

A photograph of a window with a white frame and lace curtains. A dark, rustic teapot is used as a planter, filled with green foliage, and sits on the windowsill. The scene is framed by a dark green border.

**THE MYSTERY
OF THE
CLADDAGH RINGS**

KALLIE LANE

She eyed him, curious about her future stepfather. He was a man any red-blooded woman would notice in a crowd—well over six-feet tall with an athletic build. Eyes as green as the hills of Ireland offset hard, striking features. She guessed his age to be late twenties to early thirties. For heaven’s sake, her mother had really done it this time. Talk about robbing the cradle.

His gaze took her in from head to toe, the sardonic tilt of his mouth speaking volumes. He’d been expecting a younger version of her mother. Instead, he got tattered jeans and a windblown mane of sable hair—not tight, leather pants and blond, rasta braids extending to her butt. Even her cornflower blue eyes were different than her mother’s mysterious brown ones. Poppy was also tall and curvy whereas Fin was shorter and what she liked to call streamlined, although some would argue she was built like a boy.

“You’re on private property.” Her future daddy’s words held bite, his muscled arms crossing an impressive chest in order to intimidate. “If you’re hoping for Poppy’s autograph, contact her publicist and maybe he’ll send you one. Now leave before I call the cops.”

Fin laughed. Just couldn’t help herself. *This one’s a real winner.* “Hmm, not even married yet and you’re already barking orders.” She locked the CR-V, and taking a step forward, got in his face. “Get out of my way.”

“Damn. I hate dealing with stalkers before my morning coffee.”

Praise for Kallie Lane and...

SILENT DECEIT

“Ms. Lane writes an excellent fast-paced story with lots of action and drama, twists and turns.”

~*Love Romances & More*

SILENT JUSTICE

“I was on the edge of my seat the entire time flipping pages. If my fingernails weren't cut short, I probably would have chewed them from all the never ending suspense.”

~*San Francisco Review of Books*

DEADLY ABANDON

“A high-octane thrill ride you won't be able to put down.”

~*Coreene Callahan, bestselling author*

“Explosive read, action packed thriller with twists and turns until the very end.”

~*Single Titles Book Reviews*

DARK ABANDON

“Wow—fully packed with suspense, intriguing characters, and hot and sexy chemistry. I would recommend this to anyone who loves a romance story filled with suspense and a great storyline.”

~*Romance Writers Reviews*

“Awesome Romantic Suspense...*DARK ABANDON* is an action packed thrill ride of hotness!”

~*Guilty Pleasures Book Reviews*

RECKLESS ABANDON

“Kallie Lane writes smart, sharp, fast, and funny. ...takes you on an emotional, sexy, action-packed ride that lingers long after the last page!”

~*Roxanne St. Claire, NYT Bestselling Author*

“This book was one that I couldn't put down, from start to finish, and thoroughly enjoyed it. This will for sure be going on my keeper shelf and I can't wait to check out the rest of the sexy crew and their ladies.”

~*Long and Short Reviews*

LETHAL ABANDON

“Lethal Abandon takes the reader on a vicarious adventure that is high octane from start to finish - a total escape from the ordinary, mundane world. Exciting entertainment!”

~*San Francisco Review of Books*

The Mystery
of the
Claddagh Rings

by

Kallie Lane

Any references to historical events, real people, or real places are used fictitiously. Names, characters, and places are products of the author's imagination.

MYSTERY OF THE CLADDAGH RINGS

Copyright © 2014, 2019 by Kathryn Donaldson

Publishing History

First edition published 2014, The Wild Rose Press, Inc.

Second edition published 2019, Kathryn Donaldson

All rights reserved. This book or any portion thereof may not be reproduced or used in any manner whatsoever without the express written permission of the publisher except for the use of brief quotations in a book review.

Thank you for your support of author's rights.

Printed in the United States of America

www.kallielane.com

Dedication

To those who serve and protect.

Prologue

Fiona Murphy stood on the steps of the stone cottage, gazing down the hill toward the Boston harbor. Moonlight broke through the clouds, illuminating the solitude around her. Winter's bite was out in full force tonight, sending people into the Faneuil Hall Marketplace to finish their Christmas shopping, not braving the outdoors in the chilly harbor district. Tree limbs groaned, swaying in the wind. Snow crunched underfoot as she descended the stairs to follow the path around back of the house to the parking lot.

It's beautiful. The perfect setting for my restaurant.

She patted the deed inside her pocket, still trying to absorb her good fortune. Her financial backer had come through with the money, and the cottage was hers. Another three or four months of renovating and hiring the right staff and she would open the doors to *Irlandais*, the classiest eatery to hit Boston. Not too classy, mind you, at least not where pricing was concerned. No, Fin planned to create a bistro atmosphere, a touch of old Europe everyone could enjoy, where only the food quality and ambiance exceeded expectations, and not the cost of a meal. All those years in culinary school and working in the finest restaurants across Europe had given her the confidence and ability she needed to finally accomplish her dream.

The ground beneath her boots was slick with ice. She trudged along, guessing only the minimum amount of snow removal had been done, just enough to allow real estate agents to show the property. Lucky for her, the weather had taken an ugly turn for the worst last week. She'd been the first to bid on the house, her offer immediately accepted by the previous owner, who was anxious to retire to Florida.

Fin ran numbers through her head as she turned the corner of the cottage, braving a fresh gust of wind. She kept herself warm by imagining tables on the lawns in summertime. The solarium extension she'd designed would bring the view of outdoors inside in inclement weather. The antique brass lamps she'd purchased in Holland would add to the decor.

Fin had saved almost every penny she'd earned over the last several years, the vision of having her own restaurant taking precedence over everything else in her life. At last, she was back in Boston and things would fall into place.

Her thoughts stopped dead when a man stepped out of the trees edging the drive. He stood between her and her car. His face was in shadow, the hood of his jacket hiding his features. Big and menacing, he pulled a handgun from a pocket, pointing it at her.

“Give me your jewellery!”

Fin's heart stopped beating for an instant before tripping double-time. Her gaze searched the woods around the parking lot. She didn't see anyone else, but that didn't mean he was alone. She stared, frozen in place. Guessed he was in his early twenties, although it was hard to tell. Baggy jeans slid off his hips, showing the waistband of his undershorts. Crude tattoos on the knuckles of his gun hand said he'd spent time in jail.

He snapped his fingers in front of her face. “Pay attention, lady. Hand over the bling and you can walk away.”

Paralyzing fear threatened to shut her down completely. Fin stripped off her gloves while she still could, tugging the rings off her fingers. She pulled diamond studs from her earlobes. Unclasped the gold chain she wore around her neck. Then she placed everything in his free hand, her own trembling so badly she couldn't control it.

“Yo! You fucking with me, bitch?” He tossed what she'd given him into the snow, grabbed her by the front of her coat. She saw him clearly now. A teardrop was inked beneath an eye, a jagged scar running along one side of his face from cheekbone to jaw. “Hand them over, or I'll blow your brains out and find them myself!”

“H-hand what over?” Her voice shook as badly as the rest of her. She fought for control, knowing she had to convince him she didn't have whatever it was he wanted. She unzipped her purse, pulling out her wallet. “I've given you everything, except for my money and credit cards. Here, that's all I've got.”

“Shit, lady, now you're really pissing me off!” He waved his weapon in her face, angling it sideways.

She mouthed a silent prayer, and a miracle happened. A car roared up the drive. Her attacker sprinted for the trees. The vehicle screeched to a halt beside her.

Her financial backer angled out from behind the wheel. “Who the hell was that?”

“I d-don't know.” God, she had to pull herself together or he would think her a complete fool. “The idiot tried to r-rob me.”

He touched her elbow. “Are you all right?”

“Yeah, I'm good.” Fin breathed deep, settling her nerves. This was their night to celebrate the new restaurant and partnership. She refused to let some fool with a gun ruin it for them. “I'll follow you to the club so we can have that drink.”

“Fin, maybe you should contact the police first.”

“And tell them what?” No, she wanted to forget the whole thing. She scooped up her jewellery, money, and credit cards instead. “The guy is long gone. Besides, nothing was stolen.”

“Still, you should report it.”

“Okay, I’ll make you a deal.” She kissed him on the cheek. “Let’s toast our new venture first, and then I’ll speak to the cops.”

He studied her for a moment, clearly not happy with her decision. But, he didn’t push it.

“Deal, but make sure you stop by the station on your way home tonight.”

Chapter One

Fin drove through the gates of her former home, still a bit rattled after the attempted robbery last night. The cops had taken her statement, but didn't hold out much hope they would find the creep who had attacked her. Apparently, he was either new to the area or just passing through, and not someone they recognized. She'd bought pepper spray after leaving the police station. If some nut job ever approached her again, she would defend herself. That was her right. She pushed the incident out of her mind, determined to focus on the upcoming visit with her mother instead.

The Cape Cod mansion looked the same as she remembered. Overlooking Nantucket Sound, it stood alongside the shore, within walking distance from the Kennedy's Hyannis Port Compound.

Taking a breath, she stared at the rambling white cottage with the gray shutters and roof, its four brick chimneys standing like sentinels. She remembered seals sunning themselves on the beaches here, watching horseshoe crabs scuttle, and searching for sand dollars and starfish as a child. Carefree moments meant to be cherished, the uglier ones left in the past. Today was her first visit back since leaving for college ten years ago, preferring her little townhouse in Boston to the hoopla surrounding her celebrity mother.

But family was family, and sometimes sacrifices had to be made. The famous—although

infamous might be a better word—movie star and singer, Poppy, aka her mother, needed her help. Fin had no idea why.

Like Madonna and Cher, Poppy didn't have a last name. What she did have was the ability to whip her fans into a frenzy through abhorrent behaviour, her stints in rehab, and a string of exes almost half her age. Fin had never understood why her mother needed bad press to keep her career alive. Not when she had incredible Oscar and Grammy winning talent.

Poppy was on top of the world on a good day. On a bad day...well, Fin didn't like to think about those. Too many childhood memories steeped in nightmarish scenes of booze, drugs, and abusive men. Which was the reason Fin cancelled her ski trip to Whistler. Poppy was back in residence for the holidays and hadn't come alone. Soon-to-be-husband number five stood waiting in the wings for a Christmas wedding. The knowledge weighed heavy on Fin's heart.

She braked to a stop in the driveway and hopped out of her SUV. Enjoying a quiet moment before facing her mother, she inhaled the ocean's scent and watched gunmetal waves roll into shore. A dusting of snow covered sand dunes and sea grass, beach heather poking through the drifts. Frozen sunflowers and blue hyacinths drooped along white picket fences lining the drive. They looked forlorn and yet beautiful, very much like Poppy herself.

