

The background of the cover is a scenic photograph. It shows a paved path in the foreground, a calm lake in the middle ground, and a dense line of green trees in the background under a clear blue sky.

# For Love or Money

KAREN DUVALL

For Love or Money [The Legacy of the Celtic Brooch 7]  
*by Karen Duvall*

**The Wild Rose Press**

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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 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*

What people are saying about Karen Duvall...

"Karen Duvall's Celtic Brooch is a tantalizing blend of suspense and humor bathed in the golden glow of rediscovered love. I guarantee you'll read it from start to finish without pause."-Alice Sharpe, Harlequin Intrigue author

"With For Love Or Money, Karen Duvall takes readers on a fast-paced adventure full of excitement and romance."

—Cindi Myers, author of Marriage On Her Mind, (Harlequin, October 2007)

"A cool, sexy romance heightened by danger, mystery and a hint of mysticism involving a priceless Scottish heirloom, FOR LOVE OR MONEY pits a feisty redhead against an irresistible, modern-day highlander."—Cassie Miles, author of Navajo Echoes (Harlequin Intrigue, July 2007)

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Dedication

To my husband, Jim Duvall, for his unending patience and support.

## Chapter One

Claire Ballard stared at the envelope in her lap and touched the crisp edges that had yellowed with age. Even the rough handwriting that spelled her name had faded to a milky blue. When had her father written it? Probably not long after he abandoned their family in Scotland for the United States fifteen years ago. For a treasure hunt of all things. And now he was dead.

In the Oregon hotel lobby, the lawyer sitting in the armchair opposite hers waved a hand at the envelope he'd traveled halfway across the U.S. to deliver. "Why don't you open it?" Peabody Henry asked. "Your father thought it important for you to know—"

"I don't care what my father thought," Claire said, her gaze still glued to the letter. His words would just be lies anyway.

Mr. Henry lifted a bushy grey eyebrow and nodded. "Sure. No problem." But he didn't look like he meant it. He scowled and heaved a sigh that would have cracked the rib of a smaller man. The guy was tall and broad-shouldered, his face weathered like a map of more years on the road than she'd lived her entire life. "You take your time, dear," he said. "I'm in no hurry."

She flapped the letter against her palm. Damn her curiosity, but she had to ask. "What does it say?"

The lawyer shifted in his chair, causing the naugahyde to creak. He leaned forward, thick elbows on even thicker knees,



and pinned her with a serious stare. "It's okay to ask me questions about your father."

Claire pushed her back against the cushion behind her, increasing the distance between them. She glanced down at his over-sized feet and noticed one of his laces was untied. "Thanks, but I don't have any questions." Or she wished she didn't. Barely twelve years old when he left, she'd never stopped wondering what had become of him. And whether or not he was okay.

"I was more than your dad's lawyer, you know," Henry confided. "I was his best friend."

She nodded. It was easy to see how this gentle giant might befriend almost anyone, even her deadbeat dad. Henry spoke soft and deep, his kind eyes turning up at the corners when he smiled. Dressed in wrinkled khaki pants, an untucked flannel shirt and wearing an old pair of suede hiking boots, the guy looked more like a homeless transient than a lawyer. At least he was clean. He smelled like juniper trees.

He cleared his throat and slid a manila folder from a scuffed leather portfolio. "I have papers for you to sign."

She frowned. "Dad's life insurance papers?"

"Mm. I've already transferred the funds to your Bank of the Cascades account, but you'll want to move them into something more high yield. That's far too much money to keep in a checking account."

Staring at his untied shoe, she said, "The money should have gone to my mother."

Henry slipped a pen from his breast pocket and offered it to her. "Your father knew you'd take care of her. And your sister."

Claire tightened her grip on the letter and felt the paper tear. "A bit late for that."

"Neither of us knew about the accident."

She shrugged. "Nothing can be done for Celeste, but my mom's still breathing." Not that breathing always meant living, at least not in her mother's case. After the car hit the median and rolled, her mother's injuries had left her in a coma and left her sister without a pulse. The pickled state of Mom's inebriated brain might have been the reason for the wreck in the first place. Or the leaky brake lines. Whichever, the result was the same, and two months later nothing had changed.

Why the hell wouldn't he tie his shoe? She gestured toward his feet. "Mr. Henry, your shoe—"

"I told you to call me Peabody." He smiled that kind-uncle smile again and didn't even look at his shoe. "She's comfortable? Your mother?"

"As comfortable as anyone unconscious could be. She's in a nursing home."

"The money from Ian's policy should take care of all her medical needs from now on."

Claire didn't hide her sigh of relief. She'd taken out a loan with the trailer as collateral to help pay for her mother's care. Selling it was the next step, but then where would she live?

Henry noticed the change in her expression and his smile turned rueful.

"Money doesn't solve everything," she said, her tone biting, but she didn't care. Peabody Henry wasn't her friend. He was some vagabond lawyer who'd taken up with her dad fifteen years earlier to traipse across the U.S. in search of some stupid family treasure. Jewelry. Some kind of pin. Whatever it was, it didn't mean crap to her. Tears burned her eyes as she glared at Mr. Henry, and he jumped when she launched herself from her chair to crouch at his feet.

"What are you doing?"

"Hold still." She grabbed the ends of his shoelaces. "This is driving me nuts." Once his shoes were tied, the knots so tight he'd need scissors to get them undone, Claire returned to her chair. "I signed your papers. Are we done?"

He sighed again, but this time he sounded more relieved than sympathetic. She heard the jingle of his hotel key as he checked his watch. "One last thing. I have a package for you."

For Pete's sake. Now there were gifts? Anything to ease Dad's guilt. Whatever it was would go in the Deschutes River the moment she got close enough to toss it in.

Mr. Henry withdrew a box wrapped in plain brown paper and handed it to her. "I'd really like to see you open this one," he said. "It's what your father came all the way from Scotland to find."

Her face felt suddenly hot. This was it. She shook the box. "Is it that pin thing?"

"That *pin thing* may have cost your father his life." Mr. Henry's eyebrows bunched in a scowl. "He went to the

hospital with food poisoning the same night he told me to give you this."

"Food poisoning isn't criminal, it's accidental.

"I'm not so sure it was an accident."

"Are you saying—?"

"Claire," he said, reaching out to take her hand. "Since the first day I met your father, he told me that when I saw you I was to warn you about the Coyne."

"He wanted you to warn me about money?"

Henry shook his head. "No. The name Coyne, as in the family you knew while growing up in Selkirk."

Claire still wasn't over being homesick for Scotland. She'd loved living there as a child. But Mom was from Oregon, which is why they had moved here after her father ran off. As for the Coyne, there had been several of the brats in her Selkirk neighborhood, all boys and none of them very nice. Well, one wasn't too awful. Tall and clumsy, orange hair, scary pale, bad skin, and about five years older than she. Leland? Latham? Damn, she couldn't remember.

"According to your father, those people are bad news."

"That was a long time ago, Mr. Henry. They were neighborhood bullies, for heaven's sake. My village was loaded with them, and so is every town here in the U.S. Bullies are just cowards in wolf's clothes."

He shook his head. "Stubborn. Just like your old man told me you'd be. And he was just as bad."

It irked her to think she was anything at all like her father. She was nothing like him. For one thing, she would never abandon her family to go hunt down some enigmatic piece of

jewelry in America. It was absurd. And probably a lie. She knew the real reason her father had left was because of Celeste's handicap and she'd never forgive him for turning his back on his Down's Syndrome child.

Henry's eyes pleaded with her. "If you won't open his letter, at least open the box."

She blew air through her nostrils. "Fine. But only because you've been so nice. I have to tell you, though, that I don't care much for jewelry. Whatever's in here means nothing to me."

His gaze shifted as he took in her drab sweater and faded blue jeans. She wore no rings, no bracelet, no necklace, not even a watch. Her cell phone worked well enough to tell time. As for make-up, what was the point? That liquid foundation stuff suffocated her skin. She had no opinion about her hair. It just *was*. Long and red as mahogany, she always kept it in a single French braid that followed the line of her spine to her tailbone. She was plain and she knew it.

She tore the brown wrapper from the box. "You think I'm homely."

Henry's eyes widened. "I think nothing of the sort. You're a lovely girl—"

Claire held up a hand. "Save it, counselor. You did what you came here to do. Flattery isn't necessary." The box lid lifted easily, and there, nestled in a bed of white tissue lay the most magnificent sculpture Claire had ever seen.

Technically, it was a pin. Or more accurately, a brooch, due to its historical origins. She remembered learning about Celtic designs in grade school. Round, about two inches in

diameter, the silver circle of symbols tarnished with age. It made her think of Scotland. In her mind's eye she saw an emerald landscape, blades of thick grass rustling in the wind and she could almost smell the marshes. How was that possible?

"It's beautiful," she breathed, barely aware of Mr. Henry's watchful expression. She touched the brooch. Warm, like fresh bread from the oven, or like a sun-baked stone in a pasture. She touched her warmed fingers to her cheek, but they felt as cool as the autumn breeze outside. "Where did he find it?"

"Kentucky. He was doing his regular random checks on eBay to see what came up, and there it was. Someone found it in some wreckage after a tornado. Talk about luck."

Maybe for her father, but not for those poor people ravaged by a tornado.

Mr. Henry grinned. "Your father would have been pleased to see the way your face lit up when you saw the brooch."

Claire frowned, pushing away her sudden pleasure at seeing and feeling the old brooch. Her reaction made no sense. She didn't like gaudy jewelry, same as she had no desire for fashionable shoes or designer clothes. Those things didn't matter to her. She existed solely to care for the two people she loved: her mother and her sister. At least she had, until the accident two months ago.

