One-Night Love-Child

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McAllister A.

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It was one night as hot and passionate as only young love can be. But they left it at that. Flynn had the world to conquer–alone. Only three months later, Sara's life changed: she discovered she was expecting Flynn's baby. Now Flynn has taken his rightful place as the Irish Earl of Dunmorey.But once he discovers that he also has an heir, his strategy is simple: claim his love child. He wants his son, and he wants Sara, too. . . as his bride.

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Anne McAllister
ONE-NIGHT LOVE CHILD

TORONTO • NEW YORK • LONDON
AMSTERDAM • PARIS • SYDNEY • HAMBURG STOCKHOLM • ATHENS • TOKYO • MILAN • MADRID PRAGUE • WARSAW • BUDAPEST • AUCKLAND

For Anne Gracie who kept my head above water
For Nancy, Cathy and Steve
who shared the journey
And for Kimberley Young, whose editorial
comments made this a better book

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CHAPTER ONE

THE letter arrived out of the blue.

"I don't know what it is, my lord." Mrs. Upham sniffed, then dangled the smudged and tattered pale-blue envelope from between two fingers with clear disapproval. "It's very…dirty."

She had put the rest of the post on Flynn's desk in neat sorted stacks as she always did. Estate business—the biggest stack. Fan mail and book business—the midsize stack. Personal letters from his mother or brother—neither of whom seemed to believe in phones or e-mail—in the third.

All very tidy and organized—as if she could do the same to Flynn's life.

Good luck, he thought.

As his life currently consisted of Dunmorey, a dank and crumbling five-hundred-odd-year-old castle full of portraits of disapproving ancestors who looked down their noses at Flynn's efforts to literally keep a roof over their heads, its attendant farms, lands and tenants, as well as his horse-mad brother, Dev, who had great plans for reviving the Dunmorey stud but no money to accomplish it, and his mother, whose mantra since his father's death seven months ago had been, "We need to find you a bride," Flynn didn't think Mrs. Upham was likely to find any joy in it at all.

The only joy he could give her would be to tell her to throw it out.

His father certainly would have.

The late eighth earl of Dunmorey had no patience for anything that wasn't proper and traditional. He had once thrown out a letter Flynn had scrawled on a piece of a paper bag from a war zone where he'd been working on a story.

"If you can't be bothered to write a proper letter, I can't be bothered to read it," his father had informed him later.

It would have been nice if the late earl had stopped saying things like that since he was dead. But the fact was, Flynn spent most days trying to deal with all of Dunmorey's demands while inside his head he heard the virtually unceasing drone of the dead eighth earl saying, "I knew you couldn't do it."

Save the castle, he meant. Be a good earl, he meant. Be dutiful and responsible and Measure Up, he meant.

If you can.

The implication had always been that Flynn couldn't.

"My lord?" Mrs. Upham persisted.

His jaw tight, Flynn glanced up. He needed to run these figures again, to see if somehow—this time—there was enough to put the new roof on and still get the stables in order by the time Dev brought his new stallion home from Dubai.

There wouldn't be.

He had more chance of hitting the New York Times bestseller list with his new book coming out in the States next month. At least he had a talent for hard-hitting interviews, for insightful stories, for the written word.

It was what he'd done—what he'd been good at—before the earldom had changed his life.

But he was not going to give up on Dunmorey, even though the battle to keep the grim old Irish castle from crumbling to bits under his watch was fierce. It was his obligation, not his joy. And frankly, as a younger son, he had never expected to have to do it.

But like everything else in his life these days, he'd inherited while he was making other plans.

His late father would have said it served him right.

And maybe it did.

It wasn't what he would have chosen, but by God, he was determined to show the old man—dead though he was—that he could do it right.

"Everything you need to deal with is here, my lord," Mrs. Upham said. "I'll just throw this nasty old thing out, then, shall I?"

Flynn grunted and started again at the top of the column.

"May I bring you a cup of tea, my lord? Your father always liked a cup of tea with his post."

Flynn ground his teeth. "No, thank you, Mrs. Upham. I'm fine on my own."

He had learned rather quickly that while in Mrs. Upham's eyes, he would never be his father—and thank God for that, Flynn thought—he did have his own version of the Voice of Authority.

Whenever he used it, Mrs. Upham got the point.

"Very good, my lord." She nodded and backed out of the room. He might as well have been the king of England.

He did the figures again. But they still didn't give him the total he wanted. He sighed and slumped back in his chair, rubbed his eyes and flexed his shoulders. He had an appointment with a contractor at the stables in an hour to see what else needed to be done before Dev brought the stallion home in a fortnight.

As the horse was a proven winner and thus a money-making proposition, the stables were an absolute priority. Stud fees and book royalties didn't seem like enough to keep Dunmorey afloat.

The castle had been in the family for more than three hundred years. It had seen better times, and, hard though it was to believe, it had seen worse times as well. To Flynn it was the physical embodiment of the family motto: Eireoidh Linn, which he knew from his Irish schooldays meant, roughly, We Will Succeed Despite Adversity.

His father had always told English-speaking guests it meant, We Will Survive!

So far they had; though since the castle was no longer entailed, it could be sold.

They hadn't had to sell it yet. And Flynn was damned if he was going to be the one to lose the fight.

But the post brought more renovation estimates that were depressingly large, and bills that were equally so. They'd borrowed against the castle to get the money to get the stud up and running. When it was, things would be better. If his book did well, they would certainly improve. In the meantime…

Flynn shoved back his chair and got up to prowl the room, cracking his knuckles. It was on his return to the desk that his eyes were drawn to the spot of blue paper in the bottom of the bin.

It was every bit as dirty and crumpled and unappetizing as Mrs. Upham had said. And yet it intrigued him.

It wasn't another bill or another set of estimates. It wasn't a circular about a farm auction or an invitation to Lord and Lady So-and-So's house party. It wasn't stuffy. It wasn't embossed.

And it was, he could see, addressed half a dozen times over, to him. A call from his old life.

"Junk," his father would have said, dismissing it.

But he had never been his father, as they all well knew.

Flynn reached down and fished it out. The original address had been sent to him in care of Incite magazine in New York City.

His brows lifted at that. Once upon a time he'd done entertainment personality pieces and feature articles for them. But he hadn't written articles for Incite in years. Not since he'd covered what had been dubbed "The Great Montana Cowboy Auction" in tiny Elmer, Montana, six years before.

His father had always called those articles "fluff" and said it was a pity Flynn hadn't been good enough to write real news about something that mattered.

In fact, he had been. And the succession of addresses crossed out on the envelope were pretty much a record of where he had proved exactly that: Africa, the East Indies, west central Asia, South America, the Middle East.

One hot spot after another, each one hotter than the last.

Now he stared at the envelope, caught up in a flickering cascade of memories—of excitement, of challenge, of life.

He studied again the firm but neat feminine handwriting beneath the others. He didn't recognize it. He was amazed that the letter had caught up with him at all. It must have been a labor of love or sheer stubborn perseverance on the part of the world's post offices. The single U.S. domestic postage stamp had first been canceled in November five years before.

Five years?

