

Hart's Passion

Pirates & Petticoats Novel Two

by Chloe Flowers

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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.

This is book 2 of a 3-Book Saga. Book 1 (Hart's Desire) can be found FREE at most retailers.



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CHAPTER ONE

Charleston, South Carolina

June 1811

If they were going to steal it, tonight would be the perfect time.

The moon was nothing more than a sliver in the sky, leaving the night almost as dark as pitch. A single sentry strolled along the street in front of the warehouse. He passed the main doors and continued until he reached the far corner. He yawned, stretching his arms out wide. Removing his floppy hat, he scratched his head vigorously and then jammed the hat back on. After a lazy glance up and down the street he pulled a bottle from his pocket and took a swig before he leaned against the wall and yawned again.

A dog barked in the distance, provoking a shouted curse from one of the city's sleepy residents. The sentry sank to his haunches, tipped the bottle to his mouth and then rested his head against the bricks behind him. Once more he looked around. Finally, with a bored sigh, he sat on the ground and placed his bottle within reach before resting his arms on his knees. Within minutes, his head slumped to his forearms. The gentle sea swayed against the pilings with the easy rhythm of a rocking chair. The street was quiet except for the gently breaking waves and the soft snoring of the sentry.

Drago Viteri Gamponetti, Gampo to his men, leaned around the corner and gestured to a pair of wagons waiting behind him. A few men slipped down to lead the teams forward. A loud 'clop' on the cobblestones made everyone freeze in stunned silence.

"One of the mufflings has fallen off," whispered a driver.

"Crowe, you'd best check them all before we head on," he hissed. "And check all the wheels!"

"Aye, Cap'n Gampo, sir." Crowe muttered, as he scampered hastily about doing as he was told. All metal parts should still be wrapped in strips of dark cloth to keep them from jingling with the horses' movements. He ran his hands over the strips of oiled leather covering each wheel. As soon as everything was secure, Crowe motioned for all to move out. The caravan stopped near the

warehouse doors.

With the stealth of a shadow, Gampo descended from the lead wagon. Producing a key, he placed it in the lock and turned it until it gave a dull 'click.' After a quick glance toward the end of the building and the sleeping sentry, he pulled a glass bottle from his pocket and squatted by the door hinges and removed the cork with his teeth. After the hinges had been fully doused with the oil, the man stepped back and gently pulled one of the doors open a bit and then closed it again, testing. He repeated this procedure several more times. Satisfied he'd eliminated any squeaks, he opened both doors wide.

One of the men gestured toward the snoring sentry near the corner. Gampo studied the man, noted the whiskey bottle next to him and gave a slight shake of his head. The other shrugged, stepped down and grabbed the halter of one of the horses then led it inside. Gampo followed and slid the doors shut.

Once inside the warehouse, the men remained motionless, barely breathing. Gampo struck a match to the candle wedged between the boards of the wagon seats.

"Take the blankets and cover the windows facing the street," he directed in a harsh whisper. "Once they're secure, light your lanterns and get to work."

"Aye, Cap'n."

The men went about doing what he'd ordered done. They all were well aware there was no room for error. Failing to execute even one small detail could get them caught. Getting caught would get them hanged. It gave the men strong impetus to do the job correctly.

An hour later the wagons were loaded with casks of brandy and whiskey, rolls of silk fabric, boxes of spices, ammunition and countless other treasures from across the sea. They snuffed out the lanterns and removed the blankets from the windows. Gampo was the last to exit. The sentry hadn't moved. He chuckled to himself. The poor tar would have a great deal of explaining to do when his employer arrived in the morning. Still smiling, he reached into his pocket, pulled out the key and locked the warehouse.

That ought give 'im something to think about.

The sentry shifted slightly. Steel blue eyes glinted from under the rim of his hat, as he watched the wagons pull away. After giving a slight nod to the roof of the boarding house across the street, an oil lamp flared in answer. Landon Hart rose and headed in the direction taken by the wagons seconds before.

"They turned east down the next street," Landon whispered to Conal O'Brien, as they followed the path of the thieves, staying near the darker shadows. "They're heading in the direction of those warehouses we scouted earlier."

