2 in 1 GREAT VALUE

WEDDING AT KING'S CONVENIENCE

Maureen Child

BEDDING THE SECRET HEIRESS

Emilie Rose



Desire

Mills & Boon Desire

Maureen Child

Wedding at King's Convenience / Bedding the Secret Heiress

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Wedding at King’s ConvenienceIn one unforgettable night, Jefferson King, movie mogul, had made Maura Donohue pregnant. Worse, he’d been avoiding her phone calls. Naturally he’d give the expectant mother a wedding worthy of a King’s bride. But Maura wouldn’t marry without love… Bedding the Secret Heiress Gage Faulkner is the enemy. At least that’s what heiress Lauren Lynch keeps telling herself. Gage’s business mind tells him Lauren is hiding something. But his body tells him he wants her anyway. Seducing her should reveal the truth…

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Wedding at King's Convenience

by

Maureen Child

"Why're you here?"

"You mean, why am I standing in the rain in front of a hardheaded woman who isn't honoring the contract she signed?"

"Your people are littering the street in front of my house at this very moment," she challenged, "so I'm thinking I'm honoring what was between us a good deal more than you have."

"You know," he said, "I've been back in Ireland about an hour and in that short amount of time, I've been rained on, had a flat tire, got mud in my shoes and been insulted by everyone I've spoken to. So I'm not in the mood to listen to more obscure references to what a bastard I am. If you've got a problem with me, then tell me what it is so I can fix it."

Her eyes narrowed on him. She crossed her arms over her chest, lifted her chin and said, "I'm pregnant. Fix *that*."

MAUREEN CHILD is a California native who loves to travel. Every chance they get, she and her husband are taking off on another research trip. The author of more than sixty books, Maureen loves a happy ending and still swears that she has the best job in the world. She lives in Southern California with her husband, two children and a golden retriever with delusions of grandeur. Visit Maureen's website at www.maureenchild.com.

To Kate Carlisle

A great friend, a terrific writer, and the one person I want to share a latte with before RWA meetings!

Can't wait to see your first Desire™ book in print, Kate!

Dear Reader,

Thank you so much for coming along for the ride in this latest from the KINGS OF CALIFORNIA series! I can't tell you how much fun I'm having with the Kings and I'm delighted you're enjoying them, too!

In this third book, you'll meet Jefferson King. He's the head of King Studios in Hollywood, but he's not a man to sit behind a desk every day. He prefers going out into the field, scouting locations for the movies his company produces.

And it's on a location hunt that he meets Maura Donohue, owner of a sheep farm in County Mayo, Ireland. Maura is his match in every way and Jefferson is more intrigued than he wants to admit even to himself.

Sparks fly and passion simmers as these two hardheaded people are forced to find common ground.

Ireland is one of my favorite places in the world. And this little slice of that country, in County Mayo, is where my husband and I stayed the last time we visited.

The country's as beautiful as its people are warm and welcoming, and personally, I can't wait to go back! I really hope you enjoy this latest KINGS OF CALIFORNIA book—just as I hope you love the peek at Ireland!

I would love to hear from you—to e-mail me just go to my website at www.maureenchild.com or, if you prefer, my mailing address is PO Box 1883, Westminster, CA 92684-1883.

And happy reading!

Maureen

Chapter One

"You think I'm charming," Jefferson King said with a smug smile. "I can tell."

"Charming, is it?" Maura Donohue straightened up to her full, if less-than-imposing height. "Do you believe I'm so easily swayed by a smooth-talking man?"

"Easily?" Jefferson laughed. "We've known each other for the better part of a week now, Maura, and I can say with certainty there's nothing 'easy' about you."

"Well now," she countered with a smile of her own. "Isn't that a lovely thing to say."

She was pleased. Jefferson read the truth on her features. No other woman he'd ever known would have been complimented by knowing that a man thought her difficult. But then, Maura Donohue was one in a million, wasn't she?

He'd known it the moment he met her.

In Ireland scouting locations for an upcoming movie from King Studios, Jefferson had stumbled across Maura's sheep farm in County Mayo and had realized instantly that it was just what he'd been searching for. Of course, convincing Maura of that fact was something else again.

"You know," he said, leaning one shoulder against the white-washed stone wall of the barn, "most people would be leaping at the chance to make some easy money."

She flipped her long black hair behind her shoulder, narrowed sea-blue eyes on him and countered, "There you are again, using the word 'easy,' when you've already admitted I'm not a woman accustomed to taking the easy way."

He sighed and shook his head. The woman had an answer for everything but damned if she wasn't intriguing enough that he was enjoying himself. As the head of King Studios, Jefferson was more accustomed to people falling all over themselves to accommodate him. When he rolled into a town looking to pay top dollar for the use of a location, those he dealt with were always eager to sign on the dotted line and collect their cash.

Not Maura, though.

For days now, he'd been coming to the Donohue farm to talk to its stubborn owner/operator. He'd plied Maura with compliments, tempted her with promises of mountains of money he knew damn well she could ill afford to turn down and in general had tried to make himself too amiable to resist.

Yet she'd managed.

"You're in my way," she said.

"Sorry." Jefferson stepped aside so she could walk past him carrying a sack of God-knew-what. His every instinct told him to snatch the heavy load out of her arms and carry it for her. But she wouldn't accept or appreciate his offer at help.

She was fiercely independent, with a quick wit, sharp tongue and a body that he'd spent far too much time thinking about. Her thick black hair fell in soft waves to the middle of her back and he itched to gather it up in his hands to feel its sleekness sliding across his skin. She had a stubborn chin that she tended to lift when making a point and a pair of dark blue eyes fringed by long, inky-black lashes.

She was dressed in worn jeans and a heavy Irish knit sweater that covered most of her curves. But winter in Ireland meant damp, cold weather so he could hardly blame her for bundling up. Still, he hoped she invited him into her house for a cup of tea, because then she'd strip that sweater off to reveal a shirt that gave him a much better peek at what she kept hidden.

But for now, he followed her out of the barn into an icy wind that slapped at his face and stung his eyes as if daring him to brave the Irish countryside. His ears were cold and his overcoat wasn't nearly warm enough. He made a mental note to do some shopping in the village. Buy a heavier coat if he could find one and a few of the hand-knit sweaters. Couldn't hurt to endear himself to the local

merchants. He'd want everyone in the tiny town of Craic on his side as he tried to sway Maura into renting King Studios the use of her farm.

"Where are we going?" he shouted into the wind and could have sworn he actually *saw* the wind throw his words back at him.

"*We're* not going anywhere," she called back over her shoulder. "*I'm* going to the high pasture to lay out a bit more feed."

"I could help," he said.

She turned and looked him over, her gaze pausing on his well-shined, expensive black shoes. Smirking then, she said, "In those fine shoes? They'll be ruined in a moment, walking through the grass and mud."

"Why not let me worry about my shoes?"

Lifting that stubborn chin of hers, she said, "Spoken like a man who needn't worry about where his *next* pair of shoes might come from."

"Is it all rich people you don't like," Jefferson asked, an amused smile on his face, "or is it just me?"

She grinned back at him, completely unabashed. "Well now, that's an interesting question, isn't it?"

Jefferson laughed. The women he was used to were more coy. More willing to agree with him no matter what he said. They didn't voice opinions for fear he wouldn't share them. He hadn't enjoyed himself this much in way too long.

And it wasn't just the women, either, he mused. It was everyone he knew back in Hollywood.

Came from not only being a member of a prominent family, but from being the head of a studio where dreams could be made or shattered on the whim of an executive. Too many people were trying too hard to stay on his good side. It was refreshing as hell to find someone who didn't care if he *had* a good side.

Maura slammed the gate of her small, beat-up lorry, then leaned back against it. Folding her arms over her chest in a classic defensive posture she asked, "Why are you trying so hard, Jefferson King? Is it the challenge of winning me over that's driving you? Are you not used to hearing the word 'no'?"

"I don't hear it often, that's true."

"I imagine you don't. A man like you with his fine shoes and his full wallet. Probably you're welcome wherever you go, aren't you?"

"You have something against a full wallet?"

"Only when it's thrown in my face every few minutes."

"Not thrown," he corrected. "Offered. I'm offering you a small fortune for the lease of your land for a few weeks. How is that an insult?"

Her mouth worked as if she were fighting a smile. "Not an insult, to be sure. But your stubborn determination to win me over is a curiosity."

"As you said, I do love a challenge." Every King did. And Maura Donohue was the most interesting one he'd had in a long time.

"We've that in common, then."

"Shared ground at last. Why not let me ride with you up to the high pasture? You can show me the rest of your farm."

She studied him for a long, quiet moment as the wind buffeted them both. Finally, she asked, "Why do you want to come with me?"

He shrugged. "Honestly, I've nothing better to do right now. Why is it you don't want me along?"

"Because I don't need help," she pointed out.

"You seem pretty sure of yourself," he told her.

"And I am," she assured him.

"Then why should you care if I ride along and help out if I can? Unless you're worried that you're going to be seduced by my lethal charisma."

She laughed. Threw her head back and let loose a loud, delighted roll of laughter that touched something inside him even as it poked at his pride. "Ah, you're an amusing man, Jefferson."

"Wasn't trying to be."

"Which only makes it that much more funny, don't you see?"

Hunching deeper into his overcoat against the cold, Jefferson told himself that she was no doubt trying to reassure herself that he wasn't getting to her. Because he knew he was. She wasn't nearly as distant as she had been the first time he'd driven onto the Donohue farm. That day, he'd been half expecting her to pull out a shotgun and force him off her land.

Not exactly the picture of Irish hospitality.

Thankfully, he'd always been the patient one in the family.

Trying a different tack now, he said, "Look at it this way. While you drive me around your place, you can have the chance to elaborate as to why you don't want to take me up on my offer to rent your farm for an already mentioned *exorbitant* amount of money."

She cocked her head to study him and her black hair danced in the cold wind like a battle flag. "Fine then. Come along if you must."

"A gracious invitation, as always," he muttered.

"If you want gracious," she told him, "you should head down to Kerry, go to Dromyland Castle. They've fine waiters, lovely food and neatly tended garden paths designed to make sure their visitors' fine shoes don't get ruined."

"I'm not interested in gracious," he told her, heading for the side of the car. "That's why I'm here."

After a moment, she laughed shortly. "You give as good as you get, I'll say that for you."

"Thanks."

She joined him at the door of the truck. "But if you don't mind, I'll drive my own lorry."

"What?" Jefferson realized he'd gone to the right side—what should be the passenger side—but in Ireland, the steering wheel was on the right. "You do realize you guys have the wheel on the wrong side of the car."

"It's a matter of perspective, now isn't it?" She shooed him off and he rounded the front of the small truck, walking to the other door. "Wrong side, right side, makes no difference, as they're both *my* side."

Jefferson leaned his forearms on the roof of the truck. "Believe it or not, Maura, I'm on your side, too."

"Ah now," she said, grinning, "that I don't believe, Jefferson King, as I'm thinking that you're always on your own side."

She hopped in, fired up the engine and Jefferson moved fast to climb in himself, since he was sure she'd have no qualms about driving off and leaving him standing where he was. She was hardheaded. And beautiful. As stubborn as the hills here were green.

