

In from the cold

Nora Roberts

MacGregors - book 7

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Chapter One

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His name was MacGregor. He clung to that even as he clung to the horse's reins. The pain was alive, capering down his arm like a dozen dancing devils. Hot, branding hot, despite the December wind and blowing snow.

He could no longer direct the horse but rode on, trusting her to find her way through the twisting paths made by Indian or deer or white man. He was alone with the scent of snow and pine, the muffled thud of his mount's hooves and the gloom of early twilight. A world hushed by the sea of wind washing through the trees.

Instinct told him he was far from Boston now, far from the crowds, the warm hearths, the civilized. Safe. Perhaps safe. The snow would cover the trail his horse left and the guiding path of his own blood.

But safe wasn't enough for him. It never had been. He was determined to stay alive, and for one fierce reason. A dead man couldn't fight. By all that was holy he had vowed to fight until he was free.

Shivering despite the heavy buckskins and furs, teeth chattering now from a chill that came from within as well as without, he leaned forward to speak to the horse, soothing in Gaelic. His skin was clammy with the heat of the pain, but his blood was like the ice that formed on the bare branches of the trees surrounding him. He could see the mare's breath blow out in white streams as she trudged on through the deepening snow. He prayed as only a man who could feel his own blood pouring out of him could pray. For life.

There was a battle yet to be fought. He'd be damned if he'd die before he'd raised his sword.

The mare gave a sympathetic whinny as he slumped against her neck, his breathing labored. Trouble was in the air, as well as the scent of blood. With a toss of her head, she walked into the wind, following her own instinct for survival and heading west.

The pain was like a dream now, floating in his mind, swimming through his body. He thought if he could only wake, it would disappear. As dreams do. He had other dreams—violent and vivid. To fight the British for all they had stolen from him. To take back his name and his land—to fight for all the MacGregors had held with pride and sweat and blood. All they had lost.

He had been born in war. It seemed just and right that he would die in war.

But not yet. He struggled to rouse himself. Not yet. The fight had only begun.

He forced an image into his mind. A grand one. Men in feathers and buckskins, their faces blackened with burnt cork and lampblack and grease, boarding the ships Dartmouth, Eleanor and Beaver. Ordinary men, he remembered, merchants and craftsmen and students. Some fueled with grog, some with righteousness. The hoisting and smashing of the chests of the damned and detested tea. The satisfying splash as broken crates of it hit the cold water of Boston Harbor at Griffin's Wharf. He remembered how disgorged chests had been heaped up in the muck of low tide like stacks of hay.

So large a cup of tea for the fishes, he thought now. Aye, they had been merry, but purposeful. Determined. United. They would need to be all of those things to fight and win the war that so many didn't understand had already begun.

How long had it been since that glorious night? One day? Two? It had been his bad luck that he had run into two drunk and edgy redcoats as dawn had been breaking. They knew him. His face, his name, his politics were well-known in Boston. He'd done nothing to endear himself to the British militia.

Perhaps they had only meant to harass and bully him a bit. Perhaps they hadn't meant to make good their threat to arrest him—on charges they hadn't made clear. But when one had drawn a sword, MacGregor's weapon had all but leaped into his own hand. The fight had been brief—and foolish, he could admit now. He was still unsure if he had killed or only wounded the impetuous soldier. But his comrade had had murder in his eye when he had drawn his weapon.

Though MacGregor had been quick to mount and ride, the musket ball had slammed viciously into his shoulder.

He could feel it now, throbbing against muscle. Though the rest of his body was mercifully numb, he could feel that small and agonizing pinpoint of heat. Then his mind was numb, as well, and he felt nothing.

He woke, painfully. He was lying in the blanket of snow, faceup so that he could see dimly the swirl of white flakes against a heavy gray sky. He'd fallen from his horse. He wasn't close enough to death to escape the embarrassment of it. With effort, he pushed himself to his knees. The mare was waiting patiently beside him, eyeing him with a mild sort of surprise.

"I'll trust you to keep this to yourself, lass." It was the weak sound of his own voice that brought him the first trace of fear. Gritting his teeth, he reached for the reins and pulled himself shakily to his feet. "Shelter." He swayed, grayed out and knew he could never find the strength to mount. Holding tight, he clucked to the mare and let her pull his weary body along.

Step after step he fought the urge to collapse and let the cold take him. They said there was little pain in freezing to death. Like sleep it was, a cold, painless sleep.

And how the devil did they know unless they'd lived to tell the tale? He laughed at the thought, but the laugh turned to a cough that weakened him.

Time, distance, direction were utterly lost to him. He tried to think of his family, the warmth of them. His parents and brothers and sisters in Scotland. Beloved Scotland, where they fought to keep hope alive. His aunts and uncles and cousins in Virginia, where they worked for the right to a new life in a new land. And he, he was somewhere between, caught between his love of the old and his fascination with the new.

But in either land, there was one common enemy. It strengthened him to think of it. The British. Damn them. They had proscribed his name and butchered his people. Now they were reaching their greedy hands across the ocean so that the half-mad English king could impose his bloody laws and collect his bloody taxes.

He stumbled, and his hold on the reins nearly broke. For a moment he rested, his head against the mare's neck, his eyes closed. His father's face seemed to float into his mind, his eyes still bright with pride.

"Make a place for yourself," he'd told his son. "Never forget, you're a MacGregor."

No, he wouldn't forget.

Wearily he opened his eyes. He saw, through the swirling snow, the shape of a building. Cautious, he blinked, rubbed his tired eyes with his free hand. Still the shape remained, gray and indistinct, but real.

"Well, lass." He leaned heavily against his horse. "Perhaps this isn't the day to die after all."

Step by step he trudged toward it. It was a barn, a large one, well built of pine logs. His numb fingers fumbled with the latch. His knees threatened to buckle. Then he was inside, with the smell and the blessed heat of animals.

It was dark. He moved by instinct to a mound of hay in the stall of a brindled cow. The bovine lady objected with a nervous moo.

It was the last sound he heard.

Alanna pulled on her woolen cape. The fire in the kitchen hearth burned brightly and smelled faintly, cheerfully, of apple logs. It was a small thing, a normal thing, but it pleased her. She'd woken in a mood of happy anticipation. It was the snow, she imagined, though her father had risen from his bed cursing it. She loved the purity of it, the way it clung to the bare branches of trees her father and brothers had yet to clear.

It was already slowing, and within the hour the barnyard would be tracked with footprints, hers included. There were animals to tend to, eggs to gather, harnesses to repair and wood to chop. But for now, for just a moment, she looked out the small window and enjoyed.

If her father caught her at it, he would shake his head and call her a dreamer. It would be said roughly—not with anger, she thought, but with regret. Her mother had been a dreamer, but she had died before her dream of a home and land and plenty had been fully realized.

Cyrus Murphy wasn't a hard man, Alanna thought now. He never had been. It had been death, too many deaths, that had caused him to become rough and prickly. Two bairns, and later, their beloved mother. Another son, beautiful young Rory, lost in the war against the French.

Her own husband, Alanna mused, sweet Michael Flynn, taken in a less dramatic way but taken nonetheless.

She didn't often think of Michael. After all, she had been three months a wife and three years a widow. But he had been a kind man and a good one, and she regretted bitterly that they had never had the chance to make a family.

But today wasn't a day for old sorrows, she reminded herself. Pulling up the hood of her cape, she stepped outside. Today was a day for promises, for beginnings. Christmas was coming fast. She was determined to make it a joyful one.

Already she'd spent hours at her spinning wheel and loom. There were new mufflers and mittens and caps for her brothers. Blue for Johnny and red for Brian. For her father she had painted a miniature of her mother. And had paid the local silversmith a lot of pennies for a frame.

She knew her choices would please. Just as the meal she had planned for their Christmas feast would please. It was all that mattered to her—keeping her family together and happy and safe.

The door of the barn was unlatched. With a sound of annoyance, she pulled it to behind her. It was a good thing she had found it so, she thought, rather than her father, or her young brother, Brian, would have earned the raw side of his tongue.

As she stepped inside the barn, she shook her hood back and reached automatically for the wooden buckets that hung beside the door. Because there was little light she took a lamp, lighting it carefully.

By the time she had finished the milking, Brian and Johnny would come to feed the stock and clean the stalls. Then she would gather the eggs and fix her men a hearty breakfast.

She started to hum as she walked down the wide aisle in the center of the barn. Then she stopped dead as she spotted the roan mare standing slack hipped and weary beside the cow stall.

"Sweet Jesus." She put a hand to her heart as it lurched. The mare blew a greeting and shifted.

If there was a horse, there was a rider. At twenty, Alanna wasn't young enough or naive enough to believe all travelers were friendly and meant no harm to a woman alone. She could have turned and run, sent up a shout for her father and brothers. But though she had taken Michael Flynn's name, she was born a Murphy. A Murphy protected his own.

Head up, she started forward. "I'll have your name and your business," she said. Only the horse answered her. When she was close enough she touched the mare on her nose. "What kind of a master have you who leaves you standing wet and saddled?" Incensed for the horse's sake, she set down her buckets and raised her voice. "All right, come out with you. It's Murphy land you're on."

The cows moored.

With a hand on her hip, she looked around. "No one's begrudging you shelter from the storm," she

continued. "Or a decent breakfast, for that matter. But I'll have a word with you for leaving your horse so."

When there was still no answer, her temper rose. Muttering, she began to uncinch the saddle herself. And nearly tripped over a pair of boots.

Fine boots at that, she thought, staring down at them. They poked out of the cow stall, their good brown leather dulled with snow and mud. She stepped quietly closer to see them attached to a pair of long, muscled legs in worn buckskin.

Sure and there was a yard of them, she thought, nibbling on her lip. And gloriously masculine in the loose-fitting breeches. Creeping closer, she saw hips, lean, a narrow waist belted with leather and a torso covered with a long doublet and a fur wrap.

A finer figure of a man she couldn't remember seeing. And since he'd chosen her barn to sleep, she found it only right that she look her fill. He was a big one, she decided, tilting her head and holding the lamp higher. Taller than either of her brothers. She leaned closer, wanting to see the rest of him.

His hair was dark. Not brown, she realized, as she narrowed her eyes, but deep red, like Brian's chestnut gelding. He wore no beard, but there was stubble on his chin and around his full, handsome mouth. Aye, handsome, she decided with feminine appreciation. A strong, bony face, aristocratic somehow, with its high brow and chiseled features.

The kind of face a woman's heart would flutter over, she was sure. But she wasn't interested in fluttering or flirting. She wanted the man up and out of her way so that she could get to her milking.

"Sir." She nudged his boot with the toe of hers. No response. Setting her hands on her hips, she decided he was drunk as a lord. What else was there that caused a man to sleep as though dead? "Wake up, you sod. I can't milk around you." She kicked him, none too gently, in the leg and got only a faint groan for an answer. "All right, boy-o." She bent down to give him a good shake. She was prepared for the stench of liquor but instead caught the coppery odor of blood.

Anger forgotten, she knelt down to carefully push aside the thick fur over his shoulders. She sucked in a breath as she saw the long stain along his shirtfront. Her fingers were wet with his blood as she felt for a pulse.

"Well, you're still alive," she murmured. "With God's will and a bit of luck we might keep you that way."

Before she could rise to call her brothers, his hand clamped over her wrist. His eyes were open now, she saw. They were green, with just a hint of blue. Like the sea. But there was pain in them. Compassion had her leaning closer to offer comfort.

Then her hand plunged deep into the hay as he tugged her off balance so that she was all but lying on him. She had the quick impression of a firm body and raging heat. Her sound of indignation was muffled against his lips. The kiss was brief but surprisingly firm before his head fell back again. He gave her a quick, cocky smile.

"Well, I'm not dead anyway. Lips like yours would have no place in hell."

As compliments went, she'd had better. Before she could tell him so, he fainted.

He drifted, on a turbulent sea that was pain and relief and pain. Whiskey, the good, clean kick of it, warming his belly and dulling his senses. Yet over it he remembered a searing agony, a hot knife plunged into his flesh. Curses raining on his head. A warm hand clutching his, in comfort. In restraint. Blissfully cool cloths on his fevered brow. Hateful liquid poured down his throat.

He cried out. Had he cried out? Had someone come, all soft hands, soft voice, lavender scent, to soothe him? Had there been music, a woman's voice, low and lovely? Singing in Gaelic? Scotland? Was he in Scotland? But no, when the voice spoke to him, it was without that soft familiar burr, but instead with the dreamy brogue of Ireland.

The ship. Had the ship gone astray and taken him south instead of home? He remembered a ship. But the ship had been in port. Men laughing among themselves, their faces blackened and painted. Axes swinging. The tea. The cursed tea.

Ah, yes, he remembered. There was some comfort in that. They had taken their stand.

He had been shot. Not then, but after. At dawn. A mistake, a foolish one.

Then there had been snow and pain. He had awakened to a woman. A beautiful woman. A man could ask for little more than to wake to a beautiful woman, whether he awakened live or dead. The thought made him smile as he opened his heavy eyes. As dreams went, this one had its virtues.

Then he saw her sitting at a loom beneath a window where the sun was strong. It glistened on her hair, hair as black as the wing of any raven that flew in the forest. She wore a plain wool dress in dark blue with a white apron over it. He could see that she was wand slender, her hands graceful as they worked the loom. With a rhythmic click and clack she set a red pattern among deep green wool.

She sang as she worked, and it was her voice he recognized. The same voice had sung to comfort him when he had toiled through the hot and the cold of his dreams. He could see only her profile. Pale skin of white and rose, a faint curve to a mouth that was wide and generous, with the hint of a dimple beside it, a small nose that seemed to tilt up just a bit at the tip.

Peaceful. Just watching her gave him such a full sense of peace that he was tempted to close his eyes and sleep again. But he wanted to see her, all of her. And he needed her to tell him where he was.

The moment he stirred, Alanna's head came up. She turned toward him. He could see her eyes now—as deep and rich a blue as sapphires. As he watched, struggling for the strength to speak, she rose, smoothed her skirts and walked toward him.

Her hand was cool on his brow, and familiar. Briskly, but with hands that were infinitely gentle, she checked his bandage.

"So, have you joined the living, then?" she asked him as she moved to a nearby table and poured something into a pewter cup.

"You'd know the answer to that better than I," he managed. She chuckled as she held the cup to his lips.

The scent was familiar, as well, and unwelcome. "What the devil is this?"

"What's good for you," she told him, and poured it ruthlessly down his throat. When he glared she laughed again. "You've spit it back at me enough times that I've learned to take no chances."

"How long?"

"How long have you been with us?" She touched his forehead again. His fever had broken during the last long night, and her gesture was one of habit. "Two days. It's the twentieth of December."

"My horse?"

"She's well." Alanna nodded, pleased that he had thought of his mount. "You'd do well to sleep some more and I'll be fixing you some broth to strengthen you. Mr...?"

"MacGregor," he answered. "Ian MacGregor."

"Rest then, Mr. MacGregor."

But his hand reached for hers. Such a small hand, he thought irrelevantly, to be so competent. "Your name?"

"Alanna Flynn." His was a good hand, she thought, not as rough as Da's or her brothers', but hard. "You're welcome here until you are fit."

"Thank you." He kept her hand in his, toying with her fingers in a way that she would have thought flirtatious—if he hadn't just come out of a fever. Then she remembered he had kissed her when he'd been bleeding to death in her barn, and carefully removed her hand. He grinned at her. There was no other way to describe that quick curve of lips.

"I'm in your debt, Miss Flynn."

"Aye, that you are." She rose, all dignity. "And it's Mrs. Flynn."

He couldn't remember a swifter or weightier disappointment. Not that he minded flirting with married women, if they were agreeable. But he would never have considered taking it further than a few smiles and murmurs with another man's woman. It was a bloody shame, he thought as he studied Alanna Flynn. A sad and bloody shame.

"I'm grateful to you, Mrs. Flynn, and to your husband."

"Give your gratitude to my father." She softened the order with a smile that made her dimple deepen. He was a rogue, of that she hadn't a doubt. But he was also a weak one and, at the moment, in her care. "This is his house, and he'll be back soon." With her hands on her hips, she looked at him. His color was better, she noted, though the good Lord knew he could use a good clipping on that mane of hair he wore. And a shave wouldn't have hurt him. Despite it, he was an excellent-looking man. And because she was woman enough to have recognized the light in his eyes when he looked at her, she would keep her guard up.

"If you're not going to sleep, you might as well eat. I'll get that broth."

She left him to go into the kitchen, her heels clicking lightly on the plank floor. Alone, Ian lay still and let his gaze wander over the room. Alanna Flynn's father had done well for himself, Ian mused. The windows were glazed, the walls whitewashed. His pallet was set near the fire and its stone hearth was scrubbed clean. Above it was a mantelpiece of the same native stone. On it candles were set and a pair of painted china dishes. There were two fowling pieces above it all and a good flintlock, as well.