Fin heard a door open and close behind her. She turned to see a man walking down the steps. Hands deep in his pockets, she thought it amazing he didn't keel over in the biting wind without a jacket. But no, he obviously had enough meat on his bones not to notice the chill. She eyed him, curious about her future stepfather.

He was a man any red-blooded woman would notice in a crowd—well over six-feet tall with an athletic build. Eyes as green as the hills of Ireland offset hard, striking features. She guessed his age to be late twenties to early thirties. For heaven's sake, her mother had really

done it this time. Talk about robbing the cradle.

His gaze took her in from head to toe, the sardonic tilt of his mouth speaking volumes. He'd been expecting a younger version of her mother. Instead, he got tattered jeans and a windblown mane of sable hair—not tight, leather pants and blond, rasta braids extending to her butt. Even her cornflower blue eyes were different than her mother's mysterious brown ones. Poppy was also tall and curvy whereas Fin was shorter and what she liked to call streamlined, although some would argue she was built like a boy.

“You're on private property.” Her future daddy's words held bite, his muscled arms crossing an impressive chest in order to intimidate. “If you're hoping for Poppy's autograph, contact her publicist and maybe he'll send you one. Now leave before I call the cops.”

Fin laughed. Just couldn't help herself. *This one's a real winner.* “Hmm, not even married yet and you're already barking orders.” She locked the CR-V, and taking a step forward, got in his face. “Get out of my way.”

“Damn. I hate dealing with stalkers before my morning coffee.” In a quick move, he had her plastered against him, her hands pinned behind her back. Not exactly the way a man should greet his future stepdaughter, considering it felt more like an embrace. “I thought I made it clear. Poppy wants to be left alone.”

“I can see you're a little slow on the uptake, so I'll try again.” Fin stood tall, tipping her head back to glare at him. He smelled of woody shower gel and looked even better close up, the stubble on his jaw as dark as his short-cropped hair. Then again, Mom had always been selective about packaging. Too bad she never saw the worms rotting inside her eye candy. “Take your paws off me before I knee your balls clear through the top of your head.”

He chuckled, his grip tightening around her. “Honey, you'd need a stepladder to do that.”

“Fiona?” Poppy ran down the stairs in a silver hip-length sweater and yoga pants, her beaded rasta braids clinking together. She batted the hulk out of the way and wrapped her in a familiar cloud of perfume. “Ohmigod! I can’t believe you’re really here.”

“It’s me, Mom,” Fin said, hugging her back.

Her mother grabbed her hand and started dragging her to the house. “Call me Poppy remember? God forbid anyone finds out I have a child your age.”

A familiar reminder, one Fin had been hearing since high school. She stopped the forward momentum, gesturing to the man breathing down the back of her neck. “Aren’t you going to introduce me to your fiancé?”

“What?” Poppy turned, her eyes questioning. “Oh, him. He’s not my fiancé, darling. Say hello to Ryan O’Shea, our temporary property manager while Holmsby recuperates from gallbladder surgery.”

“Ma’am.” Fin thought him too arrogant to be a property manager. “If you’ll hand me the keys, I’ll grab your luggage from the car.”

Sure, don’t bother apologizing for being a macho jerk. She pulled the key ring from her pocket. “You can put the bags in the guesthouse.”

“Seriously, Fiona?” A hand fisted at her waist, her mother’s mouth formed a pout. “There’s so much going on this week you should stay in the main house with the rest of us.”

Uh-huh. Fin guessed “going on” meant party central with hoards of guests from the glossy tabloid world. So not her thing. “Thanks, but I need the quiet.”

“You always did.” Poppy shook her head, opening the door to the foyer. The oak-panelled walls and wood-beamed, white ceiling hadn’t changed. Polished wood floors and thick scatter rugs were also the same. The long bank of windows on the far side of the room provided a

sweeping view of the ocean. A fireplace large enough to roast a small deer crackled center stage between the windows. A massive spruce tree decorated with lights and Christmas decorations stood in a corner, holly and tree boughs winding the staircase banister. They moved into the vast white living room, pale-yellow and blue accents in the pillows, vases and flower arrangements.

“Paul, where are you? Come say hello to Fiona.”

A guy sauntered down the long hallway from the kitchen. He was bare-chested with his jeans unbuttoned, tattooed sleeves running down both arms, and what looked like a Bloody Mary in his hand at nine o'clock in the morning. A rat's nest of tangled brown hair hung past his shoulders, sleep creases lining his face. *Not a morning person on his best day*, Fin decided. He flopped on a couch, dangling a leg over an armrest. “Yo.”

Obviously a man of few words, Fin recognized him from a hard rock group of the nineties, famous for trashing hotel rooms, nailing groupies, and bashing reporters. No doubt he'd blown through his own millions and needed Poppy's money to keep him in style. Another loser in a long line of them. God, would her mother ever learn?

“Let's go to my room,” Poppy said, no doubt realizing her knuckle dragger had limited social skills. “We can talk there.”

Fin climbed the stairs to the elegant corner suite. The sitting room decorated in pale-blue and pink chintz sofas and chairs, airy antique end tables, and lamps complimenting the white trim surrounding two walls of windows. White carpeting on gleaming hardwood floors continued into the bedroom, an old-fashioned Amish quilt on the bed matching cornices over more windowpanes. Fin loved the way sunlight and ocean views filtered into the rooms. Even the hot tub in the bathroom overlooked the beach. She also hoped the glass was one-way. Paparazzi would have a field day if any gained access to the property or glided by on the water, although

Nantucket Sound was too rough this time of year for boat traffic.

Her mother poured coffee from a carafe on the table, adding cream to her own. Fin liked hers black and strong. She waited while Poppy gathered her thoughts, dreading the upcoming confrontation. “I know you think I’m making a terrible mistake, but Paul and I are getting married.”

“Just tell me why, Mom.” Fin sat back in the chair and studied Poppy. Her mother’s decision didn’t make sense. Why would she chain herself to that loser? “He looks like he belongs in rehab. You’ve had problems of your own with drugs and alcohol. Why get involved with him?”

“My addictions are in the past.” Poppy took a moment before she continued. “The truth is our relationship has nothing to do with love, and everything to do with upping my visibility in the entertainment world.”

“Lovely,” Fin said, shaking her head. “You’re willing to sell out for sound bites and video feed.”

“I am, if that’s what it takes to keep me in recording studios and in front of the cameras.” Defiance tipped her mother’s chin. “This is what I live for, Fiona. Besides, there’s no such thing as love.”

“Still, it’s one hell of a trade-off, Mom. But then, you’ve always settled for less.” Putting down her coffee cup, Fin popped out of the chair. “I can’t stay here and watch this train wreck waiting to happen.”

“Please, honey.” Her mother tugged on her hand. “I promise you the marriage will be annulled within six months. It’s a publicity stunt. That’s all it is.”

Fin huffed and sat back down, wanting to paddle her mother’s backside. How could two

people with the same gene pool be so different? Fin was a chef, in the process of opening her own restaurant, and used to working for a living. Why couldn't Poppy do the same, realize she didn't have to fool the public to hike her popularity? She could do a musical on Broadway or a show in Las Vegas. Heck, didn't she have any confidence in her talent?

“Does Paul know about this?”

“Yes. He's signed a prenup. Separate bedrooms and separate lives for the duration of our marriage.” Poppy slipped a croissant onto a small plate, breaking it apart with her fingers. “He'll receive a modest income after we end the charade, providing he keeps silent.”

“So you're paying him off. I think you're crazy, but if it's what you want, I'll go along with it.” Really, what else could she do? Poppy was her mother and, stupid decision aside, deserved her support.

“Thank you.” Poppy rose and went into the bedroom. She came back holding a small velvet bag. Opening the folds, she passed her the bundle. “I'd like you to keep these safe until my wedding day. They're gifts for my maid of honor—which is you, if you agree—and my bridesmaids.”

Fin stared down at five beautifully-crafted, gold Claddagh rings, each of them with different gemstones in the crown and clasped hands design. “They're lovely, but why give them to me?”

“Too many people know about them.” Poppy shrugged it off with a laugh, but Fin sensed her unease. “I'm afraid they'll disappear.”

“Spill it, Mom. What aren't you telling me?”

“Honestly, Fin, sometimes you can be irritating.” Shaking her head, her mother indulged in an eye roll. “If you must know, I tweeted about them and showed them in a television

interview when I announced Paul's and my engagement."

"So? They're not extremely valuable, are they?" Fin knew there had to be more, something her mother wasn't saying. "Has something happened?"

"God you're persistent." Poppy buttered the croissant, taking a nibble before she answered. "I'm concerned because my house in Los Angeles was broken into shortly before I left to come here. Someone gained access to the safe, although nothing appeared to be missing."

"Let me guess...the rings weren't in the safe at the time." Fin examined them again, noticing some unusual symbols etched on the inside of the bands. "Where did you get these?"

"I don't remember. It was a long time ago." Poppy wouldn't meet her gaze, a sure sign she was lying. "Please, just humor me and protect the rings."

Ryan entered the old Gamekeeper's cottage that doubled as the estate security office. He scanned the bank of high-tech monitors on a wall and checked the computer readouts. No breaks in the alarm system. No intruders. At least something was going right today, because meeting Fin had messed with his head. He hadn't expected to be attracted to the daughter, and that was a definite no-no for two reasons. Not only was she a principal in this case, but he also knew her father. Someone she didn't even know existed, and maybe never would. Hell, he needed to keep his emotions in check. Yet the way she'd challenged him had rocked his world. A small woman like her willing to take him on in order to get to her mother said a lot. Damn it, she was not only brave, but she'd felt good in his arms, too.

He brushed those feelings aside and hit speed dial on his cell phone, listening to it ring while hating the position he was in. Going undercover to recover the Claddagh rings left him with few options and little backup. Fin's appeal was simply the icing on this time bomb of a

cake.

“What have you got?”

“Fiona’s arrived,” Ryan said, hearing the edge in his friend’s voice. Thomas sounded like he was climbing the freaking walls. “I gave her a hard time, pretended I didn’t recognize her, and tried to get rid of her. I struck out.”

“Do you think she knows?” Thomas was CIA. He was also Fin’s biological father, although she knew nothing about him. Anyone connected to that long ago op believed Thomas was dead. Including Poppy, who hadn’t known who he really was when they’d spent the night together. “I don’t want anything to happen to her or her mother.”

Ryan blew out a breath. “What she does or doesn’t know won’t save her now. She and Poppy are in danger until I secure those damn rings. Look what happened to Fin last night? Did you read the police report?”

