



*Legacy of the  
Celtic Brooch*



# *Something Borrowed*

*Kathleen  
O'Connor*

**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

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Kathleen O'Connor is the author of three novels: *No Accident*, described by Harriet Klausner of Best Reviews as "an exciting police procedural romance;" *The Way it Happens in Novels*, called a "romance leavened with wisdom" by Publisher's Weekly; and her new romantic-suspense book from Whiskey Creek Press, No Doubt, called a "well-told tale" by the New Mystery Reader.

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## Dedication

For Margaret Blake and Kathy Cottrell for all the  
encouragement and good advice.

I could see the rest of my life unfolding before my eyes and wanted to burst into tears. Instead, I fiddled with the phone cord while reassuring my cousin that her daughter's wedding was going to be wonderful—just perfect.

What I actually visualized was myself at this wedding, and all future family gatherings: the lonely, tragic figure in a shapeless blue dress and flat, sensible shoes. The family has already taken to calling me 'Poor Jody'. It was only going to get worse.

I have been divorced for less than a year but that year has changed me from carefree to cautious. I have also gone back to work as a librarian. After a twenty-year hiatus as a constantly-moving military wife, I am back to working the rookie shifts—all day Sunday and four to ten on weekdays.

"It's going to be beautiful," I repeated to my jittery cousin. "And you are going to be one gorgeous mother of the bride."

Marion sighed. "It's the day after tomorrow and there's so much to worry about."

"You've been planning for a year. What could go wrong?"

"Lots. I worry about you driving across the state alone. Can't you stay over or bring a girlfriend?"

"I work on Sunday." I also had no female friends who wanted to spend an entire day attending a total stranger's wedding. If my son wasn't busy with his rigorous studies at West Point, the Military Academy in Upstate New York, he would have escorted me. Sam understood how difficult it was for me to appear dateless at the same ceremony his father and new bride would be attending.



Marion was my favorite cousin. It was her husband Frank who introduced me to Len, his college roommate and best friend. So my ex and I were both obligated to attend the wedding though I was the one people would be watching. I could already hear them chorusing, "Poor Jody. Poor Jody."

Worse, they would compare me to Lacey, the new wife, a woman twenty-three years younger than my ex-husband.

I wished Marion had asked me if I might like to bring a date. But that was silly. Everyone knew I wasn't dating. As she chattered about last-minute problems with the florist, I glanced out my kitchen window and saw my next-door neighbor attach a magnetized decal to the driver's door of his car. Bold red lettering announced: *Rides 4 you. \$25 an hour.* Maybe this was a message for me to stop being so predictable. I squeezed the phone cord and said, "Do you mind if I bring a guy?"

There was a pause and then an enthusiastic "Yes. Give me his name and I'll go fix his place card."

*Why not become my neighbor's first customer?*

Of course, I barely knew him and what I'd heard from a gossipy neighbor indicated he was neither friendly nor especially available. Fran Zishen reported seeing him on two separate occasions eating dinner in a local restaurant with a gorgeous-looking woman who was obviously still in her twenties. He probably never dated anyone over thirty. Still, he lived alone, was about my age and handsome in an intense, athletic way. Besides, this was strictly a business deal. I squinted to read the bottom half of the decal. "Clifford Fisher," I said out loud.

"You don't call him Cliff?"

"No." Suddenly this didn't seem like such a great idea. But it was too late to back out so I hung up the phone and continued staring at my neighbor while he carefully buffed the car's black exterior. If he was half as nice to me as he was to that elegant Lexus, he would make a great wedding escort.

I would have liked to change out of my denim skirt and scruffy tee shirt but was afraid if I procrastinated for even a minute that I would totally lose my nerve. I grabbed a rubber band from the counter to pull my hair back and, checkbook in hand, headed out the door.

I wondered what Clifford Fisher heard first—my flip flops slapping against the driveway or the hammering of my nervous heart. His dark eyes held all the warmth of an icepack. Scowling, he straightened and said, "Look, if you are coming to complain about my having a business, don't waste your breath. The Association gave me permission to do this."

So he thought I was another Fran, a neighborhood busybody coming to snoop. How flattering. I shook my head and said, "I didn't come to complain. I would like to hire you for this Saturday."