Conal, who was half a head taller than Landon and two stones heavier,

nodded. "Hopefully they take it to the same one containing the rest of our cargo. It'll be harder to find the first half if they put this load in a different place."

A couple weeks earlier, several wagonloads of goods from the hold of one of their damaged ships was stolen en route to a warehouse he'd rented. The worst part, was that thieves had severely injured a young galley boy in the process.

It was a risky venture but the only way to find out where their goods were taken, was to leave the rest vulnerable. Conal had bragged at the pub near the docks they had rented the most secure warehouse in the city, and had complete confidence in the quality of the locks. They were so convinced, he'd boasted, only one man was needed to guard the lot.

The thieves swallowed the bait and now Landon had his hook embedded deeply.

An ugly image of Keelan in the brutal arms of a pirate or leering privateer nudged its way to the forefront of Landon's daydreams. He couldn't get the fiery-haired vixen out of his mind. This was no time to be preoccupied with thoughts of a woman, but this wasn't just any woman, it was his heart, his love. It was difficult to avoid thinking about how sweet her mouth tasted or how she smelled of jasmine and sunshine, or how passionately her body curved into his...

Stop it.

It hadn't been his intention to become entangled with her when they made port in Charleston. He and Conal O'Brien had suffered a major loss, Conal's Uncle Fynn, at the hands of Gampo. Damned ruthless pirate.

They'd intentionally planned a trade route to include a stopover in Charleston so Fynn could meet with a Commodore George Grey, Keelan's father. Fynn had been very secretive about his reasons why he wanted to meet with the commodore. So, following the run-in with Gampo, they tucked their ships in dry dock for repairs. Landon and Conal decided to keep Fynn's mysterious meeting out of curiosity more than anything.

At Twin Pines plantation, he met Keelan, masquerading as a boy and dueling with swords with her father's valet in a small meadow a short distance from the main house. It was only after he'd had given her a brief lesson in knife throwing he the learned the boy was actually a young lady. Conal had found it highly amusing and had retold the story several times at the Whistling Pig Tavern, where they'd rented rooms.

What Conal hadn't seen, occurred later the same morning. Landon had caught Keelan eavesdropping from the depths of the garden bushes. At the time, he didn't know she was the commodore's daughter. He saw her as a curiosity. Up close she was more than that. She was smooth and lithe with the quickness of a boy and the curves of a woman.

Eyes wide like a startled doe and lush lips parted in surprise, she'd have bolted if her hair hadn't been severely tangled in the branches. How could any

normal man possibly *resist* the opportunity to kiss her?

She froze in shock at first of course, but after a moment her lips softened and she began to move her tongue with his. His boyish prank soon became something over which he nearly lost control, especially when he pressed his hips against hers and instead of pushing him away, she slid her hands over his forearms and pulled him closer. The only thing between his erection and her was...

Enough!

Focus on the task at hand; retrieve the stolen cargo without getting killed.

Then, he'd locate Keelan and find out why she had not yet arrived. Less than a week ago, she'd promised to sail away with him on the *Desire*. The Blue Peter was flying above his top gallants, signaling the ship was preparing to sail. She was to arrive this afternoon.

Unless...she'd changed her mind.

Running away with him was a risk for Keelan. She'd have to leave behind the shelter of what little family she had left: an uncle, aunt and cousin, as well as the possibility of marriage. Dr. Garrison had already asked for her hand. Her uncle would have her marry Pratt, a wealthy plantation owner old enough to be her father. Life on the sea could be hazardous and hard. It could also be invigorating and prosperous.

To accompany him on the *Desire*, she had to accept that they'd be a certain degree of uncertainty with each dawning day. Danger presented itself in many forms: British warships, pirates, privateers and tempests. Had she changed her mind and decided to stay within the protective embrace of the Charleston Low Country? Had Garrison convinced her that she'd be better off married to the country doctor, rather than a merchant ship captain?

He couldn't think about that now. There was work to be done.

Landon pulled a bottle from his pocket and took a mouthful of the amber liquid. He sloshed it around then spit it into his hands and rubbed it on his face and shirt. He handed the bottle to his friend.

"Seems a shame to waste such good whiskey," Conal muttered sadly, as he repeated the same procedure.

