



*Legacy of the
Celtic Brooch*

The Pendulum



*Tarah
Scott*

The Pendulum
by Tarah Scott

The Wild Rose Press

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The Pendulum—Legacy Of The Brooch, Book One

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Welcome to the Legacy of the Celtic Brooch series. The authors of this series were handpicked by our editors at The Wild Rose Press and asked to write a tale using an heirloom Celtic Brooch as the one constant in each story. Beginning in March, 2007 with English Tea Rose and Tarah's Scott's, *The Pendulum* and ending sometime in early 2008 with Marly Mathews from the Faery Rose Line we will follow this brooch on its mystical journey from Regency England to modern times. It might show up as part of a dowry or be used to pay a ransom. It might be magical; it might simply be a piece of jewelry. Every author was asked to put her own spin on the brooch's appearance and they have all done a beautiful job.

We welcome your comments on this series and hope that you will enjoy reading the stories as much as our authors enjoyed creating them for you.

Enjoy the journey!

RJ and Rhonda

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Dear Reader:

Thank you for purchasing this electronic copy of the first in our "Legacy of the Celtic Brooch" series. Please send the following code to me along with your first and last name to legacyseries@thewildrosepress.com. You will be entered into a drawing for an actual Celtic Brooch. The winner will be drawn at the end of the series, approximately January 2008. Only one entry per person per story is allowed. If you purchase all 13 stories as they come out this year you will have 13 chances to win this authentic Celtic Brooch.

CODE: LG19728

Dedication

This book is dedicated to my dear friends and fellow authors, Kimberly Comeau and Evan Trevane. Your willingness to read this book over and over went well above the call of duty. Thanks you guys. You're the best.

I would also like to acknowledge my publisher Rhonda Penders, who never shied away from the hard questions. My editor Katherine Malayvin, for her patience in allowing me to pour over this manuscript until it was right. Lastly, I'm thanking RJ Morris in advance for this, and every other wonderful cover and galley she has created for me.

CHAPTER ONE

Scottish Highlands, 1388

Lady Airin Keith slid free the bolt, then inched open the hidden door to the Scarlet Knight's bedchamber. Light sliced across the floor in a single, thin strand, and music mingled with male laughter seeped into the room from the great hall below. She hesitated. The hallway door had been left ajar. Had the knight already taken to his bed? Curse him *and* her father. She had ridden hard in order to arrive before it was too late.

She cocked an ear, straining to hear light snoring or breathing. Nothing. The hour was not yet nine. Surely, the knight would not leave the merry making so early? Mayhap he was unable to hold his liquor. That would serve her well, but no man such as the Scarlet Knight could be anything less than a skilled drunkard.

Airin pushed open the door several inches and peered into the dark until the bed took shape. Thank the saints, empty. She whirled, her long braid snapping around to her belly, and hurried back twenty feet to retrieve her lit candle. Back at the door, she stepped into the room as a man staggered down the hallway. She jerked her head right as his plaided backside disappeared from view. A moment later, his roar of laughter echoed up the stairs he descended.

Fool. 'Twould serve him right if he landed skull first on the great hall's stone floor. Airin hurried to the hall door. With a quick glance through the slitted opening, she clicked the door

shut, then turned. She blew out a long breath. When this was finished, she would teach her father a lesson for such underhanded dealing.

Her gaze fell on a table sitting beneath a lavishly curtained window directly opposite her. On the table sat a small, unadorned, wooden box. Airin straightened. The box looked like that which Perry had described. She lifted the candle and peered at it. By the saints, could the burglary be accomplished so easily? At least eighty men milled about the castle. Yet, no guard stood watch outside the room. Mayhap the Scarlet Knight was not as canny as was said. The thought should have soothed; instead, dread coiled like an adder around her insides.

She hurried around the bed to the table, then stopped, afraid of what she might find.

"Ridiculous," she muttered. Her great grandmother's brooch had disappeared seventy years ago without a trace. The Scarlet Knight's claim that he had found it was false.

She set the candle on the table and lifted the box. Music abruptly lifted in a hard crescendo. Airin stood, heart pounding, as the music dropped again into a low hum. The merry making would continue through the night. Anger simmered just below the level of control. *Aye, Scarlet Knight, make merry while you can. Tomorrow you return home—without the bride you thought to claim.*

Airin opened the box. There, on purple velvet, lay an ornate silver brooch. Just as her great grandmother Brianna described, knot work ran the full circle of the ring brooch. A dagger embossed with gold, and concealing the stickpin,

sliced through the middle of the brooch. She ran a finger over the lower right edge where the links widened and joined with a coat-of-arms, then paused. Centered over the coat-of-arms, two curls butted, one a fraction smaller than the other.

Brianna loved to tell how her husband had been pulled aside during a fair in Edinburgh and given the brooch. The picture was burned into Airin's memory. Except for a scratch on the back of the brooch, Brianna spoke of no other defect. Satisfaction surged through Airin. The Scarlet Knight should have commissioned a better silversmith. She turned it over, then bent toward the light in order to discern the scratch. She snorted. Just as she thought: no scratch.

Something rustled behind her. She spun, yanking free the dagger strapped to her waist. A blur of gray flitted in her vision. A sharp pain to her head preceded a flash of white light. Thrusting the dagger blindly, she rocked sideways and struck the table. Metal scraped wood as the candle holder slid across the table, then dropped off the edge. It hit with a tiny thud, and the candle flickered, then extinguished. Airin swung, facing the open path around the bed.

Shadow shifted against darkness and a wisp of air brushed her arms. A chill raced up her spine. *Madeline*. Airin's heart beat faster. Her younger sister was no longer satisfied with haunting Beaton Hall, she had returned to her childhood home. Another shift. Airin kicked, connecting with flesh and blood muscle of a man as a low grunt sounded. So the phantom was human. She kicked again, hitting air.

Nausea rolled through her. She stumbled, dropping the box, and groped for the bed. She missed and crashed to her

knees. A flash of light blazed behind her. Fire? Had she died and entered Hell? She glanced over her shoulder. Her vision blurred, but she made out a candle lying beside flaming gold brocade curtains. Airin fumbled for the bedpost, felt wood, then held tight as spots raced across her vision.

Shouts went up in the courtyard as she forced her head up to see a cloaked figure disappear into the passageway. She tightened her grip on the bedpost and heaved to her feet. Her knees buckled, but she held fast, swinging around to face the fire.

The hallway door struck the wall with a crack. Airin twisted around and her heart leapt into her throat. A giant stood in the doorway! Stories of pagan Celtic gods rising from the underworld to claim their victims sprang to mind. The god charged. She reared back before registering the men who rushed past him carrying buckets.

"Airin," a deep voice shouted as she fell sprawling just short of the wall.

She glimpsed the fallen box lying halfway under the bed before a voice near her shouted, "Water."

Airin yanked her gaze up and nearly jumped out of her skin at sight of the towering plaided god standing over her—then she blinked. Deryll? She jammed her eyes shut and shook her head in an effort to dislodge the specter. Pain rattled the gray within her mind and she grimaced. She was having that dream again, only this time, it had taken a bad turn. She wanted to laugh. Dreaming while awake was surely a bad sign. Cold water doused her head.

"What—" she sputtered, spitting water and shaking her head again. By the saints, her head throbbed.

Someone shouted for more water.

Fingers closed around her arm hard enough to hurt and a yank brought her to her feet. Someone rushed past as strong arms slipped around her, brushing the curve of her breast as he scooped her close. Warmth rippled through her. She suddenly wanted nothing more than to burrow into his warmth. The mouth, a bare inch from hers, snagged her attention. He had Deryll's full mouth and square jaw. Were Deryll's hands as warm as this man's?

She leaned back and squinted. This man's face was fuller, more angled and—He stepped into the well-lit hallway and Airin went cold at sight of the scar running down the right side of his cheek. A man raced from the room, bumping into them.

Despite the pain, she narrowed her eyes on her rescuer. "Sir *Scar-let*." She slurred the insult.

Amusement glinted in his green eyes.

"Airin!"

Airin tore her gaze from the Scarlet Knight and stared at the older man running toward them. He halted at the door, grasped the doorjamb on each side and leaned into the room.

He pivoted to face her, and demanded, "What have you done?"

She flashed a lopsided smile. "Hello, Father."

The pain wasn't so bad now, she thought, and swooned.

* * * *

Airin shifted against her bed pillows. "Gone?" She gave her father a quizzical look.

He snatched the fragment of purple velvet from the night table and tossed it onto the bed beside her. Shadowed hills and valleys leapt to life on the fabric's surface and she wished she could disappear in the beautiful landscape. She lifted her gaze. Light from two newly lit candles sitting on the far edge of the night table reflected in her father's amber eyes.

"When did I steal the brooch?" she asked. "I arrived but an hour ago and have since been surrounded by you and *your* servants."

"I heard your cross words to the maid," he replied in clipped tones. "Your dear Cerdwin is not here only because you sneaked back home like a rat instead of sending word of your arrival. Until she returns, you will not abuse the other maids."

"I can return home when I please."

"Costly curtains burned to a cinder, a blackened bedchamber, and your dress. For God's sake, Airin, your dress was on fire."

"'Tis only the sleeve that was singed. Cerdwin can repair the fabric."

"Do not toy with me, Daughter."

Anger flashed. "Toy with you? You sell me to the first man willing to pay your price and say I toy with you."

Hard eyes blazed back. "I could not sell you for a single gold piece."

She laughed. "Yet I cannot toss a stone without hitting a suitor."

Her father's mouth thinned. "You are a beautiful woman, Airin, but your tongue can cut metal. Thank God I have coin to buy you a husband."

Airin straightened. "Give my dowry to whomever you like." She eased back against the pillows, sorry she had given her throbbing head such a painful lurch. She would find the knave who'd hit her and return the favor in kind. "I will not marry," she swore.

Her father gave her an appraising look. "Now you will not marry? Yesterday, you would not marry until the bastard who killed your sister hung."

Airin looked away. Her lovely sister Madeline cut down in the prime of life. How had Airin so misread her sister's unhappiness in those last days? Airin knew she grieved over not bearing a child, but she hadn't considered the possibility Madeline was being abused. When the hangman's noose squeezed the last breath from the man who had married then killed Madeline, Airin would witness his entrance into Hell without flinching.

"You have said he will not hang," she reminded her father.

"You will live up to your part of the marriage bargain."

She gave a mocking laugh. "Your hand is not well played, Father. The brooch is missing. Without that, I need not marry."

When she told her father she would marry the man who found her grandmother's lost brooch, she thought herself safe. Every eligible man would set out in search of a brooch that could not be traced. By the time her suitors returned empty handed, she would have her brother-in-law's head.

However, her father had taken no action—until she left for the lowlands—and she was no closer to proving the Earl of Bothwell's guilt.

"You agreed to marry the man who found the brooch," her father said.

She shrugged. "We have no proof 'twas my great grandmother's brooch."

"I examined the brooch. It is hers."

She sent him a withering glare. "You have an interest in seeing me wed."

Sir Douglas Keith, the Earl of Arbothnott, regarded her with eyes that brought back softer memories of childhood. "Aye," he replied. "'Tis no sin for a father to wish his daughter well cared for."

"Well cared for?" She snorted. "You have given me to a butcher."

"Sir Deryll is a man of war. A man of honor."

Airin's heart stirred. *Sir Deryll*. So the Scarlet Knight was, indeed, her childhood hero. Her mind tumbled through memories of raven hair, eyes as green as the clearest emerald, and Deryll pulling her from the lock when Iain MacNab threw her in. Deryll gave her a turquoise ribbon the year he left. The village had gathered to wish God speed to the men called into King Robert's service. Bernadette Hay cried when Deryll left, but it was her, Airin, to whom he bestowed his last smile. She had discerned none of that boy in the man who had pulled her from the fire.

"Butcher," she repeated. "Well named *Scarlet* for the blood he has shed. I have heard of his exploits." Her heart pounded

at recollection of how Nan, one of her father's tenants, had told of a cousin who barely escaped with her life when the Scarlet Knight slaughtered a village that gave aid to the English.

"Stories," her father replied. "The loser names the victor butcher. So named was Robert the Bruce."

"I will not wed a murderer."

A knock sounded.

"Enter," Airin called, glad for a reprieve. The night had not gone as planned.

The door opened and her co-conspirator, the young minstrel Perry, hurried into the room. He halted a few feet from the bed when his gaze fell on Douglas.

Perry glanced from him to Airin. "I—" His gaze dropped.

"You have heard of my adventures?" she asked gently.

He looked at her.

Airin wondered once again at the young man's shyness. A shame some of the fire in his shoulder length red hair had not seeped into his spirit. "I am well." From the corner of her eye, she saw her father's mouth thin. "I am fatigued, however," she said. "'Tis late. Rest. I shall see you in the morning."

