back and letting the sun shine on her face. The way she was smiling made me grin.

I took the middle swing. “That’s a big smile,” I said as I swung back and forth.

“I’m exhausted. Presley has colic. Preston is always at the pub. But I’m happy as hell. Well, I could use more sex.”

“Gross. Okay, that’s way too much information, Harmony,” Angie said while making a gagging sound.

Harmony groaned. “It’s true. I need a night with my husband.”

“Finn and I can watch Presley tonight if you guys want to go out,” I offered.

Angie jumped up. “But you’re camping, Rory!”

“Camping?” Harmony asked with a confused expression.

“Finn had Wes set up a tent yesterday. We stayed in there last night. It was beautiful, and so romantic. I think he has some hiking or something planned for today.”

With a dreamy look on her face, Harmony sighed. “How romantic. I tell ya what, Angie. Your mom did an amazing job with these brothers of yours.”

Angie kicked up her feet and dropped her body back, swinging higher. “Tell me about it. I compare every guy I date to my brothers. Then I see them do romantic shit like what Finn did with the whole camping thing, and I just think I’m screwed unless I want to date Wes.”

The three of us started laughing as I pushed off and swung a little. My

heart was so conflicted. In a way, I needed to tell someone what had happened with my parents last night, but at the same time, I couldn't risk Harmony or Angie telling Finn.

"Okay, ladies," Angie said suddenly, "I have to run. I'm meeting a friend in Boston and helping her look for a wedding gown."

"How fun!" I said.

Angie frowned. "Not really. Once my mother finds out where I'm going she'll be all over me with questions about why *I* haven't found a boyfriend."

Harmony stood and walked over to her. Taking Angie's hands in hers, she smiled and lifted her brows as she talked. "You're still so young. Don't worry about dating. Finish school, get your degree, and have a little bit of fun. Trust me."

I couldn't help but notice the sadness that clouded Angie's face.

"It's all good. I've got to run, or the bride will be freaking out. You guys have some girl time. I'll let Preston and Finn know where you are."

"Bye, Angie. Have fun!" I called out as she started back toward the house.

Harmony turned and faced me. Her hands went to her hips while her head tilted some.

"Why are you staring at me with a mom look on your face?" I asked, chuckling.

She folded her arms and lifted one brow. "Spill it."



Rory

Making memories before saying goodbye

Swallowing hard, I half smiled. “What do you mean?”

Harmony slowly nodded her head and took a few steps closer to me. Her expression hardened. “Don’t play coy with me, Rory. Something is not right. I’m the queen of hiding emotions and pretending like everything is okay.”

I stopped the swing. “Everything is fine.”

My heart pounded so hard against my chest I was sure she could hear it. “Your eyes are bloodshot, and I know it’s not because Finn kept you up all night in that tent. You’ve been crying. You offered to watch Presley instead of spending another romantic night alone with Finn, and I can only guess that’s because you’re afraid to be alone with him for some reason. Your smiles have all been forced and you are a terrible liar. By the way, that might hurt your career as a lawyer.”

Laughing, I stood. “Honestly, I’m fine. I had a bit of a falling-out with my father, but it will be fine.”

She narrowed her brows. “You’re sure?”

Taking her hand in mine, I gave it a squeeze. “I’m sure.”

“So, you’re telling me that I read all of this wrong.”

I nodded. “Totally read it wrong. I know Finn mentioned wanting to spend more time with Presley, and I thought it would be a good thing for everyone. For you and Preston to have some alone time, and for Finn and me to visit with Presley.”

A wide smile crossed her face. “You know, I’ve never seen Finn with a girlfriend before. Preston was talking about it this morning. He said Finn is

head over heels in love with you.”

Keep it together, Rory. Keep it together.

“I feel the same way about him. He’s opened my eyes to so many things. I’ve learned to enjoy life and not let it revolve around work.”

“That’s good! I don’t want to jinx anything, but I sure would love having you as a sister-in-law.”

Tears built in my eyes, and I quickly looked away.

“I’m sorry. Maybe I shouldn’t have said that.”

Forcing myself to get my composure together, I grinned. I was never going to make it through the rest of the weekend if I didn’t get a handle on my emotions. “It’s okay. I would love that too, Harmony. I really would. I know Finn and I haven’t been together for very long, but I love him. I love him so much, and that scares me for so many different reasons.”

Harmony laced her arm around mine and guided us back toward the house. “You know, when I first started to date Preston I was scared every single time he went to the station. I swear, my breathing nearly stopped until he walked back in through the door. But *you* have to know how that is, right? Your dad’s a firefighter.”

I stared down at the path. If only that was the main reason I was so scared. Finn was going to hate me come Monday. I’d promised him I’d never leave him. Biting on my cheek, I focused on keeping my tears at bay.

“I’ve never really been in a relationship before. I mean I have, but the feelings weren’t so...intense...like they are with Finn. The idea of losing him, for any reason, is scary.”

Harmony made a *pssh* sound. “You don’t have to explain that to me. I’ve never known a love like I have with Preston. He somehow makes me feel whole.”

“Yes! Like you’ve been found and you didn’t even realize you were lost.”

She let out a soft laugh. “Exactly! Sometimes when he touches me, my whole body aches, but in a good way, if that makes sense.”

I nodded. “It totally does. My father thinks Finn will end up hurting me.”

“That’s bullshit. I see the way he looks at you. Preston tells me how Finn talks nonstop about you. No way. He may have been a player at one time, but that boy only has eyes for you.”

I wasn’t sure where it came from, but I blurted out my next sentence. “My father cheated on my mother. He admitted to it last night.”

Harmony stopped walking. “What? Is that why you were crying?”

No. I'm being forced to walk away from the man I love.

"Partly. I don't know. I mean my mother told him she needed some time to herself and he did it when they were apart so I don't even know if that really is cheating. I'm honestly not sure about anything anymore."

Harmony faced me. "Rory, please tell me what's going on. Let me help you."

A single tear slipped from my eye and slowly traveled down my cheek. "Whatever happens, Harmony, you have to promise me something."

"I will, but nothing's going to happen."

Shaking my head, I looked directly into her eyes. "Please let Finn know how much I love him. That I will always love him. No matter what. Promise me that."

Harmony's brows drew down in confusion.

The front door opened, and we both turned to see Finn and Preston. "Hey, your girl time over?" Preston asked.

Glancing back at Harmony, I gave her pleading eyes. "Promise me?" I asked in a whispered voice.

She nodded. "Of course. I promise."

Finn's arms wrapped around my body while his hot breath hit my ear. "I missed you."

"I wasn't gone that long," I said, attempting to sound normal.

"Anytime you're away from me it feels like forever."

My heart was slowly ripping into two. Harmony watched me as I smiled and turned around in Finn's arms to face him. "Hey, I told Harmony if she and Preston wanted to go out this evening, we would watch Presley."

Finn's smile grew bigger. "Hell yeah. I think that would be fun."

I glanced over to a stunned Preston. His mouth was dropped open as he stared at us. "Are you serious? Are you guys being serious? I can be alone with my wife? Can I use the tent?"

"Preston!" Harmony cried out.

Finn let out a roar of laughter. "No you can't use the tent. I plan on bringing my girl back to our little hideout, but yes, you guys should at least go out to dinner."

"Or rent a hotel for a couple of hours," Preston replied as he wiggled his eyebrows over at Harmony.

She was worrying her lip. "It does sound nice, but Preston, I don't know. We've never left Presley."

“What don’t you know?”

Finn pulled me against his body and rested his chin on my head while we listened to Harmony and Preston talk it out.

“I mean Finn and Rory?”

“Hey!” Finn and I said at once.

Harmony focused back on us and lifted her hands. “Not that I don’t think you would do a great job, but let’s face it: Have either one of you watched a baby before?”

“She’ll be asleep, right? I mean she probably goes down around seven or so? How hard could watching a sleeping baby be?” Finn asked.

Chewing on her thumbnail, Harmony looked back and forth between us and Preston. “Okay. Be at the house at seven-thirty. Presley goes down at seven. Her colic tends to flare up in the mornings, so she shouldn’t wake up.”

I smiled while Finn and Preston fist pumped.

Harmony turned her attention on me. “But maybe you guys should come earlier, to spend some time with Presley before she goes to sleep.”

Finn replied, “That sounds like a plan. We’ll get there around five-thirty or so.”

“Perfect!” Harmony said with a look of happiness on her face. “Rory and I have a few things we didn’t get to finish talking about, so that will give us time to chat.”

Shit.

“Okay, well, hate to run but I’ve got our day planned out. You guys have a good one.”

Finn whistled and Flash came running from around the house, full speed.

“Wait for it. Wait. Now!”

We jumped out of Flash’s way before he could knock us over. Laughing, Preston said, “He is going to make a terrible fire station dog! I hope you know you’re ruining him!”

Finn lifted his hand and waved his brother off.

“You ready for our hike?” he asked with a wink.

Looking up at him, I couldn’t help but feel his excitement. “I’m more than ready.”

“Angie’s shoes fit okay?”

I nodded my head. “Yep. Like a glove. If I didn’t know any better, I’d think they were mine.”

His smile was infectious. “Good, then we can head out.

We walked hand in hand through the woods in silence. The only sounds we heard were a stray branch breaking when one of us stepped on it, a bird singing every now and then, and the wind blowing in the trees over our heads. The quiet was welcoming. It gave me more time to think about how I could keep Finn and not break things off between us. According to my father, I only had this weekend.

The thought of leaving Finn made me feel sick. Placing my hand over my stomach, I took in a deep breath.

“You okay?”

I nodded. “My stomach’s feeling a bit off, but I’m okay. It’s so beautiful here,” I said as I glanced up at the canopy of trees over us.

“I know. It’s different from the city. The wind blowing through the trees has got to be one of the most relaxing sounds I know. When I was younger, I would walk out here to my spot and sit for hours.”

“Really? For some reason I pictured you as a city guy.”

Finn laughed. “Nah. Don’t get me wrong, I love the city. But the country is where I want to live.”

His hand squeezed mine. “At least get out of Boston. Outside the city. Build a house on a few acres and raise a family like my parents and Preston and Harmony.”

I couldn’t swallow from the lump in my throat. His thumb gently stroked the skin on my hand, sending wave after wave of longing through my body. “That sounds amazing.”

“What about you, Éan? Could you see yourself living in the country?”

Stopping, I turned to face him. “Yes, but only if I got to wake up to your kisses every morning.”

He drew me in closer to him. “I may have to take you up against one of these trees if you keep looking at me like that.”

My tongue ran along my lip. “I certainly wouldn’t argue. I can’t seem to get enough of you, Mr. Ward.”

His hand wrapped around my neck, drawing me in closer. My breath caught when his eyes met mine. “We’re here.”

I felt dizzy. His lips barely above mine. His hot breath tickling my senses, causing me to moan. “Where?” I softly asked.

“My favorite spot.”

I didn’t care where we were. All I wanted was to taste him against my mouth.

He must have sensed it, because he put his mouth to mine. I wrapped my arms around his neck while he drew me in flush against his body. His hard-on pressed into my stomach. “Finn, I want you.”

His kisses moved from my lips down to my neck, sending goosebumps across my body. “Fucking hell, Rory. I want to fuck you so bad.”

His dirty words sent me into a frenzy. Every time we’d been together it had been passionate, but a part of me wanted something more raw. I wanted to feel how much he wanted me.

“Yes. Please, Finn. Fuck me.”

Lifting me into his arms, he walked a few steps farther, then stopped, put me down, and pushed me against a giant tree. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw a small creek meandering through the forest.

Finn’s spot.

He shoved his hands under my sweater, and groaned when he found I was braless. He pinched my nipple between his fingers, and *I* groaned. I needed to feel him.

My hands fumbled with his jeans as I fought to get them down far enough to release his dick. When it sprung free, I grabbed it and slowly moved my hand over it.

“Son-of-a-bitch, I’m so damn hard for you.”

I couldn’t speak. All I could do was whimper I wanted him so desperately. His free hand expertly got my jeans unbuttoned and pushed down far enough to where he could slip his fingers inside my panties. I gasped when he slipped them inside of me.

“So fucking wet. Tell me what you want.”

There was no way I could have been breathing any harder. The idea of knowing Finn would take me against this tree, out in the open, did something to me. I liked it. I wanted more. I wanted the world to know I was his.

“Fuck me. I want you to fuck me hard.”

Finn wobbled some and had to grab onto the tree above my head to steady himself. “You talking dirty is a turn-on, Éan.”

Smiling, I squeezed his dick. He hissed, then gently bit my neck.

“Get these off, baby,” Finn whispered while trying to push my jeans all the way down. I got one foot out of a sneaker while he pulled the pant leg off. “Yes. That’s it!”

Finn lifted my leg, positioned himself at my entrance, and pushed in hard and fast. Gasping, I gripped his shoulders.

“Oh God!” I shouted.

He instantly stopped moving. “Did I hurt you?”

“No! I need this, Finn. Please don’t stop!”

He did exactly what I asked him to do. Each thrust into me sent me closer to the edge. He moved in and out of me, fast and hard while I held on. I loved it. I wanted more of it.

“Harder, Finn. I want to feel you for days,” I cried out, the sound of our bodies hitting pushing me closer to the edge of pleasure.”

His face burrowed into my neck. “Damn it, Rory.”

It wasn’t going to take me long to come. When Finn slammed his lips against mine, my orgasm exploded as I cried out his name. A few more pumps into me and a groan of pleasure, and Finn poured himself into me, giving me every single ounce of himself, which I greedily accepted.

When he finally stopped moving, I opened my eyes. He was staring at me with a blank expression. “What’s wrong?”

His eyes filled with tears. “I didn’t hurt you, did I? I kind of lost control.”

My arms wrapped tightly around his neck. “No, you didn’t hurt me. I enjoyed every single second of that.”

He smiled. “You never cease to amaze me, Rory Adams. You telling me to fuck you about drove me insane.”

Giving him a wink, I replied, “I try to keep you on your toes.”

With a laugh, he shook his head. “Keep doing such a great job.”

Finn leaned down and helped me get dressed. When he put on my last sneaker and tied it, I got tears in my eyes. I’d never be able to find someone like him again. Each thing he did for me, he did with so much care. My heart ached knowing I only had a few more hours left with him.

I hated my father.

I was never going to forgive him for trying to force me away from the only man I’d ever love.



Chapter Forty-One

Finn

The fort and one bad dog

I watched with concern as Rory's face constricted in anger. "Is everything okay, Éan?"

She quickly masked over whatever it was she was thinking about. "Yes. I'm sorry. I got lost in thought for a moment."

"Well, I hope you weren't thinking of me, because it looked like you wanted to kill someone."

With a laugh, she stood on her toes and kissed my lips quickly. "Trust me, when I think of you it's always good things."

Taking her hand in mine, I replied, "Good. Now come on. You and your horny ways interrupted my hike."

Rory walked alongside me with a huge smile on her face. So much better than last night, when she cried herself to sleep.

"Seems to me you weren't complaining about my horny ways a few minutes ago."

I chuckled. "I'll never complain about that."

Walking to the edge of the creek, I took in a deep breath of air. "Damn I love it here."

Rory rested her head on my arm. "It's so peaceful and beautiful. I can see why you'd come here often."

The sound of the water trickling down through the rocks was one of my favorite sounds. "When I was younger, my mom said she had to put on white noise in my room to get me to fall asleep. She played a running creek. I often wondered if I liked coming here so much because of that."

We stood there in a comfortable silence for a few minutes, listening to everything around us. The wind blowing through the trees. The sound of leaves slowly making their way to the ground and landing with a soft touch against other leaves. Everything about this place, I loved.

“Hop up on my back, baby.”

“Huh? Again?”

The way she scrunched her nose was adorable. “I haven’t shown you what I wanted to yet. We need to cross the creek for me to show you.”

Her eyes widened in shock. “You’re walking across the creek?”

“It’s not that wide, and there’s a rock path I made years ago.”

She giggled and squeezed me with her legs. “Smart boy.”

I replied, “Not really. I had to slip and fall about ten times before I came up with the idea.”

Once I made it to the other side, I squatted so that she could jump off my back. “It’s right over here but close your eyes.”

Rory smiled as she closed her eyes and let me guide her, no questions asked. I loved that she trusted me like she did.

The memories of being out here by myself quickly came back to me. “Open your eyes.”

Rory gasped as she took in the view.

“Finn! This is beautiful! I’d have never guessed there was a view like this here. And this building is so cute!”

I nodded. “This was kind of my secret spot. Been coming here since I was about ten. I built this little fort because I needed a place to go to get away from my brothers, and somewhere to hide from Angie when she wanted me to play tea with her.” My eyes moved over the old wooden hideout. I’d made it out of fallen trees and a few left-over pieces of lumber my father had.

Rory laughed and shook her head. “I’d give anything to have seen that.”

Rolling my eyes, I replied, “It was always me and Mr. Giggles at her tea parties. I have no idea why she never invited Wes or Preston.”

Rory pressed her lips together to try and hide her smile. “It’s probably because they told her no.”

“Probably,” I said while walking around the fort. “They didn’t care if she got upset, but I did.”

When I glanced up, Rory was staring at me and chewing on the corner of her lip. “You’re amazing, do you know that, Finn Ward?”

“Yeah, well, don’t ask me to build you a house. I’m not sure how sturdy

this thing is.”

Her eyes filled with tears. She spun around, then started down the path and back to the creek. “Rory? Hey, what’s wrong?”

Reaching for her arm, I stopped her before she crossed the water. I faced her to me and lifted her chin with my finger. Those blue eyes looked so sad. “Talk to me, Rory. Please.”

“It’s...I don’t deserve you.”

My head jerked back in shock. “What? If anything, I’m the one who doesn’t deserve you. But I’m greedy and want you all to myself.”

She gave me a weak smile before saying, “I’ll always be yours, Finn. I know we haven’t been together for long, but the way I feel about you...”

Glancing at the ground and then back to my eyes, she continued. “The way I feel about you is undeniable. I love you. I promise to always love you.”

I cupped her delicate face in my hands. “And I love you, Rory. I don’t care who tells us we’re moving too fast, because I don’t think we’re moving fast enough. If it were up to me, I’d have you move in with me.”

She sucked in a rush of air, then closed her eyes.

“Is it your dad?”

She didn’t say a word, but I saw it in her eyes when she opened them. Her father had to have said something to her last night to make her this upset.

“I’m sure he told you how I’m going to break your heart, or never be home, or how you’ll worry every time I go out on a call.”

She smiled weakly. “Something like that.”

