

*ONE FOOT FORWARD*

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*ONE FOOT FORWARD*  
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The men and women of the Metropolitan Fire Brigade and the Country Fire Authority do a fantastic job. So I'd like to thank the fire fighters of the Sunshine and Deer Park Fire Stations for answering my avalanche of questions about their profession, and give a special thanks to the volunteer firey's at the Caroline Springs CFA Station.

## **Chapter 1**

He was going to die of complete embarrassment. And there was not a single thing Mick Knight could do to prevent it.

He adjusted his red suspenders to stop them itching against his bare chest. Of course, the second he did that, his yellow over-trousers shifted against his bare legs. Wiggling in the crazy outfit, he scored an admonishing shake of the head from his best mate, Nate. Some friend, the little devil had been the one who'd talked him into this insane auction.

You're so gonna pay for this, Mick thought wickedly, already dreaming up some scheme to get his revenge. Nate King, every girl's dream date, had a crazy way of showing his friendship. Mick couldn't even begin to count how many outrageous dates he'd been on, courtesy of Nate's match-making.

Mick shook his head, chastising his inability to say no to Nate.

The announcer's voice boomed over the PA system, calling the next *item* to the auction block. Nate jumped to his feet, puffed out his chest and tucked his thumbs into the front of the yellow pants.

"My turn!" he yapped, half running, half tripping up the stairs.

He was about to be sold at auction, and Mick was next.

Mick grumbled under his breath and stared down at his heavy black boots. The boots had been through thick and thin, right alongside Nate's fireman's boots. Mick had scrubbed them clean, well, as clean as he could get them. There was still evidence of his last job that refused to budge.

Shrugging, Mick listened as the bidding for Nate King, known on the job as Kinga, took off at a frantic pace. He really was a popular guy, and when the numbers drifted back stage, Mick could only sigh. The guy was a money spinner of the highest calibre.

All the money went to the Fireman's Fund, a trust established to help the wives of firemen who died on the job. It was a great cause, one Mick had worked tirelessly to set up in memory of his father, Joe Knight. The man was a legend, and that was before he'd perished trying to save two tots.

So if Mick really died of embarrassment, it was at least for a noble cause.

Still, his heart did a back flip the minute he heard his name. Time to go, he thought bravely, taking deep breaths for courage. He'd rather face a burning building than the gaggle of women out there. Who thought of the auction, anyway?

Mick didn't need to think about that one, it was easy. Jane, Nate's younger sister, was the culprit. As he climbed the stairs and stepped out onto stage, he hoped like crazy she was here so he could give her a piece of his mind.

Fat chance of that, he realised, staring out over a sea of masked faces. He'd forgotten about that. Damn. He couldn't tell who was who.

He never expected the crowd to go wild, nor did he think they'd surge towards the stage. Honestly, the mass of women looked like the rolling waves of the ocean. They moved together, as one, like a school of fish.

Cut that, he thought. More like a school of very hungry sharks. And he was the bait.

Mick stifled the urge to turn and run. This was not his scene. He was not the kind of guy who loved the spotlight. Rather, he preferred the back benches. Well, he had to grin and bear it. He'd said he'd do it, and he never went back on his word.

"Why don't you spin around for us, son?"

Mick glared at the auction's emcee, Chief Fire Officer Glenn Harding, a man he'd known all his life. Glenn grinned and motioned for him to spin. I'll get you, too, Mick promised silently as he did a pirouette and sent the women below into a screaming frenzy.

He felt naked up there on stage. Given the way women ogled his body, he may as well have been. The yellow over-trousers hung low on his hips, exposing his upper body completely. Red suspenders didn't exactly hide anything.

"Flex those muscles, baby!"

A woman's voice reached his ears and he suddenly understood what it felt like to be a piece of meat up for tender. But because he wanted as much money for the auction as possible, Mick did as asked, flexing his biceps and rippling his abs.

The effect was stunning. One woman, she must have been in her forties, fainted while two others stumbled. The screaming intensified and Mick wondered how they'd react if he hammed it up as much as Nate had.

When the bidding began, the offers came thick and fast. Good Lord, he thought. Who would've thought the bidding would creep into the thousands for him? Nate maybe, but Mick?

He could barely contain his astonishment as the next offer floated over the heads of the crowd and smacked him hard in the face. Mick stumbled. The bid was three times that for Nate. He was gonna cop a hiding from the boys at the station for that.

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Squinting against the bright spotlights, he realised the successful bidder held a phone to her ear. She was taking phone bids. For who? His heart raced, almost tripping over itself. Could it be? No, he thought, tamping down on the hope swelling deep in his chest. It couldn't possibly be.

He jumped when the gavel hit the lectern with a resounding *thwack*. Blinking, Mick watched stupefied as his *date* made her way to the stage to collect her prize. She grinned, a cheeky twinkle in her eye leaving him covered in goose bumps.

Her small hands barely fit around his bulging bicep, as she showed him off to the other women. Mick wanted to swat her hands away, at least until he knew who she was.

His heart galloped at the thought of who it could be, but as he scanned her body, it dawned on him who his *date* actually was.

Jane.

She was Nate's sister, for crying out loud. They'd known each other as long as he'd known Nate. He suddenly felt a little ill as she led him down the steps and through the crowd.

"What's going on?" he demanded when they made it to the back of the crowd. He was glad all eyes were still on the stage.

Jane lifted off her mask and stuck her chin out at him. "It's just one date Mick," she huffed indignantly. "You're acting like you were just bought by Godzilla."

"I'm sorry, Jane, I just..."

"You were hoping someone else bought you, right?" she grinned. "Who would that someone else be, Mick?"

Why was Jane so perceptive? He wondered if Nate had said something and then thought better of his friend. Nate may have been her brother, but he wasn't a tattler. Mick trusted him without question. Besides, the man couldn't spill the beans on something he didn't know about, could he?

Clearly, Jane didn't need any hints as to who he was thinking about.

"Never mind," he sighed as Nate, and the woman who'd bought him, joined them. Mick didn't recognise her. He smiled and extended a hand. "Mick."

She nodded. "I know," she shook his hand. "I'm Lara."

"Nice to meet you," he said politely before turning back to Jane with a demanding glare. "Now, where were we?"

She laughed lightly, the sound carefree. But he knew Jane, and nothing about her was carefree. She was one of the most calculating women he'd ever met. Not that she was unattractive or even unfriendly. Jane was like the female version of Nate, and Mick suspected she'd probably been on as many dates as her brother.

She was a fast paced, highly fashioned business woman who never let anything get in her way. In short, she was a piranha. Mick wanted to keep well away.

"So, who's my date then?" he persisted.

"You know," Jane slipped a finger under the elastic suspender and snapped it against his skin. "If you're going to be rude, I'll throw you back out into the crowd."

Lifting a hand, Mick rubbed at the spot she'd smacked with the elastic. It stung like mad. "Come on, Jane," he cajoled. "Why tease me?"

She chuckled throatily before leaning in close. "You could do with a little teasing."

Mick shook his head, he'd had enough. "I appreciate the donation to the Fund, but why the games?"

Jane shrugged. "Okay, no more games. And FYI, you weren't bought with my money."

His eyes stretched wide, certain that whatever game she was playing, it had to be financed solely by her ladyship. "Oh?"

"That's right. Now, be a good boy and close your eyes for me."

She wasn't asking, of that he was certain. So he did as he was told and squeezed his eyes closed. While he waited, he ran through a list of all of Jane's friends. Lord, she had so many she could be buying for anyone. And if he added in her co-workers, well, he could have been bought by anyone in greater Melbourne.

Damn.

Vulnerability wasn't high on Mick's list of characteristics. He needed to feel like he had some control over his life, but he knew without a doubt that if he peeked, Jane would catch him. No telling what she'd do if he got caught cheating.

The noise of women cheering for the next fireman on the chopping block prevented him from hearing Jane or the woman who'd bought him. He felt like he'd been left on his own and no one was coming to claim him.

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Stepping up to the hulking man, Molly wobbled a little before Jane placed a steadying hand on her arm. Glancing at her best friend, Molly was glad for the encouragement and enthusiasm in Jane's eyes.

Most people thought Jane was a man eater but deep down, the woman was soft as butter. If it wasn't for her strength, for her zest for life, the last two years would have been a nightmare. Molly wondered if she'd be as far along the track of recovery as she was had Jane not been by her side.

Molly mouthed *thanks*, and watched as Jane shooed away her brother Nate and Lara, Molly's physiotherapist. Lara managed a thumb's up signal over Jane's shoulder aimed at Molly.

She was on her own now.

For the first time in two years, she was face to face with him. He'd seemed larger in her broken memories. Not that she relied on those very much, because she couldn't even remember seeing his face. She must have, after three hours alone with the man, she should've seen his face. But standing here, in front of him now, it was as though she saw him for the first time.

Her heart pounded, knowing she should have thanked him a long time ago. He'd been to the hospital, but she'd been so heavily sedated she never knew about his visits. By the time Jane informed her, Molly's life was a merry-go-round of surgery and rehab. She'd had no time to see him.

She was here to change that. "You can open your eyes now."

Those big blue eyes popped open and fixed her to the spot. Surprise mixed with awe as his lips parted in a silent O. The effect he had on her was incredible. Molly closed her eyes and breathed deeply of the familiar scent. The smell of the outdoors, of hard work, of comfort. Aside from the pain, it had been the only thing she really remembered from the crash.

"Molly Keating?"

His deep baritone voice echoed through her. Yeah, she remembered that, too. She cleared her throat to speak, but his big hands on her upper arms stole the words. Her eyes sprang open as he smiled down at her.

"You were swaying. Are you okay?"

She nodded, so far beyond okay it was heavenly. "Sorry. I lose my balance sometimes."

His eyes searched hers while the strength of him flowed through her. God but he was so manly. She didn't remember that. In fact there was so much she didn't remember,



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she'd thought this would be a piece of cake. Buy the guy, take him to dinner, thank him for saving her life and leave.

Yeah, right.

"*You* bought me?"

"Uh-huh," words stuck in her throat. She cleared it and tried again. "It's my way of saying thank you."

He blinked, seeming astounded. "You say thank you with a couple thousand dollars to charity? I'm impressed."

Finally, she found enough control to form a smile. "It's the least I could do. You saved my life."

She wondered if the rest of the crowd hadn't stopped to stare. The room had gone quiet, eerily quiet actually, but she refused to turn around. Her mission to show her gratitude was all that mattered now, and Mick Knight would accept her thanks whether he liked it or not.

He opened his mouth to speak, though no words sounded. Rather, those lips caught her attention, drew her gaze and sent a shiver down her spine. That was unexpected. She didn't remember him being so...so sexual. She had to be careful.

The dinner date with Mick couldn't end badly. The last thing she needed was another rejection. She had to keep this purely platonic, completely professional.

"I'm flattered you'd go to this length," he was saying. Molly didn't hear, rather she felt every word bounce through her. "You didn't have to."

"Yes I did," she nodded vigorously. "Yes I did."

He smiled, a full, broad, beautiful smile. "I'm glad, really glad Molly."

The genuine emotion in his voice enveloped her and soothed her nerves. She'd expected to feel nervous, but she'd never expected to feel attracted to him. That was just wrong. It had to be hero-worship or something. It was only because he'd been the one to drag her out of the car wreck.

Yes, that was it.

It wasn't like she actually remembered him, or knew anything about him. He was a fire fighter doing his job, nothing more. She should remember that.

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"So I'll take you to dinner," she blurted, suddenly overcome with the urge to sort out the particulars of their date and get the hell out of here. "Do you have a preference?"

He shrugged, the powerful muscles rippling under his skin. "Anywhere, anytime."

She gulped at the innuendo her brain lent to his answer. *Stop it.* "Well, how about Mac's?"

He nodded. "I like the sound of that. When?"

"Tomorrow night?"

Again he nodded, and she noticed his thumb on her right arm rubbing her softly. The movement zipped along her skin, up her arm, down over her breasts and exploded in her belly. She had to get out of here, get some fresh air and a generous dose of perspective.

"Can I get you a drink?" he offered, seemingly unaware of her arousal. "I don't know about you, but I could sure use one."

His simple offer paralysed her. If she spent any more time this close to him, there was no telling what questions he'd ask. So now that things were settled, she should vamoose. Knowing she should make tracks and actually making them were two different stories. Struggling to remove her tongue from the roof of her mouth, Molly moistened her lips. "It's late," she said. "I should go."

"Do you have to?" he sounded like he wanted her to stay.

Molly held herself still and looked up into his eyes. At six foot, he was six inches taller than her but she liked that he didn't look down on her. Lifting her hand, she pressed her palm to his jaw and marvelled at the smooth skin. His eyes fluttered closed as he exhaled. Hot air brushed across her skin but it was nothing compared to the feel of his baby smooth jaw. She absently wondered what kind of razor he used to get such a glassy finish.

"I'm exhausted, Mick, I need rest," she explained, her voice barely above a whisper.

"Are you okay to get home?"

"Jane's taking me."

His eyes opened and those baby blues struck her deep. "I'll see you tomorrow then?"

Sucked in by those gorgeous eyes, Molly let her hand linger longer. His gaze held her in a warm cocoon that made her feel safe. Inexplicably, her eyes watered.

"Molly? What is it?"

She shook her head and tried to step out of his grasp. "I'm okay. Just a little silly is all. Nothing to worry about."

He didn't look convinced. "Tell me," he encouraged softly. "What is it?"

She sighed, resigned to the fact that he'd ask questions during their dinner anyway. "I don't remember much," she whispered. As the crowd started up again, Mick brought her closer. "I didn't even remember your face. I just remembered your smell."

He smiled. "My smell?"

"Warm, safe. It was the only thing I could recall about you. I'm sorry."

"Why are you sorry?" he chuckled. "There's nothing to be sorry about."

Molly rolled her eyes. "You stayed with me the whole time. Three hours, wasn't it? And all I can remember is how you smelled."

Mick quieted as he stared at her. "I remember the whole thing. I'll tell you anything you want to know, okay?"

"Thanks."

Mick nodded as his hold on her loosened and he set her back on her feet. She hadn't even realised he'd lifted her off the ground. Glancing down, she checked that her left foot was where it should be and then froze when his lips brushed her ear.

"It's nothing to be ashamed of," he whispered.

Lifting her head, he pressed a warm kiss to the centre of her forehead. Molly sighed contentedly. He was so warm and caring, he seemed to know what to say to make her feel right again. Had it been that way during the crash? Had he known what to say, how to help her believe she'd get out? She made a mental note to ask him during dinner.

"I finish at six, I'll see you then, right?"

How could she say no? How could she deny the sense of longing in his voice? "I'll see you then," she smiled, leaving the half-naked Mick behind as she pushed through the crowd to the exit.

Outside, she stumbled down the stairs and leaned against a tree to catch her breath. Had he sucked it right out of her? She didn't remember breathing during their entire meeting. Starved for oxygen, she was so busy panting that she barely noticed Jane race over to her.

“Oh my God, are you okay? What did he do? I’ll kill him.”

“Jane!” Molly grabbed her friend’s arm to stop her from killing her date. “Relax. It’s just me.”

“You?” Jane looked appalled. “There’s nothing wrong with you Molly.”

While Jane waited, Molly composed herself as best she could. Hard to do when she’d been knocked for six. “I don’t remember him being so...” Molly searched for the right word.

Jane stared at her expectantly, her eyes wide and the corner of her mouth quirked in amusement. Molly wanted to wipe the smug look off her friend’s face. Jane had warned Molly this was a bad idea, told her she could easily thank Mick over the phone and be done with it. No need to spend thousands for the same privilege.

“I know you don’t like Mick and I know you think this is a waste of time, but I need this, Jane.”

“Honey, you just bought the man for a princely sum. He ought to be gorgeous. But I want you to be careful with Mick. He dates girls as often as I buy new shoes.”

Molly tried to tamp down on a grin at the analogy but it wouldn’t be dissuaded. It was exactly the reason she thought this a great idea. No point getting all dreamy-eyed over the playboy fireman. Still, she hadn’t expected to be hit so forcefully by his masculinity.

Jane nodded approvingly. “That’s a girl. Look, it’s true. He’s hot, though he’s not my type. And I don’t think he’s yours, either.”

Molly laughed at that. No, he really didn’t seem like Jane’s type at all. Mick appeared sensitive, in touch with his feelings, very in touch with hers. Or was she just wishing he was?

Heroes never matched their image, the real thing never quite equalled the fantasy. But with Mick, it looked like reality had come excruciatingly close. Though she should keep an open mind about him. She’d been proven wrong about men many a time lately. Mick might be no different.

“It doesn’t matter,” Molly said, sobering. “Nothing will happen. I’ll take him to dinner and say thanks and we’ll go our separate ways.”

Jane shot her a look of annoyance. “Don’t do that.”

“Do what?” Molly asked. They started toward Jane’s car.

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“That.” Jane waved a hand in the air. “That thing where you put yourself down. Those other guys were jerks Molly, and you know it. Or at least, you used to know it.”

“You mean when I had two legs?”

Jane pulled up and gaped at her in horror. “That’s not what I meant.”

Silence filled the air as Molly silently rued her stupidity. She’d taken out her frustrations on Jane too many times over the last two years, she really had to cut it out. “Sorry.”

Jane kicked at a tuft of grass with her Diana Ferrari black leather boot. “It’s okay. I’m sorry, too. I meant before the crash.”

Molly shrugged. “It’s true and you’re right. I was a different person before it happened. I can’t help but be sceptical of men though. The last two years haven’t exactly been easy.”

Draping an arm around Molly’s shoulders, Jane sighed. “I know. Men are pigs sometimes, but don’t let that stop you from having fun.”

Molly groaned inwardly. How was she supposed to have fun when men acted like pigs? What a pickle she was in. She’d tried dating again, and at first, it went well. Brian was sweet and caring, had doted on her adoringly until he found out about her leg. Then he’d stopped calling.

Ben had been on the track team with her in high school, so he knew all about her sporting prowess. He even knew about the accident. Still, he didn’t behave much better when she showed him her leg. He just about turned and bolted out the door. After Grant, she gave up. None of them cared until she told them, but none of them made it easy to explain in the first place.

So, dating was off the cards. Her dinner with Mick wasn’t really a date. After all, she’d paid for the privilege. It was more a meeting of sorts, and she had no intentions of seeing him afterwards. So what if he made her insides go all gooey with a look.

She sighed as she flopped into the front seat beside Jane. What was it about Mick Knight that left her so hot? Okay, so he was a fireman and he looked delicious in a uniform. But it was just the uniform and the heroic efforts of his work that did it. Wasn’t it?

If he was a lawyer, would she be so aroused? She tried to picture him in a suit arguing his case in court. The image of his masculine form draped in top of the line Armani made her mouth water.

Bad example.

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What if he were a teacher? She tried to picture him standing in front of a class of rowdy, disrespectful kids but failed. Instead, she got him dressed in tight shorts and a muscle tee stretched tight across his chest as he taught a physical education class how to throw a javelin. Her sport-oriented brain appreciated the view nicely.

Boy oh boy, no matter where she pictured him, she made herself hotter. She'd strung herself out so tight that her head spun. This wasn't working.

Okay, so he had a fantastic physique. So what if his six pack rippled with each movement? Who cared if those big shoulders felt strong and reliable? And what did it matter if his skin was tanned honey brown right down to his...

Molly gasped, causing Jane to look at her warily. It's just an image, Molly reasoned with her severely famished libido. You only like him because he rescued you, because he's got a hot body and because he's to die for dressed in uniform.

Mick Knight could be a sexist, macho guy who didn't give a toss about anyone else. She didn't know enough about him to make any sort of sound judgement. Surely she'd see his true colours after dinner with him.

~

Mick cornered Nate before the guy could skedaddle from the auction. In the men's bathroom, he'd waited until they were alone before pouncing.

"You set me up."

Nate frowned. "Uh-uh. If anyone set you up, it's my sister. I know nothing," he said in a fake German accent. "Nothing."

Mick clipped him over the ear. "Be serious. How did this happen?"

Nate straightened as George Howell, another fire fighter at their station, entered. They waited for George to finish, all the while eyeing each other. When he was gone, Nate exploded.

"How did what happen? That you were bought by the woman who's been on your mind for two years? Or that you're going to dinner with her so you can finally get her out of your system and move on? I dunno man, but I'm glad."

Mick jerked backwards. "Glad?"

"Oh yeah, bloody giddy I am. You've been pining over Molly for two years and you've done nothing about it."

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Not wanting to hear it, Mick turned and made for the exit. As he let the door swing closed behind him, he heard Nate's voice call out one last time, "Don't waste this opportunity."

He didn't know what the hell Nate was talking about. Sure, he'd thought about Molly since the accident. Yeah, he'd wanted to know if she was okay. But pine over her? Not likely, he thought savagely as he barged through the crowd and into the crisp September air.

Still without a shirt, the cool air stung. At his Jeep, he grabbed out a shirt and pulled it on over his head. Warmer, he leaned back against the four wheel drive and stared up at the star studded, cloudless night sky.

He'd pined over her? He didn't think so, but since holding her, being touched by her, he wondered. She was more beautiful than he remembered, but then, the last time he saw her, she was out cold on a hospital gurney, her head wrapped in bandaging.

Mick shuddered. He remembered that day like it was yesterday. To hear her say she couldn't remember it squeezed his heart so hard he couldn't breathe.

The first time he saw her was through the twisted metal of the car. Trapped with a ten tonne truck threatening to squash her, she'd looked so vulnerable. His rig had been the first to attend the scene, the nightmare as he referred to it. Crawling in to the unstable wreckage, he offered her support, never leaving her side until she was safely in the ambulance.

Yeah, he remembered every detail in crystal clear clarity. Like a high definition digital movie playing just for him. Only, this film had smell-o-vision and he could still sniff the blood in the air. Molly's blood.

His belly groaned and tightened. Holding her hand that morning, he'd marvelled at how small and fragile it was, how easily he could cover it with his big claw.

He'd never really gotten a good look at her face until tonight and it blew him away to think she almost died.

Mick swallowed, his mouth drying up at the memory. He'd been to dozens of road accidents since, including fatalities, and none hit him the way Molly's accident did. Nothing compared to that cold, dark morning. He wasn't even supposed to be working, having been rostered off. But when he was called to fill in, Mick never thought twice.

He thought back to Nate's suggestion to use the dinner to get her out of his system. It struck him that he had no idea how to do that. Molly was the kind of woman one didn't exactly get over in a hurry. That reality had smacked him hard tonight.

Lifting his hand, he touched his jaw where her hand had been. When she'd traced his lip with her thumb, he'd been barely able to hold back. Perhaps the one thing that shocked him was the uncertainty in her eyes. While his mates cut the tin can open, her confidence never wavered. He didn't even have to tell her everything would be alright. She knew it already. Her strength touched him deeply, but it wasn't there tonight.

Something had changed. She wasn't quite the Molly he remembered and he'd be damned if he'd let it go unquestioned. If there was one thing he could do for Molly, it was re-ignite the fire in her eyes.

## **Chapter 2**

Still adjusting to her new leg, Molly took longer to do household chores these days. Vacuuming was a dangerous affair. She could easily get tangled in the cord. Without the benefit of nerve endings in her prosthetic leg, she had caught herself twice already. As for mopping the tiled floors...

Molly plonked down on the sofa after a full morning of cleaning. Tired, she lamented the loss of fitness she once had. Gazing up at the wall of photos, she spied one of her crossing the finish line during the qualifiers for the Commonwealth Games.

She smiled, the memory still fresh in her mind. The euphoria of knowing she'd qualified had carried her through the medal ceremony on a soft cloud of air. At twenty-three, she had the world at her feet and a score to settle with her rival from Great Britain.

Times had changed, of course, but she never resented the lost opportunity. It had been expected, after all, the accident happened just weeks before the Games. Not only did she not attend, she saw only a fraction of the track meet in between rehab sessions and subsequent operations. She didn't even know who won her pet event, the marathon.

With months of hindsight, therapy, and the realisation she was lucky to be alive, Molly understood that sometimes, that's the way the cookie crumbled. She'd missed out on a once in a life time opportunity, but it wasn't the end of the world.

She jumped when her mobile rang and crossed the room to collect it from the bench. The familiar number gave her reason to smile, and when she accepted the call, she sang her greeting through the phone.

Sebastian laughed. "Hey gorgeous, good morning to you, too. How was the auction?"

Molly leaned against the bench. Trust Seb to be impatient for the juicy details when they were due to have lunch. "It went well."

"Ooh, honey," Seb admonished playfully. "Don't tease me. Tell me how it *really* went."



Molly swallowed. He had to have already spoken to Jane, otherwise he wouldn't be so interested. The two of them were thick as thieves sometimes, leaving Molly feeling either smothered or like the third wheel. It was always a crazy extreme with them around.

She sighed, giving in. "I successfully purchased a date with Mick Knight." Lord, when she put it like that, it sounded so clinical. But nothing about his touch or the look in his eye had been cold or detached. The hair on the nape of her neck stood up just thinking about those warm, full lips pressed to her forehead.

"You know I'll go straight to Jane if you don't give me more," Seb whined playfully. He was twenty-five, had known Molly all her life and still lived at home. But he was a good friend and could be counted on when the chips were down. "So dish it up, girl."

"What more do you want to hear, Seb? That I went weak at the knees because my hunky saviour was half naked?"

He laughed. "Oh baby, he sounds divine. Are you sure he's straight?"

Seb's loaded question made her laugh and forget the fact her knees were weak again at the thought of Mick Knight. "You're jealous, Seb."

"Aha," he agreed pointedly. "So where are you taking him?"

"None of your business. None of Jane's either," Molly replied sternly, hoping to deflate any ideas they had of spying on her. "And it's just dinner."

"That's what they all say," he cooed knowingly before breaking into a cacophony of laughter. He was incorrigible.

"Goodbye Seb," she called before he could assault her with any more of his madness. "See you at lunch."

He was protesting when she ended the call, and no doubt he'd never let her forget she'd cut him off, but Molly still had work to do.

~

Molly stared hard at Jane and then at Seb. "No."

"Why?"

Molly gaped. "Because I said so. Didn't you pass that message on?" She fired her question at Seb, flabbergasted by their persistence.

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Jane pouted, though with the hard planes of her face, it didn't look much like a pout. Either way, her friend was not happy. "You're being unreasonable."

Sipping from her glass of water, Molly gazed around the small highway tavern. Mac's Bar and Grill was familiar, friendly and to Molly, it was home turf. A throw back from English ancestry, the quaint inn sat on the edge of a man made lake, bred ducks for consumption and even gave lessons in the fine art of duck calling.

"It is not unreasonable that I ask you and Seb to stay away from my dinner with Mick. Get over it."

Twisting her mouth in anxious wait, Molly prayed Jane wouldn't press the issue. Jane and Seb dining three tables away would make her look like a chicken, like she couldn't go out on her own without an escort.

"But what if...?"

Rolling her eyes, Molly collected her purse and keys. "No, no, no. Nothing bad will happen. I'm taking the guy to dinner, that's all. Why do you look so worried?"

Reaching across the table, Jane pressed her hand over Molly's. The earnest expression in her eyes was one reserved for Jane's closest friends. If any of her rivals in the corporate world of business mergers and take overs knew she possessed it, Jane was a goner. "We don't want you to get hurt."

Molly gave the both of them a reassuring look. "Mick won't hurt me," she said firmly, patting Jane's slightly cool hand. "And if he does, you get the first shot, okay?"

Pacifying Jane was an art Molly mastered in grade school. Appeal to Jane's protective side and then encourage her bravado should things go wrong. As easy as Molly found it, Seb still hadn't worked it out.

Out of the three of them, Seb was probably the least macho, but his sensitivity and creativity more than made up for it.

"I suppose," Jane gave a curt nod, the pins holding her bun in place not game enough to move. "But call me."

"Yes, yes," Molly nodded, making to leave. "Now, I need to get home and change for dinner. Jeans are too informal."

The plan was to lure them into believing she'd never bring Mick to the tavern. They frequented it too often, so why she suggested dinner here was a bit of a mystery. The risk of running into Jane and Seb was too high. She sighed. Her motives were unimportant right now, she just needed Jane to leave.

*Rose Middleton*  
One Foot Forward

Thankfully, Jane and Seb played nice and as they walked to their cars, Molly thought it best to scope out Jane's evening plans. "And what about you? Hot date tonight?"

Jane grunted. "When was the last time I went on a hot date?"

Molly shrugged. "Evan?" She watched Jane's reaction closely, though saw nothing. "Robert?" Jane laughed.

"Robert was as cold as a wet blanket. Try again."

Molly smiled. "Sam," she announced triumphantly. "Whatever happened to him?"

"Sam?" Jane actually pulled off the look of disdain but Molly knew better. The tiny red blotches on Jane's ears gave her away. "You mean the high flying lawyer who breezed in and out of town? He's history."

Narrowing her eyes, Molly evaluated Jane's expression. "You're lying. He might not be in town, but he's definitely not history."

Jane feigned indignation and then burst out laughing. When she giggled like that, she recaptured her femininity, the part of her the corporate world was determined on beating out of her.

"Listen, Molly," Jane finally settled as they reached their cars. "I know it's important for you to thank Mick for saving you, but you need to see him for who he really is."

"And who is he, really?"

Jane shrugged. "He's just a man, honey. Don't be fooled by the fire fighter image or those big muscly shoulders. Deep down, he's still a plain old ordinary man."

After a hug, Molly watched Jane and Seb climb into Jane's hulking four wheel drive and speed away in a puff of dust. Molly sighed. Okay, so guys hadn't exactly treated Jane fairly. And lately, the same could be said for herself. But there was still hope, wasn't there?

~

With six o'clock fast approaching, Molly made a quick decision about what she'd wear to dinner. Black silk trousers, cream knit turtleneck and her usual black, low heel boots.

With less than six months training on her prosthetic leg, she'd mastered the half inch heel. Her two inch heels of the past helped with her height disadvantage, but since the accident, she'd buried them in the deepest recess of the wardrobe. They didn't fit her prosthetic leg and she was sure they'd never see the light of day again.

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She pulled her unruly curls into a neat pony tail and nodded at her reflection in the mirror. Elegant but understated, just what the tavern called for. Perfect for a platonic, thank you for saving my life date.

At six, she left the house and drove the short distance to Mac's. The fading light behind her gave the evening a gentle feel, but the instant she pulled into the parking lot and spotted Mick waiting for her, Molly's heart kicked into overdrive.

Leaning casually against his Jeep, the man epitomized sex appeal. Sunset brought out the golden hue of his skin and played with his scruffy blonde hair to give him a glowing halo. Dressed in a deep blue shirt and beige cargos, he gave a whole new definition to delicious.

She spied the big bunch of deep red tulips cradled in his arms and nearly slammed on the brakes. He'd bought her flowers? She sighed dreamily. The man had charm, too. Who knew?

She swallowed hard and circled the lot to park her car beside his. The grin on his face spread from one ear to another, so much so, he almost looked relieved she'd arrived. Relieved? Molly snorted sarcastically at her wishful thinking and shut off the engine.

"Hey there," he was at her door in no time, extending a helping hand, those blue eyes sincere and genuine.

"Hi," she quipped cheerfully. Finally, an emotion she didn't have to fake. "You're early."

He shook his head as she took his hand and got to her feet. He closed the door when she stepped aside. "You're late," he said softly. "What happened to six?"

Molly chuckled and checked her watch. "It's ten past. I'm fashionably late."

Mick stood so close she could smell his cologne, the same one she remembered from the crash. The fragrance paralysed her as an image of his face materialised before her. He looked worried as he stroked her face and whispered hushed words she couldn't decipher.

"Molly?" His voice at her ear brought her back and she had to fight the urge to wrap her arms around him. Mick's warmth reminded her that he never left her that day. From the minute he crawled into the small, claustrophobic space of the wreck to the moment she was loaded into the ambulance, he was there.

Leaning back, Mick's gaze threatened to steal her breath. "What is it?"

She shook her head. "Nothing. Sorry, I don't know what got into me." She made to step aside but he stopped her, his big hands gripping her arms gently. When she stared up into his eyes again, it was clear he wasn't taking no for an answer. "It was just a

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One Foot Forward

flashback," she admitted. "Of your presence at the crash." She smiled. "I saw your face this time."

Mick smiled too. "Remember, if there's anything you want to know, all you need to do is ask."

"Thanks."

He grinned, reached behind him to the roof of his Jeep and returned with the flowers. "For you."

"You didn't have to," she gushed, taking the cellophane wrapped blooms and examining them. They were perfect. "But thank you. How'd you know I liked tulips?"

When she looked up, the answer smacked her between the eyes and they both said, "Jane."

"I bet it's unusual for a woman to be taking you out, huh?"

Chuckling, Mick shrugged. "There's a first for everything. Now, why don't you leave those in your car while we eat?"

Nodding, Molly felt his warm hand grip hers. It was strange how, in his presence, she felt whole again, like she'd found the pieces missing since the accident. She knew it was all in her mind, that she associated him so strongly with the accident because he was there with her. Intellectually at least, she understood that Mick had been doing the job he was trained for.

"Come on," he urged. "I'm starved."

Locking the flowers in her car, Molly followed him into the popular eatery. She sighed internally when she didn't see Jane or Seb. They were early eaters, so if they weren't here by now, they weren't coming. She took that as a positive sign for the evening; that her date with Mick Knight would go off as planned.

The waiter led them to their booth, set down a pair of menus and then left them to ponder their choices. Sitting across from Mick, Molly picked up her menu and tried to concentrate on the meals listed. All the while, she felt Mick's eyes on her. Rationalising her behaviour as absurd, she looked up to prove her mind wrong. Only, she found him doing just as she'd felt.

Mick smiled, two little dimples forming at each corner of his upturned mouth. "Anything in particular you'd like for dinner?"

"No duck," Molly insisted.

“Okay, no duck.”

“Or quail.”

He nodded. “Definitely no quail. Now, what *would* you like to eat?”

Molly grinned, suddenly feeling a little silly. “I’ll have the roast of the day,” she said, unable to tear her eyes away from his. “You?”

He swallowed, looking strangely guilty. She wondered what was going through his mind to cause such a look. “I’ll have whatever you’re having,” he finally said, his voice sounding a little strangled.

“Are you nervous?”

Mick laughed and she felt some of the tension in the air ease. “A little, I think.”

“Why?”

“You paid a lot of money for this date,” he said softly, leaning in so no one else would hear. “I feel a little pressure to perform.”

Molly tamped down on a smile, hardly believing Mick Knight ever felt pressured into anything. “You’re not at an audition, or in a contest, Mick.”

“I know, I just...” he shrugged. “I guess I want to make you happy.”

Without thinking, she reached across the table and laid her hand over his. It was warm and strong, so different to her small, fragile hand. The contrast took her breath away. “Just be you.”

He glanced down at her hand and she snatched it away quickly, reminding herself to keep it cool. When he looked up, he frowned. “I think you could do with some of your own advice,” he motioned to her hand and then reached for it. “Just be you.”

Molly swallowed as the warmth of his skin met hers. Ever so gently, his roughened fingers traced her hand. The sensation was incredible and felt so familiar. In hindsight, his was the only touch that had felt real and genuine since finding herself trapped under a ten tonne truck.

The familiarity was wonderful and soothing, so much so, she closed her eyes. Deepening her breathing, she remembered those fingers on her face, wiping away her scared tears. Her eyes popped open. “I cried that day.”

Mick started. “A little. Not as much as others I’ve seen.”

"You dried the tears," she said, the memory raw in her mind. "You told me I was safe."

The waiter chose that exact moment to take their orders. Feeling exposed and vulnerable, Molly turned her head while Mick ordered for the both of them. When they were alone again, Mick tugged on her hand. She resisted, needing a moment to compose herself. The returning memories took her by surprise, left her open. She should be grateful to fill the gaps from that day, but when they came so quickly, she wasn't sure how to deal with them.

She heard shuffling from across the table. Mick stood, crossed her line of sight and then slid onto the wide bench seat of the booth beside her. His body rested against her side, his left leg against her right, his left arm over her shoulders. How could she resist the coaxing hand cupping her chin? She turned, helpless against him and stared up into his encouraging eyes.

"You were safe Molly."

"I'm sorry, I didn't want to talk about it. But being around you keeps bringing back the memories."

"It's okay," he smiled as he stroked the side of her face. "It might help you heal."

If he only knew how much healing she still had to do, he'd probably run in the opposite direction. Just like Ben. Just like Brian. She didn't know if she could take that again.

Deep down, she knew she should shrug off his arm and usher him back to his side of the table, lighten the mood and keep things casual. Having him so close reminded her of the things she'd been missing out on, the affection she'd probably never feel again.

"What is it?"

How, with just three words, could he break down the barriers and sweet-talk her scarred soul back out into the open? It was too easy for him. She had to be careful. "I'm okay, but thanks for your concern."

~

Mick felt her words hit deep. She didn't want his help, didn't feel as if he had any more to offer her. But he couldn't ignore the fear in her eyes. Just the mention of the word heal, and she wanted to run. Why?

Tugging her closer, he wasn't about to let her push him away. He wasn't going to be the guy who walked away when things got tough. "Talk to me Molly, please. Tell me what's going on in that pretty little head of yours."

She chuckled softly. "You don't want to know."

Mick didn't budge. "Yes, I do."

Molly stilled in his arms as he peered down into her eyes. Why wouldn't she let him in? "Mick, this dinner is about saying thank you. I don't expect anything else from you."

"Listen to me," he shifted, taking her face in both his big hands and leaning in close. "I was there, remember? I saw everything, I know what you went through. I accept your thanks Molly, but if there's anything more you need, just ask."

She blinked, her eyelashes glistening with unspent tears. "Was it just another day on the job for you?"

He didn't hesitate. "No. I learnt a few things about living that day, about the meaning of life. You taught me that."

"Me?"

He huffed at her scepticism. "Yes, you. Watching you fight to stay alive, seeing you grit your teeth at the pain and not give in, yeah, you taught me a whole lot that day. Don't underestimate yourself," he winked. "You're the strongest woman I've ever met."

Being so close to her, feeling her pounding pulse under his thumbs, Mick knew he was pushing the boundary here. Jane had told him in no uncertain terms what she'd do if he upset Molly. Hell, even Molly was trying to tell him to keep it cool. But Mick, stubborn as ever, thought he knew better.

"You're also one of the most beautiful women I've ever seen."

She gulped, the movement of her throat drawing his gaze. The creamy smooth skin quivered but he resisted the urge to kiss it. That could wait. Right now, he needed her to stop rejecting her femininity, her distinctly womanly appeal.

"Mick," she breathed, her hot breath teasing his lips.

"I'm not lying, not trying to boost your ego with false truths," he whispered, his lips so close to hers he could taste her breath. "I do think you're beautiful. And on our second date, I'll show you what I mean."

Her eyes stretched wide. "Our second date?"

He nodded, slowly backing away, unable to trust himself so close to those plump, ripe lips. Especially when she licked them and left them sparkling. "Uh-huh."

She smiled. "We haven't even finished our first date Mick. Aren't you getting a little ahead of yourself?"



Her challenge moved him to action. He brought his lips down to hers and caressed her mouth gently. She responded, lightly licking his bottom lip before nipping his top lip. He chuckled softly, the sound never leaving his throat.

“See? Second date, Molly.”

She nodded, her eyes glazed. As they drifted shut, he became acutely aware of her body against his, every curve demanding his attention. Her thigh shifted against his, sending sparks through his vision and leaving him hard.

It was when her hand flattened against his chest that Mick lost the ability to breathe. The air, stuck in his chest, burned his lungs and screamed for release. But he didn't dare move, fearing she'd remove her touch and leave him dying for more. “Molly, open your eyes.”

She did, her clear gaze meeting his head on. “Yes, Mick?”

“Our food's here.”

He lightly stroked his thumb across her cheek before letting her go. When he made to get up, her hand on his thigh grounded him. “Stay,” was all she said, as she turned toward her plate and picked up her fork.

For the rest of the meal, he relished every point of contact between their bodies. He'd shift his thigh so he could feel her against him, and was sure she did the same with her hip. They ate in silence, for which he was glad, because he didn't know what other outrageous predictions he'd make if given half a chance.

Second date. What was he thinking? He hadn't even asked her, just demanded it because he couldn't get enough of her silky smooth skin or her deeply penetrating gaze. He realised he shouldn't have kissed her, shouldn't have taken control of the date like that. This was her night, her opportunity to extend her gratitude.

Why couldn't he resist the magnetism he felt between them? And why the hell was it so strong?

In the short break between their plates being removed and dessert being served, he turned to her. “I think I should apologise.”

“What for?”

He noticed her squirm. “I can get a little bossy sometimes. I meant to ask you out on a second date, not push you into it.”

She smiled, and relaxed. “I have seven brothers Mick, no one pushes me around.”

Feeling his eyes pull wide, Mick let his mouth drop open. Seven brothers? How had that little piece of information dodged his attention? His head spun at the thought. That meant he had seven men to impress. One hell of a task, he'd say.

"Are you asking me now?"

He leapt at the hopeful sound of her voice, taking her hand in his and squeezing it firmly. "I want to see you again, Molly. Let's have lunch tomorrow?"

"You don't have to work?"

He nodded. "Swing by the station about noon. The boys would love to meet you again, see how you're doing. What do you say?"

Her hand squeezed his in return. "I'd love to."

~

She watched the waiter set their desserts on the table and leave. The guy didn't even look at them once, and when he was gone, she turned her attention back to Mick, finding his eyes taking in every inch of her face.

She shuddered at the attention he paid her and allowed herself to wonder what it would be like to feel his hands on her naked skin. If it was even close to the wondrous sensation of being kissed by him...her belly clenched and she shook the feeling away. Turning herself on would leave her more exposed than she already was.

He grinned. "What were you thinking?"

"Nothing," she lied. "Nothing important."

"I bet it wasn't unimportant, that it was definitely something. The colour in your cheeks says so."

"Oh," she felt her cheeks grow hotter. Mick only chuckled and leaned down to her ear.

"What colour do you go when you're turned on?"

Gulping for air, Molly gripped his bicep but he didn't move away. Rather, his lips touched her ear, lightly at first and then more demanding as he worked his way down to the spot just behind her ear lobe.

Molly squirmed against him, torn between wanting him to touch her more and ordering him to stop. They were in public.

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One Foot Forward

She stilled when his hand curved around her left hip and pulled her hard against him. Involuntarily, her right leg crossed into his lap and landed against his hardness. If this was a show, he was a damn good actor.

“Molly,” he murmured, his lips fixing to her neck while his tongue gently swirled. He lifted her left thigh into his lap and held her to him. “You taste so good.”

