

Hart's Desire

Pirates & Petticoats Novel One

By Chloe Flowers

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Thanks to Kathleen Woodiwiss and her novel *A Rose in Winter*,

I became an avid reader of Historical Romance.

Thanks to Peter Pan and The Pirates of the Caribbean,

I became a fan of pirate tales (real and imagined).

Thanks to the Sunshine Critique Group: Wendy Larken, Kate Pembroke,

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I became a writer.

Thanks to Bella Andre, Barbara Freethy, Courtney Milan

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I became a better writer.

Thanks to my tall, dark, and handsome husband,
and his patience and encouragement, I'm living my dream.

And thanks to *you*, I have a new reader.

I would not be a published author otherwise...

I'm grateful and blessed.

CAF

This book is a work of fiction.

Names, characters, places and incidents are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual people, (living or dead) events or places is entirely coincidental.

Bonus material: Please enjoy the first few pages of the next book in the Pirates and Petticoats novels, *Hart's Passion*, inserted at the end of *Hart's Desire*!

I've also included some recipes prepared by Ruth, one of the characters in *Hart's Desire*. The dishes Ruth served were inspired by recipes from: *An Antebellum Household Journal Including the South Carolina Receipts and Remedies of Emily Warton Sinkler*, by Anne Sinkler Whaley LeClercq. I purchased it in Charleston when touring a plantation home; it's filled with wonderful information about life in the Lowcountry.

CHAPTER ONE

Charleston, South Carolina

May 1811

Two figures circled, each with a sword in one hand and a dagger in the other. The first stood tall and lithe. His blade flashed, barely visible in the early morning light. His opponent, smaller in both build and height, quickly used his dagger to block the slicing blade.

Merchant ship captain, Landon Hart, and his best friend and business partner, Captain Conal O'Brien, crept to the edge of the clearing for a better view of the duel.

"We'll skirt the meadow and keep behind the cover of the trees," Landon said in a low voice. As an orphaned youth, he'd been in his fair share of unbalanced skirmishes. In more familiar surroundings, rather than among the vast plantation estates outside the city of Charleston, he would have already intervened. As it was, he and Conal had just turned down the lane to Twin Pines when they heard the clash of swords nearby.

A thick layer of dead pine needles on the forest floor muffled their steps. Soon they were close enough to hear the whisper and hiss of the blades slicing the air, followed by the strident metallic *clash* and *ching* as sword met sword.

Although the larger dueler had tinges of gray at his temples, he moved with a seasoned grace and nimble ease. Fluid arcs followed quick thrusts in seamless sequence. His sleeves were rolled to the elbows, shirt tucked into his breeches.

The boy's breeches were thin at the knees and stuffed into a pair of boots several sizes too large. A faded blue length of cloth wrapped his head, tied at the base of his neck where the tail hung halfway down his back. Even in the oversized boots that threatened to trip him up with every thrust, the surprisingly quick and light-footed waif held his own.

Landon glanced around the rest of the meadow. The two duelers seemed to be alone. There were no mounts or wagons nearby, so this didn't appear to be an

ambush or an attempt at a robbery. He saw no seconds to serve as witnesses, nor a physician standing ready, so perhaps not a planned duel. But then, what was it?

Conal leaned closer, keeping his voice low. "Doesn't seem a fair fight. I'm going to put a stop to it." His eyebrows shot up as the boy's dagger flashed in an arc away from his body, catching the upper shaft of his opponent's sword. The youth beat the tip away and began his own attack with his long blade.

"Wait." Landon placed a hand on Conal's arm. His friend had a knack for acting first and thinking second when it came to physical confrontations. "I don't think it's an earnest fight," Landon murmured, as he studied the movements of the duelers. "It seems to me that it's a training session of some sort. Let's see how the young one fares. I find it peculiar a grubby whelp wields such a fine weapon but wears such poorly fitted boots."

Conal watched another moment and nodded his agreement. He relaxed and leaned a shoulder against a tree trunk.

"Step away, Keelan," the older man said in a clipped British accent. He swung his sword in a swift upward flash toward the lad's shoulder. "You are offering too short a path to your middle. It leaves you vulnerable to my long blade."

Keelan. An Irish name. Many families from Great Britain, his included, took the crossing to America hoping to start a better life. Interesting that an Englishman took the time to tutor an Irish lad.

In answer, the urchin, Keelan, slashed his sword diagonally down across his opponent's exposed stomach, neatly slicing a ten-inch swath in the older man's linen shirt.

"You mean like that, Daniel?" he retorted with a barely contained smirk. He also spoke with a British accent to his tongue. British with an Irish name, curious.

"He's but a lad barely weaned," Conal whispered. "His voice still has the high pitch of a child."

The two combatants paused. Daniel scowled at the tear in his shirt. Lunging forward, he swung his weapon in a rapid combination while the boy tried valiantly to block the attack. The blows thundered harder, the blade hissing like an angry snake. However, it wasn't the man's skill that brought the boy down.

It was the boots.

The thick meadow grass snagged his heel and foiled his hasty retreat. With a loud "Oof!" Keelan went down hard on his backside, the jolt knocking the sword from his grasp.

"You are finished," Daniel said. He pointed the tip of his weapon to the boy's chest.

"Perhaps it is time to make our presence known," Landon said, stepping from

the shelter of the trees. If he was wrong about the training, another moment's delay could mean the boy's life. He wouldn't stand idly and allow the outmatched lad to be harmed. "Hold!"

Daniel's head jerked up. As soon as the shout distracted the man, Keelan reacted. He kicked his legs up and somersaulted backward, losing both boots in the process. The maneuver put him in a crouched position ready to fight again. He threw his dagger.

Landon and Conal both yelped and dove to the ground as the weapon whizzed over their heads and landed on the forest floor somewhere behind them.

Daniel shook his head. "Your throw was not balanced." With his hand on his hip, he stood over Keelan and jabbed the air with his sword. "Your chest must point to your target before you release."

"What matters is I threw first, which yields me five points!" The boy flexed his hand and licked the inside of his thumb. "It beats the three you get for disarming me, aye, Daniel? I win our game today."

Daniel glanced at his wounded shirt, then over at the trees where Keelan had thrown the dagger.

"An interesting game," Landon said, brushing his breeches as he got back to his feet.

Daniel turned toward them, pointing the tip of his sword at Landon's chest before stepping in front of the boy. "Have you business at Twin Pines?"

Conal stepped forward, drawing the movement of Daniel's sword with him. "My uncle, Fynn Ahern, scheduled a meeting with Commodore Grey for this morning."