“Well, he’s wrong on over half of that. I can’t keep you from worrying, but I sure as hell can promise to never break your heart. And I swear I’ll spend every spare moment of my time with you.”

Her mouth opened, but quickly shut again as she searched my face. Almost as if she was trying to commit the moment to memory.

“Kiss me,” she whispered.

With a grin, I replied, “Gladly.”

I swept my tongue across her lower lip, drawing out a whimper from those plump pink lips. When she opened a little, I covered her mouth with mine. We quickly became lost in each other, our hands moving gently over our each other’s body while the sound of the water rushed past us.

Drawing back, we gazed into each other’s eyes. Rory softly said, “I wish we could stay in this spot forever. Just you and me.”

“You’d get bored of me.”

“Never,” she stated with a wink.

“Come on, let’s head back to the campsite.”

After I got Rory safely over the creek, we walked hand in hand to the campsite. The entire walk was filled with Rory talking about how excited she was to see Presley later. Truth be told, so was I.

We rounded the corner and came to a complete stop.

“Oh no,” Rory whispered. “How did we not notice he wasn’t with us?”

“Son of a bitch!” I cried out while my eyes swept over the destruction of the campsite. When my glare landed on the black-and-white dog, I pointed to him and he quickly sat. “I’m going to kill you!”

Suddenly Rory screamed from behind me, “Finn, no! It’s not that bad!”

Flash jumped up and took off running to the other side of the tent. I’d have caught him if I hadn’t tripped over the large stick that appeared out of nowhere.

“Finn!” Rory called out. “Oh my goodness. Are you okay?”

She kneeled down next to me. “Your leg is cut, but it’s not deep,” she said, then giggled.

I jumped up. “You think this is funny?”

Flash barked, and I glared at him again.

“Finn. Take a deep breath and blow it out. It’s not that bad.”

I stared at her with an open mouth. “Not that bad? Look at it, Rory.”

I did a three-sixty while flailing my arms about. “He destroyed it! He even chewed up the lights!”

Glaring back at Flash, I shouted, “I hope your shit lights up for weeks, you little bastard!”



Chapter Forty-Two

Finn

Who signed us up for this?

Harmony opened the door and gave us a huge grin. “Perfect timing. Presley just got a bath and she smells extra yummy.”

I knew it was wrong, but I pushed Rory out of the way before she could get to Preston first and take the baby from him.

I heard her laughing behind me as I walked up to my brother.

“Give her to me. Now.”

Preston narrowed his eyes at me. “You can’t demand my daughter from me, dude.”

“I can and I just did. Give her up. You get her all the time, Preston.”

Giving me a dirty look, he stated, “She’s my daughter. Back the fuck off, Finn.”

“Preston!” Harmony said as she slapped him on the head. “Don’t talk like that in front of Presley.”

Preston rolled his eyes. “She doesn’t understand me.”

“Harmony, tell your greedy husband to give up the baby before I challenge him to a round of Monopoly.”

“Monopoly?” Preston asked with a smile while Harmony gasped.

“No! Not Monopoly!” Harmony cried out.

Rory walked up to the baby and smiled at her while asking, “I don’t get it. What’s wrong with Monopoly?”

Quickly pulling Rory away from us, Harmony stated, “Don’t ever ask them to play that game, challenge them to it, or even hint that you could win at it. You’ll be stuck for hours. In Monopoly, the Wards are a play-until-only-

one-person-is-standing kind of family.”

Preston stood and gently placed his daughter into Rory’s hands while my jaw dropped to the floor.

“How...why...? We’re blood, dude! You gave her to Rory first?”

Preston shot me a dirty look. “I like her better than I do you.”

I shot him the middle finger and turned my attention to Rory. “Let me have her.”

“Not yet,” she said as she rocked the baby back and forth. Soon Rory softly started to sing to her, and I had to grab onto something to keep my legs from giving out.

“You’re such a beautiful girl. Yes you are. Look at how big you’ve grown. Oh my, look at those blue eyes.”

“Care to share what you’re thinking right this second, Finn?” Harmony whispered.

Dragging my eyes off Rory, I took Harmony in. She looked so much more rested than she had earlier today. “I’m not thinking anything.”

“Uh-huh. So you’ve got that goofy look in your eyes and you’re wobbling on your legs because...?”

I didn’t want to blurt out to Harmony how I wished that this was our child Rory was holding. The idea alone should have had me running for the hills, but strangely, it didn’t. I was even a tad bit jealous of Preston. He had the very thing I found myself longing for.

A family.

“Want to feed her before she goes down, since you guys showed up late?”

I couldn’t help but notice how Harmony looked at Rory. Almost as if she thought it was Rory who’d made us late.

“Flash destroyed the campground. Dad and I had to take everything down while Rory and Mom cleaned up the campsite. Looks like our camping trip is over.”

“Well, that’s a bummer. You guys gonna head back into Boston tonight?” Preston asked while handing me a bottle.

I glanced over to Rory, who nodded. “Probably,” I said.

Preston flashed me a big grin. “Well, you know you can stay here. We have a guest bedroom.”

Laughing, I took Presley from Rory. “You just want to be able to stroll in late tonight, that’s all.”

“Hell yeah, that’s what it is.”

Harmony playfully hit Preston's stomach. You couldn't help but feel happy for them. When Preston draped his arm over Harmony's shoulders, I felt a ping of jealousy. I was going to push Rory a little harder about moving in with me. I wanted to be around her as much as I possibly could. Things were starting to pick up more in the solar business Wes and I owned, which meant that on my days off I'd be working on that as well. If Rory lived with me, I'd see more of her.

Glancing down at the beautiful baby in my arms, I made a funny face and was rewarded with a smile. "Hello there, princess. Are you hungry?"

Presley had opened her mouth and was about to fuss when I slipped the bottle in just in time.

Harmony sat on the edge of the sofa. "You know you're a natural at this, Finn."

I laughed. "Well, it's easy when you know it's not your kid."

When I glanced up, I couldn't help but notice how Rory's smile faltered some. Was she wanting kids right away? Hell...for all I knew she wanted kids now.

Shit. Was it too soon in our relationship to talk about things like that?

I made a mental note to talk to my parents about it.

Harmony kissed Presley on the forehead. "I'm going to go get changed. Be sure to burp her well—and don't forget the burping rag this time. I don't want to hear you screaming like a girl again, Finn."

"Hey!" I replied with a frown. "Her spit up ran down my shirt. Down. My. Shirt. That was nasty."

Preston fell back onto the sofa and kicked up his feet. Harmony turned and stared at him. "You aren't getting ready?"

"Um...I am ready. Wait. Am I ready? What's the right answer?"

Laughing, Harmony waved him off and said, "You're taking me somewhere nice for dinner...that's all I know."

Rory giggled. "That means go get ready and dress nice."

"Damn it. That's what I thought it meant."



"Want to make out?" I whispered in Rory's ear while she shoved a handful of popcorn into her mouth.

She hit me on the stomach and rolled her eyes. "I'm not making out with

you on your brother's sofa."

Frowning, I asked, "Why not?"

Rory searched through the popcorn, looking for the yellow ones; she claimed they were the best because they had the most butter on them. In the background played a movie she'd picked out. *Beauty and the Beast*. I'd already dozed off three times, only to be woken up by the singing.

"For starters, this is my favorite movie. Then we have the fact that we are babysitting so we shouldn't be messing around. And then you factor in it's your brother's house and that just makes it weird."

"It does not make it weird," I replied while grabbing a handful of popcorn.

"Wait! Don't take the good ones!"

Flash whimpered at our feet. Glancing down to him, I frowned. "Oh yeah. I forgot you were here."

"Don't you dare make him bark, Finn Ward. If you do, Presley will wake up, and you're changing her diaper."

I leaned back and drew her closer to me.

Another song started playing. Rory's face lit up, and my chest tightened. Moving closer, I softly kissed her neck. She tilted her head, giving me better access. Bullshit she didn't want to mess around—I could practically smell the desire come off her. Sliding my hand up her shirt, I rubbed her hardened nipple through her bra.

Her head dropped back against the sofa. "Finn...we...can't."

Running my tongue along her neck, I sucked in her earlobe and gently bit it. "Why can't we, Éan?"

My cock was so fucking hard. Would it always be like this with Rory? The constant need to have her near me? To fill her so deep with my dick she'd begged for more?

Sliding my hand out from her shirt, I slipped it into my sweatpants, which she was wearing. I'd never seen her look so damn adorable as when she'd walked out of the bathroom at my parents' dressed in my old sweatpants and T-shirt. Her hair was in a ponytail, and all I could think about was how I wanted to see that sight every day for the rest of my life.

Taking the bowl of popcorn, I set it on the coffee table. "I want to make out."

She giggled and slowly lay down on the couch. "What are we, in high school?"

“Are you volunteering to dress up like a naughty schoolgirl?”

Her teeth sank into her lip, and my cock pulsed harder.

“Fucking hell, Rory. Don’t look at me like that.”

She shrugged and ran her fingers lazily down my chest before sliding her hand under my shirt. “I’m only trying to say that if you wanted me to, I would do it for you.”

My eyes about rolled to the back of my head imagining it. Crushing my mouth to hers, I kissed her hard. She gave back as well as she took. It was raw. Passionate. Filled with a pulsing sensation of heat and desire.

Rory stroked my cock through my jeans while I played with her nipples.

“Are you wet, Rory?”

“Yes. Oh, Finn.”

“Still don’t want to do this?”

She pushed back on my chest. “We have to move to the floor.”

What? The floor?

“What the hell for?”

“I can’t have sex on their sofa. That’s weird. What if you got your spoooge on it?”

Drawing back, I lifted a brow. “*Spoooge?* Did you seriously just call my cum that?”

“I did,” she stated while trying desperately to hide her laugh.

“You know, two minutes ago the heat radiating between us was insane, and you went off and ruined it by wanting to get on the floor because of my...*spoooge.*”

“Do you want me?”

Rory ached as much for me as I did for her. I saw it in her eyes.

“Fuck yes.”

I pulled her off the sofa, and she thumped onto the floor.

“Ouch!” she cried out, then covered her mouth. We both remained perfectly still. When we heard no sign of Presley, I pulled her sweats down while she unbuttoned my jeans.

Slipping my fingers inside of her, I let out a groan. “Damn, baby. You’re soaking wet.”

“It’s the movie. It does that to me.”

I stopped moving and stared at her. When she busted out laughing, I lifted her ass some and slipped inside of her.

She drew in a breath. “Yes. Finn, that feels amazing.”

Flash walked up and stood at our side. We both turned and glared at him. “Go on, boy. Go lie down,” I said as I tried to stay focused.

He moved in closer.

“What is he doing?” Rory asked.

Oh God.

“He has a strange look in his eyes,” I whispered.

Rory grabbed my arms. “Oh no. He’s going to bark.”

“He wouldn’t.”

Flash let out a low growl.

Rory squeezed my arms. “He’s mad that I yelled at him before. This is his payback to me.”

I looked down at Rory. “What? Dogs don’t ‘pay back’ anything. He’s too stupid to know to do that.”

As if on cue...Flash barked.

Loudly and with a look of defiance in his eyes.

“Flash...bad boy!” I whisper-shouted.

He barked again; this time louder.

“Get off me, Finn. Make him stop!”

Flash ran from us and raced up the stairs.

“That bastard!” Jumping up, I started to take off but got tripped up by my jeans and fell forward. The coffee table was the only thing I saw as my head hit it.

“Finn!” Rory cried out.

“Shh! Don’t wake up—”

Cries from upstairs filled the entire house.

Holy shit. That kid has some set of lungs on her.

Rolling over, I covered my left eye. “Son of a bitch.”

“I’ll get her,” Rory said as she rushed by me, jumping over my head and coming dangerously close to stepping on it.

“I’m okay! Don’t worry about me,” I called out sarcastically.

Rory rushed up the stairs. “You’re not the one screaming...she is.”

I slowly sat up. The headache instantly hitting me and making me feel sick to my stomach.

Flash appeared next to me and barked, scarring me half to death.

“I’m selling you to the black market and they’re going to make horse food out of you.”

He tilted his head and gave me a low growl.

“Yeah, fuck you too, Flash.”

He barked. “See, I can totally read your mind.”

A strange odor hit me, making me gag. Standing, I turned to see Rory holding Presley while she plugged her nose.

“You have a problem.”

I swallowed hard. “*Me? I have a problem?*”

The odor grew as she stepped closer. “Yep. Your niece went potty in her diaper and she needs Uncle Finn to change it.”

Oh holy hell.

Taking a step back, I held up my hands. “No. I didn’t sign up for this. You did!”



Chapter Forty-Three

Rory

Baby talk and broken hearts

A look of pure horror washed over Finn's face as he took a few steps back. I didn't want to tell him, but his eye was starting to swell and turn black.

I forced myself not to gag as I held the stinky baby. "Take her. You woke her up."

Finn's mouth gaped open. "Me? It was that evil bastard dog that woke her up."

"He wouldn't have barked had he not gotten jealous we were on the floor playing."

"*Playing?* Rory, we were making love... Or at least trying to."

I shrugged and stepped closer to him, pinning him against the fireplace wall. Presley cried louder, and I had no idea what to do. I'd never changed a diaper. "You've changed her before. You know what to do."

He shook his head as fear washed over his face. "No I haven't. Not once."
Oh. Shit.

I was pretty sure that now I was the one with a fearful look on my face. "Finn, what are we going to do? I've never changed a diaper. I don't even know where they keep them!"

"The bedroom!" Finn shouted as he somehow ducked around me and ran up the stairs.

"You jerk!" I cried out. Presley was now in a full-on scream and sucking in air. I held her closer to me to comfort her, and when she stopped crying, I couldn't help but smile.

I've totally got this.

“I got her to stop crying,” I stated as I made my way up the stairs. I made a mental note to learn this stuff before I ever had kids.

Walking into the nursery, I watched as Finn ran from one side of the room to the other. Finally he said, “Okay! Here are the diapers.” He held up a box of baby wipes. “I’ve seen Harmony use these when there’s been number two.”

I lifted my brows. “‘Number two’?”

He shot me a dirty look, then a shocked one. “Hey, she stopped crying.”

With a wide, confident grin, I responded, “I know. I tucked her close to me and she instantly settled.”

Finn returned my smile. “You’re a natural, Éan.”

Presley picked that minute to start crying again.

“Dang it! Let’s put her on the changing table,” I said as I carefully laid her on it. I took off her little one-piece pink pajamas and stared at the diaper.

“You just pull the tabs, Rory. Pull ’em!”

I shot him a death stare. “I’ll pull them when I’m ready. Give me a second. I need to mentally prepare myself for this.”

He held up his hands in surrender. “This is your deal. I’ll keep my mouth shut.”

“Thank you!” I replied sharply.

My hands shook and I could hardly breathe without gagging.

I took a deep breath and pulled both tabs, shifting the front of the diaper away from Presley.

Oh. Mother. Of. God.

“It’s green! Why is it green, Finn?”

When he didn’t answer, I turned to him. His face was about the same color as the baby’s poop.

“Finn! Snap out of it. I need help!”

He covered his mouth and handed me the box of wipes.

Rolling my eyes, I focused back on the diaper and its nasty green contents. At least Presley had stopped crying. Taking the diaper, I wiped down to get most of the poop off.

“Disgusting! Oh God!” Finn leaned over and started gagging. It took everything for me not to gag. Lifting Presley’s legs, I got the diaper out and handed it to Finn.

“Take this! Quick”

His face dropped. “W-what? I don’t know what to do with it!”

“Finn! Please! The trash can!”

I looked away and held my breath.

“Drop it!”

Turning, I laughed when I saw the garbage can in his hands. After I dropped the dirty diaper, I took some wipes and started to clean up Presley. Finn gagged each time he saw the green-poop-covered wipe.

“Stop gagging—you’re making *me* gag!” I yelled, in between gags. My stomach was not feeling right, and I had to fight hard at not throwing up.

I looked at Presley, and our blues met. When she smiled, my heart melted on the spot. The feeling of sickness instantly dissipated. Leaning closer to her, I did my best impression of baby talk.

“Did you go potty-wotty in your diaper? Did you make a stinky? Yes you did! How does a pretty little thing make such a stinky-winky poop!”

“What. *Are*. You. Doing?”

Glancing over my shoulder, I stared at Finn. “I’m talking to her. She likes it! She’s smiling at me.”

“She’s smiling because that nasty shit is off her.”

I frowned and went back to cleaning her up and baby-talking. I placed the new diaper under her and stared down at it.

“Does she need powder or cream or something?”

Finn walked over and looked down. Presley decided to laugh right then, and before I knew it, Finn was talking baby talk to her too.

“What, my precious little angel. Are you feeling all better-wetter? Is da princess all fresh and cwean? Is that a smile from my number-one girl? Yes it is! Look at that pretty smile.”

And my ovaries just exploded.

I shook my head to clear my thoughts and went back to my task. “How tight do I put the tabs?”

When he didn’t answer me, I turned to him. He was totally mesmerized by Presley.

“When we have babies, I hope they get your blue eyes.”

My heart dropped and my body completely froze.

Tears built in my eyes as his words settled in my heart. I swallowed hard, not knowing what to say. I wanted to tell him everything. Tell him I wanted him to stop being a firefighter. Tell him I wanted to live the rest of my life with him and give him as many children as he wanted.

Instead. I pushed the heartache away. “Um, how...how tight should I

make it?”

He reached over and looked at the diaper. “I wouldn’t make it too tight. Kind of like how you do with Flash’s collar.”

“What? You do realize you just compared a diaper to a collar.”

He had a point, though.

“Yeah. Here, move over. Let me do it.”

I stepped to the side to let him take care of it. My emotions were all over the place as I took in a few deep breaths.

Finn had mentioned kids.

Kids with me.

Our kids.

My father’s deadline loomed in the air, making it hard for me to breathe.

“There! Let’s put new clean pj’s back on you, shall we, princess?”

I attempted to keep my chin from trembling.

I wanted a future with Finn. A family. A life full of memories. But I was too afraid to tell him the truth. Too afraid he would walk away from his dream because of my father’s hate.

Turning, I walked to the window and gazed at the moonlight peeking through the tree branches. The light barely lit up the colored leaves that adorned the front yard.

“Hey, are you okay?”

I prayed for strength. Forcing a smile, I spun around and looked at Finn and Presley.

“Never better. How do we get her to go back to sleep?”

Finn’s eyes drifted to my chest.

“Uh, I don’t know how to tell you this...but...you’ve got shit all over your shirt.”