His rich, deep voice and sensual touch felt magical, like a hand reaching into the dark to lead her back into the light. Her eyes moistened at the divinity of the moment and she squeezed them tight to trap the tears.

Too late, she realised, when one rolled down her cheek and dripped onto Mick’s temple. His head shot up and a look of fear crossed his face.

They stared at each other for silent seconds. Her mouth wouldn’t cooperate, wouldn’t work to tell him she was okay and he hadn’t done anything wrong. When she parted her lips, no sound came out.

“What’s wrong?”

“Nothing,” she shook her head gently.

“Why the tears?”

Molly smiled. “It’s hard to explain.”

“Try me.”

Taking a breath, she realised she was about to bare more of her soul than she ever thought possible with a man. She silently prayed she wasn’t making a mistake. “I didn’t think anyone would ever touch me that way again.”

His eyes registered the moment as his lips curved into a devastatingly handsome smile. “Whatever gave you that idea?” he whispered, drawing her toward him. “Is it because of your leg?”

Molly nodded, distrusting her mouth to respond appropriately. Mick chuffed softly as he squeezed her thigh. “It’s not the end of the world, you know? Plenty of amputees live happy, healthy sexual lives.”

Molly felt her eyes spring wide. Her mouth opened and closed like a fish. Much to her relief, no sound came out. Lord but she wasn’t sure how to respond to such a direct comment. Rather than answer him, she picked up her bowl of apple pie and melted ice cream and spooned some into his mouth.

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Full of food, he couldn't say anything else. She ate some of the dessert herself, her mind running through the possibilities of what he meant. The cold ice cream contrasted dramatically with the heat slicing through her body, providing only a little relief.

When he swallowed and looked like he was about to say something, she spooned in more dessert. He took the hint, eating silently as she fed him. But while she had his mouth occupied, his roaming hand found her left knee. Molly almost dropped the bowl.

As he stroked the pit behind her knee, the sensation travelled up her leg and nestled between her thighs. Did he know it would do that? Did he understand what he was doing to her, exactly? She suspected he did by the wicked grin on his lips.

It occurred to her to stop him, to remind him they were in public—not that anyone paid them any attention—but the sensation was addictive. Her hands trembled while heat gathered low, the spoon tinkled against the bowl. Mick took it away from her and set it down.

"We should go," he said, his voice thick and deep. "I'll get the check."

"No. My dinner, my shout."

He huffed. "Fine. You get the check, then."

She smiled and tried to lift her legs out of his lap. Mick held her still. "I'll meet you out by the car."

In an instant, he was gone and she was struck with a sickening feeling that he wouldn't be out there at all. She walked to the counter on shaky legs and wondered why he took off so fast. If not to make an escape, then why?

But when she exited the inn and crossed her arms over her chest against the chilly night air, she found him right where he said he'd be. Confused, she joined him. "What was that about?"

"What?"

She faced him front on and stood to her full height. "You ran out of there so fast I—"

He touched a finger to her lips, stopping her. Confusion clouded his eyes. "You thought I was making a run for it, didn't you?"

Grimacing, Molly nodded forlornly, wishing she didn't have to admit to the stupid over-reaction. "Sorry."

"Some jerk has obviously done that to you already," he said, sounding a little angry. "I'm not him, Molly."

“So why did you take off like that?”

The anger disappeared, replaced by the biggest grin as he leaned his face close to her. “I needed air,” he growled. “I needed some kind of cold relief, if you get my drift.”

Molly felt her cheeks burn blazing hot. “Oh.”

“I won’t deny it, I’m attracted to you. Insanely fighting off the urge to kiss you every time you’re close to me, Molly. If that’s too much for you, just say the word.”

He wasn’t kidding, she thought in a state of awe. Tickled pink, she realised he really thought she was sexy. She’d missed the attention of a man, the feeling of being consumed by passion, devoured by lust. And since his kiss, she wanted more of it. She didn’t want to ever live without it again.

Maybe she could put Mick’s attraction to good use, to give her a chance to get back on the horse, so to speak. Could she be so daring? She’d never indulged in a purely sexual affair in her life, believing it came packaged with emotional attachment in the form of a relationship. Was it even possible to separate the two? Judging by Mick’s behaviour, maybe it was.

“No,” she smiled wickedly, which only drew him closer again. “It’s not too much.”

When his lips touched hers, all her thoughts disappeared. All she cared about were those heavenly lips, tasting of apple pie and ice cream.

Molly paid no attention to anything else as she explored his mouth, her tongue coupling with his in a sensual feast for her senses. Touch, taste and smell, she was suffering sensory overload and boy, did it feel good.

But when his roughened palm touched the skin just below her breast, she sucked in some much needed air. Two inches higher and he’d be in direct contact with her breast and she’d be just seconds from losing it.

“There’s no need to rush, Mick.” He nodded while she lifted his palm to inspect the reasons for the roughness. “You need some moisturiser.”

He guffawed, full and loud. “I’m sure the boys at the station would get a kick out of that.” He held up the palm and turned it over. “Did I hurt you?”

“No.”

He grinned. “Does it feel good?”

The devilish twinkle in his eye made her nipples pull tight, which in turn drew his gaze. Mick licked his lips and swallowed. "Behave, Mick," she demanded, barely in control of her body's response to him.

"Okay," he eased away from her. "But before I go," he cradled her face. "Let me leave you with this one last thought..."

His lips crashed against hers, hungry, demanding, needing, taking. Until now, he'd been gentle and sweet, but she didn't mind the change one bit. He stole the breath from her mouth, plundering her with his tongue. When he pulled away, he left her breathless and dazed.

He opened her door for her and waited until she was safely buckled in before grinning madly. Rolling down the window, she wished him goodnight, wondering how in heck she was supposed to sleep now.

### **Chapter 3**

Showering one legged took some getting used to. For a long time, a small plastic seat was the main feature of her en-suite. Pride propelled her toward self-sufficiency and within six months, the chair was replaced by chrome handrails and a slip-proof mat in the base.

After a long night of tossing and turning, her dreams fuelled by hot, lustful thoughts of Mick, she'd needed a long cold shower. Still, as Molly hopped around her room to gather freshly laundered clothes, she realised it hadn't been enough. Her face continued to burn bright while her heart boomed in the quiet of her home.

Flopping back on her bed, she stared up at the ceiling and tried to calm her body. It really was a pointless exercise, every time she closed her eyes he was there. And if she kept them closed just that little bit longer, his lips would find hers and shove her body into overdrive again.

Mick was too good to be true. A handsome, hunky fireman who was interested in her. Now there was something she thought would never happen. Not after her last attempts at finding a man. Despite his direct approach, Molly couldn't shut down the cynical little voice snapping away in the back of her head.

He pities you, it yapped, he wants you to feel better. Molly wanted to wring the snide little voice's neck and shut it up. He didn't seem the kind of man to take pity on a woman in *that* way. And since when did pity come with a long, thick hard-on?

She waited for a sassy comeback, but nothing sounded. Harrumphing triumphantly, she sat up. There, that shut it up.

Deciding to get dressed before the voice had time enough to drag her down again, Molly shook out a pair of jeans down at her feet and stuck her right foot in the leg hole. With the garment at her knee, she carefully slotted in her tender stump, pointedly ignoring the ugly scars. She'd become quite practised at not seeing them.

Standing up, she did up the zipper and wiggled about. Unhappy with the black denim jeans, she hurriedly changed into navy blue denims. Surveying them in the full length mirror, Molly shook her head and peeled them off. By the time she'd pulled on the third pair of jeans, stone washed this time, she realised with a start how nervous she was about this visit.

She was even auditioning clothes.

Sinking to the edge of the bed, she tried to detangle the jumbled mess of her hair, all the while wondering if she was more nervous about seeing Mick or the other fire fighters who'd worked to save her life that morning.

Tugging on the knotted curls, she suspected that if she was already nervous about seeing Mick, then by the time she reached the firehouse, she'd be a quivering wreck. It had to be about the other firemen, the ones who'd had to stand by while paramedics amputated her leg.

Thinking about it made her shudder. She couldn't imagine what it was like for them. It never occurred to her to ask Nate, though why she didn't know. He was there that morning, had been the one to make the dreaded call to her mum. He'd had to hold Jane back from the scene, no doubt cursing the fact they all attended the same gym. His presence in the hospital left Molly feeling extra special. Nate wasn't exactly the most sensitive of guys, so his encouragement meant a lot to her.

Staring in the mirror at her half-dressed self, she questioned the validity of this charade. She'd bought the man who'd been in that car with her two years on. *Two years*. Why hadn't she visited the stationhouse earlier? Why had she waited so long to thank any of them?

Fear. Being at her most vulnerable and critical point, hanging precariously between life and death, didn't make her feel comfortable. She hated to think that any of the fire fighters, police and paramedics there saw her as weak. A big chunk of her life had been all about remaining strong, the rock of Gibraltar, especially after her father's illness. Breaking down had never been an option. She remembered that now.

Reaching to her nightstand, Molly picked up the hard cup that housed her stump. Made from the latest plastics, the small device had become the bane of her existence. For starters, it itched like crazy. And then, after a few hours of being on her leg, it left her stump red raw and sore as hell. But it was catch 22. Without it, she couldn't wear her leg.

Pulling on her prosthetic leg and securing it into place, Molly tugged the pant leg down over the bulge. Mick knew about her leg, hell, he'd seen it get sawn off. She wondered how he'd felt at the time. Last night, he made a song and dance about it not bothering him, that it was nothing to be ashamed about. She snorted at his naiveté. He wasn't the one hopping around on one leg day in day out.

Molly pulled on a shirt before making her way out to the clean living area. She took a deep breath of the lavender scented home and smiled. Clean home, clean mind, no room for negative energy. She gave a nod, grabbed her purse and keys and headed out.

Warm spring air greeted her, lifting her spirits as she climbed into her car and started the engine. The new car purred like a kitten, much better than her old smashed up heap. Not that she'd planned on destroying it in a crash. But it was old, didn't have power steering and the clutch tended to stick between first and second. This one suited her new lifestyle fine, with its automatic transmission and absence of a bothersome clutch.

The fire station wasn't very far from her house. It was on her way to the gym, which was why she'd been on the road at five in the morning. At that hour, traffic was light, leaving her mostly alone. Trucks had been a rarity, until the authorities closed one of the main roads accessing the highway for repairs.

The problem at five in the morning was that most of those truckies drove big rigs, hauling containers from the docks to the south to the industrial estate in the north. Typically, Molly had gotten caught in the middle.

As she pointed the car north, she deliberately shut down her thoughts about trucks and wondered if she shouldn't visit the gym while she was out.

She hadn't been back since the crash, too embarrassed to turn up at a fitness gym in a wheelchair, half a leg short of the perfect pair. The managers and patrons would have welcomed her, but the hospital rehab centre was all she'd needed. Of course, now that she was on her own two feet again, so to speak, she could probably think about getting back to the fitness routine.

But the thought of walking on a treadmill with her bulky fake leg made her cringe. And ride a bike? Who was she kidding? Her sporting days were over, no matter how much she desired to get back into the action. She sighed dreamily; what she wouldn't give to go running around the lake again.

She hadn't been to see her former coach either, a fact she should be ashamed of. Norm Grant had coached her since her early teens, and he'd stood by her every step of the way to qualifying for the Games. How had she repaid him? With silence.



*Rose Middleton*  
One Foot Forward

A tooting horn yanked her out of the past and reminded her of the green light. She accelerated and turned onto the main arterial, heading east. The city skyline glinted in the distance, bringing a smile to Molly's lips. It looked clear and bright today, not a hint of fog or smog at all.

Five minutes down the road, she turned left into the small parking lot of the fire station. Her eyes pulled wide when she spotted Mick sitting on the bricked mailbox, his legs swinging in the air. His eyes zeroed in on her the moment he saw her.

He was dressed in those yellow pants again, though this time he had on a tight fitting blue t-shirt. The stretched fabric outlined the fantastic chest she'd seen with her very own eyes. Her breath caught in her throat. He was waiting for her? Surely not. Maybe he was expecting a delivery or something. He jogged over to her car and opened her door. No, not so much expecting a delivery as expecting a visitor. Molly.

"Hi, Molly," he grinned and helped her out, taking her hand gently. She watched in amazement as her hand disappeared in his. "I'm glad you came."

A little shell shocked, she stumbled when she closed the door. Good thing Mick was there to steady her. Caught in his arms, she laughed nervously and tried not to let his touch get to her. But after last night, she failed miserably. "Sorry."

He laughed softly at her ear, the air from his breath tickling the fine hairs on her skin. From out of nowhere, he produced a tiny, yellow daisy. "My pleasure," he hummed, carefully tucking the flower behind her ear. "And don't you be sorry. Why don't you come in? The guys are anxious to meet you."

~

Mick watched as she locked the sedan. He thought she'd never get here. Freshly showered, smelling of soap and shampoo, she felt right in his arms. He didn't miss her nervous laughter, or the look of uncertainty in her eyes. Her expression told him she felt uncomfortable, but he knew the crew would put an end to that.

As he led her around the back of the stationhouse, the smell of sizzling sausages and steaks made his belly grumble. It hadn't been his idea to put on the grub for her visit. He would've been just as happy preparing some sandwiches for her. But seeing her smile made him glad he'd listened to the boss.

In the daylight, with a restless night's sleep under his belt, she looked even better. Yesterday, he'd hoped the atmosphere of the auction and the weird feeling of being bought and sold had made his awareness of her sharper than it should've been. He wondered if he hadn't over-reacted to her presence.

Last night, however, proved his initial response to Molly was perfectly normal. And now, seeing her delighted expression, those clear brown-green eyes and her heart-shaped

face framed by wild brown ringlets, Mick understood his reaction to Molly had nothing to do with the auction. He should've known that already. No matter the circumstances of their meeting, Molly got him right in the heart.

"Wow."

Her voice caught his attention, and he realised he still held her hand. It was time to finally let her go. Leaning down to her ear, he whispered triumphantly, "Told you they'd be happy to see you."

Nate was the first to greet her, wrapping her up in a big bear hug. Mick watched as he squeezed her tight and laughed merrily, but then, Nate was always happy to see his sister's best friend.

It suddenly occurred to Mick he should never have lost touch with Molly. Purely by association, they were within reach. Maybe he should ask Nate why he hadn't seen or spoken to Molly over the last two years, he thought, and then promptly discarded the idea. It wasn't like Nate had been trying to keep them apart.

Glenn Harding hugged her warmly next, his eyes glistening as he nodded toward Mick. When Mick told his chief who'd bought him at auction, Glenn insisted on the barbecue. The man had a soft spot for Molly that defied reason. After all, he had so little contact with her during the crash, but it wasn't hard to see why he cared.

When Glenn told her he was glad to see her back on her feet, a hushed silence fell over the crowd. The flippant remark hung in the air. Mick held his breath and waited, his eyes never leaving her face. Everybody waited with baited breath for her reply.

To her credit, Molly cracked a smile and chuckled, lifting her left leg and shaking it for them. Relieved laughter filled the small courtyard. Out of the blue, Mick wondered if she was devastated that her running career was over.

In the mangled car, as the paramedics worked on keeping her alive, he'd asked her what she did for a living. Hearing she was an athlete about to jet off to the Commonwealth Games was both inspiring and crushing. The laws of medicine ruled out any assault on world titles or gold medals.

She had seemed oblivious to that during the three hours they were together, for which he was grateful. Keeping her up beat and positive about the future was his job, even though her teeth chattered to keep out the cold and her lips were tinged blue.

"She's remarkable," Glenn noted, handing Mick a chilled can of soda. "It's hard to think it was her in that car."

*Rose Middleton*  
One Foot Forward

That was pretty much how they all felt about Molly. Three hours of pain, freezing on an unusually icy winter morning and she never complained. It was one of the things he admired most about her.

“She’s a fighter,” Mick said softly, realising he spoke about her as if he’d known her for years. Aside from the time they’d spent together during the crash, he hardly knew Molly at all.

After filling a plate with bread, steak and salad, he retreated to the small garden. Under the shade of a sprawling gum tree, he watched her closely. There was no sign of the prosthesis. She didn’t limp, didn’t stumble, didn’t favour the leg at all.

She laughed at jokes made by the other fire fighters, graciously accepted their well wishes and mingled as if she’d known them forever. Her strength amazed him, as did the way those jeans hugged her hips.

She wasn’t a curvy woman, a trait he suspected was partly genetic and partly due to her athletics. Anyone who ran forty-two kilometre marathons was destined to carry minimal body fat. Despite that, though, she did have a sweet shape. Her narrow waist splayed out into nice hips only marginally wider than her lean shoulders. Hips he’d held in his own hands last night; hips that left a lasting impression.

Mick swallowed, his heart beating a little faster at the memory of their dinner date. Lord but he’d been pushy. Her comfort zone was small and narrow, most likely much smaller than before the crash. He’d wanted to drag her out of it and remind her how much fun life could be.

It didn’t suit her to play the meek, mild-mannered mouse. Molly deserved more than that, she deserved to be adored and appreciated for the magnificent person she was. Beginning with flowers, he was determined on proving to her that she was still one sexy lady.

Without warning, an image of her wearing a strapless black dress appeared. The vision was gorgeous and made his mouth water. Of course, it left him high and dry the second her eyes connected with his. He hoped like hell she couldn’t read his mind.

With a sausage wrapped in bread in one hand, a can of soda in the other, she ambled over toward him. The smile on her face was truly relaxed, her eyes were warm and the tension was gone from her shoulders. His heart fluttered, though he kept a tight lid on his external expression as he spied his fire fighter buddies watching him. They already knew about the date, and clearly the fact he was seeing Molly a second time convinced them he was up to no good.

“Hey,” she smiled, sitting on the wooden seat beside him, away from the glare of everyone else. He was glad he could shield her, give them some privacy.

"Hey yourself. Glad you came?" Nodding, she took a bite of the sausage. "Good. You seemed nervous earlier."

Molly swallowed, the clear smooth skin of her neck drawing his gaze. "Yeah."

"Why do you think that was?" He wanted to take the words back as soon as he heard them, but it was too late.

She chuckled nervously. "They've all seen me at my worst."

Mick blinked in surprise. "Worst?"

"Yeah, during the accident." She took another bite of her meal, looking cool and calm. He suspected she was avoiding the issue, that her relaxed façade was carefully constructed but easily destroyed. He thought so because there was the tiniest hint of fear in her eyes.

"How can you know that if you don't remember much of it, Molly? Do you have any idea how brave you were?"

"Brave? Me? I cried, remember?" she shook her head, her tight brown ringlets whipping around. Her mocking expression floored him. "You must have me confused with some other accident victim."

She spoke with such cynicism he wanted to scream. Shifting, he faced her and leaned into her space, made her stop eating and look at him. God, he was so close he could kiss her. "I've never seen anyone handle such a ghastly accident so well. Did you know that half these guys puked their guts out when it was over?"

"Really?" she asked softly.

Mick nodded vigorously. "These guys have seen some really awful stuff, but when they saw you..." he shook his head. "I think they cried more than you did."

The air between them crackled as he took slow, deep breaths. Her scent coursed through his veins, leaving him more than a little giddy. He noticed the green flecks in her brown eyes, the smattering of light freckles over her nose and suddenly longed to touch her face. He held back, content on studying the flicker of emotions in her eyes.

"Mick, these guys are professionals. Are you trying to make me feel better?"

She sounded amazed. Those slender shoulders had bunched up again, but he wasn't going to back off just because she was a little uneasy with the truth. He shook his head, his forehead almost touching hers.

"No. I'm telling you how it was. You didn't complain once. I didn't even have to tell you everything would be alright. You were strong enough to know that."

She snorted derisively. "Obviously I knew nothing, then."

When she turned away, he hooked a finger under her chin and brought her back. "What do you mean?"

Mick didn't miss the way she stiffened, or the clouds that gathered in her beautiful eyes. She thought she'd confessed too much. But the expression didn't last long, wiped off her face as she righted herself. He wondered how often she'd had to shut her emotions down like that. How many times did she have to put on a brave face for everyone to see?

If they were alone, if there was no one else around, he'd pursue the issue. But he felt eyes on his back, curious stares trying to get a peek over his shoulder and decided now was not the time.

"Don't answer that," he offered softly. The tension in her shoulders eased. Her eyes thanked him. "I'm too nosy sometimes. I just think you should give yourself more credit. Like I told you last night, you're a strong woman, Molly. I admire that."

Her cheeks turned crimson and he smiled. He'd have to have a word to Jane about this, make sure Nate's sister understood her role in helping Molly's emotional recovery. "Thank you." Her voice was so soft he almost missed it, but he was rewarded with beautifully warm eyes and the hottest kiss to his cheek he'd ever felt.

He was about to say more when the station's siren sounded, calling him to duty. Glancing over his shoulder, he saw organised chaos and sighed. He wanted to stay. Molly's hand under his chin brought him back to her but he wasn't prepared for the look of panic she was trying to hide.

"What is it?"

She shook her head, her eyes moistening. Rapidly she blinked but she didn't manage to clear them. Where did the panic come from? Why now?

He wished he could shut the siren off so they could talk. The siren? Was that it? He stared at her hard and when someone pulled on the horn of the fire engine, Molly jumped. It was the siren, the sounds she associated with the crash. He noticed the flare of her nostrils, her thundering pulse in the base of her neck and saw the fear. She was staring right through him.

Mick touched a knuckle to her cheek. She blinked and looked at him again. Torn between his duty and the woman he wanted to know better, he had precious seconds

with her. The internal struggle in her eyes was painfully honest, she didn't try to hide it from him. Then she smiled and his mind turned to mush. He couldn't think.

She really was the most beautiful woman he'd ever met. Those long eyelashes, that small button nose; he suspected those unique brown-green eyes were deadly in the bedroom.

"I have to go," he growled, his voice thick with want. The station bells had finally stopped ringing. He hoped she noticed how attracted he was to her. "Listen, I want you to come to my house for dinner, tomorrow night. Let me cook for you."

She frowned. "Really?"

Mick shook his head. "You amaze me sometimes. Yes, I really want you to have dinner with me. But Molly, keep the whole night free for me. I want you all to myself for as long as possible."

The flare in her eyes caught his attention. Should he kiss her? He wanted to, but then he wondered if now was the right time.

Nate's voice called him away. Regrettably, he turned away from Molly. The recognition in his friend's eyes gave him the unenviable feeling he'd score a grilling. Nate thought of Molly like a second sister and, since the accident, he was more protective of her than he was of Jane. That didn't bode well for Mick at all.

"I'll see you at seven," she agreed, her hand slipping away and severing their physical connection.

"Six," he demanded.

Molly smiled and winked. "I'll get there as soon as I can, okay?"

Tearing himself away from her hurt more than it should have, leaving him confused. He suddenly wondered what he was feeling for Molly. Was it just because she needed his help? Was he so drawn to her because they'd been through a trying ordeal?

This was the sort of thing he'd been warned against in training. Never a good idea to get emotionally attached, said the fifty-seven year old trainer who seemed to exemplify cold and detached objectivity. At the time, Mick wondered if the guy was like that because of his training, and he couldn't help but speculate whether the guy could hold down a relationship for very long.

Jerking on his protective jacket, Mick halted. He didn't want to be that guy. He didn't want to grow old never knowing what it was like to feel entangled in messy, fulfilling relationships with other human beings. How could a person live that way?

“Mick!”

His head snapped up at Nate’s impatient yap. “What?”

“Get your head on straight, will ya? We got a job to do.”

“I’m fine,” he yapped back.

As he climbed into the big red rig, Mick spotted Molly at her car. Glued to her, he didn’t even blush when she caught him staring at her. But he returned her tentative wave with a big grin and a wink. She certainly blushed.

“Cut it out,” Nate warned as the sound of the big engine roared under George’s foot.  
“Don’t do that.”

“Do what?” Mick enquired innocently, though when he turned to Nate, he saw his friend was serious. “Do what?” he asked more soberly.

“Lead her on.”

*Whoa.* What was Nate talking about? “Weren’t you the one who encouraged me to get her out of my system?”

“Yeah, with dinner. Not like this.”

*Like this?* “Like what, exactly?”

Nate huffed and turned to look out the window. Having none of it, Mick forced him around to meet his eyes. “Like what, exactly?” He repeated, punctuating the words with two tiny pauses. There was no way Nate was not finishing this conversation.

“Mick, she’s vulnerable, don’t toy with her. If you hurt her, I’ll...”

Mick frowned, still wanting greater detail. “Nate,” he warned. “Jane’s already given me that speech. And I’m sure her brothers would want a piece of me if that happened too. What are *you* trying to tell me?”

“Man to man?”

Mick nodded.

As the rig took a sharp right, the two of them rode out the turn before resuming their semi-stand-off. Finally, Nate gave a nod of surrender. “Jane told me last night, Molly’s been dumped by every guy she’s met since the accident. The minute they find out about her leg, they take off at a run. Not real good for the ego, I’d say.”

Mick's chest heaved as he tried to breathe. Suddenly, her words made sense. Things hadn't been alright since the crash, at least not with her love life. It made him mad as hell to think guys could be so cruel to such a beautiful angel.

"And let's face it, Mick, you're not the guy who sticks around. I understand why you're afraid to get into a long term relationship, but don't experiment on Molly."

Mick reared back. "What?"

"I get it," Nate continued. "The way your father died, leaving your mum alone. You've been left behind to pick up the pieces and it sucks. But if you need a woman, find a different one. Don't subject Molly to your games."

Games? He didn't play games with women. Okay, so he tended towards short term flings. The kind that weren't messy and ended quite succinctly, but he didn't toy with women.

"So what, you think I'm using Molly?"

"No," Nate grinned. "I think you're trying to save her again, be the big hero."

Mick sighed, frustrated by Nate's persistent attitude. It didn't help the guy was partly right about him wanting to rescue Molly. But who wouldn't want to? She was too exquisite and valuable to let her think of herself as worthless. The fact she didn't think she was sexy, that she had reigned in her desires for lasting happiness with a man, left him angry as hell.

A little voice questioned if he'd feel the same had he not seen her through the ordeal. How would he react if a woman he'd met told him her leg had been amputated, leaving her with garish scars?

Barely a second went by before he knew the answer to such a question. You didn't live the life of a fire fighter with a narrow mind and habit of jumping to quick judgements. He knew he was kept grounded by his work, his mind firmly set in the reality of life.

Mick didn't have to look at her leg to know what he'd find, but it didn't turn him away either. So she had half a leg, where was the problem with that? Without the experience and the subsequent consequences, Molly wouldn't be the woman she was, a woman he wanted to know better.

Nate leaned closer. "She hasn't *been* with a guy since." He whispered suggestively, wearing an expression telling Mick he hated every ugly word he spoke. "She's down on herself, convinced she's some ghoulish monster no one will ever find attractive again."

Those were harsh words. Were they Molly's, Jane's or Nate's? "Who said that?"



Nate frowned, as if it was clear as day. "Molly did. It's not exactly something I'd make up, now is it?"

No, Nate could be harsh and judgemental at times, but he'd never spoken so hurtful of anyone. As Mick stared at his best mate, he remembered back to dinner last night. Her confession that she'd thought no one would ever touch her again blasted back into his mind and left him breathless. Why had he reacted with such a glib attitude last night?

He'd told her plenty of amputees lived fulfilling sexual lives. Was he a moronic idiot? He couldn't believe he'd been so insensitive. Well, he'd have to fix it, and he intended to clear the air so there were absolutely no misgivings between them. When he was done, Molly would understand exactly how attractive she was.

Nate slapped his shoulder. "Oh, and by the way. One of her brothers is a black belt Karate sensei. Don't piss him off, Nobleman." Nate grimaced at the accident outside, calling Mick by his call sign. "Now come on, we got work to do."

## **Chapter 4**

After finishing up her shift in the emergency ward, Molly collected her things and took the elevator up to the surgeons' lounge. It had been a long, tiring day. Two road accident victims had been admitted, one with life threatening injuries. Acting as a road trauma advocate, Molly stayed by his side to comfort the confused man and then attend to his family once the doctors finished explaining his injuries.

She understood the confusion and fear all too well and knew she provided a valuable hand to hold. Too often road accident victims had to wait in anguish by themselves, and though the job tested her emotional strength, she wouldn't want to be anywhere else. Being based in the hospital allowed her to gather qualitative data used to develop the proposals she put to the Traffic Accident Commission.

For the first time, her training as a nurse had paid off.

The strain on her was visible, she thought, and she favoured her leg. Limping into the comfortable lounge, she spied the man who'd operated on her. Bent over the table, he held a coffee in one hand and seemed completely absorbed in the files spread out before him. Molly tapped lightly on the door until he looked up and then continued into the room.

"Hey, big brother."

"Molly!" Marcus grinned and greeted her with a long, squeezy hug. "Wow, look at you." He frowned. "Why are you standing on your right leg? What's wrong?"

“Just tired,” she offered with a wave of her hand. “Nothing to worry about. But I thought I’d drop in and ask a question of you.”

“Sure, fire away.”

Taking a deep breath for courage, Molly wondered if she was about to receive yet another rejection. The very notion she wanted to ask about running again made her heart flutter. It was probable she hadn’t allowed enough time to pass, that her wounds were still too young to consider the high impact activity, but she had to ask. “What are the chances of me running competitively again?”

He smiled knowingly and motioned for her to join him over on the couch. “I wondered how long it would take.” He sat opposite her and looked at her leg. “I’m surprised you waited this long.”

“Pardon?”

“Honestly,” he raised his head. “I thought you’d want to get straight back into it. I worried you’d want to go back before it was time.”

“Oh, I see. So it’s possible then?”

Chuckling, he sought permission to examine her leg. With it, he rolled up the leg of her trousers and removed the prosthesis. “There is an amazing array of new prosthetic limbs made from all sorts of light weight composites available now. Athletes use them. I’m sure we could sort something out for you.” He glanced up at her, worry touching his features. “It’s a little stressed.”

Molly nodded. “I’ve been on my feet all day.”

Marcus pulled a face. “Is that all?”

“Really. I’ve been down in the emergency department looking after patients. There really aren’t many places to sit down there, you know.”

“Maybe,” he nodded, letting her leg down easy. When her oldest brother looked at her, Molly always felt love wash over her. At forty-eight, he was almost twice her age. Despite the big gap, they were still close. “How are you really going? I haven’t seen you in a while.”

Molly patted his hand and nodded. “I’m doing okay. I’ve had a few more memories come to me about the crash. Just little things,” she added quickly, seeing his eyes light up. “Nothing major.”

Too many people wanted her to remember. Too much pressure was on her to recall all of the details. Witness statements clearly weren’t enough for her family, they needed

her version of events. And while she'd be more than happy to give it to them, Molly wasn't sure she wanted to relive the crash at all.

As it was, she had lasting reminders enough to fill a lifetime. Why couldn't they accept things the way they were?

Glancing at Marcus again, it was hard to find fault or stay mad with him. He'd saved her life. It was enough to have a skilled surgeon in the family, but he meant so much more. She wondered if he'd ever understand exactly what he represented to her.

"Thank you," she whispered, her throat suddenly tight with emotion. "For everything."

Marcus wrapped her up in another hug. "I'm just glad you're still with us, kiddo."

"No," she pushed against him until he released her. "I mean thank you for finding Dad a new heart. Thank you for fixing me up. Thank you for raising me."

Marcus blinked, his face frozen in a look of surprise. He'd been as good as a father to her, and as protective as any older brother could ever be. To be left with the responsibility of raising his baby sister at just twenty-three, and newly married at that, painted Marcus in the most holy of lights.

"You don't have to thank me."

"Yes. I do," Molly insisted. "You don't realise how much you mean to me, how much I admire you. Don't get me wrong, I still love Mum and Dad, and no one will replace them, but you," she shook her head, her throat closing up tight. Swallowing, she forced her voice to work. "You made me who I am."

"Don't," he sniffed, the rims of his eyes turning red. "Or you'll get me going. You just take care of yourself. Tell me, how's Jane?"

The change in subject helped ease the squeeze on her heart, and gave her a reason to lighten up again. "Jane is Jane. Need any more information?"

They laughed. As Molly's best friend, Jane had spent copious amounts of time in Marcus's home. He considered her a second sister. "I get it. Now," he settled and pointed to her leg again. "Look, the stump is in good condition. Do you want me to look into it for you?"

"Would you?"

Marcus smiled, his face showing years of experience and loads of understanding. "It'd be a pleasure Molly. I'll get back to you on it, okay?"

"Thank you," she smiled, securing her prosthetic back in place.

Saying farewell to her brother, Molly felt stronger on her leg as she made her way down to the underground car park. Climbing in behind the wheel of her car, she realised she was about to hit rush hour traffic. She sighed at the thought of the long journey home, flipped on the radio and listened to some music for a moment.

From her backpack, the loud trill of her phone disrupted the moment. Retrieving it, she checked the display though didn't recognise the number.

"It's me," he said, his voice soft and sounding relieved to catch her. It brought a smile to her lips. How did he do that? Whether he meant to or not, his presence slipped into her soul and made her feel warm all over.

"Hi, Mick."

A heart beat passed. "How long 'til you get here?"

"I'm in the city, it'll be almost an hour before I reach you."

"That's okay," he said. "Just drive carefully."

Molly frowned. He was telling her to drive safe? As if she didn't drive safely after almost being killed by a drunken driver. "Are you alright, Mick?"

She heard him breathe. "I miss you."

Molly almost dropped the phone. She didn't know what to say.

"Molly?"

"I'm here. You caught me by surprise, that's all."

He chuffed and she could've sworn she felt his breath tickle her ear. "Don't go home. Come straight to my place, okay? I'll see you in about an hour."

The line went dead, causing Molly to pull the phone away from her ear and stare at it. With a blank, numb mind, she started the car. Not knowing what to make of Mick's behaviour, Molly pulled out of the parking space and drove up the ramp into the fading sunshine.

Making her way through the bumper to bumper city traffic and out of the central business district, Molly tried to make sense of his call. She became suddenly flustered by the deep need she'd heard in his voice. Rolling down her window for some air, Molly fanned her flaming cheeks. Lord but he could turn her on with so little effort, it was almost embarrassing. He probably wasn't even trying, she mused. Did he even know what he did to her?

By the time she made it to the street outside Mick's house, she was burning up. Nearly an hour of erotically fuelled thoughts turned her into a quivering wreck, which was very, very unnerving. And very unlike her. She needed to get a hold of herself. Taking deep breaths, Molly reminded herself Mick was just trying to boost her confidence. It was all part of the game and she needn't get carried away with inexplicable dreams of forever.

Forever?

Oh boy, she prayed, this is so bad. How was she supposed to keep a straight face? How could she go in there pretending not to want him? Mick wasn't the forever kind of guy.

Grabbing her phone, she dialled his number. He answered after the first ring. "Molly?"

"What's going on, Mick?"

"We'll talk about it when you get here. Are you almost here?"

Stubborn and deflective. She'd give him a piece of her mind when he opened that door. She climbed out of the car, marched up the front path, and barely registered the lush green lawn to either side. The door swung inward. He'd been watching her the whole time, but the relief on his face derailed her interrogation.

Hauling her against him, he took a deep breath of her before growling. His lips found hers, hungrily nibbling her until she succumbed and kissed him back. Pushing her back against the wall, he kicked the door closed before pressing his body against hers. His hands found hers and lifted them above her head while he kissed her so deeply she moaned for more.

It was as if he couldn't get enough of her, like he was re-acquainting himself with her body. He couldn't have forgotten, it had been one day since they last saw each other. And yet, he traced her face with his cheek and then his lips, hovering over hers, breathing against her.

"I've missed you."

"I was only at work," she protested, but it was soon gobbled up by another eager kiss.

Above her, his hands slid down her arms until he cupped her face. Pulling back, he stared into her eyes and smiled. "How was your day?"

If he greeted her this way after a normal day at work, Molly wondered what he'd do after a couple days apart. "Fine."

"Really?"

Placing her hands over his, she gently stroked the backs of his hands and nodded. "Really. Just another day at the hospital. That's all. How was your day?"

"Awful," he groaned. "I didn't see you all day."

Feeling a little giddy at his intense attention, Molly tried not to laugh. If he could ease the ugliness of her day with a simple comment like that, she had it made.

She peered into his eyes and tried to make out if he was being serious. Was he still trying to boost her esteem, or did he really miss her as much as he said? Hard to tell with that steely gaze. But the warmth of his hands on her face whittled away her suspicions and she decided to enjoy the attention while she had it. Lord knew how easily it could be taken away.

"Mick," she gushed. "You really have a way with words."

He smiled and pressed a kiss to her forehead. "I mean it. Now, why don't you go and freshen up? Dinner's waiting."

~

When she disappeared into the bathroom, Mick dashed to the kitchen and put the finishing touches to their meal. He was no gourmet chef, and he tended to cook simple, easy dishes, but he was certain Molly would like it.

Lighting the candles he'd arranged in the centre of the dining table, Mick turned down the lights. When he was done with the open plan living-dining area, the place was awash with glowing candlelight. And with the aroma of dinner smelling so good, he felt like he could finally relax.

Checking his watch, he saw it had been three minutes. Impatience got the better of him and he peeked around the corner toward the bathroom

She chuckled when she saw him and as she drew closer, he pulled her against him, buried his face against her neck and inhaled. "I'm going to end up with a complex if you keep sniffing me," she laughed.

He ignored her protest and chuckled against her skin. "But you smell so wonderful. And you taste," he tested her lips and was immediately addicted. "Even better."

Mick hugged her tighter as she threaded her fingers through his hair. Kissing her was like eating ice cream on a hot day by the beach. Heaven. He didn't want to stop, and with the delicate probing of her tongue, he sensed she didn't want to, either.

"Are you hungry?"

"Mmm," she nodded. "Famished." She smiled. "You went to a lot of effort for me."

Mick let her go and steered her into the main living area. It probably was best he kept his hands off her. No telling what he'd do, given half a chance. But he'd been honest when he told her he'd missed her. Dreadfully, in fact. He'd been an ogre at work, grumbling at everyone and checking the clock every four minutes.

"See? You did go to a lot of trouble."

Chuckling, he leaned down to her ear and breathed against her. "No trouble at all. Make yourself at home."

~

A shudder worked its way through her at the sound of his voice so close, and she was about to swat him away when he turned and disappeared. How he could turn a simple meal into something so erotic both unnerved her and turned her on. Molly wasn't sure which was more inconvenient.

Stepping further into the open area, she took a deep breath of the delicious aromas emanating from the oven and gazed at the soft-glow of candlelight.

A candlelit dinner. For her.

Clucking her tongue softly, Molly moved closer to the dining table where a cluster of pretty pink daisies adorned her plate. The man sure knew how to romance a woman, she thought with a quiver of delight. She liked this side of Mick, and the way he showered her with gorgeous flowers left her feeling light headed.

"Everything okay?" he asked, his dominant presence right behind her. She hadn't heard him approach but she liked his hands rubbing her arms.

Molly leaned back against him and nodded. "You're spoiling me."

"You need some spoiling," he declared matter-of-factly. "You need me to pamper you. Besides, I like doing it. Wait, don't go."

His hands slid up to her shoulders and gently massaged her tired muscles. Instant relief enveloped her, flowing through her veins like some welcome relaxant and she sagged against him. Those big hands worked magic on her shoulders and neck before diving into her hair to treat her scalp to a wondrous luxury.

A moan worked its way through her when his fingers gently touched her face. Tracing the contours of her forehead, cheeks and chin, he somehow eased the tension in every part of her face. "Good?"

“Divine.”

With great tenderness, he slowly caressed the skin over her throat. “Anytime,” he added, kissing her ear. “My pleasure. Come, have a seat.”

She settled in the chair he offered and then watched him dish up two steaming plates of fillet steaks and roast vegies. Shaking her head at his offer of wine, she waited for him to sit opposite her before starting.

By her routine, it was late to be eating dinner. Normally she picked up something at the hospital, but knowing he was cooking, she’d held off. Glad she waited, she savoured the juicy, melt-in-your-mouth steak and mopped up the gravy with her perfect roasted potato. Was there anything Mick couldn’t do?

“Tell me about your family, Molly.”

Molly looked up from her empty plate. “There’s not much to tell. My mum was a teacher who now spends her time caring for my dad. He was diagnosed with degenerative heart failure just after I was born. When I turned five, he had a massive attack and needed a transplant. So they just look after each other nowadays.”

Mick smiled. “How old are they?”

She chuckled. “Old. My mum’s seventy this year, and Dad’s seventy-two.”

Mick’s eyes were so wide, she thought his eyeballs would drop out of his head. “Wow.”

“Yeah,” she nodded, not surprised by his startled reaction. Everyone reacted that way. “Mum was forty-four when she got the delightful news she was pregnant again. It’d been a while since her last child and they thought they couldn’t conceive.”

His silence made her smile. “It’s okay,” she nodded. “You can say whatever you like.”

“Are you close to them?”

“Kind of,” she squirmed a little, feeling like she was under a microscope. “See, because my dad was so sick, they couldn’t really take care of me. My oldest brother, Marcus, offered to raise me. I lived with him and his wife, Rose, until I turned eighteen. While Mum and Dad are my real parents, Marcus and Rose are like my adoptive parents. I still go to them for advice.”

Mick’s hand found hers and he gently stroked her palm. “He sounds like a great brother.”

“He is. He’s also a surgeon. You know, the one who saved my life.”



Mick almost choked. The story got more complicated with each line. "He did?"

"Yeah. Marcus actually didn't know it was me for a while there. When he found out, the chiefs at the hospital wanted to pull him off the team. But time was too short, they had no choice."

He wondered what it would be like, looking down on the operating table and finding your sister, the one you'd raised from a baby, staring right back at you. He suppressed a shudder, fearing he wouldn't have had the balls to go through with it. "What about your other brothers?"

She chuckled. "It blows your mind that I've got so many brothers, doesn't it?"

"Ah, yeah. You could say that."

Her fingers threaded through his. "Don't worry. Marcus has his own daughters to worry about. See, Dad got seven boys and one girl while Marcus got five girls and a boy. His oldest is eighteen, so he's more concerned about protecting her from boys than worrying about me."

"And the others?"

"Okay," her eyes went to the ceiling. "Let me see. There's Daniel, who's a year younger than Marcus. He lives in America with his wife. Then there are the twins, Jonathon and David, who both live in Sydney. They followed in my dad's footsteps and became architects. They're turning forty-four this year."

His mind boggled, watching her count them off on her fingers. How did she keep tabs on everyone?

"Robert is next. He's forty-two and a karate expert, fourth Dan black belt." She winked. "Don't mess with him."

"No, no."