Watching the big American striding across a sheep-dung-littered rainy field on a blustery day was a fine thing, Maura mused. Even here, where he was so clearly out of his element, Jefferson King walked as if he owned the land. The edges of his gray overcoat flapped in the wind like a ghost's shroud. His thick black hair ruffled as though spirits were raking their cold fingers through it and his delicious-looking mouth was twisted up into a sneer of distaste. And yet, she thought, he continued on. Carrying sacks of feed across muddy ground to tip and pour the grain into troughs for her sheep.

As the feed hit the bottom of the troughs, the black and white creatures came scampering ever closer, as though they'd been starved for weeks. Greedy beasts, she thought with a smile as they nudged and pushed at the great Jefferson King.

To give him his due, he wasn't skittish around the animals as most city people were. They tended to look on mountain sheep as they would a hungry tiger, wondering if the beasties were going to turn on them with fangs and the taste for human flesh. For a rich American, he seemed oddly at home in the open country, though for some reason, the man refused to wear stout boots instead of his shiny, no doubt hideously expensive shoes.

He laughed suddenly as a head butt from the sheep nearly sent him sprawling face-first into the muck. Maura smiled at the sound of his laughter and told herself to ignore the swift, nearly debilitating rush of heat that swamped her. An impossible order to obey, she thought as she watched the wide smile on his face lighting up his features.

Her knees went wobbly and she knew her body was not listening to her mind.

Jefferson King was a man meant to be ogled by women, she thought, eyeing his fine physique. Broad shoulders, narrow hips and large hands with more calluses on them than she would have imagined a Hollywood type to have. He had long legs, muscular thighs and a fine ass if anyone were to ask her opinion.

And he was only a temporary visitor to the lovely island she called home. She had to remember that. He'd only come to Ireland looking for a place to make a movie. He wasn't here on the Donohue Farm because he found her fascinating. He was here to rent her land, nothing more. Once she'd signed his bloody papers, he'd be off. Back to his own world that lay so very far from hers.

Well. She didn't like the thought of that.

And so, she continued to draw out the negotiations.

"They act like they haven't eaten in weeks," Jefferson said as he walked toward her.

"Aye, well, it's cold out. That'll make for heartier appetites."

"Speaking of," he hinted broadly.

They'd fallen into a routine of sorts since his arrival. Maura had hardly noticed it happening, but there it was. Jefferson spent most of the day at her farm, following her about, touting the merits of the deal he was trying to make her and then they ended the afternoon over a bowl of soup and some hot tea in her kitchen. Strange how she'd come to look forward to that time with him.

Still, she said, "You could ask the sheep to share their meal with you if you're that hungry."

"Tempting," he said, pushing one hand through his hair to sweep it back off his forehead. "But I'd prefer some of that brown bread you gave me yesterday."

"Fond of soda bread, are you?"

He looked down at her from his great height and she could have sworn she saw actual sparks glittering in his pale blue eyes. "I'm fond of a lot of things around here."

"Oh, you've a smooth tongue on you, Jefferson King." And her knees wobbled even more as she thought of the many uses that smooth tongue of his could be put to.

"Do I?"

"And well you know it," she told him, plucking two long strands of her hair out of her eyes. "But you're wasting your time trying to wheedle me into signing that contract of yours. I will or I won't and nothing you can say will sway me in either direction."

"Ah, but it's my time, isn't it?"

"It is indeed," she said and was silently glad he hadn't given up just yet.

In truth, she'd been considering his offer seriously since the moment he'd made it. Her mind had raced with possibilities. With the money he was offering her, she had tried to imagine what she could do to the centuries-old farmhouse that had been in her family for forever. Not to mention the changes she could make to the farm itself.

She already had a paid worker coming a few days a week, but with Jefferson King's money, she would be able to hire someone full-time, to help ease the workload. And even with all that, she'd still have money left over to make a fine cushion in her bank account.

But she wasn't entirely ready to agree to his terms just yet. He'd already sweetened his offer once and she'd no doubt he would do so again. Yes, he could find another farm just as suitable for his needs, but he wouldn't find a prettier one, Maura told herself. Besides, he'd already told her he thought the Donohue land was perfect.

Which meant he wouldn't be withdrawing his offer. And Maura, coming from a long line of wily horse traders, was going to make sure she got the very best deal she could. It wasn't greed motivating her, either. Just think what a movie crew would do to her well-ordered life, not to mention her home and land. She'd need some of the money he would pay her just to put to rights the sorry mess they would no doubt leave behind.

While she stared at him, his gaze moved past her, scanning the surrounding countryside. As she'd grown up on Donohue land, and knew every inch of it as well as Tarzan knew the jungle, she didn't have to look to know what he was seeing. Green fields as far as the eye could see. Stone fences rising up from the ground like ancient sentinels. The shadow of the Partry Mountains looming behind them and the whole of Lough Mask stretching out in front of them, its silvery surface looking on this gray day like molten steel frothing in the wind. Across the way, a tumbled ruin of an ancient castle slept as if only waiting for the clang of a sword to wake it. Sheep wandered these hills freely as they had for centuries and would, no doubt, for centuries to come. The Irish wind kissed the land and the rain blessed it and those who lived here appreciated every single acre as no outsider ever could.

The village of Craic was only two kilometers down the long, twisting road and dotted along the way were B and Bs, a few more farmhouses and even one palatial mansion belonging to one Rogan Butler and his wife, Aly, who now spent most of their time in Dublin.

But here in the middle of her own fields, she and Jefferson might as well have been the only two people on the planet. A latter-day Adam and Eve, without the fig leaves, thanks very much, and surrounded by bleating sheep.

"Did I tell you," he said, shattering the quiet between them, "that my great-grandmother was Irish?"

"You mean Mary Frances Rafferty King who was born in County Sligo and met your great-grandfather when he was taking a tour of Ireland? He saw her in a pub. On a Tuesday, wasn't it?" Maura smiled. "Aye, you might have mentioned her once or twice."

He grinned at her. "Didn't mean to bore you."

"Did I say I was bored?"

"No." He stepped closer and she felt the heat of him reaching for her, charging the icy air. "But let me know if you feel yourself nodding off and I'll try harder to enchant you."

"You mean to say you've got to *try* to be appealing?" she quipped, taking a quick step or two back from him. "I'm disappointed. Here I thought you were just a born charmer."

"Did you?" he asked, closing the distance between them again with a single, long step. "Now, isn't that interesting?"

"I didn't say your charm was *working* on me, mind you," Maura told him, enjoying their sparring far too much. It had been a long time since she'd met a man who appealed to her on so many different levels. A shame, she reminded herself, that he was only here temporarily. Better that she keep that thought in mind before her body and heart became too involved for their own good.

"You can't fool me, Maura. I'm wearing you down."

"Is that right?"

"It is," he said. "You haven't threatened to throw me off your property in almost—" he checked his watch "—six hours."

Still smiling, she said, "I could remedy that right now."

"Ah, but you don't want to."

"I don't?" That smile of his should be considered a lethal weapon, she told herself.

"No," he said, "because you actually like having me around, whether you'll admit to it or not."

Well, he was right about that now, wasn't he, she thought. But then what single woman in her right mind wouldn't enjoy having a man such as Jefferson King about the house? It wasn't every day a rich, gorgeous man showed up on her doorstep wanting to rent her farm. Could she really help it if she was enjoying the negotiations so much that she was rather dragging the process out?

"Admit it," he said, his voice low enough that it was barely more than a breath. "I dare you."

"You'll find, Jefferson," she said softly, lifting her eyes to meet his, "that if I want you…*around*, I'll have no trouble admitting it. To you or to myself."

Chapter Two

In the village of Craic, Jefferson King was big news and Maura had half the town nagging her to sign his silly papers so they could all "get famous." Not a moment went by when she didn't hear someone's opinion on the subject.

But she wasn't going to be hurried into a decision. Not by her friends, not by her sister and not by Jefferson. She'd give him her answer when she was ready and not before.

She should have thought twice about suggesting to him they go to the village pub for supper. Should have known that her friends and neighbors would pounce on the opportunity to engage Jefferson in conversation while managing to give Maura a nudge or two at the same time. But, the truth was, she had been feeling far too…itchy to trust herself alone in her house with him. He was a fine-looking man after all, and her hormones had been doing a fast step-dance since the moment she'd first laid eyes on him.

Now, Maura had to wonder if coming into the Lion's Den pub for a meal hadn't been a bad idea after all.

Of course, she was surrounded by villagers, so there was no chance at all her hormones would be able to take over her good sense. But the downside was, she was surrounded by villagers, all of whom were vying for Jefferson's attentions.

In early December, the interior of the pub was dim, with lamplight gleaming dully on paneled walls stained with centuries of smoke from the peat fires kept burning in a brazier. The floor was wood as well, scuffed from the steps of thousands of patrons. There were several small round tables with chairs gathered close and a handful of booths lining two of the walls. The bar itself was highly polished walnut that Michael O'Shay, the pub owner, kept as shiny as a church pew. And beside the wide mirror reflecting the crowd back on itself, there was a television perched high on a shelf, displaying a soccer game with the sound muted.

Michael sauntered up to their table with a perfectly stacked pint of Guinness beer for Jefferson and a glass of Harp beer for Maura. As he set them down, he gave a swift, unnecessary swipe of the gleaming table with a pristine bar rag. Then he beamed at them both like Father Christmas. "I'll have your soup and bread up for you in a moment. It's potato-leek today. My Margaret made it and you'll enjoy it I'm sure. When your movie folk arrive," he added with a grin for Jefferson, "I'll see that Margaret makes it by the boatload for you."

Maura sighed. Hadn't taken him long to get Hollywood into the conversation.

"Sounds good," Jefferson said, taking a sip of his thick black beer.

"Has your Rose had her baby yet, Michael?" Maura asked, then said in an aside to Jefferson, "Michael and Margaret are about to become grandparents."

"We are indeed," the pub owner said and gave Maura a knowing look, "so the extra money made when your film crew arrives will be most welcome."

Maura closed her eyes. Clearly, all anyone wanted to talk about was the notion of having a film made in their little village. Michael had hardly left to bustle back to his bar when three or four other locals found a reason to stop by the table and talk to Jefferson.

She watched him handle the people she'd known all her life with courtesy and she liked him for it. Surely a man like him didn't enjoy being the center of attention in a village less than a third the size of the town he called home. But rather than being abrupt, he seemed to almost encourage their chatter.

Maura listened with half an ear as Frances Boyle raved about her small traveler's inn and the good service she could promise King Studios. Then Bill Howard, owner of the local market, swore he'd be happy to order in any and all supplies Jefferson might require. Nora Bailey gave him her card and told him again that she ran a full-service bakery and would be happy to work with his caterers and

finally Colleen Ryan offered her skills as a seamstress, knowing that being so far from Hollywood, his costume people might be needing an extra hand, fine with a needle.

By the time they wandered off, each of them giving Maura a nudging glare, Jefferson was grinning and Maura's head pounded like a badly played bodhran drum.

"Seems as though you're the only one who doesn't want my business," he said, then took another sip of his beer.

"Aye, it does at that, doesn't it?"

"So why are you holding out?"

"Holding out?" Maura pretended surprise. "I've not promised you a thing, have I?"

"No," he said, smiling. "You haven't. You've just sat by and let me talk and wheedle and eventually raise my offer a bit each day."

True enough and she had hopes he'd go a bit higher yet before the deed was done and the bargain struck. If her friends and neighbors could curb their enthusiasm a little.

"The whole town wants this to happen," he said.