He cast a sideways glance at Douglas, then nodded and left her alone with her father.

"You prefer that pup of a musician who calls himself a man?" he demanded without preamble.

"By the saints, Father. Credit me with some intelligence. I have no more interest in Perry than I do the Scarlet Knight." But she thanked God for the minstrel. It was his message that had informed her of her father's underhanded dealings.

"You will," Douglas said. "For the knight is to be your husband."

"Produce the *true* brooch, and I will comply."

"Airin—"

Another rap sounded, and the door opened to reveal her brother-in-law, Jason, Earl of Bothwell. Airin's heart beat in unison with the sudden jig the candlelight did in response to the disturbance of air from the hallway. She met Jason's gaze. Three months had passed since their last meeting. That had been the first she'd seen of him since her sister's body was found dashed upon the rocks of Weir cliffs.

Her father stood. "Jason." He started forward, hand extended.

The earl stepped forward and clasped his hand. "Douglas," he said, then returned his attention to Airin. "You look pale. Are you unwell?"

"Fatigued, my lord." She furrowed her brow. "'Tis late. Why have you come?"

"To see you."

"Me?" she blurted before she could stop herself. She gave a little laugh. "I cannot guess why."

"No?"

Airin looked at her father. "Father, what does this mean?"

Douglas kept his eyes on Jason. "I would ask the same."

Jason turned to him. "I loved Madeline, but I must return to my life. I must ... she did not give me children."

Airin gasped.

Jason fixed his gaze on her. "You *are* unwell."

She shook her head. "You know full well, my lord, *I* have not finished grieving for my sister."

"You are a woman. I would expect nothing less."

Airin bit her lip. *As I would expect nothing less than cowardice from a killer of women.*

"What business have you here?" Douglas asked.

Jason did not take his eyes off Airin. "The business of claiming my new bride."

Her cry was cut off by a familiar deep voice behind Jason, "Lord Bothwell."

CHAPTER TWO

Airin caught sight of raven colored hair behind her brother-in-law. Jason turned and she stared into Deryll Chishom's eyes. A tiny thrill rippled through her. Her gaze dropped to the chest that was broader than the boy's had been. The thrill peaked at the recollection of those warm, firm muscles as he'd carried her. She lifted her gaze, her attention snagging on the light scar that crossed from cheek to mouth. Joy and sadness melded into a thin ache of sorrow. Her childhood hero was dead.

"Chisholm," Jason's dry acknowledgement broke her reverie.

Deryll stepped inside the doorway and regarded him. "What is your claim on my betrothed?"

Jason's gaze riveted onto Douglas. "Betrothed?"

"Sir Deryll fulfilled the condition Airin set for marriage," her father replied.

Jason's brow shot up. "The brooch?" He swung his gaze back to Deryll. "Where is this brooch?"

"In your coffers, or at the bottom of the loch into which you threw it," Deryll replied mildly.

Jason eyes flashed, but her father cut in before the earl could reply. "Only an hour ago, the brooch was stolen."

There was an odd note in her father's voice, but Airin had no time to contemplate the meaning before the earl said, "Stolen?" He gave a single shake of his head. "That is unfortunate."

"For the thief," Deryll said.

"You caught him?"

Deryll leaned against the doorjamb. "I will."

"Then you do not have this ... brooch. That will make it difficult to compare with my brooch."

Airin gasped.

"Not at all difficult," Deryll said. "I know the brooch's every detail. Once I see yours, I will confirm it is mine."

Jason threw his head back and laughed. "By God, you have bullocks. Everything I have heard about you is true."

Dread tingled the back of Airin's neck. Her brother-in-law was too confident.

"Harold," Jason called.

A servant appeared behind Deryll. He paused and glanced up at Deryll, who seemed oblivious to his presence. Airin stifled an urge to laugh. The rogue knew the servant wished to enter, but purposely refused to move. Harold turned sideways, pressed his back against the doorjamb, and slid past Deryll with barely an inch to spare. Airin ducked her head. By the saints, mayhap the bloodthirsty knight killed opponents by causing them to die laughing.

From the corner of her eye, she spotted the red satin pouch Harold held and her head snapped up. The servant stopped before Jason, handed him the pouch, then backed away. Jason loosened the pouch's drawstring, upended the bag over her bed, and shook the contents free. All amusement vanished as she stared at a silver brooch identical to the one she had tried to steal

She picked it, turned it over, and examined the back. A small but deep scratch marred the lower right edge where the links widened. Airin rubbed a finger across the scratch. Rough bits of metal caught at her thumb. She turned the brooch over and studied the two curls that butted. As with the Scarlet Knight's brooch, one was a fraction smaller than the other.

Airin looked up at Jason, the man who had killed her sister. Despite her bravado, she feared she would be unable to bring him to justice. She shifted her gaze to the man she had determined as a child to marry. He had been twenty when he left, she but twelve. Not one missive had passed between them. As a girl, she had been hurt; as a woman, she understood the dream had been hers, not his.

Only six months had passed since her sister's death. Since Jason would be forced to allow a six-month betrothal in order to satisfy the mourning period, she would have time to prove him guilty of murder.

"'Tis my great grandmother's brooch," she said.

* * * *

Someone moved toward her. Airin started as if waking from a dream.

"I shall care for you as I did your sister," Jason said. He stopped beside the bed and grasped her hand.

Warm hands. She had expected fingers of ice. He raised her hand to his lips and she thought of her sister's ghost roaming Beaton Hall. It mattered not that Airin would now wander those corridors alongside her; she awakened many a

night in Huntley Castle to Madeline's demand for recompense. Being betrothed to Jason would place her in his home—and his bed, if need be—where she would find proof of his guilt. *And lose all hope of Deryll ever wanting you*, an inner voice whispered. Airin startled. Where had that come from?

Deryll pushed past Jason, drawing her attention onto him. The earl tensed, then released her as the knight thrust out a hand. Airin pursed her lips, but placed the brooch in his palm. Her fingers brushed his and a tingle spread through her. She jerked her hand back before realizing it.

Deryll gave her a curious look, then scrutinized the brooch. He ran a finger over the scratch. "'Tis newly formed."

Jason's jaw tightened.

"Nay, my lord," Airin said. "It is just as my great grandmother described."

His gaze slid onto her and, for the first time, Airin detected surprise in the darkening of his eyes. "Is it?" he asked.

She nodded.

Deryll looked at her father. "This is my brooch."

"Craven whoreson!" Jason exploded. "I have—"

"Silence," Douglas commanded. "Give it to me." He extended a hand and Deryll passed it to him. Douglas sat in the chair and examined the brooch before saying, "'Tis identical."

"The scratch is newly made," Deryll said.

"Yours did not have a scratch," Airin interjected before her father could reply. "I told you his was a forgery."

"You are certain this is the true brooch?" her father asked, and Airin wanted to bludgeon him. Only moments earlier, he

had been willing to give her to the infamous Scarlet Knight. Now, he protected her from Jason, when that was the last thing she wanted. The male sex!

"My lord," Deryll said, and again held out a hand for the brooch. Douglas handed it to him. He examined it once more, then faced Airin. "You know I speak the truth." He tossed the brooch on her lap.

"I will kill you for this," Jason hissed.

Deryll tilted his head. "At your command, my lord."

Respect welled in Airin. Sir Deryll Chisolm rose to any challenge with determination to win. Respect gave way to alarm. This situation would not be different. Murderer or no, the knight's blood would be on her hands.

"I found no scratch on your brooch," she insisted. "*It was a fake.*"

He regarded her and she was startled again to see amusement in his eyes. "You are certain, my lady?" he asked.

Her heartbeat quickened, but she managed to keep her voice level. "Aye."

"'Tis the same brooch."

"The scratch—" she began.

"Is newly formed," he finished.

From the corner of her eye, she saw Jason step toward Deryll. The Scarlet Knight turned and Jason halted. The two men remained motionless as if moving would break the thin ice they trod. Airin wanted to scream. Dying in a brawl over a woman would be an ironic fate for the *Scarlet Knight*, but she was unwilling to hasten his entrance into Hell. She threw back the covers.

"Airin!" Her father leapt to his feet.

She rose before he could stop her. The room swayed precariously, then reoriented. Her father reached her side and grabbed her shoulders to force her back into bed. "Stand aside, Sir," she snapped.

He raised a brow, then gave a mock bow and stepped aside.

She took two paces, the room swayed again, and she stopped. "Your brooch is a fake, Sir Deryll."

Neither man moved. She cursed under her breath. The knight was going to ruin her scheme. She considered letting Jason kill him, but couldn't face two ghosts in Beaton Hall. She blew out a frustrated breath.

"If both brooches are in question, I need not marry either of you."

"You will marry the victor," Deryll said.

"Indeed?" she replied in an icy voice.

"Aye," Jason agreed.

"I am no sheep to be bought and sold," she retorted. "Any man who takes me in that fashion will rue the day."

A grim smile curved Deryll's mouth. "I have rued many a day, my lady. I accept your terms."

"They are not terms! I will marry the man I choose."

"Aye," Jason said in unison with Deryll's "Nay."

Airin scowled. "I have the right to choose."

"Honor demands you marry the man who fulfilled your marriage condition."

"He makes a point, Daughter."

Airin sent her father a recriminating look, then addressed Deryll, "Honor demands you produce the true brooch."

"You are willing to wed Lord Bothwell for *that* brooch. It is *mine*."

She drew a sharp breath. He referred to *her*, not the brooch. "You have no proof."

His gaze bore into Jason as he said, "Proof is in my might." The earl's hand fisted at his side.

"You would die simply to claim me?" she demanded.

Deryll cast her a glance. "You are certain *I* would die?"

"Don't be a fool. Lord Bothwell outweighs you by three stones, and his skill is superior to yours."

The knight gave a mirthless laugh. "Should I be offended that you think so little of my skills, or gratified you fear for my safety?"

"There is no dishonor in accepting one's limitations." Airin stepped forward. "Deryll, this is not how I would see my friend die."

He angled his head in a tiny bow. "I am gratified 'tis my safety that concerns you."

She swept her gaze onto her father. "Stop them."

"You commanded I move aside."

"Stop them!"

"They both have a viable claim."

"Command them to abide by my choice."

"Your choice?" he repeated. "Sir Deryll fulfilled your terms, yet you rejected him. He has the right to demand your compliance."

Deryll canted his head toward Jason. "Tomorrow, my lord?"

Jason answered with a curt nod. He stepped to the bed. Airin tensed, but he only scooped up the brooch, then turned, and pushed past Deryll as he left the room. Airin snapped her attention onto the Scarlet Knight. He stared back. He was right. The scratch was newly formed. What did Jason want with her? Deryll broke eye contact and strode out the door. Her gaze slid to his muscled calves. By all that was holy, what had she gotten herself into? She collapsed onto the bed. What did *he* want with her?

CHAPTER THREE

Airin tiptoed into the hall, then cast a final glance out her bedchamber window at the gray dawn that raked the sky before clicking shut the door behind her. She pulled her shift above her ankles and padded barefoot down the hallway. Cold seeped from the stone floor into the soles of her feet. She neared the stairs and shivered. For the sake of appearing as undressed as possible, she had hazarded a nasty chill. She hurried down the stairs, then slowed. Not even a mouse stirred. She had counted on someone seeing her. She needed a witness to begin the rumor that would end with her found in the Earl of Bothwell's bed.

The Scarlet Knight would never acquiesce to the marriage. Finding her with Jason, however, would force his withdrawal. Warmth spread across her cheeks at the thought of Deryll's revulsion once he learned that she had wantonly offered herself to a man she hated—the man who had murdered her sister.

Airin stopped in front of the earl's door. In the safety of her own room, courage had flourished. Standing before his bedchamber, the magnitude of the next step shook her resolve. She stalled another moment, praying someone would appear to force her across the bedchamber threshold, but all remained quiet. She pushed open the door and slipped inside.

"My lord," she whispered, and took a tentative step forward. Light from a low fire in the hearth revealed his sleeping form beneath the covers, but he gave no reply.

"Jason," she whispered. Still no answer. "My lord," she said in a louder voice.

Was he drunk? She frowned. Jason would not drink himself into oblivion on the eve of a duel. Airin blew out a frustrated breath and strode to the bed. She knelt on the mattress beside him.

"My lord, have you gone deaf?" She pulled back the cover, then gave a loud cry.

Yellow firelight glinted off the hilt of a dagger protruding from his heart. Her dagger—the one she had dropped in the Scarlet Knight's room. She stared, unable to tear her gaze from the barely congealed blood around the wound and the thin trail that ran down his side. Blood soaked the feather mattress in a wide circle.

Airin gulped air, crossed herself, then pressed her fingers against his chest. No heartbeat. She forced herself to examine more closely the blood. Not yet dry. He could not have been dead more than an hour.

