

SONYA BIRMINGHAM

A romantic couple is shown in a close embrace against a deep blue background. The woman, on the left, has long, flowing reddish-brown hair and is wearing a dark, possibly black, dress. She is looking up at the man with a soft expression. The man, on the right, has dark hair and is wearing a white shirt with the top buttons open, revealing his chest, and a dark vest. He is looking down at the woman. The overall mood is intimate and romantic.

*Bestselling
Author of
SONG OF THE
LARK*

The BRIGHTEST & FLAME

**THE BRIGHTEST
& FLAME
SONYA BIRMINGHAM**

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PRAISE
SONYA BIRMINGHAM

"Sonya Birmingham's star burns brightly in the field of romantic fiction."

—*Rendezvous*

"Sonya Birmingham has a rare talent, able to blend humor and tears to create a moving story."

—*The Time Machine*

"Endearing characterization and expressive language."

—*The Paperback Forum*

SONG OF THE LARK

"A rich, rewarding story of unselfish love and unbridled passion."

—*Affaire de Coeur*

"An unforgettable, sensuous page-turner."

—*Rendezvous*

SCARLET LEAVES

"A compelling Civil War masterpiece."

—*Rendezvous*

"A high-tension love story, set in the darkest days of the Civil War."

—*Romantic Times*

FROST FLOWER

"*Frost Flower* is sure to steal your heart."

—*Romantic Times*

THE BEST OF EVERYTHING

"Don't I have dreams and wishes, just like the fine ladies you eat dinner with every evening?"

"And what are those dreams?"

She met his twinkling eyes. "I want to stand on my own feet—take care of myself, and never ask a blessed soul for a thing. And I want a chance to learn, learn everything I can. Whatever I do, from making beds"—she glanced at her journal—"to hooking words together, I want to be the very best. There's something that delights the heart about being the best, isn't there?"

Lassiter remained silent, but she noticed a warm, satisfied expression on his face. He gently took her by the shoulders, and his eyes deepened until they were the color of the starry, moonlit night sky. "You're a beautiful girl, Molly Kilmartin, and a brave one, too."

A new softness glazed his face and her pulse fluttered crazily. "Of course," she chirped playfully. "Didn't you know that already?"

Shivery excitement raced through her as he cupped her chin. "What a joy you are."

He loosely gathered her to him, and the warmth of his body and the scent of tobacco clinging to his clothes released a raw, primitive feeling buried deep within her. His smoky eyes held her captive, and when he lowered his head, her heart pounded as if it might burst through her rib cage. He was going to kiss her, she thought, trembling with sweet anticipation.

Other *Leisure* books by Sonya Birmingham:

SONG OF THE LARK

SCARLET LEAVES

FROST FLOWER

*This book is dedicated to the memory of
Cora Hester Shehann, my plucky Irish grandmother, who
had such a great influence on my childhood and
adolescence. How brightly the flame of life burned in her
laughing blue eyes.*

An Irish Blessing

**May you have warm words on a cold evening,
a full moon on a dark night,
and a smooth road all the way to your door.**

**THE BRIGHTEST
& FLAME**

Chapter One

The Atlantic—1883

Molly Kilmartin caught the scent of a man's cigar and whirled about. From her place by the *Saxonia's* railing she spied a tall, well-built figure crossing the first-class saloon deck, now shrouded with night shadows. Soft light spilled from the steamship's ballroom, washing over the man's huge form and tousled hair.

Her heart pounding, she guessed it was one of the ship's officers coming to tell her she had no business up here when she belonged in steerage. If he caught her, he'd escort her below and demand a fine she could ill afford to pay. Trembling, she turned and stared at the dark sea, knowing the man would soon be right behind her. Caught like a rabbit in a snare, she thought miserably.

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In her haste to flee, she pivoted and actually bumped into the man's hard chest. "Excuse me," she gasped, her legs turning to jelly. "I-I'll just be moving on now."

The man flashed a smile, sending her pulse fluttering wildly. Dressed in a fine tuxedo that outlined his broad shoulders to perfection, this tall stranger was clearly no ship's officer, but a passenger like herself, although so self-assured and richly dressed, he took her breath away. To make matters worse, he possessed a reckless, wild-blooded look that made her feel all soft and vulnerable inside.

Lines creased the corners of his laughing blue eyes, and she shivered with excitement that anyone so high-born would grace her with such a beautiful smile. And heaven knew she hadn't expected the fire in his eyes or the appealing cleft in his strong chin. He was nothing like the swains in her simple Irish village, but from his polished manner, she could tell he was exactly the sort of man her mother and Father Riley had warned her about.

He clamped a glowing cigar between his strong, white teeth and in the smoothest, deepest voice Molly had ever heard said, "I'm sorry, miss, I didn't mean to startle you."

"Y-you didn't startle me," she stammered. "I-I always look this way."

The man laughed and glanced at the twinkling stars. "Beautiful night, isn't it?" he remarked in a friendly tone.

All was silent except for the waves lapping against the ship's hull, and the sound of music and feminine laughter floating from the ballroom.

"That it is," Molly answered, trying to put some

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starch in her voice. "There's a nice breeze up here, not like—like—"

The black-haired scamp took the cigar from his mouth and held her gaze, setting off a tingling excitement in the pit of her stomach. "Like down below?" he asked, cocking a knowing brow.

