

Because
you're
Mine

COLLEEN
COBLE



THOMAS NELSON
Since 1798

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*For my dear friend in heaven, Diann Hunt.
Because You're Mine was her favorite of all the
books I've written. I miss you every day, Di!*



One

She'd never get through this final set.

Flinging her dark red hair away from her fiddle, Alanna Connolly swallowed down the soreness in her throat and danced across the polished wooden floor of the stage. She couldn't fail—not here at the great Hibernian Hall where Charleston had turned out in force for Ceol, the four-woman Celtic band she'd founded. Her fingers flew across the fingerboard, and her other hand manipulated the bow across the strings of her instrument.

Almost there. If her voice held out for one more song, she could rest. She turned slightly so she could see her husband, Liam, as he pounded out the beat on his bodhran. He twirled the double-headed tippers in his hand and nodded at her, the special sign between them. He was praying for her.

When the Irish jig ended, the applause rose in a crescendo. Alanna bowed, then stepped to the mic. Her throat thickened, and she knew not a note would clear her mouth with a true, pure

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sound. The pleading glance she sent Ciara caused the alto singer to step to Alanna's aid. Fiona and Ena joined them at the mic, and Ciara took the lead on the final song.

The audience fell silent as the melancholy Irish ballad "The Last Rose of Summer" wafted over the sold-out house. Alanna mouthed the words and prayed no one would miss her voice in the mix. Her face hurt from smiling, and she wanted to rush from the stage to the sanctuary of the dressing room. Her blood pounded with the thump of Liam's blows on the big bass drum behind her. *Run, run*, the drum said, but Alanna held her ground.

Just a few moments more.

The song ended and the four of them bowed, then Liam joined them. They bowed together one last time as the crowd roared its approval. Liam glanced at her, and she gave a slight shake of her head. There would be no encore tonight.

After their final bow, he led her out of the hot lights to the cool relief of backstage. "I shouldn't have let you sing tonight." Once they reached the seclusion of the curtains, he pulled her into his arms.

Fiddle at her side, she leaned into him and inhaled his beloved aroma, a mixture of Irish Tweed cologne and the pungent odor of the bodhran's goatskin. Weariness settled over her like a shroud. "I'll be needing tea."

He tucked her hand into the crook of his elbow. "You need some shut-eye."

She smiled at him. "That I do."

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Jesse Hawthorne leaned against the doorjamb of the dressing room and watched his friend embrace his wife. Alanna should have been his—and would have been if not for Liam. He knew the precise moment when Alanna saw him, because she stiffened and pulled out of Liam's arms. Nothing would convince him she didn't still harbor some feelings for him. He approached the couple.

"Jesse, you made it!" Liam high-fived his friend and clapped him on the shoulder. "Weren't we on fire?"

"It was terrific." Jesse's gaze lingered on Fiona a moment. She'd given him a come-hither glance a time or two, but whenever Alanna was around, he found it hard to concentrate on another woman.

"Thanks." Alanna tucked a lock of burnished hair behind her ear.

Jesse stood close enough to catch a whiff of her sweet perfume. What would she do if he leaned in for a better sniff? "You should see my new Mustang. That convertible can fly! I'll take you on a ride sometime. Can't wait to get your husband out in it tonight."

She averted her glance and smiled. He took that to mean she'd like to go, and he let himself imagine a warm, sunny day with her long hair flying in the wind.

A suffocating blanket of depression settled over him. Liam had it all—beautiful wife, exciting career, and rich parents. Jesse's own life was going nowhere. If only he still had Alanna by his side. She had been his good-luck charm. When she was on his arm, he knew what it was like to ride the wave to better things.

Now he was nothing, and that was all he'd ever be.

There was something different about Jesse tonight, but Alanna couldn't put her finger on it. She'd dated him for a time, but his eyes wandered to other women. She had him to thank for introducing her to Liam, though.