Molly laughed. "Okay, then there's Steven, who's forty and is a full time dad to his six girls. And last of all, there's Richard, who's a cop in Brisbane. So there you have it, the Keating clan in a nutshell."

Mick sighed. Somewhere deep down he was kind of glad her brothers weren't closer in age. He didn't have to impress them, or convince them he wasn't going to be a bastard. "So you come from a big family, then?"

Her eyes twinkled as she grinned. "You could say that. What about you?"

*Rose Middleton*  
One Foot Forward

"Only child," he sighed sadly. "But I would have loved a brother or sister. Don't get me wrong, I got spoiled rotten. I just had to ask and I got everything I wanted. But it was lonely sometimes."

"Marcus's wife had their first when I was seven. It was a little lonely until then. That's why I'm so close to Jane and Seb, I think."

Mick pulled a face. "You and Jane are so different."

"Not really. Jane's just more overtly aggressive than I am. You know that deep down she's a pussy cat, right?"

"Ha! Are we talking about the same woman who threatened to cut off my..." Mick's cheeks burned hot. "Never mind."

Laughing, Molly shook her head. "What did you do to deserve that?"

Mick fell quiet, as did Molly's mirth. His heart thundered as he remembered the conversation. "It's not important."

"Oh yes it is," she insisted, setting her cutlery on the table and leaning closer to him. "What did you do?"

Wanting to be closer to her, Mick left his seat. He slid another chair close to Molly's and made himself comfortable. "It wasn't so much what I did. It's more about what you did."

Molly blinked. "Huh?"

Smiling, he reached up and plucked one of her curls from the rest. Twirling the soft lock around his finger, he looked deep into her eyes. "After the auction, she told me that if I did anything to upset or hurt you, she'd...well, you know."

"Oh, I see." Molly winked. "Well, she told me she'd kill you if you did something awful. Maybe we should keep you two apart."

Nodding, he rested his forehead against hers. "Yes, when it comes to Jane, I need as much protection as I can get."

"Don't worry," Molly cajoled. "I'll protect you."

"You'd better, or I won't be able to do this anymore," he said before pressing his lips to hers.

"Mmm," Molly nodded. His kiss kicked her playful mood and left her wanting. "We can't have that."

*Rose Middleton*  
One Foot Forward

Mick stood, taking her with him. His arms circled her waist as he continued feasting on her mouth. The quiet room amplified their breathing, though Molly could still hear her heart beat over it. One kiss was all it took, she realised, and she was hooked.

Trailing her hands over his buns of steel, she slid them under the edge of his shirt and found hot skin. Mick growled into her mouth, the reverberations echoing deep in her belly. Strong back muscles rippled under her touch while an equally strong erection nudged her belly.

She dragged her nails across his skin lightly, causing him to shudder. He pulled away for a moment to give her a heated look. When he dipped his head again, Molly turned her face so he got her neck. Clearly unfazed, his lips danced over her skin, licking and nibbling.

Fuelled by the pounding between her legs, Molly released the top two buttons of his shirt and pressed a kiss to his smooth chest. In the open V, she trailed kisses up his sternum toward his throat. Reaching up, she pressed her lips to his Adam's apple, felt it bob up and down and vibrate with another growl.

"Making out with you is so good," he hummed in her ear as he lifted her left knee to his hip.

Making out? Molly grinned at the words she hadn't heard in a long time. No, she hadn't made out with anyone lately and it felt darn good. Better than good, though when he captured her lips, her brain stopped functioning. Her body took control. With her heart jack hammering against her ribs and her blood rushing through her ears, Molly felt so much better than good it was sinful.

Circling her arms around his neck, she pulled her hips up and closer to his. His hard bulge touched her most sensitive place, causing her to break away and suck in air.

Reaching down, Mick took hold of her other knee and, with a wink and a nod, lifted her off the floor. Her legs naturally curved around his hips, holding on tight and bringing that impressive hardness deep between her thighs. His heat easily burned through the thin barriers of their clothes and ignited a long neglected need deep in her soul.

She hardly noticed when he walked over to the couch, but it was impossible not to notice when he laid them down and settled on top of her. Feeling him heavy against her reminded her of the deep satisfaction a man could bring a woman, and she wanted it. She wanted it from Mick.

He moaned in her ear as his fingers crept under the hem of her shirt and touched bare skin. Lord but he was so hot. And the roughness of his skin only heightened the pleasure as he gently palmed her ribs.

"I want you, Molly."

Running her fingers through his hair, Molly smiled up into those stark ocean blue eyes but didn't say anything. Hell, she wanted him, too. Why was it so hard to admit it? Why couldn't she just open her mouth and demand he take her to bed?

She tried to speak, opened her mouth even, but no sound came out. Instead, she kissed him, hard and hot, demanding silently what she couldn't say out loud.

"I want to make love to you," he hummed, looking a little dazed by her kiss. "All night long."

Her heart stuttered, her belly flipped. Yes, yes, yes.

"Is that what you want?"

Yes. She thought she said the word aloud but when she realised it only sounded in her head, she harrumphed in frustration. Instead, she nodded.

"Say it."

"I—"

He pressed his nose to hers and stared into her eyes. "I need to hear you say it. I want to hear you say it."

Molly cleared her throat. "Mick, I—"

A heart beat slid into three before he huffed and pushed himself up to his feet. He strode over to the window, kept his back to her while he asked, "Why can't you say it?"

Sitting up, she tried to piece together her thoughts. She understood his disappointment. Why couldn't she say the words? The more she thought about it, the more she realised why and it left her angry with the broken record in her head.

Yes, she wanted to make love to him, but there was one undeniable obstacle in the way. Her leg. "Before I answer you," she started, standing up as he turned around to face her. "There's something I should tell you."

~

Mick's heart skipped a beat. "Anything Molly, tell me anything."

"My leg," she hesitated. "I—"

He'd been a heel. "It's okay," he nodded, crossing the room to stand mere millimetres away from her. Sliding his fingers down her cheek, he silently implored her to trust him. "I know."

"You don't understand, it's a mess Mick."

"Have you forgotten who you're talking to?" he chided lightly. "I've seen it messy, nothing could be as bad."

She sighed, though he couldn't tell if it was in relief or frustration. "Maybe you shouldn't make a judgement until you've seen it."

"I have seen it. Why are you talking like this?"

She shrugged, though her expression was too tight for Mick's liking. "I'm giving you an out, I guess."

"Why?"

"Because it's ugly," she growled through clenched teeth, her eyes fierce, her chin trembling. "It's monstrous."

While he was thankful for her openness, he didn't like seeing her so worked up about it. Taking her hands in his, he willed her thoughts to more charitable territory. "Your leg doesn't scare me Molly. I don't know why you think it would."

She rolled her eyes. "Oh come on, be honest. The thought of having a one legged woman around freaks most guys out."

He pressed his forehead to hers. "I'm not most men. Has something happened with a guy? Is that why you're afraid?"

Her shallow, rapid breathing tugged at his heart. "Every date I've had since the accident has ended in disaster. They find out about it, and they run."

He tucked his fingers under her thigh and lifted it, stroking the pit of her knee. "Molly," he called softly. He loved it when she looked at him with such warmth. "I'm not running anywhere. Let me help you rediscover your sexuality."

She gasped and he had to stop himself from kissing her again. The way her lips parted, the sound of her panting, the feel of her supple leg in his hand left Mick hot and hard. He told her, too, rubbing his length against her belly. "Mick," she warned.

He smiled. "I like the way you say my name. I like the way you feel, the way you smell. Do you want me to stop?"

Her hand found his chest. "No."

"Those guys were jerks," he said harshly. "Let me show you how a real man treats a woman."

"Oh," she gasped again as her hand fisted into his shirt. "You make it sound so easy."

He laughed throatily. "Honey, you're a sexual woman, or have you forgotten that?" When she didn't answer, he pressed on. "Or did you think no man would find you attractive or sexy because of your leg?"

She only nodded, her closed eyes testament to her vulnerability. Mick released her knee and cupped her cheek again. "You are still sexy, Molly," he said urgently, praying she'd open her eyes and see his honesty. "Do you hear me?"

He waited, holding his breath for agonising seconds until she opened her eyes. The look in them rocked him to the core, and he pulled her into his arms and held her tight.

She pushed against his chest until she could look him in the eye. "You don't have to do this," she offered. Was she offering him a way out? Did she think it was better if he walked away now? "I love my life. The very fact that I'm alive is miracle enough. I don't need pity."

He frowned. "Pity? Who the hell convinced you of that? Do you honestly believe a guy who thinks you're attractive is doing it out of pity? Who told you that?"

She gulped. "No one."

"Don't lie to me. Who?"

His heart pounded in his chest as he waited for an answer. Molly wouldn't meet his stare, wouldn't look in his eyes.

"Those guys you went out with?" Mick demanded angrily. "Who were they? I'll set them straight."

Smoothing her hand down his chest, Molly seemed to relax. Her gaze connected with his and he understood straight away she'd convinced herself of the horrible thought. "They didn't say that, Mick. I worked it out all by myself."

"Then I'll have to set *you* straight," he nodded confidently. "But there's something you have to promise me Molly."

"What's that?"

“Reserve your judgement of me. Let me show you who I am, the kind of man I am. Can you do that?”

“That might be difficult,” she said, momentarily shutting off his air supply. “I already think you’re a hero.”

He grimaced. “Honey, you see me that way because of the crash. Think of this as an opportunity to get to know the real Mick Knight. What do you say?”

She hesitated, and he wondered if she was afraid of what she’d learn about him.

“I won’t hurt you,” he whispered, his fingers playing with an escaped curl. “Trust me, Molly.”

“I want to.”

He sucked in a breath at the delicate sound of her voice. “You can trust me, but you have to be honest with both of us. Do you want to make love with me? You have to say the words.”

Her head bobbed before finally, a smile lit her eyes and curved her lips. “Yes Mick. I want to be with you.”

Relief exploded in his gut. “Okay then. Listen, I want to take you away. Just for a couple of days. There’ll be no distractions, just you and me. Can you do that?”

“Yes.”

Grinning, glad to have cleared the air, Mick hauled her against him. He smiled when her arms circled around his neck and her hips found his. “Good. Be ready by ten tomorrow morning. I promise, you won’t regret this.”

## **Chapter 5**

When she opened the front door at ten o’clock, he was there, still surprising her with his eagerness. The kiss he delivered woke her completely and brought every erotic dream she’d had back to the fore. It took every ounce of effort she had to let him go. “So where are we going?”

He laughed again, leading her by the hand to his Jeep. “You’ll have to wait and see.”

Molly sighed dramatically while he opened the door for her. “You’re a frustrating man, Mick Knight.”

*Rose Middleton*  
One Foot Forward

Before she could climb into the passenger seat, he spun her around and held her close. The sparkle in his eyes was blinding but it didn't hide the smouldering need. He breathed heavily, closed his eyes and turned his face up to the bright morning sun.

"Mick?"

He sighed and faced her, the heat of his gaze almost searing her. "Tell me you dreamt about me last night." He sounded exhausted.

Molly swallowed while flames licked her belly. Had he been dreaming about her? Lord but she hoped so. "Uh-huh."

"What were we doing?"

Leaning up to his ear, she chuckled. "You'll have to wait and see."

He growled playfully but didn't let her go. Rather, his mouth found hers again. She tasted spearmint toothpaste as he kissed her deeply. "You're a cheeky girl," he whispered. "That could get you in trouble, you know."

Molly shrugged as he let her go. She turned, preparing to get into the truck when he swatted her bottom. The resounding slap stung her cheek and elicited a naughty laugh from him. When she was in, he closed the door and touched her chin through the open window.

The tenderness in his eyes softened her response. She watched him through the windscreen as he rounded the front of the car and climbed in beside her. Eyeing him sideways, she huffed with feigned indignation when he smiled, clearly smug with himself.

On the road, they headed northwest toward the hills. In the shade of the forest, the air was chilly, causing her to roll up the window. At that, Mick took her hand and rubbed it against his chest. She turned to look at him. While he concentrated on the road, she took in the strong line of his masculine jaw, the broadness of his shoulders and the muscles of his arms bulging against the sleeves of his cotton tee.

"What is it?"

Molly frowned. "This might sound dumb."

He shrugged. "No it won't."

"I know I said I didn't remember you from the crash, but somehow, you seemed bigger in my memories."



*Rose Middleton*  
One Foot Forward

He smiled and flattened his palm against hers. The size difference between them was stunning. "Any bigger and I'd be a giant."

"Like I said though, my memories aren't exactly reliable."

Mick squeezed her hand. "Do you remember the crash?"

"No. All I remember is getting dressed for the gym and then waking up underneath the truck..." her voice cracked, drawing his gaze. "I remember your voice. I remember Nate."

Mick made a small sound and kissed her palm. "Did you ever consider that maybe it's a blessing you don't remember the actual crash?"

Molly blinked. "I've been so frustrated that I can't, but yeah, that did occur to me." She smiled. "We think alike, you and I."

"Good. Now I have a question for you."

Taking a deep breath, Molly braced herself. "Okay."

"Why has it taken you this long to come and see us at the station?"

"Yes, I was wondering that myself. See, it took a long time for me to leave the hospital. I had to have four more operations on my leg. And then there was rehab."

"Did you know I came to see you?" he asked, glancing over for a moment.

"Jane told me. I wish I hadn't been so drugged."

~

Mick grimaced and squeezed her hand tighter. He didn't want to let her go, especially now that she was talking, but when she tugged on it, he didn't have a choice.

"How long 'til we get there?"

"About half an hour. Why?"

She looked at him as he glanced at her, and the worry on her face scared him. "I need to take my prosthetic leg off. Is that okay?"

"Do you want me to pull over?"

She shrugged, which he took as a yes. At the first available site, he pulled into the shade of some trees and cut the engine. Turning to her, he touched her shoulder. She didn't look at him, just stared down at her leg.

"Do you want me to step out for a moment?"

Her head snapped up. "I'm sorry. I'm freaking you out, aren't I?"

Mick smiled and shook his head gently. "Actually, no. I thought I was making you uncomfortable."

"I just," she tried to smile but couldn't. "It starts to throb on long drives, that's all." She turned and leaned down to her leg.

He watched as she rolled up the leg of her jeans to reveal the plastic underneath. Her hands shook though she tried to hide it by rubbing her palms on her thighs.

Mick's eyes travelled from her hands to the limb. Although it matched her skin tone, it looked quite unlike any leg he'd ever seen. The smooth finish was so out of character for a human limb that he felt he understood her apprehension.

Feeling compelled to ease her burden, Mick got out of the Jeep's cabin, rounded the hood and opened her door. He smiled at the surprised expression on her face and gently touched her cheek. Leaning across her, he unclipped her seat belt and turned her to him.

"I can do it," she protested softly.

"I know you can, Molly," he nodded, his hands resting on her knees. "But I want to help you."

As he held her gaze, his breath burned his lungs. She could turn him away at any moment and he silently prayed she wouldn't. Relief washed over him when she accepted his presence. Placing her hands on his, she guided them to the prosthesis, and showed him how to remove it. The weight of it surprised him, he was sure human legs weren't that heavy.

He set it on the back seat and returned to be with her. As she held out the small socket that connected the fake leg to the real one, her hands shook.

"Are you okay?" he asked.

She nodded, but he sensed the façade was back on show. Her eyes glistened and her chin trembled as she bit her bottom lip between her teeth. Fear of being rejected or ridiculed had to be tearing at her; he knew he'd be scared out of his wits if he was in her

*Rose Middleton*  
One Foot Forward

place. So Mick did the only thing he could think of. Stepping in between her knees, he pulled her into his arms and held her tight.

"I'm okay," she insisted against his chest, though he didn't miss how tight her arms were wrapped around him. "Really."

He chuffed at her ear. "You are one tough lady."

Her head came up and he pushed aside the curls to get a good look at her. "You're not too bad yourself," she smiled. "Maybe you're not like most guys."

Shaking his head, he leaned down to press his lips to hers. She was hesitant at first, but with a little encouragement, she opened to him and welcomed him in. It still amazed him how right it felt to kiss her, how perfectly they fitted. He tried to communicate that, tried to show her she wasn't in any danger with him.

When she pulled back, her hands crept to his chest again and toyed with the ripples of his abs. The woman certainly knew how to turn him on, and when he pressed his erection against her inner thigh, her eyes went wide.

"Oh," she sighed.

He nodded. "You do this to me, Molly," he growled, letting her have every ounce of need and desire he felt. "This is very real."

"Tell me," she swallowed and then stretched up to try and match his height. "The place we're going, is it private?"

He smiled, glad they were thinking along the same lines. "Oh yeah," he crooned, sneaking another kiss. "Very private. Maybe we can re-enact some of your dreams."

She turned deep crimson and Mick's belly tightened in response. He couldn't help but wonder what they'd been doing in her dreams. Because if her dreams matched his in any way, they were in for a long night.

~

When he pulled off the road into the driveway, Molly's palms grew sweaty. As the Jeep crawled along the gravel driveway, a neat little cottage came into view. Hanging vines grew along the front porch while large hibiscus trees flourished all about.

The Jeep covered the short uphill distance and came to a stop by the entrance. Mick shut off the engine. In the silence that followed, Molly's ears adjusted to hear the squawks and trills of rosellas and parrots. While she stared at the pretty cabin, it became clear just how private this place was.

She turned but he wasn't behind the wheel. Instead, Mick was opening her door. A huge grin and two dimples greeted her.

"It's pretty," she said, unfastening her seatbelt.

He nodded. "It was built by my grandad and left to me by my dad," he gazed up at the cottage. "I come up on my days off for some peace and quiet." When he turned back to her, the hunger in his eyes hadn't subsided. "I thought you might like it."

Cradling his handsome face, Molly smiled. "I think it's beautiful."

He grinned. "Thanks."

"Now can you get my leg off the back seat?"

Shaking his head, Mick turned and offered her his back. "Climb on."

She burst out laughing. "Pardon?"

"Come on," he urged, patting her knee. "I'll carry you up to the house."

"I haven't had a piggy-back ride since I was five, Mick."

"Good," he laughed. "Then let me remind you how much fun they can be."

Seeing he wasn't backing down, Molly shrugged and wriggled closer to him. Hugging his hips tight with her knees, she wrapped her arms around his shoulders. In turn, Mick gripped her under the knees and held her strong, lifting her out of the car.

"See? That wasn't so hard, now was it?"

It was hard not to laugh at his cheekiness and so she held on while he climbed the steps to the porch. At the door, he let go of her right leg and released the dead lock, and pushed it open with the toe of his boot. Inside, he set her down on the kitchen counter and turned to face her.

He wasn't even breathing hard, she noticed, as he lightly stroked her cheek. "Okay?"

She nodded, excruciatingly aware of him pressed between her thighs. "All good," she breathed.

"Don't move. I'll be right back."

And with that, he dashed out of the cabin, leaving her alone to inspect the interior décor.

*Rose Middleton*  
One Foot Forward

Furnished with warm colours and pieces of older, worn furniture, the cabin felt homey and comfortable. She spied an old rocking chair by the window and wondered if Mick's grandmother had nursed his father there. She made a mental note to ask him about his family, a topic she knew nothing about. Jane had been vague on those details.

Letting herself down off the counter, Molly hopped over to the rocking chair. She gently set it into motion and, drawn to the soothing movements, lowered herself into it. The chair creaked gently under her before resuming its motion with the help of her foot.

Molly smiled at the cosy feeling swelling inside her and peeked out the window. The little garden was full of roses in bloom, the array of colours making her wish she had her leg so she could go outside.

Well, there was time for that, she decided, leaning back into the chair. The rocking motion settled the nervousness stirred by the hunky fire fighter outside. He was so eager, so tender, so downright nice that she was sure it was illegal. No man had a right to be so perfect.

When he'd helped her take off her leg, Molly had almost cried. He touched her with just the right strength, looked at her with the warmest expression in his eyes. How he knew to say the right words floored her. Until now, he hadn't really made a gaff of any sort. While she'd promised to reserve judgement, he was fast proving her initial guesses right.

She should guard herself, she realised. Just in case he wasn't the perfect specimen she thought he was.

~

At the door, he found her in the rocking chair, gazing down at his grandmother's prized rose garden. The sight of the late morning light touching her face stopped him dead in his tracks. He stared down at the fake leg cradled in his hands for a moment and then back at the woman to whom it belonged.

Mick felt his heart squeeze. She fit the house perfectly, with her delicate features, her inner strength, her quiet sense of self. At that moment, she reminded him of his grandmother and he felt a sense of loss for the older woman strike him deep.

Daisy Knight had been the sweetest, most stubborn woman he could remember. She'd succumbed to illness long before she should have, and he had said so at her funeral. He wasn't a religious man by nature, but Mick knew Daisy was supposed to live longer and fulfil her purpose in life. Her death had broken his grandfather's heart, and severely tested his father's belief in all things good. As for Mick, he couldn't remember a time he'd been so angry.

Except for when his father died.

If his father, a veteran fire fighter with almost twenty-five years of experience, could be killed so easily, what did it matter if Mick lived on the edge? He'd bought a motorbike and raced it ruthlessly, dishing out more trash on the circuit than he had a right to.

He'd tried dozens of extreme sports, including skydiving and hang gliding, but it was the bike that nearly brought him undone. It had happened two weeks before Molly's accident, when he'd pushed one too many times. Another rider finally pushed back, sending Mick off the track and down the hillside. Coming away unscathed, he was ready to hunt the rider down, but his bike was a mess. The bike spent weeks in the repair shop, preventing him from probably killing himself. That was when he found himself confronted with one of the worst road crashes he'd ever seen. Meeting Molly and helping to save her changed his life.

Now, as he gazed across the room at Molly, Mick felt an unusual calm settle over him. He still hated the fact his father had been snatched away so suddenly, but the anger wasn't so strong. The miracle, sitting over by the window, proved to him just how precious life was.

Setting the prosthetic limb down by the door, he crossed the room and knelt in front of her. Taking her cold hands, he rubbed them in his. "Wanna tour?"

She nodded. "Hand me my leg."

Shaking his head, he stood and lifted her to her one foot. Turning, he encouraged her to hop on again. Ignoring her protests, he waited until her hands settled on his shoulders. She leapt into his waiting hands, her legs hugging his hips, her arms tight around his shoulders.

Taking her outside, he started in the rose garden. "Grandma Daisy's rose garden," he announced, waiting while she leaned down to sniff one of the big blooms. "She won the local competition every year she entered."

Molly chuckled. "Sweet."

"She was," he agreed, heading down the hill toward the clump of pine trees where most of his family was laid to rest. "She would have liked you," he said, setting her down and turning to her. "Grandpa Bill would have loved your curls."

She blushed when he stroked her hair. He loved the way the ringlets bounced. "Thanks."

"As for my dad," Mick glanced over at Joe's headstone, his throat tightening. "He would have thought you were beautiful, too."

*Rose Middleton*  
One Foot Forward

"I'm sorry about your dad, Mick," Molly said softly, her small palm curving under his chin. Mick turned back to see those big brown-green eyes so full of empathy, they almost brought him undone. "That must have been a hard time for you."

He nodded but stayed silent. As if sensing his need for comfort, she hugged him to her and stroked his hair. Holding her tight, he marvelled at her selflessness. How she could still find the strength and energy to be there for someone else amazed him.

Pulling back, he stared down into her sweet face. "Are you hungry yet?"

She smiled, though he sensed she thought he was avoiding talking about his father. If so, she was right. Nothing could erase his arrogant, dangerous behaviour after his father's death. At the time, he didn't care whether he lived or died. Now, with experience and time shaping his mind, Mick was ashamed of his behaviour.

He didn't want Molly knowing he could lose it like that. And he didn't want her thinking he was dangerous or reckless. The last thing she needed was unpredictability.

"I am," she nodded finally. He was glad she didn't push the issue. "What is for lunch, anyway?"

He grinned, more about the lunch he'd put together than the change of subject. "Oh, just some leftovers I had in the fridge."

When she frowned, he kissed the end of her cute nose. "But I had planned on a picnic down by the creek," he nodded toward her missing leg. "I should've given you back your leg and stopped acting like a caveman, huh?"

Molly tilted her head to the side and winked. "Oh, I don't know. I think I could get used to be chauffeured around like this."

They laughed. "Okay, I'll take you down to the creek and then get the picnic basket. Hop on."

He crouched and waited for her to load up again. Carrying her was no sweat, she weighed next to nothing and besides, he was quite partial to having those slender legs wrapped around his hips. He wanted to keep it that way.

From the small cemetery, Mick jogged down the hill to the edge of the creek. He'd played here often when he was a kid, usually climbing back up the hill covered in mud and soaked to the skin. He couldn't count how many times he'd been admonished and made to sit in a hot bath.

Slowing, he realised he'd forgotten about the tub at the house. It was one of those big, free standing claw foot things that took an eternity to fill. But he remembered it stayed

hot and was probably the most comfortable tub in the world. As a grown man, this was the only place he dared to bathe in anything other than a shower.

"Wow," Molly's voice at his ear brought his thoughts back to reality. He grinned at the sight, the small deck built by his granddad complete with picnic benches and table. "Your dad, or your granddad?"

He laughed at her intuition. "Grandpa Bill. How'd you guess?"

Setting her down, he found her gazing up at him with the sweetest smile. "Your face gave it away," she admitted, her voice soft, her eyes sparkling. "You have this look of pride, it suits you well."

It was his turn to blush. Mick couldn't remember the last time he'd felt self-conscious. "Thank you. Now, I'll run up to the house. Are you gonna be okay down here by yourself?"

Nodding, Molly hopped over to a seat and made herself comfortable. His heart raced at the way her bottom bounced with each hop and he suddenly lost his appetite for food. "I'll be fine," she called casually, waving him way. "Go."

~

While he was gone, Molly took several long, deep breaths and reminded herself to be calm. It was so hard to stay relaxed when every time he laid those blue eyes on her, she just about melted into a puddle. She didn't remember ever feeling so aroused by a man, ever. No man seemed to have the effect on her Mick did.

He was able to blow her serenity out of the water and knock her body for six without even trying. Okay, so he had kissed her. She reasoned that while he might have been attracted to her, he still hadn't seen the ugly reality of her leg. It was possible he was being kind, though she'd never known kindness to extend into such stirring territory.

Maybe Mick was the suave smooth talker she needed to help break her out of her shell. If they kept everything light and fun, she'd be able to regain her confidence. She'd get the attention she needed and Mick would get to play the hero. When it was over, they'd part amicably and get on with their lives. Mick wouldn't hurt her deliberately, this was his way of reminding her she was still a woman.

Of course, that didn't mean he couldn't break her heart.

Molly sighed and squinted up through the canopy of the trees at the sun. Maybe she should take his advice and stop judging everything and everyone until she had enough evidence.



It suddenly struck her she hadn't meant to see him again after the bought date. She shook her head at her lack of conviction. Here she was, days later and literally being carried away by him.

"Hey!"

His voice broke the silence, causing her to jump in her seat. That sure was quick, she thought, ready to turn to him and scrutinise his motives. Only, he beat her to the punch, standing over her, cupping her face and planting a lip smacking kiss on her.

"I hope you're hungry," he quipped, acting like kissing her was something he did everyday. "There's a lot of food here."

She watched him spread out the items on the table and then narrowed her eyes at him. "Just some leftovers, huh?" He grinned cheekily. "Looks more like a banquet to me."

He shrugged lightly. "I've got a big appetite, let's say." Molly held her breath as his eyes grew dark and scoured her body. "A very big appetite."

"Are we still talking about food?"

He laughed and shook his head. "Oh, no. This," he gestured toward the food, "is to keep up our stamina."

Struggling for air, Molly fanned herself with a napkin, uncaring whether she seemed naïve or not. The man knew how to turn her on and he was milking it. Still, he laughed at her antics and tugged on her hand.

Shuffling aside, she made room for him on the pine log bench. She felt a smile pull her lips upwards as his big, svelte body settled beside hers.

"You're incorrigible," she chuckled, stealing a carrot out of the salad.

Mick nodded as he filled a plate with salad, cold chicken and coleslaw. When he handed it to her, Molly thanked him though waited for him to fix himself something before she ate.

"So all this was just sitting in your fridge?"

He nodded. "Seriously, I have a big appetite. I have to eat a lot to keep this temple in working order. Didn't you notice that last night?"

Stabbing her fork into the salad greens, she eyed his body appreciatively. No, she hadn't noticed the appetite. But she sure as hell noticed his temple. The muscle tee, with its stretched sleeves, gave her a first class view of his enormous biceps and a perfect image of his muscled chest.

*Rose Middleton*  
One Foot Forward

She sighed at the amount of work that went into a physique like that, remembering her training days and the endless hours she put in to run marathons. It was hard work, there was no doubting that, but in the end, it was worth it. The doctors had told her that without her prime physical fitness, she probably wouldn't have lived through the crash.

"Molly?"

She blinked and stopped day dreaming. "Sorry."

"Don't apologise. What were you thinking?" he turned toward her, straddled the bench and started eating.

"About how much I'd love to run again."

His eyes grew dark. "You miss it, don't you?"

"You don't know the half of it." She shook her head scornfully. Despite her chat with Marcus, she couldn't shake her scepticism. Especially not since she saw it reflected in Mick's eyes. "See this leg?" she pointed to her good leg. "It's the only one I've got left. You can't run on one leg."

A frown crossed his face momentarily and then disappeared. "Running on your stump might cause a lot of pain."

He was serious and she had to admire his honesty, even if it left her a little deflated.

"My running days are over."

"You know, my Grandma used to say that when one door closes, God opens another one. Maybe that's what is going on here. It's not impossible for you to run again, I mean, look at the Para-Olympians, they run. I just don't want you to be disappointed if it's too hard or doesn't pan out."

"You're sweet Mick, and I appreciate your thoughts."

He shrugged, but she could see the tension in his shoulders and realised he was trying to make a point. She should probably tell him about her plans, but she didn't want to pre-empt anything. Or get her hopes up too high. "Fine."

"If you've got something to say Mick, say it," she insisted, placing another forkful of salad greens into her mouth.

Setting his plate on the table, Mick twisted his hands together. He looked positively adorable with his uncertain manner and should-I-shouldn't-I expression. "It sounds like you've accepted it without a fight, Molly."

*Rose Middleton*  
One Foot Forward

Molly chewed her salad, rueing her decision not to tell him how much she wanted to run again. Or that she'd started looking into it. She hadn't given in easily, but she was being realistic about things. Everything could fall flat on its ass at any given moment, and then she really would never run again. She had to prepare her heart for such a let down, whether anyone else understood or not.

"I don't give in easily," she murmured softly, letting her gaze settle on his hands. "I never have, Mick."

"You're right," he conceded, taking her plate and lifting her chin. He shuffled closer, pulling her against him. Molly hooked her knees over his right thigh, appreciating his embrace. "I'm sorry, that was careless. I should know better."

"You hardly know me at all, Mick."

He nodded, his expression too caring, too intimate, and making Molly feel like she was in too deep. "I know. I want to change that. But I know this, when I was with you in that car, I saw you fight for life. You never gave in, not even when the pain meds wore off. Your strength amazed me then, and it still amazes me now."

Soothed by his caresses, calmed by his confession, Molly felt safe enough to tell someone the truth. "Sometimes, my stump hurts so much I wonder why I bothered."

He winced and hugged her. "I can help," he smiled, his hand sliding down her thigh, over her knee to curve gently around the stump. "Let me massage it for you."

Her breath hitched, causing her to cough. "It's not pretty."

"Neither is pulling burnt bodies out of buildings, but I still do it."

Molly swallowed and touched his face gently, trailing her fingers down his cheek to his lips. She traced her index finger along his bottom lip and gasped when he sucked it into his mouth. His tongue laved her finger as his lips held it in place. His mouth was so hot it made her shiver.

"How do you do it?" she asked. "Your job can be pretty gruesome at times."

He nodded and released her finger. "It's hard to go to sleep some nights. I had a hell of a time after your accident. Every time I closed my eyes, I'd see you looking so pale and fragile. I had nightmares that we couldn't save you, that you died in my arms."

"Oh, Mick."

Staring up at this strong man, she never would have guessed he could hurt so deeply. It stirred her response to nurture, left her wanting to hold him, to tell him everything would be all right.

He sniffed, drawing her eyes to his. "Don't get me wrong, I love my job. Some days however, are harder than others. And some days," he smiled and leaned down to press his lips to hers. "I get to witness miracles."

## **Chapter 6**

When the waning sunlight slanted through the trees, Mick sighed at the golden glow enveloping Molly. Talking to her was too easy. Words rolled off his tongue without effort and his ears perked every time she spoke. He'd never known a woman so fascinating, so driven to save others from the trauma she'd suffered.

Actually, as he thought about it, the word driven was quite inadequate. Obsessed was a little closer in description to the fervent manner in which Molly chased her newfound purpose. Actively involved in the Traffic Accident Commission's road campaign, she'd taken a hands on approach to road safety.

The woman was dynamite as she described the submissions she'd put forward for new television ads reminding drivers to slow down and to refrain from drink driving. It was understandable, since the truckie who'd hit her had been speeding and over the legal blood alcohol limit.

Her time, he learned, was primarily spent at the hospital rehab centre. He never knew she had a degree in nursing, a qualification she now put to use. Hearing her talk so intimately about the experiences of others, Mick was moved by her tenderness and her compassion.

She wasn't angry with the world for her circumstances, and she had even met with the truckie who'd hit her. To say he was blown away by her ability to forgive was an understatement.

"Sorry," she blushed, shifting her legs slightly. Apart from small movements, she had stayed in his embrace the whole time. Mick wouldn't have it any other way. "I get a little carried away sometimes. Just tell me to be quiet or something."

He chuckled, watching as the light breeze moved her curls. "Keep talking, Molly."

"But you had other plans for today," she winked, lending her words a not so subtle emphasis. "You didn't come here just to talk."

"Maybe I did," he winked, his hand on her thigh giving a squeeze. "I like listening to you."

Molly rolled her eyes. "And what about your *appetite*?"

Laughing, Mick hugged her to him. She had a point. He had brought her here with a singular purpose in mind. True, he did want to make love to her. In fact, his entire body buzzed in anticipation, and was kept primed by her proximity. All she had to do was say the word, but her presence so close to him was enough. And he didn't want to rush her, make her regret agreeing to their trip. As he looked down into her face now, he saw something in her eyes that spurred his libido into overdrive.

"What are you saying, Molly?"

"Maybe we should go up to the house?" she suggested, her voice soft and a little uncertain. He couldn't tell if she was accustomed to initiating sex or not, or whether those previous buffoons had beaten her adventurous spirit into a cave.

"We don't have to do anything. Talking is good enough, hon."

"Oh, okay."

She tried to pull out of his arms but he held on. If he wasn't mistaken, she wore an expression of hurt. "What is it?"

Molly froze. "I appreciate your efforts, Mick." She looked everywhere but in his eyes. "You're a true gentleman."

He blinked. "Huh?"

Finally, she wriggled free and put some distance between them. He couldn't believe how cold he suddenly felt, and alone. With a foot of space between them, he felt like she'd fled to the other side of the planet. His hands itched to touch her while his body hung onto the memory of hers.

"It's okay," she nodded, plastering a fake smile to her lips. He gaped at the turnaround in her. "You don't have to go through with it."

"Go through with what?"

Molly hesitated, her hands trembling on her thighs. She looked distinctly nervous. "You know..."

He knew all right, but he wasn't letting her off the hook. Why she'd grown so distant confused and annoyed him. Did she believe he'd rejected her? "No, I don't know. Tell me, Molly."

With a harrumph, she stood up. She looked around but seemed a little lost. "I wish I had two legs. I hate not being able to pace."

Mick didn't take the bait. She wasn't going to side track him so easily. "Please, what's going on?"

Propping her hands on her hips, she took a deep breath. Then she turned to him with a sympathetic expression. "You don't have to keep up the charade. If you want to take me home now, it's okay. I appreciate you were trying to show me I'm still attractive, but I understand if you don't want to..."

She wobbled a bit, bringing Mick to his feet and then to her. Steadying her, he crowded her space deliberately. She wanted to let him down easy, to give his male ego an out. He marvelled at the way she tried to save him from having to recuse himself from his promise.

Mick shook his head, leaning down to her face. "Don't want to what?"

Her quick, shallow breaths told him she was scared, but she drew her shoulders back and stuck her chin out in defiance. "You don't have to take me to bed, Mick."

"True, I don't have to," he smiled at her horrified expression. "But I damn well want to."

Thick tension hung between them as they stared at each other. If she didn't say something soon, he didn't know what he'd do. Why couldn't she admit what she wanted?

Her mouth moved but no sound came out. It was lucky her eyes did all the talking and told him what he needed to hear. Pulling her against him, Mick crushed his lips against hers and kissed her deeply. He freed the hunger he felt and almost devoured her entirely.

"Oh," she gasped when he pulled back enough to give them air.

If she wasn't going to admit what she wanted, then he would. "If I had my way, I'd take you right here Molly."

"But you said talking was enough."

He chuffed. "It is. It was. I didn't want to pressure you."

"So you'd rather—"

He kissed her again, encouraged by the twinkle of hope in her eyes. "Oh yeah. I'd rather be exploring your naked body. With my hands, my fingers, my mouth, my tongue." She groaned, her eyes turning a shade of brown-green that sent a ripple of delight through him. "There is nothing about you that is hideous, Molly. Let me show you."

*Rose Middleton*  
One Foot Forward

Her head dropped back, exposing her neck. Mick licked and nibbled, his hands finding the curve of her hips. Pressing his hard cock against her soft belly, he kissed a wet path down to the hollow in her throat. With his lips resting on her skin, he smiled at her booming pulse.

“Tell me what you want,” he growled, working his fingers under her cotton shirt. “I want to please you.”

She whimpered and tunnelled her hands through his hair. God she knew how to touch him. Her fingers worked magic on his scalp, sending goose bumps down his arms, making him impossibly harder.

Following the V of her shirt, he slipped the buttons out of their loops with his mouth. The soft, white skin between her breasts held his attention as her chest heaved with each laboured breath.

He hummed approvingly. White lace, his favourite. She was so fresh, so inviting, that he dared to trail his fingertips along the edge of her bra cup. Goose bumps appeared and her skin quivered under his touch. Mick could barely contain himself, especially when she whimpered and moaned. He felt her lips at his ear, heard her arousal in her breathing and knew what she wanted.

Not waiting for her answer, he nudged her shirt out of the way with his cheek and sucked her nipple into his mouth. Through the lace of her bra, he laved and stroked and then gently bit her. Words filtered through the haze in his head but he couldn't make sense of them. All he heard were her sweet little gasps; all he felt were her hips rocking against his.

He should take her up to the house before continuing, but his restraint was useless. Instead, he lifted her onto the picnic table, and pushed aside the containers and dishes behind her. Laying her down, spreading her out for his visual pleasure, Mick licked his lips.

“You are beautiful,” he nodded, sliding his hands up her open thighs and over her hips to cup her breasts. He liked that she didn't close her eyes. “I'm going to make sure you really understand that.”

He unbuttoned her shirt the rest of the way and pushed it aside. Flattening his palms against her belly, he curved them around her ribs and was rewarded when she arched toward him. His lips found the valley between her breasts again while his fingers slipped under the lace and touched her bare skin.

“There's no one around for miles,” he grinned against her. “Make as much noise as you want, Molly.”

*Rose Middleton*  
One Foot Forward

When he rolled her nipples between his thumb and finger, she moaned louder, and when he flipped the bra cups out of the way and licked her hot skin, she cried out. Her arched back allowed his hands to slide under her and release the clasp of the bra easily. She did away with the shirt completely and then helped him with the bra.

Totally exposed to him, her lithe body made his mouth water and hunger for more. He made sure to touch her everywhere, lick her most tender places, and suckle her until she cried out with pleasure. For once, he was happy his woman wasn't touching him. Mick was sure he'd explode if Molly decided it was her turn.

In the fading light, he released the catch on her jeans and slid the zipper down. Her white lace underwear matched the bra, he realised. He stroked her lower belly through the material. She squirmed and when he looked up, he fell straight into deep pools of desire. She wanted him as much as he wanted her, but he could tell she wanted to play too, to touch him as intimately as he touched her.

"We should go up to the house," he whispered, leaning over her, against her, kissing her. "By the time we're done, it'll be dark."

"And?" she asked expectantly.

"One, I didn't bring a torch, which might make the trek up to the house a little dangerous. And two," he exhaled against her face. The ringlets at her hairline fluttered. "I want to see you, watch you. There'll be no dancing in the dark, Molly."

She shuddered beneath him, testing his mettle. Then she smiled, her face lighting up under the emotion. "What are we waiting for?"

~

He made it sound simple, but without her leg, the journey up to the house was tricky. Still on his back, she carried the picnic basket while he concentrated on the ground. Tripping was definitely not on the agenda.

When she'd tried to put her clothes back on, he insisted she stay half naked. To be fair, she made him remove his tee and so as he carried her, the both of them naked from the waist up, she felt his every muscle move against her breasts. By the time they reached the house, her breasts were so tight with arousal, her nipples had become hard bullets.

"Set the basket over there," he nodded toward the counter with his head. "Hurry."

Hurry? Impatient was he? She chuckled, though realised he could probably feel her nipples against his bare back. With the basket on the counter, he made a bee line for the bedroom, dropped her on the bed and then lowered himself over her.



*Rose Middleton*  
One Foot Forward

His mouth found her nipple and his tongue caressed her while he sucked. It felt so incredible, so perfect. The best part was that he didn't leave the other breast out, palming it with his roughened hand. As he pulled on her sensitive tip, she felt a tug deep in her loins.

She was so small in his hands, her white flesh stark against his tanned skin. His roughness contrasted with her smoothness, but she wouldn't have it any other way.

Switching to her other breast, his hand slid down her belly and into her jeans. His knees nudged her legs wider, giving him better access.

As his fingers swirled through her curls, Molly sucked in a deep breath, anticipating a deeper caress. His head bobbed up and his mouth found hers as he ventured deeper. Her scream was swallowed by his kiss, shortly followed by a deep, satisfied chuckle.

"Told you," he grinned. "As loud as you want."

"I want to touch you," she protested, though she about swallowed her tongue when his fingers fondled her clit.

"Not yet, Molly. You first."

Without further ado, he disappeared, dropping out of her line of sight. Next, her jeans were dragged off, leaving her only in her panties. Not for long, however, because he had them off without fuss.

Completely exposed, she raised her head to find him examining her stump. Her cheeks burned and she almost scrambled away. She would have, except for the caring look in his eye when he looked up. The smile that tipped his lips filled her heart with joy. "It's not ugly," he said gruffly. "And it's not monstrous, Molly. It's not going to stop me."