"Aye, but the whole town won't have the disruption of a film crew camped out on their land during the height of lambing season, will they?" She considered that a point well made and rewarded herself with a sip of her beer.

"You said yourself that most of the sheep give birth out in the fields. We'll be filming mostly at the front of the house. Outdoor shots of the manor—"

She snorted. "It's a farmhouse."

"Looks like a manor to me," he countered, then continued quickly, "There may be a few scenes around the barn and the holding pens, but we won't get in the way."

"And you can promise that?" She eased back in the booth and looked at him across the table.

"I'll promise it, if that's what it takes to get you to sign."

"Desperate now?" She smiled and took another soothing drink. "Might make a woman think you'd be willing to sweeten your offer a bit."

"You drive a hard bargain," Jefferson told her with a nod of approval. "But I might be willing to go a little higher yet, if you'd make up your mind and give me your decision."

She smiled to herself, but kept it small so he wouldn't see the victorious gleam that had to be shining in her eyes. "As well I might, depending on how much higher you're talking about."

He gave her an admiring tip of his head. "Too bad your sister's not the one making this deal. I have the distinct feeling she'd be easier to convince."

"Ah, but Cara has her own priorities, doesn't she?" Smiling at the thought of her younger sister, Maura could admit to herself that she would have eventually accepted Jefferson's offer even if he hadn't paid her for the use of her land. Because he'd agreed to give Cara a small part in the movie. And since her sister dreamed of being a famous actress, Cara had been walking in the clouds for days now.

"True," he said. "If she were doing the bargaining, she might have wangled herself a bigger part."

"She'll do fine with what she's got. She's very good, you know." Maura leaned forward. "For a few weeks last year, Cara was on one of those British soap operas. She was brilliant, really, until they killed her off. She had a lovely death scene and all. Made me cry when she died."

His mouth quirked, just high enough to display a dimple in his left cheek. "I know. I sat through the tapes."

"She is good, isn't she? I mean, it's not only that I'm her sister and love her that makes me think so, is it?"

"No, it's not. She's very good," Jefferson told her.

"She has dreams, Cara has," Maura murmured.

"What about you? Do you have dreams, too?" he asked.

Her gaze met his as she shook her head. "'Course I do, though my dreams are less lofty. The barn needs a new roof and before long, my old lorry's going to keel over dead with all four tires in the air. And there's a fine breed of sheep I'd like to try on my fields, as well."

"You're too beautiful to have such small dreams, Maura."

She blinked at him, surprised by the flattery and, at the same time, almost insulted to be told that her dreams were somehow lacking in imagination. She'd once had bigger dreams, as all young girls do. But she'd grown up, hadn't she? And now her dreams were more practical. That didn't make them less important. "They're mine, aren't they, and I don't think they're small dreams at all."

"I just meant—"

She knew what he meant. No doubt he was more accustomed to women who dreamed of diamonds or, God help her, furs and shiny cars. He probably saw her as a country bumpkin with her worn jeans and fields full of shaggy sheep. That thought was as good as a cold shower, dousing the fire in her hormones until she felt almost chilled at the lack of heat.

Before he could speak again, she glanced to one side and announced, "Oh look! The Flanagan boys are going to play."

"What?"

Maura pointed to the far corner of the pub where three young men with dark red hair sat down, cradling an assortment of instruments between them. While Michael finally made good on his promise and delivered their bowls of steaming potato-leek soup and soda bread hot from the oven, the Flanagan brothers began to play.

In moments, the small pub was filled with the kind of music most people would pay a fortune to hear in a concert hall. Fiddle, drum and flute all came together in a wild yet fluid mesh of music that soared up to the rafters and rattled the window panes. Toes started tapping, hands were clapping and a few hearty souls sang out the lyrics to traditional Irish music.

One tune slid into another, rushing from fast and furious to the slow and heartbreaking, with the three brothers never missing a beat. Jefferson watched the energized crowd with a filmmaker's eye and knew that he'd have to include at least one pub scene in the movie they would be filming here in a few months. And he was going to put in a word with his director about the Flanagan brothers. Their talent was amazing and he thought the least he could do was display it on film. Who knew, maybe he could help more dreams to come true.

Once he finally got Maura to sign his damned contract.

Jefferson's gaze slid to her and his breath caught in his chest. He'd been aware of her beauty before now, but in the dim light of the pub with a single candle burning in a glass jar on the table, she looked almost ethereal. Insubstantial. Which was a ridiculous thought because he'd seen her wrestle a full-grown sheep down to the ground, so a fragile woman she most definitely was not. Yet he was seeing her now in a new way. A way that made his body tighten to the point of discomfort.

You'd think he'd be used to it, he thought. He'd been achy for nearly a week now, his body in a constant state of unrequited readiness that was making him crazy. Maybe what he needed to do was stop being so damn polite and just swoop in and seduce Maura before she knew what hit her.

Then a whirlwind swept into the pub and dropped down at their booth, nudging her sister over on the bench seat.

"Oh, soup!" Cara Donohue cooed the words and reached for her sister's bowl with both hands. "Lovely. I'm famished."

"Get your own, you beggar," Maura told her with a laugh, but pushed her soup toward her sister.

"Don't need to, do I?" Cara grinned, then shot a quick look at Jefferson. "Have you convinced her to sign up yet?"

"Not yet," he said, putting thoughts of seduction to one side for the moment. Cara Donohue was taller and thinner than Maura, with a short cap of dark curls and blue eyes that shone with eagerness

to be doing. Seeing. Experiencing. She was four years younger than her sister and twice as outgoing, and yet Jefferson felt no deep stirring for her.

She was a nice kid with a bright future ahead of her, but Maura was a woman to make a man stop for a second and even a third look.

"You will," Cara said with a bright, musical laugh. "You Americans are all stubborn, aren't you? And besides, Maura thinks you're gorgeous."

"Cara!"

"Well, it's true and all," her sister said with another laugh as she finished Maura's soup, then reached for her sister's beer. She had a sip, then winked at Jefferson. "It does no harm to let you know she enjoys looking at you, for what breathing woman wouldn't? And I've seen you giving her a look or two yourself."

"Cara, if you don't shut your mouth this minute…"

Maura's threat died unuttered, but Jefferson couldn't help smiling at the sisters. He and his brothers were just the same, teasing each other no matter who happened to be around to listen. Besides, he liked hearing that Maura had been talking about him.

"There's no harm in it, is there?" Cara was saying, with a glance at first her sister, then Jefferson. "Why shouldn't you take a good look at each other?"

"Pay no attention to my sister," Maura told him with a shake of her head.

"Why?" he asked. "She's not wrong."

"Maybe not, but she doesn't have to be so loud about it, does she?"

"Ah Maura, you worry too much," her sister told her and patted her arm.

The music suddenly shifted, jumping into a wild, frenetic song with a beat that seemed to thrum against the walls and batter its way into a man's soul. Jefferson found himself tapping his fingers on the tabletop in time with the quickening rhythm.

"Oh, they're playing 'Whiskey in the Jar!' Come on, Maura, dance with me."

She shook her head and resisted when Cara tried to pull her to her feet. "I've worked all day and I'm in no mood for step dancing. Most especially not with my big-mouthed sister."

"But you love me and you know it. Besides, it'll do you good and you know you adore this song." Cara grinned again and gave her sister's arm a good yank.

On her feet, Maura looked at him, almost embarrassed, Jefferson thought, then with a shrug she followed her sister into the cleared-away area in front of the tables. A few people applauded as Cara and Maura took their places beside each other, then, laughing together, the Donohue sisters leaped into action. Their backs were arrow straight, their arms pinned to their sides and their feet were *flying*.

Jefferson, like most everyone else in the world, had seen the Broadway show with the Irish dancers and he'd come away impressed. But here, in this tiny pub in a small village on the coast of Ireland, he was swept into a kind of magic.

Music thundered, people applauded and the two sisters danced as if they had wings on their feet. He couldn't tear his eyes off Maura. She'd worked hard all day at a job that would have exhausted most of the men he knew. Yet there she was, dancing and laughing, as graceful as a leaf on the wind. She was tireless. And spirited. And so damned beautiful, he could hardly draw a breath for wanting her.

Without warning, Jefferson's mind turned instantly to the stories he'd heard about his great-grandfather and how he'd fallen in love at first sight with an Irish girl in a pub just like this, on one magical night.

For the first time in his life, he completely understood how it had happened.

Cara left the pub soon after, claiming she was going to drive into Westport, a bustling harbor city not five miles from the village of Craic.

"I'll be at Mary Dooley's place if you need me," she said as she left, giving Jefferson a wink and her sister a kiss and a smile. "Otherwise, I'll see you sometime tomorrow."

When her sister was gone in a blur of motion, Maura looked at Jefferson and laughed shortly. “She’s a force of nature,” she said. “Always has been. The only thing that came close to slowing her down was our mother’s death four years ago.”

“I’m sorry,” he said quickly. “I know what it’s like to lose your parents. It’s never easy no matter how old you are.”

“No, it’s not,” Maura admitted, feeling the sting of remembrance and how hard it had been for her and her sister in those long silent weeks after their mother had passed away. Smiles had been hard to come by and they’d clung to each other to ease their pain.

Eventually though, life had crowded in, insisting it be lived.

“But my mother had been lonely for my father for years. Now that she’s joined him, she’s happy again, I know.”

“You believe that.”

A statement, not a question, she thought. “Aye, I do.”

“Are you born with that kind of faith, I wonder, or do you have to work to earn it?”

“It just…is,” Maura said simply. “Haven’t you ever sensed the presence of one you lost and felt better for knowing it?”

“I have,” he admitted quietly. “Though it’s not something I’ve ever talked about before.”

“Why should you?” She smiled at him again. “It’s a private thing, after all.”

Jefferson looked at her for a long moment and she tried to read what thoughts might be rushing through his mind. But his eyes were cool, shadowed with old pain, so she was forced to wait until he spoke.

“Ten years ago, my parents died together in a car accident that nearly killed one of my brothers, too.” He finished the last of his beer in one swallow, set the glass down and said, “Later, once my three brothers and I had lived through the grief, we all realized that if they’d had a choice, our folks would have elected to go together. Neither of them would have been complete without the other.”

“I know just what you mean.” Maura sighed through a sad smile. Music played on in the background and dozens of voices rose and fell in waves of conversation. Yet here in the shadow-filled booth, she felt as if she and Jefferson were alone in the room. “My father died when Cara was small and my mother was never the same without him. She tried, for our sakes of course, but for her, there was always something missing. A love like that, I think, is both blessing and curse.”

He lifted his beer glass in a toast. “You might be right about that.”

He smiled, too, and she thought how odd it was that they would find this mutual understanding in memories of pain. But somehow, sitting in the near dark with Jefferson, sharing stories of loss made her feel closer to him than she had to anyone in a long time.

“Still,” she said, her voice soft and low, “even knowing your parents were together, it must have been hard on you and your brothers.”

“It was.” A slight frown creased his features briefly. “I’d finally recovered from…” He stopped, caught himself and said instead, “Doesn’t matter. The point is, when we needed it the most, my brothers and I had each other. And we had to help Justice recover.”

She wondered what he’d been about to say. What he’d thought better of sharing with her. And wondered why, if it was so many years ago, that thought could have left a shadow of pain flashing in his eyes. His secret, whatever it was, had hit him deeply, cutting him in his heart and soul. So much so that even now, he didn’t talk about it.