Maybe I wasn't his first customer because his face wasn't registering much excitement. He went back to buffing. "I might be available."

"It will be a long day." I explained about the one hundred-forty mile drive to the wedding and a reception that might last three hours or more. "I'll just write you a check for three hundred dollars." It was my clothing allowance for the next two years.

He made eye contact for the first time. There was something about his asymmetrical face with its thin patrician nose and wide Native-American cheeks that made me feel like a weak-kneed gawky teenager. "I couldn't take that kind of money from a neighbor."

I bit my lip in disappointment. I supposed this was his way of saying 'no' in a kind way.

Before I could think of some face-saving exit line, he asked, "Do you believe in the barter system?"

He would have been the perfect escort, with an obvious assurance and a hint of silver in his long, dark hair, but I had no idea where this conversation was going so I stood there frozen.

"I'm in a bit of a jam. I invited someone for dinner tomorrow and I don't cook."

"You want me to cater a meal?" He had a date with a much younger woman who expected him to cook. He was from that generation who had been waited on hand and foot, and now had to compete with younger men who possessed culinary skills. If I wasn't about to become his chef, the situation would have been laughable. "Cooking a meal isn't worth three hundred dollars."

"I think it might be. Come look at the state of my house. And I'd want the table set, flowers, the whole deal. I sort of lack those domestic touches—whaddya call them?"

Inside I smiled. "Knick knacks?"

"Yeah, those. The whole place lacks ... uhm, whaddya call it—oh, yeah, ambience."

That was an understatement. I followed him into his dark, cool home and stared. The black leather living room furniture looked unused. There was no coffee table and no color in the room.

The house had an unfinished look as if he couldn't be bothered with paintings or books or anything that gave a peek into his personality. The kitchen was just as barren. A few plates rested in the kitchen sink and though all his appliances were brand new they looked dusty.

"I don't eat here much," he admitted. "I have my morning coffee and toast but otherwise eat out."

"I'll bring over a few vases and some colorful knick knacks. I'm a garage sale junkie, so I have plenty to choose from."

"That would be great."

I started towards the door, then halted. A laptop computer and a week's worth of newspapers covered the dining room table, but all I noticed was the ornate silver brooch that rested beside them on bubble pack. It glowed in the Florida afternoon sunlight and drew me forward like a magnet. I reached to touch it. "Is this a family heirloom?"

"No, just a delivery job."

I didn't believe him. He spoke with deliberate casualness but there had been a tension and hair-trigger alertness in his posture when I asked about the brooch. The pin was massive with gleaming gold in its center. I fingered the Irish Claddaugh symbol for love on its right side and knew the Celtic spirals on the left signified the soul's journey to eternity. My grandmother's grandmother, Deirdre Sullivan, had left Ireland with a similar looking brooch. It had been lost

during the Civil War, but I had often heard tales of its beauty. Until now I had never seen one with those particular symbols though as a teenager I had haunted consignment shops searching for one to give my grandmother.

He watched me stare at the brooch and added, "A close friend asked me to deliver it to a certain place at a certain time."

I nodded as if I believed him and checked my watch. "I'm about to go to work so I'll start here tomorrow morning at eight. I'll clean then leave dinner in the crock pot and a strawberry and mandarin-orange salad for you to serve." I'd pick up flowers, buy a bakery dessert and wonder about my sanity later. "Is there anything you or your date can't eat?" I figured it was safe to assume this was going to be a romantic encounter. He wouldn't be worrying about his lack of ambiance if it was a relative or one of the guys coming over for a meal.

"I eat anything, but she's not crazy about fish, grouper and stuff like that."

I nodded. "I had a chicken recipe in mind."

"Great. See you in the morning."

I didn't have any illusions that he might help me with the preparations. When I arrived the next morning, cleaning supplies in hand, he was on his way out the door. "Airport run."

He was dressed completely in black and looked like Richard Gere—only better—and I felt like Cinderella as I donned rubber gloves and piled dishes into the sink.