The loom was under the window, and in the corner was a spinning wheel. The furniture showed not a speck of dust and was brightened a bit by a few needlepoint cushions. There was a scent—apples baking, he thought, and spiced meats. A comfortable home, he thought, hacked out of the wilderness. A man had to respect another who could make his mark like this. And a man would have to fight to keep what he had made.

There were things worth fighting for. Worth dying for. His land. His name. His woman. His freedom. Ian was more than ready to lift his sword. As he tried to sit up, the cozy room spun.

"Isn't it just like a man?" Alanna came back with a bowl of broth. "Undoing all my work. Sit still, you're weak as a babe and twice as fretful."

"Mrs. Flynn—"

"Eat first, talk later."

Out of self-defense, he swallowed the first spoonful of broth she shoveled into his mouth. "The broth is tasty, mistress, but I can feed myself."

"And spill it all over my clean linens in the bargain. No, thank you. You need your strength." She placated him as she would have her own brothers. "You lost a great deal of blood before you got to us—more when the ball was removed." She spoke as she spooned up broth, and her hand didn't tremble. But her heart did.

There was the scent of herbs and her own lavender fragrance. Ian began to think being fed had its advantages.

"If it hadn't been so cold," she continued, "you would have bled all the quicker and died in the forest."

"So I've nature as well as you to thank."

She gave him a measured look. "It's said the Lord works in mysterious ways. Apparently he saw fit to keep you alive after you'd done your best to die."

"And put me in the hands of a neighbor." He smiled again, charmingly. "I've never been to Ireland, but I'm told it's beautiful."

"So my father says. I was born here."

"But there's Ireland on your tongue."

"And Scotland on yours."

"It's been five years since I've seen Scotland this time." A shadow came and went in his eyes. "I've been spending some time in Boston. I was educated there and have Mends."

"Educated." She had already recognized his schooling by his speech and envied him for it.

"Harvard." He smiled a little.

"I see." And she envied him all the more. If her mother had lived... Ah, but her mother had died, and Alanna had never had more than a hornbook to learn to write and read. "You're a ways from Boston now. A day's ride. Would you be having any family or friends who will worry?"

"No. No one to worry." He wanted to touch her. It was wrong, against his own code of honor. But he wanted to see if her cheek could be as beautifully soft as it looked. If her hair would feel as thick and heavy. Her mouth as sweet.

Her lashes lifted, and her eyes, clear and cool, met his. For a moment he could see only her face, drifting over his. And he remembered. He had already tasted those lips once.

Despite his best intentions, his gaze lowered to them. Lingered. When she stiffened, his eyes flickered up. There was not so much apology in them as amusement.

"I must beg your pardon, Mrs. Flynn. I was not myself when you found me in the barn."

"You came to yourself quickly enough," she snapped back, and made him laugh until he winced at the pain.

"Then I'll beg your pardon all the more and hope your husband won't call me out."

"There's little danger of that. He's been dead these three years."

He looked up quickly, but she only shoveled another spoonful of broth in his mouth. Though God might strike him dead, he couldn't say he was sorry to hear Flynn had gone to his Maker. After all, Ian reasoned, it wasn't as if he had known the man. And what better way to spend a day or two than recovering in the lap of a pretty young widow?

Alanna scented desire the way a hound scents deer and was up and out of reach. "You'll rest now."

"I feel that I've rested weeks already." Lord, she was a lovely thing, all curves and colors. He tried his most ingratiating smile. "Could I trouble you to help me to a chair? I'd feel more myself if I could sit, perhaps look out the window."

She hesitated, not because she was afraid she couldn't move him. Alanna considered herself strong as an ox. But she didn't trust the gleam she'd seen come and go in his eyes.

"All right then, but you'll lean on me and take it slow."

"With gladness." He took her hand and raised it to his lips. Before she could snatch it away, he turned it over and brushed his lips, as no man ever had, over the cup of her palm. Her heart bounded into her throat. "You have eyes the color of jewels I once saw around the neck of the queen of France. Sapphires," he murmured. "A seductive word."

She didn't move. Couldn't. Never in her life had a man looked at her this way. She felt the heat rush up, from the knot in her belly along her suddenly taut breasts, up her throat where her pulse hammered and

into her face. Then he smiled, that quick, crooked shifting of lips. She snatched her hand away.

"You're a rogue, Mr. MacGregor."

"Aye, Mrs. Flynn. But that doesn't make the words less true. You're beautiful. Just as your name says. Alanna." He lingered over each syllable.

She knew better than to fall for flattery. But the center of her palm still burned. "It's my name, and you'll wait till you're asked to use it." It was with relief that she heard the sounds outside the house. Her brow lifted a bit when she saw that Ian had heard them as well and braced. "That'll be my father and brothers. If you'd still be having a mind to sit by the window, they'll help you." So saying, she moved to the door.

They would be cold and hungry, she thought, and would gobble down the meat pies and the apple tarts she had made without a thought for the time and care she had given them. Her father would fret more over what hadn't been done than what had. Johnny would think about how soon he could ride into the village to court young Mary Wyeth. Brian would put his nose into one of the books he loved and read by the fire until his head drooped.

They came in bringing cold and melting snow and loud masculine voices.

Ian relaxed as he noted it was indeed her family. Perhaps it was foolish to think the British would have tracked him all this way in the snow, but he wasn't a man to let down his guard. He saw three men—or two men and a boy nearly grown. The elder man was barely taller than Alanna and toughly built. His face was reddened and toughened by years of wind and weather, his eyes a paler version of his daughter's. He took off his work cap and beneath it his hair was thin and sandy.

The older son had the look of him but with more height and less bulk. There was an ease and patience in his face that his father lacked.

The younger matched his brother inch for inch, but there was the dew of youth still on his cheeks. He had the same coloring as his sister.

"Our guest is awake," Alanna announced, and three pairs of eyes turned to him. "Ian MacGregor, this is my father, Cyrus Murphy, and my brothers, John and Brian."

"MacGregor," Cyrus said in a voice that rumbled. "An awkward name."

Despite the pain, Ian stiffened and pushed himself as straight as possible. "One I'm proud of."

"A man should be proud of his name," Cyrus said as he took Ian's measure. "It's all he's born with. I'm glad you decided to live, for the ground's frozen and we couldn't have buried you till spring."

"It's a bit of a relief to me, as well."

Satisfied with the answer, Cyrus nodded. "We'll wash for supper."

"Johnny." Alanna detained her brother with a hand on his arm. "Will you help Mr. MacGregor into the chair by the window before you eat?"

With a quick grin, Johnny looked at Ian. "You're built like an oak, MacGregor. We had the very devil of a time getting you into the house. Give me a hand here, Brian."

"Thanks." Ian bit back a groan as he lifted his arms over the two pairs of shoulders. Cursing his watery legs, he vowed to be up and walking on his own by the next day. But he was sweating by the time they settled him into the chair.

"You're doing well enough for a man who cheated death," Johnny told him, understanding well the frustrations of any sick man.

"I feel like I drank a case of grog then took to the high seas in a storm."

"Aye." Johnny slapped his good shoulder in a friendly manner. "Alanna will fix you up." He left to wash for supper, already scenting the spiced meat.

"Mr. MacGregor?" Brian stood in front of him. There was both a shyness and intensity in his eyes. "You'd be too young to have fought in the Forty-five?" When Ian's brow lifted, the boy continued hurriedly. "I've read all about it, the Stuart Rebellion and the bonny prince and all the battles. But you'd be too young to have fought."

"I was born in '46," Ian told him. "During the Battle of Culloden. My father fought in the rebellion. My grandfather died in it."

The intense blue eyes widened. "Then you could tell me more than I can find in books."

"Aye." Ian smiled a little. "I could tell you more."

"Brian." Alanna's voice was sharp. "Mr. MacGregor needs to rest, and you need to eat."

Brian edged back, but he watched Ian. "We could talk after supper if you're not weary."

Ian ignored Alanna's stormy looks and smiled at the boy. "I'd like that."

Alanna waited until Brian was out of earshot. When she spoke, the barely controlled fury in her voice surprised Ian. "I won't have you filling his head with the glory of war and battles and causes."

"He looked old enough to decide what he wants to talk about."

"He's a boy yet, and his head is easily filled with nonsense." With tense fingers, she pleated the skirt of her apron, but her eyes remained level and uncompromising. "I may not be able to stop him from running off to the village green to drill, but I'll have no talk of war in my house."

"There will be more than talk, and soon," Ian said mildly. "It's foolish for a man—and a woman—not to prepare for it."

She paled but kept her chin firm. "There will be no war in this house," she repeated, and fled to the kitchen.

Chapter Three

Ian awoke early the next morning to watery winter sunlight and the good yeasty smell of baking bread. For a moment he lay quiet, enjoying the sounds and scents of morning. Behind him the fire burned low and bright, shooting out comforting heat. From the direction of the kitchen came Alanna's voice. This time she sang in English. For a few minutes he was too enchanted with the sound itself to pay attention to the lyrics. Once they penetrated, his eyes widened first in surprise, then in amusement.

It was a bawdy little ditty more suitable to sailors or drunks than a proper young widow.

So, he thought, the lovely Alanna had a ribald sense of humor. He liked her all the better for it, though he doubted her tongue would have tripped so lightly over the words if she had known she had an audience. Trying to move quietly, he eased his legs from the pallet. The business of standing took some doing and left him dizzy and weak and infuriated. He had to wait, wheezing like an old man, one big hand pressed for support against the wall. When he had his breath back he took one tentative step forward. The room tilted and he clenched his teeth until it righted again. His arm throbbed mightily. Concentrating on the pain, he was able to take another step, and another, grateful that no one was there to see his tedious and shambling progress.

It was a lowering thought that one small steel ball could fell a MacGregor.

The fact that the ball had been English pushed him to place one foot in front of the other. His legs felt as though they'd been filled with water, and a cold sweat lay on his brow and the back of his neck. But in his heart was a fierce pride. If he had been spared to fight again, he would damn well fight. And he couldn't fight until he could walk.

When he reached the kitchen doorway, exhausted and drenched with the effort, Alanna was singing a Christmas hymn. She seemed to find no inconsistency in crooning about amply endowed women one moment and heralding angels the next.

It hardly mattered to Ian what she sang. As he stood, watching, listening, he knew as sure as he knew a MacGregor would always live in the Highlands that her voice would follow him to his grave. He would never forget it, the clear, rich notes, the faint huskiness that made him imagine her with her hair unbound and spread over a pillow.

His pillow, he realized with a quick jolt. It was there he wanted her without a doubt, and so strongly that he could all but feel the smooth, silky tresses shift through his fingers.

Most of those thick raven locks were tucked under a white cap now. It should have given her a prim and proper look. Yet some strands escaped, to trail—seductively, he thought—along the back of her neck. He could easily imagine what it would be like to trail his fingers just so. To feel her skin heat and her body move. Against his.

Would she be as agile in bed as she was at the stove?

Perhaps he wasn't so weak after all, Ian mused, if every time he saw this woman his blood began to stir and his mind shot unerringly down one particular path. If he hadn't been afraid he would fall on his face and mortify himself, he would have crossed the room and spun her around, against him, into him, so that he could steal a kiss. Instead he waited, hopefully, for his legs to strengthen.

She kneaded one batch of dough while another baked. He could see her small, capable hands push and prod and mold. Patiently. Tirelessly. As he watched her, his rebellious mind filled with such gloriously lusty thoughts that he groaned.

Alanna whirled quickly, her hands still wrapped around the ball of dough. Her first thoughts shamed her, for when she saw him filling the doorway, dressed in rough trousers and a full open shirt, she wondered how she might lure him to kiss her hand again. Disgusted with herself, she slapped the dough down and hurried toward him. His face was dead white and he was beginning to teeter. From previous experience, she knew that if he hit the ground she'd have the very devil of a time getting him back into bed.

"There now, Mr. MacGregor, lean on me." Since the kitchen chair was closer, and he was of a considerable weight, she led him to that before she rounded on him. "Idiot," she said with relish more than real heat. "But most men are, I've found. You'd best not have opened your wound again, for I've just scrubbed this floor and wouldn't care to have blood on it."

"Aye, mistress." It was a weak rejoinder, but the best he could do when her scent was clouding his mind and her face was bent so close to his. He could have counted each one of her silky black eyelashes.

"You had only to call, you know," she said, mollified a bit when she noted his bandage was dry. As she might have for one of her brothers, Alanna began to fasten his shirt. Ian was forced to suppress another groan.

"I had to try my legs." His blood wasn't just stirring now but was racing hot. As a result, his voice had a roughened edge. "I can hardly get on my feet again by lying on my back."

"You'll get up when I say and not before." With this she moved away and began to mix something in a pewter cup. Ian caught the scent and winced.

"I'll not have any more of that slop."

"You'll drink it and be grateful—" she slapped the cup on the tabletop "—if you want anything else in your belly."

He glared at her in a way he knew had made grown men back away or run for cover. She simply placed her fisted hands on her hips and glared back. His eyes narrowed. So did hers.

"You're angry because I talked with young Brian last night."

Her chin lifted, just an inch, but it was enough to give her anger an elegant haughtiness. "And if you'd been resting instead of jabbering about the glory of war, you'd not be so weak and irritable this morning."

"I'm not irritable or weak."

When she snorted, he wished fervently that he had the strength to stand. Aye, then he'd have kissed her to swooning and shown her what a MacGregor was made of.

"If I'm irritable," he said between clenched teeth, "it's because I'm near to starving."

She smiled at him, pleased to hold the upper hand.

"You'll get your breakfast after you've drained that cup, and not a moment before." With a twitch of her skirts she returned to her bread making.

While her back was turned, Ian looked around for a handy place to dump the foul-tasting liquid. Finding

none, he folded his arms and scowled at her. Alanna's lips curved. She hadn't been raised in a house filled with men for naught. She knew exactly what was going through Ian's mind. He was stubborn, she thought as she pushed the heels of her hands into the dough. But so was she.

She began to hum.

He no longer thought about kissing her but gave grave consideration to throttling her. Here he sat, hungry as a bear, with the enticing smell of bread baking. And all she would give him was a cup of slop.

Still humming, Alanna put the bread into a bowl for rising and covered it with a clean cloth. Easily ignoring Ian, she checked the oven and judged her loaves were done to a turn. When she set them on a rack to cool, their scent flooded the kitchen.

He had his pride, Ian thought. But what good was pride if a man expired of hunger? She'd pay for it, he promised himself as he lifted the cup and drained it.

Alanna made certain her back was to him when she grinned. Without a word, she heated a skillet. In short order she set a plate before him heaped with eggs and a thick slab of the fresh bread. To this she added a small crock of butter and a cup of steaming coffee.

While he ate, she busied herself, scrubbing out the skillet, washing the counters so that not a scrap of dough or flour remained. She was a woman who prized her mornings alone, who enjoyed her kitchen domain and the hundreds of chores it entailed. Yet she didn't resent his presence there, though she knew he watched her with his steady, seacolored eyes. Oddly, it seemed natural, even familiar somehow, that he sit at her table and sample her cooking.

No, she didn't resent his presence, but neither could she relax in it. The silence that stretched between them no longer seemed colored by temper on either side. But it was tinted with something else, something that made her nerves stretch and her heart thud uncomfortably against her ribs.

Needing to break it, she turned to him. He was indeed watching her, she noted. Not with temper but with... interest. It was a weak word for what she saw in his eyes, but a safe one. Alanna had a sudden need to feel safe.

"A gentleman would thank me for the meal."

His lips curved in such a way that let her know he was only a gentleman if and when he chose to be. "I do thank you, Mrs. Flynn, most sincerely. I wonder if I might beg another cup of coffee."

His words were proper enough, but she didn't quite trust the look in his eyes. She kept out of reach as she picked up his cup. "Tea would be better for you," she said almost to herself. "But we don't drink it in this house."

"In protest?"

"Aye. We won't have the cursed stuff until the king sees reason. Others make more foolish and dangerous protests."

He watched her lift the pot from the stove. "Such as?"

She moved her shoulders. "Johnny heard word that the Sons of Liberty arranged to destroy crates of tea

that were sitting in three ships in Boston Harbor. They disguised themselves as Indians and boarded the ships all but under the guns of three men-of-war. Before the night was done, they had tossed all of the East Indian Company's property into the water."

"And you think this foolish?"

"Daring, certainly," she said with another restless movement. "Even heroic, especially in Brian's eyes. But foolish because it will only cause the king to impose even harsher measures." She set the cup before him.

"So you believe it best to do nothing when injustice is handed out with a generous hand? Simply to sit like a trained dog and accept the boot?"

Murphy blood rose to her cheeks. "No king lives forever."

"Ah, so we wait until mad George cocks up his toes rather than stand now for what is right."

"We've seen enough war and heartache in this house."

"There will only be more, Alanna, until it's settled."

"Settled," she shot back as he calmly sipped his coffee. "Settled by sticking feathers in our hair and smashing crates of tea? Settled as it was for the wives and mothers of those who fell at Lexington? And for what? For graves and tears?"

"For liberty," he said. "For justice."

"Words." She shook her head. "Words don't die. Men do."