Swallowing her question, she sat up and reached for the snap on his cargos. He watched, breathing deeply, as she released his erection and let his clothes drop to the floor. Sitting with her eyes level with his cock, Molly smiled at the long, thick rod and raised her hands to touch it.

Mick was quick off the mark, capturing her wrists and securing her back on the bed. He shook his head, clucked his tongue and disappeared again. Before she had time to move, he kissed her inner thighs and left a wet trail that zeroed in on her clit. The second his lips touched her, she saw stars. Her breath quickened, her heart zoomed and her womb pounded.

The motion of his mouth and tongue on her brought her quickly to the edge. She tried to hold off, tried to wait until he was inside her, but her body wasn't listening. Without her permission, the zinging deep inside exploded and sucked her body into the whirling sensation of orgasm.

Crying out, she reached for him, but he was busy working two fingers into her and spreading her juices. Feeling him deep inside her, Molly realised she'd forgotten how good it felt to be devoured. But she still wanted more, and she demanded so.

His face appeared before hers, his grin stretching so wide she couldn't see his dimples. When he kissed her, he only intensified the emotions raging through her mind.

"Mick," she huffed impatiently.

He gave her a pleading look. "I won't last long, Molly. Don't hold it against me."

Narrowing her eyes, she smiled slyly. "If I'm not satisfied, I'm coming back for more. Got it?"

He nodded. "Got it."

They chuckled before he produced a condom and rolled off her to protect them. Her eyes were drawn to his penis, her hands not far away, either. But he held her off skilfully, pinning her hands above her head and eyeing off her breasts again.

"Yeah," he sighed contentedly. "I'm a breast man. And you," he dragged his tongue across her breast, puckering her nipple. "Have great breasts."

She meant to thank him, but the suckling action solicited a long moan instead. Mick grinned, clearly satisfied with his work. Keeping eye contact, he settled between her thighs and rested against her entrance.

"Ready?"

She rolled her eyes, then stretched them wide as he entered her fully. His hard length throbbed inside her while he lifted and hooked her knees around his hips. Instinctively her right foot looked to hook around her left but only found mid-air. Still, she squeezed her knees tight to his hips, somewhat aware of the difference in weight of the two legs, but her mind released the comparison in favour of something so much better.

Mick.

He nodded, "Much better."

With her hands finally free, Molly stroked his shoulders and chest. Deep inside, Mick slowly rocked her, his thrusts gentle and rhythmic. Arching against him, Molly encouraged him to speed up and then threw her head back with a long groan when he stroked the length of her.

*Rose Middleton*  
One Foot Forward

Her chest heaved with each breath, Mick's scent filling her lungs. When he kissed her, his taste mixed with hers. And when his hands found her breasts, she bit down on his shoulder to stifle a scream.

Her world spun as he drove into her, his own shouts and grunts speeding their pace. In the frantic, frenzied mating, Molly called out his name until his mouth claimed hers. To her astonishment, he knelt on the bed, picked her up and held her to him while he continued thrusting into her.

Wrapping her arms around his neck, she watched the effortless strength of him before catching sight of them in a nearby mirror. Her gasp drew his attention and he smiled when he saw what she saw.

"We're beautiful," he whispered. His gaze met hers. Silky deep blue eyes she wanted to watch all night long. "You're beautiful. Too damn beautiful, Molly."

The visual feast of him pleasuring her combined with the sinful delights his body bestowed upon her to send a heat wave through her. The sweet words he whispered against her ear filled her heart to bursting. The quickening in her womb soon flared and her eyes fixed on the gorgeous face watching her. Kissing him, she flicked her tongue against his in time with his thrusts, drawing a growl of approval from him.

And then, in a blinding flash, her body erupted, catapulting them both over the edge. Mick stiffened momentarily and then pumped in and out of her with new vigour, growling and grunting into her mouth. Molly's orgasm spiked, gripping her and tearing a string of whispered words from somewhere deep in her throat.

Together, they fell back to the bed. Mick sighed against her breast and gently stroked his thumb across the tender mound. He trailed lingering kisses up to her mouth and then treated her to the most passionate kiss yet. The warmth in his eyes turned her insides to liquid.

Overwhelmed by the emotions running through her, Molly stroked his cheek and allowed her eyes to travel over every inch of his face. He was such a handsome man, so delicious and hunky, she wondered how she got to be so lucky.

"Satisfied?"

Molly nodded. "But I still might come back for more."

He grinned smugly. "You can come, again and again, as often as you like."

Rolling her eyes at his innuendo, Molly traced a fingertip along his eyebrow. Lost for words, she simply stared into his big blue eyes. His charm beguiled her, leaving her feeling both captivated and just a little wary.

*Rose Middleton*  
One Foot Forward

She understood this was temporary, that he felt he had a mission to restore her faith and save her. As noble as he was, she didn't think he understood how precarious her position was.

It wasn't all about the sex. It was about so much more than that. Was he capable of seeing through the tangle of emotions choking her? To see what she really wanted, what she needed?

"Are you okay?"

Nodding, she pressed her lips to his. "Thank you."

Something flashed in his eyes but he covered it quickly. "Don't," he whispered. "I told you, this is real, Molly."

She smiled. "Can't a girl thank you?"

He sighed. "Not when she thinks I'm taking pity on her. I'm not. What do I have to do to prove that to you?"

She didn't answer, left speechless by his exasperated need to make her believe him.

"I will prove it to you," he declared. "Somehow, someday, you will believe me. Right now, you need some rest." He rolled off and got to his feet. "We'll head back in the morning. Sleep Molly," he smiled. "Rest up."

~

In the bathroom, Mick stared at himself. God, when he'd seen them in the mirror, connected so intimately, he'd realised he was in trouble. In his arms was where she was meant to be. In his bed, right by his side, was where she belonged.

What was he thinking?

He splashed cold water over his face and tried to think straight. Okay, no major decisions until his head cleared. He didn't think that was going to happen any time soon, not with one bed in the cottage and the most lovable woman sleeping in it. It would be no trouble at all to slink under the blankets, wrap her up with his body and watch her sleep.

No trouble at all.

The realisation just about shocked him back to life.

*Rose Middleton*  
One Foot Forward

Peering hard at his reflection, he scrutinised his actions, examined closely the decisions he'd made and the words he'd said. Molly brought out a side in him he thought was long gone, a side he thought had perished along with his father.

It struck him dumb to think he was considering the future. He hadn't set foot in such unstable territory in years. What was the point, when life could be snatched away without warning?

For so long he'd rejected the idea of long term relationships, knowing that he risked his life on the job nearly every day. How the hell could he live with himself knowing he could make a widow of a woman?

Like his father did.

Like his mother was.

Mick closed his eyes at the thought of his mother. He should visit her tomorrow; make sure she had everything she needed. That had been his final promise to his father, he'd never let his mother go without.

When he thought back over the worry he'd put her through, he cringed. She'd had enough dealing with the death of his father, but he'd been too selfish to see anything beyond his own pain. He remembered her begging him to sell the bike, to give up racing. He'd ignored every one of her wishes.

Grunting at his greed, he stepped away from the mirror and shook his head. He had a lot of making up to do, though he wasn't quite sure why it was only occurring to him now to do it.

Molly.

He glanced toward the bedroom, longing to be with her again. Why she was so adorable was easy to see. Why he couldn't get her out of his head was a no-brainer. What he was going to do about it was another story.

Clearly, she thought he was still playing the hero, providing sympathy sex to boost her self-esteem. Mick huffed. She couldn't be further from the truth if she tried. Obviously he wasn't terribly great at communicating his intentions, his meanings. He'd do better. Next time.

Stepping over to the door, he flipped off the bathroom light and stared across the moonlit room to her sleeping form. *There will be a next time, Molly*, he silently promised, *and you will truly understand that it's not about pity*. Hell, it wasn't even about sex. He'd made love to her with his heart and soul, something he hadn't done in a very long time.

He'd make sure she understood.

Crossing the room, he climbed in under the blankets and gathered her to him. Despite her sleepy protests, he moulded his body to hers and rested her cheek against his chest. Stroking her temple with his fingertips, he took a deep breath of her scent and smiled. Her contented murmurs warmed his heart and when her arms circled him to hold on tight, Mick became aware of the precious gift he held.

It really was no trouble at all.

~

Molly woke with a start, sitting up straight, a scream caught in her throat. Disoriented by unfamiliar surroundings, her airways tightened and her heart pounded. She half expected the truck to come crashing through the wall.

Rushing into the room, Mick hurried toward her. His eyes wore concern, his face pulled tight with worry. "What is it?"

She tried to breathe but the air jammed in her throat. When she closed her eyes, the scene replayed itself, only faster and more crushing than the last time. Her arms flailing, she tried to stem the tears, but it didn't work.

Terrorised by the dream, she locked eyes with Mick and pleaded for his help. "Jesus, Molly, what is it?"

"Truck," she gasped. The minute she said it, she felt the impact all over again and jerked backward.

"Oh, God." He gathered her in his arms. "You remember, don't you?"

Wishing she could turn back time, Molly cried and nodded. Her hands gripped his shoulders in a vice-like hold, her nails digging in for extra leverage.

She remembered all right. Every last detail. The speeding truck had run a stop sign, and then ploughed straight over the top of her small car. Its loaded tray had come to rest on her roof, its rear wheels settling on her with a crushing force. She felt the bones in her lower leg snap and crackle like autumn leaves underfoot.

"Molly?"

She heard his voice in the distance, above her. Fighting off the darkness threatening to claim her, she called to him but couldn't see him. Hands cupped her face and he said her name again, firmer this time. She blinked and her vision cleared. Mick's concerned eyes loomed in front of her.

"I remember it all," she choked. "Everything. *Everything.*"

"You need to calm down, Molly. Can you take some deep breaths for me?"

She tried, coughed, spluttered and tried again.

"Good girl. You're okay, you're safe. There's no truck now."

She took another deep breath and her nose filled with Mick. His scent helped relax her.  
"It felt so real."

"It was real, honey. But you're okay now." His crooked smile helped ease the squeeze on her lungs.

"I'm sorry."

He frowned. "Why?"

"I never thought I'd remember. I didn't want you to have to worry about me."

"Oh," he smiled. "Don't you worry about that, little lady. Maybe I should apologise."

"Why?"

"It's obvious my presence is triggering your memories. It's my fault."

"No." She snapped the word firmly and loosened her grip on his shoulders.

He smiled warmly. "Let's just concentrate on making sure you're okay. Can I get you something?"

As he asked the question, Molly became acutely aware of the throbbing in her leg. Almost afraid of what she'd see, she lifted the blankets to find her stump red raw. She must've thrashed about enough to upset the sensitive skin. "Do you have any painkillers?"

He shook his head and then smiled. "What about these?" He held up his hands. "Let me."

Freeing her leg from the covers, Mick rested her thigh over his and got to work massaging the end of her leg. It felt oddly strange having him touch her so lovingly, even stranger considering the intimacy with which he'd touched her last night.

"It's only muscle memory," he said softly, his voice soothing her. "Triggered by the dream. You haven't done any damage."

"No one's touched it the way you do," she confessed. "Everyone's so afraid of it."

Glancing up at her, he shook his head. "I'm not afraid, Molly. I told you that." She nodded, his words echoing in her head. "You really should trust me."

The trouble with trusting him was it left her open to wanting more from him. Given the temporary nature of their affair, Molly wanted to keep her heart intact.

## **Chapter 7**

At a little after midday, Mick directed the Jeep up the long winding driveway of the sprawling estate. Sunlight dappled the roadway through patches of shade, and as he rounded the bend, the closed in forest opened out to vast expanses of manicured green lawns.

Towering native manna gums and stringybark eucalyptus gave way to sculpted English roses, showing him the rest of the way. As he did every week, Mick rolled down the window and took in deep breaths of the clean country air. Unexpectedly, it reminded him of Molly.

He smiled at the memory of her heart-shaped face and sighed contentedly at the memory of her touch. When he dropped her at home this morning, he'd had a terrible time dragging himself away. He still ached to touch her, taste her. It took every ounce of strength not to follow her inside the neat house.

Mick tried to shake her from his thoughts and failed. Well, it wasn't much of a hardship really. Having Molly on his mind simply reminded him of what he had to go home to. How could he even contemplate complaining?

At the enormous house, Mick pulled to a stop and cut the engine. It was an old style Bavarian mansion, though he never failed to note the Australian touches. A wide, open veranda circled the entire home and was littered with wooden furniture topped with big comfy cushions. He smiled fondly as some of the residents lounged about on the perfect spring day. Two nurses tended to them dutifully.

He didn't know how he'd found this place, he was just glad it existed. The cost was worth the peace of mind, knowing his mother was in good hands. He shuddered to think what would happen to her if she were in an aged care home, or worse, alone at home. But here, she was assured prime care.

Leaving the car, Mick ambled up the gravel path. He smiled and waved at some of the residents he'd come to know over the past two years. Most of them could probably manage on their own, he realised. They lived here for the company and the social contact because in their own homes, they'd suffer isolation and loneliness. The fact they treated his mother with absolute reverence eased his worry.



"Hello, Mick!" Nurse Sara called. She was a petite woman, close in age to his mother, who was the youngest resident at the home. "It's good to see you."

He nodded and smiled. "And you. How are things?"

"Oh," she chuckled. "The usual. Nothing dramatic happens here, and it's the way we like it. Your mother is in her room."

He paused. "How is she?"

Sara's smile faltered. "Not so good, Mick. She's withdrawn and doesn't talk very much at the moment. No one seems to be able to help her. But," Sara beamed. "You're here, and that will help."

Mick's heart plummeted into his stomach. He thought she was happy here, that being around such loving and caring people would keep her thoughts positive. It was selfish of him to hope she'd get over his dad this way, but he didn't know what else to do.

Climbing the big winding staircase, Mick twirled the single rose between his thumb and index finger. He'd cut it fresh from his grandmother's garden. Actually, he'd chosen two perfect blooms. One for his mum and one for Molly.

His breath hitched at the memory of Molly's expression upon seeing the flower. So far, he'd witnessed the same expression each time he'd given her flowers. Like no one had ever been so thoughtful and romantic before. The delight and surprise in her eyes helped wash away the terror he'd felt for her earlier. For her too, he suspected the light moment eased the crushing blow of the returned memory.

Entering the room quietly, Mick found his mother curled up in an oversized armchair, a brightly coloured crocheted blanket draped over her knees. Her eyes were closed, her breathing slow and shallow. If he wasn't mistaken, she had more grey hair.

Padding quietly across the carpet, he neared her to set the soft rose petals against her cheek. She stirred and took a long, deep breath before smiling. "Michael," she whispered, opening her eyes. "You're here."

He nodded and touched a kiss to her forehead. "I'm here, Mum. How are you?"

"Tired," she breathed, taking the rose from him. "You've been to the cottage."

He moved to the window and opened it to let in some fresh air. "It's beautiful outside, why are you in here?"

She shrugged, though it was barely noticeable that she'd moved at all.

*Rose Middleton*  
One Foot Forward

Struggling to contain his frustration, Mick pulled over another chair and sat beside her. He examined her face closely. Eyes sunken, cheeks hollow. Now more than ever before, she looked sad and exhausted.

He was struck by the need to apologise to her on behalf of his father. She should never have suffered, should never have lost her husband. Even when Mick was a kid, he knew how much they loved each other. For so long he'd prayed to find a love so deep, a devotion so focussed on one person.

When his father died and he watched helplessly as his mother spiralled into depression, Mick rejected any such notion. To love one person so profoundly only left you open to intense hurt when something went wrong.

"How is work?"

His mother's soft voice drew him out of his melancholy. Mick smiled. "Everything's good. We're all fine. Nate sends his love."

"Is he still single?"

Mick nodded. "He'll never settle down Mum, he loves all women way too much for that."

She smiled, the expression lighting her face and making her look ten years younger. At fifty-one, she wasn't old, but she looked older than her age. He supposed grief did that to a person. "So long as he's happy, dear."

Blinking, Mick was shocked by her change in attitude. She'd always harped on about finding *the one* and settling down, both to him and to Nate. What had changed? "Glenn sends his love, too."

Her face grew sad at the mention of Glenn and her eyes grew distant for a moment. Memories of Glenn and his father, clowning around down at the creek, filled Mick's childhood. They'd been thick as thieves since they were boys, which was why Glenn took Joe's death so personally.

Glenn struggled to find peace with himself, believing he'd been responsible. From a professional point of view, there was nothing more Glenn could have done. It was Joe who'd broken protocol and gone after the kids trapped inside. He should've taken back-up, should've listened to the orders of his superior.

Perhaps the most tragic consequence was that Glenn couldn't face Celia. Oh, they'd hugged at the funeral, but no words had been exchanged, no feelings communicated. Mick knew it was killing them both to keep the silence, but he didn't know how to fix it.

"Is he well?"

"Yep, doing just fine. Maggie sends her love, too."

She smiled nostalgically at the mention of Glenn's wife. "I miss them, Michael."

"They miss you, too," he said softly, stunned by yet another turnaround in his mother's attitude. What had gotten into her? "I'll bring them next time."

"No, no," she shook her hand at him. "They have busy lives. They must have grandkids by now. Let them be."

Exasperated, Mick twisted his hands together. For months now he'd wanted to shake some sense into the woman, make her find a way out of this miserable mindset. But she was his mother, it wasn't his place to tell her how to live and he didn't understand how to treat depression. The idea he could make things worse always stopped him from taking action.

"Is there anything you need?" he said finally, changing subjects to save himself from saying something stupid. "Would you like me to bring you anything?"

"No," she patted his hand. "I'm fine."

"Well then, indulge me and come for a walk outside?"

She sighed and shook her head at him. "Like a dog with a bone, aren't you?"

Mick grinned, though he remembered how she used to finish that line with *just like your father*. He tried to keep his hurt locked away, unsure of what had happened to make her stop talking like she'd lost the love of her life. Selfish as it may be, he needed her to still love his father.

"Sure am." He stood and offered her his arm. Seconds ticked by before she finally accepted it. "You won't regret this, come on."

"So tell me," she began once they were outside, strolling along the neat row of roses in bloom. "Are you seeing anyone?"

His mind instantly turned to Molly and his reaction must have been obvious for his mother grinned and squeezed his arm. "Who is she?"

Mick fumbled for the right words. How did he explain Molly? How did he explain the fact he'd gotten so intimate so quickly? Groaning, he wondered how the hell to explain it to himself, let alone his mother.

"Her name is Molly," he nodded, starting at the beginning. "I think you'd really like her."

Turning her face up to him, his mum frowned. "How long have you been seeing her?"

Biting his lip, Mick said, "We met two years ago."

Celia stopped and stared at him. "And when were you planning on telling me about her? After you married her?"

Married? Crikey.

"It's not like that," he hurried to explain. "We met two years ago but I hadn't seen her since. Until Friday night. She bought me at the auction."

Humour passed through her eyes. "*You* were on auction?"

He thought he'd told her. "It was for charity, for the Fund."

Recognition wiped the expression from her eyes and he wanted to kick himself. "I see."

"Anyway, we went out to dinner on Saturday."

"And do you intend on something long term, or is she just a flash in the pan?"

"*Mum!*"

"Well," she shrugged. "I know you. You haven't had a serious relationship since..." her voice cracked as her eyes watered. "Well, you know."

"Molly's not like that," he said defensively. "She's too special to be used like that."

"So you do intend to marry her?"

And there it was again, the M word. What was his mother going on about? One minute she's harping on about marriage, the next she's on about sowing his wild oats and now she's on about marriage again? Mick was confused.

"Michael Joseph Knight." He turned, surprised by her stern voice. "If this girl is so special, then why can't you answer my question?"

His mouth fell open as he stuttered. Deep in his chest, his heart tap danced on his lungs, preventing him from breathing properly. Oh, he was in so much trouble he couldn't begin to work it all out.

"It's complicated, Mum," he murmured softly. "There are issues."

Celia clucked her tongue and shook her head. "Issues? Complicated? Michael, life isn't easy and sometimes the hardest things to overcome offer the sweetest reward. All I ask

is that you don't hurt the girl unnecessarily. The look on your face tells me she's a wonderful girl. Try and respect that."

His mother was right. Molly wasn't just wonderful, she'd been hurt and betrayed by men. Not once but three times. In trying to remind her she was desirable, he was playing a dangerous game with her heart. She wasn't the kind who went for casual flings and he needed to remember that.

Turning to his mum, he rested his palm against her cheek. "Do you still miss him?"

She nodded, swallowing as her eyes watered. "Too much."

"And you still think about him?"

"Every single day."

He smiled. "I want you to meet Molly. Can I bring her along?"

"Any girl who makes you happy is welcome here."

"Good," he nodded. "Now, tell me what's going on with you. Why did Nurse Sara tell me you've become withdrawn and unsociable?"

~

With a long day of duties out of the way, Molly found a few moments at the end of her shift to sit alone. Her mind instantly turned to Mick. Truth be told, he hadn't been far from her thoughts all day. She'd dreamt about him again, wondering how he'd spent the rest of the day after dropping her at home. He didn't call, and while she tried to be cool and calm about it, the silence was deafening.

When Thursday dawned, Molly woke tired and weary. Restless nights never sat well with her, especially when she was worried. But she'd had to focus on her job, tend to the young man she'd met earlier in the week and help his equally young family come to terms with his injuries.

She'd been there before, understood his pain, his wife's pain. Explaining it all to their two year old, however, had sapped her strength. The little trooper took it well, though Molly doubted the boy truly understood that his father would never walk or play footy again.

Needing a few moments of peace, she skipped dinner and headed for her car. Now, as she sat in the quiet, processing her day, Molly felt her heart resume its normal rhythm.

Naturally, her mobile phone buzzed, disrupting her reverie. Snatching it up, she immediately recognised the number and groaned. Not now, she wished, *not now*.

"Hi, Jane."

"Where have you been?" Jane sounded frantic. "I've been trying to call you since Sunday. Are you okay?"

"Slow down Jane," she smiled, oddly comforted by her friend's worry. "I'm fine. I'm just leaving work."

"So, where have you been?"

Molly hesitated, not ready to hear Jane berate Mick or the fact they'd spent so much time together. "Out."

Jane sucked in air harshly. Molly imagined her face turning red with the strain of holding back. "Where's out, exactly?"

"Away from home, not at work, out of phone range. Jane, I'm tired and I've got a long drive. Please don't harass me."

"Harass? When do I harass anyone? Gee, you'd think there'd be a little gratitude for the worry you've put me through. Don't even try to call Seb, he's sick with fright for you. You go out all day and night and don't tell anyone, what were you..." Silence. "Oh."

Molly swallowed a grin as Jane finally clued in. "Glad you see my point, Janey."

"You were with Mick?"

"I was."

"Honey," Jane's voice softened. "Are you okay?"

Unable to hold it in any longer, Molly burst out laughing. Jane made it sound like such a hardship to spend some time with the man. "I'm better than okay."

"Are you saying—?"

"I'm saying that it was nice to spend time with him and talk. He's not the monster you're making out."

Jane hummed, sounding annoyed. "So you still think he's a hero?"

"A sexy, down to earth, bona fide hero. You betcha."

"Molly, be reasonable. Mick is an okay guy, but he doesn't do relationships. You'll get hurt again."

Yes, she'd realised that at some point over breakfast yesterday. The trouble was she'd not only come to trust him, but had come to rely on him. Too much.

With Mick, she felt stronger, more whole than ever and much more positive about the future. He'd gone and surpassed the heroic image she had of him with his chivalrous, noble ways. But, on their way home, Molly had realised something else, too. Being with Mick had opened her eyes again. Pushed beyond the comfort of her tiny little world, she'd stepped back into life with a raging need to live it to the full. That was why she'd spent part of her day with the prosthetic technician, picking out a new leg.

Funny how it felt to be browsing through an electronic catalogue of prosthetic limb designs. Heck, she'd even chosen to have the Australian flag printed on the titanium alloy. That ought to catch the attention of her coach when she rocked up for training in a few days' time.

She still had a multitude of tests to run and measurements to make. And she didn't doubt for one single moment that the early days would be nightmarishly painful. She'd learnt that long ago, walking for the very first time on an artificial leg.

She couldn't, however, ignore the tingle of excitement in her belly. In days she'd have a new leg, one designed and built purposely for long distance running. In weeks, she'd be running, churning up the track and feeling the wind whistle in her ears once more. Hard work always paid off, and she wasn't afraid of hard work by any means.

In a flight of fancy, she envisioned herself running alongside Mick down by the lake as the sun set behind them. Suddenly, she couldn't wait to tell him her plans, invite him along. She'd show him she could run again, that she wasn't giving in to circumstance. Eventually she'd put his concerns about pain at ease, though the early days would prove him right. It didn't matter, she was going to run again.

Turning her attention back to the conversation, Molly prepared to wind things up. "Jane, I appreciate your concern, I really do. But you need to let me make my own judgements. And if this is a mistake and I do get hurt, I'll figure it out when the time comes. Why are you so down on Mick, anyway?"

Jane was quiet for a moment. "You know about his father, right?"

"That he died, yes."

"That he was a fire fighter, too, and died in an apartment building blaze about a year before your accident."

Humbled, Molly dropped the attitude. "Jane, why are you telling me this?"

And why hadn't Mick told her any details?

"Because it's important you know everything, Molly. Did he say anything about his mother?"

Frowning, Molly shook her head. At least the length of the conversation would help her miss the worst of the traffic. "No. Why?"

"Because, Molly," Jane sighed, sounding as if she didn't really want to say anything. Too late now, Molly thought glumly.

"Why, Jane?"

"He's a monster Molly. Don't fall for him."

"What? What are you talking about? Mick is a great guy, attentive and caring, and hot to boot. There's nothing wrong with him."

"No? So why has he stashed his mother in some mental institution out in the country?"

Molly blinked. "Excuse me?"

"You heard me, Molly. He doesn't want to have to deal with her so he's hidden her away, put her in the hands of spin doctors to try and cure her condition."

"Her condition?"

What the heck was Jane talking about? Mick had said no such thing about his mother. Then again, she realised, he hadn't said anything about his mother at all. He'd avoided the issue of his father completely, conveniently hiding behind a mask of hurt.

If there was one thing her day yesterday served to do, it was to make sure she felt comfortable enough to confront him on the issue. She'd do that as soon as she got home.

"Jane, you're not making sense. Why are you being so irrational? I'll clear the air with Mick."

Jane made a choking sound. "What? You'll do no such thing, young lady."

Molly wanted to know where Jane got her information. If it was her brother, well, Molly seriously doubted that idea. Nate was loyal to Mick and she was highly sceptical of best mates dishing the gossip on each other. But if not Nate, then who? She didn't know Mick well enough.

"Relax, Jane, I'm sure everything will be fine."



“Fine?” The dismissive tone in Jane’s voice grated on her nerves. She’d never spoken to Molly like this. “Are you kidding? You’re more naïve than I thought you were. Open your eyes and see Mick for who he really is.”

Here we go again, Molly thought, trying to shove aside Jane’s accusatory tone to the truth of her argument. “And who is he, Jane, really?”

“He’s just like the others,” Jane hissed. “Insensitive, unfeeling, a damn good actor. Whatever you do, don’t trust Michael Joseph Knight. I swear it. You’ll end up getting hurt again.”

The line went dead, causing Molly to pull the phone away from her ear and stare at it. It was expected her friend might worry after not hearing from her, especially after a few days. And it was like Jane to bombard her with demanding questions. Those parts of the conversation made sense.

But why was Jane so adamant Mick had done something wrong? And how did she know about his mother?

Molly started the car and left the underground car park. The heavy traffic eased her mind, let her concentrate on something else for a while, but at red light, Molly sighed in resignation. She was never going to make sense of Jane.

She would have to go straight to the horse’s mouth and ask Mick outright. The thought didn’t exactly appeal to her. Despite his direct approach to intimacy with her, he hadn’t been so forthcoming in other areas. Their whole conversation during dinner on Monday night had been focussed on her. Deliberately, she thought, he’d steered it in her direction, away from himself.

Accelerating at the green light, she realised it was becoming clear Mick didn’t particularly like the being in spotlight. He preferred to pamper and attend to others, and as good as that was, it had its place. Right now, he needed to step up.

She didn’t know if he would. Maybe if she was already armed with information, she could ask the right questions and get the truth. The next hurdle was figuring out where to get such information. Molly could only think of one person she could ask. The question was whether he’d tell her what she wanted to know. After all, she’d ruled him out of the role of informant to Jane, so the chance that Nate would confide in her was only marginally greater than zero.

Molly sighed, coming to a halt in the gridlock around her. She hated the idea of going behind Mick’s back to find out information. Understanding the effort it took to trust another person left Molly doubting her own idea. If there was one thing she knew, it was the consequence of breaking a person’s trust.

Regaining such trust took a miracle.

Did Mick even trust her? He used his talents of deflection to avoid talking about himself quite well. So while he knew everything about her, she knew next to nothing about him. Knowing he was a damn good lover wasn't enough.

When traffic got moving again, she wondered if there was any good way to approach Nate on the subject. She needed time to think on it and consider her options carefully. The last thing she wanted to do was upset anyone. As the sky around her darkened, Molly headed for the gym. Losing her thoughts to the rigors of exercise would give her the distance she needed.

Sooner or later, she had to get over the fear of looking out of place. How else was she supposed to build her fitness again? After all, she longed to run and now she'd finally put the desire into motion. With her bag of gym clothes on the back seat and her membership renewal form already signed, she just had to bite the bullet and get on with it.

She expected the shocked expression she received from the owner, Sam Mendes, and his faithful team of personal trainers. What she never expected, was to be scooped up in the biggest of bear hugs. He whooped loudly and grinned at her. At six feet five and almost three hundred pounds, the ex-wrestler might seem scary to some. To Molly, Sam only exemplified kind heartedness. "You're back!"

Molly laughed. "I am. And I want to run again."

He only gave a single, assured nod and took her by the hand. "Come with me, young lady."

She followed him into the small interview room, set her bag on the floor and waited until he closed the door. In the confined space, Sam's bulk loomed large but the warm, welcoming expression in his eyes quelled the butterflies in her belly.

"You know we've been waiting for you, right?"

A nervous laugh bubbled out of her. "Really?"

"Honey, all the regulars keep asking about you. I've run out of things to tell them. But before I let you loose on the floor, there are some things we need to clear up."

*Okay, here it comes*, she thought worriedly. No doubt he needed to satisfy the insurers that she was safe to train again, that she wasn't a liability waiting to happen. And of course he'd want to make sure she knew the risks about being so active on her leg again. Good thing she'd mentally prepared some answers beforehand.

"Sure," she smiled, putting on a brave face. "Shoot."

"First of all. How have you been?"

"Fine. My leg has healed and the doctors have given me the green light to train."

The corner of his mouth quirked, as an eyebrow arched questioningly. "No. How have you really been? I'm asking as a friend, Molly."

When she smiled this time, Molly meant it. "I'm good, Sam. Eager to get back to my running."

"That's what I wanted to hear. And," he glanced down at her leg. "I take it you have a special leg to train on?"

"Not yet," she chuckled. "But it's not far away. I'm sure it'll turn a few heads."

"Molly, no one is going to judge you. You're welcome here."

He seemed eager to put her worries at ease, a fact which vindicated her choice to return. Molly touched his gigantic bicep lightly. "Thank you."

"Good, now let's get you training again, eh?" Molly nodded eagerly. "We'll start with a fitness test and see how those lungs are working."

## **Chapter 8**

Pressing the doorbell sent a thunderous *ding-dong* sounding through the house, making her jump. She never had gotten used to the sound, though being outside at least gave her ears a buffer against it.

Molly waited patiently, crossing her arms over her chest against the night chill. Darkness had crept in early tonight, with a spring cold snap surprising them all. Rubbing her arms, she had to hold herself still when the huge, heavy wooden door swung inwards.

"Molly?"

Grinning through the dark, she nodded. "Hey, Nate. Got a minute?"

Ushering her inside, he directed her into the massive family room and the roaring fireplace that waited there. Spring may have sprung, but in Melbourne, winter was never far away. Clearly, the King household had firewood handy all year round. She could even remember one Christmas, the middle of a blazing Australian summer, unwrapping presents by the open fire.

"What?" Nate smiled, extending a mug of steaming brew to her.

Molly chuckled. "Do you remember that Christmas when we all thought it would snow?"

He nodded. "Oh yeah. Honestly, a white Christmas would have made history."

Giggling, Molly moulded her hands to the warm mug and thanked him. Sipping the hot chocolate, she relaxed in the comfortable surroundings. "I think I spent half my childhood here," she mused, taking in the deep, thick white pile carpet and high ceilings.

Jane and Nate's home hadn't been terribly different from her own. Despite growing up under the guidance of her oldest brother, Molly never felt different from the other kids. Jane, of course, defended her at the slightest hint of anything untoward. Nate, too, though his association with his little sister grew deliberately distant during high school. What older brother wanted to be seen hanging around his kid sister?

"So, to what do I owe the pleasure?"

Molly lowered the mug and took a deep breath. The worst he could do was say no, right? Still, her tummy fluttered and her heart stuttered at what she was about to do. Reasoning that it was the only way to get information didn't ease her worries.

"I have some questions..." she began but stopped when Nate raised a hand.

"If it's about Mick, you've come to the wrong man, kiddo. I think you know that."

She sighed, accepting his loyalties lay elsewhere. "Oh well," she shrugged. "I needed to try."

His eyes narrowed. "Why? What has he done?"

Unexpectedly, she laughed. "Nothing wrong. Mick has been a perfect gentleman, which is why I should never have come here."

Dragging a hand through his hair, Nate groaned. "Oh man. I knew it was a bad idea."

With her curiosity piqued, Molly set her mug on a coaster and turned to Nate. "Pardon? What was a bad idea?"

"You," he said pointedly. "Buying Mick at the auction. When Jane told me, I knew straight away it was bad. Lemme guess, he's been sweet and tender and sensitive. Right?"

"And what's wrong with that?"

Molly heard the defensive note in her voice and smiled inwardly. She'd never had trouble going toe-to-toe with Nate. He didn't scare her, or rather, he didn't make her go weak at the knees like most other women.

When it came to Nate, Molly understood his charming ways. More importantly, she could see right through them and, almost with x-ray vision, could see what he was up to.

"What's wrong with that?" He repeated her words, incredulity wobbling his voice. "You're my sister's best friend. You're like a sister to me, Molly. I'd never forgive myself if he hurt you. Now what's he done?"

"Nothing..." Except make sweet, passionate love to her. But she was not adding that. "It's more like what he hasn't done."

"Huh?"

Chuckling at his odd expression, Molly gave Nate a little push toward the couch. When they were seated, she continued. "I want to know about his family, except he dodged the topic altogether. Quite skilfully, I might add, suggesting he's practised that a few times."

Sighing heavily, Nate nodded. "If there's one thing I'll say about Mick, it's that he's deeply protective of his family."

"Jane told me about his dad."

"Joe was a good man," Nate said honestly, the ghost of a smile touching his lips. "I was there that night, saw the whole thing. It's been tearing Mick up ever since it happened."

She understood that. Who wouldn't? With Mick's need to protect and defend those he loved, his sense of helplessness and guilt over his father's death was profound. The fact he couldn't talk about it reinforced it. "And his mother?"

Nate turned away. "What did my sister tell you?"

"You know Jane," she said softly, not wanting to start a fight between the two. When Jane and Nate went for it, fur flew and everyone got out of the way.

"Yeah," Nate's head swung around. "I know Jane. I s'pose she told you some outrageous story about Mick stuffing his mother in a mental institution, right?"

Mental institution, those were the words all right. Yet, from Nate's pained expression, Molly sensed the truth was very different.

"Nate, I think the truth is important here."

"I don't want to say anything," he growled, leaping to his feet and pacing in front of the fireplace. "It's not my place. And if you really want to know, you should be asking Mick."

"I know," she lamented. "And it was wrong of me to ask you. You guys are best friends."

His pacing ceased. Nate turned to her and frowned. "But?"

Okay, he read her far too easily, Molly worried. "But isn't there something you can tell me? Maybe not the whole story, but enough to put my mind at ease?"

Shaking his head, Nate resumed his pacing. He muttered incoherently to himself as he zipped this way and that until finally he marched right up to her and grimaced. "She's not in a mental institution. It's a boarding house, run by a private organisation that caters to those who suffer from clinical depression and other mental illnesses."

Seemingly exhausted by his speech, Nate dropped down beside her and pleaded with her. "Celia fell into a deep depression after Joe's death. Mick did everything he could, but in the end, she needed professional help. He couldn't bear the thought of leaving her to live alone."

The corner of Nate's mouth quirked gently. "She's far from crazy, Molly." After a beat, his smile bloomed and his face lit up. "Celia's an amazing woman. You'd like her."

"Now see, that wasn't so hard to say."

Nate shrugged. "Not for me, though if Mick finds out he'll knock me out. But look at it from his point of view. He lost his dad and, to some extent, his mother as well. He's not embarrassed by her, he just doesn't know how to help her."

Molly understood, and Nate's words painted a picture she needed to see for herself.

~

Sleep was the last thing on her mind when she made it home after visiting Nate. Rather than her usual Friday night of pizza and a video, she'd jumped on the net to hunt down some information. Specifically, the name and location of the home Mick's mother was in. Nate had given her nothing to go on, but with her contacts at the hospital, she found four places to fit the description. A few phone calls later, and she had the details.

With a night of tossing and turning under her belt, and a struggle with her conscience about the merit of her actions, Molly had staggered out of bed to prepare for her day.

It wasn't like her to dig up information on someone or something without going straight to the source. But Mick was an elusive man. Her call to his home ended with a short message to his machine, and a call to his mobile phone ended in voicemail.

Why hadn't she called the fire station? She wondered absently as she washed her breakfast bowl. It made sense to conclude he was at work if not at home, but for whatever reason, the thought hadn't occurred to her. In true Molly-style, she simply barged ahead with her plan in spite of the clawing sensation in her gut.

So with the bright sunshine burning off the last of the clouds, she climbed into her car and headed northwest. Gentle, calming music played on the CD player, keeping her relaxed and focussed. It wasn't a long trip, but she had to work hard to stop herself from turning back.

It was a wonder she even did it at all. Talking to Mick would have been the smartest solution but it was too late now. The turn off was in sight and she took it without further ado.

Minnaroo Manor was a privately owned property. Nestled in the foothills at the tail end of the Great Dividing Range, the enormous mansion had been built by a German baron in the 1860s with stone shipped from Germany. Amazingly, the descendants of the original owners still held a substantial share of the property's holdings. Though they preferred to remain silent partners, Molly had read they liked to be involved in the hands-on chores about the place, particularly the landscaping.

As she directed the car through the tall, shady forest, the roadway lined by towering manna gums and stringybark forest, she couldn't help but wonder how anyone needed to tend to native flora. But as the timber tunnel opened up, she understood the need for a team of landscape gardeners.

Roses followed the drive, the blooms filling the air with a sweet scent as she covered the remaining distance at a crawl. They were in perfect order, not a wilted or diseased specimen in sight. The bushes had even been trimmed of the dead flower heads, leaving perfection on display.

Coming to a stop in the small, gravelled car park, Molly was greeted by an older gentleman. He looked to be dressed in his Sunday finest, though she recognised him as the Manor's director. Dr. Magnus Larson was well credentialed to run such a place, with his thirty years of psychiatry practise behind him.

Molly smiled, both at the grey haired man extending his hand, and at the amount of information one could find on the Internet.

"Molly Keating, I presume?"

His distinguished accent caught her off guard. "Yes," she swallowed. "You must be Dr. Larson."

With an easy but refined chuckle, he beamed a smile at her. "Please, call me Magnus. No one is so formal here at Minnaroo."

His grip was firm and sure, and he even closed her door for her. Molly liked him instantly, instinct telling her Mick's mother was in the right hands. "Am I too early?"

"Not at all," he nodded. "But if you'll allow, I'd like to show you around a little. I'm very fond of the facility we've built, and I'm sure, once you get to meet some of our residents, you'll see what I mean."

Falling into step beside him, Molly tried to take in the details of the stone work, the textures and materials used to build the home. It was overwhelming, to say the least, and listening to the spritely doctor prattle on with affection for the place, she was struck with a great sense of awe.

"Molly?"

"I'm sorry," she smiled, feeling her cheeks burn with embarrassment. Damn fine time to tune out, she thought. "I was admiring the house. It's just so..."

Setting a big hand on her shoulder, Magnus nodded. "Yes, I know. The Baron really had fine taste. Now, you told me over the phone that you're a nurse?"

Molly nodded. It still felt a little weird to claim the title, but she was slowly growing accustomed to it. "I completed my degree while I was training. I never thought I'd need it, to be honest."

His eyes briefly glanced down at her leg and she knew he'd done his research on her, too. Amazing what one could find on the Internet. "And you took it up because?"

Molly chuffed softly. "I think you know the answer to that," she chided gently. "But then, it really is no secret. When it became apparent that my running days were over, I had to reassess my direction and purpose in life. So, I'm finally putting to good use the information in my head."

He smiled and squeezed her shoulder. She'd forgotten his hand was even there. "That's good to hear."

During their conversation the night before, Molly spoke openly about her intention for visiting. She'd done enough sneaking around for one day and had told Magnus the whole truth. Probably not the wisest of moves, considering he could refuse her permission to speak with Celia Knight.

Talking openly with Celia's personal doctor, however, gave Molly enough insight to understand why Mick kept quiet. And if she was truly honest, then he wasn't sharing because he'd known her for a week. Yet in the same time she'd bared her soul to him, allowed him to see the depth of her emotional and physical scars. A little two way traffic wasn't much to ask.



“As I informed you last night,” Magnus was saying. “Celia is fragile. It might have been three years since her husband was killed, but to her, it may as well have happened yesterday.”

“I understand,” she nodded, hearing the subtle message to tread extremely cautiously. “And I don’t intend on asking questions about her husband.”

Leading her into the cool entryway, Magnus paused and frowned. He seemed unsure of how to put his thoughts into words, a trait she would’ve thought unusual for a man of his intellect. Given the delicate situation however, Molly felt she understood his hesitation.

“This is highly unusual,” she said. “And if you really don’t want me to see her, I won’t.”

The last thing she wanted to do was upset the poor woman.

After a moment, a warm smile finally returned to his eyes and he nodded. “Just keep me posted.”

Climbing the stairs, Molly followed the room numbers until she reached the one belonging to Celia Knight. Feeling somewhat intimidated, she stepped into the open doorway to find the woman curled up in an oversized armchair reading a book.