My eyes snapped down to my shirt. “What? How?”

When I looked up, Finn was frowning. “That’s nasty.”

Flash barked, causing me to jump and Presley to start laughing.

“I think you packed another of my T-shirts in the bag. I’ll go grab it.”

“We’ll just be here in the room. Dancing. I’m guessing that’s what princesses do when they’re tired.”

I stared at him for a moment. He was going to make an amazing father. Tears pricked at the backs of my eyes as I cleared my throat. “I’ll be right back,” I said as I motioned for Flash to come with me.

After grabbing a clean shirt, I headed back upstairs. Walking into the

room, I came to a stop. The sight before me was the most precious thing I'd ever seen. Finn was in the rocking chair with his eyes closed humming a tune from *Beauty and the Beast*. I leaned against the doorjamb and took it in. How I was going to be able to walk away from him was beyond me.

Finn opened his eyes and smiled when he saw me. Returning the gesture, I lifted my brows and whispered, "Now what?"

He slowly stood. "Now we get her in the crib and muzzle Flash."

I giggled and walked over to the crib. I made sure the sheets were clean before Finn laid Presley down.

We both slowly took a few steps back. Finn reached for my hand and led me out of the room. My heart ached in my chest as I thought about what he had said earlier about our kids. I'd never really known what people meant when they said their heart was broken. I sure knew now, because mine was breaking more and more with every passing minute.



Chapter Forty-Four

Rory

Don't let go

Once we got back downstairs, Finn and I cleaned up the small mess we'd made when we tried to do the deed on the floor. We settled back onto the sofa, and it wasn't long before I drifted off to sleep. It felt like it had only been seconds when I heard Finn speak.

"What are you guys doing back so soon? I figured you'd be out late."

I quickly sat up and stretched. Finn glanced at me and grinned from ear to ear before giving me a kiss on the lips.

"Hey, Éan."

"Hey," I responded in a sleepy voice.

Harmony placed her purse and keys on the side table in the front hall. "Preston had a bit of an...accident at the club we went to. We weren't even there ten minutes."

Finn laughed. "Hold on... Let me get the popcorn."

He reached over to the coffee table and grabbed the bowl of popcorn and shoved some in his mouth. Preston shot him a dirty look that quickly turned into a dumbfounded look.

"Did you have a black eye earlier?" Preston asked while leaning in closer to look at Finn's eye.

Harmony quickly moved to Finn and stared at him, moving his head around by his chin. It reminded me of something my mother would do.

"What happened?" she asked me.

With a chuckle, I held up my hands and declared, "It wasn't me! He tripped and hit the coffee table."

“What? How?” Harmony asked.

“I’m fine. I don’t need Nurse Harmony checking me out. We all know you just want an excuse to touch me.”

Harmony huffed while placing her hands on her hips. “Yeah, that’s it, Finn, you found out my dirty little secret.”

Waving his hand, Finn said, “Get back to what happened with Preston.”

With a long-drawn-out groan, Preston turned around. I gasped and covered my mouth, smothering my laugh.

Finn wasn’t as successful, and totally lost it. “What in the hell happened?”

“I attempted a lift.”

My brows furrowed, as did Finn’s. “Huh?” we both asked at once.

Harmony tried like hell not to smile.

Preston sighed. “I tried to reach down and pick up Harmony and then do a cool dance move or something, and when I bent over too much...my pants split open.”

“How is that even possible? Was she lying on the floor?” Finn asked.

Harmony busted out laughing.

“You’ve never had your pants split open?” Preston asked.

Finn shook his head and laughed again. “No, I can’t say I have. You should probably start running again, bro, if you’re splitting your pants trying to dance.”

Preston shot Finn a dirty look. “Fuck you, Finn. I’m going to bed. Good night, Rory.”

I tried desperately not to laugh as I forced out a “Good night, Preston.”

Turning back to Harmony, I giggled. “Oh, my that must have been interesting.”

She slowly shook her head. “You have no idea. How’s my baby?”

Harmony kicked off her heels and let her hair down. It fell along her shoulders, and I couldn’t help but notice the glow on her cheeks. She had needed this night out with her husband, and I was glad I had suggested it.

“She woke up once when Flash barked. She had a very poopy and green diaper.”

Harmony nodded. “Okay. You got her cleaned up all right?”

I puffed my chest out slightly. Proud that Finn and I had taken care of her well. “We did. She has on new comfy pj’s and she fell back to sleep quickly in Finn’s arms.”

Harmony wore a huge smile. “Aw. She loves her Uncle Finn.”

Finn walked over to me and took my hand in his. “As much as I’d love to stand here and chat all night about how amazing I am, we’re heading back to Boston.”

“I thought you were going to stay in the guest bedroom,” Harmony said, wearing a pout.

Laughing, Finn handed me my purse and bag. “Are you kidding? Look at my eye. Your house hates me.”

“It does not!”

I quickly gave Harmony a hug. “Thank you so much for everything. Tell Preston, too.”

I’m sure she noticed I hugged her a little tighter and longer than I should have. When we pulled away, she gave me an inquisitive look.

“Let’s chat tomorrow?” she asked in a hopeful voice.

I gave her a warm smile. “Sure.”

“Night, Harmony. Kiss the princess when she wakes and tell her I’m sorry her prince had to leave.”

Harmony chuckled. “I’ll do that. ’Night, you guys, and be careful driving.”

Finn kissed Harmony on the cheek. “’Night.”

I felt like someone sat on my chest with a hundred-pound weight. Each step we took, the worse it got. I had to concentrate on my breathing once I got into Finn’s car. This was our last night together, and I would not ruin it.



Flash ran down the hall toward Finn’s front door. I prayed he didn’t bark, since it was two in the morning. I knew Finn was exhausted. He talked about everything and anything on the drive back, purely to keep himself awake. And there was no denying I was fighting to stay awake as well.

Finn unlocked the door, and Flash jumped up and pushed it open and ran straight into his crate. Three turns, then he lay down and closed his eyes.

“Well, at least we know he’s not a party animal,” Finn said, tossing his keys on the side table.

I giggled and set my purse and bag on the sofa. “I’m so tired, my tired is tired.”

Drawing me into his arms, Finn stared into my eyes. “Would you be upset

if we just went to bed? I promise to make it up to you in the morning.”

With a grin, I reached up and kissed him on the lips. “I think that sounds like a great plan.”

He took me up into his arms and said, “Come on, baby. Let’s get naked and go to sleep.”

Finn stopped walking and looked at me. “I would never have thought those words would ever come out of my mouth.”

I dropped my head back and laughed. I kept laughing until he tossed me on the bed and started undressing me. Once I was naked, his lips moved to my neck, then down to my breasts. It didn’t take long for us to be tangled up in each other’s arms. Finn slowly made love to me, whispering against my lips how beautiful I was. How much he loved me. How amazing it felt to be inside of me.

When he softly called out my name and buried his face in my neck, I let my tears fall, even as I seared every whispered word into my memory.

Rolling over, Finn didn’t even bother to clean up like he normally did. He drew my body into his and held me. He was asleep within seconds. The sounds of his breathing should have soothed me to sleep. Instead, they made the pain in my chest nearly unbearable.

How was I going to do this—walk away from the man I loved.

I slipped his arm off me and snuck into the kitchen for a glass of milk. We hadn’t locked Flash’s crate, so he was sprawled out on the sofa. I couldn’t help but giggle when I saw him.

“He’d be really mad if he saw you on there, Flash.”

The dog let out a small whimper. Almost as if he was saying that what Finn didn’t know wouldn’t hurt him.

After getting my milk, I sat down on the sofa and looked around the condo. I smiled when I saw the picture of Finn and me at the aquarium. The memory of that day flooded my thoughts. We had made so many memories in the short two months we’d dated. Tears filled my eyes. I sat the milk on the coffee table and drew my legs to my chest. Resting my chin on my knees, I let the tears slowly fall.

Flash kept nudging my arm until I finally pulled him closer to me. “I don’t think I’m going to be able to live without him. He owns my heart and soul. My life is so much better because of him.”

With a whimper, Flash rested his body against mine as I cried harder. “I have to let him go, boy. I’m going to break his heart, and he’ll never

understand why.”

Pressing my eyes closed, I fought to keep the endless tears in. “I-I don’t know what else to do. Oh, God, I love him so much. Daddy, why? Why are you doing this?”

I buried my face in the dog’s fur, my body shaking as I cried.

“I can’t do it. Please don’t make me do it.”



Chapter Forty-Five

Finn

Bread, surprises, and teddy bears...

I knew she was gone the moment my eyes opened. Reaching over to make sure, I felt the empty bed next to me. I slowly sat up and swung my legs over the bed. “Rory?” I called out.

Rolling my neck to get out the tightness, I stood and walked to the bathroom, figuring Rory must have taken Flash out, since I didn’t hear either one of them.

After brushing my teeth and washing my face, I headed into the living room. One quick look confirmed they were both gone, at the same time the smell of coffee hit me.

“Coffee, come to me,” I chanted. I entered the kitchen and came to a stop when I saw a plateful of what looked like pumpkin bread. I smiled. “Fuck yes. She made my favorite bread. I love her.”

Cutting into the warm bread, I groaned as I shoved it all into my mouth. After finding my favorite coffee mug, I poured a cup of coffee, then sliced another piece of bread.

Shit, what time did she wake up to make this?

The front door opened, and Flash came racing into the kitchen. “Good morning, monster beast. What havoc have you caused this morning?”

Rory walked up to me and kissed me on the lips. She was dressed in another pair of my sweatpants. They were so damn big on her but looked cute as fuck. She pulled my Boston Fire Department sweatshirt over her head, revealing a bit of her stomach in the process. My dick jumped, and I was ready to take her right here in the kitchen.

With a drop-me-to-my-knees kind of smile, she tilted her head and glanced between the bread and me. “I take it you had a piece...or two.”

“You can’t expect me to walk into the kitchen and see this and not have a piece. And you made fresh coffee. Please. I was set up for failure the moment you took the bread out of the oven.”

She laughed and playfully hit me on the stomach. “Was it good? It smells good.”

“Hell yes, it’s good,” I said as I popped another piece into my mouth.

“Good. The first one I made sucked. So I Googled another recipe and made that one. I tweaked it a bit to make it my own. I’m glad you liked it.”

I lifted a brow. “The ‘first one’ you made? What time did you get up?”

She shrugged it off. “I don’t know. I couldn’t really sleep. I think I’ve got too much on my mind, with the case and all.”

Wrapping my arms around her, I rested my chin on her shoulder. “Is that all it is?”

“Yeah—why?”

“Just making sure. Did you want to swing by your place to change before we head out for the day?”

Her smile lit up her face. “Did you make plans already?”

It was my turn to shrug. “Well, my plans to teach you all about camping this weekend got ruined, so I had to make a few changes. I think you’ll like them, though.”

Her hand laced through my hair as her gaze met mine. “As long as we’re together I don’t care what we do.”

Tapping her nose with my finger, I replied, “That’s what I want to hear. Now let me eat some more of this bread and finish my coffee. Then we’re off.”

Rory laughed and moved to cut herself a piece of the bread. “What about Flash? Is he spending the day with us?”

I looked down at the mutt. He sat there like a perfect little angel as he stared up at me. “I think it’s doggy daycare for this little bas—”

“Finn! Stop calling him curse words.”

Flash whined. I stuck my tongue out at him, and he barked.

I huffed and said, “No one likes a tattletale, Flash.”

With another bark he jumped and ran over to Rory.

“Oh sure, hide behind the girl. Pussy.”

Rory shot me a dirty look while Flash wagged his tail.

When I looked up at Rory, I noticed her eyes looked swollen. “What’s wrong with your eyes?”

Her smile faded. “What?”

“They look puffy and red.”

She finished off her piece of bread and drank some water. “Lack of sleep, I’m sure.”

A feeling moved over me as I watched her bend down to give Flash some love. “Should we get going?” she asked, too casually.

There was something she was hiding, and I was going to figure out what in the hell it was. Taking a drink of my coffee, I nodded. “Yeah. I just need to get dressed.”

Her smile was forced as I walked by her and kissed her on the cheek. Had I said something last night? I was pretty sure I hadn’t.

She’d been quiet ever since we left Preston and Harmony’s. Rubbing the tension in the back of my neck, I pulled out my phone and sent a text message off.

Me: Did Rory happen to mention anything being wrong when you guys went for a walk?

I tossed my phone onto the bed and waited for Angie to text me back.

Little Sis: Nope. Nothing. Why, what’s wrong?

Me: Probably nothing. My imagination.

Little Sis: Probs. Love you, big bro. Got to run. Hugs to Rory!

I sat down on my bed and blew out a deep breath. I couldn’t shake the feeling that something was wrong. There was something different in her eyes this morning.

Shaking it off, I stood and pulled on a pair of jeans, then a light sweatshirt. The temperature was supposed to be on the chilly side today.

With a quick run of my fingers through my hair, I took off back to the living room. Rory was on the balcony talking to someone. I grabbed Finn’s leash and he came flying over to me, jumping around like an idiot.

“You ready to go spend the day with other dogs?”

Flash jetted his front paws out in his favorite downward dog position and barked. Laughing, I clipped the leash on. “I’ll take that as a yes.”

“All ready?” Rory asked.

“Yep. Who was that?”

“Russell. We have a meeting with the client and his accuser tomorrow morning. I’m hoping it’s to tell us she’s dropping the chargers against Robert

Long.”

I shook my head and grabbed Rory’s bag. “I hope so. He’s a good guy, and I never believed those accusations in the first place.”

Rory simply nodded her head as she reached for her purse. “Yeah. You know, I think McCormick’s butt hurt that it was me who exposed this lady.”

I shut the door behind me, then locked it. “Fuck him. Let’s not talk shop. Today is all about us.”

Her eyes filled with happiness, then suddenly looked sad. “Sounds perfect.”

Jesus, why is she so emotional?

She clapped her hands together, her mood instantly changed. “So...you going to tell me where we’re going?”

I chuckled and shook my head. Grabbing her hand, I kissed the back of it. “Nope. You’ll find out soon enough.”

With a sweeter-than-sweet smile, she gazed up at me as we headed to the elevator. “Another surprise huh?”

I kissed her nose. “Well, I know how much you love them.”

“Yes I do, Mr. Ward. Yes. I. Do.”



The streets were lined with red and yellow leaves as I drove through town. This was one of my favorite times of the year.

“Salem? We’re spending the day in Salem?”

I could hear the excitement in her voice. “Well, when you said you hadn’t been since you were a little girl and it was one of your favorite towns, I thought why the heck not.”

She bounced in her seat. “How do you always know what I want to do?”

Laughing, I took her hand in mine. “Because I listen when you talk.”

Her head turned, and she stared at me with nothing but love in those beautiful baby blue eyes.

“I hope you like carnivals.”

“What? I love them! The carnival in Salem is amazing!”

There was no way I could contain the smile on my face. I loved making Rory happy, and I had the strangest feeling I needed to do that today more than ever.



Chapter Forty-Six

Finn

What went wrong?

“Best candy apple ever!” Rory stated as we headed back to my car.

Laughing, I adjusted the giant stuffed animal in my arms.

“I still can’t believe you won that thing.”

“He underestimated my ability.”

Rory giggled. “You know they were secretly *moving* those targets, right?”

“Of course I did. Why do you think I stood there for so long watching before I knew I was ready to walk up and shoot ’em all down?”

Rory let out a contented sigh as we walked through the town.

“I love the fall. The smells, the sounds, the beauty of it. It’s my favorite time of year. No, wait—winter is. No. No, I think it’s fall.”

I chuckled and shifted the bear again. “It’s mine too. When I was younger, I always looked forward to going to all the fall fests. Apple cider.”

“Pumpkin carving!”

“Making scarecrows.”

Giggling, she said, “The smell of cinnamon in everything!”

I rolled my eyes. “Ugh...yes.”

A young man approached us, a huge grin on his face. “Good afternoon! Would you like to take part in tonight’s haunted-footsteps ghost tour?”

With a polite nod, I responded, “No thanks. We’re heading back to Boston.”

“It’s a lot of fun.”

“Nah, we’ve got plans this evening, but thank you.”

Rory took another bite of her candy apple before tossing it into a trash

can. Facing me, she asked, “What’s the plan for tonight?”

With a wink, I stated, “You’ll see.”

She shook her head, and I held the door open for her as she slipped into the car.

“You like surprising me, don’t you?”

Leaning in, I softly kissed her lips. “I like to see your face light up and your beautiful blue eyes sparkle.”

Her grin faltered a bit before she kissed me back. “I love you, Finn.”

“Love you more, Éan.”

Drawing back, I shut her door, then popped the trunk open. I couldn’t wait to put the giant-ass teddy bear down. My arm was cramping carrying it all around.

The letter sticking out of my bag caught my eye. Smiling, I picked it up.

What I love about us...

The second I’d come across the time-capsule book, I knew I needed it for Rory. I’d written out two letters from the book so far. I was going to put this one in her bag in hopes she found it tomorrow. The other one I had sent to her mother to give to Rory on a certain date.

I placed the letter back in my bag and shut the trunk. Never in a million years would I have ever pictured myself buying a damn *Letters to My Love* book.

Laughing, I rubbed the back of my neck, took in a deep breath of crisp fall air, and made my way to the driver’s side of the car.

This weekend hadn’t turned out exactly like I planned, but I had a feeling things were only going to get better.



The lights of Boston held my attention while I waited for Rory to get ready for dinner. The only thing I told her was to dress nice.

My phone buzzed in pocket. Pulling it out, I frowned.

Wes: Whenever you have a free minute. I need to talk to you.

I hit his number.

“Hey, you free right now?”

“Sort of,” I replied, glancing back toward Rory’s bedroom. “Rory’s getting ready to go out to dinner. What’s up?”

“Mandy’s getting married.”

Oh shit.

Mandy and Wes had dated all through high school and college. When Wes had taken a job in New York City and asked her to marry him, Mandy told him no, that her dream was to take over her family's restaurant in Boston. It had devastated Wes.

"What? Who is the guy? When did they start dating?"

Wes let out a frustrated sigh. "I don't know. The last time I saw her was at the club the night we all went with Harmony. Right before Preston and she finally hooked up. Mandy and I spent the evening together at a hotel, and the next morning she was gone. I hadn't heard from her until today, when I got the letter. She said she wanted to tell me before I found out from someone else."

"Damn, dude, I'm really sorry."

"I'm moving back to Boston."

His words hit me dead-on. "You're doing what?"