"Men must, of old age or at sword's point. Can you believe it better to bow under the English chains, over and over until our backs break? Or should we stand tall and fight for what is ours by right?"

She felt a frisson of fear as she watched his eyes glow. "You speak like a rebel, MacGregor."

"Like an American," he corrected. "Like a Son of Liberty."

"I should have guessed as much," she murmured. She snatched up his plate, set it aside, then, unable to stop herself, marched back to him. "Was the sinking of the tea worth your life?"

Absently he touched a hand to his shoulder. "A miscalculation," he said, "and nothing that really pertains to our little tea party."

"Tea party." She looked up at the ceiling. "How like a man to make light of insurrection."

"And how like a woman to wring her hands at the thought of a fight."

Her gaze flew back down and locked with his. "I don't wring my hands," she said precisely. "And certainly wouldn't shed a tear over the likes of you."

His tone changed so swiftly she blinked. "Ah, but you'll miss me when I've gone."

"The devil," she muttered, and fought back a grin. "Now go back to bed."

"I doubt I'm strong enough to make it on my own."

She heaved a sigh but walked to him to offer him a shoulder. He took the shoulder, and the rest of her. In one quick move she was in his lap. She cursed him with an expertise he was forced to admire.

"Hold now," he told her. "Differences in politics aside, you're a pretty package, Alanna, and I've discovered it's been too long since I've held a warm woman in my arms."

"Son of a toad," she managed, and struck out.

He winced as the pain shimmered down his wounded arm. "My father would take exception to that, sweetheart."

"I'm not your sweetheart, you posturing spawn of a weasel."

"Keep this up and you'll open my wound and have my blood all over your clean floor."

"Nothing would give me more pleasure."

Charmed, he grinned and caught her chin in his hand. "For one who talks so righteously about the evils of war, you're a bloodthirsty wench."

She cursed him until she ran out of breath. Her brother John had said nothing but the truth when he'd claimed that Ian was built like an oak. No matter how she squirmed—absolutely delighting him—she remained held fast.

"A pox on you," she managed. "And on your whole clan."

He'd intended to pay her back for making him drink the filthy medicine she'd mixed. He'd only pulled her into his lap to cause her discomfort. Then, as she'd wiggled, he'd thought it only right that he tease her a little and indulge himself. With just one kiss. One quick stolen kiss. After all, she was already fuming.

In fact, he was laughing as he covered her mouth with his. It was meant in fun, as much a joke on himself as on her. And he wanted to hear the new batch of curses she would heap on his head when he was done.

But his laughter died quickly. Her struggling body went stone still.

One quick, friendly kiss, he tried to remind himself, but his head was reeling. He found himself as dizzy and as weak as he'd been when he'd first set his watery legs on the floor.

This had nothing to do with a wound several days old. Yet there was a pain, a sweet ache that spread and shifted through the whole of him. He wondered, dazedly, if he had been spared not only to fight again but to be given the gift of this one perfect kiss.

She didn't fight him. In her woman's heart she knew she should. Yet in that same heart she understood that she could not. Her body, rigid with the first shock, softened, yielded, accepted.

Gentle and rough all at once, she thought. His lips were cool and smooth against hers while the stubble of his beard scraped against her skin. She heard her own sigh as her lips parted, then tasted his on her

tongue. She laid a hand on his cheek, adding sweetness. He dragged his through her hair, adding passion.

For one dazzling moment he deepened the kiss, taking her beyond what she knew and into what she had only dreamed. She tasted the richness of his mouth, felt the iron-hard breath of his chest. Then heard his sharp, quick curse as he dragged himself away.

He could only stare at her. It unnerved him that he could do little else. He had dislodged her cap so that her hair streamed like black rain over her shoulders. Her eyes were so dark, so big, so blue against the creamy flush of her skin that he was afraid he might drown in them.

This was a woman who could make him forget—about duty, about honor, about justice. This was a woman, he realized, who could make him crawl on his knees for one kind word.

He was a MacGregor. He could never forget. He could never crawl.

"I beg your pardon, mistress." His voice was stiffly polite and so cold she felt all the warmth leach out of her body. "That was inexcusable."

Carefully she got to her feet. With blurred vision she searched the floor for her cap. Finding it, she stood, straight as a spear, and looked over his shoulder.

"I would ask you again, MacGregor, to go back to your bed."

She didn't move a muscle until he was gone. Then she dashed away an annoying tear and went back to work. She would not think of it, she promised herself. She would not think of him.

She took out her frustrations on the newly risen dough.

Chapter Four

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Christmas had always given Alanna great joy. Preparing for it was a pleasure to her—the cooking, the baking, the sewing and cleaning. She had always made it a policy to forgive slights, both small and large, in the spirit of giving. She looked forward to putting on her best dress and riding into the village for Mass.

But as this Christmas approached, she was by turns depressed and irritated. Too often she caught herself being snappish with her brothers, impatient with her father. She became teary over a burnt cake, then stormed out of the house when Johnny tried to joke her out of it.

Sitting on a rock by the icy stream, she dropped her chin onto her hands and took herself to task.

It wasn't fair for her to take out her temper on her family. They'd done nothing to deserve it. She had chosen the easy way out by snapping at them, when the one she truly wanted to roast was Ian MacGregor. She kicked at the crusty snow.

Oh, he'd kept his distance in the past two days. The coward. He'd managed to gain his feet and slink out to the barn like the weasel he was. Her father was grateful for the help with the tack and animals, but Alanna knew the real reason MacGregor had taken himself off to clean stalls and repair harnesses.

He was afraid of her. Her lips pursed in a smug smile. Aye, he was afraid she would call down the wrath of hell on his head. As well she should. What kind of man was it who kissed a woman until she was blind and deaf to all but him—then politely excused himself as if he had inadvertently trod on her foot?

He'd had no right to kiss her—and less to ignore what had happened when he had.

Why, she had saved his life, she thought with a toss of her head. That was the truth of it. She had saved him, and he had repaid her by making her want him as no virtuous woman should want a man not her husband.

But want him she did, and in ways so different from the calm, comforting manner she had wanted Michael Flynn that she couldn't describe them.

It was madness, of course. He was a rebel, once and forever. Such men made history, and widows out of wives. All she wanted was a quiet life, with children of her own and a house to tend to. She wanted a man who would come and sleep beside her night after night through all the years. A man who would be content to sit by the fire at night and talk over with her the day that had passed.

Such a man was not Ian MacGregor. No, she had recognized in him the same burning she had seen in Rory's eyes. There were those who were born to be warriors, and nothing and no one could sway them. There were those who were destined, before birth, to fight for causes and to die on the battlefield. So had been Rory, her eldest brother, and the one she had loved the best. And so was Ian MacGregor, a man she had known for days only and could never afford to love.

As she sat, brooding, a shadow fell over her. She tensed, turned, then managed to smile when she saw it was her young brother, Brian.

"It's safe enough," she told him when he hung back a bit. "I'm no longer in the mood to toss anyone in the stream."

"The cake wasn't bad once you cut away the burnt edges."

She narrowed her eyes to make him laugh. "Could be I'll take it in my mind to send you swimming after all."

But Brian knew better. Once Alanna's hot temper was cooled, she rarely fired up again. "You'd only feel badly when I took to bed with a chill and you had to douse me with medicine and poultices. Look, I've brought you a present." He held out the holly wreath he'd hidden behind his back. "I thought you might put ribbons on it and hang it on the door for Christmas."

She took it and held it gently. It was awkwardly made, and that much more dear. Brian was better with his mind than with his hands. "Have I been such a shrew?"

"Aye." He plopped down into the snow at her feet. "But I know you can't stay in a black mood with Christmas almost here."

"No." She smiled at the wreath. "I suppose not."

"Alanna, do you think Ian will be staying with us for Christmas dinner?"

Her smile became a frown quickly. "I couldn't say. He seems to be mending quickly enough."

"Da says he's handy to have around, even if he isn't a farmer." Absently, Brian began to ball snow. "And he knows so much. Imagine, going to Harvard and reading all those books."

"Aye." Her agreement was wistful, for herself and for Brian. "If we've a good harvest the next few years, Brian, you'll go away to school. I swear it."

He said nothing. It was something he yearned for more than breath, and something he'd already accepted he would live without. "Having Ian here is almost as good. He knows things."

Alanna's mouth pursed. "Aye, I'm sure he does."

"He gave me the loan of a book he had in his saddlebag. It's Shakespeare's Henry V. It tells all about the young King Harry and wonderful battles."

Battles, she thought again. It seemed men thought of little else from the moment they were weaned. Undaunted by her silence, Brian chattered on.

"It's even better to listen to him," Brian continued enthusiastically. "He told me about how his family fought in Scotland. His aunt married an Englishman, a Jacobite, and they fled to America after the rebellion was crushed. They have a plantation in Virginia and grow tobacco. He has another aunt and uncle who came to America too, though his father and mother still live in Scotland. In the Highlands. It seems a wondrous place, Alanna, with steep cliffs and deep lakes. And he was born in a house in the forest on the very day his father was fighting the English at Culloden."

She thought of a woman struggling through the pangs of labor and decided both male and female fought their own battles. The female for life, the male for death.

"After the battle," Brian went on, "the English butchered the survivors." He was looking out over the narrow, ice-packed stream and didn't notice how his sister's gaze flew to him. "The wounded, the surrendering, even people who were working in fields nearby. They hounded and chased the rebels, cutting them down where they found them. Some they closed up in a barn and burned alive."

"Sweet Jesus." She had never paid attention to talk of war, but this kept her riveted, and horrified.

"Ian's family lived in a cave while the English searched the hills for rebels. Ian's aunt—the one on the plantation—killed a redcoat herself. Shot him when he tried to murder her wounded husband."

Alanna swallowed deeply. "I believe Mr. MacGregor exaggerates."

Brian turned his deep, intense eyes on her. "No," he said simply. "Do you think it will come to that here, Alanna, when the rebellion begins?"

She squeezed the wreath hard enough for a sprig of holly to pierce through her mittens. "There will be no rebellion. In time the government will become more reasonable. And if Ian MacGregor says any different—

"It isn't only Ian. Even Johnny says so, and the men in the village. Ian says that the destruction of tea in Boston is only the beginning of a revolution that was inevitable the moment George III took the throne. Ian says it's time to throw off the British shackles and count ourselves for what we are. Free men."

"Ian says." She rose, skirts swaying. "I think Ian says entirely too much. Take the wreath in the house for me, Brian. I'll hang it as soon as I'm done."

Brian watched his sister storm off. It seemed that there would be at least one more outburst before her black mood passed.

Ian enjoyed working in the barn. More, he enjoyed being able to work at all. His arm and shoulder were still stiff, but the pain had passed. And thanks to all the saints, Alanna hadn't forced any of her foul concoctions on him that day.

Alanna.

He didn't want to think about her. To ease his mind, he set aside the tack he was soaping and picked up a brush. He would groom his horse in preparation for the journey he had been putting off for two days.

He should be gone, Ian reminded himself. He was surely well mended enough to travel short distances. Though it might be unwise to show his face in Boston for a time, he could travel by stages to Virginia and spend a few weeks with his aunt, uncle and cousins.

The letter he had given Brian to take to the village should be on its way by ship to Scotland and his family. They would know he was alive and well—and that he wouldn't be with them for Christmas.

He knew his mother would weep a little. Though she had other children, and grandchildren, she would be saddened that her firstborn was away when the family gathered for the Christmas feast.

He could see it in his mind—the blazing fires, the glowing candles. He could smell the rich smells of cooking, hear the laughter and singing. And with a pang that was so sudden it left him breathless, he hurt from the loss.

Yet, though he loved his family, he knew his place was here. A world away.

Aye, there was work to do here, he reminded himself as he stroked the mare's coat. There were men he had to contact once he knew it was safe. Samuel Adams, John Avery, Paul Revere. And he must have news of the climate in Boston and other cities now that the deed was done.

Yet he lingered when he should have been away. Daydreamed when he should have been plotting. He had, sensibly, he thought, kept his distance from Alanna. But in his mind she was never more than a thought away.

"There you are!"

And she was there, her breath puffing out in quick white streams, her hands on her hips. Her hood had fallen from her head and her hair swung loose, inky black against the plain gray fabric of her dress.

"Aye." Because his knuckles had whitened on the brush, he made an effort to relax his hand. "It's here I am."

"What business are you about, filling a young boy's head with nonsense? Would you have him heave a musket over his shoulder and challenge the first redcoat he comes to?"

"I gather you are speaking of Brian," he said when she stopped to take a breath. "But when I go a step

further than that, I lose my way."

"Would you had lost it before you ever came here." Agitated, she began to pace. Her eyes were so hot a blue he wondered they didn't fire the straw underfoot. "Trouble, and only trouble from the first minute I came across you, sprawled half-dead in the hay. If I'd only known then what I've come to know now, I might have ignored my Christian duty and let you bleed to death."

He smiled—he couldn't help it—and started to speak, but she plunged on.

"First you nearly pull me down in the hay with you, kissing me even though you'd a ball in you. Then, almost on the moment when you open your eyes, you're kissing my hand and telling me I'm beautiful."

"I ought to be flogged," he said with a grin. "Imagine, telling you that you're beautiful."

"Flogging's too kind for the likes of you," she snapped with a toss of her head. "Then two days ago, after I'd fixed you breakfast—which is more than a man like you deserves—"

"Indeed it is," he agreed.

"Keep quiet until I'm done. After I'd fixed you breakfast, you drag me down on your lap as though I were a—a common..."

"Do words fail you?"

"Doxy," she spit out and dared him to laugh. "And like the great oaf you are, you held me there against my will and kissed me."

"And was kissed right back, sweetheart." He patted his horse's neck. "And very well, too."

She huffed and stammered. "How dare you?"

"That's difficult to answer unless you're more specific. If you're asking how I dared kiss you, I'll have to confess it was more a matter of not being able to stop myself. You've a mouth that's made for it, Alanna."

She felt herself go hot and began to pace again on unsteady legs. "Well, you got over it quickly enough."

His brow lifted. So she wasn't in a temper over the kiss but over the fact that he'd stopped. Looking at her now, in the dim light of the barn, he wondered how he'd managed to do so. And knew he wouldn't again.

"If it's my restraint that troubles you, sweetheart—"

"Don't call me that. Not now, not ever."

Gamely, he swallowed a chuckle. "As you wish, Mrs. Flynn. As I was saying—"

"I told you to be still until I've finished." She stopped to catch her breath. "Where was I?"

"We were talking about kissing." Eyes glowing, he took a step toward her. "Why don't I refresh your memory?"

"Don't come near me," she warned, and snatched up a pitchfork. "I was simply using that as a reference to the trouble you've caused. Now, on top of everything else, you've got Brian's eyes shining over the thought of a revolution. I won't have it, MacGregor. He's just a boy."

"If the lad asks questions, I'll give him true answers."

"And make them sound romantic and heroic in the bargain. I won't see him caught up in wars others make and lose him as I did my brother Rory."

"It won't be a war others make, Alanna." He circled her carefully, keeping away from the business end of the pitchfork. "When the time comes we'll all make it, and we'll win it."

"You can save your words."

"Good." Quick as a flash he grabbed the staff of the pitchfork, dodged the tines and hauled her against him. "I'm tired of talking."

When he kissed her this time, he was prepared for the jolt. It was no less devastating, no less exciting. Her face was cold and he used his lips to warm it, running them over her skin until he felt them both begin to shudder. He dragged a hand through her hair until he cupped the back of her neck. His other arm banded her hard against him.

"For God's sake, kiss me back, Alanna." He murmured it against her mouth. His eyes were open and hot on hers. "I'll go mad if you don't, mad if you do."

"Damn you then." She threw her arms around him. "I will."

She all but took him to his knees. There was no hesitation, no demur. Her lips were as hungry as his, her tongue as adventurous. She let her body press to his and thrilled at the sensation of his heart hammering against her.

She would never forget the scent of hay and animals, the drifting motes of dust in the thin beams of sunlight that broke through the chinks in the logs. Nor would she forget the strong, solid feel of him against her, the heat of his mouth, the sound of his pleasure. She would remember this one moment of abandonment because she knew it could never last.

"Let me go," she whispered.

He nestled into the sweet, fragrant curve of her neck. "I doubt I can."

"You must. I didn't come here for this."

He trailed his mouth to her ear and smiled when she shivered. "Would you really have stabbed me, Alanna?"

"Aye."

Because he believed her, he smiled again. "Here's a likely wench," he murmured, and nipped at her ear.

"Stop it." But she let her head fall back in surrender. Lord help her, she wanted it to go on. And on, and on. "This isn't right."

He looked at her then, his smile gone. "I think it is. I don't know why or how, but I think it's very right."

Because she wanted so badly to lean against him, she stiffened. "It can't be. You have your war and I have my family. I won't give my heart to a warrior. And there's the end of it."

"Damn it, Alanna—"

"I would ask you for something." She eased quickly out of his arms. Another moment in them and she might have forgotten everything—family and all her secret hopes for her own future. "You could consider it your Christmas gift to me."