The two men were very similar in appearance with their brown hair and eyes—both about six feet tall and broad in the shoulder. Their coloring was so close people sometimes mistook them for brothers. Liam often teased her that she'd never know the difference between them in a dark room, but she knew better. Liam was gentle and tender, while Jesse was someone who grabbed what he wanted and pushed his way to the front of the line as if it were his due. Tonight they looked even more alike in their identical black Ceol T-shirts. Liam had given one to Jesse last week.

Jesse gave Alanna a crooked smile but spoke to Liam. "I don't know how you play that bodhran."

She managed to smile at his light tone, but she wanted to run to the seclusion of the dressing room. Dealing with Jesse was one more pressure she didn't need tonight. Liam never seemed to notice the stares Jesse sent her way. Stares that made her uncomfortable.

"You could play it, too, if you just put in a little effort," Liam said. "I dare you to give it a try."

Jesse never took his gaze from Alanna. "I just might."

The wood-frame drum was surprisingly difficult to master, and no one played it like Liam. He was an artist of the top-end style and could vary the pitch of the thumps.

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They stepped into the dressing room, and Alanna collapsed onto a silk-covered chair that had seen better days. The rest of the group filed in behind them and pushed through to the connecting room they shared—all except for Ciara. She was tuned to Alanna as if they were twins, though they couldn't be more different, both in looks and background. Ciara wore her black, kinky hair in cornrows that accentuated her strong cheekbones, while Alanna's red locks fell in a curtain of curls past her waist. Ciara never needed makeup on her beautiful dark skin, and Alanna was forever trying to cover the red splotches her fair skin developed when exposed to the smallest amount of sun.

"Sure, but I'm knackered. I'll be sleeping till noon." Ciara pointed her long finger at Alanna. "The doctor told you not to sing tonight."

"I couldn't disappoint all our fans," Alanna said.

"It's better than ruining your voice and never singing again." Ciara waved her beringed hand. "You're already picking up an American accent."

Liam faced the open door, and a frown darkened his face. Alanna glanced around and saw their new manager, Barry Kavanagh, standing in the doorway. The blokes seemed determined to square off like two bulls. Their first manager had let Liam run things as he pleased, but Barry was more hands-on. His background as an attorney was probably to blame.

The man's easy smile came as he stepped into the room. "I noticed your throat is troubling you, Alanna. I took the liberty of calling my doctor to come examine you. We can't be too careful with our star." The Southern accent in his words was almost a caress.

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Alanna glimpsed a man in a black suit behind Barry. She nodded. "I'd be glad to have him look at it."

The doctor unzipped a compartment in his rolling bag and extracted a light and a tongue depressor. "Say ah," he ordered. Alanna complied and the doctor frowned. He stepped closer and pulled out a mirrored instrument. He peered deeper into her throat, then flipped off his light. "A bit of a sore throat. I'll give you some medicine, and you should be fine for the weekend's performance."

Alanna's hope surged. "You see no nodules?" Maybe the other doctor had been overly cautious.

"It's just a little sore throat," the doctor said, snapping shut his bag.

"That's not what the specialist said." Liam's suspicious stare went from Barry to the doctor, then back. "She needs to rest her throat for a few months. She might even need surgery. I'm going to cancel the bookings."

She clutched his arm. "Liam, you can't! The venues are sold out. Sold out, love! Everything we've worked for, prayed for, is happening now. We might never regain our momentum."

"Alanna is right," Barry said. "Ceol could be the next Celtic Woman. They could be as big as Enya. We must capitalize on the group's rising popularity."

Liam crossed his arms, muscular from his workouts at the drums. "Not at the risk to Alanna's throat."

"We'll be having three more concerts scheduled in the next week," Ciara said. "Can she finish the tour and then take some time off?"

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Liam shook his head. "Not if she wants a chance to avoid surgery. The specialist said she has to rest."

Barry nodded and put his arm around Alanna. "My doctor says she'll be fine."

