

I'll Be Stronger Tomorrow

Chapter One

"Hey, Molly! When did you get here?" My head shot up at the masculine voice of my neighbour. He walked towards me in his signature relaxed way, making my heart beat a little faster. Finn's blond waves fluttered in the breeze, and I breathed in his scent, ignoring the burn in my chest. He was a carpenter, and the fragrance of his workshop mingled with an earthy, deep-woods aroma that clung to his skin.

"Just now," I answered, reaching into my trunk for a bag and avoiding his embrace. I eyed all of the luggage and sighed. I would be here for quite a while, and I wasn't sure how I felt about it. Was I ready to face the place where my father and I had shared so many memories? Was I even ready to face Finn? I swallowed hard and glanced at the red loft cottage. A little work was needed to get her up to standard, but she was still beautiful. My memory hadn't done her justice. I had truly missed this place.

"How are you holding up?" Finn asked, putting his hand on the small of my back. It felt strange and familiar all at the same time. We'd grown up together during the summers on this lake. We had been the only two kids for miles around. He was three-and-a-half years older, but those years were nothing, when the only other options for playmates were old man Riley and his vicious dogs or the fish in the lake.

I looked at Finn's face and saw the expression that I was so used to now: sympathy. Normally, it was mixed with fear in all the well-wishers who were terrified that I was going to have a meltdown, and they would be helpless. To be fair, I'd had something of a meltdown when my mom had died, so these friends and family had seen a precedent, but I was only seven then. They'd said things like, "Mommy wouldn't want to see you carrying on and crying like this," or "It's just the two of you now, and your Dad needs you to be strong, because this is even harder for him." Their words had dammed my emotions, plugging them deep inside me. I had refused to shed another tear. I had been strong for my dad.

I shivered away the memory of their words now. Although I was twenty-six, they had never left me for long.

Finn's look held a mixture of his own grief. He'd loved my father, too.

"Thanks, Finn." I turned and touched his arm, ignoring the tingle I felt when our skin met. "And I really appreciated the flowers you sent. You didn't have to drive all that way, either, but I know he would've been happy you did." It was my usual type of response, but it felt wrong with Finn. I had never hidden behind niceties and fake, automated responses with him before. I looked out over the lake. It was almost flat. How many times had Dad and I sat on the veranda on a summer evening like this one, watching the sun set and listening to the loons and crickets? Hurt welled up in my chest, making each breath an even bigger effort. I couldn't remember the last time I'd taken a pain-free breath. Would I ever get used to it?

"Let me help you with this stuff." Finn grabbed a few bags and carried them toward the house. I watched his muscles bunch. He'd filled out even more over the last few years. I picked up a suitcase and followed.

"How was traffic?" he asked casually as he set down his load and took my keys from my hand. "I heard they were doing construction on Highway 6. The Jamisons." He paused, looking thoughtfully at me for a few seconds. "They bought old man Riley's place." I nodded, and his mouth tightened ever so slightly before he continued. "They said they were stuck for over an hour the other day." He didn't leave my bags after he opened the door, but carried them right to my old room and set them on the bed. He hesitated for a moment, staring at the flowered quilt, probably remembering the Saturday afternoon that we'd lost our innocence on it. Two awkward teens, madly in love, left alone for a few precious hours. The emotion of that day flickered for a moment, and I felt heat rise to my cheeks.

"Yeah, I had the same problem," I mumbled before turning back toward the door. I hated this weirdness between us. "How's your Dad?"

"You know." He shot me a crooked grin as he caught up. "Still bitching about not being allowed up here anymore."

I smiled back as we walked to the car. His dad was practically famous for his long tyrants about everything and anything.

"Your mom stopping him, or the doctor?" He'd had a stroke a year ago and had been having trouble getting around. He'd even had to retire from his position as an elementary school

principal. I had only met Finn's mom a few times, but I knew enough about her from Finn to know that she meant business when she said no. Finn and his dad had spent every summer here, and she'd let them, without complaint. She had seemed to know that they'd needed the time away from the city as much as she'd probably known there was no way she could handle two months in the back woods, a two hour drive from the nearest town.

"Both." He got two more bags from the trunk. "It's just me up here, now."

I grabbed the huge hiking pack and put it on my back, so I could carry the cooler, too. I had brought enough food for a month. I didn't want to have to go to town for a while. I wanted to process and digest my loss in peace, for once.