She cleared her throat. "Well, I'm sure it must be worth something to someone. I know a few antique dealers in town. One of them will be happy to take this off my hands."

Mr. Henry shrugged. "Of course. It's yours and you can do whatever you like. But if it were me—"

"You're not me, Mr. Henry." She stood and held out her hand for him to shake.

He smothered her slender fingers in his massive paw. "You take care of yourself, Claire. And watch out for those—"

"Coynes, yes, I remember." She smiled to take the edge off her attitude. "I'm sorry if I've sounded cranky. It's not like me to be rude, but I miss my sister, my mother is a vegetable, and I just found out my father is dead. I hope you understand."

"No need to apologize, dear." He handed her his card. "I'm leaving on the first plane out of Redmond tomorrow. If talking about your father will help in any way, please don't hesitate to call."

He really was a nice man. And she felt badly for behaving like a bratty, angst-ridden teenager. "Thank you, Mr.—Thank you, Peabody. I'll do that. I promise."

\* \* \* \*

Claire didn't throw the brooch box in the Deschutes like she thought she would. She drove right on past the Shops at the Old Mill and barely glimpsed the docile section of river that flowed through the City of Bend. Her weathered old Honda sputtered and choked as she slowed to turn onto the Parkway.

She could get a new car now. For the first time in her life, she realized, there was money in the bank. A flutter of excitement tickled her belly. She could pay off the loan on the

trailer. Hell, she could sell the damn thing and buy a real house!

As she steered into the trailer park, the box holding the brooch shifted on the seat beside her. She covered it with her hand, reassured of its presence. Why? It was just a thing, a piece of old jewelry. But its arrival in her life had brought about significant change.

Claire felt hopeful. Now she had enough money to move back to Scotland. But what about Mom? She'd have to stay in Bend until Mom recovered, but at least she could buy a beautiful home for her mother to return to when she got well. She'd hire better doctors and a live-in nurse. What an excellent plan! Their lives would never be the same.

She parked in the dirt drive in front her mother's trailer home. A flurry of gold and orange leaves fluttered across the porch steps, and she made a mental note to rake the tiny patch of lawn that was more weeds than grass. The trailer was simple, clean and sturdy, and had served her little family well over the last fifteen years. The two-bedroom doublewide seemed too big now that her sister and mother didn't live there any more. Once sold, it would become someone else's home, and she again felt that unfamiliar twinge of excitement. Change was good.

She let herself in and set her purse on the kitchen counter before carefully slipping the brooch box inside it along with her car keys. A sudden thud of four feline paws landed beside the bag.



She held a hand to her chest. "Treasure! You scared me. What's wrong, kitty?" The normally docile tabby growled and arched her back. "Treasure? You okay?"

"I noticed she doesn't take well to strangers."

Claire spun around to face the owner of the voice that made her insides clench. Her heart skittered beneath her breastbone and she gasped. "What the hell?" She grabbed her cell phone from her purse and started to punch in 9-1—1-1. "Get out! I'm calling the police."

"Is that any way to treat an old friend?"

She stopped dialing and narrowed her eyes at the stranger who was beginning to look more familiar with each frantic beat of her heart. His hair was no longer orange but a deep cherry wood red, and it was pulled back from his face in a ponytail. His pale skin had darkened to a bronze glow that could only have come from time spent beneath a tropical sun. Skinny? Not any more. He had to have bench-pressed his weight in coconuts on whatever island had given him that tan. He was Leland. Or Latham. Damn. One of those bully Coyne boys, and the nicer of the bunch.

"I'm hurt you don't remember me," he said, his square jaw tilted with a sly grin. "I was the one who protected you from my cousins when you were just a *bairn*. That canna have slipped your mind."

Speechless, she managed a guttural, "La ... La..."

"Are you singin' or tryin' to remember my name?"

She gaped at him.

He sighed. "It's Liam, darlin'. Liam Coyne."

Ah, yes. She remembered all the Coyne boys now. And Liam wasn't a whole lot better than his cousins. At least he wasn't the one who put mud in her school bag, ripped her classwork to shreds while she watched, or stole her lunch money. But he was still a Coyne. Her skin grew hot as the rage of childhood humiliation returned with a vengeance.

Liam stood in the tiny living room, one hand braced on the sofa as he leaned against it with relaxed arrogance. Then his friendly expression abruptly changed to alarm. She wasn't the only one remembering how it had been when they were kids.

"Wait, Claire." He backed up. "Don't be actin' up now, hear? I just dropped by for a visit—"

*Visit, hell.* She bent at the waist and plowed forward, her bowed head aimed squarely at his belly.

## Chapter Two

The blow to Liam's stomach sent him backwards onto an end table that toppled with him to the floor. He had expected Claire to react, but not so violently. As he recalled, she'd never taken guff from anyone, least of all his tough cousins, and there'd been many a schoolyard brawl that had landed the lot of them in the head master's office.

Though she hadn't knocked the wind out of him, he pretended like she had.

Claire's scowl smoothed from her forehead as she looked him over. "Oh, come on. You're not hurt."

Liam burst out laughing. It took Claire another second or two to crack a smile.

He sat up and heaved a much-needed breath. "Oh, lassie, I wasn't sure you still had it in you."

Her smile faded and she glared at him, hands on hips. Fun and games were over. "Who the hell do you think you are breaking in to my house?"

He glanced around. "This tin can is a house? Could have fooled me."

She kicked him harder than was playful. "Get up. And get the hell out."

He leaned back on his hands to gaze up at her. Dear little Claire, how she had grown up. She was a woman now, and it showed. Well, almost showed. The over-sized sweater was an unbecoming oatmeal color and it hid any curves she might have from the hem up, but the faded blue jeans were tight.

They revealed muscular calves on someone who maybe enjoyed vigorous bike rides, or perhaps she was a devoted spinner at the local health club. Liam always paid attention to such details. Making sharp observations used to be part of his job. You can't let much get past you when your uncle is a notorious crime lord.

"Stop ogling me and get up off the floor." She kicked him again before going back to the kitchen for her purse. She rested her hand over the top and gripped it closed. It was a protective gesture. And he easily guessed why.

He pushed up from the floor and sauntered toward her, seeing her stiffen as he drew close. His motive wasn't to frighten her. On the contrary, he needed her trust.

His booted foot hooked the leg of one of four chairs surrounding a small breakfast table and he dragged it toward him. Once seated, he gestured at another chair. "Join me?"

"That's funny, you're still here. What part of 'get out' didn't you understand?"

He grinned up at her sweet face. Though fifteen years had passed, he'd have recognized her even if his cousin hadn't told him exactly where to find her. Those sea-green eyes and Lady Godiva hair were a sure giveaway. Pure. Yes, that was a good description of his Claire. She had a clean, fresh scent of vanilla and ginger, and her flawless skin wasn't coated with the garish make-up most women her age wore. That's probably why she looked seventeen instead of twenty-seven. But those clothes...

"I'm parched, Claire, darlin'. Just a wee glass of water and I'll be on my way." He winked at her. "Promise."

Cussing under her breath, she moved to a cabinet for a glass, then doubled back to reclaim her handbag. Purse under her arm, she plunked the glass of water down in front of him and some sloshed over the sides. "Drink up, then leave."

"Thank you." He took a demure sip and nodded at the purse. "The way you're huggin' that bag you'd think you had a million dollars in there."

"Maybe I do."

Her words were brave, but the mouth that spoke them was pressed into a thin line of worry. Even her eyes shone with it. Liam sighed. He'd amused himself long enough at her expense. His bullish adolescence may have been left in Scotland a decade ago, but old habits died hard.

He pushed away from the table and stood. "Then you best hang tight to that." After taking a long swig from the glass, he plunked it down hard on the table. "Thanks for the drink," he said, and headed for the door.

"Wait."

He turned to see her still standing in the tiny galley kitchen, her purse clutched to her chest, her eyes round and unsure. She took a deep breath and stammered, "Please tell me how you got in. If it's that easy, I need to get a new lock or a guard dog or an alarm or something."

Good point. But how could he tell her he'd had a key? So he lied. "You left your bedroom window open."

"No I didn't."

"Yeah. You did." He reached for the door.

"Why did you come?"

He gave her handbag a pointed look. "Don't you know?"

She backed up a step. "You can't have it."

"Who said I wanted it?" He stared into her worried eyes, imagining what she must think of him. Probably that he was a thief, or even worse that he was still in league with his cousins and crime boss uncle. That part of his life had been buried so deep in the past that he rarely gave it a second thought any more. But she didn't know that.

Claire looked confused and he didn't blame her. "You break into my home, terrify my cat, scare the bejeesus out of me, then pretend you dropped in just to say hi?" She shook her head. "There's something seriously wrong with you."

"You believe I'm a criminal."

"Aren't you?"

"Not any more." But the uncertain look on her face said she didn't believe him. That was a good thing, at least for now. Once she heard his story she'd understand. For now, though, it was best for her to remain wary. Even if it meant being wary of him.

"So what is it you want?" she asked, gripping her purse even tighter.

He grinned, and once again felt annoyed with himself for enjoying the effect he was having on her. So different from when they were kids and she had ignored him, even when he'd tried and failed to protect her from his prank-playing cousins. This time would be different.

"I want..." He stopped himself. Though he had to gain her trust, it must be done slowly and believably so that his cousin Charley would be none the wiser. It would never do for Charley to know his real motive for coming to his family's aid

after several years of absence. "I want a lot of things, Claire." He tried to make his smile wolfish, and from the unhappy expression on her face, it seemed to be working. "But let's start with you coming out with me for a nice coffee."