Daniel lowered his sword. "The Commodore does indeed have an appointment with a Mr. Ahern today. Why is he not with you?"

Conal cleared his throat. "Mr. Ahern is dead. I'm Captain Conal O'Brien of the *Seeker*. This is my business partner, Landon Hart, captain of the *Desire*. We were Mr. Ahern's business associates."

Daniel shook Conal's hand before he addressed Keelan once more. "Your skills have developed well. I'm proud of your progress." He deftly flipped his own dirk from his hand. The knife hit the same tree where, moments before, Conal had stood. It hit with a solid *thunk*, and the bottom half of a feather wedged into the bark, fluttered lazily to the ground.

He shot a glance at Keelan. "Your impatience and lack of concentration denied you the ten points you would have had if you actually had *hit* the target. Instead, you're left with a meager five points and a nasty little cut." He reached down and helped the lad up. "Is it deep?"

"No, only a scratch. Slaney will rub marigold tincture on it and it'll be fine." Keelan said. He too, spoke with a British accent. He warily eyed the two

strangers as he retrieved his stray boots.

"You have us at a disadvantage, sir," Conal said.

Daniel put a hand to his chest and introduced himself. "I'm Daniel Hunter, valet to Commodore George Grey the newest owner of Twin Pines Plantation." He sheathed his sword and wiped his brow with his sleeve. Although only a couple of hours after sunrise, the air was thick and still, his shirt already damp with sweat from the exertion of dueling.

Landon assessed the boy. His shoulders, though slight, were straight and proud. Not much muscle to his arms. His wrists were thin, almost feminine, making Landon even more impressed with Keelan's skill. Recalling the trials of his own youth, before Conal's Uncle Fynn had taken him under his wing, he understood Keelan's desire to best a skill.

"You're quick for one so young," Landon complimented.

The boy shot an uneasy glance toward Daniel, grabbed an oversized boot and shoved his foot inside.

"Well, yes, er..." Daniel glanced at the ragged figure busy snatching the second rebellious boot from the grass. The valet shrugged. "The lessons are for the child's protection. Several family members recently died under rather suspicious circumstances, so Keelan's father has decided the training should become more intense."

"Your hand with a sword is impressive, Keelan." Landon gestured toward Daniel. "It's apparent you are being given excellent instruction."

Daniel smiled and inclined his head, accepting the compliment.

"My crew and I must be keen with sword, pistol and dagger, if we're to survive encounters with privateers and pirates on the seas. We all must do our part to defend the ship. May I voice an observation?" he asked.

"Please do," said Daniel.

He gestured to Keelan's dagger. "Work on the short blade further. 'Tis a more valuable skill to have." The lad tensed so he smiled to put him at ease but peered at him more closely. There was something strange about the boy that seemed a bit...off.

The youth slammed his booted foot on the ground and straightened, his face flushed. "I don't normally miss so badly," he muttered. "I suppose a sailor can do better?"

Daniel's eyes narrowed in apparent warning, and the boy dropped his gaze and busied himself by brushing the meadow grass from his sleeves before straightening the faded blue rag covering his head.

"I didn't mean to offend." Amused by the lad's pluck Landon added, "But in answer to your question, aye, any of my crew can do better. If not, they wouldn't be part of the crew for long. Now, if you'll adjust your grip like so..." Pulling out his own dagger, he placed it in the boy's hand, careful to avoid the cut. He

moved behind and reached around the lad's chest to adjust his grip. "Mr. Hunter is correct about facing your chest to the target. But, you must also cock the hand back, like this." He flexed the boy's wrist. "Try it."

Keelan stood still, taut as a fiddle string, his other fist clenched at his side. Daniel took a step forward then stopped, as if someone else's legs were attached to his body and he wasn't sure how to move them.

"Widen your stance a bit and bring this foot forward." Landon placed his leg against the inside of the boy's thigh and kicked his foot away and forward then squeezed his shoulders and gave them a rough shake. "Relax."

Oddly, Keelan remained motionless. Was the boy angry with him for his tutelage? Keelan seemed to struggle to remain composed. Landon frowned; how irritating the runt acted so ungratefully. At that age, he would have lapped up this lesson like a thirsty pup. He'd been on his own from a young age, and he grew up fast. He learned many harsh lessons in the process. Not the least had been how to defend himself against a bigger opponent.

Landon stepped back. He half expected the child to fling the blade into the pines as hard as he could, and stomp away. But pride seemed to outweigh Keelan's anger, and he relaxed his shoulders. He balanced the blade in his hand, drew back, cocked his wrist, and threw it. It hit the tree with a *thunk*, pinning the top half of the feather to the bark. The boy pursed his lips; Landon couldn't tell whether it was in grim satisfaction or acute irritation that the instruction had corrected his flaw.

"There, you see?" He clapped Keelan on the back. "You're a quick learner. We'd gladly welcome you as a ship's hand aboard the *Desire*."

"Thank you...Captain," Keelan said. The corners of his mouth lifted a little.

"You'd best get along now, and tell Slaney to inform the Commodore and Mr. Grey the men from the *Desire* have arrived and will be at the house shortly." Daniel grasped the lad's elbow and steered him in the direction of the house.

Keelan gave a curt nod and scuffed away. Daniel bent to retrieve the boy's fallen sword, walked to the tree and wrenched the captain's weapon from the trunk.

Landon's bemused gaze followed the lad's awkward gait to the edge of the meadow, where the youth halted and turned to face them. Slowly and deliberately, he reached his hand up to his head and gave the men a jaunty salute. Before Landon could raise a hand to respond, the boy pulled the long blue scarf from his head.

Landon froze.

Conal's jaw dropped.

Long auburn hair cascaded over the waif's shoulders and down to her elbows. Not a boy, but a young woman.

She flashed a triumphant smile, obviously satisfied she had sufficiently

astonished them. There was a toss of her head and a flash of blue, then she disappeared. Her laughter hung on the breeze for a moment then it too drifted away, leaving behind a stunned silence.

Landon replayed the last few moments in his mind. His arm across her chest adjusting the blade...his knee nudging the inside of her thigh to widen her stance...It's a wonder she didn't clobber him over the head with her sword.

Keelan's face hadn't been flushed with anger and restraint; instead, she'd been blushing in acute embarrassment. Landon caught sight of the valet's barely extinguished frown.

"My apologies," he said, fighting to smother a grin.

Daniel nodded. He fidgeted with his belt a moment before he spoke. "It's best forgotten, if you will." He handed the dirk to the captain. "Come, let's retrieve your horses and get them to the stables. Commodore Grey and his brother are most curious as to the nature of this meeting you have requested.