“I did. It’s my fault this happened, all of it.” Thomas paused for a beat. Ryan imagined him wanting to plow his fist through a wall. “Your dad and I were deep undercover with the IRA back then. I knew better than to take a woman back to my hotel room and sleep with her, especially one as unpredictable as Poppy.”

“Come on, Thomas.” Ryan poured coffee from the thermos jug on the counter and took a hit. “You didn’t expect her to leave during the night with your jacket and the rings.”

“I damn well should have. Poppy was lonely in Belfast and more than a little drunk after her final stage performance. I knew she was planning to leave, fly back to the U.S. early the next morning.”

“Maybe, but you *didn’t* know she’d borrow your jacket and walk out on you without saying goodbye.”

“True. But it hardly matters now, does it?” Ryan heard another voice in the background. Thomas came back on the line after a few seconds. “The rings have been missing for almost twenty-eight years. Now they’ve come to light again and the bastards will want them back. I’ve got people searching to see who’s involved, but so far we’ve got nothing.”

“I know how it goes. They need the clues on the bands to find the money stash from IRA sympathizers.” Ryan leaned back in his chair, watching the monitors. “Too bad the genius who thought that up died the day the rings were engraved, after he’d already hidden the money.”

“And how do you think he died?” Thomas said. “It’s how I got the rings in the first place.”

“You were just doing your job, man. Don’t second guess yourself now.” Ryan gazed at a flat screen, watching Fin make her way down the drive to the guesthouse. “I have to go.”

“Be careful, Ryan,” Thomas said. “A couple million dollars is enough incentive to get more people killed.”

“I know, but it ends now. My father’s name still needs to be cleared, remember? The CIA thought he stole the money and his career ended in disgrace. Hell, my mother couldn’t even collect his pension after he died in the bombing in Belfast.” Ryan stepped over the threshold and locked the door behind him. He spoke in a low voice. “And you barely survived it.”

“I’m alive, and I should be there to help you. If I didn’t think Poppy would recognize me—”

“Exactly.” And it would be one hell of a way for Fin to find out about her father. Ryan followed her at a distance. She veered off the path, heading down toward the shore. “One thing at a time, Thomas. I’ll find the rings and the money. My father’s name will be cleared. Then you can reconnect with Poppy and meet your daughter...if that’s what you really want.”

Disconnecting the call, Ryan pocketed the phone. Fin stood at the water's edge with her back to him, her jacket collar turned up against the wind. She looked lonely somehow, and self-contained. He guessed her childhood hadn't been an easy one, but then, neither had his. Not with his mother scrambling to make a living to support the family. Add that to the shame surrounding his father's death, and it was a lousy environment for a kid growing up.

While he might empathize with Fin, he wasn't above seducing her to get what he wanted. Hell, he'd almost convinced himself it would be better for her in the long run. The fact she was his type of woman had nothing to do with it. The end justified the means in this case, even if Thomas wouldn't approve. But Fin's father wasn't here to object, and Ryan would do whatever must be done to clear his father's name and end the nightmare for everyone.

He came up behind Fin, placing a hand on her shoulder. She jumped and turned. Ryan raised his hands in the air. "Easy. I didn't mean to startle you."

"Keep your mitts to yourself." Her blue eyes turned icy, very much like Thomas's. Chin tilted in the air, she warned him to back off with a glare. "Just because you work here doesn't mean we're on friendly terms."

"I guess we got off on the wrong foot." He shoved his hands in his pockets, toed the path with a boot, and tried out a sheepish grin. "I'm sorry I mistook you for a stalker earlier."

"No, you're not. As a matter of fact, I think you enjoyed it." Fin stared at him, her gaze narrowing. "Maybe *you're* the stalker. I wouldn't be surprised if you pawed through my underwear when you brought my suitcase to the guesthouse."

"You're cutting deep there, sunshine." Okay, so maybe he had, although he would never admit to it. Fumbling through sexy lingerie and enjoying the hell out of it didn't make a man feel proud. But it gave him a better understanding of Fin, even if he hadn't found the rings. Why

would someone so tomboyish wear lace and silk under ripped jeans and flannel shirts? And what was with the bubble bath, perfumed lotions, and scented candles? She obviously had a feminine side. He also suspected she had a soft spot, at least where her mother was concerned. Why else would she be here, if not to protect Poppy? He wrapped a hand around her wrist. "Maybe we should start over."

"Don't touch me." She shook free and pulled back, turning toward the guesthouse, but not before Ryan saw the anxiousness in her gaze. "Just keep your hands to yourself."

"Fin, wait." Suddenly, it made sense, what had stared him in the face from the pages of the file Thomas compiled on her. The boyish clothes, her lack of feminine wiles, pointed to a childhood lived in fear. The reason she hadn't been back to Nantucket Sound in ten years. He doubted Poppy knew, but he'd bet his eyeteeth at least one of her exes had preyed on Fin as a child. "Look, we need to talk."

She wanted no part of him or a conversation, that much was obvious. But if he scratched seduction off his list of ways to get close to her, his arsenal was flat out empty. Which meant he had no choice; he'd have to trust her with the truth. Increasing his stride, he caught up to her as she shot through the guesthouse door. He followed her inside, shutting it behind them.

"What the hell do you think you're doing?" Alarm leapt into her pretty blue eyes. Reaching into a jacket pocket, she pulled out a canister. "Get out of here this instant or I'll spray you blind."

"Don't do it, sunshine." Yeah, she was going to use the pepper spray. He saw her hit the button half a second before he knocked the can out of her grasp and sent them both to the floor. He kept his weight on his elbows, rubbing his face in her jacket to keep the stuff from burning the skin on his face. It was damn lucky he'd already had his eyes shut before she'd let loose with

her trigger finger. It only dawned on him with her next intake of breath that he'd buried his face in her breasts when he'd landed on top of her.

Shit. He felt her heart pounding beneath his ear. Her wrists strained to get free under his hands. Thank God, she couldn't get a knee in position to take out his nuts. "Quit struggling. Give me a second and I'll move off you."

"You're a son of a bitch, you know that?" He didn't blame her for being furious, although that was a dumb stunt she'd pulled. But something else caught his attention. Her nipple had beaded where his damp breath blew against the slinky tank top exposed by her open shirt and jacket. She was braless beneath it. Hell, it was all he could do not to capture the bud in his mouth and hum the "Hallelujah Chorus." One thing was certain. She couldn't be afraid of him, not when her body reacted with pulse-pounding heat to his close proximity. Of course, her words said something entirely different. "You're fired! Do you hear me? Pick yourself up, pack your bags, and get off the property!"

"Not before I search you for more weapons." Unwilling to take any chances, he went through her pockets, half afraid he'd find a taser or stun gun to knock him on his ass. When he was sure she was unarmed, he rolled off her. Gaining his feet, he kicked the pepper spray under the couch and pulled her up against him. No fear in her gaze this time—only anger. "About the leaving part...I hate to disappoint, but I'm not going anywhere."

Pulling her jacket closed, Fin tugged a strand of hair behind an ear and snarled. Yep, she was royally pissed. If she'd had a gun, he figured he'd already be dead. She strode to an end table, snatched up the phone, and wielded it like a weapon in his direction. "Get the hell out of here before I call the cops."

Ryan shook his head. He rocked back on his heels as he reached in a back pocket to haul

out his wallet. Flipping it open, he flashed his badge with a grin. “FBI at your service, sunshine. I am the cops.”

Chapter Two

Fin stared at Ryan's badge and laughed, although there was nothing funny about the situation. He stood between her and the door, effectively blocking her from leaving the guesthouse. *Wonderful*. She thought about phoning for help but who would she call? Not security, since *he* was standing in front of her waiving FBI credentials he'd most likely bought on the internet. Not her mother, who lacked the wherewithal to face off against someone like O'Shea. Poppy's fiancé would be downing Bloody Marys by the gallon by now, and none of the other guests had arrived. So that left the cook and housekeeper—who were both about seventy years old—to help Fin toss Ryan out on his perfect butt. Forget it. Judging by the way he handled himself, she'd need a small army to do that.

She tried humoring him instead. "Where's Holmsby if he didn't really have surgery?"

Ryan pocketed his identification and stood at ease, his body language benign, as if he was one of the good guys. Nice try, but his questionable creds and lethal appearance instilled about as much trust as a kick in the teeth. "I convinced him it was a matter of national security and sent him on an all-expenses paid trip to the Caymans."

"Nice for him. But you lied to gain access to my mother." He had nerve, she'd give him that. But while Holmsby might have been snookered, she didn't believe O'Shea's story for a minute. In fact, she was inclined to report him to the local cops. Knew she should, but wouldn't.

Involving Nantucket police would mean forcing some truth out of Poppy, whatever she was involved in, something she wasn't sure she could do. Fin had no choice but to play along with Mr. FBI and get to the bottom of the "national security" issue herself. "What do you want?"

"Don't pretend you don't already know. You and your mother are in danger." Green eyes flashed with so-called concern from his damn sexy face. Fin licked her bottom lip, holding his steady gaze when what she really wanted to do was run for cover. No, he didn't frighten her, but he attracted her, which was worse. While the illusion of interest might be her body's way of processing adrenaline, this wasn't the time to be curious about a man who wasn't who he appeared to be.

Besides, Fin was inexperienced when it came to the flirting game. Poppy's third husband had seen to that. Always lurking and watching her, his touch making her skin crawl whenever he got her alone. Once she was old enough, she hadn't played the victim any longer, earning a scholarship to a top culinary college in Paris. Going as far away from home as she could get. Since then, she'd made it a point to avoid big men with rough hands. Which didn't explain the punch of heat she'd felt when Ryan landed on top of her a few minutes ago. Not something she wanted to acknowledge. Or explore.

He was doing it again, watching her teeth sink into her bottom lip as if he wanted to cover her mouth with his. A ridiculous thought and one he didn't act on, thank God. Fin reined in her confusion, knowing he wasn't above using her to get to Poppy, or whatever else he wanted.

Hands on his hips, Ryan rocked on the balls of his feet. "Your mother has five rings that don't belong to her. The sooner I retrieve them, the safer you both will be."

"I don't know what you're talking about."

The rings, damn it, her mother hadn't told her where she'd gotten them. More to the

point, Poppy had avoided the conversation. Fin wondered if Ryan was the one who broke into the L.A. house and then followed Poppy here. It made sense, didn't it?

“But if what you're saying is true, why are the rings a matter of national security?”

“That's need to know information, sunshine.” Ryan reached out and ran his fingertips along her hairline, tucking a curl behind an ear. “The important thing is I find them before anyone else comes looking.”

“Sorry. I can't help you there.” She brushed past him for the door and opened it wide. “If you'll excuse me, Poppy needs my help with wedding preparations.”