"I'm ready!" Rory said.

Spinning around, I nearly dropped the phone. "Holy shit," I whispered.

"Hey, I'll let you go. Give me a call tomorrow, Finn."

I nodded and moved closer to Rory. "I...I will. Hey, Wes?"

"Yeah?"

"Don't do anything stupid."

I knew my brother. He was coming back to Boston for one reason only.

To win Mandy back. And I wasn't so sure that was a great idea.

With a gruff laugh, he replied, "No promises."

The call ended and I shoved the phone into my pocket.

My eyes raked over Rory. She wore a light blue sweater dress that showed off her amazing body. Her legs looked like they went on forever. The blue in Rory's eyes seemed to stand out even more against the dress... especially with her hair pulled up and placed perfectly on top of her head.

"You look beautiful, Éan."

Her cheeks turned pink. Damn how I ached for her.

"Shall we head out?"

With a nod, I extended my arm for her. The moment she touched it, my body came to life. I couldn't imagine losing her to another man. My heart hurt for Wes.

"It's a good thing that where we're going we'll be alone. Otherwise I'd be fighting the men off you."

She laughed as she nudged my shoulder with hers and we headed to the elevator.

When we got outside I was able to immediately hail a cab. I told her about Wes's call, and I could see that she was moved by his pain.

The taxi pulled up to Mamma Maria and stopped.

Rory sucked in a breath and grinned from ear to ear. "Finn, I love this restaurant!"

"I know. I asked your mother what your favorite restaurant was."

Rory launched herself into my arms. Placing her mouth to my ear, she whispered, "Please don't ever think I don't love you."

I drew back, a bit confused. "What?"

She shook her head. "Nothing. I'm starving!"

I paid the driver and stepped out of the cab, helping Rory to get out as well. The hostess smiled as we approached her. The restaurant was dimly lit, and you could barely hear conversations drifting across the room. The aromas instantly made my stomach growl, which caused Rory to giggle.

"Good evening. Do you have reservations?"

"Yes, it will be under Finn Ward."

Glancing down at her book, her face exploded into a full-on grin. "Yes! The Rossini Room is ready for you."

Rory turned to me and lifted her brow. "'Room'?"

Lacing my fingers with hers, I winked. "It's a small room, but I wanted privacy."

She slowly shook her head. "Finn Ward, you have got to be the biggest romantic I've ever met in my life."

I kissed the back of her hand. "Nah. It's seeing you smile that makes me do it. I only want you happy."

Her eyes filled with tears as she bit down on her lip. The only thing she said was one whispered word. "Finn."

"Right this way, Mr. Ward."

We followed the hostess up to the second floor. The room was set up with one single table. The lights were dimmed, and the candle on the table cast a flurry of lights that danced on the walls.

"Oh my, it's perfect."

My phone rang in my pocket with the fire station's ringtone.

"It's the station. Let me grab this."

Rory's smile faded.

“This is Finn.”

“Ward, we’ve got a situation,” John said.

“What’s wrong?” I asked, taking a few steps away from Rory.

“There’s been an accident. It’s Zeb.”

My heart dropped. “Is he okay?”

The silence on the other end told me the answer to that question.

“He’s in critical condition.”

Scrubbing my hand down my face, I asked, “What happened?”

“He fell through the floor of a warehouse. A few broken ribs, some internal bleeding, and a head injury. They have him in surgery now to try and stop the bleeding.”

“Fuck,” I whispered. “Sissy?”

“She’s not doing too good. Colton is at the hospital now.”

“I’m on my way.”

Hitting End, I turned to Rory. Her face was white as a ghost. “Éan, I’ve got to go.”

She swallowed hard. “What...what happened?”

“It’s Zeb. He fell through a warehouse floor and is in pretty bad shape.”

A tear slipped from her eye.

“Do you want to come with me?” I asked.

She stared at me for the longest time before finally answering. “No. I’m going to head back home.”

I shook my head. “You don’t have to go home. Go back to my place, and once I make sure Sissy is okay—”

“Sissy?”

I glanced away for a quick second before looking back into her eyes. “Zeb’s fiancée.”

Her hand covered her mouth.

“Once I make sure she’s okay and so is Zeb, I’ll be right behind you.”

Her hand dropped to her side. “I can’t.”

Confusion swept across my body, along with a sense of panic. “You can’t what?”

“It’s okay, just go, Finn. Zeb and Sissy need you. I’ll be okay.”

“We’ll share a cab.”

She nodded. “Okay.”

The hostess asked, “So that means you’re no longer using the room?”

“Yes, just bill my credit card what you need to. I’m sorry.”

I took Rory's hand in mine and we headed back down the stairs and out the front. I called for a taxi, and we quickly slipped into the backseat. I told him to take me to the hospital and then gave him the address to my condo.

We sat in silence as Rory stared out the window. Taking her hand in mine, I squeezed it.

"That could be you, Finn. You were supposed to work tonight."

I tugged on her chin, making her meet my gaze. We were face-to-face, eye-to-eye. "It wasn't me. So don't even think that way."

"When were they getting married?"

"They *are* getting married four days before Christmas."

A tear slowly made a path down her beautiful face. Using my thumb, I brushed it away. "He's going to be okay, Rory."

She forced a smile.

"We're at the hospital, sir."

Placing her hand on the side of my face, she softly spoke. "I love you."

"I love you too, Éan."

I gently kissed her lips, then rested my forehead on hers. "I'll meet you back at my place."

She didn't answer me. Pulling out a few twenty-dollar bills, I handed them to the driver and repeated my address. I quickly exited the cab and started heading in.

"Finn! Wait!"

Turning, I saw Rory running over to me. She slammed into my body and held me tight. "Kiss me. Please kiss me."

Drawing back, I held her face in my hands and kissed her. She deepened the kiss while wrapping her arms around me, holding me tight. It almost felt as if she was kissing me for the last time.

When she finally pulled away, she smiled. "I'll see you in a bit, okay?" I said as I gently tapped the tip of her nose with my finger. She nodded.

"I'll be praying for Zeb."

One more quick kiss and I replied, "Thanks, Éan."

I headed into the hospital and looked back to see her getting into the cab. She leaned forward and said something to the driver. I stopped walking and faced the cab. Glancing my way one more time, she waved as the cab pulled off.

After making my way into the hospital, I found Colton and Sissy. We waited together for an hour before the doctor came out.

Sissy jumped up and rushed over to him. When he told her they'd stopped the internal bleeding and that Zeb had woken up in recovery and asked about her, she jumped into the doctor's arms and cried.

I turned to Colton and we shared a look of relief. Sissy was now in a full-blown cry, thanking the doctor over and over.

The thought of Rory being that scared did weird things to me. I sent her a quick text telling her Zeb was going to be okay. She didn't respond until I was in the cab and heading back to my place.

Rory: I'm so glad he is okay.

I was taken aback by how short her text was. Something felt wrong.

Terribly wrong.

I ran to the elevator when I got back to my building. Racing to my door, I almost knocked down a neighbor. I rushed inside.

"Rory?" I called out.

Flash jumped up in his crate and barked.

She isn't here.

Me: Where are you? Did you go back to your place?

There was no response to my text.

Something caught my attention as I walked over to the crate and let Flash out.

To Finn.

A sinking feeling hit my stomach as I stared down at the envelope. My hands shook as I opened it. The key to my condo was in it, along with a letter. As I pulled the paper out, my heart pounded in my chest as I struggled to breath.

I read her letter through blurred eyes.

My Sweet Finn,

I know I promised to never leave you, and my heart is breaking as I write this, but we can no longer be together. Please, please know that this is the hardest thing I've ever had to do, but it's the only thing I know to do. Please try to understand I wouldn't do this unless I had to.

The last few months have been the most amazing of my life. I wouldn't trade them for all the gold in the world. And no matter what you may think of me right now or in the future, please know that I love you. I'll

always love you, Finn Ward.

Please don't hate me. I don't think I could stand it if you hated me.

Forever yours,

Rory

The letter slipped from my hands as I stumbled over to the kitchen bar.

“Why?” I whispered to myself. “Why would she do this to me?” I closed my eyes and tried to steady my breathing.

Flash barked at my side, causing me to jump and look back at the letter. Seeing the glass plate with the bread on it, I picked it up and threw it across the room. Glass shattered everywhere, and Flash ran into the bedroom.

Yelling louder, “Why, Rory? Why?”

Picking up a vase with flowers Rory had bought last week, I threw it against the wall.

“How could you do this to me?” My arm swept across the bar, causing everything to hit the floor in loud crashes.

“How could you do this?” I yelled out.

Spinning around, I grabbed whatever I could and started throwing it. *Why would she do this? Why would she destroy my entire world?*

Something inside of me snapped as I pushed my sofa over, kicked Flash's kennel, and reached for anything I could while screaming out “Why?”

Pushing my hands into my hair I closed my eyes.

“You lied! You fucking lied! Motherfucker!”

“Finn! Stop!”

Spinning on my heels, I saw Regina standing in the doorway with a stunned look on her face.

“What is going on? It's four in the morning. You're going to wake everyone up.”

My legs started to feel weak. “She left me.”

Regina's eyes widened in shock.

“What? That's impossible. She loves you.”

Slowly shaking my head, I whispered, “She left me.”

The bottle of Jack caught my eye, and I grabbed it and started drinking.

“Finn. Please don't do this.”

Paul walked up to me and tried to take the bottle from me. I looked directly into his eyes. “I can't. I can't live without her.” He nodded and

turned to Regina.

“Wes is in town. I have his number. I’ll call him,” Regina said as Paul turned back to me.

“Let’s sit out on the balcony, Finn.”

I finished the bottle of Jack in record time, then moved on to beer, then fell into a stupor. When I came to, Paul was sitting next to me, along with Wes, who’d showed up at some point, unbeknownst to me.

Neither of them said a word, probably realizing that the alcohol had been the only thing that could numb my heart; that the darkness it provided was the only thing that could keep me from feeling; that I needed that darkness now, more than I ever had before in my life.



Chapter Forty-Seven

Rory

Worst day of my life

I headed into the conference room, with Russell and Robert Long trailing behind me. My body felt numb. When I'd woken up in the hotel this morning, nothing in my life seemed to matter anymore. I felt so out of sorts from being away from my own home, but I knew that would be the first place Finn would come and look for me.

"You need to snap out of it, Rory. I have no idea what is wrong with you," Russell whispered against my ear.

Glaring back at him, I replied, "I'm fine. Besides, I thought I was only here to sit next to you and look pretty. Wasn't that what you said?"

He rolled his eyes. "Did you drink too much last night at a Halloween party or something? For Christ's sake, I was kidding. Believe me, the fact that you blew Casey Steven's testimony out of the water is not lost on me. In your mother's eyes, you're the golden lawyer on this one."

My body shook with anger. I hated Russell. Or maybe I hated myself more than anything else. Regina had sent me a text last night, and it had been haunting me since I'd read it at five-thirty this morning.

Finn is freaking out and tearing up his place. What happened, Rory? Please call me!

The buzzing of my phone caused me to jump. I feared it was Finn, but it was Autumn. Swiping up, I read her text.

Autumn: He was here this morning. I let him in because he didn't believe you weren't here. Rory, he begged me to tell him where you were. He was angry and I'm pretty sure drunk.

My heart pounded deafeningly in my chest. I closed my eyes and took in a deep breath.

Me: You didn't tell him, did you?

Autumn: No. But I wanted to. Especially when the guy about broke down in tears. His brother Wes...who I might add is sexy as fuck...had to force him to leave. My heart broke for him. You need to tell him the truth, Rory. Let him decide if being a firefighter is worth losing you.

Tears filled my eyes.

Me: I can't do that to him, Autumn. I won't make him choose.

Autumn: Rory, you're making the biggest mistake of your life.

Me: I've got to go, in a meeting.

Autumn: Of course. You always were good at two things Rory. Running from your feelings and letting your parents decide how to live your life.

My mouth dropped as I read her last text. What in the hell did that mean? I wasn't running from my feelings.

Was I?

The door to the conference room opened, and Casey Stevens and her lawyer walked in.

I opened my briefcase, and my breath caught. There was another letter in there that was almost identical to the one my mother had given me from Finn on Friday night. I picked it up and read

*What I love about us . . .
To be opened on Monday, November 1.*

Snapping my eyes up, I quickly glanced around the room. I was on the verge of a complete meltdown.

I slid the letter under my notebook and took in a deep breath.

Russell cleared his throat and got the room's attention. I looked at him but didn't hear a word he said, and soon I turned from him and just stared out the window. When had he put that in my briefcase? It had to have been last night when I was getting ready to go out to dinner.

What does it say?

Should I read it?

"Rory? Rory!"

My head jerked to look at Russell. "I'm sorry, what was that?"

"Ms. Stevens would like to withdraw all accusations against Mr. Long, as long as he agrees not to press any charges against her."

I stole a glance at Robert. He nodded his head. "I'm ready to move on so I can get back to work and get married."

I glanced around at the roomful of lawyers and the judge. Standing, I cleared my throat and dug deep inside to get my shit together. "I suggest Ms. Stevens writes a letter of apology and reads it during a press conference, and the sooner the better. With Mr. Long being a public servant and the amount of press this case generated, that's the best way to get it out that the accusations were false."

Russell cleared his throat. "I agree; I think a public statement is a good idea."

I watched as Casey Stevens's face turned white as a ghost. She shot me a dirty look and turned to her lawyer. "This is insane. I simply tried to help out my sister, and now I have to go on TV and say I'm a liar."

When she looked back at me, my brows lifted. "Are you not...a liar, Ms. Stevens?"

She went to speak, but the judge spoke before she could. "I don't think asking you to make a public statement regarding your false accusations is any worse than you accusing an innocent man of sexual assault, Ms. Stevens."

The bitch's lawyer spoke up before Casey Stevens could. "We'll get it scheduled as soon as possible."

"What? I'm going to lose my job if I go on TV and say I lied about this. This isn't fair."

I'd had enough of this lady. Hell, I'd had enough of everything. As I started gathering my things, I pierced her cold stare with one of my own. "You could be sitting your ass in jail, Casey. But Robert didn't want that and asked the judge to go easy on you. Six months of probation and a hundred hours of community service is pretty damn fair, I think. I wouldn't argue too much if I were you, unless you want to go to jail."

It gave me great satisfaction to see her slink down in her chair some. And one quick peek at the judge's smile told me he was satisfied with the outcome too.

"If you'll excuse me, I'm late for a meeting," I said.

Russell wore a stunned expression as he stood and followed me out of the conference room.

"Where in the hell do you think you're going?" Russell asked as he grabbed my arm.

Looking down at his hand, I frowned. "Take your hands off of me. Now."

He dropped his hand, then dragged it through his hair in frustration. “What was that, Rory? You went off on her and now you’re going to just leave? That was the most unprofessional thing I’ve ever seen.”

I laughed. “I doubt that, Russell. Now if you’ll excuse me, I’m late.” I turned toward the elevators.

“For?”

Stopping, I glanced over my shoulder. “It’s none of your business.”

“Running off to your manwhore again, Rory? How long are you going to take advantage of being the boss’s daughter?”

Heat raced through my veins as I walked directly up to him. “Do you have any idea how much of a total and complete asshole you are?”

He smirked. “The truth hurts, doesn’t it, sweetheart?”

I wasn’t sure what came over me. I pulled my arm back and put every ounce of energy into my swing. My fist hit him square on the chin, and he stumbled and hit the wall.

My hand ached instantly, and I wanted more than anything to let out a scream and cry. But I didn’t. Instead, I lifted my chin and watched as he regained his composure.

“What in the hell is wrong with you? Don’t think I won’t be reporting this to your mother!”

With a smirk on my face, I replied, “Have fun with that, Russell.”



I stared out the window of my hotel as tears streamed down my face. It felt as if there was a hole in the middle of my chest. The pain I was feeling was deserved. I’d done this to myself, because I didn’t have the guts to face my father, or to even let Finn face him.

As I thought about it now, I realized that a part of me knew deep down inside that the situation with Zeb had scared me more than I wanted to admit.

The letter sitting by my side caught my eye. Picking it up, I wiped my tears away and attempted to read it.

My sweet Éan,

This is hard, because there are so many things I love about us. I love how we feel when we are lying in bed in each other’s arms. I love how your laugh makes me feel alive. I love surprising you and seeing you get excited. I love that we can have fun together simply by hanging out and watching your

favorite Disney movies.

But the thing I love most about us is that we have a future together. I see it, Rory, and I hope you see it to.

All my love,

Finn

Closing my eyes, I buried my face in my hands and cried harder.

“What have I done?” I cried. “God, what have I done?”

The light tap on the door caused me to jump. Wiping the tears from my face, I held my breath.

He found me.

My stomach dropped at the idea of Finn coming after me. Would he? He’d gone to my condo looking for me, so surely he would keep looking. Would he know to come to the hotel we had been to?

I prayed he would.

“Rory? Darling?”

The feeling of disappointment washed over my body. I slowly made my way to the door and looked out the peephole to see my mother and Autumn.

“Damn you, Autumn,” I whispered. Unlocking the door, I opened it and walked back into the suite.

“Rory, you weren’t answering your phone, and then when your mom called and said you left work, I freaked and got worried.”

Glancing back to Autumn, I forced a smile. “It’s okay.”

My mother walked up to me and tried her best to give me that stern yet loving look that moms gave. “Rory darling, you can’t hide out in a hotel room.”

Sadness ripped through me. “Why not, Mom? I feel sad and want to be alone. What’s so wrong about that?”

She placed her hands on my arms. “You’re hiding, that’s what is wrong about that. Darling, why didn’t you tell Finn the truth?”

Dropping my head back, I groaned in frustration. “Not you too.”

“Yes, me too. Had you told him what your father was doing, you know he would have—”

“Quit. He would have quit, Mom. You and I both know that.”

She shook her head. “You didn’t give him the chance to fight the battle, Rory.”

My lips trembled as I looked into my mother’s eyes. “I was going to tell him, Mom. That night after dinner. I went over it in my head a million times.

Who knows, maybe Finn could transfer to another station. We'd come up with something...together. All I really knew for sure was how much I loved him and that I wouldn't walk away from him because my father told me too."

My mother gave me a confused look. "Then what in the world happened, Rory?"

A knot formed in my stomach. My fear of Finn's losing his job no longer was my number one concern. It was my fear of losing *him* that had caused me to walk away.