Five years ago last November Flynn had been in the middle of a South American jungle, writing a "real news story" on twenty-first-century intertribal warfare—by experiencing it firsthand.

"You sure you want to do this?" His editor in London had been skeptical when Flynn had announced he was going. "You've already been shot once this year. This time you could get yourself killed."

That had been the general idea at the time.

His older brother, Will—"the heir," his father had always called him—had died just months before. And depending how you looked at it—certainly if you looked at it the way the earl did—Will's death had been Flynn's fault.

"He was going to the airport to meet you!" the earl had railed, feeling only his own pain, never even acknowledging Flynn's. "You're the one who had to come home to recover! You're the one who got shot!"

But not the one who'd died.

That had been Will—steady, sensible, responsible Will who had stopped on the way to the airport to help a motorist change a flat tire and got hit by a passing car.

In a matter of an instant, the world changed—Will was gone and Flynn had become "the heir" in his place.

It was hard to say who was more dismayed—Flynn or his father.

Certainly when he'd recovered from his gunshot wound received pursuing one of those "real news stories that mattered"—the one he'd come home to recuperate from when Will had been killed—no one, least of all his father, had objected when he'd left for the intertribal warfare in South America.

No one had objected when he'd pursued increasingly dangerous assignments after that.

But no matter how dangerous they were, no matter that he got shot again, more than once, Flynn hadn't died. He'd still been the heir when his father had dropped over from a heart attack last July.

Now he was the earl. He wasn't traveling the world anymore. He was stuck at Dunmorey Castle.

And a five-year-old letter that had chased him around the world and finally tracked him down seemed far less demanding—and much more appealing—than thinking about any of that.

Flynn slit it open. Inside was a single sheet of plain white paper. He took it out and unfolded it. The letter was brief.

Flynn. This is the third letter I've written you. Don't worry, I won't be writing any more. I don't expect anything from you. I want nothing. I just thought you had a right to know.

The baby was born this morning just after eight. He was seven pounds eleven ounces. Strong and healthy. I'm naming him after my father. Of course I'm keeping him. Sara.

Flynn stared at the words, tried to understand them, put them in a context where they would make sense.

Expect…nothing…right to know…baby.

Sara.

The paper trembled in his fingers. His heart kicked over in his chest. He started again—this time with the signature: Sara.

An image of intense brown eyes, flawless ivory skin and short-cropped dark hair flickered through his mind. A vision of smooth golden skin and the taste of lips that spoke of cinnamon and spice teased his thoughts.

Sara McMaster.

Dazzling delightful Sara from Montana.

Good God.

He stared at the letter as its meaning became clear.

Sara had been pregnant. Sara had had a baby.

A boy…

His son.

It was Valentine's Day.

Sara knew this because last night she had helped her five-year-old son, Liam, print his name laboriously on twenty-one Valentine cards complete with cartoon-art mutant creatures saying, "Be Mine" and "I'm 4 U."

She knew it because together they had covered a shoe box with white paper and red hearts to be his own "mailbox" at kindergarten and because she had baked cupcakes—chocolate ones with chocolate frosting and red and white candy hearts on them—as right before he went to bed Liam remembered he had volunteered to bring the cupcakes for the class party today.

And she knew because—for the first time since Liam was born—she actually had a date.

Adam Benally had asked her to dinner. He was the foreman out at Lyle Dunlop's place. He had come to the valley a few months ago from Arizona. A widower with a past he didn't often talk about, he was at least candid about "trying to outrun his demons." He'd brought the ranch accounting work in for Sara, and that was how they'd got to know each other.

No stranger to demons herself, Sara thought she and Adam might have a lot in common. He at least was getting past his demons. It was about time she got past hers.

"You can't be a recluse forever," her mother, Polly, had told her more than once. "Just because you had one bad experience…"

Sara let her mother talk because that's what Polly did. A lot. And her mother was probably right about the recluse part. It was the "bad experience" part that was the sticking point.

It hadn't been bad. At least not while it was going on. While it was going on it had been the most amazing three days of her life. And then…

Nothing.

That was the bad part. That was the part that made her gut clench every time she thought about it. The part that spooked her, that made her hesitant to ever open up to another man, to ever try again.

But finally she'd said yes. She'd made up her mind to try again with Adam. A dinner date. A first step.

"About time," Polly had said when Sara told her the plan. "I'm glad. You need to banish some ghosts."

No. Just one.

One Sara saw in miniature—right down to the tousled black hair and jade-green eyes—every time she looked at her son.

She shoved the thought away ruthlessly. Now was not the time to be thinking about that. About him.

Liam might be a reminder, but his father was past. Ordinarily she went whole days without thinking of him at all. It was just today—because it was Valentine's Day, because she'd accepted Adam's invitation, determined to kill two memories with one night out—that he kept plaguing her thoughts.

"Don't," she told herself out loud. The past was over. She'd rehashed it often to kill it from over scrutiny. It had done no good. Now she needed to concentrate on the future—on Adam.

What would Adam expect? She paced the kitchen, made tea, thought about what to wear, how to be charming and make conversation. Dating was like speaking a foreign language she had no practice in. It was something she'd done very little of before—

No! Damn it. There she went again!

Determinedly she carried her mug of tea to the table and laid out files so she could work. If she could get the hardware store accounts finished before Liam got home from school, then she could take a break, maybe go out and build a snowman with him, have a snowball fight. Do something to distract herself.

Liam was going to spend the night at her aunt Celie's who lived up the street with her husband, Jace, and their kids.

"Why all night?" she'd demanded when Celie had offered. "We're only going to dinner. I'm not spending the night with him!"

"Well, you might want to invite him in after," Celie said innocently. "For a cup of coffee," she added with a smile. It wasn't what she meant.

Sara knew it as well as she knew that she wasn't up for anything beyond dinner. Not now. Not yet.

How on earth could she have let six years go by without a single date?

Well, really, she rationalized, when had she had time?

She'd spent the first three years after Liam's birth finishing a degree in accounting, then setting up in business. Between her son and her schooling and the jobs she'd taken to make ends meet, she'd had no time to meet eligible men.

Not that she'd wanted to.

Once burned, twice shy and all that. And while she supposed there was wisdom in the notion of getting right back on a horse once you'd been thrown, there was also wisdom in being a damn sight more cautious the second time around.

She'd been too reckless the first time. This time she was taking it slow and easy and that meant dinner, perhaps a quick peck on the lips. Yes, she could do that.

But first she had to get to work.

One of the pluses of her job as an independent certified public accountant was that she could set her own hours and work from home. That made it easier to be home when Liam was. The downside, of course, was that it was easy to get distracted—like today. There was no boss to crack the whip, to make demands. It was more tempting to think about checking her closet to see what she wanted to wear or to put in a load of laundry, make a cup of tea and talk to Sid the cat when she really needed to focus on work.

So she started again, made herself settle down at the kitchen table, which was also her desk, and spread out the accounts from the hardware store. Adding columns of figures required that she pay close attention and didn't allow her mind to wander, to anticipate, to worry.

A sudden loud knock on the front door made her jump. She slopped tea all over her ledger sheet. "Damn!"