"I beg your pardon?" She straightened, adding an inch of height to her petite frame. "What makes you think I'd go anywhere with you?" The words *you big bully* remained unsaid, but she spoke well enough with her eyes.

Still smiling, he said, "Because you can't help yourself."

He prepared himself for another head-butt, but she surprised him by narrowing her eyes as if struck by a sudden thought. She lifted her chin, defiant. "Fine. I have some questions about you Coynes that I demand an answer to."

He chuckled. "You demand? I hardly think—"

"Shut up." She glared at him, her eyes glistening with an emotion he couldn't quite put his finger on. She was pissed all right, but she was also sad. And whatever was making her sad was pissing her off. She said, "Meet me downtown day after tomorrow at Thump Coffee on Minnesota Avenue. Two o'clock."

Liam was relieved to know Claire was still the same scrappy girl he remembered from school. And she was tempting his less honorable side to come out and play. He cocked his head and suppressed a smile. "Aren't you the cheeky one? Why don't we skip the coffee and go straight for shaggin'—"

She gasped. "You crude bastard!" She threw a kitchen sponge at him, hitting him in the chest. He ducked the scouring pad that followed. "You've got some nerve—"

"Two o'clock, then?" he said quickly, sliding out the door just as a plastic cup pinged off the doorframe, missing him by inches. He wrote his room number on the back of a hotel business card and slid it under her door.

He dialed his cell phone as he walked to his rental car parked a few trailers down the road. His cousin answered within two short rings.

"Did ya get it?" Charley asked by way of greeting.

"No."

Sounding exasperated, his cousin said, "Why the hell not?"

"It wasn't there," he answered truthfully. He didn't add that Claire didn't yet have the brooch in her possession when he searched her trailer. Charley didn't need to know she had it now. If he knew, Liam was afraid he might try to take the brooch himself and the consequences of that would be bad.

"Look, Charley. Just let me do my job, all right?"

Charley snorted. "You've lost yer edge, Liam, old boy. You don't have it in you ta steal from the little hen, do you? I'm gonna have ta do it me'self."

Liam slid into the driver's side of his rental, a late-model Saturn. He hated American cars. "You ain't doin' it yourself, Charley. Uncle Catan gave me strict instructions—"

"Bah! I'm runnin' this job. What I say—"

"You gonna go against your own father?"

Silence on the other end.

"Patience, Charley. I have a plan. We'll get the brooch."

Charley paused before saying, "It rightfully belongs to our family, coozin. Dinna forget that."



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*You always been a crazy choob, Charley.* Liam punched the end button and disconnected the call.

### Chapter Three

"We should have gone shopping before lunch," Claire said to her best friend Janey as they rifled through a rack of designer tops in Banana Republic. "I feel bloated."

"You look great." Janey blew a wisp of black bangs from her eyes and selected a dark orange blouse to hold beneath Claire's chin. "What a great color on you. Really brings out the green in your eyes."

Claire pushed it away. "Too gauzy. And slinky. Janey, it's the beginning of fall. I'll freeze to death in something like that."

Janey rolled her eyes. "You will not. We're getting a fabulous jacket to go with it." She fingered a purple top with a plunging neckline. "Now this would look awesome on *me*."

"You've got the boobs for it."

"True. But I was thinking more of the color. Purple compliments my hair." She cocked her head and gave Claire an appraising look. "Chocolate brown would look yummy on you, Claire. I can't wear brown."

"I love brown."

Claire sidled over to a sale rack and reached for a long-sleeved sweater, the thick cable knit of gray and brown calling to her sensible side.

Her friend yanked her back. "Oh, no you don't. You asked me to come shopping with you because you want a makeover." She tugged the sweater off its hanger and held it out like it was covered in germs. Making a sour face she said,

"The old you." She brightened and held up the orange blouse. "The new you. Trust me. You'll love it."

Claire sighed and added the orange blouse to her armload of colorful clothing she was about to try on. She liked the earth-toned tops Janey had picked out, but the bright colors made her nervous. They were like neon signs announcing she was making a change in her life. This new direction was personal, and she couldn't help being squeamish about sharing it with the world.

"Stop taking yourself so seriously," Janey said. "You're supposed to be having fun."

Claire smiled. Janey was right, and she actually was having a good time. She peeked inside her purse at the box holding the brooch and her smile widened.

"Show it to me again." Janey held out her hand. "Let's see how good it looks with this blouse."

"I'm not planning on wearing it. It's a family heirloom, Janey, not costume jewelry."

Her friend frowned. "So?"

"It's too valuable. I might lose it."

"You're being silly, Claire. You won't lose it."

Claire pulled the box from her purse and handed it to Janey, who removed the lid and lifted the brooch from its nest of white tissue. "It goes perfectly. See?"

She had to agree with her. Every item of clothing, every scarf, every belt, even her new shoes had been chosen with the brooch in mind.

After paying for her purchases and spending more money than she'd ever spent on herself at one time, Claire left the store with Janey, whose excitement was contagious.

Janey asked, "Have you decided which outfit you'll wear on your date with Liam tomorrow?"

Claire's cheeks grew suddenly warm. "It's not a date."

"Oh, yeah?" There was a sly edge to Janey's voice. "Then what is it?"

"An interrogation."

"Ah." Janey removed a bracelet from one of the many shopping bags they carried and slipped it on her wrist. "Why not 'interrogate' him on the phone?"

Claire felt her blush deepen. "Because..." She had to think for a second. "Because I need to see his facial expressions, and his body language, when he answers my questions. How else can I know if he's telling me the truth? A phone call won't let me do that."

"The need to see his body goes without saying." Janey snickered.

"Grow up." Claire slapped her playfully on the arm.

They walked in silence through the outdoor mall of shops and restaurants in Bend's trendy Old Mill. Claire wondered whether it was the clams she'd eaten for lunch or her nerves that had her stomach in knots. She'd hardly stopped thinking about Liam since yesterday. He'd looked delicious in his blue jeans and white t-shirt that stretched tight across his chest and showed off his tan. Judging from his biceps, she guessed his entire upper body was equally defined. She'd made the

mistake of telling Janey about him and her friend hadn't stopped ribbing her since.

But Liam was a Coyne and not to be trusted. Even her father had passed along that message before his death. Claire was never sure what the beef had been with their families, but she recalled more than one heated argument between her father and Catan Coyne. They had hated each other. And that hate was passed down from Catan to his sons. Except Liam was Catan's nephew. Maybe that's why he hadn't been as mean to her as his cousins had been. Another knot twisted in her gut and she groaned.

"You okay?" Janey asked.

"Yeah. The clams I had for lunch are talking to me." She stifled a belch. "Sorry."

"Don't wimp out on me now, Claire. Your makeover isn't over yet. Hair, remember?"

Claire pulled her braid over her shoulder and began stroking it like a pet. "I don't know..."

"Hon, it's the total image we're going for here." Janey gave her a sympathetic look. "I'd never have suggested it if I didn't think it was important."

"But I've always had long hair." What if she was like the legendary Samson, who lost his strength along with his hair when Delilah cut it off?

"It's for a good cause, remember?"

Claire nodded, feeling instantly better. Janey was talking about Locks of Love, the charity that made wigs for child cancer victims who'd lost their hair from chemotherapy treatments. "You're right. I should have done this a long time

ago." She flung her braid behind her and marched toward the steps leading up to Salon Estilo. "I can hardly wait to see the new me."

\* \* \* \*

"That's me?" Claire stared at the reflection in the mirror. The woman staring back looked a little older and much more sophisticated. She wore the silky orange blouse that looked tailored to fit her slender waist, and a pair of black jeans caressed her hips like a second skin. But the hair ... It was still long enough to flair around her shoulders, but loose and layered, feathering in gentle waves against her neck. Janey had convinced her to add subtle highlights that made her look kissed by the sun. As for make-up, just light mineral powder, a translucent sheen of blush, and a hint of brown mascara to define her lashes. It was just enough to make her look like a grown-up.

"Wow." The girl who had cut and styled her hair stood back to give her a once-over. "Planning on breaking a few hearts?"

"Claire, sweetie," Jenny breathed. "You're absolutely gorgeous. And I'm a goddamn genius."

"Then it *is* me." Claire smiled, showing off her one and only dimple at the left corner of her mouth. The light coat of gloss on her lips looked sweet and sexy. Who'd have thought she'd ever look sexy? "I can't get over the difference."

"Can I tear you away from that mirror long enough to take you home?" Janey jingled her car keys. "My extra long lunch break is over and I need to get back to the office."

Claire turned sideways to check out her bootie. What do you know? She really did have a butt. "You've got a great boss, Janey. You have nothing to worry about."

"Since I work for myself, I suppose you're right." She started gathering shopping bags. "And how about your boss?"

Claire fussed with her hair and gave her head a shake. It fell right back into place. Amazing. "My boss? Oh, you know what she's like."

"As a matter of fact, I do. She's a lot like my boss."

"You mean she's exactly like your boss." Claire wondered if her personal organizer business was worth keeping now that she had more money than she knew what to do with. But what else was there for her? Besides, she still had Mom to think about. Her care was expensive at nearly eight thousand dollars a month, and that was the budget plan. Claire intended to upgrade her mother to first class.

Janey checked her watch. "We really do need to get going. I have a client meeting at a house on the west side this afternoon."

"Yeah? Whose?"

"Marne Stevenson's. It was featured in the last Tour of Homes."

"I remember. Nice work, by the way. What's she having you do this time?"

"She wants me to redesign the den for her kids. Some kind of teen haven to keep them at home more. I doubt a cool rec room is gonna make much difference."

