



*Legacy of the
Celtic Brooch*

Sarita
Leone



*Freedom's
Touch*

The Wild Rose Press

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Welcome to the Legacy of the Celtic Brooch series. The authors of this series were handpicked by our editors at The Wild Rose Press and asked to write a tale using an heirloom Celtic Brooch as the one constant in each story. Beginning in March, 2007 with English Tea Rose and Tarah Scott's, *The Pendulum* and ending sometime in early 2008 with Marly Mathews from the Faery Rose Line, we will follow this brooch on its mystical journey from Regency England to modern times. It might show up as part of a dowry or be used to pay a ransom. It might be magical; it might simply be a piece of jewelry. Every author was asked to put her own spin on the brooch's appearance and they have all done a beautiful job.

We welcome your comments on this series and hope that you will enjoy reading the stories as much as our authors enjoyed creating them for you.

Enjoy the journey!

RJ and Rhonda

Dear Reader:

Thank you for purchasing this electronic copy of the first in our "Legacy of the Celtic Brooch" series. Please send the following code to me along with your first and last name to *legacyseries@thewildrosepress.com*. You will be entered into a drawing for an actual Celtic Brooch. The winner will be drawn at the end of the series, approximately January 2008. Only one entry per person per story is allowed. If you purchase all 13 stories as they come out this year you will have 13 chances to win this authentic Celtic Brooch.

CODE: LG41307

Dedication

For Vito, with all my love. Ti amo.

Prologue

May 1, 1630

Somewhere on the Atlantic Ocean

The *Arabella* was a sturdy vessel weighing several tons, with a hull thick enough to withstand even the most brutal seas. It had masts and riggings that soared to such heights that watching the activity in the crows' nest made most of the passengers dizzy.

Even so, as the next wave crashed against the wooden ship Deirdre Sullivan clutched Patrick's shoulder, her breath catching in her throat as she struggled to keep to her feet. The leather soles of her shoes sought purchase on the rough wooden decking but still she slid a few inches, her hip banging against a support column before her body stopped and she regained her balance.

"Aye, and that was a heavy one, wasn't it?" Patrick said. "Much bigger than those that tossed us during the night. Seems the storm that's been brewing is finally coming hard upon us. Aye, I'd say it's found us for sure now. Are you all right, my Deirdre?"

Patrick, a man whose broad back, wide shoulders and rippling muscles were noteworthy on land but even more so in the close confines of the 'tween deck, wrapped his thick hands around the hand-hewn column. His attempt to shelter her from losing her footing as the boat lurched was successful and his sturdy body took the brunt of the sea's next crash while she merely jostled against the circle of his arms. It was a gesture that most likely saved Deirdre from another round

of buffeting. Gazing down on her with what could only be described as a look of complete adoration in his deep brown eyes, he smiled.

"There. Now that wasn't so bad, was it? I'm much too sorry I didn't catch you quicker with the first blow but I think we've got it figured out now," Patrick said as he tightened his grip on the column. "And how's your hip where you hit it? Do you think you'll be bruised very badly?"

Deirdre rubbed a hand absently over the sore spot. It would be bruised, but it couldn't be helped. Besides, what was another bump or two when she already had so many?

When they'd discussed this journey they'd known it would be an arduous one. They knew that many people would likely die on the trip and that countless others might perish soon after they reached their destination. But they'd also acknowledged, as they sat in their one-room cottage in Kilkenny, with the peat fire making the air so thick it chased away breath but did little to allay the cold, that the voyage, even with all its perils, was a trip they wanted to make.

Any chance at a better life was a risk worth taking.

Deirdre lifted her gaze to his and felt her heart swell. They'd been married for three years and still one glance at him made her heart skip and her body heat. She hoped that was something that would, unlike this difficult passage, never end.

"Ach, it's nothing." She waved a hand in the air between them. "No worse than any I'd have gotten carrying a bucket o' milk from the shed to the kettle. And now that I'm thinking of Gert, that stubborn monster, I wonder how she's getting

on with the Flannigan brood? Mayhap she's wishing for her old, quiet life by now."

When they'd left home they'd taken very little—not that there was much for them to choose from to begin with. But they had given their meager collection of household items, along with a few chickens and their ornery goat, to a neighboring family. Deirdre and Patrick felt that with nine mouths to feed, the Flannigans needed all the help they could get—even if that assistance came by way of gruff old Gert. She'd been known to butt an inattentive person in the rear end and was fond of taking bites of trousers and shifts, but still and all she gave rich, sweet milk. It was, they'd always thought, a case of putting up with the bad to get the good.

Chuckling softly, Patrick said, "Aye. The bairns have probably ridden her 'round the yard a few times already."

Another wave hit the ship broadside and the timbers creaked ominously. There was a loud chorus of exclamations, fearful pleas for blessings and bosom-clutching gasps. A number of children began to cry as their mothers grabbed them tightly and the crowded space became, if possible, even noisier. Still, the sound of the storm's fury could be heard above the wail of human terror.

"Ach! That was a big one," Deirdre placed a hand over her heart. "Looks like it has gotten most of the little ones rattled."

"And some of the big 'uns, too." Patrick pressed his body closer to hers, holding her firmly against the post as a new round of buffeting shook them. Despite the precariousness of their current situation the fit of his hips to hers, his muscular thighs pressed to her skirt and his chest flattening her breasts

was enough to make Deirdre's heart lurch more swiftly than even the *Arabella* could.

"Aye, them too. If they only knew, as I do, that we'll be fine, they'd not take on so. No, we'll not have a watery end to this voyage, no matter what the thunderclouds seem to think," Deirdre said cheerfully. "One way or another, we'll be seeing the green grass of the new colonies. I know we will."

Her confidence in their safe passage had been unflagging these past months. She'd endured weeks of walking through the Irish countryside, sleeping rough by the road and eating when the opportunity, rather than hunger, arose. In England they'd had to find shelter in a decrepit shack near the wharf with others waiting for winds favorable enough for sailing. It had been crowded with lice-infested, foul-smelling people, many of whom looked as if they'd rather eat you than stand beside you, yet she'd tolerated that with a stiff upper lip, too. And now, while those around her keened and prayed, Deirdre had the conviction and grace to smile.