She went to the sink and grabbed the dishrag, mopping up the spill, cursing the delivery man, who was the only one who ever came to the front door. He left her office supplies when she ordered them. But she didn't remember—

Bang, bang, bang!

Not the delivery man, then. He only knocked once, then, having awakened the dead, he always jumped back into his delivery truck and drove away. He never knocked twice.

Bang! Bang! Bang!

Let alone a third time.

"Hold your horses," she shouted. "I'm coming!"

She stalked to the door and jerked it open—to the ghost of Valentine's past.

Oh, God.

She was hallucinating. Panicking at the notion of dating again, she'd conjured him up out of the recesses of her mind.

And damn her mind for making him larger than life and more appealing than ever. Tall, rangy and narrow-hipped, but with shoulders even broader than she remembered. And just for reality's sake, her brain had even dusted his midnight hair with snowflakes. They should have softened his appearance, made him seem gentler. They didn't. He looked as pantherish and deadly as ever.

"Sara." His beautiful mouth tipped in a devastatingly appealing lopsided grin.

Sara knew that grin. Remembered it all too well. Had kissed the lips that wore it. Had tasted his laughter, his words, his groans, his passion.

Her face burned. Her whole body seemed suddenly consumed by a heat she'd tried to forget. She glanced at her hands knotting together, astonished that they didn't have steam coming off them, the memory of him was so powerful.

"Speechless, a stór?" His rough baritone with the light Irish inflection made the tiny hairs at the back of her neck prickle. It felt as if a ghost had run a finger down the length of her spine.

"Go away," she said fiercely, closing her eyes, resisting the hallucination, the memories—the man. It was agreeing to go out with Adam that had done this to her. It had tripped a trigger of memories she'd bottled up, stored away, refused to take out and look at ever again.

She screwed up her eyes and shut them tight. Counted to ten. Opened them.

And felt her stomach plummet to her toes at the sight of him still standing there.

He wore jeans, a black sweater and a dark-green down jacket. He hadn't shaved in a day or two. His cheeks and jaw were stubbled. His eyes were bloodshot. But his impossibly long lashes blinked away snowflakes as he watched her with amusement. And when he grinned a little more at her befuddlement, she saw that he had chipped a tooth. She didn't think she would have hallucinated the chipped tooth.

So he was real. He was everything she remembered.

And worse.

Six years ago Sara had dreamed of this moment. Had held on to the hope that he would come back to Elmer, to her. For nine months she had planned and hoped and prayed. And he'd never come. Had never called. Had never written.

And now—out of the blue—he was here.

Sara's heart turned over, and at the same time, she felt the walls slam down. A fury of pain so fierce engulfed her that she had to swallow and swallow again before she could find her voice.

And when at last she did, she prayed it sounded as flat and disinterested as she wanted to be as she acknowledged him. "Flynn."

Flynn Murray. The man who had taken her love, given her a child and left her without a backwards glance.

It had been her fault. She knew that. He'd never promised to stay. Had never promised anything—except that he would hurt her.

And by God, he'd done that.

At the time, of course, she hadn't believed he could. She'd been nineteen, naive, foolish and in love beyond anything she'd ever dreamed possible. She'd met Flynn unexpectedly when he'd come to their small town to cover the human-interest angle of a celebrity cowboy auction. It had been strange, serendipitous, and almost like finding the other half of herself.

She'd always been practical, sensible, driven. She'd had goals since she was old enough to spell the word. Meeting and falling in love with Flynn had turned them upside down. He'd come to her tiny town and changed her world.

Flynn had made her want things she'd never dreamed of wanting—and for a few days or weeks she'd believed she could have them.

She knew better now.

She knew about hurt and pain and getting past them. She knew she wasn't letting it happen again. Ever.

"You look beautiful," he told her. "Even more beautiful than I remember."

Sara's jaw tightened. "You look older," she said flatly.

And harder. The lines and angles of his face were sharper, his features almost gaunt. He was still handsome, of course. Perhaps even more handsome, in a rough-edged harsher way. At twenty-six Flynn Murray had been all smooth easy smiles, pantherish grace and spontaneous Irish charm. At thirty-two he looked rugged and ragged and battle weary, like a man come home from war.

There were surprising flecks of gray at his temples. And a scar creased his temple and disappeared into salt-and-pepper hair.

Had some jealous boyfriend attacked him when Flynn had charmed a local girl?

Sara wouldn't have been surprised. Living a fast-lane life must be tougher than she'd ever imagined. How hard it must be, Sara thought mockingly, tracking celebrities all over the globe.

Flynn's mouth tipped ruefully and he shrugged. "You know what they say—it's not the years, it's the miles."

"And you've gone quite a few, I'm sure," Sara said acidly. And he could keep right on going. She didn't need him here now. Didn't need him upsetting her life, her hopes, her son.

Oh, God, Liam. A shaft of panic shot through her. He couldn't have ignored Liam for five years just to turn up now, could he?

"What are you doing here?" she demanded.

And as if he could read her mind as well as disrupt her life in every other way imaginable, Flynn said, "I want to meet my son."

CHAPTER TWO

SARA'S jaw set. She steeled herself against his words, his intent and, mostly, against the green magic of his eyes.

"You're a little late," she said through her teeth. About five and a half years.

"I am." He nodded gravely. "I just found out."

Just found out? She blinked her disbelief. "Yeah, right." There wasn't enough sarcasm in the universe to flavor her response.

But Flynn didn't seem to notice. He was rummaging inside his jacket, pulling a small manila business envelope out of an inner pocket. He opened the envelope and extracted a dirty creased faded blue one. Wordlessly he held it out to her.

Sara stared at it. Then, slowly, she reached out and took it from him with nerveless fingers.

The paper looked as if it had been trampled by a herd of buffalo. She turned it over and saw at least half a dozen addresses printed and scrawled and scratched out, one on top of another. One word caught her eye: Ireland.

That was a surprise. Six years ago he'd been delighted to be out of the land of his birth.

"Nothing for me there," he'd said firmly.

Like her ancestors 150 years ago, she'd supposed. Her dad had often told handed-down stories about their own family's desperate need to leave and find a better future for themselves. Though Flynn had never said it, she had no trouble believing it had been true of him, too.

Now, curious about his change of heart, she glanced from the envelope to the man. But his green eyes bored into hers so intently that her own skated away at once back to the envelope.

It had originally been a pretty robin's-egg blue, part of a set with her initials on it that her grandmother had given her at high school graduation. Sara hadn't had the occasion to write many letters. She still had some sheets of it left.

But this letter she remembered very well.

She had written it only hours after Liam was born. She had known that there was little chance Liam's father would heed it. He hadn't paid any attention to her previous two letters, not the first one telling him she was pregnant, not the later one telling him again in case he hadn't got the first one.

He'd never replied.

She'd understood—he wasn't interested.

But still she'd felt the need to write one last time after Liam's birth. She'd given him one last chance—had dared to hope that news of a son might bring him around. She wasn't proud. Or she hadn't been then.

Now she was. And she was equally determined. He wasn't going to hurt her again.