Maura buried her curiosity for the moment and said only, “Justice? An interesting name.”

“Interesting man,” Jefferson told her with a quick smile that was filled, she thought, with a bit of gratitude for her ignoring his earlier slip of the tongue. “He runs the family ranch.”

Delighted by the image, she smiled. “So he’s a cowboy, then?”

“Yeah, he is.” He grinned suddenly, though sorrow still glittered in his eyes. “And he’s married now, with a son and another baby on the way.”

"Lovely," she said, envying him his large family. "And your other brothers?"

"The youngest, Jesse, is married, too. His wife just had a baby boy a few months back." He stopped and grinned. "Jesse passed out during the delivery. We love to remind him of that."

"What a wonderful story," Maura said. "His love and worry for his wife making him faint. He must be a lovely man."

"Lovely?" Jefferson thought about it and shrugged. "I'm sure his wife Bella thinks so."

The sorrow in his eyes was fading, the longer he talked about his brothers, and Maura realized she thought even more of him now that she knew how close he was to his family. "And your other brother?"

"Jericho is in the Marines. He's serving in the Middle East right now."

"That's a worry for you." She saw the truth of that in the way his jaw clenched briefly.

"Yeah, it is. But he's doing what he loves, so…"

"I understand." Maura drew a fingertip through the ring of damp her beer glass had left behind on the table. "When Cara first left home to go to London and be an actor, I wanted to lock her in the closet." She laughed, remembering how panicked she'd been at the thought of Cara alone in the big city. "Oh, it's not the same kind of worry you must feel, I know, but at the time I thought for sure she'd be eaten alive by all manner of terrible monsters in that city."

"Worry's worry, Maura," he told her, "and it probably drove you nuts to be so far away from her."

Maura nodded and laughed to herself. "I shouldn't have bothered making myself crazy, of course. Cara sailed ahead, claiming the city as her own and making a good start to the career she wants."

"What about you?"

"What about me?" she asked.

"Your career," he said, his eyes locked on her. "Did you always want to be a sheep farmer?"

Maura gave him a half grin. "Well now, what little girl wouldn't dream of sheep dip and shearing time and lambing emergencies. It's the glamour, you see, that drew me."

Now he laughed and she thought it a wonderful sound. She was glad to see that the sadness in his eyes had all but disappeared, as well.

"So then, what made you choose to be what you are?"

"I like my life being my own. I've always worked the farm. I answer to no one. No clock to watch, no boss to kowtow to. No harried rushing about to drive into the city."

He nodded as if he understood exactly what she was saying. But that couldn't be, because the man made his living in one of the busiest cities in the world. He'd no doubt schedules to keep, people to answer to and hordes of employees clustering about him.

"I can see the appeal of that," he admitted.

"Oh, sure you can," Maura teased. "Look at yourself. Flying all around the world, looking for places to put your cameras. I'd wager you've never spent a full day away from a telephone or an Internet modem in years."

"You'd be right about that," he said with a grudging smile. "But to the travel, I do it because I enjoy it. Take Ireland for example…"

"Why don't we?"

Still smiling, he said, "The studio has location scouts, but I wanted to come here for myself. I've always enjoyed travel, seeing new places. It's the best part of the job. So I had my scout find two or three suitable properties online, then I flew over to check them out."

"Two or three?" she asked, curious now. "And which was the Donohue farm? Where did I figure on your list?"

"You were the second place I looked at—and I knew the minute I saw your farm that it was the one I wanted."

"Which brings us back to your offer."

"Isn't that handy?"

She had to give it to him. He was as stubborn as her, with a mind that continually returned to the goal no matter how many distractions got in the way. She could admire that.

Just as she could admit silently that it was time to act. To accept his offer, sign his contract and let him be off, back to his real life before she became so attached her heart would break at his leaving. Besides, she'd gotten her sister's warning glare earlier and knew that Cara would never forgive her if Maura didn't sign on the dotted line, allowing her sister to earn a small part in a big-budget American movie.

"So what's it going to be, Maura?" he asked a moment later. "Are we going to strike a deal or am I going to have to revisit those other properties?"

In the sudden silence, Maura gave a quick look around the Lion's Den. But for Michael behind the bar and a few straggling patrons nursing a final beer, she and Jefferson were alone. The crowd had gone off and the Flanagans had packed up their instruments and left for home and she hadn't even noticed. She'd been so wrapped up in talking with Jefferson, watching his smile, listening to the rumble of his voice, the whole world could have come to an end and she'd have sat through it all without a care.

Which told her she was in very deep danger of losing her heart to a man who wouldn't be interested in keeping it. Yes, best all around to have their business be done so he could leave and her life could settle back into its familiar pattern.

She held her right hand out to him then and there. "We've a deal, Jefferson King. You'll make your movie on my farm and we'll both get what we want."

He took her hand in his, but instead of shaking it as she'd expected, he simply held on to it, stroking his thumb across her slender fingers. Her stomach jittered and her mouth went dry. Suddenly, she wished she'd ordered another beer because something cool and frothy would no doubt ease her parched throat.

"I have the papers at the inn," he said. "Why don't you come to my room now and we can get them signed."

She slipped her hand from his and chuckled. "Oh, no thank you. If I'm seen going into your hotel room at this hour, the village wags will be talking about us for weeks."

"How would anyone know?"

"In a village, there are no secrets," she told him. "Frances Boyle runs a tight ship at her inn. Believe me when I tell you she knows every person that steps across her threshold."

"Okay," he said, "then why don't we order another round, I'll go to the hotel, gather the papers and bring them back here for you to sign?"

Maura considered it, chewing at her bottom lip. She did want the deed done, but it was already late and she'd have to be up with the sun and—

"I thought you said you didn't have to run your life by the clock," he reminded her.

"Touché," she said with a nod, amused that he'd rightly guessed what she'd been thinking about. "All right then, I'll order the beer while you get your paperwork."

When he left, Maura's gaze dropped to his behind and she gave herself a stern talking-to. *You'll have a drink, sign his papers and say thanks very much and goodbye. There'll be no loitering in the moonlight, Maura Donohue. He's a man you can't have, so there's no point in wishing things were different. Don't be a fool about this, Maura, or you'll surely regret it.*

All very rational, she thought. Too bad she wasn't listening.

Chapter Three

He wasn't gone long.

The truth was, Jefferson hadn't wanted to leave her at all. He'd hoped to get her back to the hotel where he could try to slide her into his bed and seal the deal in a way that would ease the ache he'd been carrying for the last few days. But typically enough, Maura had managed to shatter his quickly thought-up plan with a simple "no." So, adjusting his plan on the fly, he thought he could maneuver her into letting him take her home and maybe he could slide himself into *her* bed instead.

When he walked into the quiet pub, Michael the barman gave him a nod of welcome, then went back to watching the news on the television. There was only one other customer left at the bar and Maura at the table where he'd left her. The single candle flickering on their table threw dancing shadows across her face and its faint light seemed to shimmer in the rich thickness of her hair.

The need he'd been carrying around inside him burst into flame. Instantly, his mind filled again with the image of her dancing. Her smile. Her regal yet somehow wild bearing. The rhythm in her body, the fast fury of her small feet, and he wanted with a desperation he'd never known before.

"That was quick," she said when he stopped at the edge of their table.

"No point in wasting time, is there?"

"None at all," she agreed, sliding out of the booth to stand beside him. "But I think we should go back to the farm so Michael can close the pub and go home. I've some wine in the fridge. We can toast the signed contract if you like."

Jefferson was silent for a moment, simply because he couldn't believe she'd suggested the very thing he'd been about to recommend. She seemed to be one step ahead of him and that was an unusual enough happening that he could enjoy the sensation. He wondered, though, if she wanted what he did. Was she simply being nice, or was she as anxious as him for them to be alone together?

He'd find out soon enough.

"Good idea." He laid one hand at the small of her back and guided her across the room. When she called out good-night to Michael, the barman merely waved a towel at them.

Then they were outside, in the stillness. The village was quiet—houses dark, streets empty. There was a hush in the air that felt as if the world had taken a breath and held it. Or maybe, Jefferson told himself, his time in Ireland had been enough to make any man—even *him*—fanciful.

The trip to the Donohue farmhouse was a quick one, yet it felt like forever to Jefferson. With Maura beside him in the car, her scent seemed to wrap itself around him, taunting him, arousing him to the point where simply sitting still became an act of torture.

At the house he parked the car in the driveway, what Maura would call "the street," and walked beside her in silence to the front door. Neither of them had much to say, mainly he thought, because there was too *much* to say. So where was a man supposed to start?

Sign the contract?

Take off your clothes?

He knew which he'd prefer, but he had a feeling it wouldn't be that easy.

Inside the house, Maura flipped light switches on as they moved through the silent rooms to the kitchen. There, she tossed her keys onto the table and walked to the fridge. Looking at him over her shoulder, she said, "Will you take down a couple of glasses from the far cupboard?"

"Sure." Jefferson laid the envelope containing the contract on the table and went for the glasses. A moment later, she was filling them with a cold, straw-colored wine that shone almost gold in the overhead light.

He'd been in this room before, though those visits had been in broad daylight. The old kitchen was clean and tidy, its ancient appliances gleaming with the care she took with them. The counter

was bare of all but a set of canisters and a teapot and the wood floor was scarred from wear but polished to a high shine.

"I suppose I should sign the papers first," she was saying and Jefferson turned his attention to her.

"Good idea. We take care of business first."

"First. And then what?" Her blue eyes glittered as she turned them up to him and Jefferson's body stirred like a hungry dog on a short leash.

"Then," he said, "we'll toast to the success of our joint venture."

A smile tugged at her lips. "Venture, is it? A fine word for it, anyway."

She took the pen he offered her and sat down to read through the short contract. He liked that about her, too. He thought a lot of people might have just taken him at his word and signed where he indicated. Not Maura though. She was careful. Not going to take his word for it that her interests were being looked after.

Was there anything sexier than a smart woman?

Her teeth pulled at her bottom lip as she read and he heard the ticking of the wall clock behind him in the strained quiet. Her head was bent over the paperwork and he had to force himself not to touch her. Not to stroke his fingers through the shining black hair that was only inches from him. *Soon*, he promised himself, reaching for the self-control that had always been a part of him.

But even as that thought rattled through his mind, he had to smile. His self-control had been mostly absent since the first moment he'd seen Maura. She tripped something inside him. Something he hadn't even been aware of in years. Something he hadn't felt since—

The scratch of a pen on paper broke the silence and he came out of his thoughts in time to watch her put the pen down and pick up the now-signed contract.

"It's done," she said.

"It'll be good doing business with you, Maura."

"Ah, I'll wager you say that to all of the people you rent locations from."

"No," he said, sliding the contract back into the envelope then tossing them on the table. "I don't. You're…different."

"Is that so?" She picked up the wineglasses, handed one to him and took a sip of her own. "And how might that be?"

"I think you know the answer to that."

"I might at that," she mused and set her glass down again to take off the cream-colored Irish sweater she wore. Pulling it up and over her head, she shook her hair back and smiled up at him.

Jefferson sucked in a gulp of air, then chased it with a swallow of cold, crisp wine. All she'd been wearing under that sweater of hers tonight was a white silk camisole that clung to her skin and displayed her pebbled nipples with fine clarity.

"You must have been freezing tonight," he muttered.