He wondered if she knew that at that moment he would have pledged her all that was his, even his life. "What is it you want?"

"That you'll stay until Christmas is passed. It's important to Brian. And," she added before he could speak, "that you will not speak of war or revolts until the holy day is over."

"It's very little to ask."

"Not to me. To me it is a very great deal."

"Then you have it." She took a step back, but with a lift of his brow he took her hand firmly in his, raised it to his lips and kissed it.

"Thank you." She regained her hand quickly and hid it behind her back. "I have work to do." His voice stopped her as she hurried toward the door.

"Alanna... it is right."

She pulled the hood over her head and hurried out.

Chapter Five

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The snow that fell on Christmas Eve delighted Alanna. In her heart she held the hope that the storm would rage for days and prevent Ian from traveling, as she knew he planned to do in two days' time. She knew the hope was both selfish and foolish, but she hugged it to her as she bundled into scarf and cloak to walk to the barn for the morning milking.

If he stayed, she would be miserable. If he left, she would be brokenhearted. She allowed herself the luxury of a sigh as she watched the flakes whirl white around her. It was best if she thought not of him at all, but of her responsibilities.

Her footsteps were the only sound in the barnyard as her boots broke through the new dusting to the thin crust beneath. Then, in the thick hush, the door creaked as she lifted the latch and pulled it open.

Inside, she reached for the buckets and had taken her first step when a hand fell on her shoulder. With a yelp, she jumped, sending the buckets clattering to the floor.

"Your pardon, Mrs. Flynn." Ian grinned as Alanna held both hands to her heart. "It seems I've startled you."

She would have cursed him if there had been any breath remaining in her lungs. Not for a moment could she have held her head up if he'd known she'd just been sighing over him. Instead, she shook her head and drew air in deeply. "What are you doing, sneaking about?"

"I came out of the house moments behind you," he explained. He had decided, after a long night of thought, to be patient with her. "The snow must have masked my approach."

Her own daydreaming had prevented her from hearing him, she thought, irritated, and bent down to snatch the buckets just as he did the same. When their heads bumped, she did swear.

"Just what the devil would you be wanting, MacGregor? Other than to scare the life from me?"

He would be patient, he promised himself as he rubbed his own head. If it killed him. "To help you with the milking."

Her narrowed eyes widened in bafflement. "Why?"

Ian blew out a long breath. Patience was going to be difficult if every word she spoke to him was a question or an accusation. "Because, as I have observed over the past days, you've too many chores for one woman."

Pride was stiff in her voice. "I can care for my family."

"No doubt." His voice was equally cool. Again, they reached down for the buckets together. Ian scowled. Alanna straightened to stand like a poker as he retrieved them.

"I appreciate your offer, but—"

"I'm only going to milk a damn cow, Alanna." So much for patience. "Can't you take the help in good grace?"

"Of course." Spinning on her heel, she stalked to the first stall.

She didn't need his help, she thought as she tugged off her mittens and slapped them into her lap. She was perfectly capable of doing her duty. The very idea of his saying she had too much to do. Why, in the spring there was twice as much, with planting and tending the kitchen garden, harvesting herbs. She was a strong, capable woman, not some weak, whimpering girl.

He was probably used to ladies, she thought with a sneer. Polished sugar faces that simpered and fluttered behind fans. Well, she was no lady with silk dresses and kid slippers, and she wasn't a bit ashamed of it. She sent a glare in Ian's direction. And if he thought she pined for drawing rooms, he was very much mistaken.

She tossed her head back as she began the tug and squeeze that squirted the brindled cow's milk into the bucket.

Ungrateful wench, Ian mused as he, with less ease and finesse, milked the second cow. He'd only

wanted to help. Any fool could see that her duties ran from sunup to sundown. If she wasn't milking she was baking. If she wasn't baking she was spinning. If she wasn't spinning, she was scrubbing.

The women in his family had never been ladies of leisure, but they had always had daughters or sisters or cousins to help. All Alanna had were three men who obviously didn't realize the burdens that fell on her.

Well, he was going to help her if he had to throttle her into accepting.

She finished her bucket long before Ian and stood impatiently tapping her foot. When he was done, Alanna reached for the bucket, but he held it away from her.

"What are you doing?"

"I'm carrying the milk in for you." He took up the other bucket.

"Now why would you be doing that?"

"Because it's heavy," he all but bellowed, then muttering about stubborn, empty-headed women, he marched to the door.

"Keep swinging those buckets like that, MacGregor, and you'll have more milk on the ground than in your belly." She couldn't quite catch what he muttered at her, but it wasn't complimentary. Suspicious, she brushed snow from her face. "Since you insist on carrying the milk, I'll just go gather the eggs."

They stalked off in different directions.

When Alanna returned to her kitchen, Ian was still there, feeding the fire.

"If you're waiting for breakfast, you'll wait a while longer."

"I'll help you," he said between gritted teeth.

"Help me what?"

"With breakfast."

That did it. With little regard for how many eggs cracked, she slammed down the bucket. "You find fault with my cooking, MacGregor?"

His hands itched to grab her shoulders and give her a brisk shake. "No."

"Hmm." She moved to the stove to make coffee. Turning, she all but plowed into him. "If you're going to be standing in my kitchen, MacGregor, then move aside. You're not so big I can't push you out of my way."

"Are you always so pleasant in the morning, Mrs. Flynn?"

Rather than dignify the question with an answer, she took the slab of ham she'd gotten from the smokehouse and began to slice. Ignoring him as best she could, she began to mix the batter for the pancakes she considered her specialty. She'd show Ian MacGregor a thing or two about cooking before she was done.

He said nothing but clattered the pewter dishes he set on the table to make his point. By the time her family joined them, the kitchen was filled with appetizing smells and a tension thick enough to hack with an ax.

"Pancakes," Johnny said with relish. "Sure and it's a fine way to start Christmas Eve."

"You look a bit flushed, girl." Cyrus studied his daughter as he took his seat. "You're not coming down sick, are you?"

"It's the heat from the stove," she snapped, then bit her tongue as her father narrowed his eyes. "I've applesauce made just yesterday for the pancakes." She set the bowl she was carrying on the table, then went back for the coffee. Flustered because Ian had yet to take his eyes from her, she reached for the pot without remembering to wrap a cloth around the handle. As she singed the tips of two fingers, she let out a cry and followed it with an oath.

"No use bringing the Lord into it when you've been careless," Cyrus said mildly, but he rose to smear cooling butter on the burns. "You've been jumpy as a frog with the hiccups these past days, Alanna."

"It's nothing." She waved him back to the table with her good hand. "Sit, the lot of you, and eat. I want you out of my kitchen so I can finish my baking."

"I hope there's a fresh raisin cake on the list." Johnny grinned as he heaped applesauce on his plate. "No one makes a better one than you, Alanna. Even when you burn it."

She managed to laugh, and nearly mean it, but she had little appetite for the meal as she joined the table.

It was just as well, she decided some time later. Though the men in her life had chattered like magpies through breakfast, they hadn't left a scrap for the rest of the birds. With relief she watched them bundle up for the rest of the day's work. She'd have the kitchen, and the rest of the house, to herself in short order. Alone, she should be able to think about what and how she felt about Ian MacGregor.

But he had been gone only minutes when he returned with a pail of water.

"What are you up to now?" she demanded, and tried in vain to tuck some of her loosened tresses into her cap.

"Water for the dishes." Before she could do so herself, he poured the water into a pot on the stove to heat.

"I could have fetched it myself," she said, then felt nasty. "But thank you."

"You're welcome." He shrugged out of his outer clothes and hung them on a hook by the door.

"Aren't you going to go with the others, then?"

"There are three of them and one of you."

She tilted her head. "That's true enough. And so?"

"So today I'm helping you."

Because she knew her patience was thin, she waited a moment before speaking. "I'm perfectly capable—"

"More than, from what I've seen." He began to stack the dishes she'd yet to clear. "You work like a pack mule."

"That is a ridiculous and a very uncomplimentary description, boy-o." Her chin jutted forward. "Now get out of my kitchen."

"I will if you will."

"I've work to do."

"Fine. Then let's be at it."

"You'll be in my way."

"You'll work around me." When she drew her next breath he cupped her face in his hands and kissed her, hard and long. "I'm staying with you, Alanna," he said when she managed to focus on him again. "And that's that."

"Is it?" To her mortification, her voice was only a squeak.

"Aye."

"Well, then." She cleared her throat, stepped back and smoothed her skirts. "You can fetch me apples from the storage cellar. I've got pies to bake."

She used the time it took him to return to try to compose herself. What was becoming of her when she lost her brains and every other faculty over a kiss? But it wasn't an ordinary kiss, not when they were Ian's lips doing the work. Something strange was happening when one moment she was pinning her heart on the hope that he would stay a while longer—the next she was resenting him so that she wished him a thousand miles away. And a moment later, she was letting him kiss her, and hoping he'd do so again at the first opportunity.

She'd been born in the Colonies, a child of a new world. But her blood was Irish—Irish enough that words like fate and destiny loomed large.

As she began to scrub dishes, she thought that if her destiny was in the shape of one Ian MacGregor, she was in trouble deep.

"It's simple enough to peel an apple," she insisted later, fuming over Ian's clumsy, hacking attempts. "You put the knife under the skin."

"I did."

"And took most of the meat with it. A little time and care works wonders."

He smiled at her, all too strangely for her comfort. "So I'm thinking, Mrs. Flynn. So I'm thinking."

"Try again," she told him as she went back to her pie-crusts and rolling pin. "And you'll be cleaning up all those peelings you're scattering on my floor."

"Aye, Mrs. Flynn."

Holding the rolling pin aloft, she glared at him. "Are you trying to rouse my temper, MacGregor?"

He eyed the kitchen weaponry. "Not while you're holding that, sweetheart."

"I've told you not to call me that."

"So you have."

He watched her go back to her pies. She was a pleasure to watch, he thought. Quick hands, limber fingers. Even when she moved from counter to stove and back again, there was a nimbleness in her movements that sent his heart thudding.

Who would have thought he'd have had to be shot, all but bleed to death and end up unconscious in a cow stall to fall in love?

Despite her criticism, and her tendency to jump whenever he got too close, he was having the best day of his life. Perhaps he didn't want to make a habit out of peeling apples, but it was a simple way to be near her, to absorb that soft lavender scent that seemed to cling to her skin. It melded seductively with the aromas of cinnamon, ginger and cloves.

And in truth, though he was more at home in political meetings or with a sword in his hand than in the kitchen, he had wanted to ease what he saw as an unfair burden of responsibility.

She didn't appear to deem it so, he mused. Indeed, she seemed content to toil away, hour by hour. He wanted—needed, he admitted—to show her there was more. He imagined riding with her through the fields of his aunt's plantation. In the summer, he thought, when the rich green might remind her of an Ireland she'd never seen. He wanted to take her to Scotland, to the glory of the Highlands. To lie with her in the purple heather by a loch and listen to the wind in the pine.

He wanted to give her a silk dress, and jewels to match her eyes. They were sentimental, romantic notions, he knew. Surely he would have choked on the words if he had tried to express them.

But he wanted to give, that much he knew. If he could find a way to make her take.

Alanna felt his stare on her back as though it were tickling fingers. She'd have preferred the fingers, she thought. Those she could have batted away. Struggling to ignore him, she covered the first pie, fluted and trimmed the crust and set it aside.

"You'll slice a finger off if you keep staring at me instead of watching what you're about."

"Your hair's falling out of your cap again, Mrs. Flynn."

She took a hand and shoved at it, only succeeding in loosening more curls. "And I don't think I care for the tone you use when you call me Mrs. Flynn."

Merely grinning, Ian set aside a pared apple. "What should I call you then? You object to sweetheart,

though it suits so nicely. Your nose goes in the air when I call you Alanna—without your permission. Now you're ready to spout into temper when I, very respectfully, call you Mrs. Flynn."

"Respectfully, hah! You'll go to hell for lying, Ian MacGregor." She waved the rolling pin at him as she turned. "There's not a dab of respect in your tone when you use it—not with that smug smile on your mouth and that gleam in your eye. If you don't think I know just what that gleam means, you're mistaken. Other men have tried it and gotten a good coshing for their pains."

"It gratifies me to hear it. . . Mrs. Flynn."

She made a sound he could only describe as hot steam luffing out of a kettle. "You'll call me nothing at all. Why took Brian's part and asked you to stay for Christmas will always be a mystery to me. The good Lord knows I don't want you here, cluttering up my kitchen, giving me another mouth to cook for, grabbing me and forcing your unwelcome attentions on me at every turn."

He leaned against the counter. "You'll go to hell for lying, sweetheart."

It was the reflex of the moment that had the rolling pin lying out of her hand and toward his head. She regretted it immediately. But she regretted it even more when he nagged the flying round of wood the instant before it cracked into his forehead.

If she had hit him, she would have apologized profusely and tended his bruise. The fact that she'd been foiled changed the matter altogether.

"You cursed Scotsman," she began, lathering up. "You spawn of the devil. A plague on you and every MacGregor from now till the Last Reckoning." Since she'd missed with the rolling pin, she grabbed the closest thing at hand. Fortunately, the heavy metal pie plate was empty. Ian managed to bat it away from his head with the rolling pin.

"Alanna—"

"Don't call me that." She hefted a pewter mug and tried her aim with that. This time Ian wasn't so quick and it bounced off his chest.

"Sweetheart—"

The sound she made at that would have caused even a battle-trying Scotsman to shudder. The plate she hurtled struck Ian's shin. He was hopping on one leg and laughing when she reached for the next weapon.

"Enough!" Roaring with laughter, he grabbed her and swung her around twice, even when she bashed him over the head with the plate.

"Damned hardheaded Scot."

"Aye, and thank God for it or you'll have me in my grave yet." He tossed her up and caught her nimbly at the waist. "Marry me, Mrs. Flynn, for your name was meant to be MacGregor."

Chapter Six

It was a close thing as to whom was the most shocked. Ian hadn't realized he'd meant to ask her. He'd known he was in love, was both amused and dazzled by it. But until that moment his heart hadn't communicated to his brain that marriage was desired. Marriage to Alanna, he thought, and let loose another laugh. It was a fine joke, he decided, on the pair of them.

His words were still echoing in Alanna's head, bouncing from one end of her brain to the other like balls in a wheel. Marry me. Surely she hadn't mistaken what he'd asked her. It was impossible, of course. It was madness. They had known each other only days. Even that was long enough for her to be certain Ian MacGregor would never be the life companion of her dreams. With him, there would never be peaceful nights by the fire but another fight, another cause, another movement.

And yet... Yet she loved him in a way she had never thought to love. Wildly, recklessly, dangerously. Life with him would be... would be... She couldn't imagine it. She put a hand to her head to still her whirling brain. She needed a moment to think and compose herself. After all, when a man asked a woman to marry him, the very least she could do was...

Then it occurred to her that he was still holding her a foot off the floor and laughing like a loon.

Laughing. Her eyes narrowed to sharp blue slits. So it was a great joke he was having at her expense, tossing her in the air like a sack of potatoes and chortling. Marry him. Marry him indeed. The jackass.

She braced a hand on his broad shoulder for balance, rolled the other into a fist and struck him full on the nose.

He yelped and set her down so abruptly she had to shift to keep upright. But she recovered quickly and, feet planted, stuck her hands on her hips and glared at him.

Tentatively, he touched his fingers to his nose. Aye, it was bleeding, he noted. The woman had a wicked right. Watching her warily for any sudden moves, he reached for his handkerchief.

"Is that a yes?"

"Out!" So deep was her rage her voice shook even as it boomed. "Out of my house, you pox-ridden son of Satan." The tears that sprang to her eyes were tears of righteous fury, she assured herself. "If I were a man I'd murder you where you stand and dance a jig on your bleeding body."

"Ah." After an understanding nod, he replaced his handkerchief. "You need a bit of time to think it over. Perfectly understandable."

Speechless, she could only make incoherent growls and hisses.

"I'll speak with your father," he offered politely. She shrieked like a banshee and grabbed for the paring knife.

"I will kill you. On my mother's grave, I swear it."

"My dear Mrs. Flynn," he began as he cautiously clamped a hand on her wrist. "I realize a woman is sometimes overcome with the proposal or marriage, but this..." He trailed off when he saw that tears had welled from her eyes and run down her cheeks. "What is this?" Uncomfortable, he brushed a thumb over her damp cheek. "Alanna, my love, don't. I'd rather have you stab me than cry." But when he gallantly

released her hand, she tossed the knife aside.

"Oh, leave me be, won't you? Go away. How dare you insult me this way? I curse the day I saved your miserable life."

He took heart that she was cursing him again and pressed a kiss to her brow. "Insult you? How?"

"How?" Behind the veil of tears her eyes burned like blue suns. "Laughing at me. Speaking of marriage as if it were a great joke. I suppose you think because I don't have fine clothes or fancy hats that I have no feelings."

"What do hats have to do with it?"

"I suppose all the elegant ladies in Boston just smile indulgently and rap your hand with their fans when you play the flirt, but I take talk of marriage more seriously and won't stand by while you speak of it and laugh in my face at the same time."