Multiple footfalls sounded in the hallway. Airin yanked her attention to the door.

"You should have informed me immediately," came her father's taut voice.

"He did right," another man answered.

Dread slammed through Airin. *Sheriff Gewain*. She backed off the bed and whirled as the door opened.

Her father, Gewain, and Harold stared.

Her father stepped toward her. "Airin!"

"Look!" Harold pointed at her leg.

Airin glanced down and gasped at sight of blood on her shift.

"Lady Airin," Gewain said, and shoved past Douglas.

"Halt," her father commanded.

The sheriff pivoted, his cape swirling about him. "She is caught, my lord."

Douglas' eyes hardened. "I will have you hanged this very morn for your insolence."

Gewain hesitated, then gave a terse nod and stepped aside.

Her father approached. "What means this?"

"Lord Bothwell and I are betrothed," she replied in a steady voice. "I came to his bedchamber, but found him dead."

Harold snorted.

Douglas yanked a plaid from the bed and threw it across her shoulders. "Cover yourself."

She forced back the nausea that rocked her belly at the thought of Jason's blood on the blanket. Her father grasped her arm and shoved past Harold and Gewain.

He remained silent until they reached her bedchamber. When he closed the door behind them, he shoved her onto the bed.

"You surprise even me, Airin."

"You think I killed him," she said in astonishment.

"The knife is still warm from your hand."

"Why would I agree to wed him, only to kill him?"

"Do not play innocent with me!" Douglas slammed a fist down on the night table. "'Tis exactly what you planned."

Airin thrust her chin forward. "If I meant to murder him, the deed would have been done long ago. I wanted proof—I wanted to see him go to the gallows a convicted murderer, his title and land stripped from him. I am a fool. I never imagined anyone would kill him." Her father remained unmoved. "I could not murder him with a mere dagger," she insisted. "He outweighs me by seven stones."

Douglas hesitated, then his eyes went cold. "Once he was finished between your legs, you could catch him as he slept."

Airin gasped.

"Now you are the injured maiden?" He snorted.

"I would not be so stupid as to use my own knife," she snapped. "I lost the dagger last night."

"Aye?" he asked in mock agreement. "I saw no dagger."

"The thief who stole Deryll's brooch must have taken it. *Harold*," she sneered. "It was he who assaulted me, then stole the brooch."

Her father stared. "You will send another man—even a servant—to the gallows for your crime?" He shook his head and dropped into the chair beside the night table.

A rap sounded at the door and Deryll entered. He closed the door, then inclined his head to Douglas. "My lord."

"Sir Deryll," Douglas said, "you may seek a bride elsewhere. This one will soon hang."

"Father!"

"I will do well with this one," Deryll replied mildly.

Airin started to ask him if he was desperate enough to gain land at the cost of marrying a murderess, but stopped short

at the possessive look in his eyes. She had never seen him look at Bernadette that way.

Her father waved a hand. "You have done your duty. I will reward you. You need not sacrifice yourself."

Airin sucked in a breath.

Deryll leaned against the wall. "Are you terminating the contract?"

"Nay," Douglas replied. "But I will not wed you to a woman who bedded then killed another man."

Airin shot to her feet. "I did neither!"

Both men looked at her.

"Nay?" her father asked. "You admitted bedding him was your intent."

"Aye, but I would not condemn another to death for my sake. And what did you suppose? I did not wish this one—" she jabbed a finger in Deryll's direction "—dead on my account, and I would not rest until Jason was brought to justice."

Her father regarded her for a long moment. "If you did not kill him, who did?"

Airin sat back on the bed. "I do not know."

Another knock rattled the door.

"Enter," Douglas called.

She pulled the blanket close about her shoulders as the door opened and Gewain and Harold entered.

Gewain addressed her father, "If you had taught her a woman's place, things might not have come to this."

"She denies killing him," Douglas replied in a dismissive tone.

"Your daughter accused Lord Bothwell of murdering her sister."

Douglas looked at Airin. She knew he wondered what she had said to give herself away. "I accused Lord Bothwell of nothing," she replied.

"She asked questions," Harold said.

"Questions?" she repeated.

"Ye asked what Lord Bothwell was doing the day your sister died."

Airin frowned. "I never spoke to you."

He straightened. "Not me. The housekeeper."

Airin looked at Gewain. "You say I accused Lord Bothwell of murder all because this servant says I asked the housekeeper what he was doing?"

Gewain's eyes glittered. "'Tis but a small part."

"You believe the claims of a servant over my daughter's word?" Douglas demanded.

"We found her in his bed, knife in hand."

"'Twas not in hand," her father replied in a cold voice.

"Beware your facts, Gewain."

"Sir Gewain," Airin interrupted. "Harold discovered the body earlier, then summoned you?"

"Aye."

"I was not there when he discovered the body. Why would I return?"

"For the dagger you left in his body."

Dread coiled tighter in her. The village was an hour and a half's ride. Jason had not been dead long enough to summon the sheriff. "Why was my father not informed the instant the

earl's body was found? Anyone could have come and gone in the three hour's ride to fetch you."

The sheriff crossed his arms. "My presence frightens you, Lady Airin?"

He was avoiding the question. Her heart beat faster. "A servant does not change law," she replied.

"I am the law."

"Nay, sir. My father is the law." She lifted her chin. "So says King Robert."

"King Robert has yet to hear the circumstances. He will agree with my right to mete out justice."

"My God," she laughed. "You are a fool."

His face reddened, but he was given no chance to reply. "He was here, too." Harold pointed at Deryll.

A dark light flickered in Gewain's eyes and Airin realized the sheriff liked Deryll no more than her father. A tremor shook her. No noblewoman hung unless for treason, and King Robert would not readily imprison Douglas Keith's daughter. But Gewain would not dismiss an opportunity to elevate himself by bringing low not one knight, but two. She cursed her foolishness. In her determination to avenge Madeline she had neglected to consider any consequences.

She met Gewain's gaze. "My sister could not give Lord Bothwell children. I have wondered of late if the shame became too much." Airin swallowed the pain that twisted her heart. *Forgive me, Madeline.*

"Is that so?" The sheriff laughed softly. "You are a marvelous actress, my lady."

Deryll straightened from the wall. "Actress?"

"Actress," Gewain repeated.

"Only last night I promised to wed Lord Bothwell," she said.

Gewain lifted a brow. "Have you a contract?"

"Nay. We only—"

"Witnesses?"

"My father and Sir Deryll."

"Sir Deryll wanted to wed her," Harold interjected.

Airin wanted to squash the little bug.

Surprise flashed across the sheriff's face. He faced Douglas. "Sir Deryll wished to wed your daughter? Forgive me, my lord, but one of them is a murderer."

"We were to marry," she insisted. "He fulfilled the marriage condition." She winced inwardly, wondering where Bothwell had hidden the brooch.

"The *brooch*." The sheriff flashed a look of utter contempt. "I heard of the quest. You think much of yourself, Lady Airin."

"Enough not to waste my charms," she replied coldly.

He nodded slowly. "Aye, and your charms would be wasted on one such as Jason Bothwell."

She longed to throttle him. "I have said, I agreed to wed him."

"Because he fulfilled the marriage condition."

"Nay. His brooch was a forgery."

"Forgery?" Gewain said in surprise. "My God, lady, you can twist a sword into a knot. Where is this brooch?"

"Lord Bothwell took it."

Gewain turned to Harold. "What say you?"

The servant cast Airin a sullen look. "I know not where he put it."

Deryll stepped forward. "No matter."

Airin frowned. "What?"

Deryll faced Gewain. "Before Lord Bothwell arrived yesterday, Lady Airin and I were betrothed. He ignored the betrothal and demanded her hand. Airin feared for me and went to beg for my life."

"She admitted to going there to bed him," Gewain said.

"Aye," Deryll agreed. "When she found Lord Bothwell dead, she feared I had committed the murder." Deryll looked at her. "You need not fear, Airin. I passed the night in the great hall, and," he managed an ironic smile, "I found your brooch." He opened his palm to reveal the brooch. "It must have fallen under the bed when you were attacked."

"Attacked?" Gewain interjected.

The knight nodded. "Last night, while she admired the brooch, someone attacked her. The room was set afire. She barely escaped with her life."

Speechless, Gewain's stepped aside as Deryll strode to Airin. Deryll's gaze locked with hers while he gently moved aside a corner of the blanket. He slid his fingers beneath the fabric. The warmth of his hand sent a shock through her. She swallowed, but kept her gaze fixed on him as he pinned the brooch to her shift, then stepped back.

CHAPTER FOUR

Deryll's explanation of her involvement had struck so close to the mark it startled Airin. How much easier it would have been to let Lord Bothwell slay him. She reached up and touched the brooch. She would toss the cursed thing into the loch at first opportunity. Nay. She would ride *today* and *throw* it in.

"This is the brooch?" Gewain broke the silence.

"'Tis my brooch," Deryll replied. He angled his head toward Airin. "A gift for my bride."

This had gone far enough. Airin straightened. "I would recover my senses. Leave me."

The sheriff shook his head. "My questions will be answered."

She stared in amazement. "I have entertained too long in my night clothes."

Deryll faced the sheriff. "We shall await her in the great hall."

Gewain opened his mouth, but her father interrupted. "Leave my daughter."

"I must—"

"*Enough*." The word crackled with menace.

The sheriff's hand twitched at his side, and Airin watched in stupefaction. She let out a silent breath when he turned and stalked toward the door.

"And you," her father pointed a finger at Harold, "do not set a foot outside Huntley Castle."

The servant's eyes snapped onto the sheriff's retreating back.

"He will do you no good," Douglas growled.

The servant cast a wide-eyed glance about the room, then hurried after the sheriff. Deryll turned to follow.

"Sir Deryll," her father said.

The knight turned and Douglas motioned for him to close the door. He did as bade and her father looked from Deryll to her. "The two of you shall be my death. Which one of you killed Jason?"

"You acknowledge, mayhap, 'twas not me?" Airin murmured.

Her father scoffed. "Do not forget how well I know you, Daughter."

"I did not kill him. God knows, 'twould be simpler if I had. What of this?" She tapped the brooch. The length of the stickpin jabbed the tender flesh below her collarbone. "'Tis Jason's brooch." She motioned at Deryll. "He stole it."

"*Retrieved*," Deryll corrected.

"You stole it, then killed him."

"I would have to kill him first, then steal it."

"Your confession gratifies me."

"I never left the great hall," he replied, unruffled.

By God, she was tired. "You paid someone to accomplish the deed."

Deryll crossed his arms over his chest. Airin was startled to discover her gaze fixed upon the chest hair visible at his gaping collar.

"I ... paid someone to kill Lord Bothwell?" he asked.

Airin jerked her attention onto his face. His gaze sharpened and a tingle traveled her belly. "You stayed in the hall all night in order to elude suspicion," she shot back harder than intended.

"If you believe this, why not tell Gewain?"

She took a deep breath. "Because Jason deserved to die."

"How gratifying that I am more honorable than your murdering brother-in-law."

Airin paused. Did he believe she was right about the earl? "Jason's cruelty ran deep," she said carefully.

Deryll straightened. "What do you mean?"

His eyes had turned cold as the North Sea. He believed Jason abused her—and it angered him. "He did not harm me."

The knight studied her. "Nay?"

"Nay."

"Prove it."

She blinked, then lifted her chin. "Because he would not have lived out that day."

"Aye," Deryll murmured. "I do not condemn you for hating him ... or killing him."

Airin sucked in air. His actions a moment earlier screamed that he was the killer. Was he a skilled enough actor to feign acceptance of a crime she was accused of, but that he had committed?

Douglas rose. "You have made your bed," he said as he strode to the door. "Now you must lie in it—" he paused, hand on the knob, gaze locked with Airin's, "—together."

She opened her mouth, but he raised a hand. "It is time you married. Sir Deryll fulfilled the marriage condition and, he

paused, his tone softening, "you no longer need fret about revenge." He frowned. "As for Gawain, I may have to appeal to King Robert. Do not leave the castle. If he arrests you without my knowledge, he could condemn you before I found where you were imprisoned."

Airin's heart pounded. "Surely, he fears your sword."

Her father's mouth thinned. "Gawain has not forgiven my sanction with King Robert."

"But King Robert will—"

"Once you hang, King Robert may not be inclined to intervene."

She nodded. Her father had never hidden the truth from her. She wondered if, in this case, ignorance might not have been preferable.

Douglas's gaze shifted to Deryll. "If you killed Jason and Airin suffers as a result, I will run my sword through to your soul."

"Your trust has not been misplaced," the knight replied.

Her father turned toward the door.

"Father."

He looked over his shoulder.

"I swear by God, I did not kill Jason. I have never lied to you. I wanted him to pay by the hangman's noose. If ... if I had murdered him, I would not deny the truth."