CHAPTER TWO

She'd made a terrible mistake. A stupid mistake.

Keelan jogged down the path in the direction of the main house. She'd retrieved Daniel's dirk from the tree trunk and her own poorly thrown dagger, which she sheathed in irritation. She placed Daniel's dagger into the back of her waistband.

"*Too bad your short blade is weak. My men can do better,*" she mimicked. "*We fight privateers and pirates...Bah!* I've been training with Daniel since I was ten. I can throw a bloody dirk as good or better than any gritty sailor."

The heady aroma of pine surrounded her. She tore a few needles from a drooping branch and rubbed them between her fingers to further release the refreshing scent, hoping to calm her nerves a bit.

Why couldn't she resist the urge to prove her worth to the men in the meadow? Why did she need to shock Captain Hart as he had shocked her? She had barely been able to quell her panic while he adjusted her grip on the dagger. However, what happened next almost sent her to flight like a quail from the grass. Landon Hart touched her in a place no man had ever dared. When he nudged his knee against the inside of her thigh, the outline of his leg left a lingering heat, even after he stepped away. The urge to slap him was overwhelming.

She studied her wrist. Even now, the impression where his fingers had touched still seemed warm. Keelan frowned. In the past, enough suitors had pushed their presence upon her: an arm casually brushed against her breast while fastening her cloak, a thigh pressed against hers while seated on a settee. While those actions often earned them a stinging slap and a short path to the door, no man had ever affected her state of mind as Captain Hart had done so nonchalantly a few moments ago.

All she'd been able to think about was the fact that he was *touching* her. His arm had almost brushed her breast when he reached around her chest to adjust her hold on the dagger. She fought to keep her outrage internal, and restrain from slapping his hands from hers and bolting away. She'd been terrified he'd discover she wasn't a boy.

She normally wouldn't care that he discovered her fairer gender. However,

circumstances being what they were at the moment, it was best to keep activities such as this, well, secret.

Now that point appeared to be mute. The entire episode seemed to have left her without any rational sense. She had foolishly revealed her identity as if there were no consequences at all. She stomped further along the wooded path, her irritation growing because she allowed her embarrassment and humiliation to distract her from exercising good judgment.

Now she'd placed all involved in jeopardy.

Daniel, especially.

She swallowed, her stomach queasy with nervousness. She'd never forgive herself if her father's servant was punished or let go because of her reckless actions.

A couple weeks ago, after witnessing a training session between Keelan and Daniel, her Aunt Sarah had nearly fainted from shock. Uncle Jared quietly talked with her father, and asked them to cease the exercises. For added insurance toward her good behavior, Uncle Jared had confiscated her boots.

Out of respect for his sister-in-law, Papa acquiesced publicly but privately encouraged Daniel to continue training her in secret. If the captain mentioned what he'd seen, then Uncle Jared could flog Daniel for disobedience, and Papa would use the occasion to bring up his desire to secure her future by marrying her to ancient Mr. Pratt. She kicked a pine cone, sending it flying into the dusky underbrush. It was crucial she find a way to meet with the captain alone and ask him to remain silent about the scene he'd witnessed. Would he agree to keep her secret? What kind of man was Captain Hart? Honorable, she hoped. He was a ship's captain, that had to count toward an honorable reputation, did it not?

Judging by their dress, both were men of significant means. With his sun-bronzed skin, and hair was dark as pitch hanging about his shoulders like a wild mane, it was easier to picture Captain Hart as a Persian or better yet, a pirate. Maybe a Persian pirate.

He had the cocky arrogance of a man used to taking what he pleased. His strong self-assurance unnerved her. Even the air about him vibrated with intense power and confident composure. The russet-haired business partner, with his neatly trimmed mustache and beard, had been pleasant and amiable. Quite the contrast to the cocky, arrogant and probably terribly conceited Captain Hart.

The path broke through the trees near the stables, and she crept inside to return the boots she had borrowed earlier from one of the slumbering grooms.

Keelan headed toward Slaney, her maid, who stood amid a flock of at least two hundred chickens and geese. The petite woman with boisterous salt and pepper curls and twinkling gray eyes had been with Keelan's family for as long as she could remember. Back home in Chatham, England, Keelan's mother had been content to let Slaney care for her daughter. Raise her.

Mother seemed to resent Keelan's intrusion into her life and spent most of her time in her shop. When Keelan was younger, she happily spent her days with Slaney, rather than her melancholy mother, who never spoke unless it was to criticize.

That life was gone now. The scandal surrounding her father's court-martial, followed by the strange deaths of her mother and aunt, had disrupted the path of her life like a stream of water is redirected when a jagged rut is carved into the earth.

Slaney, quite the opposite from Mother, teased and laughed and told exhilarating stories about pirates and giants and magic faeries. It was Slaney who dried Keelan's tears, wrapped her scrapes, and taught her how to draw and mix healing herbs.

Daniel, on the other hand, taught her to defend herself. She chewed at her lip. And now she had endangered his well-being and employment.

"This squawking and honking is enough ter wake the dead," Slaney muttered. She scattered another handful of grain over the dirt yard, and shrieked when a bold rooster pecked at a wayward kernel which had landed on the top of her shoe.

"These are the only shoes I have, ye wicked cock! Be off with ye!"

With an insulted squawk, the rooster flapped away in an effort to dodge Slaney's swinging foot. The sea of fowl parted briefly with his departure but soon clucked its way back into a mass of scratching and pecking birds.

"Good morning, Slaney."

"A fair morning to ye, Mistress," the maid replied with a frown. Slaney clucked her tongue with disapproval, sounding much like one of the chickens still pecking at her feet. "Yer a sight! The whole house will soon be awake. Should Himself see ye, there will be hell to pay, for sure. Best ye go inside and clean up, lass."

"Is Uncle Jared about yet, then?" Keelan asked, ignoring the maid's mild tirade. "There are two merchant ship captains here to see him and Father."

"I'll tell him. 'Tis already almost seven o'clock, and ye know breakfast is served at half past eight."

"I'll be on time, Slaney, don't worry," Keelan said. A movement caught her eye, and she glanced up to see Daniel and the two visitors leading horses down the lane toward the stable.

"Well, don't get distracted this morn. Your father will want to speak to ye, and I'll not have him see ye lookin' like a common stable boy," Slaney said, with an unconvincing scowl.

"How is Papa?" Keelan asked, hoping his color and appetite had returned with a good night's rest.

Slaney's expression softened. "Weary. He's up and sittin' in the chair by his

window. Perhaps if you sit with him, he'll eat something."