"I didn't know, Sara," he repeated. He met her gaze squarely.

"I wrote you," she insisted. "Before this—" she rattled the envelope in her hand "—I wrote. Twice."

"I didn't get them. I was…moving around. A lot. I wasn't writing for Incite anymore. They sent it on. So did others. It kept following, apparently. But I didn't get it. Not until last week. Then I got it—and here I am."

Sara opened her mouth, then closed it again. After all, what was there to say? He'd come because he'd discovered his son. It still had nothing to do with her.

It shouldn't hurt after all this time. She'd known, hadn't she, that she didn't matter to him the way he'd mattered to her. But hearing the words still had the power to cut deep.

But she was damned if she was going to show him her pain. She crossed her arms over her chest. "So? Should I applaud? Do you want a medal?"

He looked startled, as if he hadn't expected belligerence. Had he thought she'd fall into his lap with gratitude, for heaven's sake?

"I don't want anything," he said gruffly, "except the chance to get to know my son. And do whatever you need."

"Go away?" Sara suggested because that was definitely what she needed.

Flynn's scowl deepened. "What? Why?"

"Because we don't need you."

But even as she said it, she knew it was only half-true. She didn't need him. But Liam thought he did.

"Where's my dad?" he'd been asking her for the past year.

If he wasn't dead, why didn't he come visit? Even divorced dads came to visit, he told her with the knowledge of a worldly kindergartner. Darcy Morrow's dad came to see her every other weekend.

"He can't," Sara said. "If he could, he would." It wasn't precisely a lie. Even though she'd believed Flynn had deliberately turned his back on them, she knew telling Liam that would be absolutely wrong. It wouldn't be wrong to say his father would come if he could. He simply couldn't —for whatever unknown reason. End of story.

Fortunately, Liam hadn't asked why. But when told at school that Thanksgiving was a family holiday, he'd wondered again why his dad wasn't there. And then he'd said, "Maybe he'll come at Christmas!"

"Don't get your hopes up," Sara had cautioned. But telling Liam that was like telling the sun not to rise.

"I'll take care of it," he'd said, and when they went to the mall in Bozeman, mortified Sara by marching right up to Santa, telling him that for Christmas he wanted his father to come home.

Sara had been prepared for tears on Christmas morning when no father appeared. But Liam had been philosophical.

"I didn't get my horse at Grandma and Grandpa's right away, either," he'd said. "I had to wait till spring."

Because, of course, the colt hadn't been born till spring. And now? Sara could just imagine what Liam would say when he came home this afternoon.

"He should have a father," Flynn said now. "A father who loves him."

There was something in his voice that made Sara look up. But he didn't say anything else.

"He's fine," she insisted. His life might not be perfect, but whose was? "You don't need to do this."

"I do," he said flatly.

"He's not here."

"I'll wait." He looked at her expectantly. She didn't move.

He cocked his head and studied her with a look on his face that she remembered all too well. A gentle, teasing, laughing look. "You're not afraid of me…are you, Sara?"

"Of course I'm not afraid of you," she snapped. "I'm just…surprised. I assumed you didn't care."

The smile vanished. The look he gave her was deadly serious. "I care. I mean it, Sara. I would have been here from the first if I'd known."

She didn't know whether to believe him or not. She did know she wasn't going to be able to shut the door on him. Not yet. She was going to have to let him in, let him wait for Liam, meet his son.

And then?

He was hardly going to be much of a father if he was in Ireland. But at least Liam would know he had one who cared.

But first she would need to set some ground rules. So, reluctantly, she stepped back and held the door open. "I suppose you might as well come in."

"And here was I, thinking you'd never ask." He flashed a grin, the one that said he knew he'd get his way.

Sara steeled herself against it—and against the blatant Irish charm. She stepped back to let him pass—and to make sure not even his sleeve brushed hers as he came in.

But as he passed through the doorway, he stopped and turned towards her. And he was so close that she stared right at the pulse beat in his throat, so close that it wasn't his sleeve, but the chest of his jacket that brushed against the tips of her breasts, so close that when she drew in a sharp breath, she caught a whiff of that heady scent of woods and sea that she remembered as purely and essentially Flynn. Her back was against the wall.

"Did you miss me, Sara?" he murmured.

And Sara shook her head fiercely. "Not a bit."

"No?" His mouth quirked as if he heard the truth inside her lie. "Well, I've missed you," he said roughly. "I didn't realize how much until right now."

And then quite deliberately he bent his head and set his lips to hers.

Flynn Murray had always known how to kiss. He had kissed her senseless time and time again. She'd tried to forget—or at the very least tried to assure herself that it was only her youthful inexperience with kissing that had made her body melt and her knees buckle.

She'd told herself it would never happen again.

She'd lied. And this kiss was every bit as bad—and as marvelous—as she had feared.

It was a hungry kiss, a kiss determined to prove how much he'd missed her. And it was—damn it all—mightily persuasive. It tasted, it teased, it possessed.

It promised. It promised moments of heaven, as Sara well knew. But she wasn't totally inexperienced now. She knew it also promised years in the aching loneliness of hell.

She lifted her hands to press against his chest, to push him away, and found her hands trapped there, clutching at his jacket, hanging on for dear life as every memory she'd tried so hard to forget came crashing back, sweeping her along, making her need, making her ache, making her want.

Exactly as she had needed and ached and wanted before. Only, then she'd believed he felt the same.

Now she didn't. Couldn't. Not and preserve her sanity. Not if she didn't want to be destroyed again.

Flynn had come, yes. But he'd come because of his son—not because of her.

And despite his kiss—the sweetness, the passion, the promise—and because of his kiss—its ability to undermine her reason, her common sense, her need for self-preservation—she had to remember that.

She'd loved him six years ago, and he had left her.

He'd made no promises, but she'd trusted. She'd given him her heart and her soul and her body. He had known her on a level no one else ever had. She'd believed he loved her, too. She'd believed he'd come back.

He never had.

Not until today. Not until he'd found out about Liam.

He wanted his son. Not her.

Finally she managed to flatten her hands against his chest and give a hard, furious shove.

He stumbled backwards awkwardly and, to her amazement, fell against the nearest chair. "Damn it!"

But it wasn't her he directed the words at. He muttered them to himself as he staggered, then winced and shifted his weight onto his left leg. Sara didn't know which stunned her more—the kiss or the fact that he was clearly favoring one leg and moving with none of his customary pantherlike grace.

Still trembling from the kiss, she asked, "What happened?"

"I got shot." The words were gruff and dismissive.

She felt as if they'd gone straight to her heart. "Shot?" She gaped, then told herself it probably served him right. Maybe he'd played fast and loose, loved and left a woman who got angrier even than she had. "Take advantage of one too many women?" she asked. Given the fast-lane celebrities he wrote about, it seemed all too likely.

"Assassin."

"What?"

"He wasn't trying to kill me." He shrugged. "I was in his way."

Sara swallowed, then shook her head. "I don't understand." She wasn't sure she wanted to, but it was better to be distracted by assassins than kisses. She shut the door and stepped around him into the room.

