

FOR LOVE OR MONEY

By Karen Duvall

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 burly 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."

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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—?”

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“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 Coynes.”

“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 Coynes, 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 clothing.”

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 Claire'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.

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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."

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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 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. "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.

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"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.