"Sounds like fun for you, though." Claire tried to imagine Janey's creative brilliance at work. Grafitti on the walls? A

dance floor? Surround sound through speakers embedded in the walls?

"Marne needs your help, too," Janey said. "Both her kids are super slobes and their rooms need a major overhaul."

Nothing like a trashed kids' room for motivation. Ugh. But how bad could it be? Besides, Claire enjoyed a good challenge. Problem was, an organized kids' room rarely stayed organized for long. This would be an ongoing project. "Great, Janey, thanks. I'll look forward to it."

Claire gazed out at the bright orange and red trees lining the median as Janey drove her home. Today couldn't have been more perfect. She could hardly wait to visit her mom at the nursing home tonight and share with her all the wonderful things that had happened that day. Though her mother lay in a coma, Claire believed she could still hear her daughter's voice. If only she were able to open her eyes and actually see Claire's transformation.

"Thanks for taking me shopping," Claire told Janey as she got out of her friend's Subaru in front of her trailer. "You helped change my life."

Janey smiled. "Don't thank me yet. Let's wait to see how tomorrow's date goes first." Her brows suddenly bunched in an unhappy frown. "Hey, did you forget to close your front door?"

Claire gawked at the trailer. The front door was wide open.

Janey cut the engine and left the car to join Claire as she ran to her front porch.

"Holy crap." Janey stared, her dark eyes round with awe. "I hope your homeowner's insurance is paid up."



For Love or Money [The Legacy of the Celtic Brooch 7]  
*by Karen Duvall*

Claire took in the shambles that had once been her living room. "I've been robbed."

## Chapter Four

"Is anything missing, Miss Ballard?" asked the cop.

Claire paced the few short steps from one end of her dining area to the other. "My TV. And my CD player."

The officer jotted something on his notepad. "Is that all?"

"I think so." She hugged her purse, grateful she'd had the brooch with her when this happened. She had a sneaking suspicion that's what the thief was after *and* she suspected who the thief was. But why would he take her TV and CD player while vandalizing her entire living room in the process? Talk about mean. That wasn't the Liam she'd known as a child. His cousins, on the other hand, were as mean as they come.

"You know the chances of getting your stuff back are slim to none," the cop said. "We've been seeing a lot of break-ins lately, most of them perpetrated by meth addicts. They sell the stuff to buy a fix. You might check the local pawn shops to see if anything turns up there."

Claire closed her eyes and sighed. "Thanks for your help, Officer."

"Carson."

She stared at him, puzzled. "Excuse me?"

The cop grinned as he tipped back his hat. He had an appreciative look in his dark eyes. "That's my first name. Carson."

Was he flirting with her? He was kind of cute, dark and dangerous looking. The scar across his cheek appeared

recent, but it suited his whole protector-cop image. She smiled and his grin broadened. "Okay," she said. "Then thank you, Carson."

"Happy to be of service." He stood staring at her for a few more seconds, then cleared his throat and tipped his hat again. "I should get to the station and file my report. But if you see any strange cars drive by, or if anyone suspicious approaches you—"

"I'll be fine." Her cheeks started burning and she looked away, certain he'd seen her blush. She could hardly believe it. This good-looking cop was coming on to her. What wonders new clothes and a haircut could do.

"You should think about staying with a friend tonight." Carson moved closer to her. "It's not safe for you to be alone—"

"She won't be alone," came a voice thick with a Scottish burr. Liam stood in the doorway.

Carson looked puzzled, but quickly recovered. "Miss Ballard, is this man a friend of yours?"

Claire narrowed her eyes at Liam. "Not exactly."

Pulling his shoulders back, Carson stepped around Claire to stand in front of her in a show of protection. "Sir, this is official police business. Unless you have information to contribute..." The cop lifted his chin and stared down his nose at the Scotsman.

One corner of Liam's mouth turned up in an arrogant half-grin. "Contribute? Uh, no, I don't think so."

Claire wanted to feel relieved to hear that, but apprehension tugged at her instead. He was a Coyne, and

aside from being no good, there was an air of secrecy about Liam that made her both wary and curious. Her instincts said be careful, but she also sensed something noble lurking just beneath his bad-boy exterior. He probably knew something about what had happened inside her trailer. He may not have done it, but he knew who did.

"Ignore him, Officer," she told Carson, and from his chagrinned expression, he just then realized he'd lost whatever ground he thought he'd gained with her. She reveled in her first almost-romantic interlude. And was that jealousy she saw in Liam's blue eyes? Wow. She'd struck the mother lode. "And I'll be fine."

"But if he's not exactly your friend," Carson said hopefully.

"Terribly sorry," Liam said, his tone cocky. "It appears the lady doesn't want me to go."

"Oh, I want you to go, all right." Claire put both hands on her hips. "I'll see you tomorrow."

This seemed to shake Liam's cool as a frown ruffled his thick eyebrows. "But I thought we—"

"Then you thought wrong." She gave them each a pointed look and they glared at each other. "I promise you both that I won't be alone tonight, okay? I'm staying with a friend."

"I'll have a patrol car drive by your trailer every couple of hours." Carson gave Liam an accusatory glance, then switched his gaze to her, his eyes soft with meaning. "If that's all right with you."

"Sure. If you see anything, you can reach me on my cell." She motioned toward the door. "Now if you two will excuse me, I need to pack a bag."

Both men stood in stubborn silence, each waiting for the other to leave first. Claire hid her amusement, though she was secretly pleased. Whoever said chivalry was dead?

\* \* \* \*

"Why'd you do it, Charley?"

Charley slouched on the couch in his high-priced rented condo and ignored Liam. He stared bleary-eyed at the television screen where half-naked women in a music video gyrated to a hip-hop beat. Though his posture said he hadn't a care in the world, Charley's white-knuckled grip on the remote told a different story. His cousin was a damn good actor. Every career criminal was.

"I told you I'd get it," Liam said, the sneer in his voice edgier than he'd intended. Charley was Catan's middle son and the runt of the litter. Despite his size, he was a crafty *bajin*, the family's black sheep with steel wool. Liam didn't like him. "Give me time and she'll gladly let me have it." There was double meaning there, but he kept it to himself.

Charley's lips curled back. "Not bloody likely. She hates your guts."

"Not for long." Or so Liam hoped. He'd thought Claire was beautiful before, but the lovely duckling had suddenly changed into an amazing swan. Her hair, her clothes, her style ... Her stunning image had imprinted itself on his mind and he wanted her more than ever. He just had to make her want him back. "She's warming up to me."

"You keep sayin' that, but I ain't seein' no results from your wooin'." Charley launched himself from the couch, his

body a taught spring ready for a fight. "I'm done with this small town of hikers and bikers. And I'm done waitin' for you to get off your arse and get the job done." His pale blue eyes were shot with red, the pupils no bigger than the head of a pin. High, as usual.

Liam stepped close to him, shoulders back and chest out. The little creep had no power as far as he was concerned. "I'm doin' this my way and with your father's blessing."

Unfazed, Charley swaggered to the window, his back to Liam, and glanced down at the rushing waters of the Deschutes below. He lifted a bottle of dark ale, its label named for the river he was watching, and chugged down half of it. "Then do it, Liam. I got no patience. I want shut of this whole thing, hear?"

Liam did, too, but not for the same reasons. Charley loathed the U.S., and he resented his father for sending him here. Liam was resentful as well, but only because Catan hadn't trusted him enough to send him here alone. Liam had been shunned from the family a decade ago, and not just because he'd accumulated so many gambling debts from the family's European casinos. On the contrary, his uncle and cousins were impressed with his risk taking. But when he refused to kill some poor bastard who had embezzled from one of the old man's money laundering operations, he was banished. He still had his gambling debts to repay, which helped sway Catan toward using him to recover the family's legacy. Liam, however, had other plans.

"Charley, you do realize your father wants this recovery project kept private. He brought me in because I have no criminal record in The States. You do."

"Your point?"

"If you get caught—"

"Prison. Yeah, so I heard." Hooded gaze lingering on the rushing water below, he took another swig of beer.

Liam drew up beside him, the display of companionship only pretense. He longed to see Charley put away; his cousin was a borderline psychopath. But Liam had to continue playing the game for now. He had convinced Catan their family was important to him, and now he'd have to convince Charley as well. As much as it turned his stomach to do so.

"Said all you came to say?" Charley's attention never left the window.

Liam gave him a hard look before saying, "One last thing."

Charley slid him a sidelong look, his eyes glazed with boredom.

"Stay away from her."

## Chapter Five

Claire grabbed a handful of popcorn from the bowl on the coffee table. "So what movie did you rent?" she asked Janey, not caring how she answered. She'd never be able to concentrate on a movie tonight. The Coynes, Liam, her brooch ... That's all she could think about.

"I got you a romantic comedy." Janey picked up the Hollywood Video case and checked the back. "It has Cameron Diaz in it. You love Cameron Diaz."

Claire shrugged and tossed the popcorn back in the bowl. "Janey, you're too good to me, you know that?"

Her friend crossed her fuzzy-slipped feet on top of the coffee table. "Only because you add drama to my life. Hanging out with you is better than a marathon of Clint Eastwood movies."

"Was that your plan before I called?"

She nodded.

Claire smiled. She was lucky to have Janey for a friend. She'd even welcomed Claire's cat into her home. Poor Treasure was scared to death of the strange surroundings and had found a place in the hall closet to hide. She still hadn't come out.

Claire's cell phone rang and she snatched it from the pocket of her robe. She checked the caller ID. Carson. Instead of a greeting, she immediately asked, "Is everything okay with the trailer?"

"Your trailer's just fine. That's not why I called."



"Then what's up?"

"It's about the lawyer you saw yesterday."