Finn nudged my shoulder gently. "I'm glad you're here, though. It's been too long."

It had been four years, since I'd gotten Finn's call from the hospital and had returned to take my dad back to the city to die. It was a long battle with a slow-growing cancer that had turned my strong, confident father into a frail shell, and me into a lost soul. His pension from the university, the life insurance, and the sale of our large Toronto house had left me with more than enough money to live in the cabin for the rest of my life, but was that what I would do? Was this what I wanted, a life without purpose? I'd run from this life once, already.

Finn left me to get settled in, but made me promise to come get him if I needed anything. He said he'd come by some morning soon for coffee, though, which I was glad about. I had always liked the peace of solitude, but his quiet company was always welcome. We could be together in comfortable silence for hours. I unpacked the food.

What I'd done was horrible – unforgivable – and yet Finn wasn't even angry with me. I knew he wasn't hiding it, either. I knew him well enough to know when he was mad; it was in his every movement, word, and look. An angry Finn was animated and loud, the exact opposite of his norm. I didn't understand why he wasn't upset, but I was glad I didn't have to deal with it just yet. I shoved a can of corn deeper into the pantry and chewed my lip. I would bring it up when I was ready and deal with whatever came with it. If anything, I was braver now. When you've had your worst fear come to life, nothing can scare you ever again.

When I finished unpacking, I felt the familiar agitation growing inside me. I took one of the Ativan tablets my doctor had prescribed and curled up on my bed. Sleep would come soon, I told myself as I chanted, "I'll be stronger tomorrow." I rocked gently.

That was how my days continued for a week. I never set foot outside. As much as the inside held my father's memory, the outside was where our true home was. The porch where we ate all our meals; the beach where we walked, collected and swam; the forest where we explored and learned. I numbly cleaned and organized the cottage, then fell into a drug-induced sleep each night.

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I was groggy when I woke to the smell of coffee and bacon, the momentary fog allowing a pain-free moment. My stomach rolled as my memory cleared. I forced my eyes open. I was still wearing my grey track suit from the night before, my mouth tacky and my eyes gritty. The absence of traffic was a relief and yet still reinforcing the void inside me. Sometimes in the mornings, the hole was so large and suffocating, I was sure that would be the day I'd be swallowed by it.

"Since when do you sleep past eight?" Finn's head popped around the doorway to my room. "Breakfast is ready." He eyed me. "By the looks of you, I didn't make enough, though." He pointed at my sunken abdomen. "I've never seen a hip bone jutting out that far before." He scrunched his nose. I wanted to tell him to piss off, but I stopped myself. That was not the person he knew. That was the person I had become, away from my dad and him. It was normal for my friends and I to banter back and forth, using unsavoury language, among other things. When I had returned to care for my dad, I'd learned very quickly that my new personality was not welcome. No matter how weak or frail he was, he had no trouble putting me in my place. I groaned. I would curb my language for now, but I wasn't willing to change totally. Finn would have to learn to accept me for who I was or turn into the kind of neighbour that just waved every now and then.

"I don't remember letting you in, Finn. Why don't you go back to the porch and knock? At that point, I'll decide whether or not to pretend I'm not here."

Finn flinched momentarily and then laughed. "Feisty! I like it. It suits you." He turned out of my room. "I'm not leaving, though, and if you're not at the table in five minutes, I'm coming back to throw you in the lake."

I bit my tongue. He had perfected his tone. He'd spent too much time learning my father's tactics. All those years I was gone, how close had they become? My father had told me he thought of Finn as a son. I had figured it was a small poke at the fact that I'd run from Finn's marriage proposal. I could still hear my father's voice: "Like it or not, young lady, he's my son-in-law!" He would have strong-armed me down the aisle had I not run. Dad was like that – he did what he thought was right, at all costs, and stuck to his guns.

I got up, but I took extra time brushing my hair and teeth just to show Finn that he wasn't the boss of me. That was as far as I was willing to push him at this point. I really didn't want to take a swim in the lake, and not for a moment did I doubt that was where I'd end up if I didn't comply.

"Sit." Finn pointed at my chair with his fork. "You've been sleeping too much, and I haven't seen you outside since you got here."