He studied her for a long moment, then left.

Deryll's gaze settled on her. A tremor climbed her spine.

"Do you fear the hangman's noose?" he asked.

"Nay," she replied, then silently cursed her too-quick tongue.

"And me, Airin," he added in a soft voice, "do you fear me?"

His gaze dropped to her breasts and her pulse jumped to a gallop. He returned his attention to her face, then pivoted and left the room, closing the door behind him.

Airin shoved off the bloody plaide and tossed it on the floor. How could she have been so short sighted? She unfastened the brooch, then slipped it free of her shift and stared at it. How had Deryll come into possession of Jason's brooch? She wanted to laugh. The earl had stolen the brooch from Deryll, then the knight had stolen it back. She turned it over, then froze at sight of the scratch.

* * * *

"Cerdwin!" Airin spotted her nursemaid at the base of the stairs and flew down the narrow steps to the landing. She threw her arms around the older woman's neck. "'Tis good to see you." Airin stepped back, holding her at arm's length. As was her custom, Cerdwin's plaited hair coiled like a crown atop her head, and a white apron covered her gray dress. Her blue eyes shone with keen intelligence and an indomitable spirit that had kept the gates of heaven at bay. "When did you return?"

"A few moments ago. What is this?" Cerdwin lifted the silver chain around Airin's neck, pulled it free of the dress's neckline, and dangled it in front of Airin.

The attached brooch swung in perfect motion. Apprehension resurfaced. Jason had stolen Deryll's brooch, then scratched it in an attempt to fool her. Yet, the scratch

now appeared as old and faded as it would have if the brooch was her great grandmother's. But it was not Brianna's brooch. Even now, Airin could discern the curl over the coat of arms that was slightly smaller than the other. Brianna had described every facet of the brooch, and not once mentioned the flaw.

For an instant, Airin envisioned her great grandmother as a young bride, the true brooch pinned to her plaide. It had meant more to her than any other possession. After fifty years of marriage, Duncan Keith died, leaving Brianna with nothing but memories—and the brooch. When, the brooch disappeared a year later, she mourned the loss of this last connection with him.

Cerdwin released the brooch, pulling Airin from her reverie. "How is it you came so soon from the lowlands and without sending word?" the maid asked.

Airin tucked the brooch back inside her dress. The metal settled between her breasts, its coolness instantly seeping through the thin shift to her skin. "Coming was just as easy as sending word."

Cerdwin clucked her tongue. "Fool others, my lady, but not Cerdwin. I weaned ye, and know every thought in that pretty head. You came to spoil your father's marriage plans."

"And why not? He schemed behind my back." She still hadn't forgiven him.

The maid straightened. "Sir Deryll Keith fulfilled the marriage condition *set by you*."

Airin gave a grim laugh. "'Tis strange business, Cerdwin."

"Aye," the maid's tone softened. "News of the murder has spread halfway around the country."

Airin lifted a brow. "All before the morning meal?"

"Never mind," Cerdwin said. "There is a wedding to plan."

"What need have I of marriage?" she replied bitterly. "I have seen the result of that holy institution."

"To the devil with your father's title and lands, then?"

In one fell swoop, the old woman had cut out Airin's heart. Four years ago, when Madeline married, Airin told herself their father would now have the son he craved. He never made her feel the deficit of being female, but a woman could not carry on the Keith name, work the land, and continue the legacy that Douglas Keith had built by the sweat of his brow.

No knight was more respected. Born to a poor baron, he determined to add to his father's meager holdings. At eighteen, he entered David II's service and, at twenty, was knighted for valor on the battlefield. Two years later, Robert II assumed the throne and wasted no time in securing Douglas' allegiance. Robert betrothed Judith McNaught to Douglas. Judith's father, Lord Malcom, the Earl of Arbothnott, sired no sons, and Douglas inherited the earldom at his death. Regret pricked Airin. Neither her grandmother nor mother had produced a son. What if she, like Madeline, couldn't bear even a daughter?

She faltered, suddenly realizing the meaning of her thoughts. How had she remained ignorant of her inner fears? Airin was sixteen, Madeline fifteen, when Jason Bothwell wooed Madeline. Her father protested that Airin should marry first, but she refused to wed simply to satisfy tradition. If she

had insisted that Madeline wait—her knees weakened—would she have discovered the truth before her sister? Might she have saved Madeline a childless marriage? Her conscience, rubbed raw by sleepless nights and the ceaseless churning of her thoughts, gave way. She reached for the wall.

"Airin! What is it, child?"

Gnarled, firm hands grasped her shoulder, then slipped around her back, eased her forward three paces, then down onto a nearby bench. Cerdwin pressed Airin's head against her breast.

"'Tis not so bad," the old woman crooned. "Most men dinna' mistreat their women. Look at your father. No man more adored a wife." She rocked Airin as if she was a child and, for the first time since Madeline's death, Airin did not hold back the tears. "There, there," Cerdwin said into her hair.

"She was so young," Airin whispered through a sob.

"A mere eighteen," Cerdwin agreed. "But she is safe in God's bosom."

Did God welcome sin-tainted man back into his bosom? Yes, Airin thought. If the fires of Hell punished killers, the innocent were surely rewarded.

"Ye cannot live life for the dead, child. Madeline would not ask it."

The sound of a door opening echoed down the stairs leading to the third floor. "The matter shall be finished this very day," her father said.

Airin straightened from Cerdwin's grasp.

"Aye, my lord," came Deryll's voice.

Airin locked gazes with her maid. The pad of the mens' boots said they were headed for the stairs. She seized her skirt and dabbed at her eyes, but instantly realized the futility of the effort and jumped to her feet, searching wildly about as if she had forgotten the castle's every nook and cranny.

Cerdwin seized her hand, placed a finger to her lips, then pulled her down the hall. Before Airin could stop her, she opened the nearest door—the Scarlet Knight's bedchamber. Airin glanced back as the maid tugged her into the room, then clicked the door shut.

"The secret passage," Airin whispered, and hurried around the bed to the small table against the wall.

She glanced at the charred remains of the shredded curtains before dropping to her knees in search of the candle that had started the fire. At sight of melted wax mixed with burnt fabric, she cursed. Foolish. Of course, the candle had not survived the fire. She leapt to her feet and took three paces toward the secret door. What need had she of light? She knew these passageways well enough to traverse them blind.

She ran a finger along the edge of a panel until she detected the spring. She prayed no one had locked the door from the inside, and pressed it. The door sprang open. Thank God the room her father had given Deryll was one of the three connected by the passageways. *How much better to have chosen a hiding place other than the knight's bedchamber?* Airin glanced back to see Cerdwin, ear pressed against the door.

"Cerdwin," she called in a whisper.

The maid abruptly straightened and backed up against the wall. The door opened. Airin's eyes widened at sight of Deryll.

He raised a brow. "What have we here?"

Curse him. In her fervor, she had not realized 'twas possible he was using the bedchamber. The room still stank of smoke. What was he doing here?

"Pray, tell me," he drawled, "have you come to bed me or murder me?" His eyes lit with wicked laughter. "Do not fear. I am prepared for either."

Fury swept through her. "I am no murderess!"

"Then bed me, it is."

Her cheeks flushed hot as he strode toward her.

She backed up a step. "W-what are you doing here?"

He stopped before her.

"Do you not have business elsewhere?" She winced at the squeak in her voice.

"Aye," he replied distractedly.

"What sort of business?"

Deryll reached behind her and lifted her braid over her shoulder. "The kind that does not concern you."

"What sort of business does not concern me? Sir Gawain is—"

Deryll's head snapped up. "Nothing I cannot handle," he finished.

The heat in her cheeks spread through her belly as, his gaze glued to hers, he lifted the end of her braid to his nose and breathed deeply. Airin's heart pounded against her chest. Hands, calloused and brown from years in the sun, held the

braid as if it were a fragile flower. He breathed deeply again, as though to inhale her very essence.

"Is there any battle you can not handle?" she asked.

Deryll shifted his gaze to her face. "I am a man, Airin. No man is invincible."

Her girlhood hero *was* invincible. The hero who always saved his lady from all harm, who knew when to bestow a kiss, and never pressed her into an uncomfortable situation. This man was anything but those things.

Deryll's gaze dropped to her mouth. Would he kiss her?

"You may come out now, Cerdwin," he said.

Airin blinked, and he raised a brow.

The maid stepped from behind the door. "Forgive me, my lord. I did not mean to eavesdrop." She edged toward the hallway.

Airin shot her a glare, but the woman paid no heed. She looked back at Deryll. "You knew all along she was there."

"Course he did." Cerdwin backed across the threshold. "'Tis why he hasna' bedded you."

Airin riveted her gaze onto the maid in time to see the door close behind her. She narrowed her eyes on Deryll.

"Step aside."

"You do not wish to be bedded?"

She rolled her eyes and reached to shove him aside. Her palm connected with the hard muscle of his chest. As if made of stone, he did not move. Airin fell back a pace.

"Do you intend to force me?"

Both his brows rose. "Is that what you wish?"

"You are mad."

"'Tis no answer."

"What I wish is of no consequence."

"Not so," he replied.

"Indeed?"

"I fulfilled your condition," he said. "'Tis a bargain."

Her gaze rested on the scar running down his cheek. She fisted her hands at her sides. "Why you?"

He looked genuinely surprised, then laughed. "Who were you expecting?"

"Not you." What was amiss with her? She had turned into a shrew.

"Anyone *but* me?" he asked.

"I gave you no thought."

He laughed again. "Lady, you know how to cut a man."

Airin gave him a recriminating look. "Do not play the wounded lover. I was a child when you left. You gave me no thought."

"I cared for you," he replied.

"As a sister."

"Mayhap, but that is eight years past. Today, I need no sister." He slipped an arm around her waist and pulled her close.

Despite her efforts, her heart pounded as her breasts pressed into the hard contours of his chest. Their lips were a hair's breadth apart, his breath a warm flutter against her cheek. Her nipples hardened and she closed her eyes. Could he feel her arousal? Heat flashed over her at the thought, and fanned out from between her legs.

Moist lips touched hers. Deryll's flattened palm slid to the curve of her buttocks as he spread moist kisses over her jaw and down her neck. At the curve of neck and shoulder, he flicked his tongue. Shivers raced down her body and fueled the fire between her legs. Her knees weakened. She threw her arms around his neck, her head falling forward onto his shoulder. He groaned, the sound resonating in his chest and startling her. She jerked her head up, and he kissed her, his fingers threading into the hair held tight against her head by the plait.

The door flew open. "Lady Airin!" Cerdwin cried.

Airin jumped back, breathing hard.

"What is amiss?" Deryll demanded.

The commanding note in his voice yanked Airin from the haze of passion and she registered Cerdwin's flushed face.

"What? Quickly, what?"

"Your father—"

Airin faltered a step toward her nurse.

"He was attacked."

Airin started forward, but tripped on the carpet. Strong arms caught her and she looked up into green eyes gone hard.

CHAPTER FIVE

"Sheriff, we are finished," Airin said without looking up from her father. Her heart constricted. He appeared far too pale. She smoothed back locks of hair that stuck to his sweaty cheek.

"If your father awakens I must question him," Gewain said.

Airin jerked her head up, pinning him with a glare. "If? Leave, before one of my father's men throws you out on your—"

"My lady!" Cerdwin cried, pushing past Gewain in order to enter the room.

Deryll filled the doorway behind her. "Wait in the great hall if it pleases you," he said to Gewain. "Better yet, find this killer before he attacks again."

"I have no proof the attack on his lordship is connected with Lord Bothwell's murder," Gewain said.

Airin's jaw clenched. "What sort of fool are you?"

"The kind that does not make snap decisions, *my lady*."

"Be gone," she said as Cerdwin hurried around the bed, clean bandages in hand. "Be gone from my father's house altogether. The great hall will not be your refuge this day."

The maid set the bandages on the bed and Airin reached for one as Cerdwin knelt on the mattress, slid her arms beneath Douglas' shoulders, and lifted him. Airin slipped the first strip of cloth beneath him and began wrapping it around the other blood soaked bandages.

"I will begin my investigation."

"Do so. But once you finish, you may await news of my father's condition *outside* our walls."

"I have yet to question you about the earl's murder."

"Be gone," she replied, and cast a glance at Deryll before continuing to wrap her father's wound.

Gerwain hesitated, then left, accompanied by Deryll.

A dizzying jolt of panic threatened to reduce her to tears as she watched the new layers of bandage too quickly soak up blood. "He still bleeds." She cast a helpless glance at the maid.

"I have seen worse."

Airin saw no deceit, however well intended it might have been, and choked back a sob.

Cerdwin nodded in understanding. "'Tis a nasty wound, but your father may not yet be ready to meet his maker."