His proprietorial touch made her lean away just a bit. Alanna couldn't think, couldn't decide what to do. How could she stop now when the group was a shooting star? "You think the specialist was wrong?"

"You'd be believing a bloke like this?" Liam stabbed a finger in the doctor's direction. "And get your hands off my wife."

Barry's smile dropped away and he removed his arm. Alanna glanced at Ciara and found her glaring at Barry as well. No one liked the way Barry seemed focused on her. She didn't like it either, but the man was a marketing genius, and the group had soared to a new level under his management. They couldn't afford to offend him.

Alanna touched her husband's hand. "Liam, let's talk about it privately."

Liam's jaw worked, then he glared at Barry. "This is our decision, not yours."

Barry shrugged, then ushered the doctor toward the door. "I'll leave you to discuss it."

The moment he was gone, Ciara flipped her cornrows away from her face and scowled. "What an *eejit*. We'll wait for you in the hall. You two can be hashing it out."

Alanna didn't ask if she meant Barry or the doctor. The band trooped out the door.

Liam shut the door behind them, then went to the keyboard

and pulled out the chair. He settled in front of the keys and began to play.

“What’s that?” The haunting tune filled the room, evaporating her anger, lifting her spirits as she finally placed the melody. “It’s from my sister’s music box.” She stepped closer to him and laid her hand on his shoulder.

“It is.” He continued to play.

The melody with its pure passion sent chills down her spine. One of her clearest memories was of a music box her sister, Neila, had been given by their great-grandfather. Alanna never heard the melody anywhere else, though she’d never forgotten it and had picked it out on her fiddle the moment she learned to play.

Liam began to sing and Alanna gasped. “You wrote words for it.”

His intense gaze fastened on her, and love shimmered in his eyes. “Two souls bound and none can sever. This nightsong is for you. Our love will last through darkness, fire, and trouble. This nightsong is for you. Though death may try to break our hearts, I’ll find you where’ere you go. This nightsong is for you.”

The words bound themselves to the music and filled Alanna’s heart. “I’ve never heard anything so beautiful,” she whispered as the music stopped and faded.

He took her hand. “We’re beautiful together, love. We can’t let anything come between us. Not Barry, not Ceol, not our families.” He rose from the chair and took her in his arms. “Promise me.”

“I promise.” She burrowed her face against his chest and inhaled the scent of him deep into her lungs, into her very being.

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His lingering kiss ignited her senses, and she snuggled closer, then sighed and rested her head on his shoulder. "In just five months, we'll be parents, Liam. We must tell everyone soon. Your parents, our mates."

"It's lucky we are that you aren't showing much, but yes, we will need to let the world in on it soon."

She put her hand on her belly, and his cell phone rang. She sighed and pulled away. "It's Jesse wanting you."

"I know." He pressed his lips to her hair, then opened the door for her.

They found the rest of the group, along with Jesse, waiting by the exit. Jesse opened the heavy metal door into the dark alley where their van and Jesse's car were parked.

Some fans lined the back alley and screamed out Fiona's name. The beautiful blonde played Irish spoons and sang backup vocals. Fans bought the Celtic jewelry she designed, and Alanna spotted more than one of the beautifully crafted necklaces and earrings.

Fiona, Ciara, and Alanna stopped to sign a few photographs, but Ena kept her pink-dyed head down and ran for the van with her pennywhistle without looking at any of the fans calling her name.

Liam tugged Alanna to the van, then dropped a kiss onto her lips. "I'll be back in a few hours."

"Have fun. You think Jesse will let you drive?"

He grinned. "I doubt it. He's smitten with that car."

She watched him disappear around the corner to join Jesse, then climbed into the back of the van with her friends.

"Deadly concert tonight," Fiona said. "We'll be having them

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all the time now.” When no one answered her, she glanced at the set faces and shut up.