"One of his best friends was in the hospital in critical condition last night from falling through a floor during a warehouse fire. The moment I heard him talking about it, I panicked. Even the idea of Dad's ultimatum was nothing compared to the thought of Finn dying. All I could think about was this man's fiancée and how scared she must have been knowing the man she loved could very well die. I don't think I'm that strong of a person to handle that, Mom."

Fresh tears came and covered my cheeks. Autumn walked up and hugged me as I let myself go. Sob after sob shook my body.

When I finally got my emotions in check, I drew back and looked at my mother and Autumn. "I don't know what to think anymore. Maybe a small part of me was looking for a reason to end it with Finn because I'm too much of a coward to deal with it all. It's just...I love him so much, and I'm not sure about anything in my life anymore."

Stepping forward, my mother gave me a concerned look. "What do you mean?"

I shrugged. "I'm not sure what I want anymore, Mom. I'm not happy, and I haven't been for the last few years. The only time I've felt whole was when I was with Finn. Now I feel like I've lost my dreams *and* the man I loved."

She frowned. "Your dreams?"

My gaze dropped to the floor. "It was never my desire to be a lawyer, Mom."

"That's not true, Rory! You majored in history. It's in your blood."

Suddenly it was as if everything I had buried deep down inside of me came bubbling up to the surface all at once. My mother deciding Harvard was the school for me. My father deciding the condo he liked was much safer than the condo I wanted, the one that overlooked the harbor. My parents pushing me into law school to be like my mother. Sunday dinners with my parents so they could keep tabs on me. My father telling me who I could date. My

mother insisting I take a job at her firm. My whole life had been mapped out by my parents.

No more.

“Mom, you controlled my career path. Dad controlled my personal life. It’s time I took control of my own life.”

Autumn’s face grew wide with a smile. I knew she was happy I was finally standing up for myself.

The look on my mother’s face showed she was in complete shock. “What would you do if you weren’t a lawyer, Rory? This is simply insane. You love being a lawyer.”

I squared my shoulders off, lifted my chin, and spoke the words I feared would give my mother a heart attack. “No, Mom. *You* love being a lawyer. I simply do it because it was expected of me. What I really want to do is teach. I want to help people. I want to live in a house that has a huge backyard for my kids to run around in. I want to grow a giant garden and have flowers planted everywhere. Meeting Finn opened my eyes to what I really want, have always wanted, in my life.”

My mother’s eyes widened in shock. “What exactly are you saying, Rory?”

My eyes darted over to Autumn, who winked and nodded.

My mouth instantly dried and I was nervous as hell, but I told my mother exactly what I intended on doing. “I’m quitting the firm. I don’t want to practice law any longer. I think I’m going to leave town for a few days, figure out how I’m going to win Finn back.”

“Quit the firm? You’re walking away from a highly promising career... for what?”

“Happiness, Mom. A life I look forward to getting up to every day and living. Not a life where I’m going through the motions trying to prove to myself day in and day out that I’m more than just the boss’s daughter. What I want to prove *now* is that I can make a life with the man I love.” I smiled. “That’s what I’m walking away to, Mom. And I’m walking away *from* the life you and Dad wanted, not me.”

My mother shook her head, as if trying to shake out the words I had just thrown at her. “You’re not thinking clearly. You’re going to regret this, Rory. I’ll talk to your father. We’ll get this straightened out and make him see how wrong he is about Finn. He was being stubborn, but I know we can make this right. Finn will not lose his job.”

I shook my head. “No, Mom. I’m not sure when I’m going to be able to forgive Daddy for what he did...or myself for listening to him. For all I know, Finn hates me right now. I was stupid and naïve to ever let Dad strong-arm me. I love you and love that you support me regarding Finn, but I don’t want your help in this. I made the mistake; now I have to figure out how to fix it.”

“Rory, you don’t mean all of that,” my mother said.

I took her hands in mine. “I do. Mom: *Please*, for once in my life, let me do things the way I want to do them. Let me make my own choices in life. Please.”

A tear slipped from her eye. “I never meant to force you into something you didn’t want to do.”

I drew her into my arms, and we hugged. “I know, Mom. I know.”

She pulled back and wiped her tears away. “I’m here for you if you need anything. Especially help with your father—who I might add is in the doghouse for his little confession Friday night and this whole insane thing with threatening Finn’s job.”

With everything else going on, I had totally forgotten about my father’s confession.

“What are you going to do?” I asked.

“Forgive him. I’d broken up with him, and he turned to another woman. Am I disappointed in him? Very much so, but at the same time, I’d told him we were through, so he technically didn’t cheat.”

Fear gripped my body and I felt like I couldn’t breathe. Would Finn do the same thing? Turn to another woman for comfort? The thought made me sick to my stomach.

Autumn gasped and asked, “What happened?”

Turning to her, I said, “I’ll catch you up on all of that later.”

Clearing her throat and checking her makeup in a mirror, my mother turned to me. “I hate leaving you, but I’ve got to run. Will you be coming back to the office today?”

I shook my head. Seeing my mother dash off as if nothing had just happened made me realize I was doing the right thing. “Not today, Mom. I can’t. And when I do come back it will only be to clean out my office.”

A look of disappointment washed over her face before she forced a smile. Kissing me on the cheek, my mother whispered, “Good luck with Finn.”

“Thanks. Bye, Mom. I’ll talk to you later this evening.”

Autumn hugged and kissed my mother goodbye. As soon as she walked out the door, I turned to Autumn.

“I can’t tell you how amazing that felt.”

She walked up to me and drew me into her arms. “About damn time if you ask me.”

Taking a step back, she lifted her brow. “Now what?”

There was no way I could deny the sick feeling I had in my stomach. If my father had fallen into the arms of another woman, would Finn do the same?

“I know what you’re thinking, and he wouldn’t do it. No way.”

I nodded in agreement. My heart knew the truth.

I was done listening to my head. It was time to follow my heart.

Looking intently at Autumn, I asked, “How do I get him back?”

She smiled. “Call him. Right now and tell him everything.”

Racing over to my purse, I pulled my phone out and hit Finn’s number. It rang three times before a female voice answered. My already sick-feeling stomach took a nosedive.

“Finn’s telly. How can I help you?”

The lump in my throat made it hard to speak. “Is...um...Finn available?”

The girl chuckled. “Aah...hold on a second.”

I snapped my eyes over to Autumn, and her smile vanished.

I heard Finn ask who was on the phone. “It’s Rory,” the woman said.

Finn’s voice appeared on the other end. “What do you want, Rory?”

His voice sounded distant and cold.

“I was...I was wondering if I might be able to come over and talk to you.”

Silence.

“Or we could meet somewhere and talk.”

“You promised me.”

His words felt like a knife piercing my heart. “Finn, please let me explain.”

“I’ve never in my life opened my heart to someone like I did you. I loved you, and I thought you loved me.”

“I do love you! Do you not remember this past weekend? My note...I’ll always love you.”

Finn let out a gruff laugh. “That’s not what your father said.”

I sucked in a breath of air. “What do you mean?”

Finn let out a frustrated sigh. “I can’t do this, Rory. I trusted you with my heart, and you broke it. No, you didn’t just break it...you destroyed it. You fucking destroyed *me*. I don’t want to talk to you. I don’t care what you have to say.”

And with those words, he hung up. I stared straight ahead, my arm dropping to my side as tears burned my eyes.

“Rory? What happened?”

“He hates me,” I whispered.

Autumn walked up to me. “He doesn’t hate you. I read that letter he wrote to you. He’s hurt and angry, that’s all.

I hit my father’s number. He sounded relieved when he answered the phone.

“Rory, are you okay?”

“You don’t get to ask me that question, Dad. Did Finn show up for his shift today?”

“Yes. After he walked into my office smelling like alcohol this morning, then proceeded to chew me out and demanded I tell him why you broke up with him.”

“What did you say?”

“I told him what I thought was the best thing to say.”

Fear gripped my chest. I closed my eyes and asked, “What. Did. You. Say?”

“I told him you only entertained this whole notion of being with him to be rebellious against me. That you agreed Friday night that the best thing to do would be to end this ridiculous affair you had going with him.”

Anger filled my entire body as my eyes snapped open. “I never said any of that. You lied to him. How could you lie to him?”

“Because you’re going to see that that boy was never going to be faithful to you, Rory. I know the type.”

I yelled into the phone, “You know *nothing* about Finn! Nothing! He is ten times the man you ever were.”

“Do not raise your voice to me, young lady.”

Shaking my head, I attempted to keep myself calm. Every inch of my body was shaking in anger. I felt sick to my stomach.

“I cannot believe you. I’ll never forgive you for this, Dad. Never.”

“Rory, I’m only—”

“And I’m going to win his love back if I have to keep trying til the day I

die, and there is nothing you can do about it.”

“I forbid you to see him, Rory Ann Adams.”

I laughed. “I’m not a child. I’m twenty-six years old, and I neither need nor desire your direction in my life.”

“You are my daughter, and I have every right to be a part of your life.”

“No more, Dad. I never in my life thought I would say this to you, but I hate you. I hate you for doing this to me and to Finn. I will never...ever... forgive you for this.”

“Rory.”

“Goodbye, Dad.”

Hitting End, I looked at Autumn. “He lied and told Finn I agreed the best thing to do would be to end things with him. No wonder he was so angry.”

She covered her mouth with her hands. “That bastard!” she gasped.

“He lied. How could my own father do this to me?”

My body was numb.

I did the only thing I knew to do. I threw my phone against the tile floor and screamed, “I hate him so much!”

My knees shook and I felt my entire body give out.

Autumn was by my side, holding on to me tightly as I cried hysterically. “I’ve lost the fight. Oh, God, Autumn! I’ve lost him forever.”

“You have not, Rory Adams. You’ve lost one round, but you’re going to win the battle, I swear to you.”

After I had no tears left to shed, I stood and walked to the window. The gray sky parted and the sun shined through the clouds. It was as if all the crying had totally cleared my head. I wasn’t giving up on Finn. No matter how angry he was at me, or how much he pushed me away. I. Was. Not. Giving. Up. What we had was worth fighting for. A future that we both dreamed of, and a love so amazing that now, finally, it had showed me the light.

“I’m not giving up. I’ll never stop trying to win him back.”

Autumn appeared at my side and wrapped her arms around me. “That’s the Rory I know.”



Chapter Forty-Eight

Finn

Lost hope

Hitting End, I tossed the new phone Angie had brought over onto the sofa.

“Well, at least you didn’t break this one,” Angie said with a smirk.

I rolled my eyes and headed to the kitchen. My head was fucking pounding from all the alcohol I drank last night.

Opening the refrigerator, I grabbed a bottle of water. “I don’t need a babysitter, Angie.”

She grinned. “I know you don’t. What did she say?”

With a shrug, I replied, “She wanted to talk.”

“And you said no?”

I drank half the water. “You heard what I said. Her letter to me was pretty damn clear, as were her father’s words this morning.”

Angie frowned. “You believe him?”

Wes sat at the kitchen bar and lifted his brow. He’d been with me this morning when we went to Rory’s place before going to the station. Autumn had looked like she was on the verge of telling me where Rory went, but then had gone tight-lipped.

Glancing around my place, I sighed. Angie and her friend must have spent a few hours cleaning.

I motioned to the living room. “Thanks for cleaning that all up.”

“Thank Regina, your neighbor. She had most of it cleaned up before we got here.”

Nodding my head, I made a mental note to thank her and Paul.

“So, what do we do now?” Wes asked.

With a fake laugh, I replied, “Vow to never love women again.”

A laugh came from the living room. We all focused in on Angie’s friend Alexia. “So, you automatically blame the woman. Why?”

Flash was all over the young blonde. She wore black leggings and her hair was in two ponytails, which actually made her look sexy and not like a ten-year-old. If Angie had brought this girl around three months ago I’d probably have tried to get into her pants. Now I had no desire at all.

“They *are* to blame,” Wes replied.

“How so?” the young girl asked as she stood.

Pushing off the kitchen counter, I walked up to her. “We gave them our hearts, and they ripped them out.”

She pouted. “Aw, poor babies. Did you really think love was going to be all roses and sunshine? No, dipshits. You have to work on that shit. Anything that is worth having comes at a price. A cost that sometimes may seem too great to pay.” She turned to Wes, who had told Angie all about Mandy and his plan to move back to Boston to win her back. “So you, Wes. You took a job in New York and the girl you loved didn’t follow you and ended up moving on with her life. Well, fuck her for wanting to have a life and follow her own dreams, right? I mean she should have given it all up and followed you to a completely different state so you could follow your dreams and have her by your side. No, sorry, dude, puppies do that shit. Not women.”

I glanced over to Angie, who stood silent, but had a huge smile on her face.

“And you, Finn. You’ve fallen in love with a woman who twenty-four hours ago begged you to remember how much she loves you. Then she suddenly gets a wild hair to break up with you, her daddy tells you it was all part of her plan, and you believe him? Oh my gosh. I’ve only heard bits and pieces, and I can already tell you the father is controlling, probably has been this girl’s whole life, and she was forced into breaking up with you. Now she’s asking to talk to you and you say no?”

She knocked on her head with her fist. “Hello? Earth to Finn.”

Narrowing my eyes at her, I replied, “She’s an adult, Alexia.”

The girl lifted a brow. “An adult who kept her relationship secret from her father for fear he would find out. Now, I do wonder what in the world would make her so scared to tell her father she was dating you that she would keep it a secret, but obviously it was something—something she just reached out to you for help with.”

I wanted desperately to ask her to keep going, but instead I glanced over to Angie and said, “Don’t you think you should be taking Dr. Laura home or to school or whatever it is you guys do?”

Angie walked over to Wes. She hugged and kissed him goodbye. “Let me know if he destroys another phone.”

Wes winked. “I will.”

She made her way over to me. She looked at my black eye and shook her head. “You look like shit, Finn.”

I nodded my head. “Thanks, Angie.”

She hugged me tightly. “Don’t push her away, Finn. I know you’re hurt and angry but trust me when I say you need to talk to her.”

As she gazed into my eyes, I said, “I can’t right now, Angie.” Glancing down at the floor, I repeated, “Not right now.”

She kissed me on the forehead. “Don’t wait too long, Finn. If you do, she’ll move on.” Not taking her eyes off me, she added, “Isn’t that right, Wes?”

My head snapped up to look at Wes. He frowned, then looked away.

Angie and her friend headed out, though not before giving Flash some love. Once the door shut, I reached down for an unopened bottle of beer.

“What the fuck do they know?” I mumbled as I walked to the door that led to the balcony. The cool air felt crisp and clean.

Wes nodded. “Yeah. What do they know?”

Glancing at the beer in my hands, I turned to Wes. “I’m going for a run. I need to clear my head.”



Two weeks after Rory had written me her breakup letter, I was lying in my bed at the station and staring at the ceiling.

“Ward? You up for a run?”

Colton had been doing whatever he could to get my spirits lifted the last few weeks. None of it had worked, because I didn’t give a fuck about anyone or anything. Every time I saw Captain Adams, I looked the opposite way. I figured he would be rubbing it in. Giving me a smile that said he won and I lost. He didn’t do that, though. In fact, he seemed to be avoiding me as much as I avoided him.

I wouldn’t admit it to anyone, but I had sat in my car one day and waited

all day hoping to see Rory. When a cab had pulled up and she'd emerged from it, my breath caught. She looked tired. I could see the same sadness on her face that I saw on mine every single morning. Before she'd walked into her building she'd stopped and looked around before heading in.

"Nah. I'm not in the mood."

"Jesus, Finn. You've got to snap out of it. Either talk to her or move on."

I sat up and stared at him. "You still dating Melissa?"

His face dropped. "No. She broke things off a few weeks back."

"Why?"

He shrugged. "I wouldn't commit to the relationship."

Frowning, I replied, "I'm sorry about that, dude."

With a short, empty chuckle, he said, "It was my fault."

Nodding, I asked, "You want to go out tonight?"

He grinned. "Are you going to sulk or try and enjoy yourself?"

I smiled. "I guess the only way to move on is to enjoy myself."

"And is moving on what you want to do, Finn?"

Before I had a chance to answer, an alarm sounded and we both started hustling. The last fucking thing I wanted to do was go out. But if it meant forgetting the pain in my chest for a while, I was willing to give it a shot. I pulled my pants on, then my jacket. Grabbing my helmet, I slipped it on and went to get into the truck. Cap's gaze caught mine. It was hard not to notice the sadness in his eyes.

"You got your head in the game, Finn?"

I wasn't sure how to respond. Was he asking because he thought I couldn't do my job? Or because he knew he was the reason his daughter and I were miserable?

"Always, sir. Always."

He nodded. "Good."



There was chaos at the scene. Residents of the building were all over the place, yelling at us to get the fire out. They were losing everything. A lady screamed that her dog was still in the house and begged Colton and me to go in and get him. Captain Adams nodded for us to enter the brownstone.

Before going in, I hit my helmet three times. Colton walked slightly ahead of me.

“I can’t see a thing in here,” Colton said.

“Engine 33,” I called into the mic.

Dispatch came on. “Fire alarm answering Engine 33.”

“We have smoke filling the entire building, making it difficult to see.”

“Copy that, Engine 33 states a lot of smoke in the building making seeing difficult.”

I heard a cracking sound and reached out for Colton. “Stop! Something’s about to go.”

“I hear it!” Colton replied.

A bark came from the right. I pointed and said, “Over here—I hear it over here.”

“Engine 33, we are heading into the first-floor main living. We hear barking.”

“Fire alarm to Engine 33, you are entering the main-floor living.”

Making our way into another room, I caught the silhouette of a young girl holding a dog.

“Holy shit,” I whispered. “There’s a kid in here with the dog!”

“Engine 33, repeat please.”

“There’s a young girl in here. Still conscious...though possibly only barely.”

“Copy that, Engine 33 has found a young girl still alive in the building.”

Captain Adams’s voice filled my helmet. “Engine 33, I need all members to vacate the building immediately. It’s about to go. Finn, Colton, I need you to get out of the building. Now! I repeat, get out of the building. There is a fire in the basement and one working under the roof.”

Fuck. Two different fires, two different places most likely meant the fire was arson.

“Grab her, Finn. I’ll get the dog.”

I went to reach for the girl and she screamed, then started coughing. “It’s okay, sweetheart. I’m not going to hurt you or the dog, but we have to go or you’re both going to be hurt really bad. Do you understand?”

She nodded and handed me the dog, which I then handed to Colton. Reaching down, I picked up the little girl and shouted to Colton, “Get moving—the ceiling above and below is about to go; I feel the heat!”