Finding information about Celia on the net had been a piece of cake. Her work with the Red Cross in remote, outback Australia had garnered numerous humanitarian awards. Caring for the children of Aboriginal communities in far flung corners of the country showed Celia to be a dignified, compassionate woman who epitomised grace and elegance.

Molly smiled. The woman, sitting cosily in her chair with her eyes down, presented an image unlike any Molly had seen. Oh, she’d seen people in the same pose before, but there was something about Celia that defied ordinariness, that repelled mediocrity and invited a sense of stoicism. Molly felt it down to her toes.

When she shifted, Celia raised her head and smiled. Seemingly unperturbed by the stranger in her doorway, she greeted Molly in a soft, welcoming voice. “Come in,” she gestured. “I’m Celia.”

Fragile? “Hi, Celia,” Molly returned the greeting, crossing the room to take Celia’s extended hand. “I’m Molly Keating.”

Celia’s eyes widened momentarily. “And how do we know each other, dear?”

Molly suddenly felt like she was five and had been caught wearing her mother’s jewellery. She couldn’t explain the feeling, but it was strong. “I’m a friend of your son, Mick.”

"You must be the Molly he mentioned when he was here last," she smiled. "My, you are pretty. Please, sit with me."

Celia's compliment took her by surprise and she stumbled. Crossing her feet awkwardly, Molly managed to plop down into a chair. Nervousness got the better of her and she giggled and blushed and couldn't meet Celia's curious gaze. "And clumsy." Molly added.

"Hush," Celia shook her head. "My son spoke very highly of you."

Uh-oh. Just what did Mick say? And when was he last here? "Thank you," Molly tried to relax. "But I have to be honest. He doesn't know I'm here."

Waving a hand in the air, Celia shrugged. "He's too protective of me, I think. Wants to keep me from prying eyes. It's nice, if not a little suffocating."

Paying attention to Celia's features, Molly saw an incredible likeness between mother and son. Particularly their facial features, so similar Molly wondered which features he'd inherited from his father. Perhaps his body shape, she thought, noting Celia was much smaller and narrower than Mick.

"I'm not even sure why I'm here," Molly whispered.

Celia chuckled softly. "My son isn't exactly talkative, dear. Getting information from him can be like drawing blood from a stone. I'm glad you came though. It's nice to talk without Michael hovering about nervously. So tell me, how did you two meet?"

Obviously he wasn't very forthcoming with his mother either, Molly realised. "We met two years ago. He was attending a car accident."

"Oh?" Celia's eyes narrowed. "And you?"

A nervous giggle bubbled out of Molly, sounding rather strangled. "I was in the accident."

The expression on the older woman's face morphed into concern, though Molly shook her head and gently patted her hand. "I'm fine."

"I heard about that accident. My son took that one badly. A lot of them did." A warm hand covered Molly's as those grey-blue eyes fixed on her. "And then you bought him at an auction?"

The memory warmed Molly's insides. "Yep. Thought I could say thanks and donate to a worthy cause in the meantime. I realise I probably should have thanked them a long

time ago, but it never seemed the right time. I had lots of follow up surgery and time spent in rehab,” she shrugged. “It’s been a long road back.”

“So you were quite badly hurt then?”

Molly nodded, deciding the details were irrelevant. “Yes, I was. But it’s been two years now and I’ve healed. I must admit, I never expected to grow so close to Mick in such a short time.”

No, that had come as a complete surprise. The bond between them felt strong, unlike the tenuous connection sometimes shared between two people who share an extreme experience. Thinking it through from various angles, Molly understood that part of what she felt came from Mick’s presence and strength during her darkest day. But she also believed their relationship had grown to be more than that.

Relationship? Wow, she sighed at the weight such a word carried. It signified long term togetherness, not the temporary nature she used to define their time together. She didn’t know if she was ready for it. Her previous attempts at dating had been about propping up her flagging esteem, not about finding Mr. Right and making babies. It had never been about happily ever after.

Good lord, she thought as her heart gave a thump, making babies? She could barely carry herself about, how would she cope running around after children?

“Molly?”

Molly jumped at the hand on her shoulder. She hadn’t noticed Celia move closer, but as she focussed her eyes, she found Mick’s mum right by her side.

“Are you okay?”

“I’m not really sure,” Molly said, incredulous with herself.

“Does it frighten you, being so close to someone?”

It would scare her to death if she didn’t trust Mick so faithfully. The trouble was, he didn’t trust her. “No, no,” Molly forced a light chuckle. “Mick is a good man.”

Smiling knowingly, Celia shook her head. “That’s not what I asked. I understand what it’s like to lose someone you love and, while you may not believe me, I can see how caring for my son might be a little dangerous.”

Dangerous?

“He has a wild streak in him,” Celia continued, her voice wistful as she turned to look out the window. “After his father died, Michael was so consumed with anger he stopped

caring about himself. I worried about him day and night, riding that bike and making plenty of enemies on the race track.”

“Race track?”

Celia nodded and turned back to Molly. “He would cut off other riders, push some off their bikes, ride like there was no tomorrow. One day, he almost found it, too, crashed his bike and nearly gave me a heart attack. That was two years ago,” she smiled. “The only reason he was working the day of your crash was because the bike was at the mechanics and he couldn’t ride.”

Speechless, Molly simply stared at the older woman. Mick seemed like such a stable guy, one with his head firmly attached to his shoulders and in good working order. The story his mother told didn’t fit the image she had of him at all.

She knew he still grieved for his father, had seen first hand the emotion clogging any need to speak about it. But she wouldn’t have expected he’d put himself in harm’s way. What had he hoped to gain from that? Did he hate the world so much he couldn’t stand living in it?

Casting supposition and speculation weren’t going to give her answers. She should talk to Mick, but his mother’s kind eyes kept her rooted to the spot. It was like Celia could see straight into her heart, and it spooked her no end.

“Will you stay for lunch?” Celia inquired. “I would love to show you around the gardens, talk a little more. Do you have the time?”

Molly blinked, suddenly noticing the light in Celia’s eyes. She found her welcoming and engaging, and she couldn’t think of a better way to spend her time. Besides, her appointment to run a few more tests for her new leg wasn’t until much later.

~

Dragging his tired body out of the shower, Mick glanced imploringly at the phone. *Ring, damn it.* As he towelled off, he glared at the phone a couple more times, silently willing it to announce Molly’s call. He knew it was late, that she might even be in bed, but the need to hear her voice made it hard to breathe.

He hadn’t spoken to her in days and he missed her like crazy. Why he hadn’t called was easily explained with work. Pulling double shifts to cover for sick fire fighters had exhausted him, but now he had a few days off and couldn’t think of anything or anyone else other than Molly.

She’d left messages for him, sweet pick-me-up notes in her beautiful angelic voice. Coming home to them kept him going until he could taste her again, hold her, touch her. He had yet to deliver on his promise of a next time.

He groaned at the images playing in his head. The things he'd do once he got her alone again...his cock twitched in anticipation. Damn it, *ring*.

Scrubbing the towel over his head, he dried his hair and then secured the towel around his hips. He was about to sort out some fresh clothing when the phone finally sprang to life. Almost with a shout of glee he skipped – *skipped* – across the room, laid flat on the bed and snatched up the phone on the second ring.

"Hey there, beautiful," he crooned.

There was a brief pause and he suddenly suspected Nate was about to make him pay for that greeting. The voice he heard, however, deflated any thoughts of glorious sex.

"Hello, my son."

He sat bolt upright. "Mum?" His heart kicked into overdrive at the sound of her voice. He should dance a bloody jig.

"Yes," she laughed. "It's me. I thought I'd call and say hello."

Call and say hello? First time in nearly two years she was calling him. Inexplicably his eyes burned and his throat itched. "Well hi there," he grinned to the empty bedroom. "Oh Mum, it's so good to hear your voice."

What a breakthrough!

She laughed, full and proud, like she'd done when his dad was alive. "I'm glad you're so delighted. But you must tell me, who were you expecting?"

He cringed at the deep, husky tone he'd used, thinking it was Molly. "Ah," he cleared his throat. "I was kind of hoping it was Molly."

"I see," she giggled. His mother actually giggled. What the hell was going on? Maybe he shouldn't question it, he thought, just in case he jinxed the good turn in her condition. "Well, let me just say that she's a gorgeous lady, and you'd better do your damndest to keep her, young man."

Mick's head threatened to implode. From the sound of Celia's voice, she'd met Molly. That was impossible. Right?

"What do you mean, Mum?"

"I like her Michael, a lot. I think she's perfect."

The rushing in his ears grew louder. “Mum, you’re talking like you’ve met her. Did the doctor’s change your meds?”

“Hush,” she chided, barely containing a laugh. “And don’t sound so shocked. Yes, I did meet her. She came by this morning and stayed for lunch. I wish you’d come with her. We would have had a fantastic day.”

The room around him spun and he gripped the phone with all his strength. How would Molly have known about his Mum? Where did she get her information from? With his belly threatening to eject its contents, Mick gently laid back on the bed and closed his eyes.

Nate. Jane. Glenn. Anyone who knew him really, though he had a hard time believing Nate or Glenn would give up that kind of information. As for Jane, he sighed, well, that was a given. She’d regurgitate whatever rumour and innuendo she’d heard, regardless of accuracy. Anything to make sure Molly wasn’t in the dark.

He was going to tell her about his mum, but he could barely contain the emotions when talking about his father. The thought of opening up about Celia, and the guilt he harboured, threatened to pop him like a can of fizzy drink.

There’d been no ill-will or malicious intent in keeping the truth to himself. He would never have hidden the truth from Molly if she’d asked. Why hadn’t she just asked him? Why had she gone behind his back to get the information?

“Michael, are you still there?”

What the hell did it matter? Molly visited and suddenly his mother was calling him out of the blue. He should be thanking Molly.

“I’m here Mum. God,” he sighed. “It’s so wonderful that you called.”

“I’ve been neglecting you, Michael. In fact, I’ve been hiding from life. I still love your father, but I need to live again. That girl of yours showed me that.”

He grinned, pride swelling his chest. “She’s amazing. Did she show you her leg?”

“Pardon? What about her leg?”

His breath caught in his throat. Somehow, Molly worked her magic on his mother without evoking empathy and compassion for her lost leg. The idea floored him. Molly had simply been Molly, minus the horrific injuries. He couldn’t help but wonder if she’d told his mum anything about the accident at all.

“She lost it in the accident,” he clarified. “She has a prosthetic leg.”

A pause in the conversation gave him enough brain power to find his feet and some clothes. He needed to thank Molly tonight.

"I didn't know that," Celia said softly. "She truly is remarkable. Don't you dare let her go."

Ending with a promise to bring Glenn and Maggie to see her soon, Mick hurriedly dressed. He vaguely acknowledged the two different shades of blue in his socks, but didn't care.

Talking to her, seeing her propelled him to cover up, grab his keys and get the hell out of the house.

Thank God she lived close by. Any longer in the car and he'd have had a coronary.

Bounding up the front path of her neat home, Mick pounded on the door eagerly. No sounds came from the house, no lights flipped on, nothing suggested she was home at all. He thumped on the door again, called her name through the dark.

One more minute, just one, and then he was calling. If she didn't answer the door soon, he suspected his heart might leap out all by itself.

And then, finally, the porch light came on. Mick blinked at the light and hopped from one foot to the other as he listened to the locks sliding open. When the door swung inwards and he caught sight of Molly, his incessant fidgeting came to a complete stop.

## **Chapter 9**

He stood there, like a wax statue, frozen in time. Only his eyes moved, slowly sliding down from her face, lingering over her breasts before dropping down to her foot. Molly tried to keep still, to stay balanced, but it seemed every time he was near, her equilibrium took a holiday.

She felt her body tilt sideways, felt the wobble in her tired arms moments before Mick rushed in. His grip on her upper arms rendered the crutches useless and she resisted the pull of gravity.

"Jesus, Molly," he breathed, his face so close to hers she could taste his minty breath. He'd just showered and smelled so clean and fresh. "Are you okay?"

Convincing him she was tired and weary required too much effort, so she closed her eyes and soaked up the strength he offered. The day had been too long, her appointment with the prosthetist far too exhausting for her to argue with Mick.

"I need to rest," she explained, her eyes popping open to study his face. "There's nothing to worry about."

"You're getting about on crutches and you're telling me not to worry?" He shook his head. "Not gonna happen. Can you stand for a minute?"

Releasing her, he turned to close the door. Once it was locked and secure, he set aside her walking aids and gathered her in his arms. She found herself floating through her dimly lit home in the arms of a hunk, and, rather nicely, the pain in her leg eased considerably.

"You can put me down, Mick," she offered softly, touching the strong jaw she'd missed so much. "I'm okay."

His eyes were a heart rending mix of concern and excitement. In the living room, he set her down on the couch beside him and immediately cradled her pained left stump in his palms. "So why the crutches?"

"I've been on my feet all day. I was getting ready to go to bed. Actually, I thought you might be Jane."

"Oh really?" he drawled with a smile. "I should've known. You girls stick together."

Normally, she'd have a retort to such a remark, but with his big strong hands gently massaging out the aches and pains, Molly was lost for words. During her appointment, she'd tried on two different prosthetic limbs. She'd walked up and down the stairs, jogged along the corridors and even walked blindfolded on the treadmill.

The difference between the titanium alloys and her plastic limb was astronomical. Lighter, easier and far more manoeuvrable, she'd felt like a kid getting a new pair of sneakers. Her initial fears about the ankle joint proved insubstantial as the new technology took away the guess work.

For the first time in eighteen months, she felt like a human being again, she'd felt whole. Despite the pain and the discomfort of the standard, ill-fitting sockets—a cast had been taken for new ones—Molly saw a whole new future.

One in which she could run again.

The thought made her dizzy with joy.

"Well," she sighed, leaning back and resting her head on the arm of the sofa. "Think what you will. She'd been worried, and with Jane you never know when she's going to turn up."



He chuckled, the deep masculine sound reminding her she hadn't seen him in days. "I'm not Jane," he said. She heard shifting before he appeared over her, his body inches away but oh, so close. The scent of soap tickled her nose. "And we need to talk."

Molly groaned at the no-nonsense sound in his voice. "You actually came here to talk?"

He nodded and then pushed away. On his feet, he paced the living room. "I had a phone call tonight," he stopped and turned to her. "From my mother."

Gradually, Molly's heart rate quickened. The resulting pounding in her chest made her ribs hurt. This was the part where she had to explain her actions, justify why she hadn't asked him about his mother and maybe convince him she hadn't intended to hurt him.

Biting her bottom lip, Molly sat up. "That's good, isn't it?"

"Good?" his voice rose. "Good doesn't begin to describe the miraculous change in her. She hasn't called me in almost two years. Since she moved into Minnaroo Manor, the only time I speak to her is when I call or visit. And yet," he laughed, sounding a touch hysterical. "You visit one time and she's making plans again."

Unable to read Mick's mood, Molly stayed silent while he paced. The air grew thick as she waited for him to say something.

While he paced, he flexed his hands, fisting and un-fisting them. His shoulders, pulled high and tight, were bunched with muscle. And his head leaned forward, his focus on the floor in front of him. All in all, he looked angry.

"I'm sorry, Mick. I shouldn't have gone behind your back."

"No, you shouldn't have," he said but didn't stop. "Let me guess, Jane?"

She pushed up to her foot and hopped over to him. Blocking his path, she forced him to a stop. "I asked Nate. He didn't actually tell me much, but Jane had given me some story about your mum being crazy and I wanted the truth."

He frowned, though she saw the hurt in his eyes. "Why didn't you ask me?"

"Why didn't I ask you?" He nodded. "Mick, the other night when we had dinner, you asked me to reserve judgement of you. You wanted to show me the real you, the real man."

"I did."

"And the whole time we were together, you told me very little about you. I learned about your grandparents, and that your dad had died. But that's it. You said nothing about

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One Foot Forward

your mum, nothing about the way your dad died. I understand it's hard to talk about a loved one who's passed away, really I do. But you didn't try."

"My dad was killed trying to save two kids from a burning building, Molly. He was a fire fighter, too, and every time I think of it, it scares the hell out of me."

Yes, she could see that now. "I know it's hard to talk about it."

"Hard? You don't know the half of it, Molly." He stalked away.

Cold air circled around her, leaving her to wonder if she hadn't gone too far. Well, she wasn't stopping yet. "How did you cope with his death, Mick?"

He stood at the window, his back to her. "I didn't. I shoved all the ugly feelings deep down inside and stayed strong for my mum. That's what I did. She needed me to be strong, to take charge. I wish I'd known how to help her. She still hasn't recovered."

"It's not your fault."

"I sure as hell didn't help. I wasn't exactly a model son." Guilt tore through him and he felt the anger start to get the better of him again. "She needed me and I let her down."

"No," she said softly, sounding much closer. When he turned, she was by his side. How did she move so quietly? "She doesn't believe that, so neither should you. I didn't ask you because I didn't think you'd tell me. I'm sorry, I was wrong. You asked me not to judge you and I did just that."

The air rushed out of his lungs when she touched his bicep. And when she looked up at him with those clear brown-green eyes, his anger dissipated. "How did you find her, anyway?"

"A little research on the net, ask a couple of colleagues at work and voila, Minnaroo Manor. Which, by the way, has the most qualified staff to help your mum. You were right to put your faith in them."

Mick felt his chest heave at her approval. God but he hated putting his mother in a home, despised himself for being unable to care for her and raged at the world for bringing this upon them. And yet, with Molly's words and compassion, he felt those awful feelings relinquish their hold on his heart. How did she do that?

"I don't talk about it because I'm ashamed I did it," he confessed. "I'm not enough for her."

"Honey," she rubbed his arm gently before reaching up to press her palm to his cheek. The warmth encouraged him to face her. "She doesn't think that. No one does."

“Jane does.”

Molly smiled, a genuine smile he sensed was for his eyes only. “Jane likes to go off half cocked sometimes. You know that and you know better than to listen to her.”

“You do, too.”

She nodded. “I should have come straight to you. Can you forgive me?”

All games aside, he had no intention of letting her think for one more minute he was angry with her. Wrapping his arms around her waist, Mick pulled her against his chest. He marvelled at her little gasp, glad he could still surprise her with his impulsiveness.

“No more secrets Molly,” he insisted. “Let’s be open and honest.”

“Yes,” she whispered, cradling his face in her hands. “Honest.”

“Good,” he grinned. “Because I came here to thank you. Your visit to my mum has done wonders. I don’t know what you two talked about, but I know she appreciated it.”

“Well,” she sighed, sounding proud of herself. “You know us women. We stick together.”

Setting her down, Mick cupped her chin and pressed a gentle kiss to her forehead. “I’m glad you met her. I’m happy you like her.”

“She’s a wonderful lady, Mick.”

“Mmm,” he hummed, planting butterfly kisses down her cheek. At the corner of her mouth, he paused and smiled. “Like another wonderful lady I’ve recently met. A lady I plan to make love to right now.”

Before she could say another word, his lips crashed against hers in a powerful, hungry kiss. Needing to touch him, she plastered her body against his and wormed her hands under his shirt to find that hot, delectable skin again.

“She’s a lucky woman,” Molly breathed, letting her head drop back as Mick dragged his tongue over her throat.

“Babe, I’m the lucky one. Come on,” he grinned, lifting her off the floor in a bear hug. “Which way to your room?”

~

Setting her on the bed, Mick stood back and slowly stripped for her. His golden body mesmerised her and Molly almost forgot to breathe. When he was completely naked, he spun around and then posed for her.

"You're beautiful," she gulped, her eyes darting over every dip, curve and bulge. Finally, after a lingering look at his impressive manhood, she settled on his eyes. "My turn?"

He nodded, extending a hand to her and helping her upright. "Don't make me wait, Molly."

A nervous flutter erupted in her belly, giving her cause to hesitate. She'd never stripped for anyone in her life, and since the accident, she was too conscious of her flaws to even try.

She wobbled a little, though Mick held her still. With a squeeze of her hand, he gave a nod of encouragement and then reclined on the bed for his show.

Molly began with the white shirt, slowly unbuttoning it down the front. Her eyes stayed connected with Mick's and the strength of the want in them, until his gaze dropped to her chest. The way his pupils dilated and his nostrils flared when she revealed the satin pink bra made her smile. It was nice to know she could still do that to a man.

Dropping the shirt to the floor, Molly carefully turned her back to him, showing him she was releasing the clasp of her bra. Then he was there, his fingers sliding between hers to speed things along until the clasp gave and she was free. Clearly impatient, his hands scooped under the cups of the bra to touch her breasts.

Suddenly unable to move, she let her hands drop to her sides as he kneaded her sensitive nipples. She groaned as they pulled tight and arched her back when he teased them. His cock nudged her bottom, his knee encouraging her to part her thighs. He fitted the hard rod between them and stroked her.

She grew hotter, her panties dampening at the feel of him moving against her female flesh. Dragging in some much needed air, Molly exhaled on a long moan. Using his teeth, he pushed the straps of her bra off her shoulders and she watched it fall to the floor. Her eyes turned to watch his hands squeeze and stroke her breasts.

No longer wanting to be the only one dressed, she quickly loosened her trousers. Mick grunted a needy yes in her ear before his hands slid them down over her hips. Once the material was out of the way, he got to work on removing her pink satin panties. His fingers slid under the material to graze across her belly before he pushed them down and away.

Naked, Molly let him lift her out of the tangle of clothes at her foot and ushered him back. With practised finesse, she made one complete turn for him. He didn't say a word. He didn't need to. The smouldering expression in his hooded eyes said it all.

"I've never done that before," she admitted, feeling her cheeks grow hot.

He moved in to her space, his chest grazing her nipples while his erection nudged her belly. "Did you enjoy it?"

Raking her hands over his shoulders, Molly nodded. "Did you?"

Mick threw his head back and laughed. Her heart skipped a beat at the thought he could be laughing at her, but when his face returned and his eyes met hers, the tightness in her chest eased. "You can do that for me any time, babe," he growled, his lips closing in on hers with speed and purpose.

Molly held on as his tongue explored her mouth. She loved that he was so sure of himself, so confident in his touch. It made her feel truly desirable, and intent on returning the sentiment.

Dragging her hands down his chest, she curled one hand around his shaft and stroked him firmly. After all, one good turn—or should she say stroke?—deserved another. He tried to back out of her grip but she shook her head, "Uh-uh."

"Molly," he sighed. "I'm not really good with that."

Curious, she blinked. "Say again?"

"I'm—" he pulled a face, looking a little lost for words. Finally, he pushed his face against hers and growled softly. "I come too quickly. Satisfied?"

She giggled and shook her head. "Not nearly satisfied enough, Mick, but I'll go easy on you."

His eyes widened playfully as his hands moulded to her behind. With a jerk, he pulled her hard against him. "You're a cheeky one, aren't you?"

Not for a long time, she thought. For so long, she shied away from playful banter for fear of getting in too deep. Sometimes, she even worried that by being happy and enjoying her life, she was disrespecting the seriousness of the accident.

Intellectually, she understood the irrationality of her thoughts. From her experiences, however, she had learned differently. It was like people expected her to be caught up in the near-death experience rather than celebrate the fact she'd lived. Against the odds at that. She wanted to move on, find the long lost spark within her soul and fan it back to life.

"You know," she breathed. "For a man who came here to make love to me, you sure do a lot of talking."

Mick chuckled softly, his breath sending the flyaway curls about her face into a frenzy. "I remember you saying something about being tired and needing rest. What happened?"

Framing his strong face with her hands, Molly sighed over-dramatically, playing up to their little charade. "Let's just say I had a better offer than a quiet night in bed."

"What are you saying? You want some action?"

"Hmm, let's see. I'm naked, you're naked, and look," she grinned. "We happen to be in my bedroom."

Smiling, Mick lifted her off her feet. "I hope you don't give that invitation to just any guy," he said, as he dropped her on the bed and crawled over her. "I think I might get jealous."

"Really?" She quipped, her vision completely filled by his face, her nose entranced by his scent, her body crying out for his touch. "Good thing it's just for you then, I say."

"I'll say, indeed," he hummed, dropped out of her sight to press a kiss between her breasts.

Molly groaned and arched her back to entice him to other, more sensitive areas. He took the hint, licking and nibbling his way up the mound to suck her nipple into his mouth. Unintentionally she yelped at the explosion of heat in her chest and threaded her hands into his hair.

His big body settled on hers while his hands traced the sides of her waist, hips, thighs. There, he spread her wide, hooked her legs around his hips. Clearly, he liked the feel of that. Molly did, too.

He was inside her before she could think another thought, his heat infusing her with wild abandon. But it was his eyes that held her captivated. Holding her gaze with his liquid desire flowing for her to see, he slid along her length and kissed her hungrily. The weight of him between her thighs, his flat hard belly against her softer one, his tight chest raking across her nipples propelled her toward climax at light speed.

Before she could reach it, he slowed to a stop deep inside her. He was everywhere all at once, touching, feeling, tasting like he couldn't get enough of her. All without really moving. Still buried deep inside her. A forced exhale and she realised he'd been holding his breath watching her.

"You really are a beautiful woman, Molly."

She opened her mouth to speak but he captured her lips in a long, slow kiss so full of promise she wondered what else he could offer her. God, she didn't want this to end. Anything so he wouldn't go away and leave her cold and wanting. As his tongue swept through her mouth, his hips moved slowly.

*Rose Middleton*  
One Foot Forward

The depth of his strokes didn't slow her body's response, catapulting her into the longest series of pulsing waves she could ever remember. So long, she had time to cry out, kiss him, pant and growl his name. And still he continued, the smug smile on his lips one she just wanted to eat.

She never anticipated his next move, and never in her wildest dreams thought it possible she'd ever sit astride a naked man again. But with two good knees and a pair of strong, manly hands guiding her hips, Molly could look down on him and ride her wild stallion.

It took a moment to get her balance, his hands very helpful in that department, but once she had it, she could rock her hips and set her own dramatic pace. He wanted it slow, tried to hold her back. Mick had another thing coming.

Her.

Oh dear, she cried out again as her pelvic muscles convulsed and deep satisfaction spread through her like wildfire. Two, and still counting.

"Uh-uh."

He shook his head and rolled them, settling between her thighs with that determined, deliberate slow pace.

"You're trying to kill me," she breathed, her hands buried in his thick shaggy hair. "Aren't you?"

A wicked chuckle greeted her. "Oh no, honey, never. But I made a promise while you slept at the cottage."

Molly frowned. She remembered no such promise. "Which was?"

"To remind you how desirable you are."

"But don't you wanna..." He cut her off with a kiss.

"Come?" He nodded vigorously. "You have no idea." He winked. "But I like watching you. And I'll keep this up until I simply cannot hold out any longer."

They could be here all night, Molly thought. Then she smiled. Like that was a bad thing. "Bring it on."

~

Woken by her scream, Mick had to dodge a flailing arm the second he opened his eyes. When he saw her, his heart skipped a beat.

Wound tight in the sheet, Molly struggled against an unseen evil. Her face was wet with tears, her skin flushed from her writhing and her breathing shallow and rapid. Really rapid. Hyperventilating rapid.

"Molly," he called firmly. "Wake up, Molly."

She screamed again and jerked backwards. The crash. She had to be reliving it again. He wondered how many nights she'd spent trapped in that car from the safety of her own bed. It explained her exhaustion, the reddened tenderness of her stump and it sure as hell explained why she hadn't wanted to go to sleep.

"Molly," he called again, pinning one arm under his body and the other with his hand. "Honey, wake up." Stroking her face, he waited.

When her eyes popped open, he winced at the bloodshot whites. "Mick?" She heaved in air, relaxing enough for him to let her arms go and cradle her face. Shakes racked her body as she blinked rapidly.

"Slow your breathing," he instructed calmly. "That's my girl. You're safe, Molly. Was it the crash?"

Her eyes watered, the tears spilling out of the corners and down her temples.

"How many nights Molly?"

She swallowed, tried to turn away, but he wouldn't let her. The trembling of her chin attracted his gaze momentarily before she whispered, "Every night."

"That's why you wanted to stay awake, wasn't it?" he pushed, stroking her face and drying her tears. God but she looked so vulnerable. Like the first time he'd laid eyes on her.

"Will it ever end?"

He nodded and rested his forehead against hers, silently wondering how long it'd taken for the nightmares to end the first time around. "I don't know when, but it will. You remember it all now, no more surprises."

Finally her breathing slowed, then she sighed and wrapped her arms around his neck. She held him tight, like he was her lifeline. He wouldn't deny it made him feel good and useful, but it scared the life out of him to think he'd become her rock. The responsibility alone weighed heavily on his shoulders. Not because he didn't think he was capable or because he didn't want to. That wasn't it at all. But the very idea screamed long term. A notion he'd never been very comfortable with.



His mother and Nate had him pegged. He was a short term guy. Provide the laughs, the ride and the thrills, and then move on. Leave a good thing, like he had with Molly, long before he got a chance to screw it up. Or before his job got in the way. Which it inevitably did.

He didn't blame women for worrying about his safety. It came with the territory. After all, he ran into burning buildings that could collapse at any given moment. Hell, if his and Molly's livelihoods were reversed, he'd hate it. Which was why he couldn't put a woman through that, why he couldn't risk not being there in the long term.

But when he pulled back and stared down into her trusting eyes, Mick found her staring at him curiously. Her passion blew his thoughts out of the water.

"What are you thinking, handsome?"

He blinked. "My job is all about being there for people, but when you were in that nightmare..." he shook his head. "Good Golly, Miss Molly, for the first time in my life, I couldn't help."

Her thumb scraped across his cheek and her mouth fell open as if she was lost for words. Instead, her gaze did all the talking, lovingly caressing his face. Each time her eyes came back to his, he fell headfirst into them. Far from being scary, it was heaven on earth, or at least the closest thing to it.

The woman had kept up with him last night and into the morning, rolling through the waves of orgasmic pleasure he delivered and demanding more. He'd been the one to give out first but she'd been there to cradle his exhausted body against hers until sleep claimed them.

He knew he needed to clear his head, get a grip and keep things between them light and free. He should get up and shower, maybe take her to the station for a while. Anything to protect them from getting in any further until he knew what the hell he was doing and what on God's green earth he wanted. Inexplicably, he loosened the sheet from around her body and hauled her naked form against his.

"You don't have to keep saving me Mick," she said softly, her palm stroking the side of his face. All Mick wanted to do was lean into it, show her that her touch made him feel invincible. "I'll learn to deal with the nightmares in my own time. I did before."

"How long did it take?"

She shrugged, but her eyes held a heavy cost. "A year, I think. I'd finished with the last operation."

"Most people would've cracked under that kind of strain."

“Most people would’ve gotten over it by then.”

His head jerked back involuntarily. She was still putting herself down? “Molly—”

“No, let’s not talk about this, please? I’m hungry and I’m supposed to be having lunch with Jane.”

He huffed. “To talk about me, no doubt.”

She nodded, a grin on her lips so wide and so kissable he couldn’t stop himself. He leaned in but she spoke before he could make contact. “Oh yeah. I’m going to put that woman straight.”

He paused. “About?”

“About jumping to conclusions and judging a book by its cover and—”

He cut her off with a long, deep kiss, knowing she wouldn’t betray his trust about his mum. Safe in the knowledge she was about the only one capable of putting Jane in her place, he grinned. “How long have we got before you have to go?”

Molly giggled and hooked her right leg over his hip. “For you? Lots of time, bubba.”

## **Chapter 10**

Molly knew she was pushing the pain threshold in a big way. She was down to a walk on the treadmill, her heart pounding and her lungs burning, but she refused to stop. Marcus glared at her, his eyes a cross between a plea to stop punishing herself and a challenge to see how far she could go.

So far, the titanium prosthesis hadn’t impeded her running. Her flow was back, her legs pumping in a steady rhythm and feeling good. Well, except for her stump, which screamed blue murder. Like she’d taken a scalpel to it and had starting slicing.

It wasn’t until Dennis Richards, the prosthetist, hit the stop button that she ceased moving. Sweat ran down the centre of her spine, sliding under the elastic of her shorts and tickling enough to make her squirm.

“Let’s take a look at that leg, shall we?” he said it so casually, like it was just another leg. She loved it. No special attention here.

Until meeting Dennis, Molly hadn’t spent any time with other amputees. Heck, she hadn’t even known he was one until an hour ago. Unlike her, he was born without a

lower leg, something she could not possibly comprehend. The resulting condition and implications however, she knew inside out.

“Well?”

Her right leg bounced impatiently as she sat and waited for him to examine her red stump. He nodded. “How does it feel?”

Molly pulled a face. “How does it look?”

“Fair enough. But the socket feels better now?”

Her new socket felt almost as good as a second skin, though how she dealt with the sweat once it got in was anyone’s guess. “Much, much better.”

Dennis picked up the item in question to examine it. “There’s a new material called dry-fit, which is designed to literally direct sweat away from an area. Want to try it?”

Molly widened her eyes in question. “More info, please.”

He laughed. “It fits like a sock over your stump and the designer says it will push the sweat up and out of the cup. That’s the biggest problem here, isn’t it?”

Molly nodded, watched dumbfounded as he stood and went over to his toolbox of bits and pieces. The man was a legend with a screw driver, could fix almost anything. When he returned, he held a scrap of material stretched over his palm. It looked like any other piece of fabric she’d seen before, but when she touched it, she sensed the difference immediately.

“When you come back, I’ll have a sock made for you. You’ll see how good this is.”

“Not now?”

Marcus touched her arm, causing her to turn. “Honey, I think you’ve had enough for today.” He nodded toward her stump. When Molly followed, she saw what he meant. “Give it time, it’ll work out.”

Of all the things she’d been through since the accident, the waiting was the worst. Absolute, bona fide worst. While she could be patient in her professional capacity, Molly lacked it in her personal dealings. Especially when it came to her stump. Marcus knew it as well as she did.

“Okay,” she sighed, hating that she was giving in this time. “Tomorrow.”

Rolling his eyes, Marcus focused his attention on Dennis. “Thanks again. I have surgery in an hour. I’ll be back tomorrow.”

Molly sighed again. "You don't have to be here, Marcus, I'm okay by myself."

He laughed as he made for the door. "I don't doubt that, little sister, not one bit. But you need someone to put on the brakes every now and then or you'll wear yourself out. We can't have that. Not if you intend on running the Melbourne Marathon."

She watched the door swing shut behind him. The Melbourne Marathon? He couldn't possibly mean this year's event, it was only a month away. The annual October run had been one of her favourites, and she'd won it twice before qualifying for the Commonwealth Games. Since the accident, Molly believed she'd never run it again, but perhaps in twelve months' time, she'd be good as gold.

Her eyes swung to Dennis who grinned at her eagerly. "A year from October? You'll be fine."

"Are you kidding? I barely managed twenty minutes on the treadmill? Didn't even cover two kilometres. Now how would I ever finish forty-two of them?" She just about shrieked when the reality of it hit her. At that pace, she'd finish in seven hours! A far cry from her sub two hours twenty minutes, that's for sure.

Dennis tilted his head and looked at her wistfully. "Do you remember what it was like when you started out?"

"Dennis, I was ten when I realised I was a long distance runner. Now, if I'd picked it up in my teens, that would be more useful. I have to start from scratch."

He pulled a face. "Are you saying it's too hard? That you're not up to the challenge?"

That got her. "No way." She grinned sheepishly, seeing the trap he'd sucked her into. "You're sneaky."

He nodded and beamed a prideful smile. "You betcha. But look on the bright side, you've got twelve months to prepare."

Well, yes she did. Ordinary folk managed to train up for the big event, and so could she. So what if her lungs screamed out in agony. Who cared if her leg itched like mad? She'd finish the race if it killed her.

Based on her experience, Molly suspected she'd need twice as long to prepare. On one hand, there was her aerobic fitness. On the other, there was her leg. But already she'd noticed the improvement with a lighter prosthetic. In twelve months, she'd be cruising.

Lungs first. Leg second.

~

He needed to be honest with her. To bring up every last picky issue he was yet to resolve. Like kids. Did she want them? Did he? And marriage. Where did she see them going? How did she feel about his job?

Mick paced the floor impatiently. As much as he wanted to know the answers, he was actually scared to hear what might come out of her mouth. It wasn't like he could ask Jane for some advice, either. She'd probably tear his head off. She never did approve of him, and since he'd been seeing Molly, she'd been more vicious than ever.

He understood she was protective. He knew she cared. What he didn't get was why she didn't like the idea of him and Molly together.

"Okay," Nate sighed loudly. "Out with it. What's eating you?"

Mick froze, his mind suddenly realising he was at work. When he looked up, Glenn, Nate and George all watched him with curious stares. Exactly how did he explain himself?

"Oh," Mick chuckled, the solution coming to him in a flash. "You're never going to believe this. My mother wants you all to visit."

Silence greeted him. Maybe now wasn't the time to be blasé. "Celia?" Glenn blinked, his face sombre. "She wants to see us?"

Mick nodded. "I can't quite explain the change in her, but she's doing so good. Say you'll bring Maggie, Glenn?"

He waited while understanding dawned on Glenn's face moments before a blooming smile appeared. "You let me know when, okay?"

Glenn stood and left, but not before Mick saw the red rimmed eyes glossy with tears. He should go after him, make sure the old coot was alright, but Nate was up and in his face and keeping him on the spot.

"I swear, I didn't tell her a thing."

Mick slapped his shoulder. "I don't care if you did. Somehow, Molly found my mother and popped in for a visit. And voila, miracle at the Manor."

Nate's head jerked as he grabbed Mick's arm and dragged him into the courtyard and the gorgeous spring sunshine. "So what are you saying?"

"Molly is one hell of a woman."

Standing chest to chest, Nate got up in his face again, looking none too pleased. "Are you two...?"

Uh-oh. How did he answer that? Exactly? "She's an adult, she can make her own choices."

Nate's eyes bugged wildly. "Shit. You're an idiot. You know that, right?"

Not quite the answer Mick was expecting. "No, I don't know that. Why don't you explain it to me?"

Pulling away, Nate paced restlessly. After two lengths of the yard, he stopped, looked up, scowled and then continued. Mick watched him, all the while understanding that Nate approved no more than Jane did. What was it with those two?

"Nate," he called, to no effect. "*Nate!*"

"She's like a sister to me, you realise. Because most of her brothers are interstate, I'm standing in their place. If Marcus knew she was having a fling, he'd come after you."

A fling? Was that all Nate thought him capable of? It didn't speak too highly of Mick, and it kicked him in the guts.

"Yeah," Nate continued, striding toward Mick. "You heard me."

Anger welled up inside him. "You don't think I'm good enough for her. Do you?"

"Honestly? No. I will say that she's had a fantastic calming effect on you, though. It's not that you're a bad guy, you've just got issues, that's all. Long term type issues."

Mick felt his mouth quirk in an ironic twist. "And you don't? Mr. King-of-one-night-stands."

"At least I admit it," Nate retorted. "Have you told her your longest relationship was a month? Did you make it clear that you're not looking to get married and have a family? Because you know she wants that. She wants the fairy tale ending and the sweet prince to carry her into the sunset."

Nate huffed as quiet blanketed them. It gave his words time to pound Mick's earlier dilemma into submission. She wanted the works. He couldn't give it to her. Not when he walked the tightrope every time he ran into a burning building.

Mick slumped onto a brick retaining wall. Ending it with Molly would reinforce every stupid and moronic notion the men before him had created. She'd take it as a rejection of her, see her leg as the reason, perhaps withdraw deeper into herself. If he thought

she'd lost her spunk the night of the auction, this could send her spiralling back down, deeper this time.

Catch 22. He was trapped by his own doing. If he stayed, he'd eventually disappoint her, eventually blow her thoughts of happily ever after out of the water. If he left, he'd do those same things only sooner.

"I guess the question you need to ask yourself," Nate said sadly from across the yard. "Is whether you want to challenge your own screwed up beliefs?"

Answers eluded him and he was back to square one. What did he want with Molly? She sure as hell inspired thoughts of next week, next month, next year. Thoughts Mick never expected to have about a woman. The kind of thoughts he'd always been too scared to indulge in. The crazy thing was, Molly scared him in a good way.

He still didn't know how to deal with the possibility he could widow a beautiful woman like Molly. Didn't even know if he wanted to deal with it. For a brief moment, though, he let himself picture them a year from now. Waking up in her bed, coming home to her at night, falling asleep in her arms...could he do it?

No matter how hard he tried, he kept coming back to the same scenario of Molly being informed that the fire had finally taken him. Couldn't shake the look on her face, couldn't ignore the sound of her breaking heart.

No, he wouldn't do that to her. Screwed up or not, his beliefs had already driven him to the realisation that he had to end it. After the tragedies of her life, she deserved someone stable. He'd do the noble thing and step aside.

~

He was due any minute. The thought of his rough hands on her and his long slow kiss made her bounce anxiously. Hurry up and get here, she demanded, checking on the pasta sauce one last time and turning off the flame. Dinner, candlelight and Mick. What more could a woman want?

Molly glanced down at the leg of her pants. The new titanium prosthetic and its snug fitting socket would be with her all the time now. She needed to get used to the cup, and the lighter weight. Already she'd stumbled because she'd forgotten how easy walking was. Her thigh muscles kept remembering the heavy plastic leg, they needed to be trained both for walking and for running again.

Would he notice? She sure did, but then she knew about it. The difference was very noticeable because the new leg was just a stick. The material of her pants flapped about with each movement and the bulge under her knee was smaller now. What would he think of the national flag design? On some level it was corny, but God it made

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her feel good, almost like the prospect of running for her country again was within reach and not so ludicrous.

Molly grinned to the empty room. Run for her country again? Wow, the adrenaline rush alone was worth the pain of running forty-two kilometres. The giddiness took over and she swayed, had to put a hand on the bench to settle herself down.

Mick was going to flip when he heard her plans. She just knew it. When they were at the cottage, he thought she should get back to running, reclaim her passion and not give in. Well, that was exactly what she was going to do and his conviction had propelled her along. That and Marcus's constant support.

She wondered whether Mick would want to meet her brother, but didn't get very far with the thought. The doorbell chimed and she actually ran to the front door. As she pulled it open, he smiled and melted her insides.

"Hi there," she breathed, feeling the rest of the world drop out of existence. It was just the two of them.

He stepped closer, taking a deep breath, inhaling her again. "Hi there."

She couldn't help herself, grabbed a fistful of his woollen jumper and dragged him inside. Against her, he shut the door with a flick of the wrist. His eyes never left hers. She shivered under his gaze, pressed against him so he felt it too. "If you don't hurry up and kiss me—"

His mouth closed over hers, hot and wet, his lips demanding, his tongue searching. Hands clamped over her hips and pulled her flat against him. His hardness nudged her belly but it was his eyes that entranced her. Warm and inviting, they sucked her in until she couldn't breathe. It wasn't enough, she had to know what was on his mind to cause those blue eyes to burn so deep. Almost navy blue, they looked as luscious as velvet and as deep as an ocean.