Landon grinned. "Leave it to an Irishman to mourn the loss of a mouthful of whiskey."

"Look who's talkin'."

Landon threw his arm over Conal's shoulders. "Let's go."

The two men staggered down the alley.

Conal broke into song:

Oh, my wee lass is a fine, young lass if ever a lass there be...

Her tits as big as a bowl of figs

Hips broader than a wil...(burp)...low tree...

*Oh my wee lass is a fine young lass I hold in high regard,
Although she uses lard, her bannocks are marred,
'Cause they're shaped like me cock...and just as hard!*

They burst into bawdy laughter and stumbled past the first warehouse with no incident. However, as they passed the entrance to the second building, a wide bulk blocked their path.

"Hoy there, mates. Where're ye headin'?"

Landon and Conal halted, each swaying slightly.

"Why, we be headin' to Miz LeBlanc's housh, my big man," Conal slurred. "Gonna bed me a strong Irish lash wi' the biggest tits in Charson. Char-lesson." He shook his head numbly. "Town," he finally stated firmly.

Landon thrust the bottle at the burly guard. "Ha' yersef a slosh and join us, man." He jiggled the bottle enticingly. "But we git firs' choice of the wenches, since it's our idea."

The man frowned and shook his head. "Ye couple of drunken sots can't find yer way to a tit if ye was locked in a room full of nanny goats. Madame LeBlanc's be two blocks west of here."

"Two more blocks, ye say? Wish way is west?" Landon scowled and squinted over the tar's shoulder. The windows were covered but there was a sliver of light shining from the side of one along with a bright red bolt of silk. His silk, he'd wager.

Conal made an exaggerated turn toward his friend. "Did not the wench say three streets north and two streets east?" he said with arms crossed and fingers jutting into the air.

"Aye. She said two streets east and three streets south," Landon bobbed his head then staggered a couple dizzy steps sideways.

"Ha' we been goin' east or wes'?"

The warehouse guard rolled his eyes. "Listen lads," he said impatiently, pointing back up the alley. "Turn yer arses around and go two blocks that way and turn left." He waved his left arm and pointed. "Madam LeBlanc's be the white house with the red front door. Ye can't miss it."

"Two up then left ye say?" Landon repeated, blinking.

"Yes, man. LEFT. Turn LEFT." The sentry confirmed in an exasperated tone as he batted his hand to the left yet again.

Conal brightened. "Oh, well then. It's not sa far from here. We thank ye verra mush, me good man." He clapped the man on the back and nearly fell down.

Landon made a show of helping Conal regain his balance then wrapped his arm over his friend's shoulders and spun him around. "Let's be off then. Ahead and to the lef'!"

"The left!"

Conal thumped Landon on the back and pointed up the street. "To the

wenches!"

"The wenches!"

They staggered a few steps before pivoting around again to face the surly guard.

"Ye sure ye won't join us for a romp?" Conal shouted, although he was barely ten feet away.

The man gave a wave and shook his head. "Nay lads, I'm workin' this night. Have a warehouse to guard." He pulled aside his vest to show the handle of a pistol sticking out of his waistband. "Ye go on."

"Suit yershelf," Landon slurred. They swung back around and shuffled away.

The guard chuckled as the drunkards staggered down the alley and paused a moment before making a right turn. Leaning against the warehouse door he gave a dry laugh, shaking his head. "Ye'll not lay a lass this night, lads."

CHAPTER TWO

Keelan Grey stood at the foot of the grave, gazing at the sharply chiseled marks on the stone without really seeing them. This afternoon, they'd buried Papa in the Circular Congregational Church cemetery on Meeting Street. The strange illness which had consumed him over the past year took him the night of her cousin's ball...the night Landon had professed his love...the night he asked her to marry him. Strange how one evening could be both the best night and worst night of one's life.

Before he died, he'd made a confession to her. He'd planted the seed of a question in her mind and then demanded of her a promise she'd vowed to keep. After all, she was a diligent daughter, so she would, of course, keep her promise. Still, she had to wonder, what would Landon think of it all?

Aunt Sarah patted her shoulder. "Keelan, please walk with us," she prodded in a quiet voice. "Your uncle has arranged a luncheon at Rosewood's boarding house."