"Oh, sweet God." Who would have thought that he, a man reputed to be smooth and clever with the ladies, could muck things up so badly when it mattered? "I was a fool, Alanna. Please listen."

"Was and are a fool. Now take your paws off me."

He gathered her closer. "I only want to explain."

Before he could, Cyrus Murphy pushed open the door. He took one look at the wreckage of the kitchen, at his daughter struggling against Ian, and reached calmly for the hunting knife in his belt.

"Let go of my girl, MacGregor, and prepare to die."

"Da." Eyes widened at the sight of her father, pale as ice with a knife in his hands, Alanna threw herself in front of Ian. "Don't."

"Move aside, lass. Murphys protect their own."

"It isn't the way it looks," she began.

"Leave us, Alanna," Ian said quietly. "I'll have a word with your father."

"The hell you will." She planted her feet. Perhaps she would have shed his blood herself—and had, if one counted his nose—but she wouldn't have her father kill him after she'd worked for two days and nights to keep him alive. "We had an argument, Da. I can handle it myself. He was—"

"He was proposing marriage to your daughter," Ian finished, only to have Alanna round on him again.

"You lying polecat. You didn't mean a word of it. Laughing like a loon while you said it, you were. I won't be insulted. I won't be belittled—"

"But you will be quiet," he roared at her, and had Cyrus raising a brow in approval when she did indeed subside. "I meant every word," he continued, his voice still pitched to raise the roof. "If I was laughing it was at myself, for being so big a fool as to fall in love with a stubborn, sharp-tongued shrew who'd as soon stab me as smile at me."

"Shrew?" Her voice ended on a squeak. "Shrew?"

"Aye, a shrew," Ian said with a vicious nod. "That's what I said, and that's what you are. And a—"

"Enough." Cyrus shook the snow from his hair. "Sweet Jesus, what a pair." With some reluctance, he replaced his knife. "Get on your coat, MacGregor, and come with me. Alanna, finish your baking."

"But, Da, I—"

"Do as I say, lass." He gestured Ian out the door. "With all the shouting and the wailing it's hard for a body to remember it's Christmas Eve." He stopped just outside and planted his hands on his hips in a gesture his daughter had inherited. "I've a job to do, MacGregor. You'll come with me and explain yourself."

"Aye." He cast a last furious look at the window where Alanna had her nose pressed. "I'll come with you."

Ian trudged across the snow and through the billowy curtain that was still falling. He hadn't bothered to fasten his coat and stuck his ungloved hands in its pockets.

"Wait here," Cyrus said. He went inside a small shed and came out with an ax. Noting Ian's cautious stare, he hefted it onto his shoulder. "I won't be using it on you. Yet." He moved off toward the forest with Ian beside him. "Alanna's partial to Christmas. As was her mother." There was a pang, as there always was when he thought of his wife. "She'll be wanting a tree—and time for her temper to cool."

"Does it ever?"

As a matter of habit, Cyrus studied the forest floor for signs of game. They'd want fresh venison soon. "You're the one who's thinking of shackling his leg to hers. Why is that?"

"If I could think of one good reason, I'd give it to you." He hissed his breath out between his teeth. "I ask the woman to marry me, and she hits me in the nose." He touched the still sore appendage, then grinned. "By God, Murphy, I'm half-mad and in love with the woman—which amounts to the same thing. I'll have her to wife."

Cyrus stopped in front of a pine, studied it, rejected it, then moved on. "That remains to be seen."

"I'm not a poor man," Ian began. "The bloody British didn't get everything in the Forty-five, and I've done well enough with investments. I'll provide well for her."

"Mayhap you will, mayhap you won't. She took Michael Flynn and he had no more than a few acres of rocky land and two cows."

"She won't have to work from dawn to dust."

"Alanna doesn't mind work. She takes pride in it." Cyrus stopped in front of another tree, nodded, then handed the ax to Ian. "This'll do. When a man's frustrated, there's nothing like swinging an ax to sweat it out of him."

Ian spread his legs, planted his feet and put his back into it. Wood chips flew. "She cares for me. I know

it."

"Might," Cyrus agreed, then decided to treat himself to a pipe. "'Tis her habit to shout and slap at those she cares for most."

"Then she must love me to distraction." The ax bit into the meat of the pine's trunk. Ian's expression was grim. "I'll have her, Murphy, with or without your blessing."

"That goes without saying." Cyrus patiently filled his pipe. "She's a woman grown and can make up her own mind. Tell me, MacGregor, will you fight the British with as much passion as you'll woo my daughter?"

Ian swung the ax again. The blade whistled through the air. The sound of metal on wood thudded through the forest. "Aye."

"Then I'll tell you now, it may be hard for you to win both." Satisfied the pipe was well packed, he struck a match against a boulder. "Alanna refuses to believe there will be war."

Ian paused. "And you?"

"I've no love for the British or their king." Cyrus puffed on his pipe and sent smoke drifting through the snow. "And even if I did, my vision's sharp enough yet to see what will come. It may take a year, or two, or more, but the fight will come. And it will be long, and it will be bloody. When it comes I'll have two more sons to risk. Two more sons to lose." He sighed, long and heavy. "I don't want your war, Ian MacGregor, but there will come a point when a man will have to stand for what is his."

"It's already begun, Murphy, and neither wanting it nor fearing it will change history."

Cyrus studied Ian as the tree fell to the cushioning snow. A strong man, he thought, one of those damned Scot giants, with a face and form a woman would find pleasing enough. A good mind and a good name. But it was Ian's restless and rebellious spirit that concerned him.

"I'll ask you this, will you be content to sit and wait for what comes to come, or will you go out in search of it?"

"MacGregors don't wait to stand for what they believe in. Nor do they wait to fight for it."

With a nod, Cyrus helped Ian heft the fallen tree. "I won't stand in your way where Alanna is concerned. You may do that for yourself."

Alanna rushed into the front of the cabin the moment she heard Ian's voice. "Da, I want to... Oh." She stopped short at the sight of her father and Ian with a pine tree held between them. "You've cut a Christmas tree."

"Did you think I'd be forgetting?" Cyrus took off his cap and stuffed it in his pocket. "How could I with you nagging me day and night?"

"Thank you." It was with both pleasure and relief that she crossed the room to kiss him. "It's beautiful."

"And I suppose you'll want to be hanging ribbons and

God knows what else on it." But he gave her a quick squeeze as he spoke.

"I have Mama's box of ornaments in my room." Because she understood him so well, she kissed him again. "I'll fetch it after supper."

"I've other chores to see to. You can devil MacGregor about where you want the thing." He gave her hand a quick pat before he went out again.

Alanna cleared her throat. "By the front window, if you please."

Ian dragged it over, balancing it on the flat wooden boards Cyrus had hammered to the trunk. The only sound was the rustling of needles and the crackle of the fire.

"Thank you," she said primly. "You can go about your business now."

Before she could escape to the kitchen again, he took her hand. "Your father has given me permission to wed you, Alanna."

She tugged once on her hand, then wisely gave up. "I'm my own woman, MacGregor."

"You'll be mine, Mrs. Flynn."

Though he stood a foot over her head, she managed to convey the impression of looking down her nose at him. "I'd sooner mate a rabid skunk."

Determined to do it right this time, he brought her rigid hand to his lips. "I love you, Alanna."

"Don't." She pressed her free hand to her nervous heart. "Don't say that."

"I say it with every breath I take. And will until I breathe no more."

Undone, she stared at him, into those blue-green eyes that had already haunted her nights. His arrogance she could resist. His outrageousness she could fight. But this, this simple, almost humble declaration of devotion left her defenseless.

"Ian, please..."

He took heart because she had, at long last, called him by his given name. And the look in her eyes as the word left her lips could not be mistaken. "You will not tell me you're indifferent to me."

Unable to resist, she touched a hand to his face. "No, I won't tell you that. You must see how I feel every time I look at you."

"We were meant to be together." With his eyes on hers, he pressed the palm of her hand to his lips. "From the moment I saw you bending over me in the barn I felt it."

"It's all so soon," she said, fighting both panic and longing. "All so quick."

"And right. I'll make you happy, Alanna. You can choose whatever house you want in Boston."

"Boston?"

"For a time, at least, we would live there. I have work to do. Later we could go to Scotland, and you could visit your homeland."

But she was shaking her head. "Work. What work is this?"

A shield seemed to come down over his eyes. "I gave you my word I would not speak of it until after Christmas."

"Aye." She felt her bounding heart still and freeze in her breast. "You did." After a deep breath, she looked down at their joined hands. "I have pies in the oven. They need to come out."

"Is that all you can say?"

She looked at the tree behind him, still bare, but with so much promise. "I must ask you for time. Tomorrow, on Christmas, I'll give you my answer."

"There is only one I'll take."

That helped her to smile. "There's only one I'll give."

Chapter Seven

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There was a scent of pine and wood smoke, the lingering aroma of the thick supper stew. On the sturdy table near the fire Alanna had placed her mother's prized possession, a glass punch bowl. As had been his habit for as long as Alanna could remember, her father mixed the Yuletide punch, with a hand generous with Irish whiskey. She watched the amber liquid catch the light from the fire and the glow from the candles already lighted on the tree.

She had promised herself that this night, and the Christmas day to follow, would be only for joy.

As well it should be, she told herself. Whatever had transpired between her father and Ian that morning, they were thick as thieves now. She noted that Cyrus pressed a cup of punch on Ian before he ladled one for himself and drank deeply. Before she could object, young Brian was given a sample.

Well, they would all sleep that night, she decided, and was about to take a cup herself when she heard the sound of a wagon.

"There's Johnny." She let out a huff of breath. "And for his sake he'd best have a good excuse for missing supper."

"Courting Mary," Brian said into his cup.

"That may be, but—" She broke off as Johnny came in, with Mary Wyeth on his arm. Automatically, Alanna glanced around the room, relieved everything was as it should be for company. "Mary, how good to see you." Alanna went quickly to kiss the girl's cheek. Mary was shorter and plumper than she, with bright gold hair and rosy cheeks. They seemed rosier than usual, Alanna noted—either with cold from the journey from the village, or with heat from Johnny's courting.

"Merry Christmas." Always shy, Mary flushed even more as she clasped her hands together. "Oh, what a lovely tree."

"Come by the fire, you'll be cold. Let me take your cape and shawl." She shot her brother an exasperated look as he just stood by and grinned foolishly. "Johnny, fetch Mary a cup of punch and some of the cookies I baked this morning."

"Aye." He sprang into action, punch lapping over his fingers in his rush. "We'll have a toast," he announced, then spent considerable time clearing his throat. "To my future wife." He clasped Mary's nervous hand in his. "Mary accepted me this evening."

"Oh." Alanna held out her hands, and since Mary didn't have one to spare, grabbed the girl by the shoulder. "Oh, welcome. Though how you'll stand this one is beyond me."

Cyrus, always uncomfortable with emotion, gave Mary a quick peck on the cheek and his son a hearty slap on the back. "Then we'll drink to my new daughter," he said. "'Tis a fine Christmas present you give us, John."

"We need music." Alanna turned to Brian, who nodded and rushed off to fetch his flute. "A spritely song, Brian," she instructed. "The engaged couple should have the first dance."

Brian perched himself with one foot on the seat of a chair and began to play. When Ian's hand came to rest on her shoulder, Alanna touched her fingers briefly, gently, to his wrist.

"Does the idea of a wedding please you, Mrs. Flynn?"

"Aye." With a watery smile, she watched her brother turn and sway with Mary. "She'll make him happy. They'll make a good home together, a good family. That's all I want for him."

He grinned as Cyrus tossed back another cup of punch and began to clap his hands to the music. "And for yourself?"

She turned, and her eyes met his. "It's all I've ever wanted."

He leaned closer. "If you gave me my answer now, we could have a double celebration this Christmas Eve."

She shook her head as her heart broke a little. "This is Johnny's night." Then she laughed as Johnny grabbed her hands and pulled her into the dance.

A new snow fell, softly, outside the cabin. But inside, the rooms were filled with light and laughter and music. Alanna thought of her mother and how pleased she would have been to have seen her family together and joyful on this most holy of nights. And she thought of Rory, bright and beautiful Rory, who would have outdanced the lot of them and raised his clear tenor voice in song.

"Be happy." Impulsively she threw her arms around Johnny's neck. "Be safe."

"Here now, what's all this?" Touched, and embarrassed, he hugged her quickly then pulled her away.

"I love you, you idiot."

"I know that." He noted that his father was trying to teach Mary to do a jig. It made him almost split his face with a grin. "Here, Ian, take this wench off my hands. A man's got to rest now and then."

"No one can outdance an Irishman," Ian told her as he took her hand. "Unless it's a Scotsman."

"Oh, is that the way of it?" With a smile and a toss of her head, she set out to prove him wrong.

Though the candles had burned low before the house and its occupants slept, the celebrations began again at dawn. By the light of the tree and the fire, they exchanged gifts. Alanna gained a quiet pleasure from the delight on Ian's face as he held up the scarf she had woven him. Though it had taken her every spare minute to work the blue and the green threads together on her loom, the result was worth it. When he left, he would take a part of her.

Her heart softened further when she saw that he had gifts for her family. A new pipe for her father, a fine new bridle for Johnny's favorite horse and a book of poetry for Brian.

Later, he stood beside her in the village church, and though she listened to the story of the Savior's birth with the same wonder she had had as a child, she would have been blind not to see other women cast glances her way. Glances of envy and curiosity. She didn't object when his hand closed over hers.

"You look lovely today, Alanna." Outside the church, where people had stopped to chat and exchange Christmas greetings, he kissed her hands. Though she knew the gossips would be fueled for weeks, she gave him a saucy smile. She was woman enough to know she looked her best in the deep blue wool dress with its touch of lace at collar and cuffs.

"You're looking fine yourself, MacGregor." She resisted the urge to touch the high starched stock at his throat. It was the first time she'd seen him in Sunday best, with snowy lace falling over his wrists, buttons gleaming on his doublet and a tricornered hat on his mane of red hair. It would be another memory of him to treasure.

"Sure and it's a beautiful day."

He glanced at the sky. "It will snow before nightfall."

"And what better day for a snowfall than Christmas?" Then she caught at the blue bonnet Johnny had given her. "But the wind is high." She smiled as she saw Johnny and Mary surrounded by well-wishers. "We'd best get back. I've a turkey to check."

He offered his arm. "Allow me to escort you to your carriage, Mrs. Flynn."

"Why that's kind of you, Mr. MacGregor."

He couldn't remember a more perfect day. Though there were still chores to be done, Ian managed to spend every free moment with Alanna. Perhaps there was a part of him that wished her family a thousand miles away so that he could be alone with her at last and have her answer. But he determined to be patient, having no doubt what the answer would be. She couldn't smile at him, look at him, kiss him that way unless she was as wildly in love as he. He might have wished he could simply snatch her up, toss her on his horse and ride off, but for once, he wanted to do everything properly.

If it was her wish they could be married in the church where they had observed Christmas. Then he

would hire—or better, buy—a carriage, blue picked out in silver. That would suit her. In it they would travel to Virginia, where he would present her to his aunt and uncle and cousins.

Somehow he would manage a trip to Scotland, where she would meet his mother and father, his brothers and sisters. They would be married again there, in the land of his birth.

He could see it all. They would settle in Boston, where he would buy her a fine house. Together they would start a family while he fought, with voice or sword, for the independence of his adopted country.

By day they would argue and fight. By night they would lie together in a big feather bed, her long slender limbs twined around him.

It seemed since he had met her he could see no further than life with her.

The snow did fall, but gently. By the time the turkey and potatoes, the sauerkraut and biscuits were devoured, Ian was half-mad with impatience.

Rather than join the men by the fire, he grabbed Alanna's cloak and tossed it over her. "I need a moment with you."

"But I haven't finished—"

"The rest can wait." As far as he could see, her kitchen was already as neat as a pin. "I will speak with you, in private."

She didn't object, couldn't, because her heart was already in her throat when he pulled her out into the snow. He'd barely taken time to jam on his hat. When she pointed out that he hadn't buttoned his coat against the wind, he swept her up in his arms and with long strides carried her to the barn.

"There's no need for all of this," she pointed out. "I can walk as well as you."

"You'll dampen your dress." He turned his head and kissed her snow-brushed lips. "And I like it very well."

After he set her down inside, he latched the door and lighted a lamp. She folded her hands at her waist. It was now, Alanna told herself firmly, that the Christmas celebration had to end.

"Ian—"

"No, wait." He came to her, put his hands gently on her shoulders. The sudden tenderness robbed her of speech. "Did you not wonder why I gave you no gift this morning?"

"You gave me your gift. We agreed—"

"Did you think I had nothing more for you?" He took her hands, chilled because he had given her no time for mittens, and warmed them with his. "On this, our first Christmas together, the gift must be special."

"No, Ian, there is no need."

"There is every need." He reached into the pocket of his doublet and withdrew a small box. "I sent a village lad into Boston for this. It was in my quarters there." He placed the box in her hand. "Open it."