"How can you be so sure?" Another wave crashed and over their heads they heard sounds of shouting and running feet. The crew, most likely, attempting to save the ship from whatever damage the sea was ladling out. "How can you not doubt we'll see the end of this journey? I must admit, with the rolls and dips this ship is doing I'm beginning to have my doubts..."

"Oh, we'll be making it, all right. We've worked too hard for this to end in any but a fair way, Paddy. Our intentions are good, our plan well-laid, and this will work. *It has to work.*"

Her tone did not encourage arguments but, perhaps to take his mind from his roiling innards, he persisted.

"Why? Do you call it well-laid because we've given false names for the manifest? I keep wondering if that was a smart idea after all, Deirdre. God knows that if ... if ... well, if there's any sorrow to befall us, no one will know what happened to us. They'll never know that Deirdre and Patrick Sullivan are really—"

Moving her fingers from their grasp on his shoulder, she placed them across his lips. "Now, no mention of them, recall? Did we not agree, before we set off, that we'd not mention those names again? Really, dearest, how could you forget so swiftly?"

Kissing her fingertips as the deck trembled beneath them, he shook his head. "I did not forget at all, my love. It's just that I wonder if we made a wise decision, doing what we done."

Patrick's voice was as smooth as cream and filled her heart as fully as if she was the pitcher that cradled him. Deirdre felt her body respond to his touch, the whisper of his breath on her flushed cheek and the sound of his voice and wished, not for the first time, that there was some measure of privacy to be found on the ship. But there wasn't any spot on the teeming ship for romantic seclusion, not even for a few moments. Rustling in the canvas slings during the long, black nights reminded them that they weren't the only ones feeling the deprivation of a soft caress. Had it been nighttime Deirdre may have chanced a joining of bodies but, alas, it was fully

midday and, with the storm raging above deck, there was even less hope for isolation than usual.

Contenting herself with pressing her forehead against his for a long, silent heartbeat, she swallowed deeply. She'd known this topic would surface again and again, especially if the travails of the trip proved too difficult to bear. Patrick would feel responsible for their situation, something she couldn't—something she *wouldn't*—allow to happen.

Deirdre dropped her head back until her gaze met, and held, his. She saw the questions swirling behind his eyes as clearly as if they'd been written on his handsome face.

"We made the only decision open to us. There's no looking back. No regrets. Don't you recall? We talked about this before we set off. Doubtless it's not unusual to feel a wee bit of anxiety over our decision, especially at moments such as these. Why, it's hardly fitting not to have a touch of looking back, now and again. But what we're doing is the best thing for us—"

"For me, you mean," he said, scowling.

"*For us*," she insisted, running her fingertips across his brow. She buried them in the curly black locks at his temple before she spoke again. "What would I be without you? What kind of life would there be left for me, I ask, if I didn't have you?"

"Mayhap it would have been a better life than this. Leastways you wouldna be tossed around on the water like an acorn in yon stream." His brow wrinkled again but this time she didn't soothe it.

"I wouldna 'ave a life a'tall and ye know that," she said. Her voice was low and even as her emotions rose within her. "Without ye, I wouldna wanted to live—not a'tall. And ye know that, don't ye?"

He nodded, holding her close as the ship shifted again. "I reckon."

Pressing her mouth to his ear, she hissed, "They would've killed you. Hung you until all life went from your body. And that, me love, would've killed me too."

"Mayhap," he said. "But mayhap I would have been able to make them see reason. Ach, I didna' do it on purpose. You know it and I know it—mayhap I could've made them that counts, them that metes out justice, know it, too."

Deirdre shook her head, her thick russet braid bouncing with every movement. A few stray locks had escaped and were plastered to her cheek but she made no move to push them away. "No! 'Twas not a chance I was willing to take. No, 'twas no way anyone would've seen reason, no way they wouldna hung you for doing what you did. There would've been no justice for us back there. No, this is the right decision, Paddy. It matters not how hard the rain falls, the wind howls or this damned boat rocks. No, we'll get to the new world. We'll make a new life for ourselves, and for the wee ones we'll begin having soon as we've settled. No, this is a wise move for us," she insisted. "Mark my words, 'tis."

A smile stretched across his face at her words.

"An' how is it that you're so set on this? How know you that we'll be spared a watery death?"

Patting her chest, in the small hollow between her breasts, she grinned. "We're not alone, recall? I've got the brooch pinned to my under shift, right above my heart. I feel it with me all the time, Paddy. And with its weight I feel its strength. 'Twas handed down for generations in my family, you know that. And 'twill be handed down for generations more to come. Every woman who wears the circle will feel its power, as surely as she feels every other strength in her body and soul." Her hand stilled on the spot, curling protectively around the silver brooch. It was her most valuable possession—her only possession of any monetary value. Not that Deirdre would dream of parting with the brooch. No, it was far too important to her for her to even imagine being separated from it.

The brooch had been payment for an act of bravery—and sacrifice—made long ago. Deirdre's great-great grandmother had done the unthinkable—married an Englishman at a time when the English and Irish had been fiercely feuding. The brooch had been her wedding gift from him, the only thing he had aside from his love for her. In return, Deirdre's ancestor had faced her father's wrath. He had never spoken to her again, punishment for following her own heart.

As the *Arabella* lifted and fell again and those around them grew even more frantic, the young couple held fast to the pole, each other and their love. They felt the circle both within and around them and it was as if they'd found their private spot—right in the center of hundreds of unwashed, frightened, groaning bodies.

Now neither was fearful as the ship bucked on the rough sea.

"What is it, then, about the brooch, that keeps you so filled with faith? Tell me again, if you please," Patrick said. He dipped his head low, nearly touching hers, as she began to speak. Their conversation was one something, like most the pair shared, that he wished kept between them. Sharing her with anyone was nearly impossible for him—and that reticence had been one of the factors that led to the journey. "Once more, tell me what it is about yon brooch that keeps you from screaming with the others."