"Mick,"

"Hush," he whispered, his lips against hers as he spoke. "We'll talk later. Right now I just," he inhaled slowly, deeply. "I want to make love to you."

"But," she glanced down the hall to the kitchen. "Dinner?"

He shook his head, bent down to her neck and began licking and nibbling with the hottest tongue this side of the equator. Molly swallowed, how could she resist? With absolutely zero resistance, she simply held on as he loosened the buttons of her shirt, kissing her skin as he parted the edges and revealed her hard, naked nipples.



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“Oh yeah,” he growled, the rumble against her skin so delightful she giggled. His hands cupped her needy breasts, rolled her bulletted nipples with a slight pinch that nearly knocked her feet out from under her.

Her shirt fell to the floor, along with Mick’s thick sweater and cotton tee. She had his zipper down before they reached the bedroom and reached in to take a hold of him. He stopped cold in the doorway. Well, cold wasn’t quite the word, not when he was burning her hand, his throbbing almost as fast as her speeding heart.

“Jesus, Molly,” he leaned against her shoulder, his hips pumping into her hand.

“Touch me, Mick,” she demanded.

He did, freeing her trouser clasp and dropping them to the floor. Her panties were next, sliding down her legs leaving her wearing only her leg and her plain white flats.

“Back pocket,” he grunted, his hand reaching around and producing a foil wrapped prize. “Now, Molly.”

He was so desperate, so out of control she quickly sheathed him and gasped when he slid into her powerfully. Lifting her onto his hips, he seemed oblivious to everything. He held her against the wall, his hands cupping her ass and so close to her burning flesh it was maddening.

Last time was slow and sweet. This time was powerful and strong. A thin sheen of sweat covered his shoulders. She licked at it, biting his shoulder when her first orgasm pummelled through her. She bit him hard, left teeth marks. He didn’t seem to notice. Or care. Which was good, since he didn’t slow or stop.

Molly speared her hands through his hair, let herself fall deep into his eyes, saw turmoil there and it scared the life out of her. Something was wrong. Very, very wrong. He knew she saw it, tried to turn away, but she wasn’t having any of it.

“Mick—”

He shook his head. “Don’t make me stop, Molly.”

Oh God. “Just tell me. What is it?”

His face literally shook in her hands but then, her body sidetracked them, exploding and taking his along with it. He stiffened, paused, then sagged against her. “I’m so sorry, Molly.”

He put her down and turned away. Fear tumbled through her, erasing the bliss of her orgasm. She didn’t know where to begin or what to think. Should she reach for him? Scream at him? Plead with him?

Her hand acted of its own accord, stretched toward him, but before it got there, he stalked away and shut himself in the bathroom.

Shaking all over, she stared after him. Heat left her body rapidly, leaving her with no choice but to cover up. By the time she'd pulled on her robe, he was back, fully dressed and wearing an unbearably apologetic expression.

"Mick, please. You're scaring me. What is it?"

His eyes raked over her face lovingly, then changed and the turmoil was back. Her breath burned her lungs as she watched his gaze roll down her body. His eyes widened when he saw her leg and then zipped back to hers in shock. "What the hell is that?"

~

Molly glanced down and then back up. She was confused and scared and he didn't blame her. It wasn't like he'd spelled it out or anything. But staring into those brown-green eyes, he suddenly realised the mistake he'd made. He was here to end it as gently as he could. There was no hope of that now.

How could he be so stupid?

"My new leg," she said blandly. It was obviously not what she wanted to be discussing right now. "I was going to tell you, I started running. But clearly there's something you need to tell me first."

He blinked. She was running again? Why? What was her goal? And why the heck hadn't she told him? They'd said they'd be honest. Clearly she wasn't.

"Running?" His bellow surprised them both. "What happened to us being honest?"

"I've just started, wanted to make sure I could before I said anything."

He heard her and then heard the next words that came out his mouth as if he'd somehow been separated from his body. "Well, if you can't be honest with me, and you can't keep your word, then maybe we should walk away."

Who was he kidding? This wasn't about her delaying the news and he knew it. But he couldn't deny the opportunity it presented him. This way, he wasn't the one doing the disappointing and he didn't have to answer any questions about long term and marriage and kids. It was cowardly, as far from nobility as one got, but there it was. He wasn't proud of what he was doing but somehow, he was doing it.

"Walk away?" she squeaked.

When he focussed on her, he wanted to kick himself. The withdrawn and frightened body language said it all. Already he could see she was blaming her leg for it and he'd helped that right along, hadn't he? Announcing that they should break up right about the same time she wanted to share her good news.

"I asked you to be honest, Molly. You agreed."

Shit. What did he do now? Back tracking, trying to explain himself was lame. Besides, she wouldn't hear it. Because as he watched her, he saw her square her shoulders, straighten her spine and lift her chin.

"I never lied to you, Michael Joseph Knight."

Damn, there was his full name. Now she really was mad. "But you didn't opt for the truth outright, did you?"

She glanced down at her leg and when her face shot up, it was red with anger. Her eyes flared, the green in them firing up and flashing at him. "I picked it up this morning. I'm wearing it so I can get used to it. I've been running on a borrowed one. In the hospital, under doctor supervision, torturing my damned stump and doing my best not to give in without a fight."

Oh crap. Now she was throwing his words back at him. He remembered the conversation, at the cottage, at the picnic table. He remembered wanting to take back those words the instant he said them, knowing that of all the people on the planet, Molly Keating didn't give up or give in.

Just like now. Her fighting spirit had taken hold and she wasn't giving in. "You're the one who lied Mick, not me."

"How?"

"You said you weren't like most men." That hurt. "And yet, you come in here, have sex with me and then accuse *me* of lying. If you'd been able to control yourself I'd have told you about my leg, about the running and anything else you wanted to know. That was my special news." A tear streaked down her cheek. That hurt him too. "But no, you had to be all macho. Do you honestly think that it's just about the sex? That it's the only way I'll feel desirable?"

He needed to act. If she kept talking, or rather spitting venom, she'd eventually ferret out the truth. He took a step backward. "I should go."

"Oh, very good. The best solution, Mick. Run away. I'm sure that's very noble of you."

He paused. She nodded.

*Rose Middleton*  
One Foot Forward

“Yeah, I know that’s your nickname. The Nobleman.” She snorted derisively and it kicked him hard, stole the air from his lungs. She was dangerous when she was hurting. “So very fitting, I’d say. The perfect oxymoron.”

“That’s harsh—”

She stepped toward him. “Go. Get out.” Another tear rolled down her face and he was struck with the insane urge to wipe it away. But if looks could kill, he should scam or he’d be a pile of skin and bones.

“When you calm down, we’ll talk.”

Her eyes bulged and he realised how dumb that sounded. “*When I calm down?*” She practically screeched. “I’ve got every reason to kick you where it hurts. I’m not the one who’s accusing one of us of lying. I’m not the one who was out of control and couldn’t stop.”

She had him there. Damn. Upset, angry and still a mind as sharp as an arrow. This wasn’t the kind of punk he wanted to see in her. “For what it’s worth, I’m sorry.”

She shook her head and charged at him. “Oh, no you don’t. You’re not going to stand there and apologise.” Mick made for the door. “I know you well enough to know that you’re not telling me everything. I saw it in your eyes before you even noticed my leg. Something wasn’t right when you walked in the door, you thought you could obliterate it with sex and sidetrack me or you or both of us.”

~

He pulled the door open and stepped out into the cold night air. The lack of fight in him practically stole the air from her lungs. She was right. He admitted that much with his eyes. But right about what?

“All I know,” she said on an exhale, suddenly exhausted. “Is that I’m not the only one holding out on the truth. Between yesterday and today, something changed in you. I wish you had the courage and the decency to actually say it. Goodbye, Mick.”

The door swung shut, cutting off her view of him and drowning out anything he might’ve said. Molly refused to give in to the urge to crumple in a heap and blubber. No way. For once she was going to fight for her bloody self. The one thing the men before him taught her, was that she wasn’t going to take it lying down. Not again. Not ever.

Storming through the house to the kitchen, she drained the water from the pasta and then turfed the pasta in the bin. The sauce soon followed, as pots were tossed in the dishwasher. Candles were snuffed and she had the crazy urge to smash plates on the tiled floor, Greek style, though there’d be no wedding or marital bliss here.

*Rose Middleton*  
One Foot Forward

She cursed his spinelessness. Damned his stupid need to play the hero. And silently cried that he couldn't admit the problem to himself, let alone to her. He'd rot in a cold bed for scurrying away from the real issues. She only wished she knew what they were.

It suddenly occurred to her that he'd come here to break it off with her. That was why he'd wanted one more roll in the hay, a last romp to say goodbye. He'd distracted her and she'd fallen for it. Like concrete boots, she'd sunk to the bottom of his sweet seduction without a whimper. God, she was stupid.

Not anymore. Never again.

He had taught her one thing. She was still sexy and desirable. And damn it, she wouldn't waste it pining over him.

~

Mick stared up at the quiet house, shivering in the cold because he couldn't go yet. He had a hard time ridding himself of the hurt in her eyes. Despite her fighting spirit, she was confused. Just like him. Because of all the damned things they should break up over, a little white lie wasn't one of them.

He took a step toward the house and halted. Would she even open the door? He scratched his head and sighed, his breath pluming white in the cold darkness, lost as to what to do. The house fell into darkness as the last of the lights was extinguished and he couldn't stop thinking of her alone and angry.

Lame, he was. And a lot more than slightly surprised she saw right through him. Warmth bloomed in his chest at the realisation. No woman had ever really known him quite the way Molly did. Sure, they saw the fire fighter hero image, the physical strength he possessed, but he couldn't remember the last time a woman saw through his exterior. Molly looked deeper. She'd put aside her reservations, her judgements of him. Like he'd asked of her.

He sighed. If she thought he was a hero once, she surely didn't think so anymore. He'd shattered that façade good and proper. Maybe he should go home, cut his losses and find some way of explaining to his mother how he screwed up. He groaned. Forget Celia. He needed to face Nate first. Then Jane.

He was done for.

Glancing up at the house again, his heart thumped against the wall of his chest as if straining to get back to Molly. Damn, he was confused. She nurtured feelings and desires in him, things he had no right to want. How could he go without her knowing why he was really going?

He kicked the tyre of his Jeep and huffed. Going back in there right now would not fix the problem. She was angry. He was confused and would likely make things worse. Somehow, he'd find a way to get her to listen, to hear him out so that she understood he was the problem. Not her.

## **Chapter 11**

Their stationhouse was used by the Brigade to train rookies, and so had the best facilities in the western region of Melbourne. As such, it housed a three story tower and it was a regular occurrence to see the boys running up with hoses draped over their shoulders. Training never stopped.

On this particular afternoon, Mick reached the top, threw the hose down and heaved in air. His lungs burned, his eyes watered and his thighs ached from the five laps of the tower he'd already made. He bellowed to the sky and dropped his butt down on the low brick wall that ran the perimeter of the roof.

Nothing felt right in his world. Not with work. And especially not with the long nights where he'd barely slept a wink. It had been a week since they'd argued and he hadn't heard a word from her.

On some bizarre plane, he actually thought she'd call him once she calmed down. He knew that was dumb. Made him sound like a truly chauvinistic pig of the highest order. Just because she'd been mad as a cut snake didn't mean she was any less aware or coherent. She knew exactly what she was saying and if he remembered correctly, she knew exactly what he was doing.

Hiding.

Hiding behind her slip up, using her non-existent lie to save his skin.

He hadn't meant to walk in and take her like that, but everything about her called to him. It didn't help that he knew from the second he saw her she wasn't wearing a bra. She was right to accuse him of being out of control. He was. Totally and utterly a slave to the sexual chemistry that buzzed between them relentlessly. If only he'd taken a moment to—

"Hey! What are you doing?"

Mick's head snapped up to find Glenn. His eyes darted between the Chief and the hose lying on the concrete. Such a big no-no. He was in trouble. "Oh, ah, I was—"

"Save it." Glenn snapped and pointed to the rolled hose. "Fix that. You should know better."

He felt like a newbie. Suitably chagrined, he hurriedly secured the heavy roll on his shoulder. "Sorry, Glenn."

Mick stepped forward to pass the boss when a hand clamped on his shoulder and stopped him. "You alright?"

"Fine," he nodded, loathe to open up about his brutish behaviour. How no one knew about it was beyond him. Surely Molly would've told Jane, to enlist sisterly support. Women stuck together, right? Then Jane would tell Nate and all hell would break loose. "I'm fine."

Glenn eyed him warily. "You look like you haven't slept. And you know I don't like you boys pulling too many double shifts. Go home, get some shuteye. You're not even on duty."

Grumbling, Mick carried the hose back down the three flights of stairs, stored it the same way he'd done for the last eight years and hit the showers. Anything so he didn't have to go home. Anything to avoid being alone.

Drying off, he decided he should fill his belly and made for the kitchen. Without engaging his brain, he pulled down ingredients from the shelves, out of the fridge and the vegetable bin and started preparing. It was automatic, the way he'd always done it. Trouble was, when he looked down, he'd made enough vegetable burgers to feed an army.

His arms sagged to his side as air whooshed out of his lungs. It wasn't like him to be so distracted, but then, Molly was a pretty awesome distraction.

"Somebody's hungry," Nate chuckled as he passed by. "Although, why you're eating here and not at home is a question you could answer."

Mick shrugged and stared down at the pyramid of burgers. "Just thought eating here was easier. You hungry?"

Nate laughed harder. "Me? Always. You know that. Cook them up, they'll keep in the fridge and the boys will love you for it."

If he turned around, Nate would ask more questions, so Mick kept his back to his friend and pulled out the big skillet. Once he got the burgers sizzling, he found enough strength to keep his confusion about Molly contained and turned around.

Nate had the latest edition of 'Men's Health' open to a page about commitment phobia. The title was thrown across the double spread like it was some dirty disease. Obviously written by a man who had no troubles in that department, Mick decided. Clearly a man who thought anyone suffering the condition didn't deserve empathy.

"You trying to cure yourself?" he sniggered, though when Nate looked up, his pointed look said it all.

"You, actually."

So he'd heard then. "Are you cool with it? Molly and me?"

Nate shrugged. "Don't you dare hurt her."

Mick bit his tongue. Crap. Nate didn't know. "I meant to ask if you were cool that we broke up."

Snapping straight, Nate sent his chair flying backwards and glared at him. "You what?"

As Mick attempted to avoid the angry stare, he realised that the grapevine would work in reverse. Nate would tell Jane this time, probably blow the whole thing out of proportion and then he'd have to face Jane. Not a pleasant prospect. He somehow needed to make sure Nate would be okay with it.

"We had a fight, a week ago."

Nate frowned. "But you haven't said anything. And Molly hasn't said anything." A sad frown furrowed his brow and he shook his head. "Which means Jane knows nothing and Molly is hurting really badly. I should knock you out for this. Do you have any idea how much trouble you're about to cause?"

"How the hell is this *my* fault? People break up all the time, Nate, you know that. People get hurt from time to time, too. Did it ever occur to you that I'm hurting over this?"

The air was so thick he could cut it with a knife. But neither man said a word for a long time. Mick couldn't look at him, not with Nate wearing angry eyes and tight lips pulled in a thin line. Turning back to the skillet, Mick flipped over the burgers, pressed down on each one with the spatula and watched them cook.

He hadn't meant to blurt out that last bit. It revealed a wound raw and open, still throbbing in pain. It was a wound he wanted to close soon. To do that, he'd have to speak to her and set her straight. Confess his stupidity, his commitment *disease* and then somehow convince her she'd one day find a man who'd take care of her the way she deserved.

Of course, he had to get her to listen first. No point talking to a dead phone line, or a door slammed in his face so hard it might knock him out. Exactly how did he do that?

"So what? You're going to let it all go after one fight? Is that it?"



Nate was by his side now, his voice low but seething. Mick shook his head. "She needs someone who'll be there for her, forever. She doesn't need me or the threat we live under everyday we do our job."

"Oh, so because there's an element of danger about our job, you naturally assume that history will repeat itself. That you'll get killed like your dad and leave her a grieving widow. Like your mum? Is that it?"

Mick's pulse spiked. "Don't talk like that," he growled. "You have no idea what you're talking about."

"Why? Because I still have both my folks? Because I didn't grow up in the shadow of a heroic father?"

Mick turned, blood pounding in his ears. He'd never heard Nate speak so disrespectfully of Joe, or of Mick's fears about following his father's footsteps right into an early grave. Hearing Nate now made his blood boil. They'd been friends forever. Hell, Nate was there the night Joe died. He'd seen and felt everything Mick experienced, understood every rotten detail, too, because Joe was like a second dad to him.

Of all the people he knew, Mick expected Nate's support. It wasn't like he'd cheated on Molly, or hurt her physically. He hadn't meant to hurt her emotionally but how else could he put a stop to what would surely end in disaster of the fatal kind? Why couldn't Nate see that?

"So you're hurting?" Nate wouldn't let up. "Well, don't you dare expect anyone to help you. You made this mess. The only thing that you seem to be blissfully unaware of is that Molly isn't as resilient as you. She's been to hell and back. She's not some broken doll you can put back together and then walk away from."

Nate walked away, shaking his head and muttering, "Jane might rip your throat out over this."

Throat? Didn't he mean...?

"You still here?" Glenn barked, looking none too pleased in seeing him loitering around the firehouse. "I told you to go home. You're a liability without sleep."

Mick threw his hands up in the air. "I'm going. I'm going. But you can clean this up."

"Shoo," Glenn nudged him out of the way, relieving him of spatula duty. "And I'll see you on Sunday. Who's driving?"

Mick shook his head at the old coot. Gruff one minute, sorting out the finer details of a Sunday lunch at Minnaroo Manor the next. "Me. I'll pick you and Maggie up at ten, okay?"

~

Molly collapsed onto the couch, kicking off her shoes and then her leg. Sweat trickled down her arms, between her breasts and through her hair. Her ribs felt like they might burst open any minute because her lungs were trying to suck in whatever air there was.

When did running get so hard?

She sighed, knowing the answer already. She was out of shape in a big way. Mornings at the gym and evenings spent running were testing her fitness. Rather, her lack of fitness. Giving in wasn't an option. Experience had taught her it took hard work to make it to the top, and that was when she'd started out about halfway up the ladder. Now she was languishing at the very, very bottom.

Exhausted, she rolled her head and checked the time on the VCR. Nine. She'd never liked running in the dark, but it shielded her from prying eyes. Running in shorts to keep her body temperature in check, she had the leg on for the whole world to see. But in the dark, there really weren't many people to stare. If they were there, she hadn't seen them yet. A blessing in disguise, she thought.

She should shower. The idea of going to bed sweaty didn't really appeal, but she didn't move. Couldn't move because her mind drifted to him, again. The week dragged by painfully, especially when she didn't have Mick to see or talk to. Their last conversation—rather, fight—played the merry-go-round in her head, frustrating her and shaming her.

Overreaction didn't begin to cover her behaviour. Part of her heart wanted to take it all back, wanted to make her take a step back and calm down. It bugged her no end that he could've been right in saying they'd talk when she calmed down. She wasn't the one who turned her new leg into a reason to stop seeing each other.

He was covering for some other reason, one she didn't dare think about. If it was possible he was driven to be so intimate with her because he wanted to save her ego, then it was possible he didn't really care for her. And it tore at her, teased that she'd been a fool to believe him. She always thought good things happened to good people, but if he'd been acting noble and doing it to save her, then she was wrong.

Molly refused to believe she could be so wrong. About herself. About Mick.

Her heart skipped a beat and she squeezed her eyes shut. Thinking about him and what happened between them was such a bad idea. But it was so hard not to. The only time her head was clear of the thoughts was when she was running. Like the good old days, she simply settled back into tuning out the world around her to enjoy the flood of endorphins.

Jerking upright, she grabbed her leg, fastened it into place and then shoved her feet in her shoes. Maybe another run would help with the way her body demanded his, too.

~

On Saturday, Molly drove to Minnaroo Manor and joined Celia for lunch. Just because she was no longer seeing Mick didn't mean she had to cut ties with his wonderful mum.

She sat on the wooden sun lounge beside Celia's, under a gigantic gum tree. Molly leaned back in her chair and crossed her feet at the ankles, resting the metal one over the organic one. Why could she relax so easily around Celia? Maybe it was the languid spring warmth but for the first time since she threw Mick out, she felt calm. Really calm, not merely not-angry, but relaxed and easy. Her pulse thumped gently, the tension oozed out of her shoulders and her head finally felt free of the snippets of her fight with Mick.

"Are you okay, dear?"

Molly's gaze drifted across to Celia, who smiled warmly. Although she hadn't seemed fragile during their first meeting, Celia did appear stronger now. There was a fire in her eyes Molly admired, and she appeared larger. Perhaps it was the way her shoulders were held back, her head up and her chin out. Or perhaps it was that Molly no longer saw things through Mick-tinted glasses.

Molly nodded. "Fine. I've been training and I'm little tired."

Celia frowned questioningly. "Is my son up to no good?"

Ah, so Molly's question was finally answered. Celia didn't know about them. "Um," she hesitated, not wanting to make Mick out to be the bad guy here. Celia adored her only son, and if Molly was to be truly honest, so did she. Despite his pig-headedness. "We're spending some time apart right now."

"What happened?" she asked gently. Molly could've hugged her for not jumping to conclusions.

"We had a disagreement, that's all."

"They happen all the time, dear Molly. It doesn't mean that's the end. Joseph and I sometimes argued until we were blue in the face and out of breath. But we always worked it out."

"Did Mick ever see you and your husband argue?"

*Rose Middleton*  
One Foot Forward

Molly slapped a hand across her mouth and apologised profusely. It was none of her business and she had zero right to ask. Thankfully Celia only smiled and shook her head. "No. He was too young. All Michael knew was that his mummy and daddy went to bed happy."

Never let the sun go down on an argument, those were her mother's words. Until now, Molly had never really needed to consider them.

"Besides," Celia continued, oblivious to Molly's inner thoughts. "He's had enough trouble working through his father's death."

"He's still hurting."

Celia nodded as a soft, warm breeze laden with sweet scent of spring blossoms washed over them. "Yes, he is. He hasn't worked out what it means for him yet. So scared is he of it ever happening to him, he keeps his affairs short. I've been telling him for years the right one will come along," Celia's eyes grew sad. "But I don't think he's listening, Molly."

Sipping her glass of iced tea, Molly let Celia's words flow through her. Was that why he'd chosen to focus on Molly's supposed lie? So he could find a way out and keep it short?

It was sad to think he wouldn't let himself find something long term with a woman. Sadder to think he might never have really felt love. Or if he had, what did he do with it? Shove the feeling in some dark corner, throw it out, ignore it, tell himself it could never work?

Her breath hitched momentarily in her throat to think he deliberately kept himself isolated. Why would he do that? Being with someone was such a wonderful thing. Falling in love was actually addictive. Surely he thought beyond the sex. That was why his eyes held such turmoil the night they fought, wasn't it? She desperately wanted to know what he'd been thinking to cause such stress for him.

Was it because he was about to end it? Because if he worried about ending it, then she wanted to know why. Not why he needed to find a way to say goodbye, but why it worried him so.

"Molly?"

Oh, God. What must Celia think? "I'm sorry, just thinking, that's all."

Celia smiled knowingly and reached for Molly's hand as a kookaburra laughed nearby. "What about?"

Molly shook her head. No way was she dumping her concerns and worries on Celia. No way. No how. “Nothing, really.” She’d change the topic. “He was surprised when you called him. Really happy.”

“I’m glad. He worries too much, blames himself for my illness. He understands how much his father’s death impacted on me, but he thinks he should’ve been able to save me. He’s like that, wanting to save everyone. It’s who he is, how he grew up. My husband’s legacy. The job magnifies it.”

That was true, Molly thought. He seemed so caught up in the fire fighter’s lifestyle he forgot it was job. She wondered how he coped with the everyday possibility of the next fire being his last. It was a real concern they had to live with. She’d seen Nate tackle it by playing the role of die-hard playboy. He’d once complained he’d never find a woman who could deal with the job, saying he only ever hooked up with the ones that bolted the minute he said he ran into burning buildings when everyone was running out.

Amy, the hurdler on Molly’s track team, was the one Nate wished he’d never let go. The woman brushed off the danger of a fire fighter’s life easily but then, she was a police officer. She argued that the danger they both faced cancelled each other out, leaving them free to feel whatever they wanted. Nate couldn’t do it. He worried more about her on the beat than his life surrounded by fire, couldn’t figure out how to handle the idea of her getting shot in the line of duty.

It tore them apart. Really ripped holes in Nate’s sense of self. He’d gotten a glimpse of what it was like to really be loved and what it’d be like to be widowed. He didn’t like it—not that he ever stopped thinking about Amy.

“He’s a good man,” Molly whispered, a new understanding of Mick snaking around her heart as Celia’s warm hand found hers. “Who doesn’t want to hurt a woman.” Her eyes connected with Celia’s. “He saw how your husband’s death effected you and didn’t want to do the same thing to a woman he cared about.”

That was it, wasn’t it? The real reason why he needed to find a way to separate them. He couldn’t stand the thought of putting Molly through that kind of pain. Which meant what, exactly? That he loved her? That he wanted to be with her? Wanted to break the cycle of short love affairs and stay with her?

If that was the case, why didn’t he just say so? Why hide from it and pretend it didn’t exist?

Oh Mick, she sighed sadly, wishing he’d stop trying to save everyone else and look out for his own heart. It made her eyes burn to think he’d choose to live the rest of his life in isolation to protect everyone else. But it also made her angry to think he didn’t trust her enough to share that part of himself with her.

*Rose Middleton*  
One Foot Forward

She'd bared her soul. He'd hidden his. There was no hope in that, nothing that gave her cause to think they could talk it out and find a way through it. If he wouldn't deal with it, she couldn't force him. It would only make him resent her if she pried and goaded him into action.

He needed to find a way through his own issues if there was to be anything between them.

"Honey," Celia squeezed her hand. "Don't give up on him."

"I don't want to, but if he won't face up to it, I won't have much of a choice."

~

After a long run Saturday night, Molly showered and curled up on the couch to catch up on the latest movie releases. With a night of DVD action ahead, she snuggled up under the heavy blanket. Her titanium leg stood in the closet in her room, safely tucked away for the night so her stump could recover from another gruelling workout.

Before the movie could get underway, the doorbell chimed and her mobile phone screamed. Grabbing the pocket sized phone, she answered the call only to hear Jane huff impatiently.

"Answer your door, would you?"

"Jane? What are you doing?" Knocking and calling all at once? Something had to be up. "You have to wait, I'm legless."

It might've been funny if Jane didn't sound so angry. By the time she hopped down to the front door, Molly opened to a fearsome looking expression. "Can I kill him now?"

Oh, now she understood. "No. Come in. We'll talk." And the movie could wait.

Back in the living room, Jane paced the floor restlessly as Molly resumed her position on the couch. "It's okay Jane. Relax."

"Relax?" She just about yelled. "Why the hell didn't you tell me? It's been a week according to Nate and you're acting like it's nothing." Jane spun on her foot and shook her head. "Honey, why didn't you tell me?"

Molly pointed at her best friend. "Because of the way you're acting right now, that's why. There's no need to be so angry."

"How? How did it happen? What excuse did he use?"

Molly couldn't ignore the pain in Jane's eyes, no doubt caused by Molly staying silent. "It doesn't matter. Please, come and sit with me. I'm sorry you're so upset."

Kicking off her Lipstick heels, Jane joined Molly under the blanket on the couch. Nervous energy rolled off her in waves and she looked about as far from relaxed as anyone could. Molly stroked her hair and smiled.

"I don't get you, Molly. He walks away from you and you're okay with that?"

"Hon, it's more complicated than that. Mick is dealing with some issues."

"Oh yeah," Jane nodded, ready to fight again. "And he's got another one now. Me."

"Oh," Molly chuckled. "There's no need for that. Besides, he's probably hiding from you anyway. You have a reputation you know? A pretty nasty one. I hear you threatened him to treat me right in the first place. So believe me, he's keeping a wide berth of you."

Turning to face Molly, Jane tucked her legs under her and touched Molly's hand. "Why didn't you tell me? Really."

"I didn't want to upset you, or make you think you had to do something. Believe it or not, I'm okay."

"But I'm your best friend. Well, one of them. You should've said something."

Until seeing Celia again, Molly realised she wouldn't have painted Mick in a pleasant light. Even now, she was still disappointed he couldn't see her, wouldn't trust her. But at least she understood him better. Sending bulldog Jane after him wouldn't have been fair.

"I've been trying to work out how I feel about it, that's all. I needed some time."

Jane stared at her, her friend's eyes appearing to do a critical evaluation of Molly's face. Quite unexpectedly, she reached out and set her fingertips on Molly's cheek. "Are you sure you're okay? You look tired."

Molly nodded. "I'm fine. Really, Jane, you need to stop worrying about me. It's time you stopped being so over protective. I'm not a China doll. I'm stronger, thanks to you and Seb."

Jane blinked as a tear streaked down her face. "I'll never stop being over protective, Molly, not after watching them cut you out of that wreck. Not after seeing you go through such torture to come back from the dead."

Jane's words struck her deep and she reached out to hug her friend. They'd never really talked about how Jane felt, or about what she'd seen. Most of the time, Molly forgot

she'd been at the accident because Jane kept it all bottled up. She hadn't even realised Jane was there that morning until Nate told her months later.

"I'm sorry." Molly squeezed Jane tight. "Do you want to talk about it?"

Jane nodded. Again, very much unlike the tough as nails woman she appeared to be. When Molly pulled back, Jane's eyes were red and her chin trembled. "I didn't want to burden you. You've had enough things to worry about without me adding to them."

Molly thumbed away a tear from Jane's cool cheek. "It must've been hard, watching it."

Jane nodded and put her hand to her chest. "I couldn't believe that was your car. Kept telling myself it wasn't you, it was just someone who looked like you. But I couldn't ignore the number plate or the fact Nate kept trying to send me away."

Jane was already parking her car in the gym parking lot when the truck barrelled into Molly's car. She'd seen the accident from go to woe. "Did you have nightmares?"

"Oh," Jane sighed. "Every night. All I kept hearing was the sound of twisting metal. You screamed. And then there was this deathly silence. You didn't make a noise and I thought..." Jane sucked in a breath and gulped. "I thought you were dead. Expected to come over and find there was no hope. When they pulled you out, all I saw was blood. So much blood Molly. I didn't know there was that much inside a person. I wondered if you had any left."

Molly stroked Jane's hair again, felt her friend shake under her hand and wondered how she'd lived with the memory. All this time she'd complained about not being able to remember the crash and there was Jane, unable to forget it.

It was one thing for a trained fire fighter like Mick to see the gory aftermath, it was another for a civilian to bear witness. Molly thought back to Mick's tale of how the men in his crew took it badly, of how they were physically sick afterwards. How the hell did Jane cope? "I'm so sorry, Janey."

Jane shook her head. "I wouldn't have it any other way. God, I would've been a wreck if I hadn't seen it. Getting that kind of phone call has to be worse. I can't imagine what your parents went through."

"My mum said it was worse than when she got the news about Dad's heart. She said that as a parent, you never expect to see your kids deal with death. Laws of nature, she thinks that parents should die first."

Repeating her mother's words reminded Molly that living through the death of a loved one tested the human spirit. Her thoughts inadvertently went to Mick and she was thankful he hadn't been there the night his father died. It was one thing to live through someone else's death, another thing entirely to see it happen with your own two eyes.



Molly focussed on Jane. "Thank you for looking out for me," she smiled, wiping Jane's tears away. "Thank you for being the best friend a girl could ask for. I want you to promise me something."

"What's that?"

Molly took both of Jane's hands and squeezed them warmly. "Trust that I'm okay and starting looking after yourself."

Jane frowned. "What about Mick?"

Molly shook her head. "Never you mind. I'll deal with Mick in my own way."

## **Chapter 12**

"Pass the popcorn please." Molly grinned as she handed over the gigantic bowl. Seb did a double-take at her. "What are you grinning at?"

"You."

He sighed and paused the movie. "Me? Do I have popcorn up my nose or something? What's so funny?"

Molly giggled. "You're so sweet, that's all. Thanks for sitting with me."

Seb patted her hand and smiled. "Honey, you know I wouldn't leave you in the lurch. I stick by my friends."

Molly nodded. That, he sure did. He got the DVD going again and they watched the old classic in silence. Seb munched as softly as he could, apologising for being loud but it didn't concern her one little bit. Between the movie and Seb, she was delightfully distracted from her aching stump.

With another week of running down, she'd pushed herself harder. This morning, she'd covered five kilometres in thirty minutes. A fine effort but she was paying dearly now. It felt like someone had taken a jackhammer to her stump. The two little blisters on the skin had screamed, protesting every step. They'd burst as she got home.

She was precariously balanced between love and hate for her new leg. Without it, she couldn't run. With it, she ran in pain. There was no winning. Time was needed, time for her leg to get used to the socket, time for her fitness to improve and time for her to build a resistance to the pain.

The leg, safely hidden in her closet so she didn't do something drastic to it, was a necessary evil. She'd learn to cope. At least the design had everyone's approval, which was a good sign. The fact that Seb, Jane and Nate approved of her new mission also helped. She didn't know what she'd do without their support.

"So where'd you go today?" Seb queried as he left the couch to change the movie.

"For a drive," she explained vaguely. Although he would see no problem with her visiting Mick's mum, Seb wouldn't understand why. And she didn't want to explain herself again. Jane hadn't understood. "To get some country air."

He eyed her warily. "Is there something you want to tell me?"

Molly shook her head. "Is there something you want to ask, Seb?"

He sighed, DVD in one hand, the DVD case in the other. He looked to be weighing up the cost of asking whatever was on his mind, which stunned her. He'd never hesitated before. Why now?

"Seb?"

"I want to make sure you're okay. I mean, you say you're fine, but..."

"You don't think I am?"

"You're pushing yourself too hard, running to forget about Mick, aren't you?"

Molly fiddled with the blanket covering her legs. Thank goodness no one ever wanted to see her stump. If they clapped eyes on the reddened, blistered skin, they'd tie her down and never let her run again. Especially Mick. He said he didn't want to see her in pain, didn't want her to be disappointed. Probably a good thing he wasn't around now. "I'm pushing myself because I need to build my fitness again. I still love the running, Seb."

"I know," he bent to set the next movie CD in the drawer. "But be honest with yourself. The marathon's quite some time away, you don't want to burn out too early. And you must make sure you get proper rest and good nutrition."

Molly swallowed her grin. "Are you my coach now?"

"Really," he wasn't amused. "You look tired. And you seem exhausted some days. Is it worth it?"

She would not get angry. Seb was looking out for her, that's all. Just because he sounded like Mick, didn't mean she should get all defensive. "Is it worth regaining my fitness again? Is it worth being able to do the one thing I've always loved again? Why don't you tell me?"

"Molly," he cajoled, coming back to the couch by her side. "I wasn't being critical. I just," he shrugged and threw an arm around her shoulders. "I'm concerned. It doesn't look like you're looking after yourself, that's all."

She wondered if he had x-ray vision. Because he was right. If he or Jane knew she'd lost her appetite and couldn't sleep a full night, they'd freak out. She couldn't do that to them, couldn't worry them again. It wasn't as if she was deliberately starving herself, she didn't feel hungry anymore. Whether that was because she was worried about her stump, about Mick or about running, she wasn't terribly sure.

Seeing Celia today reinforced her concern for Mick. His mother was worried, too, fearing he'd take up the motorbike racing again. It left Molly under the impression that she should go and talk to him, but every time she pictured them in the same room, she started to shake. It scared her because since the argument, she'd realised how much she cared about Mick. Knowing he'd left because he was concerned about hurting her wasn't helping.

Finding Seb staring at her expectantly, she patted his hand and cleared her mind of Mick. "I'm okay. Really, Seb. You don't need to worry, and you can tell Jane she should stop worrying, too. You'll both turn grey and then blame me."

~

Strolling through the Manor's gardens with his mother's arm looped through his, Mick felt calm again. It had been an awful week, with two fatal car crashes, each reminding him of Molly. And then there were the fires, three claiming sleeping victims and somehow reminding him of her as well. He had no idea what was happening to him and he hoped like heck his mother could figure it out.

"You seemed stressed, son, how has your week been?"

He smiled, glad she could read him. It meant he had to confess less out loud.

"Terrible." He told her about the car crashes and the fires. "Arson attacks," he explained. "Some bastard actually set fire to those homes on purpose." He shook his head. Some people confused him no end.

Celia rubbed the back of his hand. "Your father always had trouble with that part of the job, too."

"I don't understand some people, Mum."

Himself included, because for the life of him, Mick couldn't figure out why he hadn't gone to see Molly. He should have. Had meant to. He needed to set the record straight. Somehow, he never quite found the time.

"Some people enjoy hurting others Michael. I don't pretend to understand it, I just know it's out there. Focus on the positive things in life."

Which were? He didn't feel like he had many of those at the moment. Sleeping was impossible. Food had lost its taste. Nate was hardly talking to him. And everyone seemed to be on his case at work. Okay, so he'd dropped the hose. And so he'd had trouble unscrewing the fire hydrant cap. Sometimes he was clumsy. Though he had no excuse for why he couldn't crawl into the first car wreck to pull out the body.

He sighed. He hoped she could lift his spirits. "Like?"

Her soft chuckle surprised him. "Like Molly."

Mick's feet stopped moving. "Molly?" Her name rode his breath out of his lungs and hung in the air between them.

It was selfish of him, but he'd dreamed of coming home to her this past week. Her embrace might help ease the ache in his heart at the senseless acts of violence around him. What he wouldn't give to lose himself in her positive light.

"She's visited, you know."

He gaped. "She came to see you? This week?"

"Don't look so surprised, dear," Celia smiled and patted his cheek. "She's such a lovely young woman. She came by yesterday, and last Saturday, too. I so enjoy her company."

He swallowed. "Did she tell you?"

"About the argument?" She nodded. "Yes."

He winced. "Are you mad at me?"

"Not at all," she gushed, giving him a little push to resume their stroll. "These things happen. It's about what you do afterwards."

Which, for Mick, had been nothing. He'd done absolutely squat to make things right between him and Molly. Not that he expected her to take him back, but he didn't want her to hate him. If she could understand him, she'd be okay. And so would he. "I messed it all up."

They strolled down to the roses and he watched in awe as she removed the stem with a white bud about to bloom. She held it out to him. "Talk to her, Michael."

He shook his head. Couldn't take the bloom. "She won't listen to me. I hurt her."

"How?"

She wanted him to explain it? Boy, she was sneaky. He'd bet the flower in her hand she'd brought up the topic so she could hear his side of the story. "Mum, please."

"Tell me, Michael. What did you say to her?"

"I accused her of lying. She started running again but didn't tell me. We said we'd be honest."

He stared at his mother's face for some indication of what she was thinking. All he saw was a peaceful, serene expression. "And were you? Being honest, I mean."

So much for being grateful she could read him. Now he wished she couldn't. "No."

"Did you ever intend on sharing with her your greatest fears?"

He spoke without thinking. "And tell her that I could do what Dad did?"

She smiled sweetly and stepped toward him. "Your father didn't mean to die. He didn't mean to hurt me. I understood the risks of the job, I accepted them. Did you give her the chance to make up her own mind? Or did you do it for her?"

His mouth fell open. When she put it like that, he sounded so judgemental. He never did ask her how she felt about his job, but then, he hadn't really been thinking about the future. Living in the moment, he'd bypassed all rational thought and enjoyed being in Molly's presence.

"When you started seeing her, what did you expect?"

His mother's question paused the memories rolling through him of his time with Molly long enough to remember he'd vowed to put the spunk back in her eyes. That had been his only thought of the future, hadn't it?

"I guess I didn't stop long enough to really think," he confessed. "She seemed so withdrawn, so fragile. I wanted to make her stronger, to bring her out of her shell again."

"You did that, son."

"But then I couldn't let her think there was a future for us," he continued, hating himself. "Because what happened if I got killed on the job?"

When he thought his mother would walk away in disgust, she instead embraced him. She pressed her palm to his cheek and stared up at him with eyes full of love and

sadness. "Better to have loved and lost than never loved at all, Michael, remember that."

As he drove home that afternoon, Mick tried to fight off his mother's final words. Was that what Molly wanted? A chance to love him? Could she possibly love him after he acted so cowardly? He was going to find out, stopping at home first before heading to Molly's.

Jane, standing with hands on hips in his driveway, thwarted his intentions. She looked pale and worried and his first thoughts went to Molly. "Jane? What's wrong?"

The usually strong, defiant woman was a vision of distress. He took her inside and gave her a glass of water.

"Look, I know you want to kill me for what happened with Molly," he said. "But please tell me what's wrong? Is it Molly?"

"You." She pointed at him. "You have to talk some sense into her, set her straight."

He didn't understand. "Why?"

"You know she's running again, right?" Mick nodded. "Well, she's running herself into the ground. She's pushing so hard, using the running to forget about you. I found her this morning, crying in the shower because her leg hurts so much. I can't watch her crumble, Mick. She's been doing so well. God," she sighed and wiped at her cheeks. "I watched her almost die once, I can't do it again."

Mick couldn't answer.

"Tell me you will go over there and set her straight. Give her the truth about why you ran away, about why you can't commit. Let her know she didn't do anything wrong."

He stared.

Jane shook her head in disbelief. "You're not going to say anything?"

"I'll go," he agreed. "Now, if you like."

"What are you afraid of?" The defiant Jane was back. "Scared that she's someone you could love for the rest of your life? Scared that you could hurt her? Or that she could hurt you? Shit, Mick, most people are scared of those things. If you love her, why are you being so stubborn about this? You should be so lucky for her to love you, but I guess you're too dumb to see that. Typical man."

With that said, Jane turned and left. Mick followed her out of the house, watched her drive away. Then he jumped in his Jeep. Numbed by Jane's words, by the possibility

that Molly could love him, that he could love her, he drove to her house and sat in the car. The two of them alone; the possibilities were endless.

He shouldn't do this now, not while he was still reeling from his mother's words and Jane's words. Especially while it was becoming obvious to him that he didn't know what to say to Molly. If he told her to stop running, it would squash her dreams. No matter how much it hurt her to run, he would never tell her to stop. If he told her to take it easy, she'd tell him he had no right giving her instructions on how to run. And if he didn't address those issues, he might just tell her the truth.