Claire leaned forward on the couch and gripped the phone more tightly to her ear. Janey tossed her a look of concern.

"Peabody Henry? What about him?"

"He's dead."

Her heart leapt into her throat and her temples began to throb. How could Mr. Henry be dead? He was supposed to have left town this morning. "What are you talking about, Carson? I just saw Mr. Henry at the AmeriTel yesterday. He was fine when I left him. And why are you telling me this?"

"Because according to the desk clerk, you were the last person to see Peabody Henry alive."

Claire swallowed. She remembered the gentle giant's kind smile, his sincere concern for her safety, and her bratty attitude when he offered his help. "Was it a heart attack?"

"I'm afraid not. He was murdered. Strangled to death with his own neck tie."

She felt suddenly lightheaded.

"What's wrong, Claire?" Janey touched her arm. "You're pale as snow."

Claire mouthed the words "I'm fine" to her friend, then closed her eyes and breathed deep. "You can't possibly think I had anything to do with it."

"Hardly. Claire, we need to talk to you. Can you come to the station first thing tomorrow morning?"

She hesitated. "Of course. I want to do whatever I can to help."

She broke the connection and placed the phone back in her pocket. What the hell was going on? Her changed life Change was supposed to be charmed, but it was becoming cursed instead.

After she relayed her conversation with Carson to Janey, her friend told her, "I think it's time you read your father's letter."

Claire had been afraid of that, but Janey was right. Her father's letter might hold the answers she was looking for. Or at least a few clues.

Saying an early goodnight, Claire left Janey with her movie and refilled her wine glass, taking it with her to the upstairs bedroom in Janey's two-story townhouse. She laid the brooch on the bed and set her father's letter beside it. As she peeled back the envelope's flap, her eyes watered and she bit her lip to hold back the tears. Damn it, she still cared about her dad. She always had, and it felt like betrayal to her poor mother, who had been forced to raise two young girls on her own. It didn't help that her older sister had the added challenge of a handicap. Claire was convinced that's why her father had left them in the first place.

The two pages were wrinkled and brittle, as though they'd survived years of varying climates and temperatures, which was probably true. According to Peabody, he and her father had journeyed across more than two dozen states while searching for the brooch. Had it been worth it? She fingered the silver pin and a sense of rightness zinged through her like an electric shock. Perhaps her father had known what he was doing after all.

When she unfolded the letter, a photograph fell out, landing face down on the bed. The writing on the back had faded to a rusty brown and was barely legible. The crudely printed letters spelled out the name Lady Airin Keith. Flipping the photo over, she saw the painted portrait of a woman in period dress dating back to the fourteenth century. Drawing from her history studies as a child, she knew the high ruffled collar and richly colored fabric indicated royalty. The bodice was pulled so tight that she wondered how the poor woman had been able to breathe. Was she a princess? Claire studied the woman's face and her heart did a little flip inside her chest. It couldn't be. The woman was...

She looked like Claire.

Her hands shook as she began reading her father's letter.  
*My dearest Claire.*

*I'm writing this as I sit on a plane headed for the United States. Someday you might forgive me for leaving you, your sister and your mother, as I go in search of a five hundred-year-old family heirloom. It was lost a few years short of the fifteenth century, but I recently received word from an American associate that the brooch has been spotted in an antique shop in Oklahoma City. Whether or not it will still be there when I arrive is anyone's guess, but I must try. For you and your sister, I must try, because you are the sole heirs to this remarkable piece of our family's history.*

Claire blinked. So he hadn't left because of Celeste's handicap? She'd always thought the search for family treasure was an excuse. As had her mother, which is why her mom had turned to the false comfort of drink soon after he

left. Celeste had been born with Down's Syndrome and because her father hadn't offered an explanation for leaving other than a treasure hunt, Claire had assumed he'd simply refused to be saddled with a defective child. So if it was only the brooch he was after, why hadn't he taken his family with him? She wiped her eyes and continued reading.

*I'm not the only one seeking the brooch. The Coyne family laid false claim to it when it disappeared. Catan Coyne is a madman, a criminal, and he won't stop threatening our family until he has the brooch to tie himself to Scottish royalty for political gain. I won't let that happen. The brooch is our heritage, yours and Celeste's, and I vow to find it for you both. Claire, the enclosed photo proves where you came from. Though you're just a child now, I see the resemblance to the woman you'll grow up to be. You're living proof of our family's claim, and that makes you a threat to Catan Coyne.*

*If you're reading this, it means I couldn't deliver the brooch in person because I'm dead. It's very possible the Coynes are responsible for my murder.*

Take care, my darling lassie. And know I love you always.  
*Your father, Ian Ballard*

Her father had left his family behind in an effort to protect them. Claire's fingers felt numb as she wrapped them around her wine glass and took a healthy swallow. If only he'd told them the truth. The main reason the three of them had moved from Scotland to Oregon was because her mother had hoped he'd give up his search and return to her. Claire now understood he'd always known where they were, but had stayed away on purpose; to keep them safe.

But the Coynes had found them anyway. Her throat closed as a new wave of realization washed over her. *Dear lord!* The Coynes were responsible for her mother and sister's accident. The car's brakes had failed and it wasn't much of a stretch to suspect sabotage. It was just dumb luck that Claire hadn't also been in the car when it happened. Thinking about it now, it shook her to know she'd had a target on her back ever since.

Claire stared at the photo again. There, attached to the bodice of the woman's gown, was her brooch.

## Chapter Six

Claire stood in line at the counter inside Thump Coffee, waiting to place her order. Did she really need caffeine to make her more jumpy than she already was? No. Something milder. Ah, yes, a green tea smoothie. Perfect.

She glanced nervously outside, looking for Liam. She'd arrived a little early after her unpleasant interview at the police station. The detective was nice enough, but he'd asked her several questions that didn't seem to have anything to do with Peabody Henry's murder. She answered everything truthfully, but when she was asked about the man who'd stopped by her trailer while Carson was there, she stumbled. Damn Carson's big mouth, and bless him for caring.

She'd still been honest with the detective, telling him Liam was an old acquaintance from her childhood. She just abstained from getting into his family's criminal history and determination to steal her brooch. That was personal business she could take care of on her own. If the police got involved, there was a chance they'd take the brooch as evidence, and she couldn't allow that to happen. Besides, she was meeting Liam in a public place with lots of people around. She glanced outside to see Carson's patrol car drive slowly by. Oh, yes. That, too. As far as safety went, all bases were covered.

Liam stepped into the coffee shop and her heart gave a jolt. Had to be nerves. But man, did he look good. It was warm for early Autumn so he wore khaki shorts that came just above his knees, showing off muscular calves as tan as

his arms. He wore a black hoody, its sleeves ripped off, the fabric at the shoulders jagged with unraveling threads. The scooped front of a green tank lay beneath the unzipped hoody. He looked like a local ready to grab a kayak and paddles, or jump on a bike to ride one of Central Oregon's scenic trails.

"You're early." He gave her his cocky half-smile and the twinge she felt wasn't in her heart this time, but someplace lower. "Hey, you've already got your coffee," he added, sounding disappointed. "Last I knew, Irish coffee wasn't green."

"That's because it's not coffee. It's a green tea smoothie." She dipped her chin so that her hair drifted forward to hide her blush. *Stay firm and aloof*, she told herself, but he wasn't making it easy. "If I drink coffee at this hour I'll never sleep tonight."

He gestured at the foamy drink in the clear plastic cup she was holding. "Any good?"

"Want a sip?" She handed it to him and watched him slide the straw between his lips. His mouth worked as he sucked and swallowed. *Lord have mercy.*

"Not bad, but I'm going for the hard stuff." He ordered an iced coffee, nothing fancy. He didn't even sweeten it.

"Where's a good place around here to walk and talk?"

"Have you been to Drake Park?"

"Drove by it on my way here." He swept his arm toward the door and dipped a short bow. "After you."

The man was too charming for his own good. She wanted to hate him, or to at least be scared of him, but she found it

impossible. For one thing, despite his belonging to a totally despicable family, he represented a happy time in her life when she still lived in Scotland, her father lived at home, her sister was alive, and her mother hadn't been an alcoholic. It was true the Coyne boys had made her life miserable as a child, but she'd had satisfaction paying them back. It had been like a dark cruel game between them, and most of the time Liam was on her side.

The park was just a few blocks away and it was a pleasant walk to get there. They strolled along the downtown streets in companionable silence, each chewing on their own thoughts as they chewed on their straws. Liam seemed interested in the shops and restaurants they passed, taking in the bright trendy signage of unique boutiques and stores with whimsical names like Hot Box Betty, King of Sole Shoes, Goodies, The Diva Den, Mockingbird Gallery. The list went on and on. Though the shops were contemporary, many of the buildings that housed them clung to a nostalgic ambience dating back a hundred years when the streets were dirt and hitching posts lined the boardwalks. Bend had come a long way since then.

"Blue Fish Bistro," he said, amusement in his voice. "Do they serve only seafood?"

Claire shook her head. "Very classy restaurant, with classy prices. I've only eaten there once and the food was delicious."

"But not good enough to go back?"

"I couldn't afford to go back." She grinned at the glint in his eye. "I don't go out much."

"We need to change that," he said, and moved closer, his arm brushing hers as they walked. A warm breeze blew the



scent of something spicy and green toward her; his cologne, unique and probably expensive. She sensed he might take hold of her hand at any moment and was appalled at the very thought. It thrilled her, too. What on earth had gotten into her?

"We're here." She stepped onto the grass and put some distance between them. The sidewalk had been too damn narrow. "It's not a big park, but the river is really pretty. It's still warm enough that I bet we'll see people floating the river today."

He looked puzzled. "Floating the river?"