Keelan nodded. "I will." She reached down, withdrew a handful of grain from Slaney's bucket, and tossed it across the ground. "Why are you feeding the chickens? Isn't little Joseph supposed to do this?"

"You needn't worry about such matters. But if you must know, he's tending the smokehouse because they just put up a hog." Slaney flung the remaining grain with the breeze and waded through the chickens toward the kitchen house. "I'll heat some water for yer bath. Don't tarry long."

Keelan shook her head. Although she tried to hide it, Slaney had a soft spot for chickens. Keelan stared at the pecking birds and recalled the conversation she had yesterday with Papa about marrying Mr. Pratt to merge the two plantations. She didn't want to get married.

Not yet. And to Pratt, not ever.

She didn't want to live on a plantation, either. She was a shopkeeper's daughter and needed to be a part of the bustling life in a city, buying and selling wares from exotic places, not buying and selling slaves to work on a plantation.

"Marriage." The word tasted bitter, like rancid oil.

After seeing how the bonds of marriage affected her parents, she was not in a hurry to wed. When her father had been a commodore in His Majesty's Navy, he was gone for months at a time, leaving Mother alone and unhappy. During the short time Papa spent at home, Mother demanded most of it, even becoming jealous of the small intervals he gifted to Keelan.

Shaking away the dark musings of marriage and her ill father, she turned and trotted to the rear of the main house, enjoying the refreshing coolness of the dew-laced grass on her bare feet. If she sneaked in the back door the servants used, then she could avoid any encounters with members of her extended family. While she was grateful her Uncle Jared agreed to run the plantation until her father's good health returned, it meant she also had to interact with her spoiled cousin, Doreen. Thankfully, the girl usually slept until midday.

She paused. Would it be better to wait by the barn and hope to catch Captain Hart before he went into the house, or should she quickly change first?

What if Uncle Jared caught her?

She decided to change.

Keelan grabbed the latch and sucked in her breath at the sting that shot across her injured thumb. Fresh blood streamed along her palm and dripped off the heel of her hand. It wouldn't do to track blood to her bedroom. Remembering the marigold tincture Slaney used for cuts and bruises, she dashed for the kitchen house to find the maid's herb box.



The kitchen was empty. A teakettle hung from an iron arm beside the hearth, steam still puffing from the spout. In front of the hearth, keeping warm, a plate of rice scones perched in the middle of a bench. Corn mush fried and popped in a large iron skillet, the aroma infusing the air. Her stomach growled, pushing all other immediate issues from her mind.

An hour and a half was a long time to wait for breakfast.

Sneaking a furtive glance around the room, she liberated a warm, soft scone from the plate. Too hungry to bother with butter or jam, she took a bite and closed her eyes as it melted in her mouth.

"Well, is 'bout time ya come see me, Miss Keelan," Ruth said, as she emerged from the pantry.

Keelan jumped and the scone flew from her grasp. It bobbed in between her hands until she regained possession of it. "Ruth, you gave me a start!" She smiled at the short, plump cook and gestured guiltily at the pastry, now pressed against her chest. "I hope you don't mind. I'm famished."

The slave gave her an odd look, but recovered quickly. "Goodness gracious, dis here's your home. You can git a bite anytime."

The kitchen door flew open and Slaney whisked inside. Kicking the door shut behind her, she placed a garden basket on the table. "Wouldn't hurt ter put some meat on her bones. The lass will flutter away like a milkweed thistle in the wind one day and we'll never see her again." The herbs from her basket wafted through the room.

"All she need is a few more months of my cookin' and she'll plump right out," Ruth said with a chuckle.

"What she *needs to do* is get herself up to the main house and dress for breakfast," Slaney chided, pulling a handful of herbs from her basket.

"Oh, Miss Keelan," Ruth said, glancing at the cut. "How did you cut yo' hand?"

Keelan and Slaney exchanged glances. She suspected the house slaves gossiped as much as any other servants would. It wasn't as if she could hide the fact she was wearing boy's clothing.

"I cut it on a dagger. Daniel is teaching me how to protect myself in case those who have murdered most of my father's family in England decide to follow us here."

The cook paused a moment, then shook her head. "I was sorry to hear 'bout dat, Miss Keelan. But dey didn't kill 'em all did dey?"

Was it only a matter of time before they did? "No, so far my father's elder brother has eluded them, although they've tried several times."

Slaney inspected Keelan's hand. The woman tsked as she examined the cut then went to the cupboard and pulled out a wooden box. She selected a small

bottle, a clove of garlic, and grabbed a marigold from the herb basket.

"Let me see, lass." She held out a hand expectantly. Keelan eyed the bottle for a moment before she did as she was told. Slaney was a good healer, but there always seemed to be additional pain involved when it came to treating cuts and ailments. The maid poured a few drops on the wound.

Keelan sucked in her breath at the sting. "Ouch! What is that?" She snatched her hand away and shook it. "It burns like the devil!"

Slaney grabbed Keelan's hand and held it firmly. "Such language from a gentle lady. Yer mum, God rest her soul, would be horrified to hear ye go on. Now sit ye still. 'Tis vinegar. That or whiskey must be used to cleanse a wound properly." The maid sniffed. "Ye should know that, as often as I've mended ye."

Duly chastised, Keelan sat and quietly bit into the stolen scone while Slaney splashed more vinegar on the cut. The sting made her eyes water.

Next, the maid reached for the garlic, pulled off a clove, sliced it in half, and rubbed it over the wound, eliciting another wince from Keelan. "Garlic will prevent infection," Slaney said. Last, she crushed the marigold petals, pressed them over the cut, and wrapped Keelan's hand in a small damp linen cloth.

"Keep it wrapped," Slaney said. "'Twill keep out the pus."

Keelan turned to the cook and gestured to the last bite of scone. "Ruth, I would love to learn how you make these." She popped it into her mouth and munched happily. It was something her mother might have sold in her shop, partnered with jellies, jams and honey.

The cook's soft, brown face broke into a pleased smile. "Come in the mornin' 'fore sunrise, an' I'll show ya in no time." Ruth turned and pulled a plate from the shelf. "Now sit yo' self down, child. I can't stand to see ya starve to death right here in the kitchen house."

To Keelan's dismay and delight, Ruth served her a plate of fried corn mush doused in cane syrup, a cup of tea, and another scone slathered with fresh butter and sweet, amber honey.

I have to get to the barn and intercept Hart and O'Brien.