"I was in Africa." He mentioned a small unstable country she'd barely heard of. It made Sara blink because there certainly weren't any celebrities there. "He was trying for the prime minister. He missed. At least he missed the prime minister. Gave me a little souvenir to remember him by." His mouth twisted in a wry smile.

None of it made sense to Sara.

The Flynn she'd known went to New York and Hollywood and Cannes, not Africa. And even if he had gone there, prime ministers were hardly the sorts of celebrities he wrote about. He wrote features about starlets and rock stars, actors like her stepdad and, at a stretch, soccer stars and tennis pros.

But she didn't have a chance to ask anything else.

She hadn't heard the back door open, hadn't heard the footsteps pound across the kitchen floor, hadn't heard anything until the door into the living room and dining room flew open.

And Liam burst into the room.

CHAPTER THREE

DEAR God, the boy was Will all over again.

And the sight of him would have sent Flynn reeling if kissing Sara hadn't already done so.

She'd given him a shove, of course, and, with his bad leg, that had been enough to send him off balance literally. But emotionally just the sight of her had already rocked him. And the kiss, well… Flynn had kissed his share of women over the years, but none of them had been like kissing Sara.

He wanted to think about his reaction—and hers—analyze it, understand the effect she had on him. But there was no time. Not now.

Now he stood stunned and staring at this vital bouncing ball of energy, this miniature version of his dead brother.

Intellectually Flynn had known that his son would likely resemble his Murray forebears. But actually seeing it was astonishing.

The boy—Lewis, if she'd named him after her father—was the spitting image of his brother. The same black unruly hair, same fair skin, same spattering of freckles, same thin face and pointed chin. Same build, too. Wiry. Slender. There was a coltish boniness even beneath the boy's winter jacket and jeans.

The boy didn't spare him a glance. He came hurtling into the room, with no regard for the stranger in the living room. His eyes—as green as Will's and Flynn's own—went straight to his mother.

"Look!" He wriggled off his backpack at the same time he was thrusting a white box covered with hearts into his mother's hands. "I musta got a skillion Valentines! An' I got a real fancy one from Katie Setsma. She must like me!" He flung his backpack onto a chair, then scrambled up on it to pull off his boots.

Sara shot Flynn a quick glance, as if she were trying to gauge his reaction to this astonishing little person. The words in a crumpled letter and the living breathing bouncing reality were two entirely different things. He wondered if he looked as dazed as he felt.

"Of course she likes you, Liam," she said to her son.

And that nearly did Flynn in.

"Liam?" he said hoarsely. The Irish shortened form of William? Flynn's hand groping blindly for the back of a chair to steady himself.

At his voice, the boy stopped jerking off his boots and, for the first time, looked at Flynn curiously.

Instantly wary, Sara stepped between them. "That's what we call him," she said firmly. "I told you I named him after my father, Lewis William. But he's not my father. He's his own person." She said this last fiercely as if defying him to argue.

He didn't. Couldn't. Could barely find his voice—or words. "I…yeah. I'm just…surprised." He sucked in a hard breath and tried again. "It was my brother's name—William. Will. We called him Will."

Sara caught the operative tense. "Called? Was?"

"He died." Flynn ran his tongue over suddenly parched lips. "Almost six years ago."

Their gazes met, locked. Sara looked shocked then, too. And there were a thousand unasked questions in hers. He couldn't answer them. Not now at least.

"I'm sorry," she said quietly. And there was the sound of real regret in her voice. "I didn't know."

It made Flynn's throat tighten. He gave a jerky nod. "I know that. It's just—" he gave his head a little shake "—one more surprise."

And then the room went silent. No one moved. No one spoke. Finally he grew aware of the sound of Liam sliding off the chair and coming around by Sara. He stopped and looked up at his

mother, as if trying to figure out what was going on, as if hoping she would tell him. But she didn't speak, didn't even seem to see him, and her gaze never left Flynn.

The boy's gaze followed hers. Will's eyes—Dear God, they really were—fastened on him, then narrowed a little in the same way Will's always did when he assessed something or someone new.

There was no doubt the boy had picked up on the current of apprehension that pervaded the room. He was like a fox scenting danger, Flynn thought.

And then, apparently deciding what was necessary, he deliberately moved in front of Sara, his back to his mother's legs as if he would protect her. His chin jutted out as he contemplated Flynn. There was no sparkle now. Just the hard unwavering green gaze that generations of Murrays wore when protecting their own.

"Who're you?"

It was the question Flynn had been anticipating since he'd made up his mind to come to Montana. It was the question he'd been longing to answer.

And suddenly he found the words stuck in his throat. After a hundred—hell, after a thousand at least—visualizations of the moment when he would meet his son, he didn't have the spit to say a word.

He opened his mouth and nothing came out. For the first time in his entire life, Flynn Murray had no words.

Sara, too, was staring at him expectantly, waiting for him to say something. He couldn't. He shook his head.

Maybe she realized he couldn't—or maybe she simply decided that taking charge herself was a better idea. Her hands came down to rest on the boy's shoulders and squeezed lightly. When she spoke, her voice was soft.

"He's your father, Liam."

Liam's eyes flew wide open. So did his mouth. He stared at Flynn, then abruptly his head whipped around so he could look up at his mother. His whole body seemed quiver with the unspoken question: Is that true?

Sara's smile was faint and a little wary. But she gave the boy's shoulders another squeeze, then nodded.

"He is. Truly," she assured him. "He's come to meet you."

For a long moment Liam still searched her face. But then, eventually, he seemed satisfied with what he saw there. He turned back to Flynn. His gaze was steady and level and curious as he stared at his father in silence. The silence seemed to go on—and on.

And then, finally, in a slightly croaky but determined voice, Liam asked, "Where've you been?"

Absolutely mundane. Absolutely reasonable.

Absolutely devastating.

Flynn swallowed. "I've…I've been a lot—" he cleared the raggedness out of his throat, glad he at least had a voice now. He started again "—a lot of places. All over the world. I'd have been here sooner. But…I didn't know about you."

Liam's gaze jerked around to challenge his mother's. "You said you wrote to him."

"She did," Flynn answered for her. This wasn't Sara's fault. "Your mother wrote me before you were born. She wrote me later when you were born…but I didn't get the letter. Not for a long time. Years." He picked the envelope up from the top of the bookcase where Sara had set it and held it out. "Take a look. It's been everywhere. But I didn't get it until last week."

Liam's gaze shifted from Flynn's face to the letter in his outstretched hand. But he stayed where he was, so Flynn moved closer.

Still the boy didn't reach out right away. But finally he plucked the envelope from Flynn's fingers and turned it over in his hands, then studied the multiplicity of addresses on it.

"I was working a lot of different places all over the world," Flynn explained awkwardly. "It must have missed me everywhere I went. It finally caught up with me back home. In Ireland."

Liam didn't look up. He was rubbing his thumb lightly over the words on the envelope, staring at the writing, which, Flynn realized suddenly, he wouldn't be able to read yet. He wasn't old enough. "All those addresses are places I was," he explained.

Then Liam looked up at him. "You live in a castle?"

Flynn blinked. He could read?