I pulled my chair out – dragging it noisily across the floor – and sat down, staring at the bacon, eggs and toast on the plate. My stomach gurgled, but I wasn't sure if it was in protest or hunger. When had I eaten last?

"Eat up, kid. I want that plate clean. Your father wouldn't want to see you moping around and starving yourself." He shoved a forkful of egg into his mouth, giving me a no-nonsense glare. His eyes seemed to penetrate beyond the physical me. I felt that tugging tickle I remembered getting when his deep green eyes read me. An internal clench that I hadn't felt in years made my heart gallop.

"Kid? You ever going to stop calling me that?" I asked, poking my toast. He shook his head, and I smirked, because it was us again. The speed in which we fell back to that was comforting. He'd called me *kid* from the first day we'd met. At the time, it was because he wanted me to know that he considered himself much older and more mature. I was supposed to be in awe of him, I think. He expected my respect, but in return, he was responsible for me one hundred percent. If I got hurt or did something stupid when I was with him, he always took the blame, even when it was clearly my fault, and on more than one occasion that got him into a heap of trouble. Even when I explained to my dad that it was my fault and begged him to intervene, he refused. He trusted Finn. If Finn felt responsible then my father interfering would only undermine Finn's sense of responsibility towards me.

Not that I didn't get into my share of trouble; my father was as strict and as old-fashioned as Finn's, but my punishments had nothing to do with Finn. Finn taking care of me the way he did also meant he had no trouble lecturing me, threatening me and even occasionally doling out his own punishments. He'd keep me from tagging along on an adventure I was looking forward to, or make me do some of his easier chores for a few days.

It was that suffocating responsibility he lorded over me that had made me run. That, and the fact that I had walked in on him and my father discussing wedding and marriage advice before he'd even asked me to marry him. When I had flipped out, he'd proven that his own ideals were just as old-fashioned as dear old dad's.

I shoved that memory away and started to slowly nibble at the food on my plate. I had enough to deal with. I didn't need to torment myself with my past...mistakes? Was that what it was? Was running from someone who was so in love with me that he was willing to take care of me for the rest of his life (whether I liked it or not) a mistake? I had loved Finn, but the thought of him making decisions for me the rest of my life was terrifying. That was what his proposal would have meant. My father had confirmed it.

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"I have to finish a project this morning but this afternoon, I'll help you tackle that back porch. It needs to be sanded and repainted." Finn leaned back in his chair and took a drink of coffee.

I frowned. He was the most attractive man I had ever known. The guys I'd dated after him hadn't been even close. Not one had made my blood pound like Finn had. Lines worried around his mouth and eyes, and I realized he was awaiting a response.

"And who says I want to repaint it?"

He raised his brows and pressed his lips together.

"Okay," I corrected, rolling my eyes. "Who says I want to paint it today?"

"Suit yourself, but my offer only stands for today." He grinned as I grumbled that I'd be waiting.

I decided I would go for a walk while he was working. Finn was right about my dad not wanting me to be moping around. I loved the smell of moist earth, and in the morning dew, it

was potent. It also happened to be the best time for deer sightings. Spotting a deer was still majestic, even if I'd seen it more times than I could count. I followed a familiar, slightly beaten-down path that led to a cliff overlooking the lake. My chest felt tighter with each step. By the time I got to the edge, it was wet-cement-heavy, and each breath was an intense effort. How many sunrises had we watched in silent awe? How many nights had we enjoyed the full moon in all its glory? How many stories had my father whispered in my ear under the red, setting sun? Now I was alone, just me, Molly Juniper Harris. I sat cross-legged on the grassy outcropping. As I stared into the blue, memories played in my head, each one leading to the next like a reel played at the climax of a journey.

"You okay?" Finn asked, startling me. I looked up; shaking off the daze I was in. He was shirtless and sweaty, walking toward me. His white tee was tucked into the back pocket of his loose jeans. I noted, with a quickening heart, the definition of his iliac muscles.

The sun hung low in the sky, casting long shadows on the ground. Had I been here all day? Panic rose and I scrambled to my feet, apologies tumbling from my lips. It was another automatic response from our previous relationship. His stride widened, and he embraced me, tucking my face against his warm chest. The manly smell of his skin made me want to curl into him as deeply as physically possible.

"It's all right, baby. I know it wasn't intentional." He pulled me back and pushed the hair out of my face with his thumbs. Hooking his arm around my hip, he supported me as we walked back to the cabin.