Mentally calculating the time it would take Daniel and the two ship captains to reach the stable, Keelan estimated that she had a couple of precious minutes before she had to leave. There would be no time for her to first change into a gown, however. She shoveled a large bite of corn mush into her mouth, trying to choose the right words she would use to convince the two sea captains to keep her clandestine activities to themselves.

Slaney glanced out the kitchen house window. "I see Daniel and our visitors are near. I'd best get along and tell Mr. Grey his guests have arrived. And you, mistress, best get along before you're caught in those clothes."

Keelan's fork clattered on her plate and she virtually flew out of the door, praying she would be able to speak with Captain Hart then sneak up to her

room.



Hurry.

Slaney's warning echoed in her head. Keelan took a shortcut through the garden. With the exception of her cousin Doreen, the entire household was probably awake.

She ducked beneath an arbor laden with lazy, purple wisteria blossoms. Aunt Sarah's garden created a buffet for the senses. Eight neatly trimmed squares of lavender, rosemary, and thyme hedges could barely accommodate the bright bursts of colorful flowers flaming up toward the blue South Carolina sky. The neat checkerboard of raised square beds flowed down over several tiers and stopped near the glassy surface of a small pond.

The sound of Daniel's voice jolted her into motion as it filtered through the hedges.

"Twin Pines is a 300-acre plantation. The main house sits at the end of the long lane you started down earlier. We've only been here a few months. The commodore's younger brother, Mr. Grey, has extensive business knowledge of milling lumber and is an extremely effective overseer. He splits his time between his business in Charleston and the mill."

"So, Mr. Grey owns warehouses at the docks and also works here? That seems a heavy burden," Mr. O'Brien responded.

"Are you interested in the mill or the warehouses?" Daniel asked. "If it's the mill, Mr. Grey might want to take you on a tour later. I'll need to let the grooms in the barn know so they have his gelding ready."

Mr. O'Brien brought out a handkerchief and wiped his brow. "Actually, we are more interested in speaking with the commodore about my Uncle Fynn's request. Seems Fynn was eager to meet with him about something. We found some letters from Commodore Grey among Fynn's things confirming a meeting today."

Keelan sucked in a breath. A meeting with her father? Was it regarding the scandal that had turned her world upside down a couple years ago? Their lives changed on that stormy day when her father gave a tragic order to sink a ship he was convinced was a French privateer trying to pass as an American passenger ship. Her father attacked, sinking it.

Unfortunately, it had indeed been an American passenger ship. All souls were lost, her father was court-martialed, and their family disgraced.

Thankfully, Papa's closest friend had been influential enough to keep her father from prison. But the scandal did much damage to her mother's business, made worse by the speculation that now someone was killing off the commodore's family in England.

Papa had an older brother in Chatham and a younger one, Jared, in America. After his older brother's son was found dead in a stable and his wife and Keelan's mother were killed in separate but equally suspicious carriage accidents, it became obvious someone was eliminating members of the family one by one.

The murders prompted their long time family friend to smuggle Keelan and her father out of the country to protect them. He'd also financed the purchase of the plantation and bribed a captain to quietly take her and her father out of the country to the southern colonies.

Had the assassin tracked them here? Was is one of the two captains? Daniel would be on guard with the same suspicions, of that she was certain. Too much had already slipped by them, the entire family was on edge. Daniel, would be extra vigilant.

She crawled behind an iron bench. Daniel, Captain Hart, and Conal O'Brien walked along the outside of the hedge. Curious, she crept closer to peek through the branches. Would Daniel ask the men to remain quiet about the scene they had witnessed in the meadow? If he did, it would prevent her from having to plead her case to Captain Hart, a task she dreaded doing on her own. Had they already discussed it? The garden was very private; it would be a good place to speak to them in confidence.

She couldn't assume the topic had already been discussed. She considered stepping out from her hiding place and intercepting them as they passed the arbor at the entrance. That plan would only work if the men continued walking along the hedge and turned left to pass the arbor, rather than turn right toward the front door of the main house. If she could get Daniel's attention, she could indicate she wanted them to enter the garden, and meet them by the arbor. She hurried to a gap in the hedge to get his attention.

Daniel continued, "Behind the Grey's house sits a kitchen house, a chicken coop, smokehouse, and a few outbuildings. In addition to crops and timber, Twin Pines also produces turpentine."

She squeezed between two bushy shrubs near a cherry tree and cautiously peered through the foliage. Daniel pointed west, his back to her. Landon stood next to him. Where was the other man? Conal O'Brien?

"Beyond this garden is a small spring-fed pond, which takes up most of the meadow bottom to the east of the main house. There's another much larger lake on the plantation a few miles southwest."

Now was the time. If Captain Hart stepped toward the house, she'd find a way to get Daniels attention. Instead, Conal O'Brien stepped through the arbor.

Oh no! She caught her breath sharply.

This wouldn't work at all. There was no way to exit her hiding place without exposing that she'd been eavesdropping. Why would Captain Hart and Captain

O'Brien agree to do a favor to someone who'd been spying on them? Curse her terrible luck. Now, she'd have to wait until they left then run to catch them before they made it to the front door. Her stomach dropped. She wouldn't be able to accomplish that without the possibility of being seen by her uncle.

She was doomed.

Daniel and Captain Hart soon followed Captain O'Brien. Keelan retreated further into the scratchy bushes behind the sweet blossoming limbs of the cherry tree. She winced as several branches poked the back of her head, legs, and arms.

"This is Mrs. Grey's pride," Daniel said, only a few yards away.

Conal stated his approval, "Tis carefully tended, for sure. Pleasin' to the eye."

Landon agreed. "Mrs. Grey has cause to be proud. The cherry blossoms are especially *magnificent*," he added loudly, sounding closer than Daniel.

Her heart thumped against the walls of her chest. She crouched lower into the shadows of the shrubs next to the cherry tree. Captain Hart was dangerously close to her hiding place. She dared not take a single breath.

"Look at this," Conal said. "The detail on this bench is as fine as any I have ever seen."

He walked straight ahead to the bench and ran his large hand over the ornate ironwork. The fragrance of a rose bush apparently caught his attention and he stepped over to sniff the flowers. Reaching down, he plucked a blossom, lifted it to his nose, and inhaled. Keelan's pulse pounded frantically. Although Conal stood several yards away, if he happened to glance to his left, he would discover her. Why hadn't she tried to intercept them earlier instead of just standing here pondering it?

Captain Hart coughed.

Conal jumped then grinned. "After five months at sea, 'tis a relief ta have somethin' nicer ta smell than salt water and eighty unbathed seamen."

"Come," Daniel said, laughing. "I'll take you inside to meet Mr. Jared Grey and the commodore."