Apparently so, for Liam was pointing at the one address on the envelope that hadn't been scratched out. "That's what it says." He scowled at it, then sounded out, "Dun-more-ee castle." Liam read it out slowly then looked up again. "That's your house?"

"No, dear," Sara began, but Flynn cut in.

"It is. Dunmorey Castle."

He heard Sara's sharp intake of breath. Liam's eyes went so wide that his eyebrows disappeared into the fringe of black hair that fell across his forehead. "You live in a real castle? With a moat?"

"I live there. And it is a real castle in name," Flynn qualified, looking at Sara for the first time, seeing accusation in her gaze. "Mostly it's a huge drafty old house," he went on. "Over five hundred years old. Mouldering. Damp. And it does have a turret and some pretty high walls. But it doesn't have a moat."

"Well, that's something, I guess," Sara muttered.

"No moat?" Liam's face fell. His brows drew down. "What makes it a castle then?"

"It was a stronghold. A really old fort," Flynn explained. "Where people could go if they needed to defend themselves against invaders. And it was where the lord of the lands lived. The boss," he added in case that made more sense. "That's what makes it a castle."

Liam digested that. "Can I see it?"

"Of course you can."

"A picture, he means," Sara said hastily. "Can he see a picture? Of your castle." Her tone twisted the word as if she were blaming him for it.

The damn place was no end of trouble. Flynn shook his head. "Not with me," he told Liam. "But I can get you some. Even better, I can take you there. You can see it in person."

Liam gaped. "I can?"

"No!" Sara said sharply.

Liam twisted around to look up at her. "I can't?"

"It's in Ireland," she explained, shooting Flynn a furious glance. "That's clear across the ocean. Thousands of miles."

"I could fly on a plane." Liam was undaunted. "Couldn't I?" He glanced around at Flynn for confirmation.

"You could," Flynn agreed. "Best way to get there, in fact. We'll talk about it." He smiled at Sara.

Sara's mouth pressed into a tight line. "I don't think we'll be talking about it anytime soon." She turned to her son and said firmly, "He can tell you all about his castle, Liam. But do not expect to go zipping across the ocean."

"But I've never seen a real castle."

"You're five. You have plenty of time," Sara said unsympathetically. "And in the meantime you can make them out of Legos."

Liam brightened. "I already did." He spun towards Flynn. "It's sort of real. But it doesn't have a moat either. Wanna see it?" He was all eagerness now, hopping from one foot to the other now, looking up at Flynn.

The expression on his face now didn't remind Flynn so much of Will as it did of the young Sara —when he had first met her. She'd had that same sparkle, that same eager, avid, intense enthusiasm.

Right now she was glaring at him, her jaw locked.

He had made a living out of reading people, picking up their body language, understanding when to move in, when to back off. He had no trouble reading Sara. She wasn't thrilled to see him and, he supposed, he didn't blame her. He hadn't been here when she needed him.

But he'd come when he found out, hadn't he? They'd get it sorted. They had to. But they weren't going to do it now in front of their five-year-old son. So he gave Sara a quick smile that, he hoped, appeased her for the moment, then turned to Liam. "I'd like that."

"C'mon, then!" And Liam was off, pounding up the stairs.

Flynn looked at Sara. She glared. Then she shrugged. "Oh, hell, go with him. But don't you dare encourage him to think about jetting off to Ireland!"

"It's possible, Sar'. Not immediately but we should discuss—"

"No, we shouldn't! Damn it, Flynn, you can't just pop up and disrupt our lives. It's been six years!"

"I didn't know—"

"And you didn't want to know," Sara said, "or you'd have come back."

"I thought—"

"I don't care what you thought. You knew where I was. I didn't leave! If I'd mattered at all, you'd have come back. You never came!"

"You were going to med school."

She stared at him. "Do I look like I went to med school?"

He blinked, then shook his head, dazed. "What do you mean? How should you look?"

"I got pregnant, Flynn. I had two and half years of university left for my bachelor's. I had a baby. It was all I could do to get through that. I didn't go to med school."

"But—"

"Circumstances change. Plans change."

"Yes, but—" He couldn't believe it. She'd been so driven. "Is that why you're so ticked at me?"

She stared. "What? Because I couldn't go to med school? Of course not! I don't care about that. I got my degree. I have my own business. I'm a CPA—certified public accountant. I like my work. I like numbers in boxes. I like adding things up and having them come out right. I like knowing the answers! Speaking of which, what the hell is this about you living in a castle?"

He shrugged, still trying to come to grips with Sara as a CPA, not a doctor as he'd always imagined. Sara as a mother had been tricky enough. But Sara changing her determined plans boggled his mind. She'd been so committed, so determined. She'd said flat-out that nothing was going to stop her.

"Castle?" she prompted, when he didn't answer immediately.

"I inherited it," he said dismissively.

"You told me there was nothing for you in Ireland!"

"There wasn't. I wasn't supposed to inherit, I didn't want to. My brother died." He got angry all over again just thinking about it. Sometimes he wanted to strangle Will—except he wanted his brother alive. That was the whole problem.

"Will," she said, making the connection.

"Will." It always felt like a lead ball hitting him in the stomach when he said his brother's name.

Sara pressed her lips together. "Well, I really am sorry about that. It was…a shock, I gather."

"An accident. Coming to get me at the airport."

A mixture of pain and sympathy flickered across her face. "Oh, God."

"Exactly."

Their gazes met again. The connection that had been so strong seemed to be flickering back to life—and Flynn couldn't believe how astonishingly happy that made him feel.

And then, as if she shut the light off, Sara's expression went blank. "You'd better go see the castle," she said, pointing through the door to the kitchen. "Just through there and up the stairs."

Thank goodness he went after Liam.

Sara didn't know how much longer she could have stood there and talked rationally—well, almost rationally. Her heart was hammering. Her hands were trembling. She had to get a grip. Had to stop flying off the handle at him. Had to stop caring!

For years she'd managed to convince herself that she didn't—that her three days of aberrant behavior with Flynn Murray had been some sort of alchemical reaction that would never be repeated.

And all it had taken was the sight of him standing on her doorstep and she was in meltdown all over again.

It was the shock, that was all. He was the last person she'd expected to see when she'd opened the door this afternoon. And the sizzling awareness she'd felt when she'd seen him had caught her off guard.

She didn't even want to think about what had happened when he'd kissed her!

But thinking about him with Liam wasn't much better.

They were so much alike.

Sara had always known that Liam resembled his father. But without pictures—and try as she had to find any of him among all those taken during that hectic February weekend, she'd discovered none—she'd told herself Liam simply had his father's coloring. After all, she occasionally saw glimpses of herself, her own father, her mom, even her brother Jack in her son.

But when Liam and his father were in the same room, she didn't only see glimpses of Flynn in her son. He was almost a clone.

But even more than Liam's features, it was his body language that was so much like his father's. He moved like Flynn, with the same intensity of purpose. And when he was stymied, he even prowled around rooms like Flynn.