"Freedom," she said simply. "This brooch will carry us to freedom. And with that freedom, we'll have a new life. We only need to be as strong as the circle itself, to hold fast to our dreams and beliefs, dear Paddy. This brooch is nearly ancient, I imagine, handed down from woman to woman for centuries. There's a tale my Grandmother told me about it being lost for a while, but that was long, long ago. It's not lost now, is it?"

Patrick took one hand from the column and pressed it to the spot where he knew the item lay. Her heart quickened under his bold touch. She felt his strong fingers trace the silver circle, touching the swirls along the side of the piece. "Nay, it's not lost at all," he whispered mischievously. Wagging his brows at her he pursed his lips and clicked his tongue against the roof of his mouth. "Would that it was ... I dinna think I'd best look for what's not lost..."

"Oh, go on with you!" Deirdre said, giggling. Her gaze darted around at those who shared the 'tween deck with them

but no one was paying them any attention. "Now don't be turning my attention to other things, Paddy. Not now, here in this spot with everyone watching everyone else. This is no time for you to be thinking of exploring my shift. So, where was I?" Her intentional primness was comical and they shared a small laugh.

A few of those in their immediate area looked quizzically to the two but quickly lost interest as the boat shuddered and shook.

"Staying strong, I think it was..."

"Aye. I was saying that all we have to do is stay as strong as the circle itself. All these years ... all these years being worn and handed around and the brooch has naught but one small scratch on it. It's as strong as the day it was forged. That's what we need to do, stay as strong as the brooch and it'll carry us to freedom. I know it as the truth," she said. One strong wave pushed them closer, pinning the brooch between their bodies. "With strength, especially when it comes to something you believe in with all your heart, there is no way to fail. Our destiny is freedom."

He pressed his lips against her temple. At his touch, she shivered.

"Freedom," he murmured, wrapping an arm around her and pulling her tightly to his body. "I pray you and yon brooch are right, love."

"We are," she said, nestling her head against his shoulder. "Didn't you hear what John Winthrop said in his speech? And he spoke so forcefully too, even with the deck beneath his feet pitching like it was settin' to burst open and swallow

him—and us, with him. That man, the one who leads this expedition, he's a man of faith. Determination. Pride. If we stay with him and his followers ... why, there's naught but for us to find the colonies. I can still hear his voice ring out, still hear his speech in my head. '...Therefore let us choose life...' So we choose life—a free life—in the new world."

"It's as simple as that, is it?"

"It is."

A couple of the men had taken up instruments and the first strains of a familiar tune could be heard above the sounds of the storm. Babies calmed as they were pressed to pallets and comforted. The ship listed, then righted itself, as its occupants attempted to gain control of the only thing they could control—themselves.

"Well, then, I have no reason to worry, it seems. So long as I have you and you have the brooch, all is well. We'll be walking on the free soil of the American colonies in a mere matter of weeks. I'll bet Winthrop will be leading us to this free world with another speech or two, so I'd best forget the past and look toward the future. Especially seeing as how I've got everything I need right here in front of me."

Deirdre took a deep breath and looked up into his eyes. "And I have all I need to begin a free life in this new land. I have you, my dearest love and the brooch—and one more thing besides," she said. Reaching down to her side, she patted the small bulge in her skirt pocket.

"Aye, that's right," Patrick covered her hand with his own. "How could I ever forget? You've got the wee bit 'o home with us, now don't you?"

Confident that the package in her pocket was safe, she twined her fingers with his and held him tightly.

"That's right. I checked it this morning and the snippet of me Grandmother's rose bush is doing just fine. I wrapped it in some soft moss and have been keeping it moist and it's looking as fit as if 'twere still in Granny's garden. It'll plant up nicely in that fertile new soil, I expect."

Aside from the brooch, the rose cutting was the only item Deirdre had insisted on carrying with her. It had been faithfully cared for during the long months and had begun to sprout a few spindly white roots. Its tenuous grip on the Irish moss would, she hoped, sustain the cutting until she had a chance to plant it properly.

"I expect you're right on that count, too. And 'twill be a nice reminder for you—mayhap you won't feel too lonely for home with the rose nearby," Patrick said. His eyes searched hers, looking for any sign she regretted their choice to join up with John Winthrop and his group of religious freedom seekers. He found none.

"Ach, but you're a silly man sometimes, Patrick Sullivan. I won't be pining for *home* at all, because we're going to be home. Don't you see? Anywhere you be, that's where my home is, too. And the rose? Why, I'm going to give it a name fitting a thing of beauty growing in a new land so that when it blooms everyone will know what to call it. Aye, and when the red-and-white striped buds open I'll remember what Gran always told me about them. Red is for the blood that runs in our veins and the pure white signifies our faith—and that freedom, for man nor beast, cannot be found without a

mixture of both. And Gran's blossoms will fill the air with a fragrance so lovely, so sweet and enticing, that no one will wonder where the scent comes from, either," she said. The lilting voice had attracted attention and several of their fellow passengers listened to her speak with faraway expressions on their faces, as if they, too, could picture a sweet-scented, fully-blooming rose bush.

"And what will you be calling this new rose bush of yours, sweet Deirdre?"

Her gaze found his as she smiled. "Why, it's to be called the American Rose, of course."

Chapter One

Chambersburg, Pennsylvania

April 1863

Spring touched the land in the Appalachian Valley more gently than anything else had that year. It was deceptively sweet, bringing fluttering whisper-winged butterflies, fat butter-yellow daffodils and warm, fragrant breezes. A poignant reminder of the bucolic existence they had enjoyed before the fighting began; there was no one in town who didn't smile at the melting snow. Even the muddy streets couldn't take away the lightness that spring brought with it.

But despite the flowers and birdsong, there was no way to forget the Civil War raged on. No longer a thirty-day skirmish, as had been predicted, but well into its second year, there was no end in sight. And although the war wasn't in their peaceful, fertile land yet, there was no one in town who didn't wait for it to come.

No, they waited. They watched. And they planned. For when—surely there was no *if* regarding the war's arrival—the war touched a deadly finger to their homes, they wanted to be ready.