Ryan moved to the threshold, his gaze serious as he huffed out a breath. “This isn't over.”

Fin hugged herself against the coolness of his expression until something else caught her attention. A classic, black Porsche Carrera rolled through the gates. Ramsey Carlyle—husband number three—hopped out, looking as cruel and intimidating as ever. Poppy must have invited him to the wedding. And why not? She'd never told her mother what he'd done to her. The air caught in Fin's lungs and her hands started to shake. Involuntary tremors; Ramsey had trained her well.

“What is it?” Closing the distance between them, Ryan laid a palm at her nape. His chin tilted in the direction of the car. “Who is that?”

“Just one of my mother's exes.” Fin backed out of sight from the doorway. “Please tell Poppy I'll see her tomorrow. I'll call the kitchen if I need anything.”

She bolted the door and began to pace after Ryan left. Of all the rotten luck for Ramsey to show up when she wasn't prepared to face him. What she needed was a plan to build her confidence. She wasn't a frightened teenager anymore, although no one would guess it to look at her snazzy wardrobe of oversized shirts and jeans. Yep, she still wore them to hide her body

from creepy men. But, no more. Fin hauled out the Nantucket phone directory and dialled. “Mrs. Westover? It’s Fin Murphy—”

“Fin?” An excited squeal came through the line. “It’s Ronnie! I’m home for Christmas and helping Mom at the boutique.”

“Oh, my gosh!” Ronnie had been her best friend in high school, although they hadn’t seen each other in the past ten years. Then again, Fin hadn’t seen anyone from her old life after moving away. “Ronnie, I forgot my suitcase in Boston and I’m desperate for clothes. Any chance you can help me choose a few items to tide me over?”

“Are you kidding? Do you still wear a size 4?” When Fin agreed, Ronnie asked her mom to pull the swankiest clothes off the racks in her size. “How soon can you get here?”

“Twenty minutes.” Fin paused for a beat. “Ronnie, I-I’m glad we’re going to see each other again after all these years.”

“Believe it, honey.” Ronnie laughed. “And best of all? Ilsa, Skye, and Eden are here for the holidays, too. I’m calling them as soon as we hang up.”

Fin locked the door and jogged to her SUV, jumped inside and booted it for Hyannis. The little boutique was on Main Street in the historic downtown area. It was a beautiful, tree-lined avenue not too far from the harbor. Christmas lights decorated store windows and were strung through the trees. The charming shops and restaurants hadn’t changed a lot since her last visit, although a few had different names.

She grinned when she locked her car and gazed across the street to the boutique doors. Ilsa stood outside chatting on a cell phone. She looked beautiful, was still willowy and blond. Her last email had been from Anchorage where she worked for an oil company. Skye stood beside her, decked out in western boots and jeans, her auburn hair streaked from the sun. She’d

followed her dream and bought a little dude ranch in Texas. Eden's tan was a honeyed glow, her body slimmed down since high school, her dark hair cut short and curly. Fin knew she managed a pineapple plantation in Hawaii now. And Ronnie? Well, Ronnie looked the same—a tall gorgeous brunette—a supermodel sought after by hip designers in New York city. Fin often saw her gracing the covers of fashion magazines.

With hugs and laughter, shopping took on a whole new meaning for Fin. Ronnie's mother popped the cork on a bottle of champagne while the women caught up and browsed to their hearts' content.

“Where have you been, Fin?” Ilsa asked. “And why haven't you come back to visit?”

“I floated around Europe after graduating, working as a sous-chef in some of the best restaurants.” She gazed at her friends, appreciating the love and concern in the room. “But now I'm back for good, ladies. I've secured the financial backing to open my own restaurant in Boston.”

“That is *the* best news!” Eden led the cheer, and then dampened the festivities with a question. “It's because of the men in Poppy's life that you haven't been back, isn't it?”

“One man in particular,” Fin admitted. There was no point in lying, not to the women who'd pulled her through so many tough times. She raised her glass for a bit more bubbly. “All that's changed now, except my mother invited Ramsey to attend wedding number five. He's staying at the house, but this time, I intend to have the upper hand.”

“You go, girl. Let us know if you need any help.” Skye checked her watch. “And guess what? I exerted a little pressure at the club and got us hair, mani, and pedi appointments. There's nothing like the spa experience to give a woman a needed boost before she tosses out the trash, right?”

The sun was down by the time Fin kissed everyone goodbye, promising to get together again before they went their separate ways after Christmas. She felt like a new woman—relaxed, buffed, and polished. Combined with the clothes she'd bought...well, she'd never felt so girly and in control of her life.

Floating home on a haze of champagne, chocolate-dipped strawberries, and rekindled friendships, she pulled up to the guesthouse. Music and voices from the main house carried on the breeze. Poppy's guests had arrived, the drive filled with expensive cars. Fin hummed a few bars of "Genie in a Bottle" while she pulled the shopping bags from the CR-V and danced to the door in her new black leather boots, matching jacket, and designer jeans. Everything fit her like a glove, including the white cashmere sweater she wore under the jacket. And, yes, it felt wonderful to be dressed like a woman. Plus, she'd gotten a discount from Ronnie's mom, easing the strain on her pocketbook.

She sighed with contentment. Just another few months and her dream would become a reality. She'd already bought the restaurant location—thanks to her financial backer—the pretty stone cottage overlooking Boston harbor. As for unfinished business, all she had to do was find the rightful owner of the Claddagh rings and return them—*if* Ryan was telling the truth and Poppy had no legal claim to them. And she needed to deal with Ramsey. Her newfound confidence said she could handle both.

Look out world. Here I come!

She turned the key in the lock. The lights didn't come on when she flipped the wall switch. Dropping the bags on the couch, she tried a table lamp. Nothing happened. She stiffened when the smell of sweat and dirty clothes hit her, heavy breathing blowing tendrils of hair across

her nape. Someone stood behind her in the dark. Grabbing a metal bookend, she spun fast, swinging it with all her strength. It bounced off an arm and crashed to the carpet. The man was built like a gorilla, his silhouette towering over her in the dim outside lighting. He grabbed her by the collar and shoved her against the picture window. Her back hit, cracking the glass. Pain racked her spine. She panicked, fighting for breath against his chest.

He wore a ski mask, his flat gaze staring out at her through the holes. "I want the rings."

"I-I don't have them." He tightened his hold on her neck and squeezed. Fin's vision blurred, her air supply all but choked off. She'd be dead in a few seconds if he didn't release the pressure.

"Listen, ya little bitch. You don't want to make me angry. Give me the rings!"

He loosened his grip for a second and she lashed out. Her boot connected with his shin. He doubled over and let out a roar. She kneed him in the face. Leaping over the couch, she raced to the bathroom and shot the bolt. Frantic, she opened the medicine cabinet, searching for anything she could use as a weapon. He threw his weight against the door. No time. Fin was halfway out the window when the doorframe splintered. She shrieked when his hands gripped her ankles, dragging her back inside. Her knees slammed down on the edge of the tub. Heaving her to her feet, he spun her into the mirror. Glass shattered and blood dripped down her temple.

The cold barrel of a gun tapped her cheek. "I won't ask ya again. Where are the fookin' rings?"

Ryan entered the guesthouse through the open front door. He pulled his Glock, instinct calling the shots. Fin was in trouble. She had parked in the drive five minutes ago, yet the lights were still off inside the cottage. A crash sounded in the bathroom, a man's voice shouting. He

raced toward the sound, bumping into the couch in the dark. A small cylinder rolled out from under, caught the ball of his foot, and sent him flying. A hiss sounded as he face-planted on the floor, a cloud of vapor shooting from the can. Fin's pepper spray! Damn, he was choked and blinded within a couple of seconds.

Lurching to his feet, he plowed into a wall. Wiping the worst of it on a sleeve, he leaned against the plaster. He couldn't breathe, needed to wash his face to get rid of the stuff.

He heard something bang at the back of the house. Someone rushed toward him. Fin, he recognized her footsteps. "It's okay, the jerk went out a window. You scared him off."

"I can't see worth a damn." Grabbing his arm, Fin led him to the kitchen sink and turned on the taps. Still gasping, Ryan holstered his Glock, soaking his head under the faucet for a good two minutes. He checked Fin over while he dried off with a dishtowel. "Are you okay? There's a nick at your hairline."

"It's nothing serious." Fin reached for a paper towel to dab at the blood. "It's just a scratch."

"You want to tell me what happened?" Of course she didn't, he could see it in her eyes. "Who was he? What did he want?"

"If I tell you, you have to keep it to yourself until after the wedding." She licked her bottom lip, something he'd noticed she did when she was nervous. It drove him crazy on a whole other level. "I don't want Poppy upset before her big day."

Wasn't that a crock of crap? Hell, Fin thought she could play him. "Think again, sunshine. Let's try for the real reason you want me to keep silent."

"Look, he was after the rings, okay?" Fin tossed the paper towel in the garbage, squaring her shoulders. "But the truth is, if my mother finds out she's liable to tweet about it or do another

television interview to create more publicity for herself.”

“That’s another lie. You’re afraid for her, worried someone else will come after her.”

Ryan shook his head to clear it. His eyes still stung, but at least he could see again. “Describe the man to me. What did he look like?”

“A big guy, built like a wrestler. I couldn’t see much in the dark and he wore a ski mask. But he spoke with an Irish accent.” Fin moved into the living room, holding her breath as she crossed to open the windows. “We need to air this place out.”

“Which reminds me…” He wrapped an arm around her waist and reeled her in. “Did you forget to pick up your pepper spray earlier after our little tussle on the floor?”

“Hmm, guess I forgot.”

“I guess you did.” He curled a strand of her hair around his fingers. She smelled like a tropical rain forest, sensuous and exotic, tempting him to forget the mission and lose himself in her scent. He backed off a couple of inches. “Do you know where the rings are?”

“Yes, Mom gave them to me this morning for safekeeping. But you’ll never find them.” She tipped her head to gaze up at him, her blue eyes daring him to think otherwise. “I’ll tell you what. I’ll give them to you after the ceremony if you promise not to involve Poppy in this. And that’s only if I think you’re on the level.”

“No dice, sweetheart. Your mother’s already involved—she’s had the rings for almost twenty-eight years.” Eyes narrowed, he studied the stubborn tilt of her chin. Figured she’d already made up her mind and would hold out until she got what she wanted. “This is a dangerous game you’re playing.”

“Take it or leave it, O’Shea. It’s up to you.” She flashed him a smile that didn’t reach her eyes. “Besides, you’re here to protect us. Right?”