Her head warned her to refuse, but her heart—her heart could not. Inside she saw a ring. After a quick gasp, she pressed her lips together. It was fashioned of gold in the shape of a lion's head and crown.

"This is the symbol of my clan. The grandfather whose name I carry had it made for his wife. Before she died, she gave this to my father to hold in trust for me. When I left Scotland, he told me it was his hope I would find a woman as strong, as wise and as loyal to wear it."

Her throat was so tight the words hurt as she forced them out. "Oh, Ian, no. I could not. I don't—"

"There is no other woman who will wear it." He took it from the box and placed it on her finger. It might have been made for her, so perfect was the fit. At that moment, he felt as though the world were his. "There is no other woman I will love." He brought her ring hand to his lips, watching her over it. "With this I pledge you my heart."

"I love you," she murmured as she felt her world rip in two. "I will always love you." There would be time, she knew, as his mouth came to hers, for regrets, for pain, for tears. But tonight, for the hours they had, she would give him one more gift.

Gently, she pushed his coat from his shoulders. With her mouth moving avidly beneath his, she began to unbutton his doublet.

With unsteady hands, he stilled hers. "Alanna—"

She shook her head and touched a finger to his lips. "I am not an untried girl. I come to you already a woman, and I ask that you take me as one. I need you to love me, Ian. Tonight, this Christmas night, I need that." This time it was she who captured his hands and brought them to her lips. It was reckless, she knew. But it was right. "And I need to love you."

Never before had he felt so clumsy. His hands seemed too big, too rough, his need too deep and intense. He swore that if he accomplished nothing else in his life he would love her gently and show her what was written in his heart.

With care, he lowered her onto the hay. It was not the feather bed he wished for her, but her arms came willingly around him, and she smiled as she brought his mouth to hers. With a sound of wonder, he sank into her.

It was more than she'd ever dreamed, the touch of her love's hands in her hair, on her face. With such patience, with such sweetness, he kissed her until the sorrows she held in her heart melted away. When he had unbuttoned her frock, he slipped it from her shoulder to kiss the skin there, to marvel at the milky whiteness and to murmur such foolish things that made her want to smile and weep at once.

He felt her strong, capable fingers push aside his doublet, unfasten his shirt, then stroke along his chest.

With care he undressed her, pausing, lingering, to give pleasure and to take it. With each touch, each taste, her response grew. He heard her quick, unsteady breath at his ear, then felt the nip of her teeth as he gave himself over to the delights of her body.

Soft, lavender scent twining with the fragrance of hay. Smooth, pale skin glowing in the shadowed lamplight. Quiet, drifting sighs, merging with his own murmurs. The rich shine of her hair as he gathered fistfuls in his hands.

She was shuddering. But with heat. Such heat. She tried to say his name but managed only to dig her nails into his broad shoulders. From where had come this churning, this wild river that flowed inside her? And where would it end? Dazzled, desperate, she arched against him while his hands traveled like lightning over points of pleasure she hadn't known she possessed.

Her mouth was on his, avid, thirsty, as he pushed her to the first brink, then beyond. Her stunned cry was muffled against his lips and his own groan of satisfaction.

Then he was inside her, deep. At the glory of it, her eyes flew open. She saw his face above her, the fire of his hair glinting in the lamplight.

"Now we are one." His voice was low and harsh with passion. "Now you are mine."

And he lowered his mouth to hers as they gave each other the gift of self.

Chapter Eight

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They dozed, turned to each other, her cloak carelessly tossed over their tangled forms, their bodies warmed and replete from loving.

He murmured her name.

She woke.

Midnight had come and gone, she thought. And her time was over. Still, she stole a bit more, studying his face as he slept, learning each plane, each angle. Though she knew his face was already etched in her head, and on her heart.

One last kiss, she told herself as she brushed her lips to his. One last moment.

When she shifted, he mumbled and reached out.

"You don't escape that easily, Mrs. Flynn."

Her heart suffered a new blow at the wicked way he said her name. " 'Tis almost dawn. We can't stay any longer."

"Very well then." He sat up as she began to dress. "I suppose even under the circumstances, your father might pull his knife again if he found me naked in the hay with his daughter." With some regret he tugged on his breeches. He wished he had the words to tell her what the night had meant to him. What her love meant to him. With his shirt unbuttoned, he rose to kiss the back of her neck. "You've hay in your hair, sweetheart."

She sidestepped him and began to pluck it out. "I've lost my pins."

"I like it down." He swallowed and took a step forward to clutch handfuls of it. "By God, I like it down."

She nearly swayed toward him before she caught herself. "I need my cap."

"If you must." Obliging, he began to search for it. "In truth, I don't remember a better Christmas. I thought I'd reached the peak when I was eight and was given a bay gelding. Fourteen hands he was, with a temper like a mule." He found her cap under scattered hay. With a grin, he offered it. "But, though it's close in the running, you win over the gelding."

She managed to smile. "It's flattered I am, to be sure, MacGregor. Now I've breakfast to fix."

"Fine. We can tell your family over the meal that we're to be married."

She took a deep breath. "No."

"There's no reason to wait, Alanna."

"No," she repeated. "I'm not going to marry you."

For a moment he stared, then he laughed. "What nonsense is this?"

"It isn't nonsense at all. I'm not going to marry you."

"The bloody hell you aren't!" he exploded, and grabbed both her shoulders. "I won't have games when it comes to this."

"It's not a game, Ian." Though her teeth had snapped together, she spoke calmly. "I don't want to marry you."

If she had still had the knife in her hand and had plunged it into him, she would have caused him less pain. "You lie. You look me in the face and lie. You could not have loved me as you did through the night and not want to belong to me."

Her eyes remained dry, so dry they burned. "I love you, but I will not marry you." She shook her head before he could protest. "My feelings have not changed. Nor have yours—nor can yours. Understand me, Ian, I am a simple woman with simple hopes. You'll make your war and won't be content until it comes to pass. You'll fight in your war, if it takes a year or ten. I cannot lose another I love, when I have already lost so many. I will not take your name and give you my heart only to see you die."

"So you bargain with me?" Incensed, he paced away from her. "You won't share my life unless I'm content to live it ignoring all I believe in? To have you, I must turn my back on my country, my honor and my conscience?"

"No." She gripped her hands together tightly and fought not to twist them. "I offer you no bargain. I give you your freedom with an open heart and with no regrets for what passed between us. I cannot live in the world you want, Ian. And you cannot live in mine. All I ask is for you to give me the same freedom I give you."

"Damn you, I won't." He grabbed her again, fingers that had been so gentle the night before, bruising. "How can you think that a difference in politics could possibly keep me from taking you with me? You belong with me, Alanna. There is nothing beyond that."

"It is not just a difference in politics." Because she knew she would weep in a moment, she made her

voice flat and cold. "It is a difference in hopes and in dreams. All of mine, and all of yours. I do not ask you to sacrifice yours, Ian. I will not sacrifice mine." She pulled away to stand rigid as a spear. "I do not want you. I do not want to live, my life with you. And as a woman free to take or reject as she pleases, I will not. There is nothing you can say or do to change that. If in truth you do care for me, you won't try."

She snatched up her cape and held it balled in her hands. "Your wounds are healed, MacGregor. It's time you took your leave. I will not see you again." .

With this, she turned and fled.

An hour later, from the safety of her room, she heard him ride off. It was then, and only then, that she allowed herself to lie on the bed and weep. Only when her tears wet the gold on her finger did she realize she had not given him back his ring. Nor had he asked for it.

It took him three weeks to reach Virginia, and another week before he would speak more than a few clipped sentences to anyone. In his uncle's library he would unbend enough to discuss the happenings in Boston and other parts of the Colonies and Parliament's reactions. Though Brigham Langston, the fourth earl of Ashburn, had lived in America for almost thirty years, he still had high connections in England. And as he had fought for his beliefs in the Stuart Rebellion, so would he fight his native country again for freedom and justice in his home.

"All right, that's enough plotting and secrets for tonight." Never one to pay attention to sanctified male ground, Serena MacGregor Langston swept into the library. Her hair was still fiery red as it had been in her youth. The few strands of gray didn't concern a woman who felt she had earned them.

Though Ian rose to bow to his aunt, the woman's husband continued to lean against the mantel. He was, Serena thought, as handsome as ever. More perhaps. Though his hair was silver, the southern sun had tanned his face so that it reminded her of oak. And his body was as lean and muscular as she remembered it from nearly thirty years before. She smiled as her eldest son, Daniel, poured her brandy and kissed her.

"You know we always welcome your delightful company, Mama."

"You've a tongue like your father's." She smiled, well pleased that he had inherited Brigham's looks, as well. "You know very well you wish me to the devil. I'll have to remind you again that I've already fought in one rebellion. Isn't that so, Sassenach?"

Brigham grinned at her. She had called him by the uncomplimentary Scottish term for the English since the first moment they had met. "Have I ever tried to change you?"

"You're not a man who tries when he knows he must fail." And she kissed him full on the mouth. "Ian, you're losing weight." Serena had already decided she'd given the lad enough time to stew over whatever was troubling him. As long as his mother was an ocean away, she would tend to him herself. "Do you have a complaint for cook?"

"Your table, as always, is superb, Aunt Serena."

"Ah." She sipped her brandy. "Your cousin Fiona tells me you've yet to go out riding with her." She spoke of her youngest daughter. "I hope she hasn't done anything to annoy you."

"No." He caught himself before he shifted from foot to foot. "No, I've just been a bit, ah, distracted. I'll

be sure to go out with her in the next day or so."

"Good." She smiled, deciding to wait until they were alone to move in for the kill. "Brig, Amanda would like you to help her pick out a proper pony for young Colin. I thought I raised my eldest daughter well, but she apparently thinks you've a better eye for horseflesh than her mama.

Oh, and, Daniel, your brother is out at the stables. He asked me to send for you."

"The lad thinks of little but horses," Brigham commented. "He takes after Malcolm."

"I'd remind you my younger brother has done well enough for himself with his horses."

Brigham tipped his glass toward his wife. "No need to remind me."

"I'll go." Daniel set down his snifter. "If I know Kit, he's probably working up some wild scheme about breeding again."

"Oh, and, Brig. Parkins is in a lather over something. The state of your riding jacket, I believe. I left him up in your dressing room."

"He's always in a lather," Brigham muttered, referring to his longtime valet. Then he caught his wife's eye, and her meaning. "I'll just go along and see if I can calm him down."

"You won't desert me, will you, Ian?" Spreading her hooped skirts, she sat, satisfied that she'd cleared the room. "We haven't had much time to talk since you came to visit. Have some more brandy and keep me company for a while." She smiled, disarmingly. It was another way she had learned—other than shouting and swearing—to get what she wanted. "And tell me about your adventures in Boston."

Because her feet were bare, as she had always preferred them, she tucked her legs up, managing in the wide plum-colored skirts to look both ladylike and ridiculously young. Despite the foul mood that haunted him, Ian found himself smiling at her.

"Aunt Serena, you are beautiful."

"And you are trying to distract me." She tossed her head so that her hair, never quite tamed, flowed over her shoulders. "I know all about your little tea party, my lad." She toasted him with her snifter. "As one MacGregor to another, I salute you. And," she continued, "I know that the English are already grumbling. Would that they would choke on their own cursed tea." She held up a hand. "But don't get me started on that. It's true enough that I want to hear what you have to say about the feelings of those in New England and other parts of America, but for now I want to know about you."

"About me?" He shrugged and swirled his drink. "It's hardly worth the trouble to pretend you don't know all about my activities, my allegiance to Sam Adams and the Sons of Liberty. Our plans move slowly, but they move."

She was nearly distracted enough to inquire further along these lines, but Brigham, and her own sources, could feed her all the information she needed. "On a more personal level, Ian." More serious, she leaned forward to touch his hand. "You are my brother's first child and my own godchild. I helped bring you into this world. And I know as truly as I sit here that you're troubled by something that has nothing to do with politics or revolutions."

"And everything to do with it," he muttered, and drank.

"Tell me about her."

He gave his aunt a sharp look. "I have mentioned no 'her.'"

"You have mentioned her a thousand times by your silence." She smiled and kept his hand in hers. "'Tis no use trying to keep things from me, my lad. We're blood. What is her name?"

"Alanna," he heard himself saying. "Damn her to hell and back."

With a lusty laugh, Serena sat back. "I like the sound of that. Tell me."

And he did. Though he had had no intention of doing so. Within thirty minutes he had told Serena everything from his first moment of regaining hazy consciousness in the barn to his furious and frustrated leave-taking.

"She loves you very much," Serena murmured.

As he told his tale, Ian had risen to pace to the fire and back, to the window and back and to the fire again. Though he was dressed like a gentleman, he moved like a warrior. He stood before the fire now, the flames snapping at his back. She was reminded so completely of her brother Coll that her heart broke a little.

"What kind of love is it that pushes a man away and leaves him with half a heart?"

"A deep one, a frightened one." She rose then to hold out her hands to him. "This I understand, Ian, more than I can tell you." Pained for him, she brought his hands to her cheeks.

"I cannot change what I am."

"No, you cannot." With a sigh, she drew him down to sit beside her. "Neither could I. We are children of Scotland, my love. Spirits of the Highlands." Even as she spoke, the pain for her lost homeland was ripe. "We are rebels born and bred, warriors since time began. And yet, when we fight, we fight only for what is ours by right. Our land, our homes, our people."

"She doesn't understand."

"Oh, I believe she understands only too well. Perhaps she cannot accept. By why would you, a MacGregor, leave her when she told you to? Would you not fight for her?"

"She's a hardheaded shrew who wouldn't listen to reason."

"Ah." Hiding a smile, she nodded. She had been called hardheaded time and again during her life—and by one man in particular. It was pride that had set her nephew on his horse and had him licking his wounds in Virginia. Pride was something she also understood very well. "And you love her?"

"I would forget her if I could." He ground his teeth. "Perhaps I will go back and murder her."

"I doubt it will come to that." Rising, she patted his hand. "Take some time with us here, Ian. And trust me, all will be well eventually. I must go up now and rescue your uncle from Parkins."

She left him scowling at the fire. But instead of going to Brigham, she went into her own sitting room and composed a letter.

"I cannot go." Cheeks flushed, eyes bright and blazing, Alanna stood in front of her father, the letter still clutched in her hand.

"You can and will," Cyrus insisted. "The Lady Langston has invited you to her home to thank you in person for saving the life of her nephew." He clamped his pipe between his teeth and prayed he wasn't making a mistake. "Your mother would want this for you."

"The journey is too long," she began quickly. "And in another month or two it will be time for making soap and planting and wool carding. I've too much to do to take such a trip. And... and I have nothing proper to wear."

"You will go, representing this house." He drew himself up to his full height. "It will never be said that a Murphy cowered at the thought of meeting gentry."

"I'm not cowering."

"You're shaking in your boots, girl, and it makes me pale with shame. Lady Langston wishes to make your acquaintance. Why, I have cousins who fought beside her clan in the Forty-five. A Murphy's as good as a MacGregor any day—better than one if it comes to that. I couldn't give you the schooling your good mother wanted for you—"

"Oh, Da."

He shook his head fiercely. "She will turn her back on me when I join her in the hereafter if I don't push you to do this. 'Tis my wish that you see more of the world than these rocks and this forest before my life is done. So you'll do it for me and your mother if not for yourself."

She weakened, as he'd known she would. "But... If Ian is there..."

"She doesn't say he is, does she?"

"Well, no, but—"

"Then it's likely he's not. He's off rabble-raising somewhere more like."

"Aye." Glumly, she looked down at the letter in her hand. "Aye, more like." She began to wonder what it would be like to travel so far and to see Virginia, where the land was supposed to be so green. "But who will cook? Who will do the wash and the milking. I can't—"

"We're not helpless around here, girl." But he was already missing her. "Mary can help, now that she's married to Johnny. And the Widow Jenkins is always willing to lend a hand."

"Aye, but can we afford—"

"We're not penniless, either," he snapped. "Go and write a letter back and tell Lady Langston you kindly accept her invitation to visit. Unless you're afraid to meet her."

"Of course I'm not." That served to get her dander up. "I will go," she muttered, stomping up the stairs to find a quill and writing paper.

"Aye," Cyrus murmured as he heard her door slam. "But will you be back?"

Chapter Nine

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Alanna was certain her heart would beat so fast and hard that it would burst through her breast. Never before had she ridden in such a well-sprung carriage with such a fine pair of matched bays pulling it. And a driver all in livery. Imagine the Langstons sending a carriage all that way, with a driver, postilions and a maid to travel all the miles with her.

Though she had traveled by ship from Boston to Richmond, again with a companion the Langstons had provided, she would journey by road the remainder of the way to their plantation.

They called it Glenroe, after a forest in the Highlands.

Oh, what a thrill it had been to watch the wind fill the sails of the ship, to have her own cabin and the dainty maid to see to her needs. Until the maid had taken sick from the rocking of the boat, of course. Then Alanna had seen to her needs. But she hadn't minded a bit. While the grateful lass had slept off her illness, Alanna had been free to walk the decks of the great ship and watch the ocean, glimpsing occasional stretches of coastland.