She shrugged. "It's a daily activity when the weather's warm. This section of river is tame and not too deep. People use inner tubes, kayaks, rubber rafts, even inflatable mattresses to float on."

"Let's go see."

He took the lead and they headed for the river's shorebank, their footsteps kicking up plumes of gold and orange leaves shed by the century-old trees towering above them. The grass was lush and dotted with people lounging on blankets and towels as they enjoyed the few warm days left before the first snow fell.

He was too calm, too relaxed. And it was time to shake him up. "Why did you come to Bend, Liam?" she asked.

He slowed his steps, acting like he'd expected the question. He turned his gaze on her, his eyes serious and his forehead smooth as the calm surface of the river. "I'm here to protect you."

Okay, so he'd alluded to that when he'd popped in on her unexpectedly two days ago. Or broken in was more like it. She didn't buy that her window had been unlocked. He'd either had a key or was a superb burglar, and the latter seemed more likely. He was a crafty Coyne boy, each one of them well schooled in the art of thievery and whatever criminal activity Catan Coyne could profit from.

"Protect me from what?" she asked.

"I think you know." He gave her handbag a pointed look.

Her fist clenched more tightly around the straps, but if he hadn't taken the brooch by now, he wasn't going to. She was more interested in knowing what he knew about her family.

"Are you aware that my father passed away recently?"

"I heard, yes. And I'm sorry for your loss."

"How did you hear?" This was an important question. His answer might help determine how much she could trust him.

His eyes narrowed in thought as he slipped both hands in his pockets. "Does it matter?"

"To me it does."

He sighed. "My cousin Charley told me."

Her back stiffened. She vaguely remembered that *bampot*, and was surprised at how quickly she recalled the Scottish slang for crazy person. She wondered what the little jerk looked like now. "And how did he know?"

"I honestly can't say, Claire. Charley had been on your father's trail for about a month and was in Kentucky when he heard the news. He could have read about it in the newspaper for all I know."

Or maybe Charley had had something to do with it. She watched the crime shows on A&E. She knew there were poisons people used that couldn't be easily detected. Maybe that's what Charley had done. She refused to even consider Liam being involved. It was totally against his character, or the character she remembered at any rate. "What about you, Liam? Were you in Kentucky, too?"

"I was in the Mediterranean until three days ago." His eyes looked suddenly sad. "Claire, I'm really sorry about your dad. I remember him. He was a good man."

Her smile was rueful. "I wish I could say I remembered him that well."

He reached for her hand and she let him take it, his rough skin warm around her cool fingers. He held her hand loosely, as if to assure her she could pull away if she wanted to. This sign of respect impressed her and her assessment of his character went up another notch.

He inhaled deeply, his shoulders tense with stress. "This whole protecting-the-family-legacy thing has been out of control ever since we were kids."

Boy, did she know it. "You do realize the brooch rightfully belongs to *my* family."

He rolled his eyes. "To be honest, I'm not sure I even care any more. That chunk of metal has caused way too much heartbreak over the past five hundred years and I want it finished. Don't you?"

She scowled. "Of course I do. If you and your cousin would back off and leave me alone, it *would* be finished."

He shook his head. "My uncle is more determined than a terrier digging a badger from its hole. He won't stop until he gets what he wants."

"Even if it means having me killed?" she asked, her jaw firm even as tears stung her eyes and she had to blink them back.

"That's ridiculous, Claire," he said, though his brows curved in worry. "No one wants to kill you. What would be the point in that? All Catan wants is the brooch."

Claire knew better. "Liam, your uncle wants more than that. I'm the only one alive who can prove the brooch doesn't belong to the Coyne."

Liam gently released her hand and gave her a hard stare. "And I can prove that it does."

She turned her attention to the river and watched a lone kayaker paddle his way downstream, a trail of orange leaves swirling in his wake. There was no way Liam had that kind of proof. Or was there? She gave him a coy look. "I'll show you mine if you show me yours."

"Deal." He reached into his back pocket to pull out his wallet and handed her a photograph weathered by age.

The sepia tones had held up well with just the edges faded and cracked from handling. He should have it laminated if he wanted to carry it with him. "Who's this?" she asked.

"Look closely."

She did, noticing this photo was of a painted portrait similar to the one she had. The man pictured was heavily bearded and a dark metal helmet covered his head, his shoulders shiny with armor. A cloak was loosely draped

around his neck and gathered at his chest, held together by a...

"That's impossible."

Liam didn't move, didn't speak. Just watched her.

She slipped her father's letter from her bag and withdrew the photo of Lady Airin wearing the same brooch. She handed it to him. "Here's why *that's* impossible."

He didn't react at first, but realization quickly dawned as genuine surprise widened his eyes and arched his eyebrows. He turned the photo over to read the back and gasped.

"What?"

"Lady Airin. You look exactly like Lady Airin Keith."

She flipped his photo over and read the name Jason Bothwell. She checked out the portrait again and saw the astonishing resemblance between Liam and Jason. If not for the beard, they could have been twins.

"This is really bizarre," she said. They stood shoulder to shoulder and held their two photos side by side. "What does it mean?"

"It means my uncle lied to me."

She waited for him to go on, understanding the deep feelings that came with betrayal. She thought her father had betrayed her family by abandoning them, but his intention was only to protect them. She knew that wasn't the case with Liam's family, especially not with Catan Coyne as its patriarch.

"How can the same brooch be worn by two different people?" she asked, not really expecting an answer. "Unless they're members of the same family." That thought crept

her out. She couldn't possibly be related to a Coyne. But if she were, that would make Liam ... Her heart sank.

"Yes and no," Liam said as he directed her to a park bench a few feet closer to the river. "What do you know of Lady Airin?"

She was embarrassed to admit, "Nothing."

He scowled.

"I'm serious, Liam. My father hardly said two words to us about his side of the family. He may have told my mother some things, but I've never seen any family pictures but this one, and there were no stories about my ancestors. My grandparents passed away before I was born, and my father didn't have brothers or sisters." She gazed at the soothing river, barely noticing a pair of mallard ducks landing on its surface. "I'm all that's left."

"I know some history of both our families, though I now question the validity of some of what I've been told." He leaned forward, his forearms crossed on his knees. "Lady Airin's sister, Madeline, had been married to my ancestor, Jason Bothwell. The brooch was a Keith heirloom, so when Madeline died in an accident, the brooch went to Jason."

"Then why is Lady Airin wearing it in the portrait?"

"That's an excellent question." He scratched his chin and joined her in watching the two ducks waddle onto shore. "One of the brooches worn in these photos is a fake."

Now there were two? "So which one is real, and which one do I have?"

Liam shook his head, looking bewildered. "Because it's a Keith family heirloom, I have to assume the one worn by Lady

Airin is the real thing. Bothwell's must be the fake." A sardonic grin touched his lips. "And why am I not surprised?"

Her sigh of relief was audible, and Liam sat up straight to look at her. But the look on his face wasn't one of relief. It was concern. His jaw tightened as if he bit back words he wanted to say.

"What is it?" she asked.

His smile returned. "Nothing. I was just thinking about how my uncle will handle his disappointment. He's not a good sport."

"He doesn't have to be. It wasn't a game he had any chance of winning." She let her shoulders relax and felt the weight of her worries melt away. Her life would finally get back to normal again.

"You know what relieves me most?" Liam said as he tucked his ancestor's picture back in his wallet. His eyes smoldered as he held her gaze, and his voice came deep and slow. "I'm relieved to know that you and I aren't related."

She laughed and he joined her, their voices merging like music carried on the clean autumn breeze. It also carried a flurry of newly fallen leaves, the golden confetti falling around them like snowflakes set on fire. A few landed in Claire's hair and when she reached up to brush them away, Liam grabbed her hand.

"Let me," he said, plucking a few leaves from her hair. "I really like how you changed your hair."

She didn't think he'd noticed. "Thanks." She blew at the strands the wind had blown over her eyes.

He smoothed her hair back, his touch gentle despite his calloused fingers. Their roughness tripped a switch inside her and her skin warmed beneath his hand. He bent his head closer, his lips gently grazing hers.

Always the gentleman, he waited for her response. Her heart beat wildly as she eagerly pressed her mouth to his.

The kiss was soft and slow, growing in intensity as they accepted each other. When Liam kissed her, it felt almost desperate, as if he'd wanted to do this for a long time. But so had she. Liam had been her childhood crush, though she never acknowledged it because of who he was. His family was her father's enemy. That the two of them were together like this now seemed inevitable. Maybe it was meant to happen this way. If not for the brooch, they might never have reunited at all.

She was vaguely aware of the sound of running feet getting closer. Probably kids playing tag or chasing a Frisbee. It wasn't enough to distract her from the taste of him, that delicious flavor of coffee and memories. He smelled so good, so masculine, his spicy cologne and the lush green hills of Scotland filling her senses.

There was a sudden yank on her arm, then a feeling of emptiness that made her heart stop. Her handbag was gone.



## Chapter Seven

Liam inhaled Claire's scent and tasted that funny green drink she'd just finished, her tongue still cold from the slushy tea. But her lips were hot, her breath almost steamy. Her breathing quickened when he cupped the back of her head to hold her closer, melding his lips to hers. His fingers slid through thick strands of silky hair to release a fragrance of vanilla and ginger. Claire's scent was unforgettable.

She leaned into him, her breasts pressed firmly against his chest, then she jerked suddenly as if bumped from behind. She gasped and pulled away.

Jumping to her feet, she looked at the bench and the ground around it, then at the footpath beside the river. Eyes wide and brows arched in surprise, she pointed and yelled, "He took it. Oh, my God! He took my bag!"