“Damn, woman, you’re not making this easy.” He hauled her back when she tried to turn away. “What difference does it make whether you give them to me now or later, as long as I don’t upset your mother?”

“That should be obvious.” The thin thread of humor in her voice reeked of sarcasm. “I don’t know who you are and I don’t trust you. For all I know, you’re as rotten as the guy who came at me with a gun.”

“Think about it, Fin.” Ryan touched a hand to her collarbone and felt a spark of heat. Everything about her attracted him—from her looks, to her intelligence, to her spunk. “If I wasn’t on the level, I’d have hogtied you, Poppy, and her fiancée this morning before anyone else arrived. Gotten the rings and taken off.”

“Not with the cook and housekeeper inside to call the cops. No, I’ve made up my mind. You won’t get your hands on them until I know why people are after them.” She folded her arms across her chest and shot him a glare. “Do we have a deal or not?”

“You drive a hard bargain.” Ryan knew she’d checkmated him and then some. Hell, he’d been outwitted by a master negotiator. “But, I have one sticking point. You move into the main house where you’ll be safe and then I’ll agree. We can shake on it.”

She thought about it. He could practically see the wheels turning inside her head. The hell with it, she wouldn’t get away with calling the shots without suffering the consequences. When she finally offered up a handshake, he ignored it and touched down on her lips. Heard her sharp intake of breath and didn’t much care. Her taste hinted of strawberries and chocolate, warm and sweet. Oh yeah, he wanted a whole lot more. But for now, it was enough. “Just sealing the deal with a kiss, sunshine.”

“Whatever,” she said, clearly rattled. At least she hadn’t pushed him away. “I’ll get my

things.”

Ryan followed her around while she gathered her unpacked suitcase, backpack, and shopping bags. “You’re sporting a different look since I saw you this morning. Very nice, but what’s with the new clothes and makeup?”

She handed him her rollaway, staring at the floor. “I needed a morale booster before greeting Poppy’s guests.”

Sure she did, especially if this had anything to do with Ramsey Carlyle. Ryan had checked him out earlier. The guy was a pervert with two complaints filed against him for inappropriate behavior with teenage girls. The charges were dropped in both cases, but he suspected large amounts of money had changed hands to make it happen. “Is this about your stepfather?”

“Let it go, O’Shea.” Determination tightened Fin’s jaw as she locked up the guesthouse. “I’ll handle him myself.”

Ryan scanned the shadows as they walked, a hand on his weapon. While it bothered him Fin planned to go up against Ramsey, what concerned him more was how the gorilla in the guesthouse had known she had the rings. A gnawing feeling clawed at his gut. Either the security system had been high-jacked and someone had seen Poppy give her the rings, or one of the wedding guests was involved.

He entered the main house through a side door, following Fin up a narrow back staircase he imagined was used by the servants. Noise filtered from the front of the house. The party was in full swing; raucous laughter and voices carried on the steady thump of drums and riffs from electric guitars. Paul must be getting his groove on with his band.

Fin paused at a door on the second floor, seemed to steady herself before turning the

handle. He understood why when she flipped on the lights. “This is my room. Welcome to the time warp.”

No kidding? Ryan couldn’t believe his eyes when his gaze landed on the frou-frou canopy bed, frilly curtains, and shelves of Barbie and Ken dolls with accessories lining a far wall. Everything was pink, from the pleated shades on the lamps to the scatter rugs on the floor. “This is the room of a seven or eight-year-old girl.”

“Oh, I know.” Fin’s mouth curved into a sad semblance of a smile. “Poppy kept it the same after I reached puberty. She didn’t want to acknowledge I was growing up, since that meant she was getting older, too.”

“I’m sorry.” For the first time in a long time, he was at a loss for words.

“Don’t be. I survived.” Fin opened a cupboard door, shook out the new clothes she pulled from shopping bags, and hung them on hangers. “But maybe now you’ll understand why I’m so protective of my mother. She lives in her own world most of the time.”

True. And Ryan understood a lot more. His heart expanded in his chest for this woman who had somehow survived an unbearable childhood and grown into the person she was today. Jesus, how could anyone be so level-headed and strong under the circumstances? She deserved more.

For some inexplicable reason, he wanted to be the man to give it to her. He knew she wasn’t someone he could mess with—a convenient and pleasurable hookup. No, Fin’s emotions were raw, on the surface for everyone but a blind man to see. He wouldn’t betray the tenuous thread of trust he saw growing in her eyes whenever she looked at him. She’d been disappointed too many times, but wouldn’t be by him.

Chapter Three

Fin opened her eyes and turned on a lamp, shuddering when she realized she was back in the pink room. The good news? She wasn't a kid anymore. The bad news? She couldn't lay in her childhood bed another minute. Dressing in sweats, she took the back stairs to the dining room, breathing a sigh of relief when she didn't run into anyone. The house was quiet. The others must still be sleeping. She imagined the party had lasted most of the night. After pouring a mug of coffee from the urn on the sideboard, she grabbed Poppy's old coat from the mudroom and slipped outside.

An icy blast of wind blew across her neck. She snuggled deeper into the sheepskin jacket, walking around to the front of the house, away from the wind. Daylight was still an hour away. Cheery Christmas lights around the windows tinkled against the glass. Tomorrow was Christmas day, but she didn't feel like celebrating, not with Poppy's entourage—especially Ramsey—in the house. Her mother's wedding would be the day after, then hopefully everyone would disappear. If only she could sneak off to the guesthouse, light a fire, and enjoy her coffee in peace. She nixed the idea, knowing O'Shea would catch her with video surveillance. Besides, she'd given him her word.

"Morning, sunshine." He stood on the path to the gatehouse, ambient light shining behind him through the open door. "Come in and get warm."

“You’re up early.” Jeez, she almost jumped out of her skin when he appeared. Between the Irish guy attacking her and Ramsey staying for the wedding, she was a bundle of nerves.

“I wanted to tidy up the guesthouse and replace the broken mirror in the bathroom in case Poppy strolled down there.” Ryan stepped to the side as she mounted the steps ahead of him, curious to see the inner workings of the small office. She already knew the layout—a bedroom, kitchenette and full bathroom in the back—but the new tech toys in the work area amazed her. “A lot has changed since I’ve been gone. Look at all the monitors and computer equipment.”

“Yeah, I was impressed too.” He ran a hand along his jaw. “Your mother hasn’t skimped on security, whatever else she might have missed.”

Fin whirled on him, defensive as ever about Poppy. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“I was talking about husband number three.” He sipped his coffee, studying her over the rim of his mug. “She didn’t know Ramsey Carlyle was hitting on you, did she?”

“No, and I don’t want to talk about it.” Fin turned away to watch the digital feed on the flat screens. Maybe if she ignored O’Shea, he would run for the hills. His arms came around her instead, his chin touching the top of her head. She flinched at his touch. “What do you think you’re doing?”

“I thought it was obvious. I’m holding you.” He turned her around, brushing his lips against her cheek. If she moved slightly, his mouth would touch hers. Tempting, but no. She wasn’t sure she could trust him. What if she instigated an innocent kiss but he misunderstood? What if he took things where she didn’t want them to go? Although, the softness in his eyes said she needn’t worry. “I’m here for you, Fin. I’m strong and solid. I won’t let you down.”

Whoa boy. He was a man in every sense of the word, from his big body to his roguish features and spicy, masculine scent. He was way too much male for her. Although, a girl had to

start somewhere, didn't she? And somehow she thought Ryan wouldn't hurt her. Still, why take the chance?

She tried backing out of his embrace. "I'm not looking for sex, if that's what you're offering. Keep your hands to yourself."

"I'm not talking about sex." He didn't let her go. Instead, he drew her closer, threading his fingers through her hair and tucking her head under his chin. She felt his heart beating beneath her ear. Strong. Steady. "I'm saying I'm falling for you, Fin. It's not something I saw coming, but it is what it is. And I'd never touch you in a sexual way...unless you asked me to."

She didn't know where to look when his green eyes melded with hers. His gaze and gentle hands said he understood her fear. God, he was tempting. She felt drawn in by him. *Almost*. "It will never happen, so you can put that idea out of your head."

"Not a problem." His hands dropped to circle her hips, bringing her flush against him. She froze when his hardness touched her tummy through their clothes. "Easy. It's just my body reacting to yours. You're beautiful, sunshine."

He held her in place, didn't back away when she panicked. His lips found hers instead, soft and firm. O'Shea could kiss; she'd give him that, the heat of his mouth sending swirls of sensation low in her belly. Her body ignited with answering warmth. His tongue touched the corners of her mouth, urging her to open for him. She did.

No pressure. No assault, just mind-bending pleasure as his tongue stroked hers. Curiosity soon replaced fear, her breath coming in short bursts. Running her hands through his hair, she kissed him back, exploring with her lips and tongue. He broke the kiss, smiling down at her.

"Can you feel what you do to me?" He firmed his hands against her backside, pulling her closer, his body rigid against hers. "We'll *make love* when you're ready. No pain. And that's a

promise.”

Fin almost fell over when he released her. She could still see his arousal straining the front of his jeans. Never mind *her* needs. She was moist in intimate places, closer to wanting a sexual experience than she'd ever been in her life. And he'd stopped. Just like that.

Taking her hand, he ignored what happened between them, bringing her over to a computer terminal. Entered some keystrokes and pointed to a schematic he brought up on the screen. “Take a look. What do you see?”

“I have no idea.” Nothing made sense to her. Not the man, not her body's reaction to him, and not the diagram on the monitor. “I don't have a clue what I'm looking at.”

“Okay, I'll walk you through it.” Ryan tugged her into his lap and nipped her ear. When she encircled his neck with her hands, he pointed to something on the screen “This is the security grid for the cameras in the main house. If you look here, you'll see where it's been breached. Someone's piggybacking the signal.”

“You mean they can see what's going on?” Holy Mike, this wasn't good. Fin licked her bottom lip, worried where the cameras were located inside the house.

“They can, but only in the corridors.” Ryan set her on her feet again. “I think that's how your late night visitor knew you had the rings. He saw Poppy give them to you.”

“It's possible,” she admitted. “My mother and I were arguing about them when I left her room yesterday morning. I remember I still had the little velvet pouch in my hand.”

“There you go.” Ryan bent over the laptop again. A few more taps on the keys and he grinned like the devil. “I've looped the readout but kept whoever broke in connected. From now on, he'll be watching the same frames over and over again. Only the time stamp will change.”

“Nice.” Body tingling, Fin edged to the door. There was too much temptation in this

room and it wasn't computer hardware. "I'll see you later. I want to change before breakfast."

Ryan's gaze poured over her like molten lava, causing her warmest places to tingle. "Lock the bedroom door if you shower."