I remembered nothing of the walk. My head was still stuck replaying memories, but this time, they were memories of Finn. The angry words I'd yelled at him as he had dragged me away from my father now echoed in my ears. The look of my father's pride as Finn had provided the final proof that he would take care of me – I shivered as the next part of the memory played out. Finn pulled me a little closer.

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"Let me go, Finn!" I struggled against his grasp. "I don't give a crap if you'd planned on asking me tonight! It's not the stone ages! You should have asked me *first!*" We stopped in

between Finn's cabin and the tool shed, away from my father's eyes and ears. Thank goodness, his dad wouldn't be arriving for another few days, so it was at least a bit private.

"Molly!" He shook me a little. "Your father appreciated the gesture." He pulled my chin to make me look at him. "You've been on this rebellious kick lately, and I don't know why, but last year, you'd have been spitting mad had I not included your dad! Frankly, I'm sick of your new attitude!"

"I don't care!" I yanked free of him and turned away. He was right, but I really didn't want to tell him exactly why the whole scenario had bothered me. First, it was the way my father had told me that I couldn't go to school and live in a dorm like everyone else. He'd said he wanted me to stay where he could keep tabs on me. I was tired of being the hillbilly girl, living in the bush with her dad. I was livid enough with him not trusting me to be responsible, but then I heard him tell Finn that he'd drag me down the aisle if I refused, and for Finn not to be afraid to put me over his knee when I needed it! What kind of hillbilly crazy talk was that! I was eighteen, legally an adult!

"You *do* care, and if you don't, I'll make you care!" he barked. I stiffened. I knew his warning tone. Lately, I'd heard it too often. I pushed both him and my father regularly now. I was irate and feeling imprisoned by the two dominant men. Once I became Finn's wife, I'd officially be an inmate for life! As much as I loved him and my father, I wasn't sure it was a life I wanted, and I certainly didn't like the decision being made for me. Anger flared again.

"No! Take your aggressive, hillbilly crap and shove it in a hole!" I grimaced at the fact that I couldn't even force a curse into my bold statement. Well, wasn't I a well-trained girl? *Scaredy cat*, I chided myself, crossing my arms. "You...you *ass*!" I added with a stomp of my foot. There, I'd done it!

A self-satisfied smile froze on my lips as his brows slammed down to hover threateningly over his heated, hard glare.

"Molly," he growled.

"Oh, boy! What are you going to threaten me with *this* time?" I felt fevered with rage again, but I also felt a change in our relationship. I suddenly had the upper hand, for once. I slapped my hands on my thighs and stormed away. "I'm done being ruled by you two. Damn you both."

I heard him take a few breaths and then his feet stomping after me. "Molly! You've pushed me too far, kid!"

I started to snort laughter at him when I was yanked off my feet and scooped up into his arms. He began to carry me toward the woods.

"What are you doing?" I demanded, struggling in his arms. "Where are you taking me?"

"Somewhere your father won't hear your screams, kid!"

I stilled at that. "The lake's the other way, Finn," I stated as calmly as I could. It was one of the ways he liked to remind me he was in charge. Dump me in the cold lake, and I come up sputtering, no longer angry and seemingly relieved of my stubborn inability to see his point of view.

"You've gone way beyond that! A dip in the lake won't cure you."

After a ten minute speed-walk through the dense forest, he was showing signs of fatigue while I was smiling as if I were a queen being carried by my servant.

Finally, he plunked me roughly down on the ground and pointed at me, but said nothing until he caught his breath.

"Molly."

"Finn, you should sit down. You're going to have a heart attack." I moved to sit on a fallen log and patted the spot beside me. "Come on, old man." I just wasn't angry anymore. He was too funny in his attempt to keep me in line, and I had made my decision – I would be leaving the first chance I got.

"Oh, no, this isn't over. You can't just turn all normal and act like *I'm* being ridiculous." He was over six feet and getting taller by the second, it seemed. From where I sat, he loomed large as he straightened his spine. "You've been behaving like a spoiled brat lately, and I plan on fixing that."

Chapter Two

I rolled my eyes. *Blah, blah, blah.* Normally, his threats were heeded with more fear on my part. I knew he would never really hurt me, but he had the power because I didn't like to displease him or make him mad. Right then, I decided I wouldn't allow his power over me to last another minute. I was willing to leave him angry with me. I was willing to move up on the ladder. "I'm not interested in being *fixed*."