Liam set off at a sprint behind the toe-headed man fleeing from the scene of his crime. Bend was reputed as having a low crime rate, yet just within the past few days Claire had been burgled twice, and now this—

Hold on. Damn if that wasn't Charley running like a mad man with Claire's tan purse clutched like a football under his arm. A flippin' *choob* is what he was. Dumber than a bag of rocks and just as charming.

Though Charley's legs were shorter than Liam's, he was anything but slow. He sprinted like a jackrabbit along the concrete path beside the river, barely dodging the pedestrians in his way. Liam was afraid he would run someone over just

to slow Liam down, but panic seemed to drive him without thought or reason. *You should be scared, Charley, old boy. The cops are nipping at your heels.* No sooner had he thought this than a siren howled in the distance.

If Charley got caught, and the cops took Claire's bag, what would happen to the brooch? Would they keep it, or return it to Claire? And what would be done with Charley? Liam's head felt like it would burst from thinking and running at the same time. Charley should go to prison, but Catan's rage at losing his favorite son to the law might get Claire hurt, or even dead. If she didn't give up the brooch, Catan would find a way to take it. Then Claire's death would be guaranteed. Liam had to keep his uncle happy just to keep Claire safe.

Head and lungs throbbing, he closed in on Charley just as his cousin approached the Galveston Bridge. Charley ducked to dive beneath the low-hanging structure, his feet splashing through the shallow water that lapped at the river's shore. He faltered and almost lost his footing, which slowed him down enough for Liam to tackle him to the soggy ground.

"What the hell?" Charley yelled, then sputtered as Liam held his face down in the water. He grabbed a handful of Charley's hair and lifted his head for him to catch a breath.

"What did I tell you?" Liam growled, giving his cousin's head a sharp shove toward the water again, but coming short of dunking him in. "Didn't I say to leave her alone?"

"You're so dead!" Charley wheezed, and this time Liam did dunk him, holding him down long enough to inspire a few panicked kicks and a flailing of arms. He let Charley go and stepped back.

"And you're so caught." Liam glanced up to see the police cruiser pull to a stop on the bridge above, lights spinning. "If you know what's good for you, Charley, you'll get the hell out of this country. Now."

Charley glared at him as he gasped for air, his face flushed and dank hair plastered to his head like a bathing cap. "I thought you wanted to finish this."

Liam breathed hard, partly from being winded and partly from alarm. He had only seconds to think before Officer Friendly joined them. It didn't take a genius to know Carson would be the one to arrive. The cop was like a randy dog with only one thing on his mind: Claire. This enraged Liam, yet relieved him at the same time. They shared a mutual goal of keeping Claire safe.

"Finished or not, Claire is to remain unharmed," Liam told his cousin, hoping the command in his voice had some impact. It wasn't a request. This was no schoolyard brawl or family spat. He was dead serious. "And I want your guarantee she will be."

Charley looked uncertain, then threw Claire's handbag at Liam's feet. Realizing Liam wasn't going to stop him, he leapt from the ground and darted beneath the bridge. He scrambled up the bank and disappeared within a dense grove of trees in a neighbor's backyard.

"Hey!" Carson yelled, drawing his weapon the second he arrived beneath the bridge. "Stop right there!"

"Or you'll shoot?" Liam said sarcastically. "I've heard that somewhere before. One of your American television shows, I think."

Carson faced him, his expression menacing as he pointed the gun directly at Liam. His expression changed to surprise once he realized what he was doing. Sheepish now, he slipped the weapon in its holster as a breathless Claire came stumbling down the narrow beach toward them.

Her face brightened when she saw her handbag, and she rushed to grab it from the mud. The leather bag was ruined, but she was no less cheerful while peering inside at its contents. Liam knew Charley hadn't had time to remove the brooch.

She looked around, then up at Liam. "Where is he?"

Carson crossed his arms. "He escaped."

"Escaped?" She studied Liam's face as if expecting to see signs of a beating. Taking in the condition of his river-soaked shorts and muddy legs, she scowled. "Are you all right?"

"He's fine," Carson said. "I got here just as the thief was leaving. It appeared the two of them had had a friendly chat first."

"Chat?" Claire looked confused. Voice rising, she said, "You let him go?" Then she added more softly, "And you knew him?"

"Claire, I—" Liam started, but Claire held up a halting hand.

She looked accusingly at Carson. "Why didn't you go after him?" She included Liam when she said, "Either of you. Because I bet he was the one who trashed my trailer, too."

Carson gave Liam an accusing stare. "Could be. Or maybe it was your friend here. And don't forget that we're still looking for your lawyer's killer."

Liam felt like he'd been punched in the stomach. This was news to him. "Lawyer? You mean that Peabody guy?"

This got Carson's attention. "So you knew him."

Liam's heart lurched. *Damn you, Charley!* "I knew of him, yes."

"Do you think the guy who took my purse—" Claire began, but Carson interrupted.

"You have your purse back, Claire." His eyes had turned steely and never left Liam's face. "And since your friend seems to know the thief personally, we're sure to get a good description. I think you and I should have a conversation, Mr..."

"Coyne. Liam Coyne." Liam crossed his arms to mock Carson, and the dig didn't go unnoticed. Liam knew it wouldn't. Carson lifted a set of cuffs from his belt and grabbed Liam's arm to spin him around. Latching the cuffs to his wrists, he recited Liam's rights.

"You knew the guy who snatched my purse?" Claire asked, astonishment making her voice crack. "But you said..." She cut a glance to Carson, appearing to think better of saying more. She was probably thinking what Liam had thought: Their family's feud was a private matter. But it couldn't stay that way much longer.

\* \* \* \*

"I really appreciate you doing this, Claire," Janey said.

"Hey, no problem," she told her friend, hugging the phone's handset against her neck and shoulder while loading

groceries into the fridge. "You'd do the same for me. You *have* done the same for me."

"I hate to leave you in that big empty house all alone, especially now."

"Your dad needs you, Janey. I know what it's like to have a parent in the hospital."

"I won't be in Portland more than a few days." Janey's voice was apologetic. "I wouldn't have even asked you to housesit for the Stevensons, but I'd already promised I'd do it while they're gone. With all the remodeling going on, I didn't feel comfortable leaving the house vacant."

"I understand." Claire peeked out the Stevensons' kitchen window at the gorgeous view of Mount Bachelor haloed by a setting sun. Breathtaking. The west side of Bend was a beautiful area, the homes in this particular neighborhood large and luxurious. Her mother would love a house like this and she made a mental note to get in touch with a realtor. "The timing works for me."

"You sure you'll be okay?"

"Absolutely." She sat on a tall stool and perched an elbow on the granite surface of the breakfast bar. "There are plenty of neighbors nearby, the house has a security system, and Carson is on the case."

"What about the guy who tried to steal your purse?" Janey asked.

"As good as caught." At least that's what she hoped. If Liam knew him, he also knew where to find him. He'd surely tell Carson. And once Carson realized Liam couldn't possibly

have had anything to do with Peabody Henry's murder, he'd let him go.

"You better keep your cell phone handy just in case."

"Uh..."

"*Uh* what. Is something wrong with your phone?"

Claire sighed. "I have to use the Stevensons' landline because service out here is iffy. Sometimes I get a bar or two, and sometimes no bars."

"Now I'm going to worry about you the entire time I'm gone."

"Please don't do that. I'll be fine." Or she would be as soon as Liam was with her again. She considered them a team now. He'd promised to protect her and she had complete faith he would. "Drive safe over the pass. The weather is unpredictable this time of year."

They said their goodbyes, Claire wishing Janey's father a swift recovery from his heart attack, and Janey reminding her again to be careful. *Enough already*. She understood her friend's concern, but Claire felt perfectly secure. If danger lurked nearby, she'd sense it. Liam's vow to keep her safe was like a sworn oath he'd keep no matter what.

When they'd kissed today, she had felt a bond strengthen between them. Though their time together had been short, their shared childhood was like a lifetime of memories that connected them. Despite his nasty family, he had protected her the best he could when they were kids and that hadn't changed. She felt confident the wrongness between their families would soon be put right.

Still feeling wistful, Claire practically floated up the stairs to the spare room she'd be staying in for the next few nights. When Liam was released, he could visit her here, except he didn't have the Stevensons' phone number. But Carson knew where she'd be. Claire would call him tomorrow during business hours to make sure he shared that information with Liam.

The upstairs of the house was a mess. No wonder the Stevensons had wanted to escape for a few weeks of R and R in Hawaii. Someday Claire would take a vacation to someplace even more exotic, like the Caribbean, Greece, Costa Rica, Singapore, Rio...

She passed the kids' rooms she had been hired to organize and glanced inside the den that Janey had already started working on. The room was gutted, the old wallpaper peeled back and wall-to-wall carpet ripped from the floor, bundles of wood laminate stacked in its place. A box of old LP record albums sat in the hallway beside the door and Claire tried to visualize Janey's decorating plans. She'd been right about the graffiti decor, and the albums played into the urban wall art concept. Her friend had an intriguing imagination.

The upstairs loft had a makeshift handrail that ran along a bridge connecting both floors on the second level. According to Janey, the railing's balusters were to be replaced with something sturdier and more modern than the missing originals. In the meantime, two-by-fours had been nailed in place to give the carpenters some semblance of safety while they worked. Claire approached the loft's edge to take a cautious look below. That was some drop, and the floor at the



bottom was solid travertine. A mild vertigo tugged at her insides so she stepped back to take in the outdoor view. An enormous picture window framed Mount Bachelor, the backdrop an amber sunset streaked with flaming clouds.

"Hi, Claire."