Airin's heart swelled. At seventy years of age, Cerdwin had lived through disease, clan attacks and a fall down the stairs. She well knew about locking the door against the Leveller.

They added pads of cloth, then wrapped more bandages until blood no longer seeped through. Then the maid dipped a rag in a basin of warm water, rung it, and passed it to Airin. She was mopping his brow when Deryll returned.

"Gewain has begun his *investigation*?" she asked, and received a recriminating look from Cerdwin.

Deryll closed the door. "Aye."

Airin reached for the blanket that covered her father's hips. He unexpectedly seized her arm, and she and Cerdwin cried out in unison. Deryll was instantly at Airin's side. She

dropped to her knees beside the bed and looked into her father's eyes. She saw his pain and had to force back a cry. His hand fell limp over the side of the bed and she gently lifted it onto the covers. His mouth moved as if to speak, then he took several labored breaths.

"Father," she said, catching her voice before it broke, "rest."

He tried speaking again, only to whisper something incomprehensible. Airin gave Deryll a questioning look. He shook his head, then dropped to a squat beside her. His shoulder brushed hers and Airin closed her eyes, thankful for his strength. She breathed deeply and opened her eyes.

Her father was looking at Deryll as he whispered, "Protect."

Embarrassment tinged her cheeks with warmth when Deryll nodded.

Douglas shifted his gaze onto her. "Land yours."

She shook her head stubbornly. "Nay. You will be well soon. I am not—" He grabbed her arm again with surprising strength.

"There!" She bit back tears. "You are still strong."

"W-wed," Douglas said with a tightening grip. "To-day."

"Father," tears washed her eyes, "you will heal."

His gaze hardened. Even at heaven's door, the weight of his authority remained strong. "Today," he repeated.

"He is right," Cerdwin said. "God have mercy, if he does not live, his land is yours. 'Tis no small parcel, and King Robert will command you to marry—without delay. The king's

choice will not be Sir Deryll." She shifted her wide-eyed gaze onto Deryll and dipped her head. "Forgive me, my lord."

"You have spoken true, Cerdwin. You owe no apology."

She nodded in gratitude and looked again at Airin. "When Robert commands you to wed, you will have no choice. It will matter not that the man is a stranger or that he beats his dogs. The land he gains will insure his allegiance. Nothing else will matter."

Airin buried her face in her father's neck. "You will recover."

"Wed," he repeated. She did not immediately answer and he added in a raspy whisper, "Lass."

The endearment tore at her heart and she nodded into his neck. "Aye, my lord."

He released her.

Deryll stood. "Cerdwin, have we a priest?"

"Aye. Father Triston. He is half an hour's ride."

"Call for him."

Airin lifted her head. "Wait." She started to push to her feet, but Deryll grasped her hand and pulled her upright.

She stared at him, for the first time in her life, uncertain of what lay ahead. He met her gaze unflinchingly as if he understood her need to force sense into the situation being thrust upon her. She broke the stare. To lose a father and gain a husband in a single hour was more than she could bear. How could she expect joy at such a cost?

"My lady," Cerdwin said.

Airin startled from her thoughts. "What?"

The maid stood at the door, a question written on her face.

The fire crackled, reminding her of her earlier thought to replenish the wood. "Forgive me. I—"

"You should rest, my lady," Deryll said. "Cerdwin and I can make the necessary preparations."

She shook her head. "Nay. I mean, the contract."

Deryll's brow furrowed.

"We have no marriage contract," she said.

"Airin," her father rasped.

She turned.

"Do not wait," he whispered. "Wed now."

"Now?"

"Hand-fasting," he said.

"But the contract."

"Signed."

"What?" She looked helplessly at Deryll.

"We signed the contract the eve I arrived."

Airin stared. "Signed?"

"Aye, my lady."

She frowned. "My signature is all that is required."

"Aye, my lady."

"What a fool I've been," she murmured. When he did not reply, she lifted a brow. "No *aye, my lady?*"

"Nay, my lady."

"Produce this contract," she said.

"My chest," her father whispered.

Airin's heart jumped into her throat. "Cerdwin, quick! We must see to the wound."

Deryll grasped her shoulders. "Nay—"

"Nay?!" she shrieked. "You would have him die? And why not? You have what you will." She beat at his chest.

"Airin," Deryll said.

"Bastard! I will give you nothing." She beat harder.

"Airin!" Cerdwin seized her arm, yanked her from Deryll's grasp, and slapped her.

Airin's hand flew to her stinging cheek. She stared at her old nursemaid. Never in twenty years had Cerdwin lifted even a finger against her. Fury blurred reason.

"How dare you?"

"Cease," Cerdwin snapped. "Your father did not mean *his* chest." She pounded on her own chest. "He meant, the chest in his bedchamber."

Airin gasped. "By the saints." She seized Cerdwin's hands. "Forgive me." She brought the nursemaid's hands to her lips. "I am a fool."

"Aye," Cerdwin agreed. "But 'tis not me you have wounded."

Airin nodded. She released Cerdwin and dropped her gaze, unable to look at Deryll.

With a finger under her chin, he tilted her face up. "I would prefer to see my betrothed's face as she makes her vows."

She wanted desperately to look anywhere but into his eyes, see anything but him, be anywhere he was not. Then she remembered her father. No daughter of Douglas Keith slinked from a battlefield. She gave a single nod. Deryll released her, then bent on one knee and tore a strip from the plaide covering her father.

He rose. "Cerdwin, stand with us and be witness along with Lord Arbothnott." The maid moved closer and Deryll clasped Airin's hand, then looked in her eyes. "I will honor and care for you. Never shall I break this bond."

"I will honor you," she replied. "Never shall I break this bond."

Deryll draped the strip of plaide over their hands.

A tremor tilted the axis of her belly as she said in unison with Deryll and Cerdwin, "So the first binding is made."

"I will share your pain and seek to ease it," he said.

"I will share your pain and seek to ease it," she repeated,

She watched Deryll's hand as he grasped an end of the plaide and wound it around their hands.

Her belly shifted another notch as they repeated in unison, "And so the binding is made."

Deryll caught and held her gaze. "I will share your burdens."

His voice somehow seemed deeper, with a quality she couldn't quite define. "I will share your burdens," she repeated.

Deryll, again, wound the plaide around their hands.

"And so the binding is made," they chanted, her belly pitching with each word.

"I will share your joy," he said.

"I will share your joy."

He wound the plaide a final time.

"And so the binding is made."

Cerdwin tied the two ends, then let them drop.

Deryll held her gaze. "As our hands are bound, so our lives and spirits are joined."

The brooch shifted between her breasts. Her belly heaved, and the room went black.

* * * *

Airin woke with a gasp and bolted upright. She looked wildly about, her gaze jumping to the mantle clock—a gift from the mother she never knew—then the embroidered picture hanging on the wall beside the hearth, and the sun dial near her window. Her breathing slowed. She was home—and her father lay dying. She threw back the covers and jumped from bed as Cerdwin entered.

"Airin," she called sharply.

Airin took a step toward her. "My father."

"Is resting. There is naught you can do for him. Return to bed."

"How is he?"

The maid's eyes softened. She set the blanket she carried on the foot of the bed and came to Airin's side. "I speak the truth." She took Airin's hand in hers. "He is resting."

"Will he live?"

"Only God can say."

"Has he lost more blood?"

"Nay. The bleeding has ceased."

Airin closed her eyes and sent up a prayer of thanks.

"Now, back to bed with ye," Cerdwin said. "Your father would not be pleased to learn you are taxing yourself. Neither will your husband, for that matter."

"Husband—" The wedding ceremony returned in a rush. Airin eased back onto the bed. "'Twas no dream."

Cerdwin laughed. "You never cared for accepting something you didn't like." Her expression sobered and she opened the blanket to reveal a document. She extended it to Airin and opened her mouth, but Airin cut her off. "The wedding contract."

"Aye," the maid replied.

Airin took the document, and Cerdwin fetched the quill and ink blotter from the small desk beside the armoire. She dipped the quill in the ink, then handed it to Airin. Airin signed her name. The maid took the quill, placed it in the blotter, then set it on the side table. She reached for the contract, but Airin waved her off and began reading.

All the land bordering the south was now Deryll's. The hectares that surrounded them to the west and butted the loch were his. He owned everything, she realized, except the castle. *The first male born will receive*—Airin thrust the contract toward Cerdwin.

"I am finished."

The maid regarded her, but took the document without comment.

"Where is Sir Deryll?" Airin asked.

"Your husband is with Gewain."

"They have learned something?"

"I know not," the maid replied

Airin glanced at the sundial. Not yet noon. She had slept nearly an hour. She wanted to curl up in the bed, then shake herself awake to discover she'd suffered a nightmare.

She stood. "I am going to my father."

"Airin." Cerdwin's brow creased in worry.

Airin smiled softly. "Dear Cerdwin. You have served me well all these years. You have reared no fool. Do not fear. I am well. It is my father I would have you care for now." She grasped the maid's hand. "There is no one I trust more than you."

Cerdwin blushed. Airin hugged her, then started to turn. She halted at sight of a rose petal stuck to Cerdwin's apron. She plucked it from the cloth. "What is this?"

"The spices I am preparing for the wedding bed."

"Wedding bed?" Airin's gaze flicked to the bed.

"Aye." Cerdwin gave her a light elbow jab. "Be sweet when Sir Deryll comes to you. He is no fool, but ye need not throw the truth in his face."

Airin frowned. "What—"

"I have something for ye." Cerdwin stepped to the chest and opened it. She withdrew a small package wrapped in plain white cloth and tied with an ivory ribbon. She smiled shyly. "I saved this since ye were a girl."

Airin took the package, placed it on the bed, then carefully untied the ribbon. She laid it on the night table, unwrapped the cloth, then paused at sight of the snow-white flax fabric.

"Go on," Cerdwin urged.

Airin grasped the corners of the fabric and lifted it to reveal a shift. The tightly knit fabric was perfect. Blue embroidered flowers decorated the collar. "Cerdwin," she breathed, "'tis beautiful."

"If anyone contests the marriage," Cerdwin said, "they will find everything in order, all the way down to the consummation before your father's death."

Airin looked up. "You said he was well."

"I said he was resting. There is no change. If he lives, it will be by God's grace."

Airin stared at her in shock. "How can I perform wifely duties while my father lay dying?"

The maid shrugged. "That depends on Sir Deryll. If ye are not cooperative, he can do the deed in minutes."

"I look forward to tonight with great anticipation," Airin said in a voice dripping with honey.

Cerdwin raised a brow. "Tonight? You will not wait until nightfall." She ran a critical eye down Airin's body, then sniffed. "Thank God ye do not smell."

"Cerdwin!"

"Och. Cease your bawling and listen. You love your father?"

"Of course."

She pinned Airin with a serious appraisal. "No man should carry his daughter into old age. Do your duty. Be a good daughter *and* wife."

Airin felt as if she would cry.

"Come now," Cerdwin said, "You have wanted children since ye were a bairn."

"Children?" She handed Cerdwin the night shift and left.

CHAPTER SIX

At sight of Nathan guarding her father's door, Airin backed down a step on the stairway. Her heart pounded. Deryll feared for her father's life while he lay in his own bed? Her heart sank. Their safety—her safety—was truly gone. Live or die, her father had insured she now survived at the whim of another man.

She remembered the young man Deryll had been. How had that chivalrous boy become the infamous Scarlet Knight, a man who had decimated an English village that gave a fugitive refuge? That same bloodthirsty knight had posted a guard at her father's door when it would have behooved him to let her father die.

With a deep breath, she took the last stair and strode down the hall to her father's room. She nodded to Nathan as she opened the door and slipped inside. Airin paused. Douglas lay on his belly, face toward the door, eyes closed. The rise and fall of the covers was slight, but his breathing was steady. A low fire burned in the hearth. She crossed to the bed and lifted the covers. The bandage was fresh. Cerdwin was the finest nurse in the northern highlands. Airin returned to the door and opened it.

"Nathan," she said, "fetch Cerdwin from my room. If she is not there, find her."

He hesitated.

"Do not worry. I will bolt the door and not open it until you return."

"Aye," he replied, and waited.

She closed the door, shoved the bolt into place, then turned her attention to the fire. When she had finished and Nathan had not returned, she knelt at her father's side and rested her head beside him. His steady breathing recalled a childhood memory of lying in his arms as the rise and fall of his broad chest lulled her to sleep.

She laughed softly. He used to tell Madeline and her that all children were born without guile. Fathers were the ones who taught them how to break God's law. Airin learned long ago her father lived as a pearl among swine. Why would such a man wed her to a killer? He insisted the stories about Deryll were rumors. She stroked his hair. Dark and wavy, like Deryll's, but peppered with silver. Her father was idealistic, but not stupid.