My mood lifted as the smell of lemon dish liquid filled the kitchen and George Strait crooned to me from the radio. But that brooch haunted me. I kept stopping my work to go into the dining room to stare at it. It seemed to glow with generations of Celtic secrets. Strong women had worn it. Women like my grandmother's grandmother who survived a rough ocean crossing, then made her way in a new country with few assets other than a pretty piece of jewelry.

I stood there staring at the brooch and wondered how it had come into Clifford Fisher's possession, and why he treated what looked to me like a priceless heirloom with such carelessness.

None of my business, I reminded myself and went back to the kitchen. At a time when my own life was spinning out of control I found pleasure in cleaning and organizing. I stuck my sponges in the microwave to warm them and went to work. By ten I had the appliances gleaming and was finished scrubbing the counters. I sashayed into the living room with my vacuum and dust rag and by noon had the place looking like it was ready for a House Beautiful photo shoot thanks to a bunch of items pulled from my garage.

I had brought over a hammered metal tray that rested on a collapsible mahogany stand to use as a coffee table and accented it with a brightly painted ceramic bowl crisscrossed with orange, green and purple patterns. Both items had been purchased in Greece when Len was stationed there. Clifford Fisher was welcome to them. Since his appliances and furniture were black, it was easy to accessorize. I chose a

jazzy red decanter to leave in the kitchen and a cobalt blue vase to place on the dining room table.

As I set the vase down, I looked again at the gorgeous brooch and wondered about its past—was it the same piece of jewelry a young Deirdre Sullivan had brought over from Ireland?

At the Publix Market, I bought the ingredients for dinner, found floral dinner napkins and purchased white carnations that would look good in the blue vase. A lemon pie completed my shopping. For some bizarre reason the success of Mr. Fisher's evening became vitally important to me—which made no sense really, considering my history. My husband had left me for a thirty-two-year-old. Why was I helping this guy hook up with someone even younger? I figured this was going to be the same young woman Fran had seen him dining with.

By two o'clock the fragrant aroma of chicken relaxing in tomatoes, onion and artichokes emanated from the crock pot and I was putting the final touches on the table setting. His plates were beige and functional but combined with the floral napkins and the centerpiece, they looked high end. I left the brooch glittering in the center of the table.

I was just gathering my cleaning supplies when he banged through the door and exclaimed, "I can't believe it. You're a miracle worker! That's what you are—an absolute miracle worker."

With a modest nod, I told him to serve the chicken at seven and pointed to the salad resting in the fridge. "Just add the dressing before you serve it."

He looked so extraordinarily pleased I figured this must be a big date.

"Fix you coffee," he offered.

I hesitated.

He plugged in the coffeemaker. "I set it up earlier so it will be ready in just a couple minutes."

"I guess I have time for a quick cup then I've got to get ready for work. I work four to ten at the college library." While others were coming home to relax and have dinner with their families, I was setting off to work. But most of the time I didn't mind. The job gave me the opportunity to refresh my research skills and kept me busy during evenings that otherwise would have been spent alone in unproductive reflection.

"And you've already been laboring hard here." He poured the coffee and handed me a mug with a kind smile. "You need this caffeine. When you work those afternoon and evening shifts, you always end up doing a day's work before you get to your real job. I worked both the afternoon and graveyard shifts for years. Sometimes I did double and triple shifts."

I figured he must have worked in health care, law enforcement, the fire service or some other profession that required its personnel to work round the clock. And though he possessed no other culinary skills, the guy made an excellent cup of coffee. I took sips as I followed him into his transformed living room and sat on the leather couch.

He gave me that thousand-watt smile as he gestured to his gleaming house. "You have no idea what this means to me."



He was right. I had no idea. My romantic life was nonexistent. Not that I was trying either. I gave my ancient cutoffs a tug down and felt suddenly shy. "Love the coffee," I blurted.

"I have friends in Hawaii who are in the business."

"I could tell it was special." He appeared to be eyeing my legs, which puzzled me. They were lean and muscled but certainly didn't belong to a twenty-year-old. Still, it felt good to bask in the appreciation.

He pointed to the coffee table. "I know you said you are a librarian but you really could have been an interior decorator. These are just the right touches. I moved from a high-rise in New Jersey with rented furniture and a weekly maid service, so I'm starting from scratch. I had an interior decorator come in but she was dressed in pink and orange and looked kind of like a parrot. She also wanted to turn my home into a jungle with all these tropical prints and potted plastic palm trees. I like a simpler look."