"I'm not hungry now, Aunt Sarah," Keelan responded, giving her aunt a small smile. "I need a few moments alone, then I'll return to the town house."

And gather my things and go.

The afternoon sun was obscured by a layer of gray which threatened rain. Aunt Sarah hesitated a moment. The older woman glanced around. Was she worried Captain Hart would appear from behind one of the large oaks lining the cemetery? Or Dr. Garrison would show up and cause a scene?

Her aunt had good reason to worry about both. Keelan had been entangled in two terribly scandalous events, one involving Captain Landon Hart and the other involving...Captain Landon Hart. First, there was an outing without a chaperone, then there was a kiss in the garden resulting in a broken engagement with Dr. Garrison, who'd taken the news badly and she couldn't blame him.

Although wildly handsome and devilishly charming, Landon Hart was everything her mother had warned her about 'men of the sea'...men who could seduce a woman with a look and leave her the following day, off to the next port, the next woman, the next adventure. Keelan understood this; her mother became bitter and lonely while Papa had been away sailing with the Royal Navy.

She didn't want to live her mother's life, married to a man who's mistress was

the sea, therefore, she'd reluctantly accepted a marriage proposal from Papa's physician, Dr. Everett Garrison a few days before her cousin's ball.

Dr. Garrison was a quiet, practical man with a quiet, practical life.

Still, her heart and body had wanted Landon Hart. If Papa hadn't died that night, she'd have run away with him the moment he'd asked her. Of course, her uncle and aunt wouldn't approve of her marriage to Hart, so she couldn't tell them her plans.

Aunt Sarah fidgeted with her bonnet ribbon a moment then said, "Don't stay too long. I'll ask Slaney and Daniel to wait for you. You shouldn't walk home alone."

"Thank you, Aunt Sarah." Her family was always vigilant. An assassin had murdered her mother and Papa's brother and his family back in England. No one knew if the assassin would come to Charleston, or even the reason her family was targeted. She suspected it had to do with Papa's court-martial. He'd fired on the wrong ship; it sank killing innocent passengers. After a huge uproar, Papa had been court-martialed, the family the main gossip topic for weeks.

After a word from her aunt, Keelan's maid paused and sat on a bench near the far edge of the cemetery to wait. Daniel, her father's valet, joined her.

Daniel had been Papa's valet when he was home, and her tutor when Papa was at sea. He taught her not only to read, write and mathematics, but also how to defend herself. She was quite proud of her skills with a blade. She had Daniel to thank for that.

They'd arrived yesterday from Twin Pines. After making a trip to the pier and back, Daniel had informed her Landon Hart's ship, the *Desire*, was flying the blue flag signaling it was ready to depart.

He was waiting for her.

Daniel stood and held out a hand for the maid, Slaney, who took it, allowing him to help her rise to her feet.

"It's hard to believe he's gone."

"Yes, mistress. I know you'll miss him. As will I," Daniel said in a low voice.

"We all will," Slaney added, blotting beneath her eyes with a handkerchief.

"What will you both do now?" Keelan asked. Slaney and Daniel had been like family to her since she was small. With Papa at sea most of the time and her mother in Chatham, England, running their shop, Daniel and Slaney had practically raised her.

"We'll fulfill our obligation to the commodore and accompany you safely back to the country cottage in England, as promised," Daniel said. "Unless you have decided to remain here, instead."

"No," she interrupted. "I have no wish to remain on the plantation. You heard what Papa said. He's left me nothing. His entire estate has gone to Uncle Jared. I no longer have Twin Pines as my dowry." She wasn't angry or upset at

this sudden turn of events. In fact it was a relief.

She had other plans involving Captain Hart, a wedding and a ship.

"By removing you from his will, the commodore thought he was forcing you to act on his request to find your real father," Daniel said gently.

Although truly, it was unnecessary; her curiosity and longing to find out who she was and where she came from would have driven her to search for the man anyway. But Papa hadn't known that. He hadn't known her well at all.

"I made a promise to find him, and I will."

"Then Daniel and I will be ready to join ye," Slaney said. "Yeer like a daughter to us both. We'll not leave ye unless ye wish it." She looped her arm through Keelan's and gave her a secret smile.