Kay Lane was certain she wanted to be ready more than anyone else did. For her, preparedness for the war's touch was more than a lifestyle change, more than a face-to-face reckoning with the horrors she'd imagined for the past months. For her, it was much more. Because she had a secret. A very big secret. One that impacted not only her own life but the lives of many others.

Thankfully the early-season chores kept her too busy to dwell overlong on the burdens her deception brought to her. With her father, Frank, and brother, Frank Junior, gone with the 16th Pennsylvania Cavalry, and her intended, Marsh Nolan, a lieutenant in the same regiment, it fell to Kay to run the family dry-goods store. Business wasn't nearly as brisk as it had been before the war but it was good enough for her to keep the store open. Besides, without the store to occupy her mind and body she thought she just might lose her mind waiting ... and wondering.

"What do you think? Shall we put the blue and pink cottons in the front window? Or do you think that would look too ... I don't know, babyish?" Kay's sister-in-law, Arden, patted the growing mound that was her belly, smiling down at her stretched linsey-woolsey as she kept her other hand on the bolts of fabric. With the sunlight streaming through the wavery pane of glass she looked like such a vision of motherhood that the sight of her brought a lump to Kay's throat.

She smiled and shook her head. "I don't think it's babyish at all, Arden dear." A lock of deep chestnut hair escaped her hair clip and she pushed it off her cheek with the back of one hand "In fact, if you add the bolt of yellow ... there is a bolt of yellow in that packet, isn't there? The invoice says we received one length of yellow cotton."

"It's here, beneath the blue dotted. See?" She pulled the cheery fabric from the brown paper wrapper and held it up to the light. It was as pale as a buttercup and looked just as fresh. "Oh, it's very spring-like, isn't it?"

"That's what I was hoping for," Kay said with a smile. She'd practically been raised in the dry goods, and she knew how best to arrange the merchandise. Even when buyers were scarce, it paid to keep up appearances. Some days she felt as if appearances were all they had left to them. "Put the three lengths in the window, draped around some of those children's caps. Who knows? Perhaps we'll entice some of the ladies to stitch up new summer clothes for their little ones."

"I don't know." Arden's tone was dubious as she began to arrange the items on the newly-dusted window seat. "We sold hardly anything for Easter, aside from a few measures of ribbon. No one, I think, aside from the Widow Warner, had even a new shift for the holiday. Depressing, isn't it?"

"Only if you let it be, dear. We must remember that the Widow Warner's contribution to Chambersburg's fashion update was a grey shawl and two black petticoats—definitely not something to notify *Harper's Weekly* about. And aside from that, we *did* sell a fair amount of ribbon and the re-trimmed hats on Easter morning were a glorious sight indeed. Don't you think so?"

Kay moved to stand beside Arden in the window. She tugged a bit of the pink fabric further off the bolt, giving it an additional drape in the display. Whether it was a subconscious gesture or not, she hoped Arden and Frank Junior's first child would be a girl. Even now, standing so close to the new life that would soon become a focal point of their family, she felt a burst of longing, a flash of tenderness.

Someday. Someday Marsh and I will have children of our own. Until that time, I'm going to coddle Frank and Arden's

babies. I'll be the best auntie around and who knows? Maybe I'll even make the wee one a quilt with this pink fabric. But if it's a boy? Perhaps I'd best wait to make quilts until the babe arrives. Although the green and yellow would go nicely, especially if I added little bits of—

"Kay!"

"What?" She started at the sound of her sister-in-law's voice. When she turned, Arden had a broad smile on her face.

Not exactly a comely woman, yet not overly homely either, her sister-in-law had the type of face that could best be described as 'dependable.' With ordinary features, mousy brown hair and an overbite, she looked less like a sleek racehorse than a plow horse, more like an everyday dish than a piece of fancy crystal. But what the woman lacked in beauty she more than made up for in personality and disposition, and her open, loving heart was legendary. Her sense of humor, too, was well known and at this instant Kay's scowl sent her into peals of laughter.

"It's a miracle that we get anything done around here, with you dallying by the fabric the way you do," Arden teased.

"Why, anyone would think you were planning baby quilts or some other such fancy bit of nonsense in your head by the way you were staring into space."

Gathering up the empty brown wrapping, Arden slowly made her way to the counter and smoothed the paper with a block of wood kept on the counter for just that purpose. When she was satisfied that most of the wrinkles had been pressed out, she carefully folded and stored the material. It would be used again—and probably again after that, even. In

these days of shortages, nothing went to waste—not even in the North.

"So, is that what you were up to?" she asked, turning to face Kay. "Planning baby things? Isn't it enough that I'm consumed with thoughts of the baby? Now I've got you daydreaming about the new arrival too."

There was a time when Kay would have protested, would never have admitted her true, sentimental feelings. But those days were gone—long gone. So many hardships, so much sacrifice in the name of freedom, for others and by others, had befallen them that any mention of the ordinary, sweet pleasures of life was to be embraced.

"That you have, I'll admit it freely," she said, moving to stand behind the counter again. She piled the receipts she'd been tallying in a neat bundle and tied them in a length of twine. "Sometimes I think I'm more intrigued with that baby of yours than you are, Arden. Honestly, how can you be so calm about it all? I think I'll be jumping out of my skin when I'm waiting for the arrival of my firstborn. No, I take that back—I don't *think* it, I *know* it. I'm going to be too excited to be as serene as you are."

Stroking her stomach, Arden smiled and looked dreamily toward the ceiling. "Oh, I'm excited, believe me. But I can't help thinking this all would be so much more thrilling if Frank were here to see it. I write to him nightly, but still..."

"It's not the same." Her evening letters to Marsh helped bridge the distance between them, but only marginally. Parchment and sealing wax were no substitute for a warm body. "I know, honey, how you feel. But who knows? Maybe

this infernal war will end soon and our men will come back home to us. Then we'll have a wedding, as well as a birth, to plan."

"From your mouth to Heaven's ears," said Arden.

Their conversation ended when the small brass bell that hung from the entrance door tinkled.