Both Flynn and Liam were edgy, intense, determined. When Liam wanted something—like building a castle or learning to read—he went after it. Like his father. And while Liam was still occasionally little-boy clumsy, Flynn, even with his limp—dear God, she still couldn't believe he'd been shot!—was clearly powerful, controlled and in command. Sara was sure that Liam would be exactly like that one day, too.

She wondered if Flynn saw it.

She wondered exactly what Flynn did see—and what he was really doing here. To see his son, yes. She could accept that. But what else did he want? What more?

He wasn't going to waltz in here and try to take her son away from her, was he?

Just because he lived a in castle now, he didn't need to think he could take over her son.

Or was it just her son he had in mind?

The memory of that kiss snuck back in to torment her—the memory of his lips on hers, the possessive hunger of that kiss! Surely he didn't want her again?

Of course he didn't. If he had, as she'd told him, he'd have come back long before this. God knew he could have had her then.

But this had been a power play, pure and simple. He was just proving he could still make her react, could still—let's face it, Sara, she said to herself—turn her on.

And yes, damn it, he could. He had! He'd nearly swept away her reason, had made her weak with longing, with wanting him exactly the way she'd wanted him all those years ago.

But at least this time she'd managed—barely—to resist. And she would not let it happen again. It could only happen, she assured herself, if he caught her unawares.

But there would be no more "unawares." Now she was forewarned. Flynn Murray had burned her once. There was no way she was letting him do it again!

Thank God she was going out with Adam tonight.

All of a sudden her lukewarm attitude towards their Valentine's Day date had undergone a definite change. Focusing on Adam would be far better than spending the evening at home thinking about Flynn.

She glanced at her watch. It was quarter to four. She didn't know how long he expected to stay, and she didn't want to follow them to Liam's bedroom and ask. Even from the kitchen she could hear Liam's excited chatter and Flynn's low baritone responses. She could hear that blasted Irish lilt in his voice. God, it was seductive. Even now—forewarned, forearmed—it had the power to raise goose bumps along her spine and make the back of her neck tingle.

"Adam," she said aloud. "Think about Adam." She had to get ready to go out with Adam.

Resolutely she climbed the stairs. At the end of the hall she could see into Liam's room, could see Liam darting past the doorway, talking a mile a minute, could see Flynn's long legs stretched out as he sat on Liam's bed.

She did not want to think about Flynn in the same sentence with the word bed.

She got her clean clothes from her own room, then headed for the bathroom, calling out as she went, "I'll be in the shower."

It was only to let them know where she was. She hoped to heaven Flynn didn't think it was an invitation!

Of course he didn't. But it didn't stop her face from flaming. She was mortified to see how red it looked when she glanced in the bathroom mirror. "Stop it," she commanded herself. "Stop thinking about him."

Of course, that was easier said than done. She showered quickly—and used mostly cold water, not wanting to think why it seemed suddenly such a good idea. She washed her hair and blew it dry. Then she dressed in the black velvet pants and red cashmere sweater that her sister Lizzie had given her for Christmas.

She had worn a red sweater the night she had gone to Flynn's motel room. And the memory almost had her pulling the sweater back over her head and looking for something else. But to do so would give him more power over her than he deserved.

He deserved no power at all.

Besides, she thought with all the dispassion she could muster, he probably wouldn't even have the vaguest notion of what she'd worn. He hadn't cared about her the way she had about him.

Flicking a brush through her hair, then putting on some lipstick that she dared hope she would not gnaw off, she gave herself one last stern look, then opened the bathroom door.

It was completely quiet. There was no sound of Liam's eager chatter now, no Irish lilt from Flynn. The light in Liam's room was off.

Had Flynn had enough already and left?

It was a happy thought—followed immediately by, Then where was Liam?

She hurried downstairs. No one was in the kitchen, either.

"Liam?"

She got no answer. He'd better not be playing hide-and-seek without telling her. When he was four he'd thought it fun to dart into the closet and stay still as a mouse while she went nuts looking for him. But he was five now—nearly five and a half—and she'd told him off in no uncertain terms. He knew better. He'd moved on to other sins—like sneaking in TV cartoons when he thought she wouldn't notice.

"You'd better not be watching television, young man," she said, marching across the kitchen and sticking her head around the door to look in the living room, expecting to find him in the semidarkened room with the sound turned down.

But only Sid the cat was there, sleeping on the couch. He raised his head and gave her a baleful look before closing his eyes again.

Sara was not given to panic. She had learned not to. But now her heart began to pound. She spun back into the kitchen.

"Liam!" Her voice rose.

Where was he? He wasn't supposed to go anywhere without telling her. Another of his sins. He'd been in trouble for going to Celie's during Christmas vacation without telling her he was leaving. She'd come down on him like a ton of bricks. He wouldn't do it again.

Would he?

Now she saw that his jacket was gone. His boots were gone.

And so was Flynn.

No!

He wouldn't! He'd never—

I'll take you to Ireland, he'd said. And she'd refused to discuss it.

He couldn't have just walked in and taken off with her child!

She ran to the back door and jerked it open. "Liam!" She was desperate now, frantic as she ran out onto the snow-covered porch. "Liam!"

"What?" The small surprised voice came from around the side of the house. It sounded quite close and completely bewildered.

Oh, God. The surge of relief nearly melted Sara's bones. Her legs wobbled and she gripped the pillar at the top of the stairs as, a second later, Liam's head poked around the corner.

"You don't have to yell. I'm right here," he said indignantly.

"So I…see." She was still gasping for air. Her heart was still slamming against the wall of her chest. "Where's Flynn? Where's your…father," she amended, still breathing hard.

"Right here." Liam jerked his head towards the side yard. "We're buildin' a castle." He gave Sara a thumb's-up and grinned broadly. "Like Dunmorey."

Sara was still gulping air, still bashing down the panic, when Flynn came around the corner of the house. It had begun to snow again and his midnight hair was dusted with sparkling white snowflakes. He looked rugged and handsome and gorgeously reminiscent of the first time she had seen him.

She started trembling.

His intent green gaze fixed on her. "Something wrong?"

"No. I just—" she dragged in a breath "—didn't realize you'd gone outside." Her fingers still gripped the porch pillar. "I thought…"

But she couldn't admit what she'd thought, couldn't acknowledge aloud her terror at the belief—even for a split second—that he'd done the most devastating thing of all: taken her son.

She shook her head. "I didn't know where he was. I thought…never mind. Just…carry on." And with those words she turned abruptly and hurried back into the house, shaken, relieved and shattered all at the same time.

She shut the door and sank down into one of the wooden kitchen chairs, trying with trembling fingers to peel of her snow-soaked socks.

The back door opened, and Flynn strode in.

"You thought I'd taken him." His words were flat. His eyes accused her.

She tried to quiet the shaking and forced herself to concentrate on peeling off the socks before she would answer. Then she stood up, needing to be on a level with him, needing to find her self-control before she could reply. "I didn't know what you'd done."

But she couldn't deny her panic—it was still there in her voice and she was sure he could read it on her face.

Flynn's jaw tightened. He pushed the door shut behind him.

Sara shot a glance towards the side yard. "Liam—"

"He's building the turret. I told him I wanted to see it when he was done. And I will see it," he said firmly, "but not before we get this straightened out."