I laughed. "I know the parrot lady and she is expensive."

"More coffee?"

I nodded. The Kona blend was delicious, and I was beginning to relax in his presence.

"What brought you to Florida?"

"My dad passed away last year and left me the house. I was in a bit of a financial jam so I moved here." I didn't tell him about my divorce and how Len had squandered our savings on other women. My ex was an officer but no gentleman. I looked at my ring-less left finger and forced a sad smile. "My dad was a terrific guy. I miss him terribly."

"Know what you mean. My mom was terrific too. Not that I saw her a lot—she was always flying abroad with her import business. But when she died I felt like a house without a foundation."

I nodded. "That's exactly how it feels." I drained the coffee and thanked him. He had an easy presence and I found myself feeling jealous of the young woman who was joining him for dinner.

"What time do we leave tomorrow for the wedding?"

"We'll have to leave at seven. The wedding is in West Palm Beach so we'll drive south on I-75, then cross over Alligator Alley."

"That Everglades Parkway can be a lonely road, especially at night. I can see why you wanted a driver."

I was glad he misunderstood my intentions. He thought I was worried about the long drive from Naples on the west coast of Florida to Weston on the Atlantic coast that extended through a deserted section of the Everglades. But traveling Alligator Alley at night wouldn't have bothered me half as much as arriving at another family wedding alone. He thought he was a chauffeur but was really an escort service

"You said seven?"

I nodded.

Ouch," he answered but kept smiling.

I passed the dining room table on my way out and stared at the brooch longingly. I fingered it one last time.

"Something about this pin really speaks to my Celtic heritage."

"Do you want to wear it tomorrow?"

"Could I?"

"Sure. I don't need to transport it until next week." He dropped it into my hand as if it were cheap costume jewelry.

On my way out the door he gave my arm a friendly squeeze. "Looking forward to tomorrow."

I doubted that but found his politeness refreshing.

My early morning departure probably put a bit of a damper on his big date. When I got home from work that night, he and the young lady (the operative word being *young*) stood under his garage lights having an intense conversation. She was beautiful with sleek shining hair and was not much older than the coeds at the college where I worked.

That night I didn't count sheep but instead thought of all the glamorous celebrities who were older than I: Jessica Lange, Cher, Goldie Hawn, Meryl Streep and Glenn Close. My favorite movie scene involved a sixty-something Sophia Loren and a sexy red dress.

Alas, no sexy red dress hung in my closet. The next morning I pinned up my long hair to better display the brooch and pulled on my trusty blue silk shirtwaist. The dress had been expensive but never especially flattering, and now it was too big as well. But it was all I had, so I pinned on the sparkling brooch, found some strappy sandals and headed out to meet my driver.

Not only was he prompt and smelling scrumptious (Ralph Lauren, I decided) but there was a hot cup of coffee waiting for me in the circular slot between the seats. "You are going to get a lot of business if you treat your customers this well."

"Hope so. I'm getting kind of antsy. I retired last year and the days are just too long. I'm hoping there's a need for a car service."

"You'll do well." He would. Besides being a competent driver, he was so good looking that women would book a ride to nowhere just for the view. And since our first meeting, his disposition had improved remarkably. He was almost cheerful. "Terrific dinner," he told me.

So okay, he wasn't available and didn't date anyone over thirty. That didn't mean we couldn't enjoy the day together.

He slipped Brooks & Dunn into the CD player. "You left my radio set at a country station."

"What a good detective you are!"

"How perceptive."

So he was a retired cop. I guess I'd known that. There was a vigilance about him that fit with the profession.

I stared at the window and explained. "I haven't always been a country and western fan. It's just that my husband divorced me last year and all of a sudden I wanted some 'kicked to the curb' heartache music."

"What a moron your ex was."

*And what a lying flatterer you are.* Still, there was something so relaxing about being with an unavailable man. There was just no pretense involved. "I really appreciate your coming to this event with me. I just can't manage a wedding on my own right now especially since my ex will be there with his new wife."

"I understand."