"Too bad." His voice took an even stronger tone. I could see the determination in his eyes. He had to prove to himself he could handle me. The change made my heart flutter, betraying me. I definitely didn't want to be the type of woman that got a thrill when the man she loved got all dominant, but as he began rolling up his sleeves, a tingle of need swirled in my girl parts. I no longer had the upper hand.

I jumped off the log, suddenly very nervous. "I'm going home!" I said, eyeing him as I walked past.

"Go home if you want, but we'll just do this in front of your dad." He put his hands on his hips.

"What do you mean by *this*?" I stopped and narrowed my eyes. I hoped my expression hid the fact that my knees had begun to weaken.

"Don't pretend you don't know." He made a rude noise with his lips. "You've been begging for it for a long time." He wiggled his finger at me. "Come on, neither one of us are going to enjoy this, so let's get it over with."

"The hell you are!" I said as I finally figured out what he meant. His brows rose, and he slowly nodded his head. I watched, dry-mouthed, as he walked to the log and sat.

"You've got ten seconds."

My pulse thumped in my ears. "Ten seconds for what?" I blurted out.

"To get over here." He looked at his watch. "Only, it's six now."

"And what happens after six?" The question came from the last bit of challenge I had in me. I crossed my arms.

"I come get you and things get a whole lot nastier, and when I'm through, I'll drag you home to your dad." He cleared his throat. "Three."

Panic rose. My dad? Now that was enough to scare me into obedience. "Okay!" I walked to him quickly. I could handle Finn over my dad any day.

"Good girl." He stood, and his fingers found my button. I swallowed hard. We'd been together, but this was different, and it made me shy.

"This is ridiculous, Finn, stop trying so hard to be what my father expects!" As angry as I was at him, I was in awe of his masculinity. The way his muscles rolled easily under his sun-bronzed skin made my middle throb. His jaw had become squarer over the last year, and his stubble had thickened. He tugged my jeans awkwardly down my hips. I crossed my arms again and pressed my thighs together. I refused to make things easier for him.

"Kid, you are playing with fire!" He yanked hard, and both my pants and thong came down. "What the hell is that?" He pointed at the string garment I had recently begun wearing, only for the purpose of rebellion, knowing Finn found them sleazy.

"My panties!" I huffed as though he was slow-witted.

"No, they're not!" He pulled his hunting knife out of his belt clip and sliced the expensive lingerie until it came off in his hands.

"Why did you do that?" I demanded, grabbing the strings from his hands. "I paid a lot of money for those, and I happened to like them!"

"I don't care!" He clasped my wrist, propped his foot on a fallen tree and yanked me hard, so I toppled over his left knee. He steadied me and then laid into my skin. The stinging swats made me wince and squeeze my eyes tight, but it was nothing like the spankings I'd received as a child. Finn was unsure of himself, and he was going easier because of it – it still hurt, but nothing I couldn't handle. I wouldn't give in to Finn and my father! Clutching the string of my thong, I pounded and clawed his leg. After several very nasty spanks, I decided there was only one way out of the situation, before Finn figured me out. I had to pretend to give in. I stopped fighting, and he continued to smack, punctuating his lecture, which I didn't hear a word of. I bit my cheek, blinked and dug my nails into my skin; I even thought sad thoughts, anything to induce tear duct production. It wasn't easy because I wasn't a crier, not since my mother's funeral. Only my father could reduce me to tears. After a few minutes, though, I was snivelling, blubbering and apologizing, telling him everything I thought he wanted to hear. I had found my inner actress.

"I don't know what to do with this new attitude, Molly, but if this is what you need, I'll do it every darn day!" He landed a very hard, final spank and pulled me up into his arms. "I want

my Molly back!" He hugged me fiercely as if he subconsciously knew I would be gone by the morning. "I love you!" He shoved me back to look me in the eye. Shaking me lightly, he repeated his love. I quickly averted my eyes so he wouldn't see through me.

I knew he was waiting to hear me say I loved him back, but the words were stuck. I took a moment to pull my jeans up and found myself pondering the question of whether I did or not. I did. I really did, but the life he wanted, the one he was offering, wasn't what I wanted, and I wouldn't settle. I didn't want to be a little, obedient wife who was pulled across her husband's lap every time she had a thought of her own.