"A bit," she admitted, "though inside the pub was warm enough and I'll admit, I thought perhaps we might end up back here tonight and I wanted to see the look on your face when I took off the sweater."

"And was it worth it?" he managed to ask.

"Aye, it was." She reached up, hooked one hand behind his head and threaded her fingers through his hair. "I've been wanting you, Jefferson."

His body jumped into overdrive, his erection painfully pushing against his slacks. "Have you?"

"I have. I think you've been wanting me, as well," she added, moving in closer to him.

"Aye," he mimicked. "I have."

Her fingers at the back of his neck felt seductive and sure and he suddenly wanted that touch all over him. He needed to feel her hands on him, to get his hands on her.

He set his glass down and reached for her. Holding her pressed tightly against him, he felt her nipples pushing into his chest and damn near groaned. Then he had to smile. “You know, I’d planned to seduce you tonight.”

She grinned up at him. “Well, isn’t it a fine thing indeed when two plans come together so nicely?”

“Indeed,” he murmured and bent his head to take a kiss. The first of many. His mouth covered hers and she sighed into him, parting her lips eagerly, hungrily. She matched his need and as their tongues twisted and danced together, the flames they built erupted into an inferno.

He wrapped his arms around her, holding her pressed tightly to him and still it wasn’t close enough. Couldn’t feel enough of her. He needed her naked. Needed to feel skin to skin, rough to smooth. He needed to slide his body into hers and feel her heat surround him.

And he needed it *now*.

Quickly, he swept her up, turned around and plopped her down onto the kitchen counter. She whooped in surprise, but recovered quickly enough. Wrapping her legs around his middle, she clung to him, her tongue tangling with his, their breaths combining into a symphony of sighs that filled the quiet of the old house with the desperate sounds of passion.

Again and again, he kissed her, long, deep, short, fast. He loved the taste of her. Richer than any wine, headier than any intoxicant could be. She was all. She was everything. The world spun about her and he was pulled into her orbit with the deliberate tug of a gravity too fierce to fight.

He yanked up the hem of that silken camisole, tore it up over her head, then tossed it behind him without missing a beat. Her breasts were bared to him and he inhaled sharply as he fed the need to admire her. Full, ripe breasts with dark pink nipples, peaked now as if just awaiting his pleasure.

Jefferson cupped those milk-white globes in his hands and sighed himself with her whispered approval. His thumbs and forefingers tweaked and pulled gently at her nipples and when she writhed into him, he dipped his head, taking first one, then the other into his mouth. He licked, he sucked, he nibbled and the sounds she made urged him on, encouraged him to take all he wanted.

Her hands fisted in his hair and held his head to her breasts as if she were worried he’d stop. But stopping wasn’t in the game plan. In fact, he couldn’t have stopped now if his life depended on it. God help him if she were to suddenly change her mind and show him the door. He’d never live through it.

He pulled back, looked up into misty blue eyes and returned the grin she had aimed at him.

“Let’s have your shirt off, Jefferson,” she said. “I’ve a need to feel your skin beneath my hands.”

He obliged her quickly, tearing off his own sweater and the shirt he wore beneath it. Then he groaned as her palms swept over his shoulders and along his back. The warmth of her touch slid into him and sent bolts of fresh need shooting through his system. Her short nails scraped at his skin. Her breath came in hard, brief pants and when she slid her hands down his arms, they were both gasping for air.

“Help me with these,” she said, her voice low and tight as though she’d had to force the words from her throat.

“What?”

“My jeans, man.” She had them unsnapped and was whipping the zipper down as she spoke. She’d already kicked off her shoes. “Help me out of them before I lose my mind for the wanting.”

“Right, right.” His head was full and spinning. All he could think about was the next touch, the next kiss. So he helped her out of her pants, lifting her off the counter so she could scoot around and free herself of both jeans and white cotton bikini underwear.

Jefferson had one shining moment of clarity when he realized that her simple, plain panties were more erotic than any scraps of black lace he’d ever seen. Then the moment was gone and he was lost in the glory of looking at her. Her milk-white skin was soft and smooth and he ached to touch her all over. Explore every curve, every line of her body until he knew her more intimately than any other man ever had.

"Now yours," she said, reaching for his belt buckle. She grinned, tossed her hair back over her shoulder and met his eyes with her own. She was strong and sure of herself, and the sexual ache he felt went a notch higher. "I've a powerful need for you, Jefferson, and I'm not a patient woman as you might have noticed."

"Believe me, I'm grateful to hear it," he muttered, stepping out of his clothes and standing naked in front of her. His body leaped to attention, hard and thick and aching to ease itself inside her. But Jefferson had one more quick moment of reason show itself, so he said, "We should go upstairs. To your bedroom."

"Later," she countered, reaching for him, wrapping her arms around his neck even as she parted her legs and scooted forward to the counter's edge. "If I don't have you inside me this moment, Jefferson King, I'll not be responsible for what happens next."

"My kind of woman," he growled with a smile. "I knew it the moment I saw you."

Her hands cupped his cheeks again. "Then fill me, Jefferson, ease the ache."

He did.

She was hot and wet and so ready for him he almost exploded the moment he entered her. Only his immense self-control kept him from hurtling too soon over an edge he craved like a dying man wished for a few more moments of life. She threw her head back, baring her throat for him and he kissed her there, along the line of her lovely throat, lips and tongue sliding across her skin until she shivered in his arms.

He pushed himself deep as her legs locked around his hips, then pulled out and did the same again. Over and over, as he set a rhythm she raced to follow, their bodies came together, melding, meshing, sliding into a dance they had been building toward for what seemed like forever.

Her soft pants and muted sighs fueled him, fed the images in his mind, the sensations in his body. Never before had Jefferson so lost himself in a woman. He wasn't sure where he ended and she began and he knew with a blinding flash of insight that it didn't matter.

All that mattered was this moment. This one heart-stopping, mind-numbing moment in time.

Pulling his head back, he watched her as he moved one hand to the spot where their bodies joined and touched the pad of his thumb to the most sensitive flesh at her core. She gasped, trembled in his arms and shrieked out his name as her body whipped into a frenzied release.

And no more than a heartbeat later, Jefferson gave himself up, at last, to the crashing need and surrendered himself into her keeping.

Hours later, Maura stretched out on her bed and felt blissfully languid. Every cell in her body was replete. Satisfied. And even as she lay there, just an arm's reach from her lover, she felt hunger begin to stir inside again.

She turned her head on the pillow to look at Jefferson and smiled to herself. He'd been well worth the agonizing wait, she told herself even as a small voice in the back of her head warned her against feeling too much. Wanting too much.

Outside, a storm was building. She heard the first taps of rain against her window as a cold wind rattled the panes. But here, in the cozy master bedroom of the farmhouse, a peat fire burned in the corner hearth and she lay on sweet-smelling sheets beside a man who touched her as she'd never been touched before.

Instantly, that nagging, annoying voice started up again. *Careful now, Maura*, it warned, *he's not the forever kind of man. He's not staying—neither here in your bed nor even in Ireland. He'll be off now that he has what he came for. So don't be a fool and fall in love.*

So she wouldn't take the fall. But she couldn't help feeling for the man.

He would go home remembering her and this night as something magical.

Seemed only fair, since so would she.

"I think I may be dead," Jefferson murmured.

Her thoughts crashed to a halt as he looked at her, his eyes the pale blue color of cornflowers in summer. There was the shadow of a beard on his jaws and his black hair was nearly standing on end. Not surprising considering how they'd spent the last few hours.

Maura's heart turned over in her chest. Soon, very soon, he'd be walking out her door. And as she considered it, she knew she had to have him again. One last time before he became nothing more than a sweet, tender spot in her soul.

Laying one hand on his abdomen, she slowly slid her palm lower and lower. His breath caught in his chest as she wrapped her long fingers around him and felt that hard, eager part of him leap into life again. "Not so very near death, I'm thinking," she said with a teasing smile.

He hissed in another breath, blew it out and said, "You could rouse a dead man, Maura. You've just proved it."

She grinned, feeling a delicious sense of female power rise up inside her. To know she had this effect on a strong man was a heady thing indeed. To know that he was watching her, waiting for her to make her next move, only enhanced the sensation.

Her fingers moved over him, the hard, silky feel of his skin pulsing beneath her own. Then she reached farther down and cupped him, gently rubbing, stroking until he lifted his hips off the mattress and into her touch.

"You do want me dead, is that it?" he managed to wheeze.

"Oh, no," she answered, shifting position to straddle him, "I want you alive, Jefferson King. Alive and inside me."

His hands came down on her upper thighs and she smiled at him, scooping her arms under her hair and lifting them high, displaying her breasts for his pleasure. Her hair fell down around her shoulders in a tangle, her nipples peeking through the black strands. And when his eyes narrowed, she knew she had him. Rising up onto her knees, she looked down at him as if he were her captive.

He reached for her, his hands moving over her body with a greedy touch and she nearly purred at the feel of him against her. But she wanted more. She wanted another time with him. She wanted to ride him and look down into his eyes and know that no matter where else he went in his life, he would take this mental image of the two of them together with him. Always.

She took his hard length in her hand, held him poised just at the entrance to her heat and rubbed the head of him against her until they were both at the ragged edge of control. Then finally, she lowered her body onto his, taking him, inch by glorious inch, inside her.

Maura groaned as he filled her so deeply, she felt him touch her heart and when they were firmly joined, connected as deeply as two people could possibly be, she moved on him. Riding him, her body sliding up and down atop him, setting a pace that started out slow and then became frantic. She swiveled her hips against him and leaned over so that he could cup her breasts and pull at her aching nipples.

Her gaze locked with his, she kept moving, tirelessly, ceaselessly, laying claim to his body as she couldn't his heart. And when the expectant rise of glory slammed home and shattered her, she called his name out loud. When she felt him release an instant later and heard him shout for her, she knew the echo of it would ripple through her life forever.

Dull gray light slid through the wisp of white curtains hanging at her windows and Jefferson knew the night was over. Maura was curled into him, one leg across his, one arm tossed over his chest. Her every breath dusted his skin and the scent of her hair was in every lungful of air he claimed.

He hadn't slept, yet he was more awake than he could ever remember being. For hours, he'd made love to his wild Irish woman. And when she'd finally fallen into exhausted slumber, he'd remained awake, just watching her sleep.

His time there was over and he told himself that was a very good thing. He'd become… comfortable in Ireland. In this house. With this woman. He'd begun to structure his days around seeing her. Arguing with her. Watching her laugh.

And that simply wasn't in his plan.

Jefferson didn't want to care about her. Didn't want to ever go down that road again. He would retain control at all costs to avoid the pain he'd once suffered.

Carefully, he slipped out of bed, amused more than anything else when Maura simply snuggled deeper beneath the handmade quilt they'd drawn up over themselves during the night. She muttered something unintelligible, then pulled that quilt over her head.

When they'd finally come upstairs the night before they'd carried their discarded clothes with them, so Jefferson snatched his slacks and shirt off a delicate-looking chair and drew them on. Once he was dressed, he was more in control. He felt his life slide back into place and knew that it was the best for all concerned.

One spectacular night with an intriguing woman wasn't going to change him. He was what he was and his life wasn't in Ireland, no matter how tempting the thought might be. Besides, no one had said anything about permanent. He'd deliberately avoided even thinking that word. What he had with Maura was fun. Uncomplicated. Best to leave it at that.