There was a better way of doing this, he was sure. A more productive way to coax her into a healthy running schedule. He didn't know what that way was yet. When he did, then he'd come back.

~

As soon as it got dark, Molly pulled on her leg and her running shoes and left the house. It hurt to put weight on her stump, but she had no choice. How else would she find her endurance again?

At first she limped, feeling like she did when she first started walking after the accident. The bandages over the blisters were thick and felt awkward, and when she picked up her gait, she felt them move against her skin. As she gathered speed and covered the kilometres, she felt the sweat soak the bandages, felt the gauze rub against her sensitive skin.

She would not give in. It was bad enough Jane had caught her with her guard down. Now Jane was worried, probably phoning Marcus to see if he could talk her around, make her slow down. She didn't want to slow down, why didn't they understand?

At least in the dark she didn't feel like such a freak. And with no one around, she was free to shed the tears for her pain, free to cry in anger that returning to running was so damn hard.

When she picked up the path that led down to the lake, Molly became aware of someone behind her. But every time she turned to look, the path was clear. She was sure there was someone there but on seeing no one, kept running.

It was exactly the same over the next few nights. She tried to be unpredictable so she could catch the dirty bugger following her, but either he was too smart, or there really was no one there. The longer it went on, the more paranoid she became, but there was an upside. She increased her speed and by the end of the week, she'd knocked another five minutes off her time for five kilometres.

When Friday night came around, Molly figured she had a good enough plan to expose the stalker. As usual, she followed the same route, headed down to the lake but instead

of turning back, she kept going. It was time to up the distance anyway, only she hoped to tire out her running friend and then pounce when he thought she wasn't looking. Of course, if there was no one there, she'd be saved from humiliation by the dark night and the late hour.

Picking up her pace, she ventured beyond the lake and the silently swimming ducks, along the path that would eventually take her to the local grocery store. There were less trees and bushes where someone could hide, and more chances to prove that someone was following her.

Pounding along like she didn't have a care in the world, Molly had to focus first on her running technique and her breathing. Her lungs certainly understood what she was doing though they protested loudly and wanted to know why. As did her leg, but she ignored them as best she could. Once she had her breathing under better control, Molly turned her attention behind her, listening for the tell tale breathing, the soft *thumping* that seemed to have been ever present on her runs lately.

At first she didn't hear it, the silence simply enveloping her with its familiar singularity. It crossed her mind she was making the whole thing up, so desperate for attention, to banish the loneliness. It almost made her puke to think she preferred the attention of a potential stalker to the emptiness she felt without Mick. Not that she could vomit if she wanted to, what with her belly empty and her appetite non-existent.

Then she heard it. A footfall in the distance behind her. A soft curse at her change in tactic. A sound she recognised all too well.

Molly spun around and caught him off guard. He stumbled, stopped and stared.

In the cool night air, he literally steamed but he didn't make a move closer to her. She didn't understand. Why was Mick following her?

"Explain yourself," she demanded, stalking toward him.

"Molly, please don't be mad."

"You've been following me every night this week, haven't you?" She poked him in the chest with each word, causing him to back up a step or two. "Why? And don't you dare hold out on me, Michael."

It felt weird to call him by his full name but she wasn't interested in games. Hell, he was the one who called it off. The one who walked away after showing her a glimpse of what was out there. And dammit, why was her body reacting like this? Heating up beyond the call of running, her heart speeding again and all her blood pooling in a place that had nothing to do with running. What was that about?



His eyes rolled over her, squinted and then pulled very, very wide. "Because everyone is freaking out about you right now. That's why."

"Oh, and they called you, did they?" she bit back sarcastically, finding it too hard to believe Jane would ask him to fix her.

Head bowed, he toed a small pebble and spoke too softly, too affectionately for her liking. "Actually, yes, they did."

The man before her shouldn't have the power to make her melt anymore, but sure enough, that's what was happening. When he looked up, the light from the streetlamp showed eyes filled with worry. "You're pushing yourself too hard," he shook his head. "I'm not telling you what to do, but we're all worried. And now that I've seen it for myself Molly, I couldn't let you work yourself into the ground."

"Who says I am? You've never trained like I have, you don't know the first thing about running a marathon." She wasn't angry at his words, but she couldn't keep the venom out of her voice if she wanted to. "I have a long way to go. I'm not starting from scratch, I'm so far behind the field it's not funny."

Mick stood still for a moment and she wished he'd say something instead of probing her eyes. He seemed to be searching for something, maybe an explanation of why. She didn't owe him one and she hoped he understood that.

He sighed. "I know it hurts." His eyes dropped down to her leg and then came up again. "I've seen you limping. Jane said she found you crying. Seb doesn't think you're eating enough. And Nate thinks it's because of me. Is it?"

Oh, God, when he pinned her with such a scared expression she almost went to him. The fact he was standing only a foot away wasn't helping. His heat reached her, familiar and arousing, comforting and strong. What she wouldn't give to be wrapped up in it again.

The cost was too great. It meant she'd forgo the truth, allow him to get away with squirming out of the spotlight so he could save his pride. It meant he wouldn't have to admit why he really broke it off with her, and that alone drove her to resist his heat and his strength. She knew what an asset it would be to have him by her side, running with her, supporting her every step. But she didn't want it without Mick facing up to the truth and being honest.

After all, wasn't he the one who'd wanted them to be open with each other? Who'd used honesty as a way of ending things when it got too intense?

"Don't be so egotistical," she chided softly. "It's not all about you. Am I not allowed to live my own life now? Or does every decision I make have to be about you?"

He pulled back, looking hurt. She never realised she could strike him so deeply and the urge to take it back was so fierce it tightened her throat.

"Molly, I—" he huffed and ran a hand through his shaggy hair.

The pause felt too long.

"I'm sorry."

"You already said that. I want to know why."

He shook his head. "I can't Molly, please. I—"

His forlorn expression pulled her closer, into his space where he stared down at her and apologised with his eyes. When his palm cupped her cheek, Molly held still and realised with a jolt how much she missed his touch. He mistook her jump as a rejection and pulled away.

"I can't do this Mick," she finally said, her eyes brimming with tears. "I can't go back and forth like this. Either you want to be with me, or you don't. It can't be both."

~

His heart lurched in his chest, trying to scoop her up so he could take her home. It almost killed him to watch her hobble out each night, to push her leg so hard. She had to be wondering if it was worth it. He was speechless to think she did it to rid her thoughts of him, but then she said she wasn't. He didn't know if he should be happy about that or hurt that she wasn't thinking about him.

Lord but he was confused.

Regardless, he didn't like to see her in pain, and he really didn't want to walk away from her tonight so far from home. It only meant she had to run back.

Glancing down, he saw her metal leg painted with the Australian flag. He also saw the skin above the socket and not even the darkness around them or the late hour could hide the redness. His eyes flew to hers. "Let me take you home."

She shook her head. "I'm okay, really."

"So then were you crying about the pain in your stump? Or were you crying over me?"

Her defiance pleased him, meant she had to admit to one or the other. Her silence, however, only gave him time to think more about why she was running so hard. The Melbourne Marathon was a year away. She had time to ease into her training. There was no hurry, no need to put herself in danger.

"Thank you for visiting my mum," he said, deciding to drop the subject. "She really likes your company."

A smile tugged at the corner of her mouth, but Molly didn't let it blossom. "I like her. You're okay with that?"

Mick found himself smiling and stepping closer. "What? That you like my mum? Or that you visit her and not me?"

The almost-smile in her eyes faded and she sighed. "I didn't know if you wanted to talk to me. You didn't call."

He nodded. "I should have. You should know it's not your fault. I didn't reject you." She shivered and he noticed the goose bumps on her arms. Man, he wanted to get her home so she could rug up.

"What did you reject, Mick? If not me, then what? The possibilities? Your feelings? The past? I really want to understand but you're not giving me a lot to work with."

He didn't know how to answer her. The more he thought about his reasons for breaking it off, the more lame he thought they were. Especially since his mother told him his father had the same fears. Especially since he got the distinct impression that Molly really did understand but she wanted him to say it. It should be simple. It wasn't.

"I'm screwed up," he finally said. Even that was too much of an admission. He went to step away when she reached for him. "Molly, I have issues."

She smiled then. Comforting. Understanding. "I have issues too, you big dope. I can admit them." She stepped closer, her chest against his. "Why can't you?"

His hands cupped her small face, chasing away the cold that had settled over his skin. If he could wrap her up, he would. Leaning in, he touched his nose to hers. "Because I can't. I don't want you to see how weak I am."

Her eyes widened. "You've seen me at my worst. You've heard me bare my greatest fears. You told me to look beyond the heroic image and see the real you. I'm trying Mick, really, I am. But if you won't let me in, what can I do?"

Her words speared his heart. "I'm sorry."

She sighed, her breath touching him so deeply he didn't want to let her go. But he'd disappointed her by not opening up. She had every reason to walk away, to be mad with him.

"If you can't be honest with me Mick, at least be honest with yourself. Admit that you're afraid fate will turn back time and do to you what it did to your father. Admit that you're scared of leaving someone a widow. Admit that you'd rather live in fear than in love."

She was too much like his mother. Like she could see into his soul and ferret out his greatest fears. Why didn't she seem scared? She could be that widow, suffer like his mother and yet, she seemed okay with it. "I'm a coward," he ground out, his throat protesting the truth.

To his surprise, she shook her head. "No. Just scared. That's okay. But you need to understand something Mick. I need a man who'll love me no matter what, through thick and thin. I need a man who can be honest with himself. Maybe even one who can look beyond his own fears. You asked me to do that. Remember? To trust you? I did, Mick. I trusted you with my heart, right from the very beginning. I wish you could've trusted me back."

She stepped back and out of his reach. "Molly, don't go."

"I'm not asking you to change, Mick. Be the man you want to be. But I can't put my heart on the line anymore. You showed me what it was like to feel again, Mick, and for that I will always be grateful. But I need to protect me, too. I don't know what the future holds for me. But I know what I want, and if I can't have someone who trusts me, is honest with me and who loves himself enough to be with me, then I have to go."

She turned, took another step and then spun back. Her eyes rolled over him and he felt the goodbye as surely as if she said it. With one final, lingering caress of his face, her eyes closed and a single tear rolled down her cheek.

In that moment, she was the most beautiful thing he'd ever seen.

Then she turned and ran into the night, leaving him cold, alone and with questions to answer.

## **Chapter 13**

The Chief grinned at her as she entered the building. Greeting her with open arms, he hugged her tight and then led her into what he called the common room. It was more like a home, with an open plan kitchen and living area. The crew lounged about. Two watched the football on the telly, one surfed the net and the others played a game of what looked like poker.

All heads turned when she walked in the room and then gazes promptly scooted down to her leg. It was on show today. How could it not be? She'd run the distance to the

stationhouse, all ten kilometres of it in her shorts. Nate promised he'd be here to drive her back home, but she couldn't see him in the room.

"It's my new leg," she announced, holding it up off the floor. "Don't be shy about it. I'm back running again, training for the marathon next year."

"You ran from your house to here?" One of the guys, a small, compact man with a buzz cut looked astounded.

"Sure did. Ten K. Easy peasy."

Well, it really wasn't that easy. She'd had to walk the last couple of hundred meters or so, to stop the jarring on her stump. If Nate didn't show up, she'd have to catch a taxi.

She hadn't planned on stopping in the stationhouse at all. Running into Mick so soon after their late night rendezvous would severely test her resolve. But she meant what she said. If he couldn't be honest, couldn't open up, then they really were over. Giving up on him wasn't an easy choice, and she so hated to disappoint Celia, but her heart was at stake, too. At least now, she was running because she wanted to, not to rid her thoughts and memories of Mick.

"How long did it take you?" Called the tall lanky fella over on the computer.

Molly grinned at his interest and checked her watch. "Fifty-nine minutes. Slower than I'm used to, but that'll improve."

That got their attention. Where everyone had eyed her warily, they now seemed openly interested in her progress. "Do you have a running partner?"

Molly turned to the two men watching the footy. Well, they weren't watching anymore. "No. And my coach is having trouble fitting me in."

It was sad but true. Her time off had allowed other runners, younger runners, to take her place. She was glad they were getting Norm's attention and she wasn't taking it as a rejection of her amputee status. He really couldn't squeeze her in. Molly knew enough and had run long enough to understand training schedules and the principles of progressive overload. Doing this on her own didn't scare her, not like it had when she was young.

"When's the marathon?"

Molly smiled, liking where he was going with his questions. "October next year. Are you offering to be my running partner?"

A ripple of laughter went round the room. "Yeah, sure."

*Rose Middleton*  
One Foot Forward

"Oh, come on George," the computer guy laughed harder. "You haven't been exactly keeping up the training."

"Eh," George shrugged, his attention staying on Molly. "Time I got back to it anyways. I'm all yours, hon. I'll even run the marathon with you."

Silence.

Molly smelled a challenge in the air.

"Hey, if George can do it..." computer guy stood and stretched. "I'm in, Molly. Name's Steven Jackson. Chances are George won't be able to run with you all the time. Let me help out. Damn, I've never run a marathon. You might end up dragging my butt along."

Everyone laughed, including Nate as he strolled in from the rear courtyard. He looked like he'd been running a marathon. "What's so funny?"

George filled him in. Nate only laughed. "Oh, I'm on the support crew already. I'm in charge of the buckets of ice water."

"You'd do that for me?" she asked when Nate led her outside. He looked exhausted and she had to wonder what he'd been up to.

"Of course."

Molly sat on the low brick retaining wall that held in the courtyard garden. "I didn't think you approved of my running."

He stared at her. "You really think that? Man, I've been a bastard then. I think it's great you're running again, Molly, but I think you're pushing too hard too soon. And I think you're doing that—"

"Because of Mick." She nodded. "Yeah, I know. He told me."

Nate sat beside her. "You guys spoke?"

Molly smiled wryly. "No, he was following me on my nightly runs. I caught him. And then we spoke. Nothing's resolved."

Nate patted her hand. "You scare the crap out of him, you know."

"Pardon?"

Nate nodded. "You accepted him, you didn't question the fire fighter in him. You didn't question the job. Hell, around here, that's worth gold, Molly. I love that you've never

asked me why I do it, or why a woman would marry a fireman. It doesn't scare you the way it scares other women."

She thought about Amy but didn't say anything. "There's more to you, and Mick, than the job. Like there's more to me than the fact that half my leg is missing."

Nate picked up her hand and squeezed it. "He's an idiot for letting you go. No wonder he took off."

"Took off?" She had to fight the urge to yell the words. "Where'd he go?"

Nate shrugged. "Not sure. He asked the Chief for some time off and then disappeared. Whatever you two talked about must've given him something to think over."

It struck her that he was probably at the cottage. But he needed time alone? To think? Her heart filled with hope she had no right to feel because he could very well come back more determined than ever to stay single, to protect all the potential women in his life from his nasty job. With that thought, some of the hope waned, but not all of it.

This was what she needed to avoid. The ups and downs, the waiting, the not knowing. She knew relationships were never cut and dried, that there were grey areas and they could be messy. But why did they have to involve the heart so completely? It wasn't like she'd thought, oh well, Mick might come to his senses and we'd have a chance. No. It was more like, he'll come back and sweep me off my feet. Which was dumb, when she thought about it rationally. Also moot because he'd swept her off her feet weeks ago.

Molly choked on the thought.

"Molly?" Nate looked worried. "What is it?"

It couldn't be. Yes she adored him, enjoyed her time with him, and wanted to be with him. But she didn't love him, wasn't *in* love with him. That was ludicrous. All they'd done was share some laughs, enjoy the intimacy and talk like a pair of old friends. And okay, she couldn't stop thinking about him or wishing he still kept her warm at night.

Oh.

God.

No.

"What? You're killing me Molly."

"He's never really been in love, has he?" She asked by way of distraction.

Nate pulled a face. And it didn't say no. In fact, if she read him right, it screamed yes.

“You ask because you’ve realised you’re in love with him. Right?”

“No,” she laughed as casually as she could manage. For Molly, that wasn’t terribly casual. “Oh hell, Nate, I’m in trouble.”

~

He couldn’t get her out of his head. Or her words. Or the graceful way she ran. Or the look in her eye when they made love. Not for the entire three days he stayed at the cottage, and it made absolutely no sense to him. Of course, the sheets still smelled like her, and every time he caught a glimpse of the rocking chair, there she was.

And nothing beat the moment he’d gone down to the creek and laid eyes on the picnic table.

But coming here was supposed to clear his head, help him understand himself a little better. She deserved some answers and he wanted to give them to her.

The only place he found any kind of peace was by the graves of his father and grandparents. The quiet there helped him think. He sort of hoped for some advice too, but the old coots had stayed deafeningly silent. He suspected it was probably a good sign that his father wasn’t in his ear. Who knew what the old man would say?

The only one he really wished to hear was Grandma Daisy. Surely she would have some useful words for him. But as he sat under the big tree, the sun setting behind him in a blaze of oranges and reds, Mick received no help on that score. At the very least, he had to tell Molly what she already knew. He needed to say it in his own words. She’d appreciate the integrity in that.

Except, every time he saw himself say it to her, he felt her words come back to him. *Admit that you’d rather live in fear than in love.* She had him there. Even his mother understood it. No matter how hard he tried, Mick couldn’t find a solution to it. If he let himself fall in love, true and undeniable love, something bad would happen. He’d be ripped away from her, or worse, she’d be torn from his life.

Mick’s thoughts strayed to the day of Molly’s accident. If they’d been together then...but she hadn’t died, had she? In her unique way, Molly grabbed life by both hands and held on. She refused to let go. Where did it leave her? Living life and reclaiming her passions. He missed that enthusiasm in his life. Missed her vitality and spirit.

It was a blessing to have her in his life, and he’d pushed it away. The one thing he’d become excruciatingly aware of over the last week was how much he missed her, how desperately he didn’t want to spend another minute without her. He still had no answers to the marriage or children issues and he realised he owed it to Molly to discuss them with her.



When he drove back to Melbourne, the first thing he did was call his mum and ask her what to do. She only reiterated the advice she gave last time around. *Talk to her*. Mick gave himself until the weekend to find the courage and the words he'd need for Molly. Four days to find a way to come clean. He didn't need to do it for himself. He needed to do it for her.

When he arrived at work on Tuesday afternoon, there were the expected barrage of where have you been questions. He gave the same answer to everybody: none of your damn business. It was only to Nate he told the truth and he'd never seen the man look so relieved in all the years they'd known each other.

"Well, hallelujah, the man isn't a complete idiot," Nate griped.

Mick slapped him upside the head lightly. "No, I'm not. Have you seen her?"

Nate only grinned. "I went running with her, this very morning, my dear friend. That girl can move."

"Run?" Mick felt his heart race. Nate was running with her?

"Yeah," George butted in. "We're all pitching in, running with her so she doesn't go overboard. Except I promised I'd run the marathon as well."

Mick laughed, though Nate chimed in with, "Maybe we all should."

Mick couldn't believe how they were all so enthusiastic about running forty-two kilometres. The mere thought of it made him tired. He'd trade it in for a night in her bed, with Molly in his arms in a heartbeat. From the sounds of it though, the whole crew were getting behind her. Not only did it reassure him she wouldn't punish herself too hard, it eased his worry for race day.

He'd be there, in any capacity he could. That he knew. Listening to the others speak so fondly and so highly of her made him yearn for the sound of her voice. He stood, left the common room and retreated to the courtyard. Phone in hand, he stared at her number on the display screen.

"Just call her already," Nate said, standing beside Mick. "You want to, don't you?"

"What if she hangs up on me?"

Nate shook his head and laughed. "She won't. Call her." And he left.

Hitting the dial button, Mick waited as the phone rang and rang. Either her phone was off or she was out of range. He got voicemail, listened to her sweet voice as if he hadn't

heard it for years, and then left a message about wanting to talk in person. He didn't know how often she checked it, but he hoped it was soon.

The station bells tolled, calling them to action. Mick ran into the engine room, shoved his feet in his boots, stuck his father's helmet on his head and grabbed his jacket. He learned on the ride over that the blaze was out of control. In the industrial estate, where old and new buildings were so close together, the fire had jumped and spread unimpeded. The whole place was alight, access was terrible and the danger was high.

Mick stared at the old brick buildings. Nothing looked steady or stable. He could see huge cracks splitting walls on the diagonal, smoke and flames billowing out. The sky, blackened with soot and smoke, closed in around them as George pulled the truck into line beside the others.

A dozen rigs ringed the far north corner of the estate. At least another dozen were needed. Mick heard over the radio that reinforcements were being pulled in from everywhere. Firey's were coming in outside their rostered hours, a water bomber—usually used to fight bushfires in summer—had been deployed and was filling at a nearby dam. Close-by residential properties were being evacuated and a wide perimeter was set up to keep people out of harm's way.

Hearing that one of the factories was a tyre manufacturer made Mick groan. The building housed an order for the V8 Super Cars event at the Thunderdome. Several thousand tyres had been stored for shipment at the end of the week. Yeah, great. Rubber plus fire made water redundant.

Another factory housed chemicals. The kind that became unstable when mixed with water. They'd need the foam trucks. Damn, what a mess.

"Mick!" His head spun toward Glenn. "We're taking Building 33. Five floors. Furniture warehouse. We check for civilians, do what we can, and get out."

"Which one's 33, Chief?"

Glenn pointed, eliciting another groan from Mick. The brick building. With the cracks and that new gaping hole in the wall.

"No heroics. No bullshit."

He'd heard the speech a hundred times and still it sent a shiver down Mick's spine. No heroics. No bullshit. In other words, do as you're told, follow the rules and get out alive. He suddenly wondered if his father had heard the same speech.

Mick shook himself. Bad omen to be thinking like that. He knew his job, he was skilled at what he did, and he had Molly to win back. He blinked. No, don't think about her. Do the job, get out alive.

When his boots hit the pavement, Mick's training took over. He checked Nate's oxygen tank. They both turned and Nate checked his. A slap on the shoulder told him he was good to go. The crew dragged hoses and carried their tools toward the flaming building. The roar of the fire filled the air, familiar and threatening.

Joe had taught him to respect the beast, to treat it as if it were a creature desperate for fuel and freedom. Mick would never forget the lessons and he would never underestimate his scalding friend. Containment only became a priority once they knew the building was empty, and with the offices housed on the second floor, the crew would have to tread carefully.

A fire ravaged staircase greeted them, made their journey to the second floor treacherous. The sound of the fire was akin to the growl of jet engines, filling his ears and eliciting an intoxicating rush of adrenaline through his blood.

Big fires like this were surprisingly few and far between, though when they happened, it took the mighty Melbourne Fire Brigade to douse them safely. Years of tradition had bred a force of men and women spurred on by the need to save, protect and serve.

When the occasion arose for so many of them to come together, Mick was reminded of the camaraderie and fighting spirit so inherent in every Australian soldier, officer and citizen. From the time of the Anzacs at Gallipoli, to the fortitude and strength in the steamy jungles of Burma, the same never-say-die courage had been handed down through the generations. It flowed through them as it flowed through Mick now.

Searching each office in the formation they'd perfected, the crew cleared the floor of any casualties efficiently, effectively. The oppressive heat and smoke-filled air made each man's heart beat a little quicker but no one lost focus on the job at hand.

From the second floor, the crew split in two. Five men, including Mick and Nate, climbed another flight of rickety stairs. It was time to contain and extinguish and they would tackle on two levels. From below, Steven Jackson would lead the others to squelch unburned fuel with water while from above, Mick and Nate would do the same.

Overhead, pipes began to buckle and burst. The heat turned the building's water supply into vapour. Blistering jets of steam sprang through the ceiling, splitting their small team again. Instead of overhead sprinklers, steam shot out across the building, forcing Mick away from the group. It wasn't the first time he'd found himself alone and the last eight years of training taught him what to do.

Nate called out, informing him of a back stairwell, but with the fire still raging and the floor stable—at least for now—Mick set about knocking down the beast's foundations. With nothing to burn, the licking flames retreated into the ceiling, causing more pipelines to burst.

He had to roll out of the way when a steam jet came too close. Across the floor, he saw Nate's hand signals. They were going up. He'd meet them there.

Turning, he made his way through the hazy swirls of black smoke to the stairwell. Took the steps two at a time, axe in one hand, oxygen mask in the other. Breaking down the door, he found a floor so full of potential for destruction he realised he should turn back, get the hell out and regroup for a second onslaught.

Standing in the doorway to the stairwell, he stared at the piles of boxed and stacked furniture. Wooden, flammable furniture. Stacked ceiling high. An inferno in the making. Quite remarkably, the fire hadn't reached this feeding ground but it wouldn't be long until it did. Mick heard it snake through the ceiling, like a freight train circling above him.

The others appeared on the opposite side of the floor. They met in the middle.

"Jesus," Nate gasped, staring at the maze of furniture.

The situation was desperate and with the instability of the building, any hope of containment was minimal. If no one was up here, they needed to vamoose. And fast.

"No heroics. No bullshit," Mick reminded them.

The others nodded. "What's that stairwell like?" Nate pointed to the one Mick had used.

"In good shape. Concrete. Steel. No wood."

Nate slapped his shoulder. "The other one's almost done for."

Together, the four headed out. On the landing inside the stairwell, the air was clear enough that they didn't need their face masks. "There's an access door at the bottom," Nate shouted as something in the building behind them crashed. He pulled the attached radio microphone to his mouth and relayed their position.

The other half of their team was on the ground floor now, retreating. The Chief growled for them to move their asses and no one was arguing.

As he was about to mask up, Mick paused. The noise around them dimmed. In the ensuing quiet, Mick felt the rumble in his bones. He'd never been blocked in by a fire, none of them had, but something in his gut triggered a warning. Leaning over the railing, he peered down into the stairwell below.

"What's on the ground floor?"

Nate leaned over too and they shared a knowing glance before turning their focus downward. "Utility room? Power grid?"

“Oh God,” Mick breathed. Understanding hit him at the same time as the gas meters on the ground floor were engulfed in orange flames. “Shit.”

Time slowed to a crawl as acid gnawed in his stomach. Mick secured his mask back over his face and sucked in air.

“*MOVE!*” Mick yelled over his shoulder. “Other stairs. *NOW. GO, GO, GO.*”

He heard their boots retreat, waited until they were safely out of the stairwell before backing away. The amber glow lit up the stairwell as the roar and rush of wind pressurised the small space. Like a bullet of fire, flames raced up the concrete cavity. Mick felt hands pull him backward.

He’d never seen anything like it. The force of the beast pinpointed in universal defiance of their efforts. Gunning for them with all its might.

He tumbled backward as the stairwell became an incinerator. A finger of flame rushed out at them, filled his vision before retreating with a hollow, sucking sound.

Expletives filled his ears moments before translucent fire spread across the ceiling. It was like watching water spread out over a flat surface, as the beast claimed the underbelly of the floor above them. Mick scrambled.

Was this how it’d had been for his father? Did Joe feel the same dread in his bones?

On his feet, Mick stumbled backwards, eyes up and watching in awe at the power he witnessed. He’d never seen it before. Eight years and he’d never watched a display of such infinite supremacy. Until now, he thought he respected fire. He’d been wrong. So deadly wrong.

Turning, he heard the creak under foot, felt the floorboards give way. Pitching forward, he found himself staring and falling into a gaping hole. Where did this bullshit come from? He stuck an arm out in blind faith. Connected with a water pipe and held. First time ever he felt the heat through his gloves.

*Trouble. I think I’m in trouble.* Old song lyrics played in his head as Nate skidded closer. “Hold on, Mick.”

Mick threw a hand towards Nate, missed by an inch. He threw it again. Missed again. The fear in Nate’s wide eyes said it all. Dangling above a fiery abyss, Mick refused to look down. Rather, he stared at his smoking gloved hand and wondered how long he had. Bodies slid into place beside Nate’s. The crew. With his free hand, Mick ripped his mask from his face and stared hard at Nate.

“Tell Molly—”

Nate shook his head, cutting him off. "No. *You* tell her. Now get your ass up here."

The pipe began to yield under the intense heat and Mick's weight, bending, now perpendicular. Mick was fast losing feeling in his burnt fingers. His hand slid, fear causing him to squeeze tighter. Swinging his body, Mick tried to gain purchase with his free hand on something, but the momentum only worsened his predicament.

The pipe finally broke free and he dropped. Flames whooshed past him, smoke curled by. He hit the next floor hard, heard ribs crack, then the floor. He groaned, as did the beam under him before it snapped. More silent falling, interrupted by another expanse of fragile floor.

When he landed in a thick bed of ash, Mick had to fight the darkness edging at his vision. Something sharp poked into him. His head hurt, his chest was numb, but he had presence of mind to roll out of the way of the flaming beam that followed him into this hell hole.

Really, really in trouble this time.

~

Was it even possible to fall in love with someone after such a short time?

She'd tried to rationalise it, tried to lay it all out in black and white for a better understanding. Maybe then, she'd be able to sit still, or sleep, or eat. Then again, if she did eat, she suspected she'd throw it all back up. The nausea in her belly was bad enough without food.

Nate hadn't helped shed any light on the situation. Point blank refused to tell her the name of the woman Mick had loved. Wouldn't even tell her how long ago it was. Stubborn rascal. Too much like Jane. As for that woman, she actually denied going to Mick and pleading for his help. Molly would've strangled her if she didn't love her friend so much.

The only thing that truly made sense was the ache in her heart that wouldn't go away. So much for protecting it, she realised when she settled in her car on Tuesday afternoon. Somehow, the stupid organ had allowed itself to become tangled in Mick's messy web of mixed up emotions.

On one hand, she felt for the guy. For so long he'd actually believed it was better to live in isolation and fear, but better for whom? Depriving himself simply left him with little joy, aside from his job. Even then she had to wonder how much of his job was linked to his father.

On the other hand however, she had trouble believing Mick could be so naïve to think he couldn't hurt a woman without getting killed on the job. Short term affairs had a way

of driving some women nuts, either with anger or want. No wonder he was one of the stationhouse's most eligible bachelors. No wonder she'd had to triple her bid at the damn auction.

Look where it got her. Her heart captured, her brain frazzled and her libido kicking.

Son of a gun. Why did he have to play hero to her? Even if she had been feeling undesirable, at least there weren't any expectations that went along with it.

Molly grunted in a most unladylike fashion and grabbed her phone to check for messages. It needed to be off while she was in the hospital, and she'd been glad for the lack of disruption. Receiving the all-too-familiar lecture about caring for her stump had been torturous but a timely reminder. She was thankful Marcus couldn't make it to her appointment today. One sermon per day was quite enough.

When she powered up the phone, it chimed to signal a message but before she could retrieve it, the blasted thing rang in her hand, scaring her half to death.

"Molly?"

"Nate?" He sounded panicked as he burst into a string of words she couldn't decipher. "Slow down. What is it?"

He paused. "It's Mick."

The world stopped. "Mick?" she squeaked, almost feeling Nate's apprehension through the phone. "What happened?"

He swallowed loudly. "Just get over here."

"Where's here?"

He relayed the address. It wasn't the stationhouse. It wasn't the hospital. That was bad news. If they hadn't taken Mick to the hospital, then he was beyond medical help, wasn't he? Oh God. This was what he'd been on about all along. The sick feeling in her gut. The blood pounding through every inch of her body. And the fear that maybe she'd lost her chance to get him back.

"Just get here, Molly. When you get to the road block, show them your license. They'll let you through."

They were bending the rules for her, too? Oh, that had to be bad. Her head felt light and she felt herself sway. "Nate, I don't think I can."

“He needs you right now, Molly. Right this very minute. Don’t hesitate or—” Nate stopped abruptly but she heard the words he was going to say as sure as if he’d said them.

*Don’t hesitate or it could be too late.*

## **Chapter 14**

At the road block, Molly expected greater resistance. Instead, she was escorted by police car to the line of red fire engines, but it was the enormous blaze that heightened her fear. The acrid smell of burning embers stung her nose while the bright orange flames leapt into the smoke blackened sky. The officer opened the door for her, but she couldn’t move. The very thought Mick was trapped somewhere in there glued her to the seat.

“Ma’am?”

Molly dared not look away until she heard her name and a familiar voice. It was Glenn, the Fire Chief. His grim expression made her wish this was a dream, but she took his extended hand and let him help her out of the patrol car. Even the air felt hot and the darkened sky made her insides shiver with worry.

“Come over to the truck, Molly.” He led her gently, directing her toward the fire truck. She expected to see the others, but no one was there.

“Where’s Nate?”

“He went back in. Another stationhouse is helping. There are more men in there now.” He patted her hand but didn’t smile. “We’ll get him out.”

She noticed he didn’t say alive. As she stared up at Glenn’s concern, sirens wailed and trucks blew their horns. She remembered those sounds from the accident, but standing so close and so aware to the danger Mick faced caused a chill to rattle through her.

She wasn’t sure why she was here. She couldn’t help, which left her feeling useless and in the way. But as Glenn draped a blanket around her shoulders, she understood why they’d called. Being a part of Mick’s life made her a part of theirs. It was no secret a fire fighter’s family was held close to the heart of his crew. She remembered Nate giving that speech a long time ago. Before she’d even met Mick.

Now she was here, as much a member of their crew as she dared to be. Except Mick was in trouble.



*Rose Middleton*  
One Foot Forward

In the truck behind her, a radio crackled into life. Nate's voice filled the air to report they hadn't found Mick yet. He sounded scared. For as long as she'd known Nate, which was pretty much her whole life, Molly couldn't ever recall him sounding so frightened.

Glenn snatched up the radio mike and told the boys to keep looking.

The focus was on the one building now, the one hiding Mick. More fire fighters rushed to it and more hoses were directed towards it. Big jet streams of water arced high in the air as they tried to douse the fire from outside. Molly heard the rumble of an engine in the sky before a big red bucket sliced through the swirling black smoke. Over the danger zone, it dumped its contents and then disappeared back into the swirling black haze.

Molly felt a spray of cold water on her face. For a long moment, the world went quiet for her as she prayed for Mick to be safe. Whatever happened between them, she needed him to be alive and well. If not for his sake, then for Celia's. Oh, God. Celia.

Molly trembled at the thought of the woman losing her son to the job. Strong as she was, Celia would feel it in her soul. But there was nothing productive in jumping to conclusions. If worst came to worst, Molly would stay by Celia's side and they would somehow get through it.

Molly heard the radio crackle again and expected to hear Nate. Instead, all she heard was a gargle, then a cough before, "I'm on the ground floor."

Relief washed through her so fast it nearly took her feet out from under her. Glenn dived for the mike, his face a vision of relief, too. "Are you hurt?"

More silence and then, "Yeah. Broken ribs I think. Burnt hand. Don't know which is worse."

Her eyes stung. The man still had a sense of humour. "Can you tell me where you are?"

Mick grunted. "On the floor?"

"Smart ass," Nate replied through the radio.

"Glenn, I need you to tell Molly something."

Glenn nodded and set his warm hand on her shoulder. "You can tell her yourself, mate."

It took her a moment to register that he was holding the receiver out to her. Her mind was still stuck on Mick's injuries and the fact that he said he was trapped. He should know. But then, the thought of not hearing what he had to say poked her in the butt and propelled her forward.

"Molly? You're there?"

She swallowed and pushed the button down, wondering what she'd say. Words escaped in a heart pounding rush as she said, "I love you, Mick. Get your ass outta there."

Laughter filled the radio waves. Some of it belonged to Mick, but mostly it was other fire fighters. "I'm sorry, Molly. I've been a coward. I blamed you when really it was me."

"That's not important right now." That, and the fact every other fire fighter here was listening.

"Yeah, baby, it is. When you said you wanted a man who could be honest, I got to thinking. I want to be that man, Molly."

Her knees wobbled as she sat on the metal step of the fire truck and pulled the blanket around her tighter. "I'm listening."

There was a brief pause and it was like everyone was frozen in anticipation of his next words. Gee, when fireys opened their hearts, everyone stopped to listen.

"You were right. I've been petrified of history repeating itself. I hated watching my mum go through so much pain after Dad died. I didn't want that to happen to me, or a woman. I've kept my heart locked away for so long. But then you came back to me, Molly. It was fate that saw you buy me at the auction."

Her face heated. Partly because everyone was listening, but mostly because of his openness. Hearing him speak so frankly pleased her in ways she couldn't comprehend. The only thing that mattered was finding him and getting him out, but time wasn't on their side.

"Mick, I—"

"No. Hear me out, Molly."

"Okay."

"When I saw you the night of the auction, it felt like there was something missing in your eyes. Spunk. Passion. I decided right then I was going to change that."

Molly's grip on the microphone tightened. In the dark, her knuckles turned white. "You did."

"Oh yeah." She heard the smile in his voice but still wondered how badly hurt he was. "I knew the real Molly lurked in there somewhere. She needed to feel whole again."

*Rose Middleton*  
One Foot Forward

It was like the man could see into her very soul. How right he was. So very, very right. She'd tell him but her mouth wouldn't work. Her throat had closed up and her tongue stuck to the roof of her mouth. Instead, she just listened.

"I wanted to help you find that, but you really didn't need me to do very much. You just needed a gentle push in the right direction. I'm glad you started running again and I understand why you pushed so hard. You made me understand, Molly. I love that you don't need me to feel whole again."

"That's where you're wrong," the words tumbled easily this time. "Oh, God, Mick. When I'm with you, it's like the accident never happened."

"I was a bastard to accuse you of lying."

And yet, on some level, she understood why he did it. "Don't be so hard on yourself."

Someone nearby chuckled and when she looked, she found Glenn. She'd forgotten he was there. "Don't let him off the hook so lightly, Molly." He hinted, with a wink.

"Molly, there's another reason why I was scared. Well, two reasons actually." He coughed, the sound so painful it made her wince. "We've never talked about the future. About marriage. Or kids."

Stunned, Molly laughed. No, they'd never discussed those things but then, she hadn't even made up her mind about them, either. She told him so.

"Well hon, I know what I want. I want both. Marriage and kids. With you. You'll be a great mum. Take as long as you need, whatever you decide is fine. But I wanted you to know how I feel. The truth, Molly, is—"

From somewhere deep inside the building, the sound of twisting metal filled the air, cutting him off. Molly looked up, her gaze transfixed on the now swaying building. Groaning mixed with the scraping metal, a foreboding and downright frightening sound.

"Mick?"

All she heard was static on the radio. Where did he go? What was happening? Her heart raced and she held her breath, fear slowly strangling her vocal cords.

For a moment, the building stopped moving and silence descended upon them. Molly felt her eyes dart wildly across the building's walls, looking for something, *anything*, to tell her what the hell was going on.

Right before her eyes, she watched the flames retreat and disappear into the building. As crazy as it sounded, she suddenly feared the fire was going after Mick. Insane and irrational thinking? Yes. Understandable? Definitely.

Glenn took the mike out of her hands. "Mick? Nate? What's going on?" He waited but heard nothing. After a minute, his eyes found Molly's. She did not like what she saw.

~

It was time to scram. The twisting, buckling metal signalled one thing. The foundations were ready to collapse. Exposed and in the centre of the rubble, Mick didn't stand a chance. While his ribs screamed, he rolled onto his belly and army crawled on elbows and knees. He had no solid proof of where he was going. The inside of the building was like a war zone. Nothing looked remotely familiar but he moved anyway.

If he could somehow get to one of the outside walls, he'd have a fighting chance. Not having searched the ground floor, however, he soon found himself blocked by an internal wall. How the wooden structure hadn't been eaten by the fire, he'd never know.

Using his axe, Mick swung the blade at the panel. The impact sent shockwaves of pain through his chest but remarkably, the whole panel swung backward. He watched in awe as it arced silently through the air before crashing to the ground. That was far too easy, although not painless.

Pausing to rest, Mick heard the threatening groan overhead. He needed to radio out he was fine but moving seemed like a bigger priority. Stowing his axe, he resumed the army crawl until he came to a bricked wall. External wall or not, he wasn't going anywhere in a hurry. Wriggling around, he laid flat alongside the wall, hoping it would hold if, or rather when, the building started to fold in on itself. Inevitable. And there wasn't a lot of time to spare.

Unhooking the radio, he pressed the trigger. "Are you there?"

He waited, his breath burning his lungs until he heard her voice again. "Jesus, Mick. You need to get out of there."

"I know, babe," he sighed. "Put Glenn on for a minute."

"Where are you?"

"I think I've made it to an external wall. It's brick. I'll see if I can take a brick or two out. Have one of the others case the perimeter and call out. I'll hear them."

"Mick," Glenn sounded anxious. "Don't do anything stupid." Mick smiled but the grin was soon wiped off by Glenn's next, hushed words. "She's panicking out here. Hurry up."

Mick swallowed and retrieved his axe. Using the blade, he started grinding into the mortar between the bricks. It was old, it chipped easily. Continuing with one hand, he brought the radio up again. "Put her on."

“Come on, Mick,” she hedged. “You’re starting to scare me.”

“The truth, Molly,” he picked up his last words. “Is that you make me whole. I realised after our trip to the cottage that I didn’t want to go another day without you. My mum helped me see that. She loves you, Molly. I love you.”

He grinned, the motion of the axe slowing as he realised how freeing it felt to say the words. In an instant he started sawing again, hacking at the mortar frantically in a bid to escape this burning hell.

He needed to get to the woman outside, the one who’d shown him how good it felt to accept love and to live in love. He was done running scared from all the what-ifs life had to throw at him, and he’d learn how to deal with tragedies as they came along. The crash had brought them together and he’d be damned if he let something like this fire tear them apart for good.

Putting his shoulder into it, Mick pushed harder against the brick wall. His chest flamed in pain and his burnt hand had barely any sensation at all but he persevered. The sound of metal twisting and groaning continued to boom around him, drowning out anything else. If someone was on the other side of the wall, he’d never hear them. It was up to him. He had to get out. For Molly. For his mother. For himself.

With a grunt, he moved the brick. The blade of the axe sliced through the wall and he was able to push the brick out entirely. Fresh air. Sweet beautiful fresh air. Mick inhaled deeply. So close. So very close. He called out through the hole, saw black booted feet charge towards him and felt enormous relief crash through him.

*Soon Molly. Soon.*

He attacked the row of bricks above the hole, pushed another out to widen the hole. It was big enough that he could see Nate’s face now. And the big grinning dope could only shake his head.

“You had us going for a minute there,” Nate knelt beside the hole. “Shit, I thought I was going to have kick your butt for dying on her. You know I’d come after you, right?”

Mick nodded, lost for words and desperately wanting to see Molly.

“She’s with Glenn. A safe distance away. Let’s get you out, eh?”