Traffic was getting heavier on I-75 and as we passed Fort Myers I said, "Thomas Edison and Henry Ford had winter estates here. You can tour them. The grounds are beautiful."

"Let's do that when we both have a day off."

*Yeah, right.* I remembered the young girl I saw him with last night. I took a sip of the tepid coffee just as he braked and muttered, "You ass," to the driver who had cut him off.

The coffee went flying, first towards the sky roof, then tipped and poured all over the skirt of my dress. With a fluid motion he maneuvered the car into the breakdown lane, then passed paper towels to me. "Are you burned?"

"Not at all, but my dress is wrecked. Let's just go home. I was dreading this wedding anyway."

"I didn't take you for being a quitter."

That made me bristle. What did he know of my life? There he was, Mr. Perfect with his hip linen suit and a pool of young girls lining up to date him. "You don't even know me."

He ignored the edge to my voice as he yanked the car back onto the Interstate. "But I do. You've got style, you're generous, and you can cook. We'll stop somewhere in Naples and you can buy a new dress."

I fingered my sticky skirt and felt so defeated. "Naples is full of expensive boutiques that I can't afford."

"Well I want to buy your coffee table. It looks good in my living room—real good."

"You are welcome to that table. I bought it at a time when I was using retail therapy to avoid acknowledging that my husband was unfaithful. I'm happy to have it out of the garage."

"That may be, but if you went to sell that on E-Bay you'd get a thousand or more for it. I checked last night. And that hand-painted bowl looks as if it belongs there too. If you also want that out of your garage, I'll take them both."

He named a sum that was more than generous, so I threw in the vase and decanter as part of the deal. That left me with more than enough money to buy a mint-green sheath dress that was stylish, backless, and suited the brooch perfectly.

When I emerged from Arabella's clutching the silver shopping bag that held my stained shirtwaist and approached the Lexus, Cliff dropped his newspaper. The corner of his mouth tipped up in a strange sort of smile. "You look invincible."

I felt beautiful and appreciated that he didn't drone about how transformed I was and how matronly the other garment made me look. The store clerks in Arabella's had left me feeling more humiliated than complimented. This guy was classy and I again envied those twenty-five-year-olds he dated.

"There will be no beverage service on the remainder of this trip," he warned.

"Damn right. I'm not spilling anything on this dress."

The rest of the ride was uneventful. A stack of Kenny Chesney CD's serenaded us through the Everglades and we were at the church twenty minutes before the wedding began.

I saw Len and Lacey sitting three pews ahead of us, but I no longer minded. In fact, I was relieved to not have to cater to Len's moodiness. His new wife was welcome to him.

Despite my Cousin Marion's worries, the ceremony went off without a hitch. I squeezed her arm afterwards and said, "Told you so. It was beautiful." She looked triumphant but tired. She wore a beaded white dress and other wedding guests kept kidding her, "There are two brides today." But I thought she looked more like a general than a bride. No detail escaped her forceful attention. She stared at the brooch and squealed, "You found it! You found Deirdre Sullivan's brooch." In high school she had been my companion as we searched for a brooch that fit Grandma's description.

"No. A friend loaned me this."

Disappointed, she switched her scrutiny to Cliff and advanced on him, loudly demanding, "How long have you two been dating?"

Cops are fast responders and schooled for the unexpected so he did great by answering, "That's a secret."

But I turned beet red and as soon as we had a private moment, whispered to him, "I misled her a little."

He flashed that killer grin. "That's all right. She is pretty terrifying. Woman like that can't be trusted with the truth."

"She means well." For a second I felt a bit self conscious knowing that my escort was practically a gigolo. Still, when a stone-faced Len approached, I put a death grip on Cliff's arm.

"Out of deference to you, we won't be attending the reception." He turned heel and left. It was all executed with cold precision.

"Was that himself?" Cliff asked. "Self-important prick, isn't he?"

God bless him, he made me laugh. There was a lot to be said for paid escorts. I watched Len walk away. He couldn't dance and hated receptions but had probably convinced himself into thinking he was doing something magnanimous here.

A retreating Lacey could be heard whining, "I thought you said she was frumpy."

Cliff held the door of the Lexus open for me. I got in, fingered the brooch, took a few deep breaths and was ready to face the rest of my family.