The only males remaining in town were either elderly or very young. Jack Conrad was one of the former, a stout, white-haired gentleman. He was usually accompanied by his manservant, Jacob Parker, who carried a long hearing tube with him everywhere he went. Shouting into it sometimes got a point across to him but communicating with the old man was a matter of intricate sign language. Most times Captain Conrad translated for his companion, who was, most suspected, more a friend than an employee.

Today, however, Mr. Parker was nowhere in sight. The Captain entered the store, his walking stick sounding like a series of shots as it struck the worn floorboards. He required a slow-paced, face-to-face conversation to hear all that was said, but he stopped short of requiring a horn or raised voices.

Having served in the War of 1812 and having never relinquished his military title, the dapper man carried himself with as much of a stiff-spine swagger as his arthritis allowed. Still faithfully polished and gleaming from hilt to tip, the sword he'd carried into battle hung from his left hip, making a dull thudding noise as it struck the man's boot with each step he took.

He was one of Kay's favorite people.

"Captain Conrad, it's so nice to see you today," she said very slowly. "How are you?"

"Fine, I'm just fine, thank you. And you? How are you ladies today?" His gaze flashed over Arden's ripe body quickly as he nodded his greeting to her, adhering to the prevailing notion among men that lingering on her physical appearance could be construed as rude. He flushed slightly, cleared his throat and turned to face Kay again, firmly focusing his stare on Kay's eyes. "You are both well, I trust?"

Nodding, Kay smiled. "We're fine, thank you."

"Nice weather we're having," he said as he poked through the meager offering of books piled beside a pencil-filled glass jar. Opening books at random and scowling at the small print, he snapped them closed one by one and re-piled them, in reverse order now that he'd examined, and discarded, each one. "About time we had some warm weather. My old bones, they enjoy the heat. This all the new reading material you've got?"

He looked up at Kay, his gaze dropping to the round silver brooch pinned above her heart before locking on her eyes. In that instant, when he touched a look to the only valuable piece of jewelry she owned, she realized the man had made his way to the store for more than a new source of entertainment. They'd done this enough for her to suspect the exact purpose of his visit. Now that he'd given their private signal, the fast look at the brooch she was never without, she knew to wait for news.

She didn't have to wait long.

"I hear there's a parcel expected soon. Perhaps there will be something a tad more interesting in it."

"Yes, new shipments are due to arrive before long," she murmured. Busying herself straightening the stack of books, she concealed her racing mind behind a businesslike façade. "We're fortunate, Captain Conrad. Our orders and shipments are still finding their way to us without any problem. Perhaps we'll soon get in one of those history volumes you so enjoy. Or even something by that Jules Verne fellow. I know that would suit you better than what I've got to offer here."

"Well, since I'm still reading *Silas Marner* by that woman ... what was her name? A woman—and she writes fairly well, at that—but with an odd name ... a man's name..."

"George Eliot?"

He waved a large hand in the air between them, his gnarled fingers still thick and sturdy-looking enough to crack walnuts if he'd had teeth enough to chew them. "That's right—George Eliot. Anyhow, I'm not quite finished with her book so I'll wait, then, and see what comes in the next shipment."

"That sounds like a sensible plan, Captain Conrad," Kay answered, nodding. Looking up, she asked, "And how soon do you hope the new shipment will arrive? That is, to suit your reading purposes."

Pausing, he cocked his head and stared into the space beyond the window as if in deep contemplation. To anyone passing by it would appear the trio was discussing any mundane topic rather than a life-and-death issue. "Oh, I haven't many pages to go, and it will probably be a long,

leisurely evening of reading for me, so..." He brought his gaze down and met hers. "By the morning, I'd hope."

"Ah, that soon. Well. I'll keep an eye open for something new for your reading pleasure, then," Kay said.

"Thank you, ladies," Captain Conrad said, tipping his hat genially, first to Kay, then to Arden. Clutching the large carved eagle-head knob on the top of his walking stick, the courtly gentleman headed for the door as he pushed his wide-brimmed brown felt back onto his white locks. "Have a pleasant afternoon, now."

"And you too, sir," answered Arden. She rubbed her stomach, as if to soothe the suddenly-active child within, as they watched him leave. When the door was closed behind him and the women were once again alone in the shop, she turned to Kay with an expression that was a combination of fear and excitement. The look made her seem almost attractive.

"By morning," she said, keeping her voice low despite their being alone. "Did you hear, Kay? Another shipment by morning."

"I heard." Already her mind was racing—as were her heart and pulse. She put her hand over the brooch she wore and, as she considered all that had to be done by nightfall, she traced the curves of the piece with her fingertip. The metal felt cool beneath her touch and, in that moment, it calmed her, as it always had.

* * * *

The darkness was absolute, but Kay pulled her dressing gown tightly about her body and walked through the yard as easily as if she was in the glare of the noontime sun. The faraway twinkling points threw no illumination from their field of velvety blackness.

Just inside the entrance to the barn she stopped. Holding as still as she could, she strained to hear any noises aside from the two horses, Molly and Mike. Only whickering and soft stamping carried to her on the wholesome hay-scented air.

Approaching the closest stall, she reached a hand over the top rail to rub Molly between the eyes. After doing the same for Mike, she squeezed into the space between their stalls and crept sideways to the wall of the barn.

She placed her mouth to a crack in the wood and took a deep, steadying breath. "It is ... a friend of a friend."

With barely a discernible sound, a panel slid open, its uppermost edge on a level with Kay's hips. Crouching, she pressed into the opening before the panel skimmed back down.

As her eyes acclimated to the gloom, Kay made out the shapes of the fugitives who were now in her care. She'd been a conductor on the Underground Railroad for twenty-three months and had helped many on their journey to freedom, but every time she got a new shipment in her station a thrill coursed through her veins, shivers shot up her spine. The courage of those she sheltered never failed to bring a flutter to her heart.

On this trip there were three passengers: a man who looked as if he'd run a marathon in the bowels of hell, his clothes horribly torn and muddied, a young woman wearing a turban and clutching the third traveler, a youngster of no more than five or six. Judging by the long braids and shabby dress, the child was female. The grime on her face could not conceal the beauty of big brown eyes, full, pink lips and an inquisitive stare. Kay had the impression the child was intelligent enough to have questions but savvy enough to keep her own council. It did not pass even the most fleeting inspection that beneath the dirty exterior, the child was fair enough to pass for white.