I was barely able to see Colton give me a thumbs-up, and we headed back the way we’d come in. The creaking and cracking sounds of the floors grew louder as we moved across it.

“You gotta move faster, Colton! Move it!”

“I’m trying to find the goddamn way out, Finn. I can’t even see my hand in front of my face.”

My heart raced. We needed to get this kid out of here before she breathed in any more smoke.

“Engine 33. We’re going to need an ambulance.”

“Fire alarm answering Engine 33. Copy that, ambulance in front of rescue two.”

Colton must have pulled ahead, or the smoke was getting much thicker, because I lost sight of him. I heard a loud crash from the direction of the floor behind me as I ran.

“Hold on, sweetheart!” I shouted. I could see the light from the door and ran as fast as I could. Praying we got out before the whole damn floor collapsed.



Chapter Forty-Nine

Rory

Moving forward

My heart raced as I listened to the live dispatch from the Boston Fire Department.

“Engine 33, all members are safely out of the building.”

“Fire alarm answering Engine 33, all members are out of the building.”

I let out the breath I was holding and fell back against the sofa. My heart raced as I dragged in one breath after another to calm myself down.

“Holy shit. No wonder this was a concern of yours. I was on the edge of my seat the entire time. Rory, you can’t do this to yourself. You’ll go insane.”

With a nod, I replied, “I know, Autumn.” Sitting up, I dropped my head into my hands and groaned. “But I have to know he’s okay.”

My cell phone vibrated on the coffee table before ringing. It was an unknown number.

“Hello?”

“Rory Adams?”

I was instantly on guard. “Yes, this is Rory Adams.”

“Rory, this Professor Williams at Harvard University.”

With a grin, I replied, “Hello, Professor Williams. How are you doing?”

He chuckled. “I’m doing well. And how are you enjoying practicing law? Have you gotten that real-world experience I talked about?”

I chuckled. “Well, if you mean working day and night and taking every case I possible could...then yes, I’ve gotten real-world experience. But...I’ve left my mother’s practice. I’ve decided I no longer want to practice law.”

“Really? How interesting. What are your plans?” he asked.

Standing, I moved to the window and looked out at the snow flurries.
“Honestly, I’d love to teach.”

“Rory, you just made me one happy man.”

I chuckled. “Why is that, Professor?”

“Because I’m thinking of offering you a job.”

A smile spread across my face. Autumn mouthed, “What?”

Holding up my finger, I asked, “What kind of job?”

“A teaching position. A course in union law. I saw the news conference a few weeks ago, and when your name was mentioned I took that as a sign. I’ve had a note to call you.”

I jumped around like a schoolgirl. Autumn giggled.

“Yes! I’d very much like to speak with you regarding a teaching position. I mean, I’m somewhat up in the air right now about things, but I’d love to speak with you regardless.”

“Great. Shall we meet for coffee tomorrow at Crema Cafe, let’s say around eleven?”

“I’ll be there.”

“I’m looking forward to talking to you, Rory.”

I had to bite on my cheek to contain my excitement. “As am I, Professor Williams. See you tomorrow.”

“Goodbye, dear. Have a good afternoon.”

The call ended, and I let out a scream.

“What was that all about?” Autumn asked as someone knocked on my front door.

“The first step to my new life,” I replied as I rushed to the door and opened it. Pulling Clare into the room, I grabbed her hands and started jumping around again. Clare laughed and joined right in.

“Did you and Finn get back together?”

Instantly, it felt as if the air had been sucked from the room. The pain that had settled into my chest for the last two weeks returned with a vengeance.

With a frown, I shook my head. “No. He hasn’t returned any of my calls or answered any of my texts. I’ve even tried to go and see if I can catch him leaving his place, but I never see him.”

Clare squeezed my hands. “Don’t give up. Keep texting. Keep calling. Just give it time.”

Autumn walked over with a wide grin. “Rory’s been offered a teaching

position!”

Clare sucked in a breath. “What? That’s amazing.”

Laughing, I held up my hands. “Well, hold on. He only wants to *talk* to me about a teaching position. I haven’t been offered anything, and I’m not sure teaching a law class is what I had in mind when I said teaching.”

“Rory, that’s amazing, though. How crazy is that? What do they want you to teach?”

“Union law,” I replied.

“Right up your alley,” Autumn said with a thumbs-up.

“Professor Williams was my advisor, and he told me right before I graduated from law school that he wanted me to go and get some real-world experience, then come back and teach at Harvard. I laughed it off at the time, because I didn’t think it would ever happen. Well, I guess he heard my name on the news conference a few weeks back and decided to reach out. I’m not sure it’s what I want, but I’m going to definitely hear him out.”

“Good!” Clare said. “It gets your foot in the door at Harvard, if that’s the road you choose.”

I nodded. “Yeah. I really need to think about what I’m going to do, and soon. My rent is pretty expensive. I’ve got about eight months of rent saved, so that buys me some time.”

Clare and Autumn both stared at me with dumbfounded expressions.

“Holy shit,” Autumn gasped. “So that’s what grown-ups do with all the money they don’t use on going out and buying beer?”

I stared at her for a second before I busted out laughing. Clare rolled her eyes and added, “Here I thought my *two* months of rent was good enough. Rory, why must you be such an overachiever.”

Rolling my eyes, I motioned for Clare to stop talking. “Hey, we should go out and celebrate me moving on with this part of my life.”

Both Clare and Autumn grinned. “Hell yes. You need to get out and party. Enjoy life a little bit and stop worrying about your hot firefighter.”

My smile faded. “I’m not so sure he’s mine anymore.”

Clare held up her finger. “He’s not yours right now, but he will be.”

I wished I had the confidence they both had. As the days had gone by and I’d heard nothing from Finn, I’d grown more and more worried that he was moving on. I’d spent the last two weeks crying myself to sleep. For all I knew, Finn was out partying it up again like he used to do before we met.

The thought made my stomach ache.

“Let’s find you something sexy to wear,” Autumn said as Clare clapped her hands and followed us into my bedroom.



The music was loud. My dress was so tight I could hardly breathe. Guys wouldn’t stop staring at my breasts. And I was not feeling like myself.

And I was having a good time.

It was the first time in two weeks I was letting go of the worry and heartache—mostly. My heart still ached, and I couldn’t stop thinking about Finn, but I was having fun, for the sake of my friends and my own sanity.

“Another drink?” Autumn shouted.

I stood. “My turn to buy this time.”

She gave me a thumbs-up as I grabbed the three empty beer bottles and made my way to the bar. Trying to get through the packed bar was insane. I had rubbed against so many men and women I felt like I needed a cigarette.

I sat the empty bottles on the bar and motioned to the bartender for three more. Two girls stumbled up next to me, clearly trashed out of their minds.

“God, I need to get mindlessly fucked.”

The guy on the other side of them snapped his head and smiled. Rolling my eyes, I waited for the bartender to bring me the beers.

“Too bad you couldn’t break the hot firefighter.”

That caught my attention. Leaning a little closer, I tried to hear what they were saying, but only caught every other word.

“He’s...not going...old girlfriend...pining over...cock.”

My eyes widened as I turned to face them. They were barely twenty-one, if that.

The blonde caught my stare. “I’m not into that. Sorry.”

I laughed and held up my hands. “Me either. You mentioned a firefighter?”

She nodded. “Yeah, there’s a whole group of them here. Two of them are fucking hot as hell. But they are both no-goes.”

Leaning in, I asked, “Why?”

She motioned she couldn’t hear me. “Why are they no-goes?”

With a pout, she made the letter X with her fingers. “Pining over their ex-girlfriends. Whoever they were, they were stupid bitches!”

I laughed. The bartender set the three beers down in front of me.

Turning back to the girls, I smiled and shouted, “Be safe and have fun, ladies.”

They yelled out in unison, “Girls’ night!”

With a lighter heart, I headed back to our table. Right as I got there, I stopped.

Finn. He’s here. I can feel it.

I spun around looking for him.

“Um, if you want to dance, Rory...can you put the drinks down first?” Autumn shouted.

“What?” I asked as I kept searching feverishly. My heart was racing and there was a growing tightness in my chest.

“Finn’s here.”

Clare jumped up. “What?”

“How do you know?” Autumn asked.

How did I explain to them I had a feeling? They would both think I was nuts.

I climbed on the chair and started looking.

“What are you doing, Rory?” Clare shouted.

“He’s here! I want to see if he’s with someone.”

“Ohmygod. She’s going to get us kicked out!” Autumn yelled.

I scanned the entire club. I was feeling a bit dizzy and wished I had eaten a bit more before we went out. “She said ‘group’! Look for a large group of guys!” I called out.

Clare climbed onto her chair. “This is insane. What if he sees you?”

Autumn reached up and tugged on our arms. “He’s not even here, you idiots! Get down!”

“Ladies, are you looking for a dance partner?”

Glancing down, I looked at the guy smiling at us. “No. We’re not.”

His smile dropped and he quickly moved on to the next woman.

Shaking her head, Clare yelled out, “I don’t see a large group of guys! Maybe they left?”

I needed to talk to Finn. If that meant tracking him down in a damn club I’d do, it and I didn’t care if I made myself look like a fool or not.

“I know how to disperse the crowd!” I yelled.

Clare turned to me with a horrified look. “No, Rory. Don’t do it. Don’t call out F.I.R.E.!”

I gave her a surprised look. "I'm not going to yell fire!"

"Fire? Fire? There's a fire?" the young girl walking by screamed out.

"No!" Clare and I both screamed, "NO FIRE. NONE!"

The girl spun around and looked at us. "What the fuck is wrong with you two? You could have caused a stampede! Crazy-ass women!"

She stomped off, and I breathed a sigh of relief.

"We need to get a line dance going," I said. The music had finally stopped and the DJ was taking a quick break.

"We're not in a country bar, Rory!" Clare replied.

"Keep looking! The crowds are dispersing!"

"Rory?"

The sound of his voice made my entire world come to a standstill. Clare grabbed my hand as I turned and saw Finn. There was a girl standing next to him, looking up at me like I was insane.

He's here with someone.

I didn't think it was possible for my heart to hurt even more than it already did.

He's moved on.

I swallowed hard and started to get off the chair. Finn reached out and grabbed me by the waist, helping me down. My entire body came to life. Tingles raced across my skin as I gazed into his eyes.

"Let me help you," he said as his eyes lit up. He felt it. I know he felt it too.

"You're going to break your neck."

I turned to see Wes helping Clare down. The way they looked at each other had me smiling. Until Finn asked, "What are you doing here?"

His anger-filled question pissed me off. Here he was with some bimbo who was clearly barely old enough to drink and *he* was asking what *I* was doing here.

"Celebrating a possible new job."

His brows lifted.

"Well, not really yet. I'm not sure if I want the job."

"Promotion?"

My eyes drifted over to the girl next to him. She smiled and reached her hand out. "Hi there. I'm Alexia."

Tears formed in my eyes, and I hated myself for letting my jealousy show. "Angie's friend. I'm here with Angie and Wes."

“And me,” Finn added.

Alexia looked at Finn, then back to me.

I nodded and forced the next words out. “It’s nice to...uh...it’s nice to meet you, Alexia.”

“It’s great meeting you finally. I’ve heard a lot about you.”

My brows pinched together in confusion. Why would Finn be talking to his date about me? I chewed on my lip as I took in every inch of her before focusing back on Finn. “I’ve been calling. Have you gotten my messages?”

He didn’t say a word.

I took a step closer to him and he backed away, causing me to draw in a sharp intake of air. Could he not even stand to be near me? “Finn, please will you let me talk to you? *Please?*”

He directed his gaze over my shoulder before looking back into my eyes. “We were just leaving. You guys have fun celebrating.”

“Finn!” I cried out as I grabbed his arm.

“Don’t touch me, Rory,” Finn shouted. When he pulled his arm from my grasp, I stumbled back and nearly fell. Colton had to steady me.

A look of horror moved across Finn’s face. He gently took me by the arms. “I’m sorry, Éan. Are you okay?”

He’d used my pet name, and I felt a small spark of hope rush through my body. The only thing I could do was answer him truthfully. “No. I’m far from okay, Finn.” Tears instantly poured from my eyes. “I’m lost without you. Please talk to me. Please let me explain.”

He searched my face as his eyes watered. “I can’t. I can’t do this again.”

Dropping his hold on me, he turned and walked away. I tried to call out his name, but it came out as a whispered “Finn” instead.

Alexia walked up to me. “I’m not with him. I swear to you he’s been alone all night, and I think he was only trying to make you jealous by making you think we were on a date.”

I nodded, then forced a smile. I felt so tired all of a sudden. “Thank you, Alexia.”

With a sympathetic look, she turned on her heels and followed Finn and Wes toward the door. Colton walked up to me and drew me into his arms. Burying my face in his chest, I cried.

“Why won’t he let me explain? I love him, Colton.”

He pushed me back at arm’s length. “Why then, Rory?”

Fighting for air, I forced the words out. “My...father. He threatened to

fire...Finn! I didn't...know...what to do!"

A shocked expression hit Colton's face. "What? He threatened you with Finn's job?"

Clare walked up to us. "Rory's father told her if she didn't break up with Finn, he was going to have him fired. She didn't know what else to do."

Colton turned back to me. "Rory, you should have told Finn this."

Frantically wiping my tears away, I replied, "I know! But I didn't want him picking me over his job. I know how much he loves his job."

I didn't feel right. Damn it, why had I been drinking without eating anything? I started to feel dizzy. Placing my hand to my head, I tried to concentrate.

"He's quitting. Finn's leaving the department."

It felt like someone had sucker-punched me in the gut. I struggled for air.

"W-what?"

"Rory, as much as he acts like he doesn't want you in his life, he thinks one of the reasons you left was because of what happened to Zeb. When his brother Wes said he was moving back to Boston, Finn decided to go full-time with their business. He's leaving the department for good."

The entire room started to spin. It had all been for nothing. I'd lost the only man I'd ever love...for nothing.

"Something's wrong," I mumbled as my vision started to blur.

"Rory? Are you okay?" Clare asked.

Colton snapped his fingers in front of my face. "Rory?"

"It was all for nothing."

"Colton! You have to go get Finn. Make him listen to her," Autumn begged.

"I've tried! So has Wes. For the last two weeks Angie has begged him to call Rory. He's not listening to anyone."

Darkness grew closer and closer as the three of them grew distant in my vision. Their voices became faint and distorted. Everything was moving in slow motion.

"I'm not feeling well," I whispered as I felt my legs go.

Clare yelled out my name, but the only thing I could say was, "Finn."

My mind finally settled.

The pain was gone.

All I could see were his beautiful emerald eyes staring back into mine.

Finn.



Finn

This isn't happening

Slamming shut the door to my condo, I glanced around for Regina and Flash. “Regina?”

Nothing.

I made my way to the kitchen and saw a note.

Flash is having a sleepover at my place! I'll have him back to you first thing in the morning.

Crumbling the note, I tossed it into the trash. I reached for a warm beer from the six-pack sitting on my bar. I'd bought it earlier today and forgot to put it in the refrigerator. Popping the top, I took a large drink. It would normally bother me that it wasn't cold, but tonight I didn't give a shit. Tonight I didn't feel a damn thing.

With beer in hand, I walked out to the balcony and sat. The middle-of-the-night cold air settled in around me like a blanket. I tried to push the look on Rory's face out of my mind. Fought to forget the way she cried after I practically knocked her down by mistake. Forced myself not to hear the pleading in her voice when she begged to speak with me.

I took another drink. The sounds of the city filtered up to me. I was finished with everything. Tomorrow I was telling Captain Adams I was done. Wes and I were taking off for two weeks to Florida on a fishing trip. It would do me good to get my head cleared and figure out everything with Rory. I needed to forgive her. I had to forgive her. I was miserable as fuck without her. My only fear was her breaking my heart again.

Someone knocked on my door. Closing my eyes, I ignored it.

The knock turned into a pound.

I lifted the beer to my lips and took a drink.

The pounding got louder, and I heard my name being called.

“Preston?” I answered.

There was no doubt my heart rate had doubled as I jumped up and ran to the door. Opening it, I looked at him and asked, “What’s wrong? Harmony? Presley?”

He shook his head. “They’re fine. It’s Rory.”

Fear twisted my stomach. “What about her?”

“Colton called. Said she passed out for no reason at the club right after you left. The paramedic thought it might be—”

“It might be what?”

“He thought it might be an aneurysm.”

The air left my lungs. Barely able to breath, I forced myself to speak. “What? I just saw her. She was fine.”

“They took her to Boston Medical Center.”

I closed my eyes. *This isn’t happening. God, please don’t do this to me.*

“Let’s go. My car is double-parked. I’ll take you to the hospital.”

Everything went silent. I no longer heard Preston talking, I only saw his mouth moving. He pushed me out the door and shut it. We headed to the elevator as I forced myself to try and breathe.

If something happens to her, I will never forgive myself for walking away from her tonight.

The elevator doors closed, and I started to have a panic attack.

“Finn. Take a deep breath through your nose. That’s it. It’s okay. Breathe, Finn.” I watched as Preston breathed in through his nose and exhaled through his mouth. I mimicked his moves. The second the doors opened, I rushed out.

“This isn’t happening,” I mumbled on the way to Preston’s car.

“Let’s not jump to conclusions until we get there. I called Wes and Angie. They both left the club at the same time as you.”

I closed my eyes and leaned my head against the seat and prayed like I had never prayed before.

With every ounce of strength I had, I fought to keep my emotions under control. “Take a deep breath, Finn. We’re almost there.”

Dropping my head, I looked out the window. “She was crying,” I said.

“What?”

“Earlier at the club when I saw her. Rory begged me to talk to her and I

walked away. I was still so mad at her, Preston. She fucking ripped my heart out.”

“I’m going to shoot you straight, and now might not be the best time to do it, but I’m doing it anyway. You’re a fucking idiot, Finn.”

My head snapped to look at him. “What?”

“You’re an idiot. If you really think that neither one of you is going to fuck up during your relationship...you’re an idiot. Finn, even Harmony begged you to call her when she told you she knew Rory was upset about something. Something wasn’t right with this whole thing. I honestly believed she was forced to call it off with you by her dad. Everyone thinks that but you. You’re fucking hung up on how she broke your heart, but you never stopped to think if her heart was just as broken.”

I shook my head. “He said she wanted to break things off.”

We came to a stoplight. “Finn.”

Reluctantly, I met his stare. “Do you really believe she didn’t love you?”

My eyes filled with tears. “No.”

“Then something else was wrong.”