A sense of *déjà vu* tingled up her spine, only it wasn't Liam's voice she heard. She froze, her heart beating into her throat. She turned around slowly, surprised at her calm reaction and alarmed by how familiar she'd become with being victimized.

A man stood a dozen feet from her, his white-blond hair tousled like a dozen cowlicks, his blue eyes appearing almost luminescent in the dim twilight. He wasn't as tall as Liam, but there was some resemblance to how he set his jaw and cocked his head at a haughty angle. He looked rumped, as though having worn the same dirty jeans and t-shirt for several days in a row. Judging from the dark circles beneath his eyes, he hadn't slept during that time, either. He seemed edgy, his left leg twitching with pent-up energy.

She recognized him immediately. "Charley."

His grin was lopsided and a little crazy. "How nice that you remember me."

"You're hard to forget." Images came to mind of cruel pinches that had bruised the backs of her arms, holes in her bike tires, spiders in her lunch box, her coat gone missing on a sub-zero day. But retaliating against these injustices had never been a problem for Claire. She was a natural at it.

"Did the hair ever grow back?" she asked, her voice sounding less shaky than it felt in her throat.

Charley reached a hand to the back of his head. "Liam threw that rock," he said, scowling.

She grinned.

"Crivens. That was you?"

She pretended to look at her watch. "I'd love to share a walk down memory lane, Charley, but Liam will be here any minute. I don't think you want to be here when he shows up."

Charley's laugh came from his belly, deep and disturbing. It faded to a chortling wheeze before he said, "You wish."

The first seed of doubt had been planted. She refused to let it grow. "I know Liam. He'll be here any—"

"You don't know Liam at all." Charley shook his head and sauntered to the bridge, his steps slow and deliberate. "He's been working on you since the first day he saw you, wooing you for the brooch. Are you so dense you didn't notice?"

"He cares about me. He always has."

"Boy, are you naïve." Charley folded his arms across his chest. "Liam would never turn against his family, Claire. You're simply a means to an end. What can you possibly offer him? Your simple little life in this pathetic little town is a real snore. Liam would never give up the good life for you. He has everything. You have nothing."

She blinked. Was that how Liam felt? "He took my brooch away from you—"

"But he let me go. Why do you think that was?" He waggled his eyebrows. "Think about it. Liam is almost twice my size and could have easily over-taken me, but he chose not to. He let me go because he's my cousin and he cares

more about his family than he does about you." He paused to sneer at her. "You think he doesn't know I'm here?"

She pressed a hand to her chest and willed her heart to stop pounding. "What?"

Charley rolled his eyes. "This is way too easy." He slid a gun from the back pocket of his jeans and aimed it at her. "He sent me to do what he doesn't have the guts to."

Impossible. Liam loved her! But had he ever said the words? No, he hadn't. A doubt seed sprouted and began to spread. She didn't know Liam well at all. She was far too trusting, too gullible. She'd believed in Liam because she'd believed in the good fortune brought by the brooch, only it turned out her good luck charm wasn't so lucky.

Feeling faint, she closed her eyes and willed herself to think clearly. Her senses filled with Liam's spicy scent and the taste of his lips, the feel of his calloused hands in her hair, the pressure of his body against hers. It was as real as if he was with her now. Her instincts forced her to pay attention to what she knew in her heart to be true. The seeds of doubt Charley had planted were fertilized with his manure; he was a liar and a thief, and she couldn't trust a word he said.

Charley straightened his arm to narrow his aim. "Betrayal sucks, doesn't it?"

Her gaze darted to the box of record albums. She quickly scooped up a handful and tossed them, one by one, like a series of rapid-fire Frisbees. The first one went wild, sailing over Charley's head, but the second hit him in the forehead, the third scraped his cheek, and the fourth struck him squarely in the throat. None of them caused any damage, but

he was surprised as hell. When the fifth disk smacked him in the eye, he reflexively swung his gun-hand up to whack it away. The sixth hit the gun's barrel and his finger reflexively pulled the trigger. When it fired, the gun jumped out of his hand.

He arched backwards to grab for the weapon, but it flew beyond his grasp. The two-by-four railing creaked as it was forced backward, straining against the nails holding it together. He struggled to regain balance, his weight shifting to steady himself and his arms pin wheeling. Claire held her breath.

He stabilized and crouched down, his hands seeking the floor as if to reassure himself he wasn't airborne.

Claire stood paralyzed. Her mind buzzed with adrenalin as she contemplated her next move.

"You bitch!" he shouted, standing and preparing to charge. But she was faster. She bowed her head and launched forward, aiming herself at his middle like a battering ram.

The second her head connected with his belly, she pushed backward to land safely on her butt. Charley, however, resumed his frenetic pin wheeling, only it didn't do much for him this time. The railing gave way and he disappeared over the edge.

He didn't scream. There were no shouts of protest. Getting bested by Claire must have shocked him into silence. But the thud when his body hit the solid travertine below echoed throughout the house.

She stayed where she was, her breaths coming fast as her heart beat at warp speed. Other than the sound of her blood

pounding in her ears, she heard nothing. She strained to hear footsteps thud across the floor and up the stairs, but there were none. It was over.

Then came the sound of the front door swinging open and a familiar voice yelled out her name.

"I'm upstairs!" Her throat suddenly closed, her voice trapped as the tears began to flow. She was alive. And Liam was here.

A pair of feet pounded over the floor downstairs, but she knew they didn't belong to Charley. Another set of footsteps followed, accompanied by Carson's astonished voice as he said, "Holy shit." He must have just seen Charley.

Claire couldn't look. Her imagination was plenty good enough to show her what was down there.

"I'll call an ambulance," Carson said quietly, though his voice carried well through the empty house.

Liam rushed up the stairs and stopped the moment he saw her. He slowed his steps the way someone might when approaching a wounded animal. Claire did feel wounded, but she also felt relieved.

He folded her in his arms and kissed the top of her head as her body shook with sobs. She shed tears of horror for what she'd just been through, but she cried with relief as well. Liam had come for her, just like she knew he would.

Once she'd calmed herself, she settled back against his chest to breathe normally again. "So you're buddies with Carson now?"

Liam grunted. "Hardly. But I did manage to convince him you were in danger."

She shuddered, images of Charley's attack still fresh in her mind. "How did Charley find me?"

"He stole a car and followed you."

And she hadn't suspected a thing. Just thinking about Charley stalking her gave her a sick feeling in her stomach. "I thought for sure you'd know where Charley was and that you'd tell Carson," she said.

"I did tell him. But by the time I told Carson everything about the brooch and explained how much of a threat Charley was, my cousin was gone."

She swallowed, realizing she'd never been as safe as she'd thought.

Liam added, "When we didn't find him in the condo he'd been renting, I'd hoped he fled back to Europe, which meant you'd be all right. Then I wondered if Charley was just pigheaded enough to try to take the brooch himself. It was his grudge against you that set him off."

"What do you mean?"

Liam grinned. "He thought you'd bullied him as a child."

She gave him an incredulous look. "Me? A bully?"

Liam shrugged. "Uncle Catan used to tease him for allowing you to get back at him for the pranks he pulled. Charley never lived it down."

This information was a huge surprise. She'd thought herself the victim as a child when she'd really been the victor.

Claire stared into his eyes and asked, "So what happens to the brooch now?"

He squeezed her hand. "It belongs to you, Claire. To your family. My ancestor got away with a fake five hundred years ago, so chances are good that I'll get away with one, too."

She smiled. "You're a scheming devil."

He kissed her nose. "I wouldn't be me if I wasn't."

"What if I want to return the brooch to Scotland?"

He tilted his head. "Do you?"

"Yes." She heaved in a breath, feeling the rightness of her decision. "That's where it belongs."

"Okay with me. We can send it to the museum in Edinburgh for inclusion in the Keith family collection."

She brightened. "I'd love that! Is the painting of your ancestor there as well?"

He shook his head. "It's hanging above the mantel in my uncle's house."

There was a brief pause before Claire blurted, "I want to move back to Scotland."

He didn't look surprised. "I haven't been back there in years."

"Where do you live now?"

"Greece." He ran his warm hand up her arm and she shivered. "I'd love for you to see my house there. It's not nearly as magnificent as this one," he said, sweeping a hand at the vaulted ceiling above them. "But it's big enough."

Her spirits waned when she thought of her mother sequestered in the nursing home. Her mom deserved a better life than that. "I'd love to see it, but I have to think about my mom..."

"She's welcome as well," Liam told her. "I want to take care of you, Claire, and not just because of what my family put you through, but because you're special to me. You always have been."

His words seeped into her, warm and sincere, and she was again struck by a powerful feeling of rightness. Her life was back on track, and now she'd have someone to share it with.

"Ahem." Carson stood at the top of the stairs, hands in his pockets. "Claire, you can't stay here tonight."

"I know." Within a few days she'd had *three* places to stay, and now she was homeless. "But I have nowhere to go."

"You can stay with me," Carson offered, his expression serious.

Liam stiffened, then relaxed. "Nice try."

Carson grinned. "Hey, I can accept that you two are an item, but it doesn't mean I have to like it."

Claire shook her head. *Men*. "So where *am* I going to stay?"

"My hotel room." Liam's cocky grin tugged at her heart. "There's plenty of space."

"Nice try," she said, and Carson laughed. "I'll take a rain check, but a hotel is a great idea."

Carson threw up his hands and turned away to head back down the stairs.

"You'd like the place where I'm staying," Liam went on. "It's downtown, has a big hot tub, an exercise room, a great restaurant and bar. What do you say?"

She snuggled against him, feeling warm and protected. "I say okay. But I'm getting my own room."



He held her close and stroked her back. "Just let me know if you want company."

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