Alanna wanted to say something to break the tension, but she ended up leaning her head against the back of the seat and closing her eyes. The music industry was filled with examples of people who left the operating room with their singing voices changed forever, husky and rough, and she refused to think about a fate like that. But the high notes she used to hit with ease had become harder and harder to reach, and Barry’s blather hadn’t dislodged her fear.

An explosion shook the van, and she turned to see smoke pouring from the corner where she’d last seen Liam.

“Liam!” She screamed. She pushed open the van door and rushed to the corner.

She rounded the end of the concert hall and gasped when she saw flames billowing from a yellow sports car. “Liam!” She started for the car, but Ciara grabbed her.

“The fire department is coming. You can do nothing.”

A siren’s wail grew louder and mingled with her own sobs as Ciara held her close. Alanna couldn’t tear her gaze from the burning car and could make out no figures inside. Deep inside, she knew no one could survive the intensity of those flames.

Two

Alanna rubbed her eyes, gritty from crying. She padded on bare feet to the window of her hotel room and turned up the air conditioning. Peering through sheets of rain, she stared down onto the wet street.

Liam was dead. She still couldn't process the reality. The fire department had taken two men away, and the driver was clearly dead. She'd clung to hope that Jesse hadn't allowed Liam to drive, but when a paramedic asked the survivor his name as he was loaded into the ambulance, the badly burned man had whispered, "Jesse."

Generations of Irish women before her had faced widowhood with their chins held high. She must show similar strength. A cry of *Why Liam, God?* hung on her tongue, but she kept it locked inside. There was no answer to such a question. Liam had possessed a strong faith. Her own was weak in comparison, especially now when faced with such suffering.

When she had called the hospital fifteen minutes before,

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Jesse was still clinging to life. His parents had the top plastic surgeon in the country standing by for 3-D facial reconstruction, and that would be done as soon as he stabilized. She should be glad he lived, but why couldn't it have been Liam? Why was her husband in the morgue while an *eejit* like Jesse would recover?

Alanna closed her eyes. Would she want Liam to go through what Jesse was enduring right now? Liam would have been grieved to see his old friend in such bad shape. The doctors had put him into a medically induced coma as they worked to save his life, and she'd been told he would require many surgeries. Maybe Liam was the luckier man.

Her eyes filled again. Liam would never flip his longish hair out of his eyes so he could wink at her. He'd never come in from planting flowers with mud under his fingernails. He'd never step into the yard with his bubble-blowing tools.

How could such a bright light just . . . cease to exist? He'd been her real family. She hadn't seen her mum or her sister in years, and the Lord alone knew if they were even still on this earth. She touched her belly. At least she had his child.

A knock came on her door, and she turned. The police had called an hour ago, and she'd expected them before now. She opened the door to find Barry standing there with two policemen.

Her manager stood in the hall with his hands in the pockets of his impeccable suit. A lock of blond hair fell across his forehead. His grave eyes looked her over, and both policemen were somber.

Alanna focused her blurry gaze on the nearest policeman. She wiped her eyes, then drew in another trembling breath.

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"Come in." She stepped aside to allow them to enter, but her pulse throbbed in her throat. "Do you know what happened yet?"

Detective Adams was a small man with red hair. His pale skin was covered by a mass of freckles on his face and arms. The delicate skin under his eyes sagged. He wore khaki slacks and a light-blue shirt. He glanced at his notebook. "A bomb exploded under the car. We're still investigating."

"A bomb." She swayed and reached out to steady herself on an armchair. Someone had done this on purpose. It wasn't some accident with the petrol tank. Her knees threatened to buckle again, but she managed to stay upright as Ciara, dressed in jeans and a Ceol T-shirt, came rushing through the still open door. She said nothing but came to stand close to Alanna. The presence of her friend gave her strength.

She stared out the window at the rainy Charleston streets. It was a soft old day. The sky was crying for Liam. She tried to focus on what the detective was saying, something about investigating the bomb-making materials, but her vision wavered and her ears seemed to have gone deaf.

"I must sit down," she murmured.