That poor woman. Her "master" was probably another one of those plantation owners who felt no shame at using a woman for his own pleasure. Disgusting—but the child was beautiful. *That is, at least, some consolation, to have a child.*

Kay stepped into the tiny space, knelt and took the woman's hand. Giving her a gentle squeeze, she said, "I know you must be tired from your journey, and time is precious. There is clothing on those hooks over there and I've left a bucket of fresh water beneath the bench. Feel free to wash and change your clothes if you'd like. Just leave the things you don't need here and I'll dispose of them. On the bench there is some food. I'm sorry it isn't hot but at least it's nourishing." Kay, motioned to the items as she spoke. Even in the gloom, she knew where everything was.

"Thank you, ma'am," the woman whispered, her voice cracking as she spoke. Kay understood that on the trail to freedom, words were a luxury those on the run could ill afford

to waste and she was touched by the woman's show of gratitude.

"You're very welcome," Kay said. She would have loved to linger but with every passing minute the chance she could be discovered missing from the house grew. "When you move on tonight, keep traveling north. You'll walk a good twelve miles this night, so rest well. Go back the way you came, through the woods until you find the stream again. Walk beside it as it winds toward the mountains. Follow the north star—you know that one, don't you?" she waited until all three heads nodded before she continued. "Follow the star, keeping the stream on your right side," she held up her right hand and waited until three darker ones joined hers. "Until you see a cabin beneath a stand of pines. There will be an 'X' on the side of the cabin—you know what an 'X' is, don't you? Good, then just go into the cabin and wait. The next conductor will be to you before sunrise. Do you understand what I've told you?"

"Yes'm, we do." The man sounded tired and looked as if he needed a bath, a hot meal and a warm bed.

Kay resisted the impulse to reach out and hug him, knowing her desire to comfort would be shocking for the travel-weary passengers to deal with. She wished she could offer these people more, wished with all her heart and soul they didn't have to pay so dearly for their freedom. But wishing, especially in a world gone mad the way theirs had, only made her sad. She took a deep breath and placed a hand on the latch that opened the hidden panel.

Before leaving, she turned and met the gaze of each person and held it for several long moments, trying to

memorize their faces. It was the only way she had of keeping them close. After she scooted through the panel and out of the barn, she would never see any of them again. Instead she'd be left to wonder whether they completed their journey, whether they lived or died and whether they'd found freedom in this world—or the next.

Chapter Two

The days of spring passed quickly. An air of expectation came to the valley as grass became thicker, buds became leaves and tulips, forsythia and hyacinths bloomed in profusion. Kay felt the tension growing along with the course of nature. As if they were waiting for something, but she simply did not know what was coming or when it would arrive.

Nights were less swift to pass. With growing frequency Captain Conrad visited her in the afternoon and after looking pointedly at the brooch on her shirtwaist they would speak of parcels, bushels of potatoes or shipments destined to arrive. Although it was liberating for her to be part of a plan much bigger than she could even envision, it was also frightening. For, with increasing occasion, the kindly old man would warn her of slave bounty hunters nearby. His words, "The wind blows from the south today" never failed to send a chill to her heart.

But the days and nights marched on, as steadily, Kay imagined, as their Union troops marched toward freedom. Freedom for the enslaved, and an end to the family-rending conflict was what the women, as well as the nation, wished for.

Keeping to life's usual routines saved her from becoming mired in wondering where loved ones were and what horrors they were being subjected to. Both Kay and Arden attempted to keep their days full with hours spent at the store.

Arden and Frank had an apartment above the store so she could slip upstairs whenever her growing body needed a break from standing. And there were fewer customers with each passing day as those with funds grew more determined to hold onto them. Having two people in the store was unnecessary but at least it kept their minds occupied, even if only for short periods.

In the afternoons they sat beside the front door on the scuffed porch and watched friends and neighbors passing by. Waving, smiling and exchanging pleasantries gave them all a feeling that their world, at least, was going on in a nearly-normal fashion.

A warm breeze caressed Kay's cheek and she let her head fall back against the white wicker. The rocker was old but comfortable. Before he'd left, Marsh had promised to paint it, and the porch, too. But painting had been forgotten in the rush to duty and the rocker's arms remained worn.

"The days are getting warmer," Kay spoke without opening her eyes. When the wind blew a bit of hair free from her chignon she pushed it back into place with a small smile. "Definitely warmer than yesterday but most likely not as warm as tomorrow."

"Mmm hmm." Arden hummed as her knitting needles clicked. "Tomorrow—what a glorious word. I can't help but think of all the tomorrows we'll have when the war ends and life becomes normal again. We'll have the men back ... Big Frank and Frank. And, of course, Marsh. And you two will finally get married. Will you have a big wedding, Kay? One like Helen Bradstreet had in ... gosh, what year was it?"

"Sixty one. She and Benton were married just before he left, remember?"

The clack-clack-clack of the knitting needles slowed, and then stopped. In the silence Kay remembered the tall, thin man who had been one of the first to fall. He'd been in Baltimore when a secessionist mob fired upon his regiment. It was a cruel reminder that sadness lurked everywhere now.

With renewed vigor, the needles began to click again. "Right. I remember that, now. Somehow I seem to push the sad bits to a place far, far in the back of my mind. Do you do that, too? Perchance it's my way of coping with what's going on because sometimes ... sometimes..." Kay opened her eyes and watched as Arden set her knitting aside and cupped her hands over her round stomach. The face that had been serene only moments before looked tortured. Arden's lower lip quivered and her eyes welled.

Kay reached across the space between their chairs and ran one hand soothingly along her sister-in-law's arm. "There, there. It's all right—we're all feeling the way you are, Arden dear. We all wait and..."

"Wonder." The word was almost a whisper.