She nodded and ran. Better to escape with her clothes on before she changed her mind. Minutes later, she stripped and was in the tub. Steam rose and bubbles frothed, the room filling with the soothing scent of gardenias. Her mind and body relaxed as she drifted toward sleep.

"You haven't changed, Fin." Her eyes shot open at the sound of that voice. Ramsey leaned against the bathroom doorframe, as big and menacing as she remembered. "You've still got that tight cheerleader's body."

"Get out!" She scrambled for a towel. He snatched it away. Fin fought the pull of hysteria, telling herself she wasn't that powerless girl anymore. "I mean it, Ram!"

"You little cock tease." He held up the old-fashioned key to her room, dropping to his haunches beside the tub, clicking the metal on the ceramic lip. "I kept the key, baby. And if you make any noise, I'll tell your mama you gave it to me."

No, oh no. I won't play that game. Never again. "You slimy rat bastard. Get your ass out of here. Now!"

"Here's the thing, baby." He touched her shoulder. She shook him off. "You might be older, but you still turn me on. It's that coltish shape of yours. So play nice with your step-poppa for old time's sake, and I won't upset your mother. Otherwise, you'll regret it."

"No." Fin pumped her hand into a fist, hauled off and slugged him with all her might. "Pack your bags and get out of this house!"

Ramsey shook his head. He stood, wiping the blood from his split lip, checking out his face in the mirror. Fin breathed a sigh of relief. Finally, she'd held her own against an evil man.

She leapt out of the tub, grabbed a towel off the rack, and wrapped herself in it. She was halfway out the door when Ramsey wrenched an arm behind her back. She cried out, fear and pain making her drop to her knees.

The bedroom door crashed open. Ryan stormed across the room, her mother close on his heels. Fin ducked when Ryan grabbed Ramsey by his shirt collar and belt. He heaved him through the air, smashing him into the far bedroom wall. Dragged him to his feet and punched him in the gut. “You sick freak.”

“Get this idiot off me, Poppy,” Ramsey whined, fear rising in his voice. “This was Fin’s idea. She invited me to her room. Hell, she even gave me the key.”

“You lying sack of shit!” Fin couldn’t believe it when her mother marched up to Ramsey, executed a perfect knee thrust, as if to shove his balls into his throat. Then she came toward her, pulled a robe off a hook on the bathroom door, and wrapped her in it, cuddling her on the floor. “I’ll take care of Fiona while you take out the garbage, Ryan. Nantucket cops are on the way.”

O’Shea nodded, slapping flex cuffs on Ramsey’s wrists where he clutched his aching junk.

“Fin, honey? Do you need a doctor?”

“No, I think I’m okay.” Her voice wobbled a little and her body trembled, but she wasn’t hurt. Stunned might be a better word, because for the first time in her life her mother was there to protect her. And Ryan? Well, he was one heck of a man. Not at all like Ramsey.

“Just give me a few minutes to get dressed. Then I’ll talk to the police.”

Ryan stumbled into the guesthouse, his senses on overload. Fin was here somewhere. He’d watched her run down the path after Ramsey was dragged away by the cops. On high alert,

he scanned the layout for intruders. *Nada*. Only the bedroom door was shut. He'd bet she was behind it crying her eyes out. Licking her wounds. It was wrong on so many levels. He wanted to hold her in his arms. He'd have to deal with Ramsey's fallout instead. He dug deep for the right words, the right tone to say them. His anger on her behalf so intense he nearly buckled from the pain.

Better to wait a few minutes and get himself under control. Make that a decade, because whenever he thought about her sweet curves, doing the right thing got lost in his river of self-pity. Man, she'd been incredible earlier. So soft in his arms and willing to follow his lead, her blue eyes shining with wonder when the realization hit her that loving a man could be pleasurable.

He should have taken her to heaven then, but hindsight was twenty/twenty and it was a lonely bitch. If he'd acted on what his body had wanted, they wouldn't have this godforsaken wall between them now. But he'd done what he thought was right. Gotten her used to his touch, not pushing her somewhere she wasn't ready to travel.

The truth was she needed to be loved by the right man, in the right way. He knew it. And he was that man. Hell, he'd kill anyone else who tried. Wrong on so many levels, but there it was. To hell with the consequences. He'd work through those one at a time. If she needed therapy, he'd be there to hold her hand. If she never achieved sexual gratification, he'd try harder or back right off, whatever her doctors advised. But he wanted her in his life; that much was clear. Did she need him in hers? There was the crapshoot, the million dollar question tearing him to pieces.

Damn, he should go through that door and act like a man. Hold her and tell her how sorry he was she'd been abused by a vicious prick. He glanced at the liquor cabinet, wishing he could

down a shot or six to lessen the ache in his heart. Not advisable. Never smart to get drunk when entering a minefield. But laying himself raw, holding himself in check to shelter her from the most beautiful act in the world could very well kill him. He realized he loved her and he wanted it all, selfish bastard that he was.

The door clicked open behind him. He turned and there she was. So beautiful she took his breath away. So vulnerable he didn't know what to do. Retreat for the hills? Pretend he was gay? Cry like a baby for what could have been between them?

Ryan told himself he'd have to wing it, maybe use all of the above to get her where she needed to be on the emotional see-saw to recovery. Yeah, he was a prince. He'd do whatever it took and curse every goddamn step along the way.

She smiled and came into his arms, coming up onto her tiptoes to kiss his lips. "I've been waiting for you."

Ryan harnessed the need surging through him, met her mouth with a brotherly peck, not the full tongue exploration he longed to conduct. The unbelievable feel of her small body against him, the innocent look in her eyes destroyed chinks in his protective armor like a sweater unraveling. He tried for casual, swallowed the lump in his throat, and cursed his libido for reacting to the first inhale of her feminine scent. "I'm here, sunshine. Why don't we sit on the couch?"

"No. I'd rather lie in bed with you."

Jesus help me.

Fin turned toward the bedroom, and he noticed what she wore. Hell, he'd have to be blind to miss it. Not the jeans and hoodie she'd had on when talking to the police. This was satin and lace, something a woman wore to slice at a man's heart. Or feel good about herself, which must

be the reason in Fin's case. Creamy silk molded to her body like a second skin. Seductive and mind blowing, the scrap of lingerie would lead to catastrophic fallout if he didn't hold himself in check.

She crooked a finger at him from the doorway. This was it, his chance to prove he could deny himself for her greater good. Ryan forced his feet to move in her direction, hands tightened into fists at his sides. Worst case scenario? He could shoot himself in the foot to keep himself under control. Best case? They'd cuddle like BFFs, shed a few tears, and catch a few chick flicks on the tube.

He stopped on the threshold. "What the...?"

Blinds were drawn, candles flickering on the night stands. She took his hand and led him to the bed. "I want you to take your clothes off."

"No. Honey—" No way could he lay with her and expect his johnson to stay quiet. "It's a really bad idea."

"Please." Her hands found the zipper on his jeans. A few quick tugs and she had him in her palm. "Do it for me."

Lord, going commando had its drawbacks. Removing her hand from his penis, Ryan kissed the tip of her nose, hoping to explain the facts of life to her without scaring her. His brain was already in meltdown, his body rock hard and wanting more action. He sucked in a breath and gritted his teeth. "Fin, you can't touch me like that and not expect me to react. I'm only human, sweetheart, flesh and bone."

Slipping the straps off her shoulders, she dropped the nightgown at his feet. Lifted his hand to her breast and held it there. "You said we'd make love when I was ready. I'm ready now."

“And I want you so bad right now I’m afraid I’ll hurt you.”

Her lips touched his, her tongue exploring his mouth, entangled with his own. She thrust deep, mimicking the plunge and retreat of lovers with their bodies entwined. His brain dissolved to mush, nerves exploded, and free will reigned. He was naked and suited up in a flash.

Scooping her up in his arms, he laid her on the bed, landing beside her. She was perfection. Soft and pliant, strong and resilient, a complicated mix of womanly curves and warrior bravado wrapped up in trust. He couldn’t let her down.

“I love you,” he said. “Remember that. Anything you don’t like—just say the word and we’ll try something else.”

Fin nodded, wrapping her arms around him, pressing her mouth to his shoulder. He cupped her waist, lowering his head to her breast, the nipple already budded. Closing on it, he licked gently at first, the whimper in her throat urging him to suckle deeper. Her knees moved, rising from the bed as she moaned.

“Open your eyes, sunshine. I want to see you when I please you.”

Blue eyes focused on him as his hand lowered between her thighs, stroking the velvet skin near her most sensitive area. “Are you okay? Do you want me to stop?”

He waited as he watched her, knowing this was the game changer.

“Please, don’t stop. I’ve never felt anything so beautiful before.”

Her mouth found his, her tongue delving deep inside, the answer to his prayers. He held the kiss, opening her with the same rhythm. Gradual caresses, his finger gliding across her precious nub and inside her again. Thrust and parry. A couple strokes and she was wet for him. A few more and her hips rose to greet him.

She writhed when his mouth skimmed down her body, exploring her navel and stomach

with his tongue. “Wh-what are you doing?”

“I’m loving you.” He kept stroking her, increasing the tempo. Waited until her hands twisted the sheets and she trembled beneath him. “Feel the rhythm, honey.”

Parting her folds, he found her sweet spot, tasted her dew on the tip of his tongue. A finger inside her, he feasted at her apex, her responding moans upping his pleasure. Ecstasy seized him by the balls. He wanted more, the urge to plunge into her barely contained. *No*. This was about her needs, not his, although giving her bliss wound him tighter than he’d ever been with another woman. He added a second finger, lubricating and stretching, her pearl quivering beneath his tongue. Fin cried out, nails digging into his shoulders.

“Stop, stop, stop!” She was on her knees in a flash.

“What?” God, had he scared her? Had he gone too far?

“Lie on your back,” she begged. “I want to be on top the first time.”

“You’re still tight, Fin. You’re not ready.”

“Shut up.” She leaned forward to kiss him. “You’re wonderful, absolutely fantastic. I’m so freaking hot, I think I’m gonna explode. Now help me!”

Ryan pushed to a seated position, bracing himself against the headboard. He didn’t move, barely breathed as she slowly accepted him to the hilt. He gripped her hips and started to move, helping her find the tempo. Fin was a quick study, increasing the pace when he held back.

She gasped as pleasure built, licked her lips, and flat-out moaned. Kneading her breast with one hand, he messaged her nub with the other to increase her bliss. God, he couldn’t hold out much longer. Fin was magic, her tight fit nearly driving him over the edge.