The words tugged her heart. "Thank you, Slaney. I can only hope the contents in the trunk Papa told us about will help my cause and not hinder it." She looked up at the valet. "You heard what he said. My mother and that man..."

Daniel's eyes softened. "Yes, I heard. But the commodore said the man, your real father, would *want* to know about you."

She sighed, her heart and head in turmoil. It's rare a bastard child is ever welcomed into a household. The scorn of her sire's wife might be more than she could take.

Slaney peered at her closely. "But what about Captain Hart? Ye fancy the man. Will ye leave him behind?"

She chewed her lip. How much should she tell them? It wasn't that she didn't trust them. Her life was in such tumult now.

"What about Dr. Garrison?" Daniel looked back and forth between Slaney and her.

She might as well tell them everything. "I don't plan to marry Dr. Garrison. Without Twin Pines as a dowry, I'm sure the doctor's interest in me will drop drastically, even if I wasn't born on the other side of the blanket."

Daniel's voice carried a note of relief. "Begging your pardon, Mistress but I've never cared much for the man. He has a dark air about him sometimes; makes me wonder if he's hiding something."

She gave him a quick glance, thinking about the doctor's uncharacteristic behavior toward her the night the commodore died. "I have had the same concerns, especially recently. And sometimes I wonder..." A thick foreboding seeped into her thoughts.

"I remember your mother's funeral when Dr. Garrison introduced himself. The commodore had been grieved but robust, then." Daniel jingled a couple coins in his pocket and stared pensively at his shoes.

The shame of Papa's court martial always lingered about his countenance, adding to his depressed state, but Daniel was right. He hadn't been ill back then, only sad. He and Dr. Garrison became friends and spent many hours together,

engaging in various activities to distract Papa from his grief, but still it consumed him. He ate less and lost weight. He slept more and became sickly.

During the journey to America, Dr. Garrison suggested Papa regularly take a medication to help him regain his appetite and good health. A shudder skittered across her shoulders. She met Daniel's gaze. "I've been wondering if he might be responsible for Papa's sickness. Perhaps he recommended the wrong medicine, or made the wrong diagnosis."

Daniel was silent a moment. "It's possible he made a mistake."

"Either way, I won't marry him. I plan to wed Captain Hart instead," she said. "I plan to marry him and sail with him aboard the *Desire*."

A startled look flashed across the valet's face, but he recovered quickly. "Is that something which appeals to you?"

Slaney smiled and hummed to herself. It truly was impossible to hide anything from her.

"Very much." Keelan plucked at a loose string on her cuff. "In light of recent events, I wonder if his offer will stand," she murmured. What if it didn't? What if he wouldn't want to marry someone's bastard?

Daniel became thoughtful. "Mr. Hart doesn't seem to be the type of man to let anything like this dictate his actions. If he changes his mind, we'll simply book passage on the next passenger ship heading north, if you wish to do so."

Slaney harrumphed. "Well, a choice like that would brand him a fool, I says."

Keelan swallowed. Daniel made it seem like the decision had no real significance, but it wouldn't be so easy for her.

Sailing away with Landon had been the only thing keeping her own shadow of grief from blanketing her in darkness over the past two days. Also during that time, a niggling fear had been swirling in the back of her mind as well. Given her current requirements, would Landon assist her? Would he want any part of her quest to find her true father?

"I'm glad you'll both be with me. It gives me comfort knowing I'll not have to make the journey on my own should things change between me and Captain Hart."

"We wouldn't ever leave ye at a time like this, Mistress. We'll help ye find yer Da," Slaney squeezed her arm.

"First, we must gather our things and take them to Captain Hart's ship. The blue flag means he's ready to leave port." With fresh eyes, she took in the ocean in the distance and the infinite blue of the South Carolina sky. "We don't have much time to pack our trunks, hire a livery and leave before Uncle Jared and Aunt Sarah return home from the luncheon." Uncle Jared would try and stop them. He wanted her to marry and stay in Charleston. He certainly wouldn't approve of her eloping with Landon Hart.

Daniel nodded his agreement. "I'll arrange for transportation to the *Desire*

while you and Slaney have the trunks brought down.”