She buried her face in the blankets, afraid the tears she could not contain would wake him. If only she could—A door scraped against stone. Airin leapt to her feet to see the hidden door in the corner of the room being forced open. She jammed her hand beneath her father's mattress, located the dagger hidden there, then raced around the bed, slamming into the wall just as the door opened. As the intruder emerged from the secret passageway, she slashed downward before recognizing the broad shoulder.

Airin cried out as Deryll whirled, his forearm deflecting her blow. Bone jarring pain shot up her arm, and the dagger flew from her hand and hit the floor, skittering to the front door. He shoved her against the wall and stared, eyes blazing. Her heart pounded against her ribs as if it would explode.

"By God," she breathed, "what were you thinking?"

"Me?" He gave her a hard shake.

She stared, dumbfounded, then understood that he did not realize she hadn't recognized him before she struck. Stirrings of hysterical laughter gurgled in her belly. She pressed her lips together and gave her head a jerky shake. Deryll's eyes narrowed and her belly tightened with restrained laughter. By the saints, he would murder her—and she would not blame him! It was the strain of the day's events, she knew, but try as she might, she could not contain herself.

Deryll gave her another hard shake. "Has one murder given you a taste for blood, Lady?"

She shook her head, afraid to speak. His expression darkened.

"I—" she managed between gasps. "I, oh," she sputtered, "'tis-tis too ri-ridic-u-lous. G-God for-give me."

Deryll glanced at the dagger.

"Deryll," she got out through laughter, "'tis you—'tis you—"

He released her.

She doubled over. "I-I nearly k-killed you."

He gave her a recriminating look. "Not nearly. But it would have been a nasty wound."

"I thought you were an intru-der." She slapped her leg. "Y-you are a fool snea-king up on me."

Deryll stared at her.

She pointed at him. "'Tis yo-you-your fault."

"By God, Airin, you will send me to the grave before I have time to deserve it."

She laughed harder. "Never f-f-fear. You alrea-dy deserve it."

He stared for another instant, then threw back his head and laughed. Airin slid to the floor with a plop. He leapt to catch her, but she waved him off. He squatted beside her and waited until she quieted. She took a deep breath and leaned her head against the wall.

"How is your arm?" he asked.

She bent, then straightened it. "I feel no pain."

"You will."

Airin shrugged. "That will teach you not to sn—" she pursed her lips against another fit of laughter, then said with slow deliberation, "sneak up on me."

"I see your tomboyish ways stand you in good stead."

She knit her brow.

"The knife," he explained.

She rolled her eyes. "A woman learns how to defend herself and she is mannish." She regarded him. "What were you doing in the passageway?"

"I was with Cerdwin when Nathan arrived. When he informed us you were alone with your father, she remembered this passageway. I should have thought of it after you entered my bedchamber in the same fashion."

She caught the censorious note in his voice and said, "Indeed, 'tis all my doing."

"I wanted to see this passageway." His brows furrowed. "I will post a guard inside the room."

Dread snuffed out the last of her amusement. "Have you learned anything of the attacker?"

"He used a dagger much like yours."

She frowned. "'Tis an uncommon weapon for a man."

Deryll nodded.

"What was my father doing in the stables? He does not spend a great deal of time there. I would expect him to be with Gewain."

"He received a note to meet someone."

Airin straightened. "A note? Where is this note?"

"Gewain has it."

"You gave it to that fool?"

"Beware, Airin. Gewain is no fool."

"He is incompetent."

"Competent enough to hang you. Who has a grudge against your father?"

She gave a short laugh. "Besides Gewain?"

"The would-be murderer chose his time well," Deryll murmured. "Copying the weapon you used to murder Jason may well be his freedom."

"Me? You play your hand well, sir."

He shook his head impatiently. "Cease fretting. I do not blame you for killing him."

Airin tried to rise and tripped on her skirt.

Deryll grasped her arm.

"Release me," she ordered.

He did, and she scrambled to her feet. Airin poked his chest. "More and more, I wish I had killed him. Bah! This is your way of throwing me off your scent."

"Throw you off my scent?"

"Do not think to fool me," she snapped.

He lifted a hand, palm out. "Never. But, pray explain why I killed him."

"For the cursed brooch."

"But I had a marriage contract," he said as if musing out loud.

"Without my signature."

"Why did I simply not steal the brooch?"

She shot him a sour look. "I married you as my father commanded. Marriage does not mean I have altered my opinion."

"But I was in the great hall—"

"Ohhhh! Yes, yes. I know."

"If I lose you to the gallows," he went on as if not having heard her, "I have no wife."

"Nay—only my lands and property to console you."

"Land and property will not warm my bed." His eyes darkened and her belly did a flip.

Airin yanked the chain from within her dress and thrust it toward him, the brooch swaying. "The brooch is not real."

He did not move.

"By the saints, you were never this stubborn as a boy," she muttered

Deryll laughed. "Who is this boy you speak of? *I* am no different today than I was then."

"This-brooch-is-not-real." She flipped it over and shoved it toward him.

He squinted at it, then looked at her. "What have you done to the scratch?"

The Pendulum
by Tarah Scott

Airin turned the back toward herself and looked closely.
She froze at sight of the nearly smooth scratch.

CHAPTER SEVEN

A rap sounded on the door. Airin jumped as Cerdwin called, "'Tis me."

Deryll strode to the door and opened it.

Cerdwin paused in the doorway, her gaze on the secret passageway, then she looked at Deryll. He shrugged and she hurried to Douglas. "Preparations for the wedding feast are nearly completed," she said.

"Wedding feast," Airin repeated.

"Aye." She inspected the bandage. "Father Tristen will not arrive today. He is north performing another marriage."

"No matter," Deryll said. "He can perform the religious ceremony when he returns."

"A wedding feast..." Airin paused. "'Tis unseemly with my father on his death bed."

Cerdwin laughed. "Ye always had a flair for the dramatics. The ceremony was private. The *marriage* is public. A celebration insures everyone witnesses the consummation."

Airin's gaze riveted onto Deryll.

Amusement lit his eyes. "Will you so much mind the witnesses?" he asked.

Airin gaped, then jumped at Cerdwin's, "*Sir Deryll*."

He looked at her. "'Twas what you said."

The maid clucked. "You know full well I meant they will know the consummation will follow the celebration."

Airin dropped her gaze to the brooch. What had happened to the scratch? "Cerdwin," she began and looked up.

Deryll's attention fixed on something behind her.

She turned and saw Perry in the doorway. He stared at Deryll. "Perry," she said. The minstrel did not answer. "Perry."

Perry's gaze jerked onto her. His eyes were red-rimmed. Guilt stabbed at her. She had never welcomed the young man's attentions, but neither had she asked him to leave. When he arrived at Huntley Castle a year and a half ago, his child-like affection was immediately apparent.

"You are truly married?" he asked.

A tremor rippled through Airin, but she gave a soft smile. "Aye."

He shook his head stubbornly. "Ye did not wish to wed. You said so."

"Sir Deryll fulfilled the betrothal condition."

The minstrel studied her. "If you are truly wed, why call for a priest?"

His tone was harsh. Airin had never comprehended his moods. Artists and musicians bore fragile temperaments, but she had not thought a man could be overly sensitive. "My father would see me married in the church," she replied. "'Tis fitting."

His eyes widened. "You married outside the church?"

"Nay. We—"

"What brought you here, minstrel?" Deryll cut in.

Perry's eyes flashed annoyance, then he smiled and his countenance smoothed. "They sent me from the kitchen. The preparations are ready."

"We will be down directly," Deryll said with a curt nod.

Perry bowed, then disappeared down the hallway.

"Strange little man," Deryll muttered.

Airin whirled. "You were rude to me, as well as Perry."

"Indeed?" her husband asked.

She scowled. "I do not care for being patronized."

"You were about to reveal personal concerns to a stranger."

"Perry is no stranger." She gave a humorless laugh. "And what personal concerns would that be—the marriage everyone knows was performed in this room before Cerdwin and an unconscious man?"

Deryll crossed his arms. "You were about to reveal a desire to secure the marriage's authenticity with Father Tristen's blessing."

She pursed her lips. He was right. "I warn you," she said, "do not interfere in my concerns."

"Lady, you are my concern." He closed the two paces between them, pulled her to him and kissed her hard. He released her just as abruptly and strode to the door. "I shall be downstairs. Cerdwin, when you finish, bring my wife to the great hall."

Airin stared open mouthed as he disappeared down the hallway. She turned to Cerdwin, but was cut off when the nursemaid said, "What possesses you? You like your mischief, but you are a more reasonable girl than this—usually. Now," she straightened the covers over Douglas' back, "we are going to the great hall. Walk proud. Ye do no' want your father's people thinking the marriage he arranged is a bad one."

Cerdwin straightened and looked Airin in the eye. "If your father does not live, these people will be Deryll's *and* yours. Do ye plan on failing them?"

"I know my duty," Airin replied stiffly.

"Good. Dinna forget it now, or when Sir Deryll closes the door to your bedchamber."

* * * *

To Airin's surprise, Perry was not present with the other musicians in the great hall. She scanned the crowd, but did not find him there, either.

Deryll wasted no time in filling her glass and making a toast to the bride. Both her father's and Deryll's men drained their glasses, then drank to their continued marriage, future children and wedding night. Deryll refilled her glass with each salute.

When he reached for the mead a fourth time, she looked at him and said, "If you want a conscious bride, stop filling me with liquor."

He paused, the jar poised over her glass, and grinned. "You cannot handle your liquor, wife?"

She hiccupped. "I am half your weight."

"And I have drunk more than double your portion."

"'Tis you who will be unconscious."

He filled her glass. "Never fear, I will remain wide awake. I swear." He winked.

Airin blinked. Had the Scarlet Knight actually winked at her? She jammed her eyes shut and gave her head a hard shake. What sort of dream had she stumbled into? The kind

where up was down and down was ... still not up. Her fingers unconsciously sought and found the chain that held the brooch around her neck. She should have taken that ride to the lock. If she had tossed the brooch in, mayhap the curse would have remained at the bottom of the loch with it. She reached for the wine. The room swayed, and she decided against the mead. What she needed was a respite. Airin shoved to her feet and the room went quiet.

"Is something amiss?" Deryll asked.

She glanced around the great hall. "Ask me tomorrow."

The room jumped to life with raucous laughter. Deryll grinned. "Do you need—"

She swayed and he grabbed her arm. She shook him off. "I am going to my bedchamber."

"Our bedchamber," he corrected.

Airin thought for a moment. "We are going to sleep in my bedchamber?"

"Eventually," he replied.

She frowned. "I want to sleep now. I will do that. You do whatever you like."

"I would *like* to sleep with you."

Airin shook her head. "Nay." She turned.

Deryll pushed to his feet and threw her over his shoulder. The room swam. Laughter rang around her as he strode toward the stairs, her stomach lurching with each long stride he took.

"Be-wa-re," she said, the word coming out in jerky syllables. "You may not like the consequences of shaking me."

He pulled her into his arms so that he carried her. Airin buried her face in his chest. His shirt smelled of fresh soap. He had been allowed at least a clean shirt. She nuzzled him. His jaw brushed the top of her head and she realized he was looking at her. She tilted her head back and stared at him.

"Beware," he said, taking the stairs two at a time. "We may not get past the salon if you keep rubbing me in that fashion."

Airin frowned. "Rubbing you?" She looked at his chest and nuzzled him with her nose. He groaned. She looked up again. "You mean that?"

"By God, Airin, you toy with me. Is this what I can expect?"

She sighed and rested her head on his chest. "You do have a warm chest and my cold is nose." She giggled. "My *nose* is cold."

They arrived at her room. Deryll opened the door, then stopped short. Airin looked up and saw Cerdwin lighting a candle on the bedside table. A fire crackled in the hearth, new sheets and fresh plaide covered the bed, and rose petals littered the blanket.

"Cerdwin, 'tis beautiful." Airin shoved at Deryll and he set her feet on the floor. She started forward, swayed, but righted herself and continued to the maid's side. Airin hugged her. "You should not tax yourself so."

"I have waited twenty years for this day," Cerdwin said. "I will do as I please." She looked at Deryll. "Sir Deryll, a moment."

He bowed, then backed from the room, closing the door behind him.

"Now," the maid said, "make haste. We canna' keep your new husband waiting. Get out of that dress and into this shift." She turned Airin around, then grasped her skirt and tugged it over her head. She tossed the dress on the bed, then pulled the chemise over her head. The brooch hung between Airin's breasts as if a last piece of armor. Cerdwin ran a critical eye down her body. "When was the last time ye bathed?"

Airin wrinkled her nose. "I do not smell."

"Nay," Cerdwin agreed, "but you do have some grime." She hurried to the table beside the wardrobe where a bowl and pitcher of water sat alongside fresh washcloths. She dipped a cloth in water. "Now," she wrung out the cloth, then turned back to Airin, "just a little on your face and arms."