The conversation continued after the men walked from the garden, but Keelan couldn't hear it clearly.

Were they gone? She waited. After a moment, Keelan leaned forward to peek around the branches, but froze at a sharp, painful tug on her hair. Reaching behind her head, she sought the cause of the entrapment and discovered her curls wildly snared in the branches. Drat. This kind of delay was not what she needed now. With a groan, she tugged harder, but succeeded in freeing only a few meager strands.

"Damn!" It didn't help her cause, but the curse certainly conveyed her mood at the moment. She tucked her chin to her chest and groped for more tangled curls. This was a fine mess. If Aunt Sarah caught sight of her now, she'd drop in a

dead faint.

“That’s an understandable expletive for a young girl posing as a boy, however, as a young girl masquerading as foliage, it’s a bit disconcerting.”

Keelan ceased her struggle, mortified. A shadow fell over the ground at her feet, followed by black riding boots, lightly dusted from the road. She raised her gaze over fine black breeches and tapered waist. Raising her gaze higher, it stuttered at a white linen shirt untied at the neck, before she took in the broad shoulders, a strong jaw, a small scar on the chin and a straight, but haughty aquiline nose. Captain Hart stood in front of her, his crystalline blue eyes glittering with amusement. This was going to be trouble.

“You can come out now. I’m afraid you’ve been discovered.”

CHAPTER THREE

With his black hair wild about his shoulders, Keelan could easily picture Landon Hart with a brace of pistols and a scabbard, standing at the helm of a dark pirate ship. When his white teeth flashed in a brilliant smile, she stopped breathing altogether.

The first impression which streaked through her mind was that he was beautiful. His azure eyes took on a mischievous glint, making her wonder if he'd just read her mind.

"I would gladly come out, but my hair is caught," she muttered, unnerved again by her body's response to the man. "And I am not a mere girl. I'll have you know, Captain, I'm nineteen." She clenched her teeth and fought harder to yank her hair from the branches. Drat, again. She had the most abominable luck.

Captain Hart stepped closer. "Perhaps I can be of some assistance and free you from your bushy captor." He gave her a lazy grin followed by a long appraisal from head to toe.

His nearness had an adverse effect on her lungs and she found it difficult to draw a breath. She sensed a rakish quality in the captain. As if he knew she was flustered by his proximity, he stepped even closer. He probably also knew that he was ridiculously handsome. She wouldn't be the least bit surprised if he was terribly conceited and prone to more than a little deceit, as well.

"No." She pulled again and a sharper pain shot across the back of her head. "I can do it, really, Captain Hart." Why didn't he just leave her alone?

"Nonsense." He gently grasped her wrists to pull them away from her hair. His fingers were still very warm.

And he was too close.

The scent of him mingled with leather and fresh spring air, which combined for a heady mix of danger and calm.

Her pulse jumped wildly beneath his fingers, and she was terrified at the thought that he might feel it too.

"Hmmm." Leaning over her shoulder, he studied the tangled web of curls. "It would seem you have a dilemma, my sweet. There is a large amount of hair and several branches involved." He reached for his dagger. "I can cut you free—"

"Wait!" she squeaked, horrified. "Can't you cut the branches, instead?" She

took a short breath. The desire to save her hair and the strong urge to flee warred with each other in her mind. The dangerous aura surrounding Landon Hart sent her nerves into a frenzied dance, and she hated that she couldn't keep calm and act nonchalant.

"It'll take a great deal of effort to both free you and keep these silken strands of copper and gold intact," he said, eyebrows raised.

It nipped at her pride to do so, but it was obvious she needed to ask for his help. How would she ever explain away a cropped head of hair *and* a sliced finger? Uncle Jared was already suspicious of her tendency to rise before the sun, unlike his family, who usually slept through breakfast. One more incident would likely push him past the limit of his patience.

"Captain Hart, can you take a moment to make an attempt?" She nudged away her pride and mumbled, "Please."

Landon sighed dramatically and touched his palm to his chest. "How can I possibly refuse such a distressed and heartfelt plea from such a comely maiden?"

Keelan expelled a breath of tentative relief. Perhaps he could be a gentleman after all.

"However," he continued in a serious tone; his gaze flicked from her eyes to the tangles and back again. "As a tradesman, my time and labor always come at a price."

Her premature sense of relief quickly chilled. This couldn't possibly end well.

"A price?" Her tone should have coated the garden with frost. "And what price would that be?"

His expression remained stoic while he scratched his neck. "The lowest price on my books for freeing a young lady from a barbaric bush is..." His gaze dropped to her mouth. "A kiss."

A what? He can't possibly be serious, the arrogant...

Keelan opened her mouth to rebuff him. Remind him of his place. And hers. Her first kiss would not be the result of a...a...barter! He dare not! Try as she would, she could not spur her tongue into motion. She swallowed. It was as if he'd just uttered a spell paralyzing her mouth as well as her limbs.

He raised his hand and ran the outside of his fingers along her jaw before cupping her face. He leaned forward and barely touched her lips, feather soft, tasting. The pressure of his kiss intensified. The touch of his mouth, soft and hard all at once, consumed her sense of time and space. A soft sound escaped from her throat and he deepened the kiss, parting her lips with his tongue and drawing a quick intake of breath from her. A tingling sensation swirled low in her belly and drew her closer to him until his body pressed against hers. A low growl vibrated in his chest and he plunged his fingers into her hair. Her strength ebbed, and she numbly feared her legs wouldn't hold. After a long moment, he

pulled away.

"You taste of sweet, maple syrup." The side of his mouth quirked up, but his voice was oddly hoarse.

Her lids fluttered open. She didn't remember closing them. Feeling a mixture of bewilderment and shocked desire, she struggled, again, to find her tongue.

"That...that..." Her hands were gripping his forearms and she quickly released him.

"Was delicious," he finished for her with a quick grin. "Your lips drive a man mad with the desire for another taste."

Keelan fought to regain her composure, which at best lay in tattered fragments at her bare, dew-drenched feet. Her reaction to the captain's kiss both surprised and angered her.

Stupid girl, letting a man like Captain Hart get you flustered as a spring bird.

"Captain, you have no sense of propriety," she managed to say out loud. There. That sounded proper. At least her tongue was working again.

"No," he agreed. "But then, I never claimed I did. Now then—" He leaned forward again.

"Don't you dare!" She narrowed her eyes, unsure she'd be able to keep her dignity if he kissed her again. Heaven knows she'd almost melted from the first one.

He chuckled and began untangling her hair from the branches. "You've paid my price. I'm honor-bound to fulfill my duties."