“It shouldna’ take long,” Slaney said. “I haven’t unpacked much yet, seein’ how we just got to town yesterday.”

“Good.” Keelan had a little more confidence now. A shiver of excitement shot through her chest. She tugged the red ribbon holding the signet ring around her neck. Papa told her it belonged to her real father.

Four lions, a knight’s helm, shafts of wheat. What did it mean?

Who was the man who sired her?

What was her real surname, if not Grey?

Who was she?

CHAPTER THREE

The man who murdered his family and fiancé was finally dead.

Yet, Dr. Everett Garrison, after more than a week, still waited for the burden of grief to lift.

But it didn't.

A brief swell of panic pushed against his chest. Once Commodore Grey was dead, things should have changed. The rock in his stomach should have disappeared, the sharp pain clenching his heart every time he inhaled should have subsided and the black emptiness filling his soul should have receded.

Yet the morning light was still dull, his feet were still heavy, the air still empty, and his hands still stained with blood. No matter how many times he washed them, the blood returned.

He had committed a heinous sin.

Commodore George Grey undoubtedly deserved to die, but Everett was used to saving lives not taking them. If Rachel hadn't screamed for vengeance in his dreams every night when he closed his eyes, he wouldn't have even considered it.

"Rachel," he whispered in anguish. "Rachel...I miss you."

Everett didn't bother to brush away the tears or dry his cheeks. Good God, how he missed her smile and adoring gaze. Her quiet words. Why was he still so tormented?

He stared down at the letter on his desk.

And now, the bank was unwilling to extend him any more credit.

This presented a problem.

In exchange for Dr. Garrison's personal medical care, the commodore and his older brother, Jared Grey had given him money to set up a practice in Charleston. Instead, Everett had used it to fund his plan for revenge. The slow poison he carefully dosed to the commodore had been expensive to procure in a discrete manner.

He tossed a bundle of papers on his desk. It had been worth every cent he paid for justice to be done. That idiot had given the order to sink the ship carrying his parents and brothers.

And his fiancée, Rachel.

It didn't matter that the commodore had claimed to have mistaken the passenger ship for a devious French privateer. The commodore had deserved to be punished, and Everett had complained loudly and frequently to those in charge of his court martial. But, before justice could be done, the commodore's friend, an aristocrat, had used his wealth and influence to whisk away the disgraced Navy commander and his daughter, Keelan, to Charleston, South Carolina and even purchased a small plantation for them. A place for them to hide...far away from the gallows in London where the commodore belonged.

Everett slammed his fist on his desk. "Did he not deserve to suffer the same pain as I?"

The man he'd hired in England arranged the carriage accidents killing the wives of both the commodore and his older brother last fall, after murdering the commodore's nephew. According to the assassin, the women were low-hanging fruit, easy to pluck. Everett didn't have the stomach to do it himself. He was a physician trained to do his best to preserve life, not take it. Besides, such things were best left to a professional. He had no desire to risk botching the job and getting himself hanged in the process of attaining justice.

But the loss...the agony. He tried *everything* to relieve it. Brandy and opiates wore off, left him groggy and sick, and didn't solve the problem, only delayed the execution of a solution. It was, however during one of those binges when he came up with the brilliant idea of hiring a man to exact revenge *for* him.

Less guilt to deal with if they didn't die by his hand. A deed he could live with, so he'd thought.

Everett opened his desk drawer, cradled a pale lavender handkerchief, pressed it to his lips and inhaled. Rachel's perfume grew fainter each time. Soon, like her, it would be gone forever.

"The commodore needed to feel the same suffering," he murmured into the scented cloth. "He had to understand that his transgressions had *consequences*." He hadn't expected he could actually go through with it. The first time he had dosed the commodore with a small amount of poison, the man complained of an upset stomach and went to his cabin. Everett had puked over the side of the ship. His hands quaked for an hour afterward.

The assassin he'd hired in London had been thorough. He'd finally sent the announcement of the death of the commodore's eldest brother, along with a letter requesting the last and final installment owed for his services.

Everett returned the handkerchief to his drawer and then picked up the missive next to the one from the bank.