His crew started on the wall, as a high pitched squeal shrieked above his head. Mick knew that sound. Nate did, too. Time was up. The building was coming down whether he was in or out. The faces outside turned upwards, a few twisted with fear as recognition set in.

*Rose Middleton*  
One Foot Forward

Mick could only hope the wall held, that he hadn't weakened it too much by knocking out a few bricks. He felt a rumble through the floor under him, saw chips of mortar shake loose from the wall. The building yawed loudly, protesting the inevitable and Mick prayed he'd see her one last time.

He felt the rush of wind first, followed by a blast of heat and a wave of flames. The smell of hair burning bit at his nose and he felt the sizzle at the back of his neck. He heard a woman scream in the distance.

*Molly.*

But it was the roar that got him, the sound of bricks and floors and furniture and glass and steel that came crashing down behind him. With the air sucked out of his lungs, he succumbed to the pull of unconsciousness.

~

Molly threw off the blanket and surged forward, terrified and moved to action. Glenn caught her, held her still as they watched the building fall like a deck of cards.

Mick wasn't out yet.

*Oh God, oh God, oh God.* Her heart hammered against her ribs as the blood drained from her head. Her eyes, open as wide as they would go, never blinked. The dust billowed above the building, engulfing everyone and everything closest to it, and in the silence that followed, Molly tried desperately to break free of Glenn's hold.

Useless. She felt completely and utterly useless. If the other fire fighters couldn't get to him, hadn't pulled him out already...Molly sank to her knees as grim reality struck her. She desperately wanted to believe Mick found a way out, that he'd put all his training and years of experience to good use and survived, but she couldn't ignore the disaster in front of her.

It took a long time for the dust to settle. Until the grey ash-cloud dissipated, there was nothing to see. When it did, she wished it hadn't. It looked like a giant baby had gathered the rubble into a pile the shape of a pyramid. Wisps of smoke curled up and out, one corner of it was still on fire with flames snaking out for a taste of oxygen.

Some of the fire fighters closest to it began to rise. They'd taken cover, laid on the ground, pulled back so they could stay unhurt in order to save a fallen comrade. Covered in a layer of ash, they looked like ghosts as they moved with heavy footsteps toward what remained of the building.

Molly felt her stomach heave. She should look away, avoid the ugly possibility that the collapse of the building had killed him, but she couldn't. His worst fear had come to life, right before her very eyes. The least she could do for him was see it through.

“Molly?”

Glenn pushed her hair away from her face, causing her to tear her gaze away from the scene. “He’s dead, isn’t he?”

“I don’t know, honey, don’t jump to conclusions. Will you stay here while I go and join the search? You have to promise me you won’t follow.”

Molly nodded. Her legs wouldn’t carry her even if she wanted to go. Just because she would see this through didn’t mean she was about to help remove the bricks one by one to uncover Mick’s body. She’d stay here, by the truck like Glenn asked because making his job more difficult wasn’t fair. “I promise.”

He smiled sadly and thumbed away the tear that had fallen without her permission. “Keep the faith, Molly, don’t give up on him.”

Glenn looked over her shoulder and motioned for someone to stay with her. The policeman who’d driven her from the road block knelt beside her and took her hand. His eyes were warm but worried. He understood the dangers fire fighters faced. She could read his eyes too easily.

“I’ll apologise now if I puke on your shoes.”

He chuffed and reached behind her. Covering her with the blanket, he edged closer and wrapped an arm around her shoulders. In wordless comfort, he stayed with her for what Molly was sure would be the worst hour of her life.

The car crash paled in comparison. At least then she had no one to worry about. Concern for her own life never really entered her mind that day. It was as Mick recounted, her only thoughts were about getting out and moving on. Not even losing her leg stressed her, at the time.

His presence in her car that morning soothed and calmed, though she’d never really appreciated it until now. Oh, she’d known he’d helped her and saved her life, but it never really hit home like it did this very minute. Without him, those three hours might have played out very differently. She would always be thankful, not because he saved her, but because he hadn’t let her panic. Because his strength and warmth had blocked out the sound of the saw that took her leg. Because his unwavering support hadn’t let the pain take away her consciousness.

Molly swallowed the tears. How would she ever repay such generosity? A debt to Mick and everyone else who’d kept her alive? Never before had she understood that what they did went beyond the call of duty. He could’ve stayed outside her car, put his safety first and simply talked to her through the smashed windows. They didn’t have to treat

her like she was their little sister, didn't have to wrap her up in their courage and bravery.

But they did.

And she was a better person for it.

She couldn't sit here and watch. Surely there was something she could do. The radio.

Molly shrugged off the kind officer's arm and climbed up into the truck. Her shaking hand picked up the radio mike and brought it to her mouth. The soft static chilled her but it wasn't going to stop her. Simultaneously, she pressed the button and released the barrage of tears.

"Mick? Are you there?"

She waited. Nothing but static.

"Please, Mick, answer me if you can. I know you wouldn't give up without a fight, so if you're there, give me something."

It didn't matter who else was listening. She needed Mick to hear her. "Do you remember how I told you that I had an image of you as a hero? You told me to stay open minded, to see you for who you really are. I see it now, Mick, and you're still a hero to me. I've already told you this, but you did the right thing for Celia. I'm proud that you were able to put aside your pride and do what was best for her. She feels the same way. I kept going to see her so I could somehow stay close to you. Do you realise how much you look like her? How similar the two of you are?"

Molly swallowed again, her mouth dry from the honest words pouring out of her heart. "When I saw you at the auction, I couldn't believe that I didn't remember you. How could a girl forget someone like you? I don't know if you realise how incredible you were the day of the crash. It wasn't just another accident, and I wasn't just another trapped civilian, and I know I've said thank you already, but I want to say it again."

Wiping at her tears, Molly smiled. "If you get your butt outta there, I'll keep saying it for the rest of our lives. I wanted to surprise you with the news about my running. I thought we could go running together, that you'd be by my side when I put my leg to the test."

She had no idea whether he could hear her, whether he was alive, or even if she sounded like a lovesick fool. It didn't matter. It needed to be said.

"And there's one more thing you need to know, Mick. I know there are others listening and it should be said in private, but well, here we are. I need you to know that you showed me that I was lovable and desirable, that to someone, I was still a sexy woman. You proved that not all men are jerks, and I take back what I said. You aren't like most



men, you're you. I love you for that and regardless of how much time we have together, I will always be thankful to have you in my life. As for your job, you do what you love. I understand how much you love being a fire fighter. If you're still worried about history repeating itself, then don't. We'll take each day as it comes, one day at a time."

She lowered the microphone, out of words and out of breath. If there was justice in the world, then Mick had heard every word she said.

~

Through the darkness he heard her voice, drawing him home. If he tried hard enough, he could feel her fingers against his jaw again, her thumb scraping across his lip. She warmed him, made him glad they'd been brought back together.

Her words filtered through the smoky haze, made it to his stuttering heart and squished lungs. When he tried to move, he couldn't. No light reached him, only the smell of ashes and charred objects. He dared not take a deep breath in case he inhaled ashes. Where was his oxygen mask? His flash light?

Searching for them was impossible. His left hand was pinned under his body, his right...where was his right hand? Mick searched, sending awareness through his body to count limbs and digits. He still didn't come up with anything beyond his right shoulder.

Fear tried to take hold, but he stamped it out, knowing there was a logical explanation. If it happened to turn out the arm had been sliced off, he'd deal with it later. After all, he had the perfect role model in Molly.

"Mick?"

He heard his name. Nate. He sighed and opened his mouth to call out but got a mouthful of ash. Violent coughs racked his body, reminding him of the broken ribs. But it was enough for someone to locate him. Voices grew louder as they neared, told him to hang on, that they'd get him out soon. Mick tried to clear his mouth and throat but it only served to draw in more ash with each breath.

Air. He needed air. Entombed in the rubble, there was nothing he could do. But he heard scratching in front of him, heard the scraping of bricks and pitter-patter of falling debris around him. Dislodged ash fluttered over his face, into his ear. It tickled, but he couldn't move.

Another round of tremors above him caused more ash to fall and the fear of being buried sparked his brain. With or without a right arm, he concentrated hard on where he thought it should be and surprised himself when he felt it move. His numb hand smacked him in the face and he remembered the hot pipe, the smoking glove. No wonder it was numb.

Clumsily he dug in front of his face, pushing his hand into the ash. He met no resistance and found his arm straightening into the ash, pushing all the way through without running into anything solid.

“There you are!” Nate’s relief was palpable. “Thanks, we needed some help.”

Mick heard movement, heavy debris being slid away. He felt someone examine his hand but they didn’t remove the glove. Bad sign. Maybe the material had melted into his skin, or vice versa. Didn’t matter. Worry about that later.

It seemed like forever before they finally freed his face enough for fresh air to get in. A ghost looked back at him, smiled and then wiped the ash from his face carefully.

“Better?”

That was Nate? Mick nodded.

“You’re pretty trapped in there, you know? Can I get you anything?”

Mick nodded and rasped, “Molly.”

Grinning, Nate unhooked his radio mike from his shoulder and said into it, “Oh, Miss Molly, I’ve got someone who wants to talk to you.”

“Oh, my God, Mick?”

A sigh left his body at the sound of her clear, sweet voice. Nate held the mike close to Mick’s lips. “Keep talking Molly.” To Nate, he said, “Get me out of here.”

## **Chapter 15**

Waking in a dimly lit room, Mick didn’t recognise anything at first. The unfamiliar objects and shapes disoriented him but the rhythmic *beep-beep* beside him let him know he was in hospital. As his eyes adjusted to the faint light, he recognised usual hospital fixtures, like the curtain railing boxing in his bed, an overhead lamp with a white metal adjustable arm, his name tag on the wall above his head.

Moving hurt. In fact, everything hurt. His ribs, his neck, legs and arms, there wasn’t an inch of him spared from the pain. Relaxing again, he let the tension drain from his muscles. There was no rush to go anywhere, just the impatient urge to see Molly. Her voice had been the last thing he remembered hearing, and he hoped it would be the first thing he got to hear now that he was awake.

*Rose Middleton*  
One Foot Forward

He rolled his head to the side and found not Molly, but his mother. The comfort elicited by her presence spread through his body warmly, easing a little of the ache. She smiled, stood and came to him. He wondered if he was dreaming, or if they'd doped him up so much he was hallucinating. Her touch, however, shooed away the thoughts and reminded him of all the times she'd comforted him as a kid.

"Hello, my son," she whispered, her fingers tracing his face. "Welcome back."

Mick swallowed, his throat dry. "Mum?"

She nodded, her eyes watery and her cheeks flushed a deep crimson. "Yes, honey, I'm here. When Molly told me what happened, I had to come and see you. Do you need some water?"

Somehow, his mum always knew what he needed. Grateful for her presence, he nodded and sipped water through the straw she held close to his mouth. The icy cool liquid felt good, washed away the memory of the ashes coating his throat and biting at his taste buds.

"Better?"

Mick smiled and waited for her to put the cup down. "Where is she, Mum? I really want to see her."

Celia touched his cheek lovingly and then glanced over her shoulder. "You can see her when she wakes. She's been worried sick about you, refusing to sleep. No one could talk her into going home. So I told her I'd stay with you while she rested."

She was in the room? Mick raised his head, ignoring the stabbing pain in his neck. He was glad for his mother's hand supporting his head. What he saw took his breath away. Molly, curled up in a chair under a blanket, sleeping. She wasn't entirely peaceful, but she was resting.

"I thought I'd never see her again."

"When you were trapped?"

Laying his head back on the pillow, Mick shook his head. "Before that. I really thought she'd given up on me."

"No," Celia smiled warmly and then sat on the edge of his bed. "It's true, you tested her trust. You accused her of lying when all she wanted was for you to be honest with her, tell her the truth about why you were so scared. I know it's been hard for you, Michael, to believe in love after what happened with your father, and then me. She knows that, too."

Sighing, he felt his mum take his left hand in hers and cover it completely. She wasn't mad at him, just honest.

"I don't want to live without her."

Celia nodded. "I understand but you need to make sure you show her that every day, in every way you know how."

He absolutely intended on doing that. "Would you wake her for me?"

"No, she needs sleep. She's been awake since Tuesday."

"So what day is it, then?"

"Friday."

He'd been out for almost three days? Wow, no wonder Molly was exhausted. He should let her sleep, talk with his mother some more. After all, she was out of the Manor. The first time since she went to stay, he realised, the significance of it overwhelming him.

"What about you?" he turned his attention to his mother's blue eyes. "How are you?"

"Oh, I'm fine, honey. Actually," she shook her head and closed her eyes for a moment, causing a spark of panic to flicker his belly. "I'm better than fine, Michael. I'm going to stay until you're better and back on your feet, and then I'm going to return to the Red Cross. I still have a purpose in this life and they want me to come back."

"Where?"

"They need extra hands in Alice Springs and the remote stations out there. The fresh air will do me good."

He almost laughed. She could get fresh air at the Manor, or right here for that matter. Why did she need to go to the Outback?

As he watched the emotions cross her face, Mick realised she needed to do this for her own sense of self. She needed to feel useful, to help others, and he was happy for her. At that moment, he honestly felt as if she'd recovered but he knew depression didn't have an on-off switch like so many people wanted to believe. Whatever she did, Celia would always have to deal with it. The how was less important than the end result for him, so long as she was comfortable and healthy.

"I love you, Mum," he said, realising he hadn't said it in a while. "I'll support you in whatever you do."

Her small hand moulded to his jaw. "Thank you, son. It's late, you should get some rest."

He'd been resting for days and he wanted to argue the point, but there was no use. She was already gliding silently to the door, warning him gently to let Molly get her sleep. When she was gone, Mick lifted his head again.

Watching Molly was as good as talking to her, though he really wanted to see her eyes, hear her voice. Lord but she looked sweet, all curled up and warm over in her chair. If his body didn't hurt so much, he'd go and join her.

"Ah, you're awake."

Mick turned toward the male voice and found a doctor in a white coat slipping into the room. "Hi."

The older man smiled and nodded over at Molly. "She's a little trooper, isn't she?"

Mick grinned, his eyes inadvertently returning to her. "Sure is. The woman's a marvel."

"Would you like to talk about your injuries?"

"No," Mick rested again. "I'd like to sit up."

Fiddling with the bed's controls, the doctor raised the upper half of the bed enough that Mick could see Molly without having to strain his neck. "Thank you, Doctor..." he read the name tag and suddenly realised who he was talking to. "Marcus Keating. Oh, you're..."

Marcus nodded and chuckled softly. "Yes, I am. I'm actually a surgeon, not that I was needed to work on you. Although I do know a good plastic surgeon. You might need to consider that at some point."

Plastic surgeon? Mick frowned.

"Your hand?"

Glancing down, Mick saw the bandaged appendage. It didn't hurt any more or less than the rest of his body. "Oh, burnt badly was it?"

"I'm afraid so. The skin of your palm suffered quite a bit, and there are some burns on the back of your neck, though they're superficial. Aside from some broken ribs, I think you came out of that fire rather unscathed. Lucky man."

Yes, he was, in more ways than one. Surviving the fire was only part of his reward. Hearing Molly say she loved him, being able to break the shackles of his past fears and

being free to love her, they were the best parts of it all. Mick felt the smile on his lips touch his heart and then noticed the way Marcus was looking at him.

He didn't care if he looked like a dork, or a man with better things to think about than a few minor scars. Granted, he should find a way to connect with Marcus because he was Molly's oldest brother, but he was in no rush.

"Yep, that's me alright. Lucky."

"You should buy a lotto ticket with that kind of luck."

Mick laughed and then caught himself when he saw Molly stir. Softer, he replied, "No, I don't think that's necessary. Having Molly is all I need."

"She hasn't stopped talking about you, you know? I don't know what happened between you, but she's like the old Molly again. So for that, I'm eternally grateful, Mick. But I want you to promise me one thing."

Mick met the man's gaze square on and was surprised to see a shadow of worry pass through it. "Name it."

"Don't let her run that race alone."

"Stop trying to protect me," Molly said sleepily, uncurling and finding her feet. Mick was glad to see her warm smile. "I'll be fine. Besides, Mick would have to fight off the others who'll be running with me."

Glad she was awake, Mick beckoned her over. As if sensing he was no longer needed, Marcus moved toward the door. "You two both need rest."

Unable to take his eyes off her, Mick barely noticed the doctor leave. All that mattered was getting her close enough to touch. He loved that she didn't hesitate, came straight to him and pressed her palms to his cheeks to lean in for a warm, slow kiss.

"I've missed you," she murmured against his lips, settling her hip close to his and flattening her hands against his chest. "Oh, my God, I've missed you."

Cupping his hand under her chin, he held her face close to his and stared into her eyes. "Molly," he breathed, purely to hear her name roll off his tongue again. "My sweet, sweet Molly."

She smiled. "Mmm-hmm. Yes, I'm yours."

"You forgive me for being an idiot?"

"There was no need to forgive, Mick, you just needed some time."

She was killing him with kindness. "Admit it, I hurt you that night at your house."

"You did," she nodded, wishing he'd let it go. "I could've skinned you alive, but I don't really need to tell you that. I'm happy you figured things out."

His warm palm left her chin, sliding around her waist to pull her against him. "The thought that something like that fire could happen again, maybe not have such a happy ending, leave you alone," he sighed and shook his head. "It still scares me to death. But you were right, I was living in fear. I don't want that anymore. I want you, I want love. I want us."

The sparkle in his eyes was good to see, his body against hers so hot and strong that she felt her eyes moisten. "I want us, too. You bring out the best in me, Michael Joseph Knight."

His right eyebrow arched. "My whole name? I only hear that when I'm in trouble."

Molly laughed. "Which is why I used it. Time for you to hear it spoken lovingly. Tell me, are you okay with your mum's plans?"

"About the Red Cross?" He nodded. "Absolutely. Good to see she's ready to move forward. I think I'll learn a lesson from her."

"Is that so?"

~

The comfortable cosiness they shared, talking about his mum, helped her relax. After two days of worrying and wondering, of not sleeping and barely an appetite, Molly hadn't argued when Celia told her to rest. At the same time, she wasn't leaving the hospital room, no matter what. Her sleep had been fitful, restless and full of nightmares she wanted to bury. Nightmares about Nate approaching her and giving her bad news, of staring down at Mick's lifeless body covered in ash.

Relaxation had been so far from her mind she thought she'd be permanently scarred with a frown. It was only hearing Mick's voice minutes ago that she'd been able to truly let go of the nightmares. And it wasn't until she'd touched his face that she felt the tension evaporate from her shoulders. Only now would she believe he was going to be alright.

"What is it, Molly?" he frowned. When her focus cleared, she found him staring hard in her eyes. "What's wrong?"

Cradling his face in her hands, Molly leaned against him, pressed her lips to his and thanked Mick silently for coming back to her. Before him, she'd never needed another

person to feel whole and she would never have known what to do without him. It was very unlike her but he felt so right in her heart and her future.

"I'm glad you're here," she whispered, smiling when his arm around her waist hugged her even tighter. "I'm not hurting you, am I?"

"Nah," he huffed. "It'd hurt if you weren't so close. All I could think about was you, getting back to you. Would you lie here with me?"

She thought he'd never ask. As they arranged themselves in the single bed, she realised there was nothing temporary about them anymore.

"Mick, when did you realise there might be an us?" she asked, snuggling against his side and resting her head on his shoulder. The smile that snaked across his lips was so smug she had the strangest urge to pinch him. "Well?"

His head rolled towards hers, putting his face just millimetres away. "At the cottage. Our first night."

Molly blinked, stunned. "But—"

"I know," he sighed, the smug smile replaced with regret. "I admit, I never realised what I was getting into with you. I just wanted to put the spunk back in your eyes, but then you fitted in my life so perfectly. It was wrong, but I always expected to disappoint you, to drive you away with my messed up head. I underestimated you."

"But our first night? That was so soon."

He nodded, then touched his nose to hers. "Scared the hell out of me. I'd been living my life day to day, never really thinking about the future. You changed that. I didn't just see a future, I saw *our* future."

Flattening her hand against his chest, Molly couldn't believe her ears. "What changed your mind? I know it wasn't the fire, because you left a message on my phone before that happened."

He smiled, the fingers of his left hand stroking the side of her face. "You said something that made me think, and my mother said the same thing. About living in love, better to have loved and lost than never loved at all. It made me realise that I couldn't be without you. I knew you understood the risks because of those things you said the night you caught me following you."

"You know," she brushed her lips against his. "Messed up head or not, I'll take you however you come. I know you've had to battle with your demons over this, you've had to give up some things you've always believed in. I admire your strength. In a way, I feel like I'm kind of cheating you. I haven't had to give up anything, Mick."



“Oh, I don’t know about that,” his hand scooted down her body to lift her knee over his hips. “You trusted me, put aside the experiences with those jerks who rejected you because of your leg, fought your way through the crappy messages they left behind.”

Feeling fatigue course through her body, Molly sighed. “I feel like I’ve gained more than I gave up.”

A deep chuckle rumbled through his chest. “Me too, baby, me too.”

~

Celia stayed until Christmas, keeping Mick wrapped mostly in cotton wool until he protested loudly that he should be at least allowed to shower on his own. He appreciated the sponge baths but after a few weeks, he needed freedom. Of course, the only freedom he got came in the form of a divine one legged woman who arranged for Jane to take his mother shopping while he showered. Not that he showered alone...

It was probably the best Christmas he’d had since Joe’s death. A big gathering at the stationhouse, friends and family and a blazing hot Sunday afternoon with all the trimmings. He couldn’t ask for a better end to the year. It was a pity Celia insisted on leaving for the Alice the very next day.

At the airport, he watched her wrap Molly in a motherly embrace and strained unsuccessfully to hear the whispered words they shared. Then it was his turn and he couldn’t remember the last time he’d felt so happy for her.

“You take care of her, you hear?” she whispered in his ear demandingly. “Don’t ever take her for granted.”

“I won’t, Mum,” he laughed, sharing a warm glance with Molly. “We’ll see you in October, then?”

It was a long way away, October, and he wasn’t sure how he’d cope without daily reports. But both Celia and Molly assured him he’d be updated regularly. He loved how they ganged up on him at times.

“Yes, my son. I’ll be here to see Molly win that race.”

“Oh, dear,” Molly chuckled as the final call for passengers rang out over the PA. “That’s a big expectation.”

“Never you mind, dear,” Celia laughed, pulling them both in for a group hug. “You’ll do fine. Michael, will you walk your mother to the counter?”

He complied, taking her arm in his and leading his mother over to the terminal's entrance. "When I come back," she explained, handing over her ticket to the young stewardess. "I expect a ring on her finger. Don't you let her get away again."

No need to fear that, he thought smugly. Now that he had Molly back, he was not letting her go anywhere. As for the ring, he already had it picked out. It was surprisingly fun to go jewellery shopping with Jane. She knew exactly the kind of ring Molly would like. He had to admit, the ring she picked was stunning and elegant and perfect for Molly.

"I've learnt my lesson, Mum," he smiled and embraced her again. "There's nothing to worry about there. We'll see you next year."

With Molly by his side, Mick watched the plane taxi out to the runway and take off smoothly. He sure was going to miss having her so close. "You okay?" Molly tugged on his bicep.

He couldn't stop the grin even if he wanted to. "Yep. Better than ever. How do you want to spend the rest of the day?"

They started the stroll back through the airport towards Mick's Jeep, arm in arm and without too much of a hurry. While he'd spent a lot of time with Molly while he recovered, they'd had to behave on account of Celia. Not because they didn't want to get caught. Rather, it had more to do with respect and his damaged ribs.

"I need to get in an hour of training, but after that, I'm all yours."

He growled playfully against her cheek. "All mine?"

She only nodded, then slipped her arm around his waist and pulled him closer. When he glanced down into her eyes, he understood why she didn't say a word and silently wondered if he could talk her into postponing that run.

Alas, she wouldn't be swayed and so when they got back home, she left him with a sweet promise to return after her run and disappeared. He didn't want her to run alone and figured that with his ribs almost healed, he'd match her pace fairly easily.

It was fortunate she was a creature of habit, running the same route most days. He caught up to her at the same spot where she caught him all those weeks ago. Shushing her protests about his injuries, he fell into stride beside her. It wasn't long before his lungs reminded him painfully that he'd been laid up of late and had lost some fitness.

"Do you want to turn back?" she asked, making it all look so easy.

Mick shook his head. "I'm by your side all the way, babe. Even if it kills me."

~

His attempt at humour only drew a wry smile and Molly slowed the pace. What was he thinking? He'd barely been on his feet since the fire, and he wanted to run with her? The man truly was insane. But his words about being by her side struck a chord deep within her and she felt her arguments evaporate.

"Whatever you do," she touched his arm. "Don't wear yourself out, okay?"

He laughed and shook his head. "I told you, I've got an insatiable appetite."

Molly rolled her eyes in mock disdain and then joined his laugh. Thinking about the kinds of things they could be doing instead of running played havoc with her body for the remaining hour, but she wouldn't let him sidetrack her.

She was aware of his heavy, laboured breathing beside her and knew he had to be hurting. It might have been weeks since the fire, but he still needed to recover. The possibility that he really would wear himself out played on her mind, turned her in a completely different direction to the usual route and secured a curious glance from the man beside her.

Neither said a word as she weaved them through the backstreets, and when they entered her street from the opposite end, understanding dawned on Mick. He picked up his pace and practically bounced beside her as she searched through the keys on her chain deliberately slowly.

"Come on, come on," he urged impatiently, causing her to laugh. "Or I might do something drastic out here."

"I'd rather we waited until we hit the shower."

His head jerked backward as a naughty, devilish grin spread over those luscious lips. "Now you're talking."

"Of course, if you're too puffed..." she giggled as she finally unlocked the front door and then shut them in the privacy of her home.

Rather than answer, Mick picked her up fire fighter style and carried her to her bedroom. "Anyone ever tell you you're cheeky?" he asked, not wasting a minute before stripping her bare the second he put her down. "Geez, Molly," he sucked in a breath, his eyes roaming over her torso as he stepped back. "And I didn't think you could get any better."

Eyeing him warily, Molly removed her prosthetic. "You want better, huh? I think I can do better. But first, you gotta get naked."

~

The silk dress swished around her legs elegantly and made her feel incredibly feminine. Molly hadn't worn anything so exquisite in years. The fact that it went all the way to the floor and helped her forget about her leg was a big bonus, but it was the fitted bodice that got Mick's attention first. His eyes greedily scoured the beaded, sequinned corset-style bodice before rising up over her breasts to her face.

"You look stunning," he whispered, sounding awestruck as he pressed his lips against her forehead warmly. "I'd kiss you properly but I wouldn't want to ruin your make-up. And I don't think I'd settle for just one kiss, Molly. Um, tonight, you're staying in my bed."

She laughed lightly. As if there was anywhere else she'd be staying. "Deal. You're looking pretty flash yourself, you know."

He grinned and pirouetted for her. Usually, he looked damn fine in his fire fighter's uniform, but in a tux, Mick was mouth wateringly gorgeous. Clearly he was glad with her appraisal, if the delighted expression in his eye was anything to go by.

"We're going to steal the show tonight. I, for one, am happy about that. You?" He offered an elbow.

Slipping her gloved hand through his hooked elbow, Molly grinned. "Oh, very much so."

When he'd invited her to the annual Fire Fighter's Ball, Molly had wondered whether she'd find a dress and then she'd fretted over the kind of reaction she'd get after pouring her heart out so publicly the night of the fire. In the end, despite all her worries and fears, she hadn't been able to douse the excitement of sharing Mick's passion. It outweighed everything else, and certainly made her concerns over a dress seem trivial.

When they arrived at the waterfront venue, the place was ablaze with lights in all colours and the loud music from the live band surged through her veins. It had been a long time since she danced in public, even longer since she'd danced with a man, but Molly wasn't worried. With Mick, life felt right and full, and there wasn't anything anyone could say to change that.

Inside, the loud, pulsing music enticed her heart to beat along to the rhythm and she found her body moving of its own accord. They took to the dance floor for a number until Nate found them and led them to their reserved table. She was surprised to see Amy, Nate's old girlfriend, the one he wished he'd never let go of.

After Amy greeted Mick, she hugged Molly. "You look fantastic. I hear you're running again?"

Molly could only nod, the elation at realising Nate had finally pushed aside his pride and reconnected with Amy stealing her words. When she hugged Nate, it was obvious she

didn't need to say anything. The giddiness in his eyes was proof enough that things had worked out.

"So what do you think of our annual bash?" Nate spread his hands wide to signal the huge crowd.

"Lots of firemen," she noted. "And firewomen, too."

It was liberating to see so many female fire fighters here, each one easily recognisable with her shoulder patch. Mick and Nate wore them, no doubt the honour all theirs. It was an elite group of ordinary men and women who put their lives on the line every day, and tonight was all about the celebration of their profession.

Up on stage, the warm-up band bid them goodnight and made way for the star-studded line up of Australia's most successful rock group of recent times. The all-female band, *Mystique*, greeted the eager crowd enthusiastically and then introduced a second band, *Tantaliser*. The double line-up pleased the audience immensely, the crowd going wild and almost all of them surging toward the stage. Molly got the distinct impression it was going to be a long, tiring night.

"Don't worry," Mick whispered from behind, wrapping his arms around her waist and pulling her against him. "We've got better things to do than stay here all night. I need to make the rounds, satisfy the bosses and then I'll announce the total amount raised for the Fire Fighter's Fund. After that, I'm all yours."

Molly grinned, resting her head against his shoulder. "I like the sound of that. What do you suggest we do in the meantime?"

He wagged his eyebrows playfully and then laughed. "There are some people I want you to meet. Maybe we'll dance again, but I think we'll stay out of the mosh-pit. What do you say?"

When her eyes strayed toward the stage, she saw what he was referring to. The crazy, frenzied mix of on-lookers upon whom the lead singer of *Tantaliser* was crowd-surfing. "Yes," she mused. "We'll steer clear of that."

It was a long night, tiring only in that she'd met so many new people she couldn't be expected to remember their names come morning. Not that she was bored, or uninterested. Mick knew a lot of amazing people. It was just that by midnight, her leg hurt, her right foot ached and she was getting sleepy. At this rate, she'd get home only to fall in a snoozing heap. She wanted to reserve her energy.

At midnight, the top dog of the Melbourne Fire Brigade took to the stage and gave a long speech of thank you's and congratulations. He ended with a call to Mick to reveal the total raised for the charity set up to honour men and women killed on the job, and to support the families they left behind.

She stood with Nate to the side of the stage, watched as Mick's incredible figure filled the stage and listened as he thanked everyone who supported the Fund. The auction had only been one small part of it, with the fund raising active all year long. He received a round of generous applause when he announced the total, and was then drowned out by wolf-whistles when he listed a few of the events planned for the year to come.

Events such as the marathon, for which he'd set up a pledge centre for those determined to back Molly and the others from their stationhouse. It had only been up for a few days, and already money was slowly but steadily coming in. Molly couldn't help but be proud to help out.

As he neared the end of his speech, Mick turned to her and beckoned her up on stage. She hesitated, not knowing what Mick had in store. Nate gave her a gentle push in the right direction, whispering that everything would be okay and only managing to encourage her trepidation. If Nate knew what was going on, then it was sure to surprise her.

"I'd like you all to meet someone," Mick smiled at the crowd. "She changed my life."

Oh dear, Molly thought, her heart beating rapidly. For a minute she was unable to catch her breath.

"Everyone, this is Molly Keating. She'll be running in the marathon, so see what you can do to support her. But I've called her up here for a different reason." Microphone in hand, he turned to her and lowered to one knee. "Molly, you showed me how to live a life full of love, a life of promise, a life of forever. You saved me in every way possible. You know I love you and I hope now you'll know I'm here for the long haul."

Molly swallowed, her heart hammering and threatening to drown out Mick's voice. "I love you, too," she said, glad the audience couldn't hear her shaky voice.

His free hand appeared before her, a small red velvet box open in his palm to produce a gorgeous diamond and ruby ring. "Will you marry me?"

The crowd broke into a deafening roar, and she hadn't even answered. She laughed all the same, and nodded without thinking. She didn't need to think, didn't need to take time to consider whether the rest of her life was with Mick. There was simply no alternative.

He stood, pulled her closer and slid the ring onto her finger without another word. "I hope you don't mind," he yelled over the ecstatic crowd, the microphone well out of range. "I just wanted the whole world to know how much I love you."

## Epilogue

Shifting her weight from one foot to the other, Molly felt the adrenaline heat her skin. A grey Melbourne sky threatened rain, a salty ocean breeze tickled her nose and the cool morning air sent goose bumps trailing over her exposed skin.

Around her, hundreds of runners milled about, trying to keep loose until the starter's gun sounded. In the thick of it, she had Nate, George and Steven by her side. Her brother, Marcus, drove the support car carrying Jane, Mick and her physio, Lara.

Nate bumped her hip with his. "You okay, slugger?"

Molly rubbed her hands together. "I wish they'd start this thing, already. I'm starting to cool down."

"Won't be long," he assured her as the public address system burst into life with the instruction to take their marks.

Molly had always found that line pointless for marathons. They didn't have marks. Aside from a standing start, there was nothing technical about a marathon start. The gun went off and they moved. Case closed.

She grinned at Nate and ignored his pointed look that screamed *what?* Neither he nor the others had much of an idea of what they were getting themselves into, but she couldn't fault them on their support. Between the three of them and Mick, her training runs over the last ten months had never been lonely or dull. At one point, Nate gave up on running and brought his bike, preferring to ride alongside her while she trudged through the winter rains and then the frosty spring mornings.

Was she ready? Only time would tell, but she'd covered the full forty-two kilometres twice in the last few weeks and lived to run again. Her stump was in fantastic condition, her fitness at its peak and her hopes, well, just finishing today would be enough. Molly didn't care whereabouts she finished, first, last or somewhere in between, she only wanted to cross the finish line in one piece.

Not that she was the only one who had the possibility of finishing in two pieces. There were two wheelchair racers and another amputee, though his was an arm amputation. She was the only leg-amputee racing this year, which meant she'd finish first in that category. By no means, however, was it *her* category. Leg or no leg, she was a whole person and she'd have words with anyone who said otherwise.

At exactly ten o'clock, the starter's gun exploded and the mass of runners surged forward.

"Here we go!" Nate quipped with an enthusiastic smile. By the ten km mark, his smile had been replaced with a scowl of determination. She wondered if he was questioning the cross training on the bike but didn't voice her thoughts. The last thing she wanted to do was distract him. He seemed troubled enough.

On her other side, Steven and George seemed to be quite comfortable and as the road rolled by beneath their feet, she became increasingly aware of her surrounds.

Hundreds of people lined the road, cheering on every runner. She caught a few shocked expressions when people's gazes dropped to her leg, but it no longer concerned her. Over the last few months, Molly had become more comfortable in exposing her leg. She'd even worn a short dress, enough to show off both her trim and toned leg, and the metal one with the patriotic design.

Thankfully, there were no snide comments made as she ran, no one to question her presence. Just a lot of wonderfully warm support.

When they neared the halfway mark, Nate's pace slowed, though he waved her on, saying he'd see her at the finish line. Shortly after, George dropped away, too. Then Steven. Before she knew it, Molly was on her own, keeping her pace and even passing a few other struggling runners.

With the passing time, she realised the sky had cleared and a bright sunny day enveloped her in sweet warmth. Birds twittered, crowds cheered, runners greeted her as she passed them. For a long time, she barely noticed the burgeoning pain in her stump, or the way her breath seemed to grow shallower with each jarring stride.

It was only when she saw the thirty-five km sign that Molly realised she might not make it to the end. All of a sudden, every step hurt, each stride harder than the last, each breath providing less oxygen. It was stupid, she rationalised, and there were only seven kilometres to go. She tried to grit her teeth and push through the pain barrier, but after a kilometre, finishing was the last thing on her mind. All she wanted to do was throw off her prosthesis and protect her stump.

Looking up, she found Marcus's vehicle on the other side of the road. A second later, she saw Mick's internal struggle in his eyes and wondered if he'd been right all along.

~

When his feet hit the ground, Mick had a devil of a time matching her stride. She was fast. Even if she was struggling. The ring on his neck chain - the engagement ring she'd asked him to hold onto until the race was over - bounced wildly until he shoved it under his shirt.

"It's worth it," he nodded to the question in her eyes. "And I was wrong. You can't give up now."



She scowled, only somewhat playfully. "I. Don't. Give. Up."

He laughed although it caused him to stumble. When he righted himself, he found her shaking her head and trying to hide the cheeky grin from him. "I know."

He wasn't too sure exactly what he was doing, given there were still five kilometres to the finish line. All he knew was that he needed to be by her side. He wasn't questioning her decision to run anymore, and he wasn't scared for her, either. Molly knew what she was doing and whether she finished the race first or last, he'd be there at the end.

"The long haul," he puffed. She frowned. "I'm with you 'til the end."

"You think you can last another five k's?" she poked him in the arm.

Mick laughed harder this time and nearly lost his footing altogether. "Honey, you couldn't get rid of me if you tried."

Finishing the race proved easier than he thought. Not because the five km were easy, but because running beside the woman he wanted to spend the rest of his life with was a piece of cake. When he tried to pull away so she could cross the line on her own, Molly grabbed him by the arm and shook her head. Stewards and officials eyed him curiously, but somehow no one questioned the guy finishing the race in a pair of jeans.

She finished in 32<sup>nd</sup> place and it took a long time for everyone else to finish congratulating her. When they were in the clear, they headed down to the beach by the finish line and plonked on the grass.

"You okay?"

Molly laid back and shielded her eyes from the bright sunshine. "Baby, I'm better than okay. Don't you dare disturb the high I'm on."

Mick chuckled and pressed a kiss to her warm lips. Her flushed cheeks seemed so full of life, her eyes sparkling despite the fact she'd just run for over two hours that he couldn't resist deepening the kiss. "Hmmm," she hummed, her fingers buried in his hair. Right where he wanted. "I so love you right now."

Laughing, Mick sat back. He watched as she sat up and began removing her prosthesis to "let the air in". When a shadow fell across them, he looked up expecting Marcus or Nate. He never expected a reporter and a cameraman. Seeing his reaction, Molly turned.

"Oh, um," the young man bumbled. His eyes ricocheted between Molly's leg and her face. "I'm Jesse Fox, from A Current Affair. You're Molly Keating."

Molly laughed. "Why, yes I am. It seems, Mr. Jesse Fox, that you've never seen anyone take their leg off before."

Mick loved the way Fox's cheeks flushed crimson as he shook his head. "Ah, no."

When she was done, Molly stood on her right leg and held out her hand to the intrusive reporter. Mick marvelled at her graciousness. "How can I help you, Mr. Jesse Fox?"

He seemed enamoured with her. Rightly so, Mick thought silently. Every man should be so taken with Molly. "I was hoping you'd consider an interview, Molly. How did it feel to run a marathon after your, ah," he glanced down at the lifeless prosthetic limb. "Accident?"

Her carefree laugh circled around them, lightening Mick's dampened mood. "You know, I'd love to chat with you but now's not the time. I want to enjoy the endorphins racing through my blood, celebrate my success with my fiancé and my family and then indulge in a long hot bath. You wouldn't deny a girl her pleasures, would you?"

The big, broad grin on Jesse's face brought Mick to his feet and then to Molly's side. "No," Jesse shook his head, reaching into his breast pocket for a card. "I wouldn't dream of it. But I would really love to tell your story, Molly," he glanced at Mick before handing over his business card. "You are an inspiration to so many people. I know of your work at the TAC and at the hospital."

Beside him, Molly beamed the most delighted grin. "I know of your work, too, Jesse."

"You will call me, won't you?"

Molly nodded. "Count on it."

They waved the nosy reporter goodbye. Mick turned her to him, held her by the shoulders and gazed down at her beautiful face. "I love you, Molly Keating. I can't wait to make you Molly Knight."

He watched as she reached up and released the chain around his neck. The ring dropped silently into her hand before she gave it to him. Mick relished the thought of making her his wife and didn't hesitate to return the engagement ring to her finger.

"That's my boy," Celia's voice called, though neither Mick nor Molly broke their contact.

"M.K loves M.K." Molly sighed happily.

Mick laughed. "Right back at ya, baby. Come on," he bent and scooped her up in his arms. "Let's celebrate."

She laughed and swatted at his hands. "Put me down!"

*Rose Middleton*  
One Foot Forward

Shaking his head, Mick carried her to the picnic table where everyone waited. His mother, Nate, Jane and the rest of the crew had put on quite a lunch. “No trouble at all, hon.”

He sighed contentedly. *No trouble at all.*

The End

**Blame it on David, the boy who challenged me to a writing contest when we were nine years old. The guidelines were sketchy, and only one rule applied: write as many pages as I could. Silly boy. He obviously didn't realise how much I loved spinning stories, which up to that point had been done by the spoken word in the playground. Until then, I hadn't actually written anything down. When I hit twenty five pages, my competitor threw his hands in the air and declared I'd won. I can't remember the title of that story, nor even any of the characters, but that's where it all began.**

**I'm an ordinary Australian girl who puts family first and, fortunately or unfortunately, sometimes lets my career take up too much time. A teacher by day, romance writer by night, my life is full of the good things. I write because I'm passionate about it, because it's in my heart. I love the escape, the adventure, and especially the life I live vicariously through my characters. Most of all, I relish the challenge of bringing sensual, delightful and fulfilling romance stories to life.**

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## **Other works by Rose Middleton:**

### **TANTALISER**

For Australian ace drummer Catherine "Charlie" Brown, it isn't about breaking into a boy's club. It's about proving a point regarding lead singer and all-round bad-boy, Nicholas St. Eve. When Nik storms out of Charlie's audition claiming no woman will ever join his band, she's convinced that she's exposed him for the chauvinistic, self-obsessed pig that he is.

But there is more to Nik than meets the eye. The second he walks out the door he realizes his mistake. He can't deny Charlie's talent anymore than he can deny the intense physical attraction he has for her. When instead of admitting that he's wrong, Nik impulsively confronts the stubborn and outspoken Aussie, sparks ignite! They exchange words, issue challenges, and share the kiss of a lifetime. Then, Charlie vows to beat Nik at his own game. The race is on!

Now it's two years later and Charlie is winning the battle of the bands with her all girl group, *Mystique*. Nik could care less; he only really wants to win her. He's never been able to forget their first encounter and if Charlie would just be honest with herself she'd admit that neither has she. She's desperate to get Nicholas St. Eve out of her system and out of her life.

*Rose Middleton*  
One Foot Forward

And, if she can't? Well, Charlie might very well give in to his persistently wicked attempts to tantalize her!

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