"I love you, too, Finn," I said, and because I knew I would never again have the opportunity, I launched myself into his arms and kissed him. He caught me, and I wrapped my legs around his middle. He held me up by my bottom, but when I hissed in discomfort, he moved his grip lower to hold my thighs. I ran my hands through his hair, trying to commit to memory the feeling of every soft curl as it ran between my fingers. I continued to touch him everywhere I could think of, promising myself the tactile sensations would be burned into my brain and last for a lifetime.

His response to my reaction was just as fierce, and his hands followed my lead. After a few minutes, we were on the ground with twigs poking and scraping our naked skin through the shirt he'd laid down for us as we rocked together.

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My reverie stopped as I stumbled onto the first step of my porch. I felt Finn's firm grip stop me, and I turned to look into his eyes. The look in them made my breath hitch. The emotional wall I had cemented in place was starting to groan against the pressure. Love and concern mingled with hurt in his gaze and penetrated my once-solid wall. I gasped for air, and my legs buckled. Finn's sure grip kept me upright, and he scooped me up into his solid arms. I tucked my face into the warmth of his neck and inhaled shallow breaths of his scent while he carried me inside to the couch.

"I'm going to get you some water and food. Stay here." He set me down and searched my face until I gave in and let him lock eyes with me again. I read his unspoken demand for an

answer and nodded. I reached for my purse as soon as he left me alone. With trembling hands, I opened my prescription bottle and took a dose. I curled into a ball and rocked.

"I'll be stronger tomorrow," I murmured, clutching my hands to my chest, hoping the extra support would keep it from splitting open. "I'll be stronger tomorrow. I'll be stronger tomorrow."

I woke with light peeking through my streaky bedroom window. I was in my bed. It took a minute to recollect that I hadn't gotten there on my own, but by then my eyes had settled on Finn. He was asleep, his arms crossed and his chin slumped on his chest, seated on a straight-back kitchen chair. The heaviness in my chest increased with the weight of guilt. How stupid did I have to be not to realize that a man who loved me that much was worth doing anything for? How had I walked away from him? I rolled my shoulders and neck and slid quietly from the sheets. I tiptoed to the bathroom, glancing at the tray of food on the table beside the couch.

I thought of the boyfriends I'd had since I'd left Finn. They were men that forgot about me the moment I was out of sight. How many times had I been brushed aside or forgotten to be picked up from work by a man who claimed he loved me more than life itself? Would any of those former lovers have slept in a wooden chair all night to keep an eye on me after I'd tossed his heart in his face, no less? Even when my appendix had ruptured, and I'd had to stay in the hospital for five days, all I'd gotten was a quick, fifteen-minute daily visit from my live-in boyfriend. When he'd dumped me, he'd said I was so independent that he'd felt like I didn't need him. I'd wanted to scream and toss something at his head. It hadn't been my fault he couldn't see past his own nose and read me. A girl shouldn't have to tell her boyfriend that she needed him – he should just know. Finn knew. He always knew. God, the crushing pressure in my chest hurt. I held my breath as long as I could, to avoid the burn that breathing created. My head started getting that fuzzy feeling that forced me to decide to inhale or pass out. I breathed.

I finished my morning routine and started cleaning up the food tray and kitchen. I made some coffee and threw some ingredients together for a quiche. Finn walked in just as I slid the pie plate into the oven.

"Why didn't you wake me?" he asked, scratching his head, looking ruffled and gorgeous. "I would've made you breakfast."

"Thank you for everything, Finn, but it's not your job to take care of me." I swallowed the urge to remind him that I had burned that bridge years ago. I didn't deserve his concern now. He balked but didn't comment further. He went to the bathroom.

I poured us coffee, mixed in cream and sugar and brought them to the table. When Finn came out, the only sign he showed of a fitful sleep was slightly puffy eyes. He grabbed the mugs, gave me a challenging look and then took them out to the porch. I followed, letting the door swing shut with a whack that startled the birds.

"Don't blame me when your breakfast burns," I grumbled and sat on the Muskoka chair next to his. Mist off the lake rose, and the haunting call of the loon hushed my further protests. I'd forgotten how beautiful six a.m. could be.