He reread the letter from the assassin. His gut clenched. The words blurred. His heart thrummed in his ears, sounding like a drum of war signaling death to the enemy.

Doctor Garrison,

We agreed upon the notification of completion of the duties required of me, that payment would be available for me at your barrister's office. Unfortunately, according to the documents your barrister showed me containing your signature, it appears you withdrew the funds prior to traveling to Charleston. This is not acceptable. I request you rectify this immediately. Should I not receive your payment in a reasonable amount of time, I will consider you in breach of our contract. In which case, I will contact a man in Charleston to perform the same duty for me, which I have so diligently performed for you.

*Regards,
Munsford*

The problem was, Everett had to use some of Munsford's funds to keep up appearances here in Charleston and to handle a slight problem in the form of Captain Landon Hart.

The gaping hole Rachel's death left in his heart didn't shrink with time; it grew. If he didn't find someone to fill it soon, it would continue to grow bigger and bigger. It would eventually consume him until there was nothing left but the edges of his soul.

It seemed like poetic justice to have Keelan Grey be the one to fill the void.

He'd not been prepared for the ripples Captain Hart had caused, though. Everett's scheme had been progressing well until Hart showed up at Twin Pines. He sat heavily in his chair, gripped the hair on each side of his head and rested his elbows on the desk.

It had taken Everett months to court Keelan to the point where she'd agreed to marry him. Then the captain interfered with his courtship, distracted her, and made it difficult to gain her full attention and affection.

Everett had been at the table one day when Hart explained the attack by Gampo's ship which had crippled his. Apparently, Hart's fleet and the pirate had some sort of ongoing feud. It only took a couple inquiries in the pubs near the wharf and a meeting with Gampo's first mate to get a message to Gampo himself.

The pirate and Hart had a history of clashes on the open sea. Gampo helped Everett develop a scheme to distract Hart. In exchange, he was supposed to find out if a woman named *Marisa* sailed with the fleet. How was he supposed to obtain that information? It was almost impossible. However, he had indeed tried. One bright morning he walked to the pier, up the ramp and asked the first mate. The man looked at him as if he was daft.

"Having a woman aboard is bad luck, mister. Any sailor knows that."

He couldn't very well approach Hart, his adversary, and ask him, could he?

Surely Hart would lie to him. Gampo wouldn't understand that, however. Unfortunately, he still had no information for the pirate, and that was disconcerting.

Thankfully, the plan they managed to execute may yet generate additional funds. As soon as he found the right buyers for the cargo the men took from Hart, there would be enough money to pay the assassin.

He hoped.

The damned pirates had some sort of hard and fast rule on dividing things into "like shares."

Even after they stole the goods, Hart had gotten to Keelan, and she broke her engagement to him, dammit. Their plan could still move forward, but now, he would have to make a few adjustments.

And it was going to cost him.

Getting to Keelan was going to be more difficult now.

Keelan Grey. The commodore's daughter.

Beautiful, cold, and distant, he understood she wasn't the type to enjoy plantation life. More than once he'd overheard her plead with her father to sell Twin Pines and move to the city of Charleston. She wanted a shop, similar to the one her mother had near the naval shipyards in Chatham. She was not the soft, gentle woman Rachel had been. Keelan was bold and impetuous; Rachel had been quiet and reliable.

Rachel was water.

Keelan was fire.

He recalled the night when the commodore had called Keelan to his room. The glass he had placed against the wall in the next room allowed him to hear much of their conversation. The commodore spoke of a treasure he'd hidden for Keelan back in his country cottage.

Everett straightened. Why hadn't he thought of this earlier? Obviously, his grief muddled his mind. Rising, he began to pace the floor and tried to recall the commodore's words.

"The contents are of great value...promise me you'll go back to Wind Briar and find my old trunk..."

There! The answer to his financial woes rested in a trunk at the Wind Briar estate. They only had to find it. Then he could leave the assassin's funds with his barrister. Everett spun on his heel and snatched his hat from the hook by the door. He had to change his strategy, which left behind a few frayed ends he'd have to clip. Soon, his sword of justice would do its duty. He'd already sacrificed time, money and energy to this endeavor.

He deserved to reap the rewards from his service.

It was his due.

And Keelan would share it with him.

As his wife.