"You're leaving, then?" Her voice was muffled, since her head was still beneath the quilt.

"Yeah," he said. "I've got to get back to work. I've been gone longer than I planned already. And, now that the contract is signed, there's really no reason to stay any longer."

"Ah yes, the contract."

She pulled the quilt down and her sleepy, dark blue eyes pinned him. For one awful moment, he was afraid she might ask him to stay. He hoped to hell she didn't, because it wouldn't take much convincing to have him going along with that idea, and all that would do was prolong the inevitable. Make this harder—on both of them.

But she surprised him again.

Pushing her hair back out of her face, she nodded and sat up, letting the quilt pool at her waist. His mouth went dry and his body stirred, requiring all of his focus just to get it under control again. Completely at ease with her own nudity, she scooted off the bed, walked right up to him and went up on her toes. Linking her arms around his neck, she gave him a long, luscious kiss, then looked up at him. "Then I'll say goodbye, Jefferson King. Have a safe trip."

His hands rested on her bare hips and his fingers burned with the heat of her. Nothing quite like a warm, naked woman pressed up against you to make a man think of a long, lazy day spent rolling around on her bed. But he had a King jet waiting for him and a business and a life to get back to.

She smiled and he asked, "That's it? No, 'Please stay, Jefferson'?"

Shaking her head, she rubbed her fingertip across his mouth, then stepped back from him. "What would be the point in that? We're neither of us children. We wanted each other and we had each other. It was a lovely night. Let's keep its ending just as lovely."

Apparently, he'd been worried for no reason. She wasn't going to beg him to stay. She wasn't going to cry or say how she'd miss him or ask when he was returning. None of the things he'd hoped to avoid were happening.

So why was he irritated?

"I'll see you off, shall I?" She stepped over to her closet, grabbed a dark green terry-cloth robe and slipped into it. Her body was covered now, but the imprint of her was still etched firmly in his mind. Hiding what he'd already spent hours exploring wasn't going to change anything.

"You don't have to go downstairs with me."

"Oh," she said, leading the way out to the landing and then down the stairs. "'Tisn't just for you. I'm off to brew some tea and then get to work myself."

His eyebrows rose. So much for the fond farewell. His leaving was no more than a by-product here. She was picking up the threads of her everyday life and so was he, he reminded himself. So again, why the flicker of irritation?

She opened the front door and held it wide for him. She smiled, reached up and cupped his cheek briefly. “Fly safe, Jefferson.”

“Right.” He stepped onto the porch and the Irish wind howled around him. “Take care of yourself, Maura.”

“Oh, I always do,” she told him. “And you, as well. Not to worry about your film crew, either. All will be here when they arrive.”

“Fine.”

“All right then.” She gave him one last smile, then shut the door, leaving him no choice now but to walk to his car and leave.

With her back to the closed door, Maura wrapped her arms around her middle and held on. After a few steadying breaths, she heard his car engine fire up and she leaned toward the nearest window to catch one last glimpse of him.

He steered his car out onto the road and in a moment, he was gone, as if he’d never been. Even the echo of his car was nothing more than a hush on the wind.

“Well, now,” she murmured, swiping away the tears running down her cheeks. “It’s best this way and you know it, my girl. No point in laying out your heart for him to stumble over on his way out of the country.”

She wasn’t the first foolish woman to fall for the wrong man entirely. No doubt, she wouldn’t be the last, either.

“Doesn’t matter now anyway as he’s gone.” She headed through the quiet house toward the kitchen and a morning pot of tea. Best to get back to her life. The life she knew. The animals and the land and the world that was hers. “You’ll get over him,” she promised herself firmly. “Won’t take long at all.”

Chapter Four

She wasn't over him.

It had been two months and she still thought of Jefferson King nearly every day. Her only hope was that he was being haunted by memories, as well. That would make this whole thing more fair.

The problem was, she had too much alone time, she told herself. Too much empty time to spend in thoughts she shouldn't be indulging in anyway. But with Cara off making a film in Dublin, Maura was alone at the farmhouse with nothing more to talk to than the dog she'd recently acquired.

Unfortunately, King, named for a certain man she was still feeling fondness for when she purchased the dog, was not much of a conversationalist.

Now, along with her wild thoughts, her misery at missing the man she never should have let into her heart, the work building up to lambing season and her new dog, she was also feeling a bit off physically. Her stomach was queasy most of the time and she'd been so dizzy only that morning in the barn, she'd had to sit down before she fell down.

"I was right, wasn't I? It's the flu, I know it," Maura told the village doctor as he walked into the examination room. "I haven't been getting enough sleep and there's so much work to be done. I'm run down is all. I thought you could give me a little something to help me sleep."

Doc Rafferty had been in the village for forty years. He'd treated everyone for miles around and he had delivered both Maura and Cara himself. So he knew them far too intimately to pull any punches, so to speak. And as he was a forthright man in any case, he met her gaze and told her the truth of the matter.

"I've got the results of your test," he said, checking the papers he held in his hand as if to be sure of what he was about to say. "If this is the flu, it's the nine-month variety, Maura. You're pregnant."

A beat of silence fell between them as those last two words of the doctor's repeated over and over again in her head. Sure she'd misheard him, Maura laughed shortly.

"No, I'm not." She shook her head. "That's impossible."

"Is it now?" The older man sat down on a rolling stool and shifted his pale green eyes up to hers. "You're telling me you've done nothing to produce such a condition?"

"Well I—" He'd examined her from head to toe too often for her to try to persuade him she was a virgin, and why would she care to? But this? No. It couldn't be.

Maura stopped, frowned and started thinking. Odd, but she'd been paying no attention at all to her period and hadn't even noticed until now that it hadn't shown up in quite some time. Quickly, she did a little math in her head and as she reached the only conclusion she could under the circumstances, she let out a breath and whispered, "Oh my God."

"There you are, then." Doc Rafferty reached out, patted her knee. "You'll be feeling fine again soon. The first couple of months are always the hardest, after all. In the meantime though, I want you to take better care of yourself." He scribbled a few things down on a pad and then tore off the top sheet and handed it to her.

Maura couldn't read it through the fog blocking her vision.

"Eat regular meals, cut back on the caffeine and I'll have Nurse Doherty give you a sample bottle of vitamins." He stood up, looked down at her through kind eyes and said, "Maura, love. You should tell the baby's father right away."

The baby's father.

The man she'd sworn to put firmly in her past.

So much for that fine notion. He would surely be a part of her future now, wouldn't he?

"Yes, I will." Tell Jefferson that he was going to be a father. Well, wouldn't that make for a lovely long-distance conversation?

"Will you be all right with this, Maura?"

"Of course. I'll be fine." And she would. Already, the first shock of the news was passing and a small curl of excitement was fluttering to life inside her.

She was going to have a baby.

"Do you need to talk about anything?"

"What?" Maura's gaze lifted to meet his. Kindness was stamped on his familiar features and she knew he was worried for her. And though she appreciated it, he needn't be.

"No, Doctor," she told him, scooting off the examination table. "I'm fine, really. It was a bit of a shock, but…" She stopped and smiled. "It's happy news after all, isn't it?"

"You're a good girl, Maura, as I've always said." He gave her a nod of approval and added, "I'd like to see you once a month now, just to keep a check on you and the baby. Make the appointment on your way out. And, Maura, no more heavy lifting, understand?"

When he left the room, she was alone with her news. Although…

"Not as alone as I was when I arrived, am I?" she whispered and dropped one hand to her flat belly.

Awe rose up inside her.

There was a child growing within her. A new life. A precious, innocent life that would be counting on her. But Maura was a woman used to responsibility, so that didn't worry her. The fact that her child would grow up without a father was a bit of a hitch. When she'd imagined the day she would become a mother, she'd had hazy, blurry images of a faceless man standing at her side, rejoicing with her at the birth.

Never once had she considered being a single mother.

Heaven knew she hadn't planned on this. Had, in fact been taking precautions—well, the over-the-counter precautions. It wasn't as though she had sex often enough to warrant anything permanent.

Of course, she should have insisted Jefferson wear a condom, that would have been the intelligent thing to do. But neither of them had been thinking straight that night, she admitted silently. For herself, she'd been in such a hunger to have Jefferson over, under and in her, she hadn't wanted to wait for anything.

Now, it seemed, there would be consequences.

But such wonderful consequences. All penances should be this happily paid.

A child.

She'd always wanted to be a mother.

Maura turned, looked out the window and watched as thick, pewter clouds raced across the sky. A storm was brewing, she thought, and wondered if it was a metaphor for what was about to happen to her life.

"We'll be just fine, you and I," she told her child, still keeping one hand tight to the womb where her baby slept. She would see to it that her child was safe and well and happy.

As soon as she got home, she'd call Jefferson. She'd keep the conversation brisk and as impersonal as she could, considering the situation. She'd tell him because it was right. But she'd also tell him she had no need for him to come rushing back. She wasn't over him just yet and had no wish to see him again, stirring up things that had yet to settle down.

One phone call. Then they'd be done.

Two months later…

"Mr. King said there would be no problems."

Maura glared at the little man standing on her porch. He was short, bald and looked as though a stiff wind off the lake might blow him into Galway city. She showed him no mercy. "Aye, your Mr. King says a lot of things, doesn't he?"

He took a deep breath as if trying for patience. She understood that feeling very well as she'd been trying for weeks and still hadn't found any.

"We do have a contract," the man reminded her.

She looked past him out to the film crew setting up tents and trailers and cameras with banks of lights surrounding them. Somehow she hadn't expected the whole mess to be quite so…intimidating. As it was, she had dozens of people trampling the grass in her front yard and the complaining bleats from the sheep were as sharp as nails against a chalkboard. Swallowing her irritation as best she could, she said, "We do indeed and I'll stay to the very letter of the contract."

"Meaning?" the little man asked, his small tight mouth flattening into a grim slash across his narrow face.

"Meaning, I said you could be on my property, but nowhere near the lambing sheds."

"But Mr. King said…"

"If you've a problem with me," Maura told him, "I suggest you phone your I'm-so-busy-I-can't-bother-to-return-a-message King and deliver your complaints to him." Just before she slammed the front door, she added, "And I wish you good luck getting him on the bleeding phone as I haven't been able to manage that no-doubt miraculous feat in the last two months."

Jefferson King was juggling what felt like thirty different projects at once. It helped to stay busy. Thankfully, his position at King Studios ensured that he remained that way.

There were currently three films under production and each of them presented different headaches. Dealing with producers, directors and, worst of all to his mind, the actors, was enough to make a man wonder what he'd first enjoyed about this business. He had deals rolling with agents, a couple of smaller studios he was looking to absorb and he was in the middle of buying the rights to a bestselling romance novel to turn it into what would be, he firmly believed, a blockbuster summer hit.

So yeah. Busy. But he preferred it that way. Busy meant his thoughts were too distracted to drift toward memories of Ireland that came only a dozen times a day now. Images of deep green fields, smoky, music-filled pubs and, mostly, thoughts of Maura Donohue.

Which was just as well because every time a picture of that blue-eyed woman rose up in his mind, he was filled with a wild mixture of emotions that were so tangled and twisted into knots inside him it was impossible to figure out which had prominence.

He tossed his pen onto the desktop and scowled at the wall opposite him. Of course he remembered the passion. The chemistry between them that had built slowly and inexorably until it had finally exploded on their last night together.