I had worried that the long reception might bore him but he appeared to enjoy himself, listening to one of my uncles going on and on about the marvels of computers. "When I started working, my company's basement was full of huge mainframes. When I retired you could run the whole payroll system off a laptop."

Cliff nodded appreciatively as if this was fascinating information. My ex would not have been that polite. When Len wasn't dominating the conversation, he sat and sulked.

"Dance?"

We got up and headed towards the other couples on the dance floor. Family members watched us more with shock than approval. I wasn't behaving as they had expected. *Too damn bad!* We stayed on the floor through a ballad, a gyrating Aerosmith tune and then a sexy rumba. I hadn't danced in years and it felt so energizing. I was glad for another slow tune because it felt so very good to be in Cliff's arms—maybe too good. I knew I wasn't just performing for the family; I was playing with fire and couldn't allow myself to



become attracted to this unavailable man. He preferred his women young, and I already had enough humiliation in my life.

As soon as the slow dance ended I rushed to the ladies room. *Get ahold of yourself*, I warned.

The powder room was pretty with real flowers and a wicker chaise lounge. I thought about resting on it for awhile. I was foolishly falling for Cliff Fisher and wanted to hide from him and all these adolescent emotions. Unfortunately I'd been spotted. My niece Eileen stood in front of the block-long mirror applying lipstick. "Aunt Jody you look beautiful. And what a hunk you're with. Is it serious?"

I shook my head. The whole event was starting to depress me because it was all such a sham. I had hired a man to escort me and soon the magical afternoon would end. All I would have to show for the day was the expensive dress because both the guy and the brooch were borrowed.

By the time I returned to the table, dinner was being served. I unfurled my napkin as Cliff said, "I would have liked this if I hadn't just eaten your artichoke chicken."

It was time to burst my bubble. "Tell me about your date last night. I saw her; she's quite beautiful."

"Isn't she pretty?"

There was such pride in his voice that I wanted to burst into tears. Instead I took a sip of wine.

"But that wasn't a date. That was my daughter."

I stared at him incredulously, I had this all wrong. I tried to hide my grin with a napkin as a sad look crossed his face.

"Her mother and I divorced when she was two. I never got to know her. Her mom moved to Florida while I was working major crimes in Trenton, New Jersey. I tried to keep in touch but you can't be close with one visit a year. Then a few years ago, after another busted marriage, I realized I had no life. I kept arresting the same drugged up, dead-eyed people over and over again. I knew more about certain criminals than my own daughter."

I gulped down a lot of mistaken assumptions. "I'm so glad you are getting to know her now."

"That was only our third meeting since I've lived here and she was very pleased that we didn't eat in a noisy restaurant. She also appreciated how elegant everything looked. You did a beautiful job, Jody. It was as if you knew how important the evening was to me."

I stared at the brooch. Maybe I had.

When it was time for the bride to throw the bouquet, Marion encouraged me to join the assembling single women.

"I don't know. I feel too old for this."

"Go," Cliff whispered. "You are cuter than any of them."

The bouquet sailed right over my shoulder. But I didn't care. All that mattered was that a kind, intelligent man was watching me with obvious appreciation. I had worn the borrowed brooch, gone to the ball and maybe prince charming wasn't as unavailable as I thought.

As we made our way back to the car, I unclasped the brooch then set it on the leather seat of the Lexus and stared at it. "Thank you for letting me borrow this." For the second time I asked, "Is this a family heirloom?"

"I don't know its history. I don't think anybody owns it. It seems to drift through lives and reframe them." He gave me an intense look that I couldn't read. "One day I'll explain how it came to me."

"No need," I said with a lightness I didn't feel. It was very possible we'd never share anything more than good neighbor waves in the future. He'd been an attentive and charming escort but there'd been no clue he was feeling anything romantic towards me.

He drove fast through the Everglades. Florida was in a terrible drought and some part of the swamp was on fire. You could smell the acrid smoke. "Glad you came with me."

"There's no way I'd want you out here alone."

That sounded sweet but I knew it was the cop in him speaking. It was close to midnight when he dropped me off at my house. "Do you work tomorrow?"

"Yes," I answered, "Noon to six." I patted his arm. "Thank you so much for a perfect day."