Airin complied and closed her eyes while Cerdwin cleaned her face, then arms. The maid tossed the cloth aside and slipped the shift over Airin's head. She tugged Airin to her feet and the fabric fell to her calves.

"A little rose water." The old woman retrieved a bottle from the chest at the foot of the bed. She dabbed a little of its contents behind Airin's ears, then pulled the shift's collar forward and sprinkled a few drops between her breasts just above the brooch.

Airin shook herself.

Cerdwin turned her around, then began to loosen her braid.

"Nay," Airin protested. "'Tis early, I will only have to plait it again later."

"Hush," Cerdwin commanded, and finished freeing her hair of the braid. She exchanged the rose water for a brush, then brushed through Airin's long tresses. The maid stepped back and ran a critical eye over her. "You will do well." She drew back the sheets and Airin climbed in. Sweet rose scent wafted up around her as Cerdwin pulled the sheet and blanket to her waist. Cerdwin glanced around as if expecting someone to leap from some obscure hiding place, then reached into her apron pocket and produced a small, silver vial. "Here." She pressed the vial into Airin's hand. "Keep this under your pillow for the right moment."

Airin squinted at the vial. "The right moment?"

"'Tis tricky business, but at that moment a man is not quite in his right mind. Ye have only two or three drops, so ye must be sure to get it in *about* the right place."

Airin frowned. "The right place?"

Cerdwin touched the middle of the bed. "You should be about here."

Airin leaned forward, peering at the spot, then looked again at the vial.

"Sir Deryll is no fool," the old woman said. "He knows the way of things, but this will keep the servants and men from talking."

Airin stared at her. "What is this?" She thrust the vial at Cerdwin.

"Dinna' fash yourself. I sneaked the blood from the hen slaughtered for the evening meal."

"Chicken blood?"

Cerdwin frowned. "You didn't expect pig's blood?"

Airin's cheeks flamed. "You mistake me. 'Tis unnecessary."

"Stop your blustering. You need not pretend with me. A woman of twenty years is not expected to come to the marriage bed a maiden. Put the vial under the pillow." She glanced at the door. "Sir Deryll may return any moment."

Airin didn't move.

"Go on," the maid urged.

Airin slid the vial beneath her pillow. Her finger came in contact with another small, smooth surface. She paused.

"Is something amiss?" Cerdwin demanded.

Airin ran a finger along the item. *Another* vial. She shook her head.

The maid headed for the door. Airin started to pull the other vial out, then froze when Cerdwin turned. Tears moistened her eyes. "You are a grown woman. Soon you will have babes of your own. I had begun to despair of seeing this day."

Before Airin could respond, she turned and was out the door. Airin slid the two vials out from beneath the pillow. The second vial was clay.

Cook had slaughtered chickens for dinner.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Airin slid the vials beneath the feather mattress and frame, then grasped the chain around her neck and pulled out the brooch. She turned it over and stared at the back. Her vision clouded. She should not have drunk so much wine. She ran a finger over the barely visible scratch. Deryll's surprise when he saw the brooch earlier still puzzled her. He had not filed the scratch as she had thought. He must be lying. But why? Her mind wandered back to the great hall when Deryll was filling her cup and watching her.

Drowsiness crept through her. She lowered her hands onto her belly. She closed her eyes, surprised at her calm, how little she feared what lay ahead. After Madeline married, Airin had quizzed her about the marriage bed. Her sister told how a man grew in size before coupling, but this she knew from watching livestock.

Airin flushed at the memory of a coupling she and Madeline observed between a mare and stallion. Women, especially she and Madeline, were not allowed to watch, but the command to stay away only fueled their curiosity. They hid in an empty stall across and down from the largest breeding stall. When the men assembled, the stallion was led into the stall, then the mare. She and Madeline watched through the open door as the stallion neighed in a voice that seemed more a scream, then grabbed the mare's mane between his teeth and mounted her.

Airin had clamped a hand over Madeline's mouth with one hand, and her own with the other, when the mare gave a piercing cry of pleasure. They had stared, unable to move, as he drove himself into her over and over. In a way, Cerdwin had been right. Airin had not shared her body with a man, but she was no innocent.

The door opened, and Airin's eyes snapped open. Deryll stood in the doorway.

He gave her a curious look as he softly closed the door. "How is your head?"

"My head?"

"You drank much wine," he reminded her.

"I am fine." Though, in truth, she wasn't. While in quiet contemplation she was relaxed, now, her head throbbed and a loud rushing in her ears pulsed with each heartbeat.

"Then I need not offer you more wine."

She grimaced. "Nay."

A corner of his mouth twitched. Airin slipped the brooch beneath her shift as he walked to the fire and squatted in front of it. He picked up the poker leaning against the hearth and began stirring the embers. She frowned. What was he doing? He had insisted that no time could be lost in authenticating the marriage, yet, now he dallied with the fire. She thought of the second vial. Had he placed it under her pillow? Mayhap he had secured the blood in order to create the illusion he had consummated the union—transaction, she corrected.

Deryll rose abruptly, startling her. His back to her, he grabbed his shirt collar and pulled the shirt over his head.

Airin's mouth went dry at sight of his powerfully built shoulders and back. He was beautiful. Hard muscle moved beneath dark skin. She heard the light clink of metal and realized he was loosening the belt on his plaide. The plaide dropped to the floor as he tossed the belt onto the chair. Heat tinged her cheeks at sight of his tight, round buttocks gleaming in the firelight. He turned. Her eyes dropped to his groin. His jutting shaft pulsed as if in salute.

Airin jerked her gaze to his face. "I have done nothing!"

He threw back his head and laughed, then started toward the bed. She stared as he strode to her. She tensed when he lifted the covers and slid in beside her. He surprised her by turning on his side and staring at her.

"Have I displeased you?" she asked.

"Nay."

His gaze dropped to her mouth and the warmth that had started in her cheeks spread lower. He reached out and brushed back her hair, then stroked her cheek. His fingers trailed her jaw and along her neck to her shoulder. He slid his hand around her back and dragged her closer.

"Are you afraid?" he asked.

She snorted derisively though she knew her rapid heartbeat must betray her. He traced circles on her back and goose bumps raced down her arms. What was wrong with him? Cerdwin had said he could finish the deed in minutes. It seemed he had barely started. He shifted and she startled before realizing he only meant to kiss her. He paused, his mouth an inch from hers.

"Not afraid?" he asked.

She stuck out her chin a fraction. "Nay."

His dark gaze pierced her as he slid his hand down her back to her buttocks. He gently squeezed, then rubbed his hard length against her. Airin gave a startled cry, and he kissed her. Instinctively, she flattened her palms against his chest to shove him away, but paused when his tongue slid past her lips. Dizziness swept through her. His tongue slid over and around hers. Her nipples hardened. She threaded her fingers through the hair on his chest, kneading the muscles.

A low sound rumbled deep within him. He broke the kiss and dipped his head to her breast. She gasped as his lips latching onto a nipple and he suckled through the fabric. Pleasure shot through to the core between her legs. His hand moved to her hip and he pulled up the shift. She jumped when his warm fingers slipped between her clasped thighs.

Deryll moved from her breast to her ear. "Do not fear, love," he murmured, and gently parted her legs.

He ran his tongue along her ear. Airin shivered. He slid a flattened palm up her hip and along her belly. She closed her eyes, amazed by a sudden need to feel his broad hands everywhere. He moved lower. She tensed, torn between a desire and fear. She had wanted men, had been kissed, had felt an ache, but not like this.

Deryll continued, slowly, gently, until he reached the blonde curls below. Warm fingers cupped her, then slipped between the folds. Her eyes shot open. Madeline had never spoken of this! What sort of depraved act was Deryll about to

perform on her? His thumb slipped upward an inch and gently rolled her nub.

"Deryll," she cried.

"Aye, love,?"

He gently flicked as he bent his head again and took a nipple in his mouth. Airin gasped. The brooch shifted, settling onto the curve her breast beside Deryll's mouth. The feel of his hands on the sensitive place between her legs made her wonder what his mouth would feel like against her bare breast without the barrier of the shift. Intense pleasure shot from her breast to the spot he caressed. He withdrew his fingers and began rubbing her pleasure point. She arched, was shocked by her response, but could not stop. His caresses intensified. He rubbed harder, building to a rhythm her body seemed to understand. She needed this—needed him—and pressed into his hand

"So sweet," he whispered.

She felt the dampness between her legs. He ceased the torture and slipped a finger inside her. She gave a small cry of protest, but he pulled the finger out and slid it across the nub, moistening her with her own wetness. His fingers rubbed and flicked, slow then fast, until she thought she would go out of her mind.

"You are mine," he whispered and unexpectedly applied more pressure.

Pleasure burst from between her legs. She shuddered and cried out. Deryll rolled onto her, his shaft inside her before she realized it. Airin cried out again, pain and pleasure mixed. She threw her arms around him as he drove into her. She

was suddenly torn between awe and uncertainty. His large frame should have squashed her, his narrow hips, large compared to hers, fit easily between her slender legs. He seemed to fill every part of her. His thrusts quickened. His arms tightened around her as he buried his face in her neck, back arched.

"Airin," he whispered in a rasp.

He gave a final thrust, groaned deep, then collapsed on top of her.

* * * *

Airin stretched in the warm cocoon of her bedding. She blinked against bright sunlight streaming through the window, then focused on the sundial. Just after two in the afternoon—

Afternoon? She sat up. The blanket slipped down and cool air washed over her. She pulled the blanket back up. Why had she slept—Recollection of Deryll's warm hands on her body flooded her memory. She swung her gaze onto the empty depression beside her, then scanned the room. Where had he gone? Then she realized the day was yet young and he would have much business, not the least of which, was her father.

She threw back the covers and started to scoot off the bed, but paused, the feel of Deryll between her legs still fresh in her mind. God help her, she liked the warmth of his dark skin against hers, the way his muscles pressed into her softer flesh, the intimacy of his shaft inside her, exciting her. A tremor rippled through her. What would he think of how she already ached for him? He would not be impressed. A man

such as the Scarlet Knight had bedded many women. She would not be the last.

Ten minutes later, Airin stood at her father's door. She did not recognize the man standing guard. So, the son-in-law of Douglas Keith had already taken command of his lord's castle. She nodded to the man and entered. Deryll and Cerdwin looked up. Airin's eyes met Deryll's and her cheeks flamed. She wanted to go to him, gently kiss his lips, lay her head on his shoulder and feel his warmth once more before attending to her father, but his impassive gaze held no invitation, no memory of what had just passed between them.

She strode to her father. "How does he fare?"

"He has lost no more blood." Cerdwin covered him. She moved aside and Airin sat beside him.

"He is still so pale," she murmured.

"Aye," the old woman agreed.

The door opened and the guard entered. "A minstrel bears a message for my lady." He stepped aside and Airin saw Perry standing outside the room.

"What message?" Deryll demanded.

Perry stepped forward and bowed to Airin. "You have a visitor in the woman's solar, my lady."

"A visitor?" Deryll asked.

Perry looked at Deryll as if just noticing him. "Lady Hayes."

"Lady Bernadette?" Airin asked.

"Aye," Perry replied.

Airin remembered Deryll's departure eight years ago, when he kissed Bernadette long and hard in farewell. Airin had wished it was her he kissed, but it had not been so. "You are

mistaken," she replied stiffly. "Lady Hayes comes to greet Sir Deryll."

"What?" her husband said.

"You cannot have forgotten Bernadette *Kincaid*."

Deryll frowned.

By the saints, the man didn't remember his former lover. "You gave her a farewell no woman could forget." He looked lost, and Airin added in frustration, "The day you left St. Bunes."

His frown deepened, then recollection crept over his features. "Duncan Kincaid's daughter?"

"Aye."

"What business would she have with me?" Before she could answer, he added, "Is something amiss, Airin?"

She fiddled with the blankets covering her father. "Nay."

From the corner of her eye she saw him cast a questioning glance in Cerdwin's direction, then he addressed Airin, "Are you not going to attend to your guest?"

"As I have said, Perry is mistaken. Bernadette has not once come calling. She is here to see you."

Deryll strode to Airin. She realized his intent a second too late, and grasped her arm, pulling her to her feet. She met his stare.

"Mayhap Lady Kincaid has come to offer her congratulations," he said with a mock pleasantry that sent a shiver down her back. He started for the door.

Airin started to yank free, but caught sight of the anger on Perry's face. She should not have said anything in front of the young man. "I will go," she said to Deryll.

"Aye," he said, and pushed past Perry and the guard out into the hall.

"There is no need to manhandle me," she whispered as he dragged her down the hall.

They reached the stairs leading to the third floor and he took them two at a time. She stumbled and he yanked her to her feet and continued to the top.