Yet he also recalled clearly the calm, cool look in her eye as she walked him to the door that last morning. He gritted his teeth as he saw her face in his mind. Clear blue eyes, luscious mouth curved in a half smile. She hadn't cried. Hadn't asked him to stay. Had, in fact, acted as if he were nothing more than an annoying guest keeping her from her work.

Fresh aggravation rose inside him at the memory, so he pushed it away and grabbed his pen again. Thumb flicking madly at the pen top, he told himself it wasn't that he really *cared*, it was the principle of the thing. Women didn't walk away from Jefferson King. No matter the situation, it was *he* who did the walking. Always. But she'd thrown him off. Caught him off balance and kept him that way and a part of him wondered if that hadn't been her plan all along.

Had she been teasing him, leading him along sexually until she got the offer just the way she wanted it, and then took him to bed to seal the deal? Was she that manipulative and he simply hadn't seen it? He'd hate to think that. Went against the grain to consider it, but why else had she been so casual about a night that had damn well hit him harder than he had expected it to?

What kind of woman spent the night with a man and then turned him loose the next morning so easily?

And why the *hell* was he still thinking about her? The deal was done; it was time to move on. "Well past time," he muttered, since there was no one else in his office to overhear him.

"That's perfect," he added under his breath, "now she's got me talking to myself and the woman probably hasn't given me a single thought."

Which really fried his ass if truth be told. Damn it, Jefferson King was *not* forgettable. Women usually crowded around him, clamoring for his attention. Not just the wannabe actresses who littered Hollywood's streets every few feet, either. But women with wit and intelligence. Women who looked at him and saw a successful man, sure of himself and his own place in the world.

Women who weren't Maura.

Still grumbling, Jefferson flipped through the stack of papers on his desk, and made a few scattered notes. He was buying up an independent film company, thinking of branching King Studios out into documentaries. But it was a stretch to say his mind was focused on that particular task at the moment.

No, like it or not, he was still thinking about *her*.

But why? After all, it wasn't as if either of them had wanted or counted on a relationship. They'd had some good times together, capped by one amazing night of mind-blowing sex. So why was he so disgusted at her casual goodbye the next morning? It wasn't as if he'd been planning to stay anyway.

It had to be ego, pure and simple.

His had taken a slap and that was something he wasn't used to. How had Maura slipped under his well-honed defenses to leave such an indelible image on his mind?

"Doesn't matter," he said aloud, hearing the determination in not only the words but his tone. The memories would fade, eventually. But that wasn't much comfort in the middle of the night when he woke up with dreams of her raging through his mind.

But a man couldn't be held responsible for what his unconscious mind dredged up, could he? He pushed away from his desk and walked to the window overlooking Beverly Hills and Hollywood. The streets were jammed with cars and in the distance he could see the stalled traffic on the freeway. Smog hung low over the scene, a hazy brown blanket covering a city with millions of people all hurrying through their lives. And for just a moment, he let himself imagine the cool green fields of Ireland. The warm welcome of the pub.

The narrow road to Maura's farmhouse.

Irritated with himself and the memories that were still far too vivid, he scrubbed both hands over his face and turned away from the window. He didn't have time to waste indulging in thoughts of a woman who'd no doubt already moved on.

His phone rang and he grabbed at it with the eagerness of a drowning man reaching for a life preserver. "What is it, Joan?"

His assistant said, "Mr. King, Harry Robinson's on line three for you. He says they're having problems on location."

Harry was directing the Irish epic shooting at Maura's farmhouse. Frowning, Jefferson said, "Thanks, Joan. Put him through."

The line clicked over and he asked, "What seems to be the problem, Harry?"

The other man's voice was sharp and filled with both static and disgust. "The problem is, nothing's going right over here. It's a nightmare."

"What? What happened?"

"What hasn't?" Harry countered. "That inn you told me about? Suddenly it has no vacancies. The local caterer's prices have gone up three times in the last week and the coffee's always cold. The guy at the pub even insists he's run out of beer whenever we walk in."

Jefferson turned around and stared blankly out at the city view again. His own reflection stared back at him from the sun-drenched glass. He looked just as confused as he felt. "Run out of beer? How is it possible for a pub to run out of beer?"

"Tell me about it."

That mild swell of irritation he'd felt earlier began to bubble and churn inside him. "That doesn't sound like Craic to me."

"Yeah, well, it doesn't exactly match the description you gave me of the place, either." In an aside to someone else, Harry said, "Well, move the trough out of the shot. No? Fine. I'll be there in a minute." Then he refocused. "That's an example of what we're dealing with. There's a feed trough I want to move and Ms. Donohue refuses to cooperate."

Jefferson tugged at the tie that felt as if it was strangling him. "Go on."

"Yesterday," Harry told him, "the owner of the market told us he wouldn't be selling to us at all and we could just go into the city for whatever we needed."

"He can't do that."

"Seems he can. I don't have to tell you that West-port's a much longer drive and it's eating up time we don't have."

"I know." What the hell was going on?

"Oh, and the market guy said that if I spoke to you I should tell you, and I quote, 'There'll be no peace for you here until someone does his duty,' end quote. Do you have any idea what he was talking about?"

"No." Duty? What someone? What duty? What the hell had happened in Ireland to turn an entire village against his film crew? The citizens of Craic had been nothing but excited about the prospect a few months ago. What could possibly have changed?

"What about Maura?" he asked suddenly. "Hasn't she been able to help with any of this?"

"Help?" Harry laughed. "That woman would as soon as shoot us as look at us."

"Maura?" Jefferson was stunned now and even more in the dark than he had been before. All right, she hadn't been as thrilled with the prospect of a film crew being on her land as her friends and neighbors had been. But she'd signed the contract in good faith and he knew she had been prepared for all of the confusion and disruption. Her own sister was *in* the movie, so if nothing else, that should have garnered her cooperation. So what had changed?

"Yes, Maura," Harry snapped. "She lets her sheep run wild through shots, her dog chews everything it can get its paws on—"

"She's got a dog?" When did she get a dog?

"She says it's a dog. I say it's part pony. The thing's huge and clumsy. Always knocking things over. Then as if that wasn't enough, one of the cameramen was chased by Ms. Donohue's damn bull."

All right, something was definitely wrong. Whatever else he could say or think about Maura, she was nothing if not meticulous about caring for her animals and the farm itself. She'd shown him the bull, and had warned him away even though the animal was an old one. "How'd the bull get out?"

"Damned if I know. One minute we're shooting the scene, the next minute, Davy Simpson's nearly flattened under the damn bull. Good thing Davy's fast on his feet."

"What is going on over there?" Frustration spiked with temper and twisted into an ugly knot inside him.

His mind raced with possibilities and none of them were flattering to the woman who'd signed his contract. Was she after more money? Was she trying to back out of the whole deal?

Too damn bad to either of those scenarios, he told himself. He had her signature on a legal document and he wasn't about to let her off any hook, nor was he going to be extorted for more money. Whatever she was up to, it seemed she'd gotten the whole village to back her play. What other reason would they have for acting as they were?

Well, it wasn't going to work.

Jefferson King didn't bow to pressure and he sure as hell didn't walk away from trouble.

"That's what I'd like to know," Harry muttered and the words were almost lost in the static of a bad connection. "The way you talked about this place, I thought it would be an easy shoot."

"It should've been," Jefferson insisted. "Everything was agreed on and besides, we've got a signed contract allowing you access to Maura's farm."

"Yeah, the production assistant tried to remind her of that the other day. Got the door slammed in his face."

"She can't do that," Jefferson told him.

"Uh-huh. I know that. You know that. I don't think she does. Or if she does, she doesn't care."

A hard punch of irritation shot through him again and this time it was brighter, fiercer. "She damn well should. She signed the contract willingly enough. And cashed the check. Nobody forced her to."

Harry huffed out a breath. "I'm telling you, Jefferson, unless things get straightened out around here soon, this shoot is going to go way over budget. Hell, even the weather's giving us a hard time. I've never seen so much rain."

This didn't make any sense. None of it. He'd thought everything was settled. Clearly, he'd been wrong. Looked like he was going to be heading back to County Mayo whether he had planned to or not. Time to have a little talk with a certain sheep farmer. Time to remind her that he had the law on his side and he wasn't leery about using it.

"All right," he said. "The rain I can't do anything about. But I'll take care of the rest of it."

"Yeah?" the director asked. "How?"

"I'll fly over there myself and get to the bottom of it." Something inside him stirred into life at the thought of seeing Maura again, though he wouldn't admit that, even to himself. This wasn't about his fling with Maura Donohue. This was about business. And she'd better have a damned good reason for being so uncooperative.

"Fine. Hurry."

Jefferson hung up, shouted for his assistant and grabbed his suit jacket out of the closet. He'd already scheduled a trip to Austria to meet with the owner of an ancient castle to talk about filming rights. He'd just work Ireland into the trip.

Shouldn't take long to fix whatever had gone wrong in Craic. He'd stay in the village, talk to everyone, then remind Maura that they had a damn deal. If she was playing games, they were going to stop.

Women were notoriously inconsistent, he reminded himself. God knew the actresses and agents he worked with could drive a man insane. Their moods could change with a whim and any man in the vicinity was liable to be flattened.

Besides, seeing Maura would probably be a good thing in the long run. Give him a chance to look at her without the haze of great sex as a filter. He'd see her for what she was. Just a woman he was doing business with. They could meet, talk, then part again and maybe then he'd stop being hounded by his own memories.

His assistant, Joan, an older woman with no-nonsense green eyes and a detail-oriented personality, hustled into the office.

"What's going on?" she asked.

"I'm going to need you to contact the airport. Tell the pilot we're making a pit stop in Ireland before we head to Austria."

"Sure, Ireland, Austria. Practically neighbors."

"Funny. Something's come up." He was already headed for the door. "I'm going by my house to pack. Tell the pilot I'll be there in two hours. Have the plane prepped and ready to go."

One of the perks of being a member of the King family was having King Jets at one's disposal. His cousin Jackson ran the company, renting out luxury planes to those who willingly paid outrageous amounts of money for comfort while traveling. But the King family always had the pick of the jets whenever they needed them. Which made all the travel Jefferson did for work a lot easier to take.

Because of that, he could be in the air before dinnertime and in Ireland for breakfast.

"I'll tell him," Joan said as he walked past her. "The jet will be ready. Should I fax you those papers on the McClane buyout while you're in the air or wait until you return?"

He thought about it for a moment, then shook his head. J. T. McClane was the owner of an actual ghost town just on the outskirts of the Mohave desert. Jefferson had the idea to do a modern-day western-gothic film set in what was left of that town. But the man had been dickering over the price for weeks. Wouldn't hurt to remind the man that King Studios was going to remain in charge of the negotiations.

"Just hang on to them until I get back," he said finally. "Won't hurt to make McClane sweat about this deal for a while."

Joan smiled. "Got it. And, boss…"

"Yeah?"

"Good luck."

Jefferson smiled and nodded as he left, and kept his thoughts to himself. No point in telling Joan that the only one who was going to need luck around here was Maura Donohue.

Chapter Five

Jefferson stopped in the village to book a room at the small inn that he'd stayed in on his last trip. He was jet-lagged, hungry and well past the breaking point. So when the innkeeper, Frances Boyle, was less than welcoming when she opened her bright red front door and gave him a grim glare, Jefferson's hackles went up.