"I doubt you understand the meaning of honor. You deserve to be slapped soundly," she said. "No gentleman would take such liberties, or suggest such a bargain." He certainly was no gentleman. Pointing out that fact would undoubtedly come as no surprise to the scoundrel. In fact, it wouldn't surprise her if he was proud of it.

He paused. "Liberties? I seized no liberties, only fair payment for services soon rendered."

"It gives me cause to wonder how many other ladies you have seduced into a kiss with your silver tongue and roguish charm," she retorted.

If it was possible, which a moment ago she would have argued that it was *not*, he leaned closer. "A gentleman never tells, my dear. Suffice it to say none were unwilling and not all were ladies." He gave her a wink and lowered his voice to almost a whisper. "I thoroughly enjoyed that, my sweet. Did you?"

"I am not your...augh!" Her cheeks grew warm. This arrogant merchant captain must be accustomed to women falling all over themselves for a chance to enjoy his kisses. Did he see her as one of them? If he thought to place her in the same category, he'd a thing or two to learn about Keelan Grey. She just needed to pull a veil of nonchalance over her demeanor, if she could. Why was that so hard for her to do in front of this man? Damned if dragging her gaze from

the deep blue eyes of Landon Hart almost demanded more strength than she could muster.

Hart changed the topic. "What's a beautiful woman like you doing dressed as a street urchin and playing with blades?"

Keelan paused a moment before answering. Here was her opportunity to prevent the captain from mentioning the swordplay to her uncle. Perhaps she could still salvage the day.

"Daniel mentioned earlier that my father demanded I be trained to defend myself..." She fiddled with a small branch.

"It appears he's been doing it very well," Captain Hart said.

She could hear the smile in his voice. Perhaps this was a game for him, but to Daniel it was not. She wanted to shake him. Perhaps curling her hands into fists would prevent them from going for his neck. Take a breath. Speak calmly.

"Since it upsets my Aunt Sarah, my uncle has forbidden me to continue," she went on, pretending he hadn't spoken.

He laughed softly. Now *that* was a dangerous sound; it made her toes tingle.

"Ah, so I see. The prohibited exercises continue in *secret* now," he said.

She nodded and studied the branch's leaves. It seemed safer than looking directly into his eyes again. Might as well just say it. Taking a deep breath she plunged ahead. "Captain Hart, I would sincerely appreciate it if you would keep that knowledge to yourself. For Daniel's sake," she added quickly.

"For Daniel's sake?"

She nodded. "My uncle will have him disciplined severely if he finds out we defied his orders." She held her breath and awaited his answer.

"But what about *your* sake?" he said, eyebrows raised.

"I can deal with any repercussions which affect only me," she replied, clenching her jaw. He didn't understand her plea. This wasn't about her, it was about protecting Daniel. "I don't want Daniel in trouble with my uncle."

Hart glanced up and appeared to ponder her request.

What a truly arrogant, conceited, horse's ass.

She had to bite her lower lip to prevent herself from saying it out loud.

After a couple more moments of torture, Hart smiled. "Of course. Your secret is safe with me," he said.

Her quiet sigh of relief was short-lived, however, as he continued to smile broadly. She now noticed he had a slight dimple in his left cheek, which was very distracting.

"My terms for keeping a lady's charade a secret...are..."

"You wouldn't!" she whispered. Would he? Another one of Captain Hart's kisses would surely be her undoing.

Worse, what if another kiss wasn't enough to buy his silence? What if he wanted more? A strange thrill rippled up her spine and she fought to squelch it.

She'd not jeopardize her future any more than she already had. They were lucky no one had seen them. Her family would spare no time dragging Hart before a man of the cloth at gunpoint and forcing him to take her as his bride.

The thought elated and destroyed her all at once. She'd become the lonely wife of a man who was, in truth, married to the sea. She could not let that happen.

She would not let that happen.

Her mother lived a miserable, lonely life while her father was at sea. Her greatest fear was to become a woman like her mother. Brittle, sad...Keelan lifted her chin. "Should a member of my family witness..."

Her words were silenced as he pressed his lips to her palm then sucked gently at its center. The heat from his mouth stirred a hotter sensation all the way up her arm and along the sensitive skin of her neck to just beneath her ear, leaving her too stunned to speak, too aroused to reason. The power she sensed earlier pulsed through the air around them and she found herself unable to move.

Unwilling to move. How did he do that?

He slowly released her hand. "I shall collect my due another day. Soon." He gave her a mocking wink. "I promise to remain mute on the topic. In addition, I am pleased to tell you I've liberated those imprisoned locks of silk from this wicked bush. You, my dear, are free."

Not yet trusting herself to speak, Keelan stared at him. The raw desire in those piercing blue eyes shook her almost as much as her reaction.

A smile spread across his face with the slowness of a sunrise. "It's indeed been my pleasure serving you." The mockery in his tone made her want to punch him. "As much as I desire to linger, regrettably I must go, though it takes all my strength as a man to do so." He gave her an exaggerated bow, bade her farewell, and left the garden.

In a mute stupor, Keelan watched him walk away. Numbly, she lifted a shaking hand to her throbbing lips, still swollen and hot, and uncurled her palm. Oddly, it was not marked, but it burned as if a hot coal had been pressed against it. The sensations both thrilled and terrified her. She inhaled and tried to steady her frayed nerves and slow her pounding heart. Even as reason had warned her to resist, her body hadn't listened. Keelan had never been drawn to a man in this way before. It left her horrified, bewildered...even a little curious.

Her mother might not have been the most nurturing mother in Chatham, but she did make sure her daughter was well-informed about the type of men who commit their lives to the sea. Most were quite libertine in their way of life. According to her mother, they lacked moral principle and any sense of responsibility, as did the women with whom they tarried. She sucked in a breath. God forbid she become one of those women.

Therefore, she'd been taught to be wary of Captain Hart's type: wanton and promiscuous. Seducing women was merely a game to him and those like him. Her naiveté had probably amused the man. She gritted her teeth at her stupidity as well as the shame of being among the women Captain Hart had seduced into a kiss.

She wouldn't fall prey to his game again. And she most certainly would never seek the arms of a seaman who traveled from port to port. Why would she ever choose to live her mother's life, full of longing and bitterness?

A shrill scream shattered Keelan's musings spurring her into motion. She ran from the garden, searching for the source of the panicked cry. A young slave boy, of perhaps nine or ten years, burst from the smoke house, his shrieks ringing across the grounds. He stumbled and fell.

Keelan recognized the boy as Ruth's child, Joseph, whose chicken-feeding duty had been performed earlier by Slaney. Although crippled, he did a fine job tending the smokehouse, fueling the fire, and keeping the coals smoldering while defending the meat from the dogs.