Ciara guided her into the armchair and pushed her head between her knees. "Breathe."

Alanna obeyed, and her vision began to clear. When she raised her head, Barry was just ending a call, and the policemen had gone.

Barry knelt in front of her. "I can get Liam's body transported back to Ireland as soon as his body is released. Adams said he'd push the coroner on the autopsy, and we should be able to leave in three days. Does that suit? I'll reserve the flights."

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“That’s perfect, Barry.” She fumbled for her purse. “Let me give you my card number.”

“I’ve already taken care of it,” he said. “Don’t worry about anything. I need to go to Dublin on business anyway, so I got myself a ticket as well. If there’s anything else I can do, please tell me, Alanna. I feel badly there’s nothing I can do to help.”

“You’ve already helped so much, Barry.” Her lips felt numb.

“I’ll pick you up at ten on Friday morning to go to the airport. You have my number. Call me if you need anything.” He rose and stepped back.

“I’ll need tickets for the rest of the band. I-I need them with me.” She reached out and sought Ciara’s hand.

“I’m sorry, but no. All that was available were two first-class seats. We can get them the evening flight though.” He turned toward the door. “I’ll leave you alone now to grieve. I’m so sorry, Alanna.” The door clicked behind him.

She would have liked to have had Ciara with her especially, but it was more important to get Liam back to the Emerald Isle, on his own soil.

Alanna sat in the blessed quiet and listened to the traffic outside along the street. They’d had such plans to see everything in Charleston this trip—the old plantation houses, the swamps, the City Market. Now all those dreams had to be packed up in a trunk that could never be opened and carted back across the sea.

“I’m going to go downstairs and get you something to eat,” Ciara said.

Alanna knew she’d never eat a bite, but she needed to be alone for a bit, so she nodded.

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Once her friend was gone, she stared at the phone. Liam's parents needed to know, but oh how she hated to call them. If she were a coward, she'd call their vicar and ask him to go by and drop the news, but Alanna didn't want to put that burden on him. He had enough problems of his own with a sick wife and two kids. She got out her cell phone and rang her father-in-law. It was around noon in Ireland. Her call would likely interrupt their dinner, and she nearly disconnected, but it clicked through before she made up her mind.

The maid answered, and Alanna asked to speak to Thomas.

"He's at his meal, miss," the maid said. Her tone of voice always made Alanna shrivel.

"There's an emergency," Alanna said. "This is his daughter-in-law." Only she wasn't anymore. The Connolly family would be only too happy to scrape her off their shoes.

Thomas came on the line a few seconds later. "Alanna? What's wrong?"

She caught her breath. How could she tell a father that his only son was dead? Her vision blurred and she blinked rapidly. "Thomas, it's very bad news I bring you."

"What's happened to Liam? Someone mugged him, took all his money. I knew it would happen. How much do you need?"

He sounded weary, as though he was used to them dunning him for money, and anger swept away Alanna's grief. Never had they asked Liam's father for a dime. "It's nothing like that." He started to interrupt her, and she went on quickly before she lost courage. "Thomas, please. It's much worse than you understand. Liam, he—he was in an accident." Though she could hardly call the deliberate planting of a bomb an accident.

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“An accident, you say? He was injured. Sheila, Liam’s been injured,” he said to his wife, who must be standing near.

“No, Thomas. He was . . . killed.” Her voice broke on the word. The stricken pause on the other end of the line brought more tears rushing to her eyes. Even though they disliked her, she knew the pain they were going through. “He was riding with his friend Jesse Hawthorne.”

“No,” Thomas whispered. “It’s a cruel joke you’ll be playing, Alanna. Tell the truth now.”

“I wish it weren’t true,” she said, a sob breaking through her resolve to be strong, “but I saw his body myself. I’m bringing him home on Friday.”

A moan came through the phone, then a click. Thomas had hung up on her, and she was thankful she didn’t have to hear his grief. Her own was quite enough to bear.