"Well," she said, crossing her thick arms over a prodigious chest covered by a shawl the color of mustard. "If it isn't himself, come back to the scene of the crime."

"Crime?" One black eyebrow lifted. "Excuse me?"

"Hah! A fine time to be beggin' pardon and if it's pardon you're asking I'm not the one it should be aimed at."

He closed his eyes briefly. The older woman's brogue was so thick, and she spoke so quickly, he'd thought for a moment she was speaking Gaelic. Then her words sunk in and he realized he was being *scolded* as if he were a five-year-old who'd thrown a rock through her window.

"Mrs. Boyle," Jefferson said, gathering the reins on his simmering temper and trying for a charming smile. "I've just spent too many hours on a jet, then driven here from the airport in a rental car that blew a tire on the road and now—" he paused to toss a hard stare at the lowering gray sky "—I'm getting rained on. I'm happy to listen to whatever your complaints might be after you rent me a room so I can change clothes and get settled."

"Humph."

Her snort was caught between a snide laugh and a jolt of outrage. "Used to giving orders, aren't you? No doubt your lackeys jump to attention when you snarl. Well, I'm no one's lackey, boyo, and I've no time for the likes of you, Jefferson King."

Lackey? He didn't have lackeys.

"The likes of—" What the hell had happened to this place in a few short months? Had he stepped into an alternate universe? He pushed his wet hair out of his eyes, blinked the raindrops off his lashes and asked, "What did I do? I haven't even been here in months!"

She huffed out a breath. "So you haven't, when you should've been, I say. You're a sad disappointment to me, *Mister* King."

"Disappointment?" Seriously, he felt as though he needed a translator. It was as if the older woman was speaking in code. "What the *hell* is going on around here?"

"A *decent* man would already know the answer to that question." Her features were hard as stone and her normally placid eyes were glittering. The toe of her practical black shoe tapped against the linoleum. "And I don't appreciate you swearing at me in my own home."

"I'm not in your home," he pointed out, as a cold drop of rain sneaked underneath his shirt collar and rolled icily down his spine.

"And not likely to be any time soon, either."

So, he was getting a firsthand lesson in what his film crew had been experiencing. He couldn't understand this. When he'd been here the last time, Frances Boyle had been warm, funny, *friendly*. He wasn't used to being treated with outright disrespect.

But whatever her problem was with him, he'd deal with it later. All he wanted at the moment was a room, a change of clothes and a meal. Once he was warm, dry and fed, he knew he'd be in better shape to handle not only Mrs. Boyle, but anything else that awaited him in this picturesque village.

Then he'd be ready to head off to Maura's farmhouse to settle whatever bug she had up her— He cut that thought off abruptly and tried one last time. "Mrs. Boyle. I just need a room for a couple of days," he said tightly.

"A shame for you as I'm full up."

"Full? It's not even tourist season."

She sniffed and her voice was cold enough to drop frost on her words. “Be that as it may.”

Then she closed the door on him with a sharp crack of sound. So much for charm. Fine. He’d just stop at a B and B somewhere along the road. As he recalled, there was one not far from Maura’s farmhouse.

Still, it stung. Hardly the welcome he’d been expecting. Jefferson turned around on her porch and looked up and down the narrow Main Street of the village. It looked like a postcard, even in this miserable weather. Sidewalks were thin strips of cement that rose up and down as the road willed it. The shops were a rainbow of colors, and smoke drifted upward from chimneys to be caught by the ever-present wind. Doors were closed against the rain currently pummeling him and early-blooming flowers in pots bent with the water and wind.

Scraping one hand across his face, he stepped off the porch and headed for the Lion’s Den pub. At least there, he’d be able to get a meal and something hot to drink. Then he’d face the rest of the drive to Maura’s. As he jogged across the empty street, he told himself that Mrs. Boyle’s attitude was probably just a case of women sticking together. He already knew Maura was angry about something and the innkeeper was just showing solidarity. God knew every female he’d ever known would be willing to take the side of a fellow woman against a man no matter what the argument might be.

Jefferson stepped into the warmth of the pub and paused a moment to enjoy the glow of the fire in the hearth and the rich scents of beer and some kind of stew simmering in the kitchen. Then he nodded vaguely at a couple of men seated at a table, before taking a spot at the bar for himself. He’d barely settled himself when Michael came out of the kitchen, took a look at Jefferson and came to a sudden stop. His wide, genial face flushed dark red and his blue eyes flashed with trouble.

“We’re closed,” he said.

Jefferson muffled a groan. This he hadn’t expected at all and if he were to be honest about it, he could admit to himself that he felt a bit betrayed at the moment. He and Michael had become friends the last time he was here. And now, the look on the man’s face said he’d happily plant one of his meaty fists on Jefferson’s jaw.

“Closed?” Jefferson jerked a thumb in the direction of the two men, each sipping a freshly stacked Guinness beer. “What about them?”

“We’re not closed to them, are we?”

“So, it’s only me.”

“I didn’t say that.” Michael picked up a pristine bar rag and idly polished a bar that already shone like a dark jewel in the overhead light.

“Yeah.” Jefferson swallowed his anger because it wasn’t going to do him any good here anyway. Until he knew exactly what he was accused of, he couldn’t fight it.

He pushed off the stool, leaned both hands on the bar and met Michael’s heated stare with one of his own. “When we first met, you struck me as a fair man, Michael,” he said. “I’m sorry to be proven wrong.”

The man inhaled so sharply, his barrel chest swelled up to massive proportions. “Aye and you struck me as a man to do his duty.”

“Duty?” He threw both arms wide. “Is everyone in the village nuts all of a sudden? What’re you talking about?”

Michael slapped the bar with his palm. “What I’m talking about is you being nothing more than a rich American taking what he wants and never paying a mind to his leavings.”

Jefferson straightened up like someone had shoved a poker down the back of his shirt. He was trying to be reasonable here, but a man could only be pushed so far. “What leavings?”

“That’s not for me to say but for you to know.”

Great, he thought, disgusted. More code.

"Look, we obviously don't know each other as well as I thought, Michael," Jefferson told him, "so I'm going to let that insult go. But I can tell you I've never shirked my duty in my life—nor do I know anything about any 'leavings'—not that I owe you any explanations."

"Oh, on that you're spot-on," the big man muttered. "It's not *me* you're owin', Jefferson King."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"It's time you found out, don't you think?"

"And just who should I ask?" Even as he said the words though, he knew what the answer would be.

Sure enough, a moment later, Michael said, "Talk to Maura. She'll tell you or not as she pleases. But don't come into Craic looking for friends until you do."

The men at the table behind him muttered agreement, but Jefferson paid them no attention at all. Why was the town one step short of a mob threatening to tar and feather him?

And why was he still standing there when he knew where he could go to get some answers?

"Fine. I'm here to talk to Maura anyway. I'll settle this with her and then you and I are going to have a talk."

"I look forward to it."

He left the pub at a brisk walk and headed straight for his rental car. The rain pelted at him as if Heaven were throwing icy pebbles down just to elevate his misery. He felt the stares of dozens of people watching him as he went and realized that he'd fully expected to solve this problem with ease.

He'd had friends here, damn it. What could have happened to change that so completely? And why was Maura the key?

He fired up the engine and steered the small sports car down the narrow road leading out of town and toward Maura. It was time to get some answers.

The muddy track was familiar, and despite the carefully banked anger inside him, there was something else within, too. A curl of anticipation at the thought of seeing Maura again. He didn't want it. Had fought the very memory of her for months. But being here again fed the flames he'd been trying to extinguish.

Now wasn't the time for that, though. He wasn't here to indulge in his desire for a woman who'd made no secret of the fact that she wasn't interested. He wasn't going to walk blindly back down a path he'd already traveled.

Besides, he was wet, tired and just this side of miserable when he pulled the rental car into Maura's drive. Through the heavy mist and low-hanging clouds, the manor house sat like a beacon of light. Its whitewashed walls, dark green shutters and bright blue door belied the gray day and the jewel-colored flowers bursting from pots on either side of the door valiantly stood against an icy wind.

On the far side of the yard, three RVs, a tent and the equipment that made up a film shoot were staggered. People bustled about, though Jefferson knew the actors would be tucked inside their trailers, waiting out the weather. Between the rain and the delays caused by an uncooperative Maura and friends, Jefferson could practically hear money being flushed down the drain.

Frustrated with the entire situation, Jefferson opened the car door to a fresh wall of wet, and once he was standing on the sodden gravel drive slammed the door closed again.

Heads turned. Worker bees, the PA, Harry the director, all looked at him, but when Harry made to walk toward him, Jefferson held him back with one upraised hand. He wanted to talk to Maura before he got any more information.

"And she'd better have some damn answers," he muttered, soles of his shoes sliding on the wet gravel.

With anger churning in his gut, he started for the house. He didn't notice the charm of the place now. Paid no attention to the half-dozen or so spring lambs chasing each other through the fenced front yard.

He didn't even slow down when someone shouted a warning, so he was taken by surprise when a black dog as big as a small bear charged from the corner of the house and made straight for him.

"Jesus Christ!" Jefferson's shout of surprise was raw and hoarse, scraping from his throat loud enough to carry over the deranged barking filling the air.

Instantly, the front door flew open. Maura stepped into the rain and said sharply, "King!"

The dog skidded to a stop on the gravel, its momentum carrying it into Jefferson, who swayed, but held his ground against the heavy impact. Still startled, Jefferson looked down into a smiling dog face, complete with sharp black eyes and a tongue the size of a flag lolling out the side of its mouth.

The dog's huge head was waist high on Jefferson, and the dog had to weigh at least a hundred pounds.

"It *is* a pony," he said, remembering Harry's comment.

"Irish wolfhound," Maura told him, then added, "He meant no harm. He was only greeting you, as he's a baby yet and a poor judge of character."

He ground his back teeth together and shifted a look at her. "His name's King? You named him after me?"

Her mouth twisted into a brief sneer. "Aye, I did as he's a son of a bitch, as well."

Jefferson wasn't amused. He looked into her dark blue eyes and saw a river of emotions shining out at him. They were shifting, changing even as he watched, so that he wasn't sure if she was going to throw something at him or rush into his arms, however belatedly. A moment later, he had his answer.

"Why're you here?"

The music of her accent didn't soften her words any. She faced him down as the wind lifted her long black hair into a dance about her head. She was beautiful and stubborn and the most fascinating woman he'd ever known.

Because of her, he'd hopped a plane and flown thousands of miles only to be treated like a leper by people he'd considered friends.

"You mean, why am I standing in the rain in front of a hardheaded woman who isn't honoring the contract she signed?" He snapped the words out and noticed she didn't so much as flinch. "I've been asking myself the same thing."

"Your people are littering the street in front of my house at this very moment," she challenged, "so I'm thinking I'm honoring what was between us a good deal more than you have."

"You know," he said, shoving the monstrously huge dog off his legs so that he could stalk toward the porch. And her. "I've been back in Ireland about an hour and in that short amount of time, I've been rained on, had a flat tire, got mud in my shoes and been insulted by everyone I've spoken to. So I'm not in the mood to listen to more obscure references to what a bastard I am. If you've got a problem with me," he added, stopping just short of the porch, "then tell me what it is so I can fix it."

Her eyes narrowed on him. She crossed her arms over her chest, lifted her chin and said, "I'm pregnant. Fix *that*."

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