Sara swallowed and straightened, not liking his tone. "Get what straightened out?" Her voice was steadier now. She wished her nerves were.

"What you obviously think. I did not come to steal my son away from you."

She bristled at the words "my son." But she knew he was just making a point. "I didn't imagine —"

"You damned well did!"

"All right, fine. I did. But only because he was gone! And you'd said you'd take him to Ireland! What was I supposed to think? I'd finished showering and dressing and you weren't there!"

"What sort of man do you think I am?" His eyes were stormy now, a turbulent sea green.

He didn't wait for her to answer that. She wasn't sure she could have, anyway. She didn't actually know what sort of man he was, did she? Once she'd thought she had, but that had been all wrong.

"We talked about Dunmorey," Flynn said patiently, as if explaining things to a small, not-too-bright child. "And we talked about forts and building castles and it was snowing and we decided it would be fun to build a snow castle. Okay? We didn't go to Ireland. We were in the garden."

Sara nodded numbly, knowing she should feel foolish, still feeling the residual effects of her momentary panic. "You didn't say," she mumbled.

"I didn't realize you wanted me to stick my head in the bathroom and announce it." A corner of his mouth quirked, and the way his eyes slid over her made her wish she had a suit of armor on, not a cashmere sweater and velvet pants.

She wrapped her arms across her chest. "Of course not!"

He didn't reply for a moment, as if considering what to say. Then he shook his head gravely. "I'm sorry you were upset. It never occurred to me to tell you. I thought you'd figure it out."

"Well, I didn't. I didn't know what you'd do. I don't even know you."

"You did," he said quietly, and the serious husky tone of his voice sent those goose bumps skittering down her spine again.

She hugged herself. "No."

But he nodded. "You did, Sara." His tone was insistent. "I think you knew me better than anyone else on earth."

"Then why—" The anguished words burst from her before she could stop them. But fortunately she managed to shut her mouth before she sounded like a pathetic twit. And thankfully, the phone chose that moment to ring.

She spun away from him and grabbed for the phone on the countertop. "Hello?"

"Oh, dear. You already know." It was Celie, sounding worried and apologetic.

"Know?" Sara echoed. She braced a hand against the counter. Celie wasn't going to tell her about Flynn, was she? The Elmer grapevine being what it was, that was distinctly possible.

"About Annie." Annie was Celie's four-year-old. "I thought you must from the tone of your voice. You sound…weird. Upset. Because I can't babysit tonight. She's running a fever. They sent her home from preschool. She's vomiting now. You don't want Liam here tonight."

"No, I—"

"I'm so so sorry."

"It's all right," Sara said. "I'll work something out."

"Maybe Jace could come down when he gets back from Billings, but it won't be until late and—"

"No, really, it's fine. Don't worry. I…have to go. Hope Annie's better soon." She hung up and stayed facing the cupboard for a moment, getting her equilibrium back before she turned around. It would be all right, she assured herself. She just wouldn't go.

"Trouble?" Flynn asked when she finally turned around.

Sara shrugged. "Celie was going to babysit Liam tonight. Now she can't."

"Where were you going?" There was something so proprietary in Flynn's tone that it set her back up.

"On a date."

His brows drew down. "With who?"

"Obviously, you wouldn't know him. His name is Adam. He's the foreman at one of the ranches nearby. And he's a sculptor, too," she added. It was true and it was definitely impressive. She'd seen some of Adam's work.

Flynn's jaw tightened. "Is it serious?"

"His sculpture?"

His eyes narrowed. "No, damn it. You and him. Adam." He fairly spat the name.

Sara blinked. "What difference does it make?"

"I want to know how things stand."

He wasn't the only one, Sara thought. Only, what she wanted to know about had nothing to do with Adam. "We're dating," she said ambiguously. "And it is Valentine's Day," she added, because why not let him think it was more serious than it actually was?

Besides, Adam was a chivalrous sort of guy. He probably wouldn't mind her hiding behind her date with him. All of a sudden going seemed far smarter than staying home.

"Excuse me now," she said, reaching for her little local phone list. "I need to find a babysitter." She picked up the phone and began to punch in the number.

Flynn took the phone out of her hand. "I'll watch him."

"Don't be ridiculous."

"What's ridiculous about it? He's my son."

"No."

"Why not?"

"He doesn't know you."

"He wants to. He told me he asked Santa for me." Flynn grinned.

Sara wanted to spit. "He's five. And curious."

"So, fine. Let him get to know me. Let me spend time with him. What better way?"

It sounded like the way to perdition to Sara. She shook her head. "It's too soon."

Flynn scowled. "Oh? And when is it not going to be too soon, Sar'? Tomorrow? Next week? Next year?"

"You've been here two hours, if that!"

"And I would have been here sooner if I'd known," he said evenly. "I'll say it again—as many times as it takes—I didn't know. And if you're worried about whether he'll stay with me, ask him."

"What?"

"Ask him if he minds. If he doesn't want me to do it, I won't." Flynn raised his brows, met her gaze, threw down the gauntlet again. "Ask him."

As if on cue, Liam yelled from outside, "Dad! C'mon! What're you doin' in there? Aren'tcha comin'?"

Sara winced at the eager tone, winced at the memory of her son striding up to Santa and saying, "I want you to bring my dad home."

Flynn's gaze remained fixed on her. His expression said all it needed to. But then he added, "Does Adam make you hot when he kisses you, Sara?"

"Fine," Sara snapped. "Babysit. I wish you the joy of it!"

CHAPTER FOUR

FLYNN wished for the joy of it, too.

Babysitting his son while his son's mother went out with another man was not what he had planned.

He'd planned—at some point after Sara had opened the door and bowled him over—to charm her and tease her as he once had done. And then, when he'd soothed her ruffled feathers, he'd intended to take her and Liam to dinner.

He had never considered how high Sara's defenses would be—and how much work he might have to do to make her remember how good it had been between them.

God knew, he remembered. And he was remembering more every minute.

He hadn't let himself think about her—about their time together—for years. What point would there have been?

They had met coincidentally, had clicked instantly. But in truth they had been ships passing in the night—Sara resolutely on her way to medical school and then to save the world, and he determined to shake the dirt of Ireland and Dunmorey off his boots and then to prove to his old man that he wasn't the useless fool the old man seemed to believe.

Just because he wasn't the solid, dutiful lord-of-the-manor type that Will was, didn't mean he didn't have his own talents, his own gifts. Not, Flynn thought wearily, that he had ever managed to convince the old man.

He had an uphill fight convincing Sara that he meant to do right by her and Liam, too. He didn't suppose that grabbing this Adam jerk by the throat and throttling him would go very far in making that point. Sara had never been especially impressed by the caveman approach, as he recalled.

So, fine. He could wait. He could even let her go out with another man—especially one whose kisses didn't make her go up in flames. And this guy's clearly didn't. She wouldn't have been so furious at his question if they had.

But he wasn't going to sit by and let the guy think he had a clear field. No way. So when he heard the knock at the back door and heard Sara open it, he stood up from where he'd been sitting on the sofa looking at old photo albums with Liam.

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