Eyes focused on him, awe shone in her gaze as her body peaked. Her muscles contracted around him, again and again, her orgasm driving his own to lift off. When they reached heaven

together, he wanted to shout from the rooftops. She tumbled against him, spent and exhausted, trembling from head to toe. He stroked her legs, ran his hands from her shapely ass to her shoulders, kissing her neck as he expelled a breath. “You’re an amazing woman, you know that?”

Brows furrowed, she searched his eyes. “Did you mean it when you said you loved me?”

“Yeah, I meant it.” Ryan lowered his head to her mouth, touching his tongue to hers. He wanted to stay there, build up her heat all over again. “I guess when it’s right, it’s right.”

A smile curved her lips. She crawled off the side of the bed, cocked a hip, and blew him a kiss. “How about we have an encore in the shower? Then maybe I’ll tell you if I love you back.”

A very good deal.

Chapter Four

Fin felt Ryan's lips brush her cheek. "Merry Christmas."

"Mmm, Merry Christmas." She stretched, pushed the hair out of her eyes, and wrapped her arms around his neck. "I didn't get you a present."

He was already showered and dressed, sitting on the edge of the bed. "You gave me yourself, or did you forget?"

"Yum, how could I?" She gazed into his green eyes and saw the answering warmth. "I love you."

"Ditto, sunshine." He rose from the bed. "I have to check the security feed and make sure everything is up and running. Then I thought I'd stop by the house and bring us back a breakfast tray."

"Nice." Her feet hit the floor as his arms came around her, pulling her close. He nuzzled her neck, causing her to giggle. She pushed out of his embrace. "I'll use the shower while you're gone so I'm ready to dig into the food. I'm starving."

"Most probably because we didn't eat yesterday." He patted her butt, his hand lingering before it slid to her hip, a delicious sensation. "How about we have breakfast, crawl back in bed for a while, and then wander over to the main house to join in the yuletide festivities. Plus Poppy may want to go over her wedding plans for tomorrow."

“Ooh, I love the going back to bed part.” She laughed when he chased her into the bathroom, pressing her against the wall to kiss her senseless. “Stop that or we’ll never get to eat.”

“Speak for yourself.” His hand travelled north between her thighs. Her breath caught, nerve endings singing. She may have whimpered when he kissed her mouth with a lot of tongue. “I won’t be long. I’m saving you for dessert.”

Fin turned on the jets and stepped into the shower, her body warm and tingling. Yesterday had been beyond her wildest dreams, the two of them tucked inside the guesthouse making love and getting to know each other. What they’d shared had changed her in the best possible way. For the first time she could remember, she felt free to choose and not worry about Poppy. And she chose Ryan. Her mother would be fine. Fin had seen it when she’d lashed out at Ramsey. Poppy was strong and smart. She had to be, to survive the media circus she called life.

And Ryan? Well, he was the answer to Fin’s dreams. Besides becoming her best friend as they talked long into the night, he was a talented lover, valiant protector, and the man who knew her better than she knew herself. Together, they’d build a life together. And what a life it would be.

Turning off the water, she towelled herself dry and slipped on sweats. She brushed her teeth, combed through her wild mop of hair, and sailed out of the bathroom. Scooping the duvet from the floor, she tidied the bed.

“Hello Fiona.”

She shrieked at the sound of the male voice behind her. Not Ryan’s. What was Poppy’s fiancé doing here? Heart hammering, she tucked a strand of hair behind an ear and fought for calm. “Paul? I didn’t hear the doorbell.”

“That’s because I didn’t ring. I have my own set of keys to the castle.” Staggering, he

bumped the bookcase near the door. He looked drunk or stoned or maybe both. “Pretty soon I’ll be part of the family. Ain’t that a kick in your prissy little ass?”

Whatever he was after, Fin knew it couldn’t be good. She choked back revulsion. Gazed at the wildness in his eyes, wondering how she’d escape before he got out of control. “Ryan will be back any second now.”

“Afraid not.” He laughed as if he’d just said something funny. “Not when Poppy’s got him up on a ladder hanging wedding ornaments in the ballroom.”

Fin tried to move past him, making a beeline for the door. Paul shot out an arm, stopping her cold.

“I want the rings. And I want them now.” A hand came out of his leather jacket holding a knife—something curved, sharp, and ugly. “I don’t want to cut you, but I will if I have to.”

“Are you crazy?” Fin did the only thing she could since her pepper spray was empty, which was stall for time. “I don’t know what you’re talking about. But I do know my mother won’t marry you if she finds out about this.”

“Don’t play dumb ‘cuz it ain’t gonna work.” He was on her in a second, dragging her against him. His hands trembled. He stank of booze and marijuana. The knife pressing the side of her neck nicked her skin. “Give me the goddamn Claddagh rings or I’ll slit your fucking throat!”

He held her too tight, an arm slammed against her diaphragm. Fin couldn’t breathe, couldn’t get the words out. “Stop. I’ll t-tell—”

A hand came around and shoved the knife away. Paul released his hold and she collapsed. She rolled on her back. Ryan had him by the front of his jacket, his fist connecting with Paul’s face. Bone cracked, Paul’s nose spurting blood as he slid to the floor. Ryan picked up the knife and stood over him, barely breathing hard. “Fin? Are you okay?”

“Just peachy,” she said, slowly getting to her feet. “But I don’t know what we’re going to tell my mother. Not if we don’t want her texting the world about the rings.”

“We’ll figure something out.” Ryan hauled out his cell phone and hit speed dial. “Drive down to the guesthouse. There’s someone here you’ll want to arrest.”

Fin walked to the main house with Ryan, his arm around her shoulders. He’d finally told her the significance of the rings and why so many people were after them. Millions of dollars were at stake. Another agent had collected Paul from behind the guesthouse, although she hadn’t seen him. Ryan had wanted the arrest far away from prying eyes, especially her mother’s. He’d also said Paul was in for one heck of an interrogation, since so much hinged on finding the other people involved.

Her mother met them at the front door and came down the steps. “I saw a car leaving before. Who was it?”

Ryan came up to her, taking her by the shoulders. “It seems Paul got cold feet and decided not to go through with the wedding. He had one of his buddies pick him up.”

“I’m so sorry, Mom.” Fin took her mother in her arms, expecting a total meltdown. “I don’t know why he changed his mind.”

Poppy looked her in the eyes and patted her cheek. “Sweetie, it’s no great loss. I’ll spin news of the breakup to my media pals waiting inside; tell them I booted Paul out on his drug-saturated ass.”

“But, all the money you’ve spent.” Fin wanted to cry, even if her mother didn’t seem upset at losing her fiancé. “The caterers, the cake, the music...you’ll have to cancel everything.”

“Not if we get married instead.” Ryan winked at both of them, picked Fin up, and swung

her in a circle. He set her down on her feet again, crushing her against him. “There’s no point denying we love each other. Will you marry me?”

“Yes, yes, yes!” She kissed him full on the mouth, joy rushing through her until common sense prevailed. “But it can’t be tomorrow. We don’t have a marriage license.”

“I think I can fix that.” Poppy clapped her hands together like a gleeful schoolgirl. “I’ll call Judge Miller. He was going to perform my ceremony anyway and he’s right here in Nantucket. He can have the town clerk open the office today to issue your license. Then he can waive the waiting period if there is one. It’s perfectly legal.”

“Do you think he’ll do it?” Ryan stared as if her mother had magical powers.

“He will.” Poppy laughed, planting a kiss on Ryan’s cheek. “We’ve been friends since high school, and he owes me. I always take him around, introduce him to celebrities whenever he’s in Los Angeles.”

The rest of the day passed in a whirlwind of activity for Fin. When she called Ronnie and asked her to be her maid of honor, her friend insisted on opening her mother’s store to find the perfect wedding dress. Ilsa, Skye, and Eden agreed to be her bridesmaids, and before Fin knew it, she was neck deep in girlfriends and beautiful dresses at the boutique.

Ryan headed back to Boston for his tux, his groomsmen and best man. His mother, brother and two sisters as well. It was nothing short of a miracle everyone made it back to the house in time to share the evening meal.

Christmas dinner became their engagement party. Wine flowed, the table laden with roast turkey and all the trimmings. Fin loved Ryan’s family and looked forward to having them in her life, especially since she and her mother didn’t have any family of their own.

“I can’t believe how lucky I am.” She sat at the table beside him, surrounded by the

people she cared most about in the world. “I’ve never been so happy.”

“Hold that thought, because I have something to tell you.” He kissed her lips, warm and inviting. “Besides the fact I love you to distraction.”

“What is it?” She sensed his unease and knew this was serious. “You can tell me anything.”

He moved his chair back from the table and took her hand. “Come into the library with me.”

Fin entered the room and stopped dead. Her financial backer stood at the bank of windows, looking out at the snow-covered lawn. He was a tall man with regal bearing, his suit perfectly proportioned to his wide shoulders. Turning toward her, he appeared nervous and off-kilter, his hand shaking on the handle of his cane. Fin felt her heart constrict in her chest. “Thomas? What’s wrong? I tried calling you earlier. I wanted you to attend my wedding.”

Ryan eased her forward until they stood before him.

“Fin.” Thomas reached for her hand and moved to the couch. “Please, come sit with me.”

She did, Ryan sitting on the other side of her. “Thomas has something to tell you, sweetheart. It can’t wait any longer since we’ll be married tomorrow. I don’t want to have any secrets between us.”

She focused her attention on the older man, wondering what had upset him so much. “Have you decided not to back my restaurant after all?”

“No, there’s no chance of that.” Thomas inhaled sharply as he loosened his tie. “I planned to wait before talking to you, but Ryan insisted. I don’t know how else to say this, so forgive an old man for making a total ass of himself. I-I’m your father, Fin. I’m the son of a bitch who had an affair with your mother and never darkened your doorstep all these years.”

“Oh. My. God.” She couldn’t believe it. She’d read the newspaper articles she’d found in Poppy’s desk. Her father had been an IRA terrorist, supposedly killed in a bomb blast. “I thought you were dead. Poppy raised me by herself!”

“I know, and I deeply regret it. I should have been there for you.” Thomas had tears in his eyes, she could see them. “I was undercover for the CIA back then and almost died in an explosion. When I recovered, I had to stay away or risk placing you and Poppy in danger.”

“Because of the rings,” Ryan added. “The IRA was desperate to get hold of them, decipher the symbols on the bands in order to find their money.” He crossed to the bar to pour them drinks. “Thomas had to disappear for a long time.”

Fin was incredulous, didn’t know what to say. But her father was wrong about one thing. He hadn’t deserted her. “Thomas, you followed me all over Europe after I graduated from chef’s school. You introduced me around and got me internships in the finest restaurants. It’s because of you I’m able to open a five-star restaurant of my own. You *were* there for me.”