"Yes, wonder." Kay passed her hand over her eyes, as if she could wipe the thoughts from her head if she tried hard enough. "I wonder all the time, about so many things. I miss Father and Frank, certainly, but my heart—oh, Heaven help me, my heart aches for Marsh. I've been fortunate that I've gotten to see him three times since he's gone. So many others haven't gotten visits, but Marsh's duties take him all

over and between traveling he sometimes gets to swing by and see us. Those visits, they're just—"

"Glorious," Arden said, smiling. Frank had accompanied Marsh on one of those visits and the two had had a swift, but lovely, reunion.

"Exactly, they were wonderful. Too short, of course, but short is better than nothing and I can't complain. But I'll confide in you—I wish Marsh and I had gotten married before he left, the way I wanted us to do. Or even during one of his whirlwind visits."

"No big ceremony?" Arden furrowed her brow as she looked over at Kay. It was no secret Kay had always yearned for a lavish matrimonial gathering.

"All I want is to be Mrs. Marsh Nolan. I don't care if Reverend Price marries us in the woodshed. I'm getting tired of wondering how it feels to ... well, you know." Kay felt her cheeks warm as she placed a hand over the brooch. Her fingertips traced the smooth silver circle, lingering on the swirls. Her insides grew fluttery every time she contemplated fully what being Marsh's wife was going to entail. Thoughts of her "wifely duties" made her feel both unsettled and thrilled—all at once—but stroking the brooch calmed her shaking hands. "I don't care about much of anything anymore," Turning to look at the other woman, Kay took a deep breath and said, "I just want to be as close to Marsh as I can ever get. And once I get that close, I don't want to ever let him go again. I don't think I could stand being separated from him again, Arden. I just don't think I could stand it." A lone tear slid down her cheek.

"You won't have to worry about that, Kay darling," Arden said, tears shimmering in her own eyes. She took Kay's free hand in her own and squeezed. "Once the men come home we'll get back to living the way we did before. There will be gay parties, Sunday strolls and tea in the afternoon again. Why, we'll all be so busy having fun we won't hardly remember that we spent this time worrying. And we'll get you and Marsh properly married as soon as he comes home so you two can get to know each other the way you want to. Believe me, this will all turn out for the best. And those poor slaves—why, they'll be free, too. The world will be a better place for us having gone through this. You mark my words."

"And you mark mine, Arden. I'm prepared to 'know' Marsh without being properly married. That's my biggest regret right now, that I let him talk me into waiting until after we're wed. Why, I think I'll die if something awful happens and Marsh and I didn't ... well, I just think I'd die. No, I've made up my mind. I love Marsh and the next time I see him—well, let's just say I'm not letting him go back to war without something to remember me by."

"Ooh—feel this, Kay! The baby—he agrees with you." Arden pulled Kay's hand to her stomach and laid it against the mound. Instantly they both felt the baby kick, a hard, forceful movement that seemed to emphasize their words. Tears dried as they giggled.

A new life. Hopefully, little one, you'll be born in a new world, too. Everyone keeps saying that the war will be over soon. Perhaps it will end before you're born, even. Wouldn't that be the answer to a nation's prayers?

Chapter Three

The horses' hooves beat a pattern on the lane leading up to the house, breaking the night's stillness so fully they completely eclipsed the night song of the chirping crickets. Kay sat reading one of the books the Captain had examined the day he'd delivered his message, in the front parlor when she first heard the sounds. Now she put the book down, lifted the flickering candle and went to stand beside a front window. Pushing the curtain aside, she strained her eyes to see who was calling at this late hour.

Living out of town had a number of benefits: privacy, solitude and no prying neighbors. Those were precisely the qualities that made the farm a logical station on the road to freedom. But they were also characteristics that made Kay uneasy at times such as these. With Father gone she was alone—and isolated.

When the house had been built by Kay's distant ancestors, Deirdre and Patrick Sullivan, there had been nothing but wilderness to surround it. Over the years it had been expanded to accommodate growing families and changing times, but the only concession to a population increase was the lane that wound through the forest toward town.

Kay didn't usually feel cut off, but at this moment she wished there was at least one neighbor within hearing distance.

She took a deep breath. Her legs wobbled beneath her but that was a fact she wasn't going to share with whoever was clomping up the steps and onto the porch. A hard knock

shook the door in its frame. Before she could inquire as to the caller's name, a familiar voice called out.

"Miss Lane are you at home? It's me, Captain Elias Conrad, and my manservant, Jacob Parker."

Kay pulled the front door open and cocked her head as she studied the pair standing before her. The Captain's household staff was limited to the one man, Jacob, who'd been in his employ for longer than anyone could recall. The pair of white-whiskered, elderly men smiled as her eyes passed over them. They both wore clothes more suited for leisure than riding, and the realization they'd left their fireside to call upon her sent a chill up her spine.

"Captain Conrad. Mr. Parker," she said, nodding a greeting. Holding the door open more fully, she gave them enough room to pass. Under normal circumstances she wouldn't even consider entertaining two men after dark, without a proper chaperone and clad only in her night clothes. But given the fact that the men in question were older even than her own father and their presence on her doorstep indicated a pressing need, the usual etiquette was something she didn't give a thought to. "Would you like to come in?"

Apparently, however, the gentlemen were wont to consider the situation more fully. Both shook their heads quickly, murmuring refusals to her invitation.

Kay set the candle on a table beside the door and stepped onto the porch. Once she closed the door behind her, there were only fireflies and a few random stars to illuminate the trio.

"Forgive us, please, for coming here at this late hour," Captain Conrad began. His words were low, his voice hoarse from the dust kicked up by his mount.

"There's no need to apologize. What, pray tell, brought you two out tonight? I know it must be something grave for you to ride in the darkness. Is there some assistance I can give you? Something you require of me?" The situation must be of the utmost importance for them to have come so far to see her. A trivial matter would have waited discussion until the morrow. She noticed the Captain's sword missing from his hip, a sure sign he'd made haste in getting to her doorstep.

"It is, I fear, just the opposite situation," the elderly man said. Dropping his face as close to hers as possible without actually touching her, he lowered his voice to a whisper. "We have ridden this way intentionally, hoping to pass on a bit of information gleaned the way most of us old fellows gather information. We were, I admit, setting on our rockers in front of the public house. You will, I hope, pardon my boldness in mentioning a place of that nature. I assure you we were not imbibing, or we would not have come to you this night. No, we were only smoking our pipes and passing the time. You won't hold it against us, will you?"