And she wondered at the vastness and beauty of the country she had never truly seen.

It was beautiful. Though she had loved the farm, the forest and the rocks of her native Massachusetts, she found the land even more glorious in its variety. Why, when she had left home, there had still been snow on the ground. The warming days had left icicles gleaming on the eaves of the house and the bare branches of the trees.

But now, in the south, she saw the trees greening and had left her cloak unfastened to enjoy the air through the carriage window. In the fields there were young calves and foals, trying out their legs or nursing. In others she saw dozens and dozens of black field hands busy with spring planting. And it was only March.

Only March, she thought again. Only three months since she had sent Ian away. In a nervous habit, she reached up to touch the outline of the ring she wore on a cord under her traveling dress. She would have to give it back, of course. To his aunt, for surely Ian wouldn't be on the plantation. Couldn't be, she thought with a combination of relief and longing. She would return the ring to his aunt with some sort of explanation as to her possession of it. Not the full truth, she reflected, for that would be too humiliating and painful.

She wouldn't worry about it now, she told herself, and folded her hands in her lap as she studied the rolling hills already turning green in Virginia's early spring. She would think of this journey, and this visit, as an adventure. One she would not likely have again.

And she must remember everything to tell Brian, the curious one. She would remember everything, she thought with a sigh, for herself. For this was Ian's family, people who had known him as a babe, as a

growing lad.

For the few weeks she remained on the plantation with Ian's family, she would feel close to him again. For the last time, she promised herself. Then she would return to the farm, to her family and her duties, and be content.

There was no other way. But as the carriage swayed, she continued to hold her fingers to the ring and wish she could find one.

The carriage turned through two towering stone pillars with a high iron sign that read Glenroe. The maid, more taxed by the journey than Alanna, shifted in the seat across from her. "You'll be able to see the house soon, miss." Grateful that the weeks of traveling were almost at an end, the maid barely restrained herself from poking her head out the carriage window. "It's the most beautiful house in Virginia."

Heart thudding, Alanna began to fiddle with the black braid that trimmed the dove-gray dress she had labored over for three nights. Her busy fingers then toyed with the ribbons of her bonnet, smoothed the skirts of the dress, before returning to pluck at the braid again.

The long wide drive was lined with oaks, their tiny unfurling leaves a tender green. As far as she could see, the expansive lawns were tended. Here and there she saw trimmed bushes already in bud. Then, rising over a gentle crest, was the house.

Alanna was struck speechless. It was a majestic structure of pristine white with a dozen columns gracing the front like slender ladies. Balconies that looked like black lace trimmed the tall windows on the second and third stories. A wide, sweeping porch skirted both front and sides. There were flowers, a deep blood red, in tall urns standing on either side of stone steps that led to double doors glittering with glass.

Alanna gripped her fingers together until the knuckles turned as white as the house. It took all her pride and will not to shout to the driver to turn the carriage around and whip the horses into a run.

What was she doing here, in such a place? What would she have to say to anyone who could live in such richness? The gap between herself and Ian seemed to widen with each step of the prancing bays.

Before the carriage had drawn to a halt at the curve of the circular drive, a woman came through the doors and started down the porch. Her billowing dress was a pale, watery green trimmed with ivory lace. Her hair, a lovely shade of red gold, was dressed simply in a coil at her neck and shone in the sunlight. Alanna had hardly alighted with the assistance of a liveried footman when the woman stepped forward, hands extended.

"Mrs. Flynn. You're as beautiful as I expected." There was a soft burr to the woman's speech that reminded Alanna painfully of Ian. "But I will call you Alanna, because I feel we're already friends." Before Alanna could decide how to respond, the woman was smiling and gathering her into an embrace. "I'm Ian's aunt, Serena. Welcome to Glenroe."

"Lady Langston," Alanna began, feeling dusty and crumpled and intimidated. But Serena was laughing and drawing her toward the steps.

"Oh, we don't use titles here. Unless they can be of some use to us. Your journey went well, I hope."

"Aye." She felt she was being borne away by a small, red-haired whirlwind. "I must thank you for your generosity in asking me to come, in opening your home to me."

"'Tis I who am grateful." Serena paused on the threshold. "Ian is as precious to me as my own children. Come, I'll take you to your room. I'm sure you'll want to refresh yourself before you meet the rest of the family at tea. Of course we don't serve the bloody stuff," Serena continued blandly as Alanna gaped at the entrance hall with its lofty ceilings and double curving stairs.

"No, no of course not," Alanna said weakly as Serena took her arm to lead her up the right-hand sweep of the stairs. There was a shout, a yell and an oath from somewhere deep in the house.

"My two youngest children." Unconcerned, Serena continued up. "They squabble like puppies."

Alanna cleared her throat. "How many children do you have, Lady Langston?"

"Six." Serena took her down a hall with pastel wall covering and thick carpeting. "Payne and Ross are the ones you hear making a din. They're twins. One minute they're bashing each other, the next swearing to defend each other to the death."

Alanna distinctly heard something crash, but Serena didn't blink an eye as she opened the door to a suite of rooms.

"I hope you'll be comfortable here," she said. "If you need anything, you have only to ask."

What could she possibly need? Alanna thought dumbly. The bedroom was at least three times the size of the room she had slept in at home. Someone had put fresh, fragrant flowers into vases. Cut flowers in March.

The bed, large enough for three, was covered in pale blue silk and plumped with pillows. There was a wardrobe of carved wood, an elegant bureau with a silver-trimmed mirror, a dainty vanity table with a brocade chair. The tall windows were open so that the warm, fragrant breeze ruffled the sheer white curtains. Before she could speak, a maid scurried in with a steaming pitcher of water.

"Your sitting room is through there." Serena moved past a beautifully carved fireplace. "This is Hattie." Serena smiled at the small, wiry black maid. "She'll tend to your needs while you're with us. Hattie, you'll take good care of Mrs. Flynn, won't you?"

"Oh, yes, ma'am." Hattie beamed.

"Well, then." Serena patted Alanna's hand, found it chilled and unsteady and felt a pang of sympathy. "Is there anything else I can do for you?"

"Oh, no. You've done more than enough."

I've not even begun, Serena thought but only smiled. "I'll leave you to rest. Hattie will show you down whenever you're ready."

When the door closed behind the indomitable Lady Langston, Alanna sat wearily on the edge of the bed and wondered how she would keep up.

Because she was too nervous to keep to her rooms, Alanna allowed Hattie to help her out of the traveling dress and into her best frock. The little maid proved adept at dressing hair, and with nimble fingers and a chattering singsong voice, she coaxed and brushed and curled until Alanna's raven locks

were draped in flirty curls over her left shoulder.

Alanna was just fastening her mother's garnet eardrops and drumming up her courage to go downstairs when there were shouts and thumping outside her door. Intrigued, she opened her door a crack, then widened it at the sight of two young male bodies rolling over the hall carpet.

She cleared her throat. "Good day to you, gentlemen."

The boys, mirror images of each other with ruffled black hair and odd topaz eyes, stopped pummeling each other to study her. As if by some silent signal, they untangled themselves, rose and bowed in unison.

"And who might you be?" the one with the split lip asked.

"I'm Alanna Flynn." Amused, she smiled. "And you must be Payne and Ross."

"Aye." This came from the one with the black eye. "I'm Payne, and the eldest, so I'll welcome you to Glenroe."

"I'll welcome her, as well." Ross gave his brother a sharp jab in the ribs with his elbow before he stepped forward and stuck out a hand.

"And I'll thank both of you," she said, hoping to keep the peace. "I was about to go down and join your mother. Perhaps you could escort me."

"She'll be in the parlor. It's time for tea." Ross offered his arm.

"Of course we don't drink the bloody stuff." Payne offered his, as well. Alanna took both. "The English could force it down our throats and we'd spit it back at them."

Alanna swallowed a smile. "Naturally."

As the trio entered the parlor, Serena rose. "Ah, Alanna, I see you've met my young beasts." With a considering look, she noted the black eye and bloody lip. "If it's cake the pair of you are after, then you'll wash first." As they raced off, she turned to introduce Alanna to the others in the room. There was a boy of perhaps eighteen she called Kit, who had his mother's coloring and a quick smile. A young girl she measured as Brian's age, with hair more blond than red, dimpled prettily.

"Kit and Fiona will drag you off to the stables at every opportunity," Serena warned. "My daughter Amanda hopes to join us for dinner tonight with her family. They live at a neighboring plantation." She poured the first cup of coffee and offered it to Alanna. "We won't wait for Brigham and the others. They're off overseeing the planting and the good Lord knows when they might come in."

"Mama says you live on a farm in Massachusetts," Fiona began.

"Aye." Alanna smiled and relaxed a little. "There was snow on the ground when I left. Our planting season is much shorter than yours."

The conversation was flowing easily when the twins came back, apparently united again as their arms were slung around each other's shoulders. With identical grins they walked to their mother and kissed each cheek.

"It's too late," Serena told them. "I already know about the vase." She poured two cups of chocolate. "It's a good thing it happened to be an ugly one. Now sit, and try not to slop this over the carpet."

Alanna was at ease and enjoying her second cup of coffee when a burst of male laughter rolled down the hall.

"Papa!" The twins cried and leaped up to race to the door. Serena only glanced at the splotch of chocolate on the rug and sighed.

Brigham entered, ruffling the hair of the boys on either side of him. "So, what damage have you done today?" Alanna observed that his gaze went first to his wife. There was amusement in it, and something much deeper, much truer, that lighted a small spark of envy in her breast. Then he looked at Alanna. Nudging the boys aside, he crossed the room.

"Alanna," Serena began, "this is my husband, Brigham."

"I'm delighted to meet you at last." Brigham took her hand between both of his. "We owe you much."

Alanna flushed a little. Though he was old enough to be her father, there was a magnetism about him that set a woman's heart aflutter. "I must thank you for your hospitality, Lord Langston."

"No, you must only enjoy it." He shot his wife a strange and, what seemed to Alanna, exasperated look. "I only hope you will remain happy and comfortable during your stay."

"How could I not? You have a magnificent home and a wonderful family."

He started to speak again, but his wife interrupted. "Coffee, Brig?" She had already poured and was holding out the cup with a warning look. Their discussions over her matchmaking attempt had yet to be resolved. "You must be thirsty after your work. And the others?"

"Were right behind me. They stopped off briefly in the library."

Even as he spoke, two men strode into the room. Alanna only vaguely saw the tall, dark-haired man who was a younger version of Brigham. Her stunned eyes were fixed on Ian. She wasn't even aware that she had sprung to her feet or that the room had fallen into silence.

She saw only him, dressed in rough trousers and jacket for riding, his hair windblown. He, too, had frozen into place. A dozen expressions crossed his face, as indeed they crossed hers. Then he smiled, but there was an edge to it, a hardness that cut her to the quick.

"Ah, Mrs. Flynn. What an... unusual surprise."

"I—I—" She stumbled to a halt and looked around wildly for a place to retreat, but Serena had already risen to take her hand. She gave Alanna's fingers a short, firm squeeze.

"Alanna was good enough to accept my invitation. We wanted to thank her in person for tending you and keeping you alive to annoy us."

"I see." When he could tear his gaze from Alanna, he sent his aunt a furious look. "Clever, aren't you, Aunt Serena?"

"Oh, aye," she said complacently. "That I am."

At his side, Ian's hands curled into fists. They were twins of the one in his stomach. "Well, Mrs. Flynn, since you're here, I'll have to welcome you to Glenroe."

"I..." She knew she would weep and disgrace herself. "Excuse me, please." Giving Ian a wide berth, she raced from the room.

"How gracious of you, Ian." With a toss of her head, Serena went after her guest.

She found Alanna at the wardrobe, pulling out her clothes.

"Now, what's all this?"

"I must go. I didn't know—Lady Langston, I thank you for your hospitality, but I must go home immediately."

"What a pack of nonsense." Serena took her firmly by the shoulders and led her toward the bed. "Now sit down and catch your breath. I know seeing Ian was a surprise, but—" She broke off as Alanna covered her face with her hands and burst into tears.

"Oh, there, there, sweetheart." In the way of all mothers, she put her arms around Alanna and rocked. "Was he such a bully, then? Men are, you know. It only means we must be bigger ones."

"No, no, it was all my fault. All my doing." Though humiliated, she couldn't stem the tears and laid her head on Serena's shoulder.

"Whether it was or not, that's not something a woman should ever admit. Since men have the advantage of brawn, we must use our better brains." Smiling, she stroked Alanna's hair. "I wanted to see for myself if you loved him as much as I could see he loved you. Now I know."

"He hates me now. And who could blame him? But it's for the best," she wept. "It's for the best."

"He frightens you?"

"Aye."

"And your feelings for him frighten you?"

"Oh, aye. I don't want them, my lady, I can't have them. He won't change. He'll not be happy until he gets himself killed or hanged for treason."

"MacGregors don't kill easily. Here now, have you a handkerchief? I can never find one myself when it's most needed."

Sniffing, Alanna nodded and drew hers out. "I beg your pardon, my lady, for causing a scene."

"Oh, I enjoy a scene, and cause them whenever possible." She waited to be sure Alanna was more composed. "I will tell you a story of a young girl who loved very unwisely. She loved a man who it seemed was so wrong for her. She loved in times when there was war and rebellion, and death everywhere. She refused him, time and time again. She thought it was best."

Drying her eyes, Alanna sighed. "What happened to them?"

"Oh, he was as pigheaded as she, so they married and had six children. Two grandchildren." Her smile blossomed. "I've never regretted a single moment."

"But this is different."

"Love is always the same. And it is never the same." She brushed the hair from Alanna's cheek. "I was afraid."

"You?"

"Oh, aye. The more I loved Brigham, the more frightened I was. And the harder I punished us both by denying my feelings. Will you tell me of yours? Often it helps to speak with another woman."

Perhaps it would, Alanna thought. Surely it could hurt no more than it already did. "I lost my brother in the war with the French. I was only a child, but I remember him. He was so bright, so beautiful. And like Ian, he could think of nothing but to defend and fight for his land, for his beliefs. So he died for them. Within a year, my mother slipped away. Her heart was broken, and it never mended. I've watched my father grieve for them, year after year."

"There is no loss greater than that of ones you love. My father died in battle twenty-eight years ago and I still see his face, so clear. I left my mother in Scotland soon after. She died before Amanda was born, but still lives in my heart." She took both of Alanna's hands, and her eyes were damp and intense. "When the rebellion was crushed, my brother Coll brought Brigham to me. He had been shot and was near death. In my womb I carried our first child. We were hiding from the English in a cave. He lingered between life and death."

So Ian's stories to Brian were true, she thought as she stared at the small, slender woman beside her. "How could you bear it?"

"How could I not?" She smiled. "He often says I willed him back to life so that I could badger him. Perhaps it's true. But I know the fear, Alanna. When this revolution comes, my sons will fight, and there is ice in my blood at the thought that I could lose them. But if I were a man, I would pick up a sword and join them."

"You're braver than I."

"I think not. If your family were threatened, would you hide in a corner, or would you take up arms and protect them?"

"I would die to protect them. But—"

"Aye." Serena's smile bloomed again, but it was softer, more serious than before. "The time will come, and soon, when the men of the Colonies will realize we are all one.

As a clan. And we will fight to protect each other. Ian knows that now. Is that not why you love him?"

"Aye." She looked down at their joined hands.

"If you deny that love, will you be happier than if you embraced it and took what time God grants you together?"

"No." She closed her eyes and thought of the past three months of misery. "I'll never be happy without him—I know that now. And yet, all of my life I dreamed of marrying a strong, quiet man, who would be content to work with me and raise a family. With Ian, there would be confusion and demands and risks. I would never know a moment's peace."

"No," Serena agreed. "You would not. Alanna, look into your heart now and ask yourself but one question. If the power were yours, would you change him?"

She opened her mouth prepared to shout a resounding "Aye!" But her heart, more honest than her head, held another answer. "No. Sweet Jesus, have I been so much a fool not to realize I love him for what he is, not for what I wish he might be?"

Satisfied, Serena nodded. "Life is all risk, Alanna. There are those who take them, wholeheartedly, and move forward. And there are those who hide from them and stay in one place. Which are you?"

For a long time Alanna sat in silence. "I wonder, my lady—"

"Serena."

"I wonder, Serena," she said, and managed a smile, "if I had had you to talk with, would I have sent him away?"

Serena laughed. "Well, that's something to think about. You rest now, and give the lad time to stew."

"He won't want to talk to me," she muttered, then set her chin. "But I'll make him."

"You'll do," Serena said with a laugh. "Aye, you'll do well."

Chapter Ten

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Ian didn't come to dinner, nor did he appear at breakfast the next morning. While this might have discouraged most women, for Alanna it presented exactly the sort of challenge she needed to overcome her own anxieties.