"You feeling any better today?" His brow rose as he looked at me peripherally.

"Shh," I ordered. "Dad's rules. No talking until seven a.m." He narrowed his eyes at me, but I saw his smirk as he tried to hide it behind his mug.

I didn't burn the quiche, and Finn helped me do the dishes after we ate. I felt less alone than I had in a long time, even though we barely said a word to each other. When he had put the last plate away, he leaned over, kissed me on the cheek, and whispered he'd be back later. I nodded, ignoring the hole that started to grow inside me as he left. I watched his pickup drive away twenty minutes later. A handcrafted bureau had been loaded carefully into the truck bed.

I went to the back deck, eager to work off the edginess quaking inside me. Finn had already sanded everything. He must have done it while he was waiting for me the day before. The red paint and brushes were set out. I dove into the work, letting my mind go where it wished but working myself to numbness.

It was almost dark when I finally laid the brush down, and Finn waved to me from his truck. I was washing up, stripped down to my boy-short undies and matching tank, when I heard him come in.

"Molly?" he called from the kitchen. I heard cupboards opening and closing. "Did you even stop to eat today?"

"Eat?" I repeated. "Sure." I hadn't even stopped long enough to drink a glass of water. I felt dry at the thought. I'd been out all day in the heat without even a sip of fluid, just like yesterday. What was I doing to myself? I had to pull myself out of this zombie state soon, or I was going to end up in the hospital.

"No, you didn't," Finn said, startling me. He was standing at the bathroom door, his hands low on his hips. "I know exactly what was in the pantry." His eyes were shiny with anger as he pointed his finger at me. "We need to talk. As soon as you're done, I want your ass in the kitchen!" He spun and left me standing there, stunned, with a wet washcloth dripping on my feet. What had happened to the sweet guy from that morning?

I wasn't sure how to feel at that moment. I actually had three gut reactions. The first was relief that someone cared enough to worry about me, but the second, and stronger, feeling was anger. I was pissed that he'd fallen back into guardian mode, after all these years. Even after proving I could survive on my own for four years, he'd decided I still needed a keeper. The last feeling I had was the strongest and most hated of all. It was arousal. Damned if it didn't make me wet when he turned bulldog on me.

I took my time walking to the kitchen, not even caring about my skimpy attire. He gave me a look that made my stomach lurch when I sat at the table. Then he slammed a cup and a plate with a sandwich in front of me. My hackles rose.

"Stop!" I yelled. "I can take care of myself!"

"Obviously!" he snorted, throwing his hands in the air. "I mean, it's evident to even a blind man!" His jaw tensed. "You walk around in a daze most of the day, forgetting to eat, and then you drug yourself into oblivion at night so you can do it all over again the next day!" He pulled out a chair and sat. "What the hell kind of life is that? You think your father would be happy to know you're wasting away?"

"I never asked for your concern *or* your damn opinion!" I stood so fast that the table shook, spilling the glass of milk. "I didn't invite you over or ask for your help! Leave me the hell alone!" I picked up the sandwich he'd made, turned my back to him and threw it in the garbage. Inside my head, I screamed for strength because as much as my words were meant to hurt and push him away, I wanted him to hold me. What was wrong with me? I was always so confused. Even when I was younger, I'd loved the way it felt being taken care of by Finn, and yet, I'd rebelled. I had run away.

His arms wrapped around me, trapping me in a vice-like hold, pinning my arms at my sides. I let go for a minute and just let his strength hold me.

"You may not know it, but you need me. Now more than ever. I won't leave you, Molly, but I won't force you, either. I still love you, and damn it, I *let* you go, because it's what you

needed, but I won't leave you to do *this* on your own, too." His arms squeezed tighter. "I am going against every instinct I have by giving you the opportunity to come to terms with everything yourself, but my strength is waning. I won't stand by and watch you harm yourself. This is your only warning, Molly." He released me. I slid to my knees on the floor and listened to him leave. "You don't have to come to me, but if you ever disrespect me like that again, I *will* make you sorry, kid." The door slapped shut.

After he left, I heated a can of soup and drank two bottles of water. I managed to choke down half the soup and three soda crackers. I was so tired by then, I could barely keep my eyes open, but still I slid on my flip-flops and walked. I had a lot going on, but how could I heal when my issues with Finn kept coming to the surface. Maybe if I dealt with my feelings for Finn, I could get on with my life and my grieving.