Using the fire poker as a brace, he now struggled to heave himself to his feet. Keelan ran to help. Had he been burned?

Before she could close the distance between herself and Joseph, a snarling creature limped out of the smoke house, its short thick fur raised along its spine. The boy shrieked again, and in his panicked haste to retreat, lost his footing and tumbled back to the ground.

In the distance, the door to the kitchen house flew open and clattered against the wall. Ruth emerged, yelling for help.

Keelan's chest constricted in panic. The dog staggered toward the boy, its gaping mouth frothing wildly. Joseph brandished the poker in the direction of the enraged creature and swung at it in terror, striking its muzzle. The animal yelped, shook its head and lowered its gaze, its yellowed eyes locked with Joseph's terrified ones. There was no time to bridge the distance. Her dagger still hung in its sheath. Keelan slid to a stop and snatched out her dirk and threw it.

And missed.

She could hear Daniel's voice in her head telling her she rushed the throw, her chest wasn't pointed to the target. Her wrist wasn't cocked correctly (Hart's voice). The knife flew over the creature's shoulder and hit the ground a few feet away. The movement or sound of the blade hitting the earth took the dog's attention from the boy momentarily. A panicked jolt shot through her limbs, and for a second she was paralyzed. Joseph still sat, frozen in terror on the ground, defenseless.

The dog swung its head back to the him. The image of the rabid dog attacking the child spurred Keelan into action. She clapped her hands and shouted, again gaining the animal's attention. It turned and took a step toward her and lowered

its head. A low, insidious growl emanated from deep within its throat.

At least if the animal came after her, she could run and hopefully make it back to the kitchen house before the dog could catch her. It would give Joseph time to scramble to his feet and lock himself in the smokehouse. It was then she remembered Daniel's dagger she'd earlier wedged between her waistband and belt.

She grabbed it and paused long enough to take careful aim, using the grip Captain Hart had taught her, then cocked her wrist and threw. The blade pierced the ragged fur behind the animal's shoulder. It snarled and snapped its jaws at the hilt as it fell, twisting and writhing less than four feet from where Joseph sprawled, wide-eyed, on the ground.



Landon rounded the corner in time to see Keelan throw the dagger. One glance at the creature thrashing on the ground told him the animal was diseased and dangerous. Even wounded, the dog's bite could kill. If Keelan drew too close to it... He doubted the proud young woman would heed an order to go no closer, so he picked up his pace.

He rushed past her, pulled Joseph to his feet then swung him up over his shoulder, and carried him further from the creature, before depositing him back on the ground. As he'd hoped, it drew Keelan away from the rabid animal.

She slipped past him and knelt by the young boy's side. Joseph's shaking hands still clutched the poker and large tears streamed down his cheeks as he dragged in shallow, ragged breaths. His eyes were filled with shock and fear, and he stared at Keelan as if she had sprouted three heads. Perhaps he didn't even recognize her.

"Are you hurt?" she asked softly, helping him to his feet. She kept hold of the boy's arm and gently brushed a spot of soot from his nose.

Joseph answered her question with a negative shake of his head, his gaze locked on her face. Two other slave boys crept closer to Keelan's side.

"Good God, Miss Keelan, you pierced the monster's heart!"

Landon nodded in appreciation. "A good throw."

The boys' eyes brightened in awe. "How'd you learn to do dat, Miss Keelan?"

With an impish glint in her eyes, she responded gesturing to Landon, "Captain Hart taught me this morning."

The chit was smart. She'd just put him in Daniel's place in the meadow. When gossip traveled about the plantation, it would be his name associated with the incident.

One of the boys leaned forward and said in a raspy whisper, "Ain't no one going' to believe dis."

"Ain't nobody... goin' to hear... about it," Ruth panted, stopping for breath beside Keelan. She pointed her meat mallet at the boys.

"As far as anyone knows, I kilt this devil." She shuffled over to the dying creature and brought the mallet down on its head with a sickening crack.

Keelan cringed and turned away. For all her bravado, it seemed she didn't have the strongest stomach. Would she faint at the sight of blood? Somehow he didn't expect it, but women were an unpredictable lot.

"Miss Keelan did a brave thing. Don't you be getting her in trouble with her papa and uncle by blabbin' yo' heads about it. Understand?"

"Yes'm," the chastised boys answered in unison.

Ruth wrung her hands as she turned to face Landon. "Please, sir, I don't want to see no trouble for Miss Keelan."

Landon inclined his head. "Rest assured, I won't retell this tale. It will be our secret."

There would be a price, though.

She glared back at him, obviously reading his expression perfectly. He couldn't keep from grinning. He suspected she didn't believe him, which made the situation even more entertaining. He'd enjoy teasing her a bit more, hopefully enough to win another one of her fiery kisses. Or maybe even two.

Ruth reached down to tug free the dirk. After removing it, she wiped the blade on her stained apron and thanked him before turning to Keelan.

"Miss Keelan, I'll git this knife back to you soon as I boil it clean again." She turned to the two older boys. "Now take dis mad animal down past the creek and bury it deep." Ruth waved her hand in dismissal. "Go on, now."

The braver of the two scuffled over and nudged the mud-caked wild dog with his toe. Satisfied the creature was indeed dead, the boys grasped its hind legs and hauled the carcass away.

Once they were out of sight, Ruth dropped her mallet, grabbed her son with the fierceness of a mother bear, and crushed him to her bosom. Joseph let out a jagged sob. Tears slid down Ruth's cheeks as she and her son swayed together in the dirt yard.

Keelan's face softened. What was it? Tenderness? Yes, but there was more to it. His chest clenched as he realized what he was watching.

Longing.

Her reaction stirred his curiosity. What did she long for? A child to love or a loving mother?

She pulled her gaze away from mother and son and caught him staring at her. Her expression shifted to one of guarded wariness. He felt he'd wrongly peeked into a raw corner of her soul.

The slamming of the front door to the main house jarred everyone.

"You'd better leave," he advised. "I'll take responsibility for the events here in

the yard.”

Keelan gave him a hesitant, grateful nod and whirled toward the garden path. Her gaze shot to a first floor window and she drew a sharp breath. Her mouth parted briefly before snapping shut. He turned in time to see a hand release the curtain. He'd not readily give away her secret, but if someone else had seen the incident, his promised silence might no longer matter.

Keelan ran to the servant's door, like a forest sprite in bare feet. He shook his head in wonderment. She'd tweaked his interest, for sure.

He'd find a way to see her again.



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