I looked away. “She got spooked. She made it clear in the beginning she didn’t want to be with a firefighter. I pushed her into the relationship, Preston. Made her a promise we both knew I would never be able to keep.”

“Bullshit. I’m not buying it, and I know deep down you don’t either. You’re pissed because she hurt you. Well, I’m telling you right now, Finn: You need to get off it, because when we get there, we have no idea what we’re going to find. So you better decide right now if she’s worth fighting for. And I say she is. Because as far as I can see, she’s been putting up one hell of a fight for you.”

My throat felt like it was closing.

“I love her, Preston. I’ll always love her.”

He hit the gas pedal. “Don’t tell me—tell her.”

Preston pulled up to the front of the ER. I ran to the check-in desk. “Excuse me, my girlfriend was brought in by ambulance. Rory Adams.”

An older woman typed on her computer and then looked up at me. “The sixth floor.”

“Is she okay?”

She smiled softly. “I’m sorry, sir, I can’t give you any information. Go on up there and they’ll be able to help you.”

I nodded. “Thanks.”

Preston rushed in through the front doors. I motioned for him to follow me. "She's on the sixth floor."

"How is she? Did they say what was wrong?"

My hand shook as I reached out and hit the button for the sixth floor. I was barely able to get the words out. "They didn't say."

With each floor we passed, the feeling of dread loomed heavier over me. *Please let her be okay. Please.*

The doors opened and I inhaled a deep breath. The first person I saw was Clare. She stood and waited for me to make my way to her. Glancing around the waiting room, I asked, "Where is everyone?"

"They went on a search for coffee. We haven't been able to get ahold of her parents. Colton headed over to the house."

"How is she?"

She shrugged. "No one will tell us anything, because we're not family."

Every one of my muscles tensed. "What?"

"The only thing they said was she wasn't in surgery and was being taken to the sixth floor." Tears slipped from her eyes and she quickly wiped it away. "I'm scared, Finn."

I walked over to the nurses' station. "Excuse me, they told me my fiancée was here on the sixth floor. Rory Adams."

The nurse glanced at her computer. "Your name, sir?"

"Finn. Finn Ward."

"If you'll wait here, I'll see if the doctor can speak with you."

The pit of my stomach fell. I slowly turned and walked back to Preston and Clare.

"Um...I told the nurse Rory was my fiancée, and she's going to get the doctor."

Clare covered her mouth. "Oh, God."

My heart drummed in my chest so loudly I could hardly hear Preston telling Clare everything was going to be okay.

An older gentleman rounded the corner and made his way over to us.

"Mr. Ward?" he asked while extending his hand.

"Yes. Is she okay? Was it an aneurysm?"

The doctor frowned and drew his head back. "Who told you it was an aneurysm?"

Clare took a step forward. "The paramedic said it might be the cause of her passing out."

“And you are?”

“Her sister, Clare.”

Preston and I both looked at Clare. I guess she figured we might get more info if she said she was family.

With a furrowed brow, he shook his head. “The paramedic should have kept his thoughts to himself.”

“So, it wasn’t an aneurysm?” Clare asked.

“No. It was not an aneurysm, and they’re both going to be okay. Her blood sugar was low; add stress on top of that, and she simply passed out. It does appear that she bruised a rib when she fell. Hopefully we can get that nicely healed before she’s too far along.”

My eyes widened in shock, and I heard Clare suck in a breath of air.

“I’m sorry. Did you say they were ‘both’ going to be okay?” I asked with a smile.

A wide grin covered the doctor’s face as his cheeks turned pink. “I’m sorry. With her only being about three to four weeks along, I should have guessed neither of you probably knew she was pregnant. I’m sure I just dropped a bombshell on you, Mr. Ward.”

I opened my mouth to speak, but nothing came out. The doctor took that as a sign to keep talking.

“When the blood work showed she was pregnant, we did an ultrasound. Everything looks perfectly fine.

Preston reached out and grabbed my arm; he must have seen me wobble. Both of Clare’s hands were covering her mouth and she was crying.

“But Rory’s okay? Nothing bad besides the rib?” I asked.

The doctor hit my upper arm. “She’s perfect. Well, minus the low blood sugar.”

Clare gasped. “She drank two beers tonight!”

With a laugh, the doctor winked. “She’ll be fine.” He pointed to me. “Now, you make sure she’s eating and drinking plenty of water. She was a bit dehydrated, so I’d like to keep her overnight to watch her and see how that rib feels. We’ve got an IV going, and you’ll need to make sure she gets in to see her doctor regarding the pregnancy.”

I nodded. “Yes sir. When can I see her?”

“She woke up a little while ago and asked where she was. But she fell back asleep pretty quickly.”

I cleared my throat, and asked, “Does she know about the baby?”

He shook his head. “No. No one has said anything to her yet. I’m assuming you’d like to tell her.”

With a smile, I answered, “Yes, sir. Very much so.”

He motioned for me to follow him. Turning to Preston and Clare, I flashed them a huge grin. “I’m going to be a dad!”

Clare did a weird laugh-cry thing and Preston shook my hand. “Congratulations, Finn. Wait until Mom finds out.”

I laughed. “Listen, would you guys mind keeping the baby a secret for right now? I’m not sure how many people Rory will want to know, and with her being not very far along and

All…”

They both nodded. “Of course, we won’t say anything, Finn. Until you and Rory decide it’s time to announce it, we’ll be locked lips.”

I leaned down and kissed Clare on the cheek. “Thank you, Clare.”

Spinning on my heels, I jogged to catch up with the doctor.

We stopped outside of room 306. “Here ya go. Congratulations, Dad.”

Tears filled my eyes. “Thank you, sir. I’m not going to lie—I’m completely surprised.”

He threw his head back in a loud laugh.

“Babies are the best kind of surprise, son.”

After a quick slap on my back, he walked down the hall.

Pushing the door open, I walked into the room. Rory was sleeping peacefully, with a slight smile on her face. I made my way to a chair, quietly picked it up, and placed it next to her. Then I took Rory’s hand and gently kissed the back of it.

She moved a bit, then mumbled something. My heart dropped when she repeated it.

“Finn, I need you.”

Squeezing my eyes shut, I felt a tear fall, and finally let go of the emotions I had been holding back.

“I’m here, Éan. I’m here.”



Chapter Fifty-One

Rory

A new life

I could feel him in the room before I even opened my eyes. My hand felt warm, and I could hear his breathing.

Please don't be a dream.

Peeking my right eye open, I saw Finn. Both eyes opened and I locked on to him at the side of the bed. He was holding my hand and was face-planted on the bed.

I tried to swallow, but it felt like I had cotton in my throat. Forcing the word out, I spoke his name.

“F-Finn.”

His head popped up, and he looked directly at me. “Rory,” he whispered before getting up and pressing his lips to mine. I moaned softly as he deepened the kiss. My heart felt light again and every nerve ending in my body tingled. When he drew back, I groaned in protest.

“I’m so sorry,” I whispered.

He shook his head. “No, Éan. *I’m* sorry. I’m sorry I let my anger get between us. I swear to you I’ll never let that happen again.”

Reaching up, he wiped my tears away.

“Thirsty.”

He stood and poured a cup of water and stuck a straw in it. He placed one hand behind my neck to help me drink. The second the straw hit my lips I drank the whole cup.

When he sat back down, I started talking. I needed to get it all out while I could.

“My father threatened your job if I didn’t break things off with you. I was so confused. I didn’t want you to resent me for the rest of our lives over that, but I knew if I told you the truth you would quit so we could be together, and I couldn’t have lived with *that*.” I started to cry. “It about killed me to walk away like that...knowing I was hurting you. I swear to you, if you forgive me, I’ll never hurt you again.”

Kissing my lips again, he whispered, “I love you, Rory.”

A sob escaped as I spoke. “I love you, Finn.”

Finn placed his hand on the side of my face. I leaned into it and felt the warmth flow from his body to mine.

“When Preston told me you had been taken to the hospital, I swore I would never forgive myself if something happened to you. I’m so sorry I walked away from you earlier. The only thing I could think about when Preston was driving here was how I was going to pull you into my arms and tell you how much I loved you. How you’re the only woman I’ve ever seen a future with. I hope you feel the same way, Éan.”

I nodded. “I do. When we watched Presley, you made a comment that I wanted desperately to ask you about.”

He lifted a brow. “Okay.”

I looked directly into his eyes. Swallowing hard, I spoke. “When you were holding Presley, you said you hoped our baby would be as beautiful as Presley. Have you thought about kids?”

He nodded. “I have.”

I breathed a sigh of relief.

Smiling, I replied, “Me too.”

He lifted a brow. “How soon?” he asked.

I shrugged. “I’m not in a rush. We can figure all that out later. For now, I just want to be with you.”

Finn kissed me again, then spoke against my lips. “Éan, I’ve got something to tell you. It’s a surprise. And the best kind of surprise.”

I was drunk on happiness and was positive nothing else he could say would ever top his thinking about having a baby with me.

“What’s that?” I asked with a huge grin on my face.

“You’ve only got me for about eight months. Then you’re going to have to share.”

Giving him a confused look, I asked, “What do you mean?”

He looked deep into my eyes, and I felt myself lost in a sea of emerald

green.

“Éan, listen to me, sweetheart. We’re going to be parents.”

My mouth opened to say something, but the only thing that came out was, “What?”

Laughing, he nodded. “You’re about three or four weeks pregnant.”

What in the hell was the emotion rushing through me? Elation? Excitement? Fear? Shock?

“I’m...I’m what?”

Finn reached into his pocket and pulled out a slip of paper. He dropped my hand and unfolded it. Turning it, I saw the picture and started to cry. It just looked like a little blob. But it was the most beautiful blob I’d ever seen. A warm and fuzzy feeling rushed through my veins.

“We’re pregnant.”

The picture was blurry as I tried to focus on it through my tears. “It looks like a blob!”

Finn chuckled. “That’s our baby.”

Darting my eyes from Finn to the picture and back to Finn, I repeated his words. “Our baby.”

Finn kissed me again. The kiss was filled with excitement and passion.

When he sat back down and gazed into my eyes, he wore a huge grin. “You know what this means, don’t you?”

“What does it mean?” I asked.

“Flash is going to be pissed when we tell him we’re bringing home a baby in eight months.”

When I laughed I instantly stopped and cried out in pain.

“Oh yeah, you also bruised your ribs when you passed out.”



There was a light knock on the hospital door. “Come in,” I softly called out.

My mother poked her head in and smiled. “Hey.”

“Hi, Mom.”

When my father walked in, my smile dropped. Finn stood and took my hand in his.

“How are you feeling, darling?” my mother asked, making her way to my side.

“I’m fine. My rib hurts a bit. The doctor said I must have hit it when I

fainted. But it's only slightly bruised."

Clearing his throat, my father looked at Finn, then me. "I'm glad it wasn't anything serious."

Finn squeezed my hand.

"Colton scared us to death," my mother said, "but luckily by the time he got to our house Clare had called and said you had just fainted from low blood sugar, and they were keeping you overnight for observation. Honey, you have to make sure you're eating healthy. If you're not taking care of yourself then you're going to run into—"

I closed my eyes and looked away from them both. "Mom, stop."

Finn's thumb moved gently across my skin. Almost as if he was attempting to keep me calm.

Finn finally broke the silence. "The one thing the doctor said she doesn't need is stress. She needs to relax."

"Then maybe you should leave," my father barked out.

"Rick!" my mother said with a harshness to her voice. "Maybe *you* should leave, Rick."

"I'm not leaving, sir. Ever. And if this is where you want to do this, then so be it. But I love your daughter and she loves me, and there will never be anything you can do about that."

I turned to face my parents. My father's face was turning red. I took in a slow deep breath and decided to let Finn handle it.

"You really think you're good enough for my daughter?"

Turning, my eyes landed on Finn's handsome face. He shook his head while lifting the left corner of his mouth into a slight smile. "No sir, I don't. I honestly don't know what she sees in me. But what I do know is that I plan on loving her until the day I take my last breath. That I will do whatever I can within my power to make her happy. Tell her every day how much I love her and appreciate her. Thank God for her every single morning when I wake and when I close my eyes at night. What I will *never* do is hurt her."

A tear slowly trailed down my cheek. My heart couldn't have been filled with any more happiness.

"And before you attempt to threaten my fiancée with my job, I'll take that option away from you right now. I quit."

The sharp intake of air from both of my parents sounded like it bounced off each wall and circled back around.

My mother shook her head. "Finn darling, you don't have to do that. I've

already talked to Rick. He's not going to threaten you or your job. There is no reason to walk away from what you love."

Gazing down at me with the most adoring look in his eyes, Finn winked at me. "I'm not walking away from what I love. I'm walking toward it."

For the first time in my life, I felt completely and utterly wrapped in a blanket of pure bliss. My hand rested on my stomach. It was our little secret for now. One that tied us together in the most beautiful way imaginable.

"Wait. Did you say 'fiancée'?" my father choked.

Finn had asked me to marry him over a shared bowl of grape Jell-O three hours ago. I cried, of course, then said yes. It was spontaneous, just like Finn. And I thought it was perfect. But if I knew him, he would have something else planned within the next few days.

"Finn asked me to marry him, and I said yes."

Tears pooled in my mother's eyes as she rounded the bed and dragged Finn in for a hug. Then she made her way over to me.

"Oh darling, don't try to move—your rib."

After she kissed and hugged me, she moved her mouth to my ear and whispered, "If you keep touching your stomach, everyone will figure it out."

My eyes widened in shock. "Your secret is safe with me."

Our eyes met. "I love you, Mom."

"Oh, my sweet baby girl, I love you too."

When she stepped back, I turned to my father. He wore a scowl. "I'm not asking for your permission or your blessing."

"I see that," he mumbled.

My chin trembled as I tried to keep talking. "But I would really like it, Dad. And until you're ready to give it to me and apologize for what you did, I won't be a part of your life."

"Oh, Rory. No, you don't mean that," my mother whispered.

The sadness in my mother's voice caused my heart to ache. But when my father turned and walked out of my hospital room, it broke. And I wasn't sure if this time it could be healed.



Chapter Fifty-Two

Rory

New Year's Eve

“We’re going to be late, Rory, if you don’t hurry up!”

Checking my makeup once more in the mirror, I smiled and pulled my hair up in a ponytail. “Coming!” I called out. One last look at the dress pants and sweater and I was satisfied. Finn had requested I dress casual-nice, but warm. That meant he had something up his sleeve.

Flash was at my feet, like always, gazing up at me. “How do I look?”

He barked, and I laughed. “Let’s go, buddy. Daddy and I have a dinner date to get to.”

I heard Regina’s voice as I made my way into the living room. Paul was already in the kitchen whipping up something for Flash to snack on.

“Don’t worry, Finn. Flash will be fine.” Regina said.

“I’m not worried. I was simply saying to make sure he goes out before you put him in for the night. And don’t forget he likes that blanket; he can’t sleep without the blanket.”

I could tell Regina was trying hard not to laugh. “I’ve watched this dog a million times. Why is tonight different? What in the hell is wrong with you?”

She stopped talking, and her eyes went wide.

“What’s wrong?” I asked.

“Uh, nothing...I was just thinking you’re going to be late for dinner if he doesn’t stop fussing about the dog, that’s all.”

With a smile, I bent down and hugged Flash. “Be a good boy for Regina and Paul.”

Finn followed my lead; except he snuck in a kiss when he didn’t think anyone was watching.

After a short cab ride, we were being seated at one of my favorite restaurants, Legal Sea Foods. Finn ordered the Bang Bang Cauliflower, which we both devoured in minutes.

“Damn, that stuff is good,” Finn said as he licked his finger.

“So other than that it’s New Year’s Eve, what’s the occasion for dinner tonight, especially since we’d agreed we’d stay in tonight?”

His smile, and those dimples, about blew me out of the chair. Finn’s emerald eyes lit up with excitement.

“Can’t a guy take his girl out to dinner?”

“Of course he can.”

Finn reached for my hand and squeezed it. “Have you heard from your dad?”

My smile faded. “No. Mom said he asks about me all the time, but he hasn’t reached out to me.”

“He’ll come around, Éan.

I forced a smile and agreed. “I know he will.” But deep in my heart, I was beginning to wonder if he ever would.



“I’m so full!” I said as I placed my hand over my stomach. “I’m pretty sure the baby liked the rainbow trout!”

Finn chuckled. “Good. How are you feeling? You tired? Feel like a walk?”

I took his hand in mine. “I’ve never felt better, and a walk would be amazing.”

We walked for a bit in silence as snow slowly fell from the sky.

“Perfect,” Finn softly said.

“I love winter,” I said while Finn drew me in closer to him, wrapping his arm around me, the warmth of his body somehow making it through my winter coat.

“Me too. I always have. I thought you said fall was your favorite time of year.”

Smiling, I looked up at him. “I honestly think it’s whatever season we’re in. But fall and winter are tied for first place.”

He laughed and kissed my forehead.

We rounded the block, and I could see the blue lights from the

Christopher Columbus Park trellis. “Oh, my goodness. Look at how beautiful the flurries look against the blue lights.”

“It is beautiful,” Finn replied.

As we walked closer, I swore I heard Flash barking. I stopped and tilted my head.

“What’s wrong?” Finn asked.

Shaking my head, I chuckled. “Nothing. I thought I heard Flash.”

I dropped my head back and looked up at the lights and held out my tongue to let the snowflakes fall on them. Giggling, I said, “I can’t wait to build snowmen with the baby.”

Finn had stopped walking, I assumed so I could enjoy myself and not trip over anyone or anything.

“I can’t wait to spend the rest of my life with you.”

Bringing my eyes back to him, I grinned. “Neither can I, Finn. I’ve never been so happy.”

His hand lifted and he gently wiped my cheek. “Snowflake.”

Laughing, I placed my hand over his.

“Rory, I hope you know how happy you’ve made me these last few months. The idea that you’re carrying our baby...I can’t even begin to tell you how that makes me feel.”

“I feel the same,” I whispered.

“To say I’m happy doesn’t seem good enough. I feel like I’ve been walking on cloud nine since the day you first looked at me.”

My eyes filled with tears as I watched Finn drop to one knee. Covering my hands with my mouth, I attempted to control my sobs.

“F-Finn,” I choked out.

Reaching into his pocket, he pulled out a blue velvet box. He snapped it open, and my eyes were immediately drawn to the beautiful cushion cut diamond, in the most gorgeous setting I’d ever seen. It sparkled as it caught the lights from the trellis. “Rory Ann Adams, would you do me the honor of becoming my wife?”