"Y-Yes, that's right." Saints above, he'd known she was from steerage the moment he'd clapped eyes on her. And here she stood with her hair all tangled and the breeze whipping her gown about her body indecently, no doubt revealing every curve she had. "I should go," she muttered, a hot flush creeping over her cheeks.

She walked away, but the gentleman followed and laid his hand on her shoulder. He turned her around, and, wrapped in the spicy scent of his cologne, a warm tide of arousal ran over her.

"Hold on a minute, Irish. Won't you stay? I'd enjoy having a little company while I smoked."

Faith, how could she possibly entertain such a fine gent? Molly wondered. He was obviously rich and American, while she was Irish and desperately poor. He epitomized the languid world of the privileged, while until a few days ago, she'd never been out of County Galway.

His questioning eyes roamed over her, shattering her defenses. "The smoke doesn't bother you, does it?"

She went weak all over. No male she'd ever known had been gallant enough to ask her if he could smoke in her presence. "No, it doesn't. It's just that I—"

"Don't belong?" A dazzling smile streaked across his face. "Don't worry, I won't give you away," he promised, eyeing her with blatant sexual appraisal.

Sweet heaven! Did the good-looking devil think

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she'd sneaked up to the saloon deck for his personal enjoyment? She might be poor, but God hadn't put her on this earth to provide amusement for this bold rascal. "Shouldn't you be getting back to the party?" she asked sternly, grasping at a last chance to get away.

Laughter burst from his lips. "No, not at all. I've been to a hundred balls and danced with thousands of women in my time. I'd rather talk to you."

Molly hesitated, but he clasped her arm and guided her back to the rail, the warmth of his fingers burning through her thin gown. When he blessed her with another blinding smile, to her chagrin, she had to struggle to hold back a smile of her own.

With an air of easy confidence, he leaned against the rail, hard muscles rippling under his expensive tuxedo jacket. "You're from the west, aren't you?" he asked in a tone alive with warm feeling.

She laughed with surprise. "Yes, Ballyshannon. How did you know?"

"I heard it in your voice. I've just been in County Sligo doing some salmon fishing."

"But you're not Irish. I know you're not."

"How?" he chuckled.

"Your clothes, your accent," she answered, realizing she was actually carrying on a conversation with the man now.

"No, I'm not. I'm American and my name is Burke Lassiter. And who might you be?"

"Molly Kilmartin. I'm going to New York City to work in my Aunt Agatha's boardinghouse," she blurted out, too late remembering Mam had warned her to never give personal information to strangers.

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A smile tugged at the corner of Lassiter's sensual mouth. "A little girl like you? Are you sure you're up to it?"

She raised her chin a notch higher. "Talking never brought the peat home, did it now? Working's nothing new to me. Done it all my life."

Lassiter smoothed back her windblown hair, making her blood race hot and strong. "And where is this boardinghouse?"

"On the east side of Manhattan. A place called Murphy Street."

His expression lit with interest. "Yes, I've been there."

Molly decided he might have been there, but he certainly didn't *live* there, for her aunt had written Murphy Street was located in a poor but decent section of Manhattan, honeycombed with small businesses and Irish boardinghouses. Why, this man looked as if he'd never done a hard day's work in his whole blessed life.

"You'll love New York," he told her easily, his eyes bright with pleasure. "It's the most exciting city in the world."

An inner voice warned Molly against getting involved with the American, but her curiosity overrode it. "Is it true that trains run on the rooftops in New York, and the shops are chock-full of pretty gowns?" she inquired, becoming more comfortable in his presence by the minute. "And is it true everyone has all the milk they can drink, and nobody goes hungry? And—"

Lassiter clasped her hand with strong fingers. "Hold on a minute. One question at a time. The trains that run on the rooftops are called elevateds, and they run *over*

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the roofs, not *on* them," he explained, amusement moving over his rugged features. "Most of them converge at a place called Battery Park."

He idly caressed Molly's fingers, seemingly unaware that his touch was spreading drugging heaviness through her limbs like warm honey. "And yes, the shops are full of lovely gowns," he continued, "but you must have the means to buy them—and the same goes for milk and food."

Lassiter looked down at the lovely girl standing beside him, marveling at her innocence. Dressed in a ragged russet-colored gown, she was tall and willowy and had a wonderful figure—a small waist and lush breasts that sped warmth through his veins. Even in the shadows, he noticed her complexion was as smooth as jersey cream and the light from the ballroom caught in her soft auburn hair, burnishing it with coppery highlights. So far she'd been the only surprise, the only bright spot in the whole excruciatingly predictable voyage that would soon be over.

Molly slipped her hand away, seemingly set back by the depressing news. "But I thought America was the land of abundance. Now you're after telling me it's not!"

He gazed into her large, emerald-green eyes, trying to soften the blow he was about to render. "Yes, America is a land of abundance, although everyone isn't rich. Far from it. But if you have the grit, you have a good chance to get ahead. Unlike Ireland, you can't be held back because your father wasn't born in a manor."

Hanging on his every word, Molly pulled a small book from her skirt pocket, and began scribbling across one of its ragged pages.