Added to that were the Langstons themselves. It was simply not possible to be in the midst of such a family and not see what could be done with love, determination and trust. No matter what odds they had faced, Serena and Brigham had made a life together. They had both lost their homes, their countries and people they loved, but had rebuilt from their own grit.

Could she deny herself any less of a chance with Ian? He would fight, certainly. But she began to convince herself that he was too stubborn to die. And if indeed she were to lose him, was it not worth the joy of a year, a month or a day in his arms?

She would tell him so. If she ever ran the fool to ground.

She would apologize. She would even, though it grated, beg his forgiveness and a second chance.

But as the morning whiled away, she found herself more irritated than penitent. She would apologize, all right, Alanna thought. Right after she'd given him a good, swift kick.

It was the twins who gave her the first clue as to where to find him.

"You were the one who spoiled it," Payne declared as they came poking and jabbing at each other into the garden.

"Hah! It was you who set him off. If you'd kept your mouth shut we could have gone off with him. But you've such a bloody big—"

"All right, lads." Serena stopped clipping flowers to turn to them. "Fight if you must, but not here. I won't have my garden trampled by wrestling bodies."

"It's his fault," they said in unison, and made Alanna smile.

"I only wanted to go fishing," Ross complained. "And Ian would have taken me along if he hadn't started jabbering."

"Fishing." Alanna crushed a blossom in her hand before she controlled herself. "Is that where Ian is?"

"He always goes to the river when he's moody." Payne kicked at a pebble. "I'd have convinced him to take us, too, if Ross hadn't started in so Ian was snarling and riding off without us."

"I don't want to fish anyway." Ross stuck up his chin. "I want to play shuttlecock."

"I want to play shuttlecock," Payne shouted, and raced off to get there first.

"I've a fine mare in the stables. A pretty chestnut that was a gift from my brother Malcolm. He knows his horseflesh." Serena went on clipping flowers. "Do you like to ride, Alanna?"

"Aye. I don't have much time for it at home."

"Then you should take advantage of your time here." She gave her young guest a sunny smile. "Tell Jem at the stables I said to saddle Prancer for you. You might enjoy riding south. There's a path through the woods just beyond the stables. The river's very pretty this time of year."

"Thank you." She started to dash off, then stopped. "I—I don't have a riding habit."

"Hattie will see to it. There's one of Amanda's in my trunk. It should suit you."

"Thank you." She stopped, turned and embraced Serena. "Thank you."

Within thirty minutes, Alanna was mounted.

Ian did indeed have a line in the water, but it was only an excuse to sit and brood. He'd given brief consideration to strangling his aunt for her interference, but before he'd gotten the chance she had burst into his room and raked him so completely over the coals that he'd had nothing to do but defend himself.

Aye, he'd been rude to her guest. He'd meant to be.

If it didn't smack so much of running away, he'd have been on his horse and headed back to Boston. He'd be damned if he'd ride away a second time. This time, she could go, and the devil take her.

Why had she had to look so beautiful, standing there in her blue dress with the sun coming through the window at her back?

Why did it matter to him how she looked? he thought viciously. He didn't want her any longer. He didn't need a sharp-tongued shrew of a woman in his life. There was too much work to be done.

By God, he'd all but begged her to have him. How it grated on his pride! And she, the hussy, had lain with him in the hay, given herself to him, made him think it mattered to her. He'd been so gentle, so careful with her. Never before had he opened his heart so to a woman. Only to have it handed back to him.

Well, he hoped she found some weak-kneed spineless lout she could boss around. And if he discovered she had, he would cheerfully kill the man with his own two hands.

He heard the sound of a horse approach and swore. If those two little pests had come to disrupt his solitude, he would send them packing soon enough. Taking up his line, he stood, feet planted, and prepared to roar his nephews back to the house.

But it was Alanna who came riding out of the woods. . She was coming fast, a bit too fast for Ian's peace of mind. Beneath the jaunty bonnet she wore her hair had come loose so that it streamed behind her, a midnight flag. A few feet away, she reined the horse. Even at the distance, Ian could see her eyes were a brilliant and glowing blue. The mare, well used to reckless women riders, behaved prettily.

When he got his breath back, Ian shot her a killing look. "Well, you've managed to scare away all the fish for ten miles. Don't you have better sense than to ride through unfamiliar ground at that speed?"

It wasn't the greeting she'd hope for. "The horse knew the way well enough." She sat, waiting for him to help her dismount. When he merely stood, glaring, she swore and struggled down herself. "You've changed little, MacGregor. Your manners are as foul as ever."

"You came all the way to Virginia to tell me so?"

She fixed the mare's reins to a nearby branch before she whirled on him. "I came at your aunt's kind invitation. If I had known you were anywhere in the territory, I wouldn't have come. Seeing you is the only thing that has spoiled my trip, for in truth, I'll never understand how a man such as yourself could possibly be related to such a fine family. It would be my fondest wish if you would—" She caught herself, blew out a breath and struggled to remember the resolve she had worked on all through the night. "I didn't come here to fight with you."

"God help me if that had been your intention, then." He turned back to pick up his line. "You got yourself off the horse, Mrs. Flynn. I imagine you can get yourself back on and ride."

"I will speak with you," she insisted.

"Already you've said more than I wish to hear." And if he stood looking at her another moment, he would crawl. "Now mount and ride before you push me too far."

"Ian, I only want to—"

"Damn you to hell and back again." He threw down the line. "What right have you to come here? To stand here and make me suffer? If I had murdered you before I left I'd be a happy man today. You let me think you cared for me, that what happened between us meant something to you, when all you wanted was a toss in the hay."

Every ounce of color fled from her cheeks, then rushed back again in flaming fury. "How dare you? How dare you speak so to me?" She was on him like a wildcat, all nails and teeth. "I'll kill you for that, MacGregor, as God is my witness."

He grabbed wherever he could to protect himself, lost his balance and tumbled backward with her into the river.

The dunking didn't stop her. She swung, spit and scratched even as he slid on the slippery bottom and took her under with him.

"Hold, woman, for pity's sake. You'll drown us both." Because he was choking, coughing up water and trying to keep her from sinking under again, he didn't see the blow coming until his ears were already ringing. "By God, if you were a man!"

"Don't let that stop you, you bloody badger." She swung again, missed and fell facedown in the river.

Cursing all the way, he dragged her onto the bank, where they both lay drenched and breathless.

"As soon as I've the strength to stand, I'll kill her," he said to the sky.

"I hate you," she told him after she'd coughed up river water. "I curse the day you were born. And I curse the day I let you put your filthy hands on me." She managed to sit up and drag the ruined bonnet out of her eyes.

Damn her for being beautiful even wet and raging. His voice was frigid when he spoke. A dangerous sign. "You asked me to put them on you, as I recall, madam."

"Aye, that I did, to my disgust." She threw the bonnet at him. "'Tis a pity the roll in the hay wasn't more memorable."

"Oh?" She was too busy wringing out her hair to note the reckless light in his eyes. "Wasn't it now?"

"No, it wasn't. In fact, I'd forgotten all about it until you mentioned it." With what dignity she still had in her possession, she started to rise. He had her flat on her back in an instant.

"Well, then, let me refresh your memory."

His mouth came down hard on hers. She responded by sinking her teeth into his lip. He cursed her, gathered her dripping hair in his hand and kissed her again.

She fought herself, all the glorious feelings that poured through her. She fought him, the long firm body that so intimately covered hers. Like scrapping children, they rolled over the grassy bank, blindly seeking to punish for hurts old and new.

Then she whimpered, a sound of submission and of joy. Her arms were around him, her mouth opening hungrily to his. All the force of her love burst out in that one meeting of lips and fueled a fire already blazing.

Frantic fingers tore at buttons. Desperate hands pulled at wet, heavy clothing. Then the sun was steaming down on their damp bodies.

He wasn't gentle now. She didn't wish it. All the frustration and the need they had trapped within themselves tore free in a rage of passion as they took from each other under the cloudless spring sky.

With her hands in his hair, she pulled his mouth to hers again and again, murmuring wild promises, wild pleas. As they lay on the carpet of new grass, he absorbed the scent that had haunted him for weeks. He stroked his hands along the smooth white skin he had dreamed of night after night.

When she arched against him, ruthlessly stoking his fires, he plunged into her. Her name was on his lips as he buried his face in her hair. His was on hers as she wrapped her long limbs around him. Together they raced toward the end they both craved, until at last they lay still, each hounded by their own thoughts.

He drew himself up on his elbow and with one hand cupped her face. As she watched, loving him, she saw the temper return slowly to his eyes.

"I give you no choice this time, Alanna. Willing or weeping we marry."

"Ian, I came here today to tell you—"

"I don't give a bloody damn what you came to tell me." His fingers tightened on her chin. He had emptied himself in her, body and soul. She had left him with nothing, not even pride. "You can hate me and curse me from now until the world ends, but you'll be mine. You are mine. And by God, you'll take me as I am."

She gritted her teeth. "If you'd let me say a word—"

But a desperate man didn't listen. "I'll not let you go again. I should not have before, but you've a way of scraping a man raw. Whatever I can do to make you happy, I'll do. Except abandon my own conscience. That I cannot do, and won't. Not even for you."

"I don't ask you to, and never would. I only want to tell you—"

"Damn it, what is it that's digging a hole in my chest?" Still swearing he reached between them. And held up the MacGregor ring that dangled from a cord around her neck. It glinted in the sunlight as he stared at it. Slowly, he closed his fingers around it and looked down at her. "Why..." He took another moment to be sure he could trust his voice. "Why do you wear this?"

"I was trying to tell you, if you would only let me speak."

"I'm letting you speak now, so speak."

"I was going to give it back to you." She moved restlessly beneath him. "But I couldn't. It felt dishonest to wear it on my finger, so I tied it to a cord and wore it by my heart, where I kept you, as well. No,

damn you, let me finish," she said when he opened his mouth. "I think I knew even as I heard you ride away that morning that I had been wrong and you had been right."

The beginnings of a smile teased his mouth. "I have river water in my ears, Mrs. Flynn. Would you say that again?"

"I said it once, I'll not repeat it." If she'd been standing, she would have tossed her head and lifted her chin. "I didn't want to love you, because when you love so much, it makes you afraid. I lost Rory in the war, my mother from grief and poor Michael Flynn from a fever. And as much as they meant to me, I knew that you meant more."

He kissed her, gently. "Don't let me interrupt."

"I thought I wanted a quiet home and a family, a husband who would be content to work beside me and sit by the fire night after night." She smiled now and touched his hair. "But it seems what I wanted all along was a man who would never be content, one who would grow restless by the fire after the first night or two. One who would fight all the wrongs or die trying. That's a man I would be proud to stand beside."

"Now you humble me," he murmured, and rested his brow on hers. "Only tell me you love me."

"I do love you, Ian MacGregor. Now and always."

"I swear to give you that home, that family, and to sit by the fire with you whenever I can."

"And I promise to fight beside you when the need comes."

Shifting, he snapped the cord and freed the ring. His eyes were on hers as he slipped it onto her finger. "Never take it off again."

"No." She took his hand in hers. "From this moment, I'm a MacGregor."

Epilogue

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Boston. Christmas Eve, 1774

No amount of arguments could keep Ian out of the bedroom where his wife struggled through her first birthing. Though the sight of her laboring froze his man's heart, he stood firm. His aunt Gwen in her quiet, persuasive way had done her best, but even she had failed.

"It's my child, as well," he said. "And I'll not leave Alanna until it's born." He took his aunt's hand and prayed he'd have the nerve to live by his words. "It's not that I don't trust your skills, Aunt Gwen. After all, I wouldn't be here without them."

"It's no use, Gwen." Serena chuckled. "He's as stubborn as any MacGregor."

"Hold her hand then, when the pain is bad. It won't be much longer now."

Alanna managed a smile when Ian came to her side. She hadn't known it would take so long to bring such a small thing as a child into the world. She was grateful that he was with her and for the comforting presence of Gwen, who had brought so many dozens of babies into the world. Gwen's husband, who was a doctor, would have attended the birth as well, had he not been called away on an emergency.

"You neglect our guests," Alanna said to Ian as she rested between contractions.

"They'll entertain themselves well enough," Serena assured her.

"I don't doubt it." She closed her eyes as Gwen wiped her brow with a cool cloth. It pleased her that her family was here for Christmas. Both the Murphys and the Langstons. She should have been doing her duties as hostess on this first Christmas in the house she and Ian had bought near the river, but the babe, not due for another three weeks, was putting in an early appearance.

When the next pang hit, she squeezed Ian's hand and tensed.

"Relax, relax, mind your breathing," Gwen crooned. "There's a lass."

The pains were closer now, and stronger. A Christmas baby, she thought, struggling to rise over the wave. Their child, their first child, would be a priceless gift to each other on this the most holy night of the year.

As the pain passed, she kept her eyes closed, listening to the soothing sound of Ian's voice.

He was a good man, a solid husband. She felt his fingers twine around hers. True, her life was not a peaceful one, but it was eventful. He had managed to draw her into his ambitions. Or perhaps the seeds of rebellion had always been inside her, waiting to be nurtured. She had come to listen avidly to his reports of the meetings he attended and to feel pride when others sought his advice. She could not but agree with him that the Port Bill was cruel and unjust. Like Ian, she scorned the idea of paying for the tea that had been destroyed in order to escape the penalty.

No, they had not been wrong. She had learned there was often right in recklessness. She had to smile. It was recklessness, and right, that had brought her here to a birthing bed. And she thanked God for it.

And hadn't other towns and provinces rallied to support Boston, just as her family and Ian's had rallied to support them in this, the birth of their first child?

She thought of their honeymoon in Scotland, where she had met his family and walked in the forests of his childhood. One day they would go back and take this child, show him, or her, the place of roots. And to Ireland, she thought as the pain returned, dizzying. The child would not forget the people who had come before. And while the child remembered, he would choose his own life, his own homeland. By their struggles, they would have given him that right.

"The babe's coming." Gwen shot Ian a quick, reassuring smile. "You'll be a papa very soon."

"The birth of our child," Alanna panted, fighting to focus on Ian. "And soon, the birth of our nation."

Though he could taste his own fear, for her, he laughed. "You're becoming more of a radical than I, Mrs. MacGregor."

"I do nothing by half measures. Oh, sweet Jesus, he fights for life." She groped for her husband's hand.

"There can be little doubt he will be his father's son."

"Or her mother's daughter," Ian murmured, looking desperately at Gwen. "How much longer?" he demanded. "She suffers."

"Soon." She let out a little sound of impatience as there was a knock on the door.

"Don't worry." Serena pushed at her already rolled-up sleeves. "I'll send them packing." It surprised her to find her husband at the threshold. "Brig, the babe's all but here. I don't have time for you now."

"You'll have time." He stepped inside, tossing one arm around his wife. "I've just gotten a message I've waited for, a confirmation from London I wanted before I spoke to you."

"Damn messages from London," Serena muttered as she heard Alanna groan.

"Uncle, news can wait."

"Ian, you need to hear this as well, tonight of all nights."

"Then say it and be gone," his wife snapped at him.

"Last month a petition was debated by Parliament." Brigham took Serena by the shoulders and looked into her eyes. "The Act of Proscription has been repealed." He cupped her face in his hands as her eyes filled. "The MacGregor name is free."

With her tears fell a weight she had carried all of her life. "Gwen. Gwen, did you hear?"

"Aye, I heard, and I thank God for it, but I've my hands full at the moment."

Dragging her husband with her, Serena hurried to the bed. "Since you're here," she told Brigham, "you'll help."

Within minutes there was the sound of church bells heralding midnight and the birth of a new Christmas. And the sound of a baby's lusty cry, heralding life.

"A son." Gwen held the squirming child in her arms.

"He's all right?" Exhausted, Alanna lay back against Brigham's bracing hands. "Is he all right?"

"He's perfect," Serena assured her, mopping her own tears. "You'll hold him in a moment."

"I love you." Ian pressed Alanna's hand to his lips. "And I thank you for the greatest gift that man can have."

"Here now." Gwen shifted the newly swaddled infant to his father's arms. "Take your son."

"Sweet God." Stunned, he looked from the baby to Alanna. It was an image she would treasure all of her life. "He's so small."

"He'll grow." Serena smiled up at her husband. "They always do." She put an arm around her sister as Ian transferred the baby to Alanna's waiting arms.

"Oh, he's so beautiful." Reaching for Ian, she drew him down beside her. "Last Christmas we were given each other. This Christmas we're given a son." Gently, she stroked the downy dark hair on the baby's head. "I can't wait to see what the years will bring."

"We'll give you time alone—" Brigham took his wife and his sister-in-law by the hand "—and go down and tell the others."

"Aye, tell them." Ian stood, and because she understood, Alanna gave him the child to hold once again. "Tell them that Murphy MacGregor is born this Christmas day." After kissing his son, he held him up for the others to see, and the baby let out a lusty wail. "A MacGregor who will say his name proudly to all that can hear. Who will walk in a free land. Tell them that."

"Aye, tell them that," Alanna agreed as Ian's hand closed around hers. "From both of us."