Tears poured from my eyes while I tried to find my voice. Finn slipped the vintage-looking ring onto my finger. Wiping the tears from my eyes, I smiled so hard I was sure my cheeks would stay forever in that position.

Finn stood and kissed the back of my hand. “The ring was one of my grandmother’s. My dad gave it to me a few weeks ago.”

I glanced between the beautiful ring and the man I loved. “I’ll never

forget this moment for the rest of my life, Finn.”

He cupped my face within his hands. “I know, because I had Regina and Paul film it!”

He kissed me, and I laughed against his mouth as Flash started jumping up on us.

“Damn mutt!” Finn called out as Flash pushed his way between us.

“Now the moment is perfect,” I said as I gazed into Finn’s eyes.

He nodded and replied, “To new beginnings.”

Trying to keep from crying again, I repeated his words. “To new beginnings.”



Three months later

I stood in the foyer and looked around.

My house.

Our house.

Grinning from ear to ear, I took it all in. The double iron doors led to a foyer that showcased a massive wood staircase. I imagined little kids running down the stairs to the formal living room in search of their Christmas presents or searching for Easter eggs.

Walking farther in, I made my way into the formal dining room. The massive fireplace was flanked by two bookshelves with glass doors. The paneling on the walls was beautiful, as was all the wood trim. All of it original to the house.

The guys had pretty much moved all the furniture in. The only thing left was the new washer and dryer we had bought.

My hand moved lazily over the old hickory wood table. It was beautiful. A large bench sat on one side, with four chairs sitting on the opposite side and two at each end.

“I think Christmas is going to be here at your place,” Harmony said, setting Presley in her little walker.

I smiled as she took off across the 126-year-old wood floors. Wes, Preston, and Finn had refinished all of the wood floors in the house and they looked beautiful. The only way to know the wide-plank floors were old was to see the wear patterns.

Grinning like a fool, I said, "That sounds like an awesome plan to me!"

Harmony walked up and warmed her hands by the fire. "There are so many fireplaces in this house. It's amazing."

"I know," I replied. "The fact that the baby has a fireplace in his room scared me at first, but Finn promised to baby-proof it."

Harmony laughed. "And if he is anything like Preston, he will adult-proof it as well."

My mother walked into the room and set a box on the dining room table. "Darling, I'm going to see if Clare needs any help in the kitchen."

I nodded, then asked, "Mom?"

She stopped walking and faced me. "Yes?"

"Has Dad said anything, about me or the baby?"

Her eyes filled with sadness as she slowly shook her head. I nodded and forced a grin.

After she left the room, Harmony walked over to me and wrapped me in her arms.

"He'll come around, Rory."

My chin trembled as I took in a deep breath. "I hope so."

"Right now he's living on that same island as my parents."

Drawing back, I gave her a questioning look. "What island is that?"

She winked. "The I've-got-my-head-up-my-ass island."

Laughing, I walked over to the grandfather clock that had been left with the house. I wasn't going to let my father ruin this day, so I changed the subject.

"Why do you think the owners left this clock?" I asked while winding it up.

"I don't know. There has to be a story behind it. Did you ask them?"

"No, but I left a message with the agent to ask her if she had the number for the previous owner. It was a single woman, and this house had been in her family since the day her great-great-grandfather built it."

Harmony signed. "It's kind of sad to think she sold it."

I came back to the table, reached in the box, and took out a frame. I walked over to the mantel and set the picture of Harmony, Preston, and Presley on it. Smiling, I placed my hands on my bump.

"You're getting bigger. How do you feel?"

I couldn't help but smile. "Amazing."

Harmony giggled. "The morning sickness?"

“Is all day but it’s starting to taper off. It’s more of a feeling of nausea.”

Presley let out a screech of pure happiness as she chased Flash all over the place.

“I still can’t believe you guys stole Flash.”

Attempting to hide my smile, I replied, “We didn’t *steal* him. My father was being ridiculous. We simply snuck into the firehouse after Finn quit and asked Flash if he wanted to come with us or stay there.”

Harmony crossed her arms over her chest. “Uh-huh. That’s how it went down, huh? You left it up to the dog to decide.”

With a nod, I replied, “Yep. Totally up to Flash.”

She rolled her eyes. “Is that why you guys spent six hours in jail until your mom came and bailed you out?”

“Minor misunderstanding.”

The guys came walking into the house, laughing and stomping snow off their boots.

“Who’s hungry? I made a lasagna,” I said with a wide smile. “Oh, and Clare is finishing the salad and homemade dessert.”

I’d never seen a whole group of guys stop what they were doing and turn to head in one direction before.

“Wow. Is my lasagna that good?” I asked.

Harmony laughed. “No, Clare is that single. Look at the two who stayed behind.”

A warmth filled my chest as I watched Finn and Preston running from Presley. Harmony locked arms with me and laughed.

The road to that very moment hadn’t been all that long, but it had been bumpy at times. There was no doubt in my mind I wouldn’t travel down it again and again if it meant I was as happy as I was.

I hadn’t even had to worry about going back to work, even with us purchasing a five-bedroom, two-and-a-half-bath house on ten acres outside of Salem. Between Finn and me, we had saved twice the amount we needed for the down payment. Clare teased us for being overachievers.

Teaching was still on my radar, but I was content to put it on the back burner for now and to help Wes and Finn with the business—and to prepare to be a mom.

“How did we get so lucky, Harmony?”

She smiled. “I don’t know, but I’ll never take it for granted.”

A small flutter moved in the pit of my stomach and I froze.

Harmony slowly turned to me. Her grin grew wider.

“You felt him!”

Sinking my teeth into my lip, I nodded.

“You felt him!” she screamed out. Presley followed her mother’s example and screamed as well. Except she did it as loud and for as long as she could.

From across the room, our gazes met. Finn looked so incredibly happy that I couldn’t help but laugh.

He slowly made his way over to me. His hands cupped my face and he gazed lovingly into my eyes.

“You’re so beautiful,” he whispered before kissing me softly.

Reaching for his arms, I held on while he took me to that place no one else could.

“How did I get so lucky in my life?” he asked while his lips trailed along my neck, sending goosebumps across my skin.

“I could ask the same question.”

He searched my face. “We’re getting married in two weeks.”

The corners of my mouth rose into a full-on smile. “I can’t wait. Just the three of us.”

Finn placed his hand over the baby. “You’re sure you’re happy about the location, and it only being us?”

“Yes. I don’t want a big fancy wedding that will be over in minutes. The only thing I want is to become your wife under the lights of the trellis where you proposed to me.”

“I like the sound of that.”

Drawing me closer to his body, Finn’s eyes captured mine. “You know, I’ve never asked you, what made you fall in love with me?”

Grinning, I reached up on my toes and replied, “You fell asleep at a union meeting while my father was talking. How could I resist that? *And* you had a dog.”

Finn threw his head back and laughed. “How romantic! At a union meeting.”

“Yes. And when did *you* fall in love with *me*?” I asked.

“That’s easy. It was when you gagged at the sight of my blood. I think I knew then I had to marry you.”

I covered my mouth as the memory hit me and I tried not to gag.

Finn chuckled. Moving his lips to my ear, he nibbled on my earlobe. “Tell me you love me, Rory.”

My head dropped, giving him access to my neck. “I love you, Finn.”
“Promise me you’ll never leave me.”

Looking directly into his eyes, I made him a vow I would never ever break again.

“I promise I’ll never leave you. Ever.”

He pulled out an envelope from his back pocket and handed it to me.

My eyes filled with tears as I read it.

I Never Want to Forget This. . . .

Sealed on December 25. To be opened on July 8

My fingers lightly traced across the dates. July 8 was our baby’s due date. Lifting my eyes, I smiled. “What’s it say?” I asked.

He winked. “It’s a surprise.”

Laughing, I held it to my chest as he lifted me in his arms and headed up the stairs.

“Um...Finn...where are you taking me?”

“I need to make love to my almost wife and the mother of my daughter.”

Giggling, I ran my fingers through his hair. “First off, it could be a boy. And second, we have a houseful of people.”

Without missing a beat, he replied, “Our bedroom is on the third floor, Éan. We’re totally good.”



Four months later

My eyes snapped open as the pain hit me in the middle of my stomach. Checking the clock on the mantel, I noted the time. I pushed myself out of the chair and began to pace.

Deep breath in...blow it out.

Flash was two steps behind me. “I think this is it, boy.” I was due in three days, and the doctor had had a feeling I might not make it to my due date. He was right.

“Get Daddy, Flash.”

With a whine and then a bark, Flash took off through the house and out his dog door.

Breathe. Breathe. Breathe.

I rolled my neck as I walked into the kitchen. I glanced out the window

and rolled my eyes in amusement. Flash had Finn's baseball cap in his mouth and Finn was chasing him all over the yard.

I headed to get my purse. Once I found my phone, I hit Harmony's number.

"Is this it?"

Dear Lord. What have I married into? For the last two weeks, no matter what time I called anyone in Finn's family, the first words out of their mouth were, "Is this it?"

I took a deep breath in, then forced it out with a sigh. "Yes. This is it, and my husband is running around the backyard chasing Flash."

Harmony giggled. "What's he got now?"

"His prized Boston Red Sox hat that Rick Porcello signed."

"Oh no!"

"Yep. But hey, back to that little thing about me being in labor. I'm worried Finn's going to freak."

Harmony laughed. "He won't freak. Finn's not the freak-out type. Everything is ready to go; all you need is your bag. I'll start making the calls. I've got your mother, Jenn and Mike, and Clare down to call first. You guys focus on getting to the hospital."

"Thanks, Harmony. You're the best."

"You've got this, Rory. Remember, just breathe through the pain! I mean, that doesn't really work until you get the drugs, but remember to breathe. Okay, off to call the rest of the gang!"

She hung up and left me standing there with a stunned look on my face. I hadn't been worried until her comment about the breathing not working.

"Got you!" I heard Finn yell.

I looked through the window and saw Finn tackling Flash, then the two of them rolling around in the backyard as Finn attempted to pull the cap from Flash's mouth.

"Hey, Finn?" I called out.

"Yeah?"

I might have been scared, but damn, my husband looked sexy as he brushed the dirt and grass off himself. If I hadn't been in labor, I would have been begging him to take me upstairs.

Wonder if we have time.

Oh jeez, Rory. Get it together.

Shaking the thought from my head, I called out, "You might want to

come in with Flash.”

Stay calm. Talk calm. Be calm. Then Finn will be calm. That had been the advice of my birthing coach.

Finn and Flash walked through the door, and Finn pulled me into his body. “Damn, you are sexy as hell, do you know that?”

The way he looked at me, like I was his everything, made it hard for me to ignore the pull in my lower stomach.

His hand trailed across my stomach and down into the comfy shorts that I’d been living in the last two weeks.

“Finn...we can’t.”

His fingers brushed against my clit, and I was stunned by how my body reacted. For Pete’s sake, I was in labor.

He slipped his finger inside of me and kissed along my neck. “Fucking hell. You’re so wet.”

“Finn.”

“I know, baby, feels so good to me too.”

The contraction was steadily growing stronger. “Oh, God!” I cried out. “It’s stronger than the last one.”

Finn stopped, then started up again. “Okay, whatever that means. As long as it’s making you feel good, baby.”

“No! Finn! Oh God!”

I gripped his arms and dug my nails into them. Anything to make the contractions stop.

“Rory, mother freaking f’er! You’re drawing blood.”

I buried my head in his chest and tried to breathe through it.

“Hee hee hoo. Hee hee hoo.”

“Yeah, feels that good, huh? Not so sure about the whole breathing-exercise thing we learned in class you’re doing, but whatever floats your boat.”

Then something happened.

“Holy shit! You’re soaking wet!”

Pulling my head back, I looked into his eyes. His smile faded. “I’m having a contraction, not an orgasm, you idiot!”

“What!”

“I think my water just broke.”

A horrified look hit his face.

“Oh, gross! Yuk! Eww!” He started gagging as he pulled his arm from

my shorts and ran to the sink.

“What the fuck! I was trying to get you off at the same time my daughter was trying to come out! I’m going to hell!” He scrubbed his hands, then looked up. “It’s because I told Flash he wasn’t getting any more food, isn’t it! This is karma!”

I followed his stare to the ceiling. “What are you looking at, Finn?”

“Nothing. I was praying. Come on, we need to get you to the car and then to the hospital. How far apart are they?”

“Um...” I looked at the clock. “Fifteen minutes or so.”

“What? Why did you wait? Rory, we need to be able to have time to get to the hospital.”

“It’s ten minutes away, Finn, and the last contraction before that was thirty minutes ago. This one came faster.”

He helped me out the front door and into the car. “We’ve got this,” he said in a reassuring voice.

“We?” I asked. “Last time I checked you were trying to have sex with me while I was having a contraction.”

Finn reached in and pulled the buckle around me. “Hey, in my defense, you were making your moaning noises like you wanted me.”

“I did want you.”

He smiled. “Really?”

“Yeah, but not anymore.”

“That is totally understandable,” he said, then lifted his hands. “Wait! I need your bag, and I need to lock up the beast.”

“Hurry!” I cried as he ran back into the house.

Two minutes later Finn came running out. He tried to jump over a bush but hit it and fell to the ground.

“Finn! Oh, my goodness, are you okay?” He stood, and my stomach turned.

Blood.

I covered my mouth and gagged.

“I’m good. Let’s go.”

Tossing the suitcase into the back of the car, he jumped in. I stared out the window, trying not to look at him.

“Let’s do this! Let’s bring a baby into the world.”

“Finn. Nose. Blood.”

I peeked over at him as he looked into the mirror. It was running down

into his mouth. “I’m going to puke!” I cried out.

“No! Not in my new car. Wait! You’re still wet from peeing!”

I shook my head. “I didn’t pee! My water broke!”

“I hope that doesn’t stain.”

My eyes were closed. “Are you still bleeding, and are you really worried about that right now, Finn?”

I could hear him open the glove box.

“Nope. I’m good on both counts.”

We somehow made it to the hospital and safely up to the labor and delivery floor. Finn’s nose started to bleed again, and the nurses had to tend to it. It wasn’t lost on me that it took three of them to stop the nosebleed.

Right as I got settled into my bed and asked the nurse for the magical shot that made all the pain go away, Finn walked in with Harmony.

“I found your poor husband practically being raped by a couple of nurses.”

Finn rolled his eyes and walked to the side of the bed. Leaning down, he kissed me gently on the lips. “Have I told you how beautiful you are?”

“You have, but I sure could hear it again.”

“She’s dilated ten centimeters. Page Doctor Tilly now,” the nurse said.

“What?” Finn and I said in unison.

Harmony started for the door. “Annnnd that is my cue to take it on back to the waiting room.”

“Harmony!” I yelled out. “You can’t leave. What if he passes out?”

“Hey, I’m not going to pass out.”

The doctor walked in and smiled. It hardly made an impact on me. Between all the people rushing in and out of the room, Finn being hit on by nurses, and the pain from the small human trying to rip itself out of my body, I didn’t know which way was up or which way was down.

I glared at Harmony. “You owe me—you’re not leaving.” Focusing in on the doctor, I stated, “I need drugs, Doctor. They’re coming...so fast now. So. Fast.”

He glanced up and made a face that said, *Oh shit, sorry but I can’t help you with that request.* “Too late, Rory. Your baby wants to make her debut.”

“Or. Him,” I said between pants.

Doctor Tilly chuckled. “Or him. All right. Finn, you ready to do this?”

“I’m ready.”

“Another one is coming,” I said as I squeezed Finn’s hand.

“That’s it, Éan. I’m ahhhhhh—holy shit, she’s trying to break my hand!”
Harmony stood behind the doctor. “I’m going to stand here. Don’t worry, Rory: I’m a nurse—I’ve seen everything. I’m here for when Finn passes out again.”

I nodded and looked at Finn. He was glaring at Harmony.

“I’m sorry about your hand,” I told him.

With a wink, Finn kissed my lips. “Don’t worry, baby. I’m...ohh...ow!”

Another contraction hit.

Harmony leaned forward. “Is that...”

“...the head. Yes, she’s crowning.”

“What!” I cried out.

“Give me another push, Rory.”

“Already?” I asked.

“Yep—you’ve got one baby in a serious rush. One more good push and I think we’ve got him or her.”

I sat up and pushed with all my might. The pain was almost too much to take, but Finn was right there, telling me I could do it, how much he loved me, and how if I needed to break his hand he would understand.

The pressure and pain were unreal, then they were instantly gone. The sounds of our baby’s cries filled the air.

Doctor Tilly looked up and said, “You have one very demanding daughter.”

Finn fist-pumped and turned to me. Tears streamed down his face. “You did it. You were amazing. Éan, I don’t know how you did that. It was so fast!”

I couldn’t talk. The happiness felt as if it was filling my entire body and I would explode if I tried to speak.

Finn cut the cord, and they placed our daughter on my chest.

I silently cried as I stared at her. Her blue eyes met mine, and I knew I’d never experienced such love before in my life.

“Hey, baby girl. We’ve been waiting for you.”

Reaching down, Finn kissed her forehead, then softly stroked her cheek. Turning to me, he said, “I really owe your dad an apology. He was right when he told me one day when I had a daughter I’d understand.”

Both of us laughing, our eyes met.

“Thank you,” I said as he looked taken aback.

“For?”

“Pushing me into that first date. Fighting for our love.”

A tear fell from his eyes and landed on the baby’s blanket. “We both fought for it, and I’ll always fight for our love, Éan. Always.”

The nurse walked over and gazed down at our daughter. “Do we have a name for baby Ward?”

“Yes,” I whispered as I watched her little hand grasp my finger.

Finn kissed my forehead, then our daughter’s, before looking up at the nurse and answering. “Karleigh Angela Ward.”

She smiled. “Beautiful name, Mom and Dad.”

Glancing around the room, I looked for Harmony. “Wait. Where’s Harmony?”

The nurse frowned. “She fainted and was removed from the room.”

“She fainted?” I asked with a stunned look on my face.

Finn broke into such a big smile I was sure it would be plastered on his face permanently.

He chuckled and said, “Oh man. This is priceless. Just when I didn’t think my day could be any better.”

I couldn’t help but giggle. Glancing down at Karleigh, I let out a contented sigh.

Finn gently stroked her cheek. “Hey, do you think they’ll let Flash come in? I got him a shirt that says *I’m a Big Brother*.”

Turning to him, I gave him a blank stare before looking back at Karleigh.

“Welcome to this crazy world of ours, baby girl.”

Read the next book in the series, [*Falling for Her*](#).