"What are you doing?" she demanded. "Just because my father lies dying, I am not without protection."

Deryll swung her around to face him. "*I* am your protection."

"I will not be mistreated."

"By God, Airin, 'tis I who need protection from you."

She narrowed her eyes. "You may have inherited my father's lands—"

"Your father is alive," he replied. "I own nothing."

Airin lifted her chin. "I am under no illusions as to why you wed me."

"Indeed?" he replied in a testy voice. "I am beginning to wonder why I did." His eyes darkened. "An hour ago, you did not seem to mind being wed to me. Is that how things will be, Airin? Will you only be happy when I bed you?"

She raised a hand to slap him, but he grabbed her arm and shoved her against the wall. "I can accommodate."

Her cry of protest was cut short when his mouth covered hers. He grabbed her buttocks and yanked her against his hard shaft. How was it that he had grown hard again so quickly? She gasped at the pleasure that rammed through

her. Deryll thrust his tongue into her mouth, mimicking the motion with his hips.

Her head swam. She wanted him to lift her up and bring her down upon him, to take her like a common maid. But that would mean he had been right, that she could only be pleased when he bedded her. Bedded her? This was more. This was claiming her. He buried his face in her neck, thrusting against her, then grinding in a circular motion. She couldn't deny a thrill. But she was no common maid—no wench to be brought to heel by parting her legs.

"Nay!" She shoved at him.

He jerked his head up, eyes glittering. "This is what you want. I—" His body unexpectedly stiffened. His gaze went glassy-eyed. "Airin," he rasped. His grasp tightened on her, then his eyes slid closed and he crumpled.

Airin cried out at sight of Sheriff Gewain, knife in hand. He cuffed her across the mouth, then grabbed her and clamped a hand over her mouth stifling a scream.

Gewain kicked Deryll in the ribs. "Should have married Argyll's daughter," he snarled.

She glanced at the knife as he sheathed it. No blood. She strained to catch a glimpse of Deryll as Gewain turned, and saw no blood. The sheriff had hit him with the hilt. Aye. Gewarin knew that to murder an honored knight was to invite the hangman's noose. Two men appeared from the stairs. Her heart leapt with hope, but she instantly realized her error as the men hurried toward them.

"What has happened?" one whispered once within a few feet of them. Then, before Gewain could reply, "We will deal with him. Go. Await us at the entrance."

Fear coursed through her pounding heart. *Deal with him?* Were they foolish enough to kill Deryll after all?

Gewain gave a curt nod, then dragged her down the hallway toward the fourth level stairs. He meant to descend on the south wing by the servants' hallways. Hope resurfaced. They would pass the women's solar on the fourth floor. Bernadette was there. If she heard a scream, she would—the baroness would be of no aid. Gewain could kill them both with little effort. Airin could not condemn the woman to death. If she but had her dagger, she would slice his bullocks first. He would never again enjoy a woman.

But how did he intend on reaching the servants' entrance without being seen, and what of the guards at the gate? Kidnapping seemed impossible, but Deryll was right, Gewain was no fool. He would not attempt such a crime with no way to escape. They reached the stairs and she kicked his shin with the heel of her shoe. He cursed, and slammed her against the wall. She bounced off the stone and slumped to the floor. Pain shot up her arm. He yanked her to her feet.

"Do that again, *my lady*, and I will disembowel you here, then inform King Robert that Douglas Keith's daughter tried to murder me during her arrest."

"You cannot get away with this," she spat.

"But I can," he replied with a nasty laugh, and slapped her with the back of his hand.

Her head wrenched sideways with such force, it felt as if her head would fly off her body in a ball of pain. She tasted blood. He yanked her back to him, jarring her head with the motion.

He grabbed her chin and forced her to meet his gaze.
"Your father is no longer able to protect you."

Airin stiffened. His eyes narrowed with satisfaction, then he pulled her down the hall. She allowed him to drag her alongside him for several steps, before rage replaced shock.

She spat on his cheek. "Coward," she snarled. "'Tis no wonder King Robert chose my father over you."

Gewain swung to face her as he yanked his knife from its sheath. Airin caught sight of movement behind the sheriff before he abruptly stiffened.

"Bitch," he hissed, and slid to the floor.

CHAPTER NINE

"Perry!" Airin threw her arms around him. "Thank God, thank God." She forced back tears and released him.

He blushed. "Y-you are pleased?"

She seized the hand not gripping the dagger. "Never have I been more pleased to see anyone. But we must go. The sheriff's men could return any moment." She released Perry and glanced at Gewain. Airin grimaced. Even unconscious, the man looked dangerous. She scanned the hall where the men had disappeared down the stairs, then looked back to Perry. "You did not encounter them on your way here?"

"I came down these stairs." He pointed at the stairs beside them.

Airin's heart sank. She wanted to return the way they had come, the straightest way back to her father—and Deryll. Her heart constricted. Had she lost both father and husband in one hour?

"'Twould be better if I had hanged," she murmured.

"My lady!" Perry dropped to a squat beside the sheriff and rolled him over.

"Perry—"

He plunged the dagger into Gewain's heart.

Airin staggered back a pace. The knife had pierced the sheriff's heart—just as it had Jason's.

The minstrel looked up. "He shall *not* hang you."

Perry stood and reached for her. She looked down at his hand, little larger than her own, as he grasped hers.

"You no longer need worry about any of them," he said, and sheathed the bloody knife.

A prickle crawled down her spine. "*Any of them?*"

His mouth parted in surprise. "You are displeased? But you said—" He broke off, his voice shaking.

Airin realized her mistake and reached to stroke the hand that gripped hers. She could not still her trembling hand, but gave a weak smile as she said, "All is well."

Indecision played across his features, then he dropped her hand. "Nay. You are angry."

Airin's heart pounded against her chest. *Run!* Her mind shouted. *Run!* But he would catch her in an instant—and if Gewain's cohorts returned ... "I am afraid," she said. "Surely, you understand."

He frowned in uncertainty. "Is there no pleasing you?"

"Perry—"

"You did not wish to wed." His lips thinned. "Sir Deryll and Lord Bothwell had no right to force you."

Airin started to argue, then realized the error of honesty. "Aye," she agreed. "They wished only to increase their coffers."

The minstrel's expression cleared. "They do not love you as I do."

"You care nothing for my property," she said.

He shook his head. "Nay, my lady. Only you."

Hurry, her mind urged, but she forced calm. "Perry, Gewain's companions will arrive any moment. We must make haste."

He searched her face. "Will you now love me?"

She hesitated. Would he believe a sudden affirmation? "I-I have always called you friend."

"You need not worry," he said in a voice so child like, the oddity repulsed her. "There is no one left to condemn us."

Airin's heart lurched. *Father*. She connected Jason's death to Perry, but she had not made the connection with her father. Perry had killed her father—and Deryll? *There is no one left to condemn us*. Her stomach heaved and she collapsed against the wall.

"My lady!" Perry leapt to catch her.

Blinding white rage burst across her vision. She slapped him. His hand flew to his cheek.

"*Murderer*," she ground out.

He winced and fell back a step.

Airin advanced, tears streaming down her face. She fisted her hands. "I could *never* love a murderer."

Perry's face contorted. "Is that what you told the *Scarlet* Knight when you spread your legs for him? Did you like it when he shoved inside you?"

Airin faltered.

"You arched for him like a mongrel in heat. I told myself you feigned pleasure, that you feared him." The minstrel's eyes blazed. "*But you wanted him*."

Her mind raced. "You-you were watching?"

"I wanted to protect you, to be sure he didn't hurt you." Perry raked a lascivious gaze down her body. "But you wanted his thick, hard manhood."

Revulsion turned to despair. Her knees weakened. She wanted Perry to plunge his dagger into her heart. Would the

endless sleep of death end this nightmare? She remembered her father, the battles he had survived, her sister pushed from a cliff, Deryll, the man who had bedded her with care. Fingers of one hand spread instinctively across her belly. What if God's miracle had begun despite the curse? She touched the chain around her neck with her other hand. How ironic the child would have no father or grandfather to guide him.

Perry's gaze latched onto the action and he shoved her hand aside and yanked the chain from her bodice. His scorching gaze shifted onto her face and he pushed her against the wall.

Airin shoved at him. "Bastard! You robbed me even of seeing Madeline's killer justly convicted." Something flickered in his eyes just before she slammed her knee into his groin.

He groaned, but did not waver as he jammed a shoulder into her breasts, pinning her against the wall. She cried out in pain and horror. She had felt no soft tissue of shaft when she kned him. He was hard for her! Her belly roiled. He would not have her! She shoved him, but he was surprisingly strong

He yanked his knife free. "I loved you!"

"Liar," Airin hissed. "No man kills the woman he loves."

With both hands, she seized the arm gripping the knife and threw her weight forward, shoulder first, into his belly. He grunted, but fell back only two paces. Blood rushed through her ears, deafening her.

"Perry!" a deep voice shouted.

Perry's hold slackened and Airin pulled free. She turned and caught sight of Deryll, sword in hand, rushing toward her

with two other men. Pride surged through her. Here was the Celtic god at his fiercest. She was yanked back by the hair. Pinpoints of pain shot from her skull into her head. Her eyes watered.

Perry swung her to face him. He raised the dagger. Airin jammed her fingers into his eyes. He howled in pain, slashing with the dagger. Pain sliced across her arm. She was grabbed from behind, and shoved sprawling onto the floor behind Deryll. A large hand grabbed her arm, pulling her to her feet as Perry drew back his dagger.

"Deryll!" The cry died in her throat as the knife sank into his thigh.

He yanked it free and leapt forward, driving his sword through Perry's belly. Deryll wrenched the sword free and the minstrel collapsed.

Airin broke from the man's grasp and rushed forward. Deryll seized her arm. She looked up at him and was startled to see fear in his eyes. His gaze locked on the arm that was bleeding.

"I must discover the truth about my sister before 'tis too late," she insisted.

Deryll's confused gaze riveted onto her face and he released her.

She dropped to Perry's side. "My sister. What do you know of her death? Was it you who killed her?"

Perry looked bewildered. He broke into a hard coughing spasm.

"My sister." Airin gripped his shoulders and shook him. "Tell me!"

"I—" He coughed up blood. After several ragged breaths he rasped, "I saw her jump."

"Why did you not tell me?" she demanded.

"I-I wanted to spare you, my-my love."

He reached a shaky hand toward her but paused, his gaze catching on the brooch swaying gently on its chain. He reached for it, but his fingers only grazed the side before his hand fell lifeless on to his belly.

Airin glimpsed a hint of blood on the brooch's edge just before strong arms surrounded her.

* * * *

Airin paused as she knelt beside the chest at the foot of her bed. She lifted the brooch from its wooden box and ran a finger across what remained of the scratch. If it had looked in the beginning as it did now, she would have believed the brooch was Brianna's. Would her great grandmother have approved this forgery? Airin closed the lid, then tucked it beneath blankets and baby gowns in the bottom of her chest.

She laid a hand on the children's gown lying on top of the clothes. It was as if the brooch had begun healing itself, then stopped when she took it off. Her arm, however, would heal. How long before her heart followed suit?

"You do not like my wedding gift?" her husband asked, breaking into her thoughts.

She closed the chest and looked across the bed at him. "Where did you get it?"

He stared at the ceiling and began in a dramatic tone, "'Twas a long, hard journey—"

"Do not jest," she said. "Tell me."

He shifted his gaze back to her. "You might ask your father when he wakes."

"My father?"

"He told me of the quest before making the announcement public. I needed time to commission the brooch." Deryll grinned. "It would not have done for another knight to appear with the real brooch—or another forgery."

"You knights think nothing of forgery," Airin commented.

But he seemed not to hear her. "The silver smith has not claimed his pay," he murmured

"Be sure to pay him well," Airin said.

Deryll's gaze cleared. "You have yet to forgive your sister."

Airin was not surprised at the change of subject.

"You cannot be sure Perry spoke the truth," he added.

But she was sure. She found not one iota of proof against Jason, and Madeline had withdrawn from life long before her death. "If she had but confided in me." Airin lowered her head. "May God have mercy on her. She was good. He must still love her."

"And you, Airin, do you love me?"

The question brought her head up. She arched a brow.

"What knight requires love?"

He stood and crossed to her. Deryll pulled her into his arms as he murmured, "The one who loves you."

His head lowered, and Airin's pulse quickened when his lips met hers in a slow, sweet kiss.

He at last pulled back, and she regarded him. "What did Gewain mean about Argyll's daughter?"

Deryll looked startled.

She caressed the scar on his cheek. "Why did you not marry *her*?"

He hesitated, then shrugged. "I saw you two years ago at the Edinborough fair." He gave her a smile that reminded her of the boy she loved.

Airin smiled back, then kissed him.

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