Did I still love Finn? I took a deep breath – it hurt like hell. Yes, I really did still love Finn. I compared every man to him, and every one of them fell short. What did I love about Finn? I kept walking, letting the underbrush slash and tear at my bare legs and feet. My mind went deeper into my feelings for Finn, and my body deeper into the forest.

Of course, there were his looks. I smiled at how just looking at him could make my heart pound. The sex had always been fantastic, too. It was so much more, though. I loved his work ethic, his honour and his sense of humour. I loved that he could read me, and he knew what I needed when I needed it. And the way that he still wanted to spend time with me, even when I was grumpy or bitchy, was definitely a bonus. We had the same love of nature. I loved that he always put me first, no matter what.

My mind stopped at that thought. How could I have not trusted someone who'd put me before all else to take care of me and give me what I needed? I had run from him, thinking I would be bending to his will if I stayed, but I had been wrong. That wasn't who Finn was. He'd let me leave and had loved me all this time. How could someone who was willing to let me go be someone that would force his will on me? He had never forced me to do anything, nor had he ever done anything himself that I had given him a good argument against. There *had* been an imbalance in our relationship, but I was the one with the power. God! What had I done by throwing his love away? The only other person that loved me that much was my dad.

I squatted down to the forest floor, knowing I wouldn't be able to hold myself up much longer. I wrapped my arms tightly around my knees. Looking down, I saw that my feet were

bleeding from twigs that had scraped and dug into the exposed skin. I knew better than to wear flip-flops on a hike.

A memory I hadn't thought of in a long time started to form in my head. Together, with it and my recent realizations, Finn's love and intent for me suddenly became perfectly clear.

* * *

"Molly, move!" Finn's voice was impatient and I knew it wouldn't be long before he was totally pissed off.

"I can't! I don't want you to do it." I stepped in front of the barrel of his rifle.

He swore and lowered it, but shot me a look that was almost as lethal.

"Finn, I love them! Every morning, I watch them."

"Do you have any idea what my dad's going to say when I tell him we won't have any venison for Thanksgiving because my girlfriend likes to watch them?" he huffed. "It's tradition – at eighteen, the Giles men hunt a deer for Thanksgiving. Since before my father's grandfather! Feast for the fall harvest meal and meat for the long winter! This is my year, Moll."

I frowned and stormed off. "I won't forgive you for this, Finn!" I knew I was hurting him with my words, but I was mad. Those beautiful deer had never hurt anyone. I loved watching them nibbling at the forest floor in the misty mornings, a steaming cup of tea warming my hands. Why was it so important for the Giles family to eat venison on Thanksgiving? Everyone else was satisfied with turkey.

"Molly! Wait!" I heard him call to me from the distance, but I ignored him. I purposely made as much noise as possible as I left him. There would be no deer dying on my watch! When his foot stomps thundered close behind me, I spun, giving him my best scowl.

"Leave me alone, Finn!"

"If I don't do it, my dad will. So not only will the deer die, regardless, but I'll look like a wimp on top of it all. I'll be the only man in Giles history to fail." He brushed my cheek, and I pulled away. "Baby, I have to do this, but I don't want to fight with you. It's our last weekend together before you go back home for school."

"I have nothing to say to you right now. I'm going home!"

It was a lie, but he believed me. I snuck back and waited for over an hour, before he set down his gun and walked off a ways to pee. The moment he was gone, I picked up his rifle and removed the ammunition. I took the remaining boxes of shells and left. I was determined to see those deer next year when I came for the summer. I needed to foil more than just Finn, though, because he was right about one thing – if he didn't shoot them for dinner, then his father would. I hurried to Finn's house.

"Good Morning, Mr. Giles," I said politely as I walked up to the porch. "I think I left my book in Finn's room, do you mind if I grab it?"

He smiled at me. "Molly, you just caught me. I was just about to head into town." He patted my shoulder. "You go ahead."

And so I did, except I didn't just grab the book I'd left: I grabbed every piece of ammunition I could find in the house, and then I dumped it all in the lake. I bit my lip while doing so, hoping it wouldn't hurt the fish. Then I dusted my hands together and walked back to the bush with my book. I'd wait all day if I had to, but I was going to see Finn take that shot and laugh my arse off.