He gave me a quick kiss and that was it.

Fortunately Sunday was a busy day for me so I couldn't spend it brooding over whether I'd ever hear from Cliff Fisher again. After church I changed into a lightweight coral twin set and slacks before heading to the library.

Most of the students weren't yet back from their weekend so when I heard the chirp of my cell phone I felt no reservations about answering it.

"Heard you were looking hot yesterday, Mom."

Sam's optimistic voice always lifted my spirits.

"Got myself a new dress."

"Dad says you also have a new beau."

Len, for all his faults, was an attentive father and kept Sam updated on all family events. "I wish. That was my neighbor Cliff Fisher."

"The Fishers are back!"

"Back?"

"Sure. Remember the sweet older lady who used to live next to Grandpa? That was Mrs. Fisher."

"I do remember a glamorous looking woman who moved away years ago. The house was empty until he moved in."

"She must have never sold the house. I always liked her. One Christmas holiday when I was eight, Cliff Fisher was visiting her and took me fishing in the Gulf of Mexico. Do you remember?"

"No. But it sounds like something he'd do."

"Do you like him?"

"I don't know, Sam. Everything is so complicated at my age."

"Follow your heart."

I pondered his advice as I re-shelved reference books and helped a student with a marketing assignment. Maybe I'd wait a week and then give Cliff a friendly call.

At six I powered down the copier and computers before locking up. The college was in summer session, library usage was down and so we were closing earlier on the weekends.

On my late shifts, a campus security officer sometimes escorted me to my car. Tonight I was on my own and there was a black car parked tight by mine. I cautiously pulled my car keys out and waited. The car looked familiar as did the

driver. Relaxing, I proceeded to my car door as the window of the Lexus beside me slid down.

"Fancy a pizza?"

I smiled at the sound of Cliff's voice and approached the Lexus. "At first I didn't recognize your car without the decals. I'd love some pizza."

"Get in then."

In the parking lot of Manny's pizzeria, Cliff turned to me. "Before we eat I want to explain about the brooch and how it came into my possession. There's a velvet pouch in the glove box. Pull it out."

I unfurled the purple velvet sack and saw a handwritten note.

"The note and the brooch were handed to me at my mom's funeral by a total stranger," he said. "Later, I couldn't even remember what the guy had looked like, but I know that's Mom's handwriting. It's a combination of Palmer method and shaky old age."

On lined paper a feminine hand had written:

*Cliff,*

*It is time for you to become steward of this brooch. To do the job well you must follow these conditions:*

+ You need to move to Florida and be near your daughter. Time is short for getting to know her.

+ Of course, this means taking early retirement. That will be hard but you've spent your life in service. It's now necessary to focus on your own needs for family, hobbies and companionship.

+ Don't hide the brooch. Leave it prominently displayed. A woman will want to borrow it. Allow that and accompany her to the event where she will wear it. She is trustworthy and will become a close friend.

+ Once these three conditions are met, you must pass along the brooch to the Papageorge family in Hawaii. Ask the woman to accompany you.

I folded the note and replaced it in the bag. "You did everything your mother asked."

"I want to do something she didn't ask."

He leaned over to brush his lips against mine and it felt so very, very right. "I thought there was some chemistry between us."

I was too embarrassed to explain how attracted I was to him. I fingered the brooch. "We need to pass this along."

"And you'll come with me?"

"Of course. I have vacation saved up." It was the most impetuous thing I'd ever committed to and yet I knew without a doubt this trip was one I'd never regret taking. I was taking Sam's advice and following my heart.

"She left us the fare for the trip and the hotel rooms. You'll have your own room. We'll go on this trip as friends and maybe we'll come back as more than that."

"We'll just see how it goes." I didn't feel cautious at all. In fact I would have followed him into the Gobi desert. But Hawaii! Already I could hear the pounding surf. I was going to Hawaii! What a wise lady his mother was. She had let the brooch choose for Cliff and in doing so had made my life infinitely better as well.

I set the velvet pouch back in the glove box and reached for Cliff's extended hand. "I'm looking forward to another cup of that great Hawaiian coffee."

"You'll get one," he said with certainty. "You will."

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