“Thank you for saying that.” Even so, she could see he blamed himself for her sometimes difficult childhood. And yes, maybe she should be angry he hadn’t been around when she’d needed someone to talk to. But he’d done his best from afar, and that counted.

“Thomas sent me to protect you as soon as your mother began tweeting about the rings.” Ryan handed her a glass of wine. “And there’s more. My father was Thomas’s CIA partner, also in Belfast. He died in the bomb blast and was labelled a traitor by our government when the money disappeared. They believed he’d stolen it. I need the rings to clear his name, Fin.”

“I understand.” And she did, but it was too much to wrap her mind around. First things first, the rest could come later. She levelled a gaze at Ryan. “But if you really love me, you’ll put this on hold until after our wedding.”

“Consider it done.”

She nodded. “And Thomas, I expect you to be there.”

The older man smiled, clearly relieved she had chosen to include him. “Actually, Ryan’s asked me to be his best man.”

Ryan danced with his new bride under the mistletoe hanging from the ballroom ceiling. She was the most beautiful woman he’d ever seen. Ivory satin clung to her curves as her spike heels tapped out the merengue rhythm. Her mane of sable hair swung to the beat, blue eyes laughing as he claimed her delicious mouth. They circled the dance floor, her scent swirling, a flash of leg blasting his desire into the red zone. He yanked it back, holding onto his sanity by a tenuous thread. Another few hours and he would sate his passion. And hers. Especially hers. Teach her other ways a man could love a woman besides the traditional.

She belonged to him now. She was his to honor with his body and soul. He saw the trust in her eyes when she looked at him. A trust so new and fragile it scared him to death. And yet he cherished it, would build on it, would die before he’d let her down. Emotion rose, tightening its hold. He’d be lost without her.

The band changed up the tempo. Thomas tapped his shoulder when a waltz began to play. “You wouldn’t refuse an old man a dance with his daughter, would you?”

Ryan hesitated. Fin pushed against his chest, moving into her father’s arms as if it was the most natural thing in the world. He relaxed, noticed his friend’s cane hooked behind his chair at the table. Could only imagine how important this dance must be for Thomas to attempt a step without it. His leg had been badly damaged in the bomb blast. The simple act of walking was painful.

“Do you think you could partner with your mother-in-law now that Fiona’s found herself a distinguished older gentleman?” Poppy stood at his elbow, looking radiant in shimmering yellow silk. “It’s strange, but Thomas looks so familiar. It’s as if I’ve met him before.”

Ryan didn’t want to go down that road and neither did Thomas. Not until the rings were in their possession. Only God knew what would happen if Poppy recognized the father of her child. Although chances were slim, considering they’d only spent one night together. Still, he danced her to the other side of the room and changed the topic. “Thanks for giving us the wedding. You’ve made Fin and I very happy.”

She tipped her chin, the ghost of a smile touching her lips. “I’m the dreamer in our family, Ryan, the one who believed in love at first sight. And yet, I think Fiona is the one who found it.”

“I love her and she loves me.” He dipped Poppy slightly and swung her upright again. “It doesn’t matter how long we’ve known each other.”

The song ended. She stepped away from him, hands dropping at her sides. “Stay true to her, Ryan. Or I’ll be forced to kill you.”

He laughed as she walked away, although he hadn’t missed the steel edge in her voice. Admiration spiked for some crazy reason. Poppy might play at being an empty-headed movie star, but he suspected she was calculated and brilliant beneath the facade. And he wouldn’t bet on Ramsey’s continued good health now she knew he’d abused her daughter. Of course, she might have to stand in line to do any damage.

He glanced up and saw his mother coming toward him, looking elegant in moss-green silk. She’d never looked happier, moving through the room and greeting other guests. He took her aside and told her he was close to clearing his father’s name. “Take your time, Ryan. Enjoy

your life with Fin. That's what's important. If it's meant to be, the rest will fall into place."

He swept her out on the dance floor, admiring her moves as they danced to an old rock 'n' roll number. The song ended and he walked her back to her table, noticing Judge Miller place a proprietary arm along the back of her chair once she was seated. Who knew, maybe his marriage to Fin had sparked a little romance for his mom. God knew she deserved it.

Saying his goodbyes, he looked around for Fin. Ryan frowned. Where was she? She'd been on the dance floor just moments ago. He searched the crowd again. Still no Fin. Okay, something was going on. His gaze settled on a cluster of women off to one side of the room, Fin at their center. Ah, that explained it—the bouquet toss. And Ronnie was the big winner, shrieking with delight.

He touched Fin's elbow. She turned, taking his hand and grinning. "The men are waiting for you to toss the garter."

"They'll be waiting until the cows come home, sunshine, because it's not happening."

Yeah, he refused to do the garter thing, slipping it off her leg and pitching it into a bunch of single guys. No freaking way. First off, he would have to strip her naked at the first feel of her leg in his hands. And second? Nothing worn on her delectable body would ever be handled by another man. That's the way it was. Take it or leave it.

He grabbed Fin around the waist, growling in her ear. "It's time to go."

"Yes it is." She kissed him on the lips. "Just let me see my friends off first."

Tears were shed and promises made for upcoming visits. He bundled Fin into his coat to keep her warm as her girlfriends piled into a limo. Nantucket Memorial Airport was just a few kilometres down the road. The girls would fly from there to make their connecting flights for Hawaii, Texas, New York and Alaska. Fin waved until the town car disappeared from view.

He unlocked the door to the guesthouse, carried her across the threshold, and set her down. Someone had been busy. A fire glowed in the hearth. Champagne chilled in a silver bucket and rose petals adorned the bed. Fin laughed. "I think we've been visited by cupid."

"Your mother?" he asked.

"Or maybe yours." She came into his arms, laying her head against his shoulder. "Could we pop the cork and enjoy a drink in the hot tub? I love watching the stars."

"I love watching you." His lips met hers and she opened for him, taking the kiss deeper. He was about to undress her when he heard a car drive up. He peered out the window and opened the door. "Hold that thought, sunshine."

Thomas crossed to the doorway, a frown riding his brow. He nodded to both of them. "I wouldn't be here if it wasn't important."

"What's going on?" Fin pulled him inside, sitting him down by the fire. "Tell us what's happened."

"It's Poppy." Undoing his overcoat, Thomas accepted the glass of scotch she handed him. "I made an error in judgment by keeping her out of the loop about the rings."

Ryan's gut tightened. This couldn't be good. "What are you talking about?"

"I overheard her talking to your mother." Thomas sighed, shaking his head. "It seems she put little parting gifts into the maid of honor's and bridesmaids' luggage."

"Well, what are they?" Fin looked perplexed. "Knowing Poppy, it could be anything from jewellery to offering them one of her timeshares for a holiday."

"Why don't you check for yourself, Fin?" Thomas tipped his glass, downing the scotch in one swallow. "Apparently, she also left a little something for you."

Fin gazed around the room and noticed a small gift box on the fireplace mantel. She

pulled at the ribbon and tore at the paper. Ryan stood at her shoulder. Nestled inside was a Claddagh ring. “My God, she found them. I hid them where I used to hide my childhood treasures, inside my dollhouse. She must have known where to look.”

“And, unfortunately, Poppy didn’t know their significance.” Thomas added, “I’m guessing your friends have the other four.”

“I’ll call their cell phones.” Fin handed her father the jewellery box, found her phone and flipped through the address book. “They should check for messages as soon as they land.”

“Honey, don’t say anything to alarm them.” Ryan shot her a smile, the kind that never reached his eyes. Hell, the women were carrying pieces of a puzzle that could get them all killed. “Just ask them to call you as soon as they land.”

“I wish we knew who’s after the money. Paul still isn’t saying much. He keeps shouting for his lawyer.” Thomas moved to the scotch bottle to pour himself another round. “There were a lot of people still at the reception when Poppy and your mother were talking, Ryan. Anyone could have overheard them.”

“I’ll contact the bureau and have agents meet the flights when they land.” He made the call, providing the flight numbers Fin gave him before disconnecting.

“Do you think my friends are in danger?” Fin wrung her hands, clearly rattled, her gaze locked with his. “Tell me the truth.”

Crossing the room, Ryan gathered her against him. He wanted to lie, but God help him, he couldn’t. “Maybe. It’s also possible no one heard Poppy and my mom talking. Either way, I doubt whoever is after the rings knows where your friends live.”

“Well, at least they didn’t get this one. And they can’t break the code without it.” Thomas left his drink on the table, pocketed the ring, and opened the door. Ryan watched him limp off

the front step and ease behind the wheel of his car. He turned the key in the ignition and powered out of the drive.

Arms wrapped around his neck, Fin rose on her tiptoes to kiss his cheek. She curved into him, murmuring against his throat. "I'm so happy for us, and so afraid for my friends."

He sat on the couch and pulled her into his lap. Calmness came over him, his sixth sense telling him the journey of the Claddagh rings wasn't over. Whatever was meant to be would happen no matter what they did. The best he could do was put a positive spin on it. "The rings brought us together, Fin. We'd never have found each other without them. Try to hold onto that."

"You're right." She snuggled deeper into his embrace. "They were lucky for us in a way, weren't they?"

"They were." Ryan slowly undressed her. Scooping her up, he carried her to the hot tub. Stripped off his clothes and slid in beside her. He gazed overhead. Stars winked above them, one of them burning brighter than the others.

"I'm wishing on that one." Fin pointed to it and smiled. "It looks magical."

"*You're* magical." Ryan cuddled her against him, nipping an ear.

He thanked God for this moment, this woman, and whatever the future held for them. With Fin by his side, they might be in for a wild ride, but they would handle the highs and lows together.

A word about the author...

Kallie Lane writes suspenseful romantic fiction with a touch of humor to lighten the dark moments. She excels at hard hitting action and complex relationships that end with the heroine and hero building a life together.

Kallie loves to write stories with realistic characters, intricate plots, and happy endings. And while she loves doing extensive research, many of the locations and perils in her stories stem from personal experience.

Kallie lives in Canada and loves winter in the cool blue North. Ever the optimist, she claims a hot toddy by the fire can work wonders after dragging oneself through snowdrifts and -30°C temperatures. It's also the perfect setting for hatching romantic suspense novels.

To learn more about Kallie, visit her website at <http://www.kallielane.com/> or follow her on Facebook at <http://www.facebook.com/KallieLaneAuthor> or Twitter at <https://twitter.com/KallieLane>.

Also by Kallie Lane

The Shadow Soldier Series:

Deadly Abandon

Dark Abandon

Reckless Abandon

Lethal Abandon

The Black Force Renegades Series:

Silent Deceit

Silent Justice