Struggling to conceal her amusement, Kay shook her head. "No, of course not. Every woman realizes that men must have a place to gather, to talk and socialize, especially at times such as these. And I can tell that neither you nor Mr. Parker is inebriated, so I feel no misgiving at your being here." Bringing her voice down to a tone just above his, yet keeping her face turned toward him, she spoke softly but

slowly. "What brings you here? I know it must be important for you to come all this way."

Again he looked furtively about before answering. "It is of the utmost importance, I assure you. Jacob and I overheard a conversation just a short time ago that bears repeating. Rumor has it that a wind blows from the south today—a *strong, harsh series of winds.*"

Her throat tightened. Never before had Kay received such a dire warning. Lifting her hand to the side of her head, she plowed her fingers through her unbound hair as she considered the implications.

Strong, harsh series of winds—that must mean there are scads of bounty hunters in the area. Damnation! That means I won't be able to provide safety or shelter to anyone until they're gone. It would be too dangerous to the passengers to move while so many are searching for them. The fugitive slave laws and their ramifications are nearly laughable in comparison to what some of these bounty hunters are apt to do to those they find.

"I understand, sir. I'll take that into consideration, although I'm sorry to hear it as I much prefer a cool northern breeze." Kay offered a tight smile that spoke much louder than her words ever could.

"And I too, Miss. Perchance there will be a cool breeze sooner than we expect. Who knows? In these crazy times, anything is possible."

"You are right, I know that. Captain, will you and Mr. Parker please take care on the ride home? I fear for you, too," she said. Standing on the porch as she was, dressed for

slumber, she did not feel extraordinary in their presence and the additional few moments of talk, with its veiled expressions of concern, made the visit feel less stressful.

The smile the Captain gave her afforded a glimpse at the man he had once been; mischievous, decidedly rakish. "There is no cause for you to worry, dear lady. Did you forget that I fought on that fateful day, in that blood-bath? Why, after September eleventh, with its brutal carnage and howls of misery, there can never be anything that renders me fearful. So fret not, Miss. We will be fine."

His reference, given with an obvious puffing out of his chest, made her smile. The Captain had been a hero, highly esteemed for his part in the Battle of Plattsburgh. But the War of 1812 was long past, and although the gentleman evidently felt he was the same man who'd fought on that day, Kay still feared for his safety. But what could she say after hearing such a valiant speech?

There was really only one proper response to give. "Ah, yes, Captain, how foolish of me. Of course I didn't forget your brilliance on that day in September. How could I? You're legendary, and you know that to be true. Well, then, I'll merely wish you and Mr. Parker a pleasant journey home," Kay said, praying silently that the old man would not come to any harm. "And thank you again for stopping by. It has been an enjoyable visit."

With a tip of their hats, the two men went down the steps and toward their horses. Kay watched them mount and turn the animals back before she went inside.

Closing the door firmly behind her, she leaned her back against it and shut her eyes.

Weary, that's what I am. Plain weary. This whole affair has gone on for so long, with so much heartbreak. Even when I try and do all I can to further our cause there always seems to be a blockade to go around ... or over ... or under. Why oh why can't everyone see this slavery issue for what it is? Why can't we simply let people live as they were intended to live without having to go through all of this misery? Damn, I'm so tired of it all! Just so...

At the sound of the approaching horse, Kay turned and opened the door. Had Captain Conrad forgotten to tell her something? Surely not another maudlin warning...

Stepping out onto the porch, she noticed, as she had earlier, the scent of a few early rose blooms that wafted upward on the night air and surrounded her with their sweet fragrance. A distant grandmother's transplant, the roses grew in abundance beside the front porch and along the back wall of the garden, in the side cutting garden and near the barn. Their fragrance masked the odor of the privy, as well. Apparently a snippet of a rose bush grew in profusion when planted in rich, sweet soil!

Crossing her arms over her bosom, she waited for the men to make themselves known to her a second time. She saw only one large black mass in the darkness and thought Mr. Parker must wait at the end of the lane, assumed that the Captain had one last word or two to exchange with her.

The voice that came to her from the gloom wasn't the one she expected. It was, instead, the voice she heard night after night in her dreams.

"Why, you'd think it was an ordinary occasion for you to receive visitors after dark, the way you're standing there in your night dress."

"Marsh—is that really you?"

The figure swung off his mount, secured the animal to the hitching post and took the steps two at a time.

"Of course it's me, Katy-did. Did you expect someone else?" His teasing tone made her heart skip a beat, as did the familiar nickname—no one else called her Katy-did but Marsh. The sound of it on his lips stole her breath away.

Throwing her arms around him, she lifted her face to his and smiled. He felt solid in her arms, the living embodiment of her endless imaginings. Pressing herself to him, she opened her mouth to speak but didn't manage to utter a sound. Marsh's mouth met hers with a hunger that took them both by surprise. Their lips touched, their tongues explored and their bodies heated as all the repressed desires rose to the surface in the beat of their hearts. Kay met his touch without restraint, her tongue swirling around his in the age-old dance of love that required no lessons.

The thin cotton nightdress provided no buffer between her body and the regulation uniform Marsh was wearing. His arousal was evident, insistent against her body as her hips ground into his.

I don't know what you're doing here, my darling man, but I'm not going to let you go until we've dropped these barriers

between us. So often I wonder if I'll ever see you again. Why waste what precious time we have on social protocol? It's ridiculous, and I won't stand for it, not another second. In this world, a second may have to sustain us for a lifetime. And more importantly, you feel so completely enchanting...

Marsh pulled his lips from hers, and would have taken a step back, but Kay wouldn't let him move away. She kept her arms wrapped firmly around his wide shoulders, her body against his and when he looked down at her she smiled broadly at him.

"Kay, I don't know what came over me." His voice was hoarse with desire and his breathing ragged. "I don't know how it happened, I—"

"Don't you dare apologize for kissing me, Marsh," she nipped his lower lip playfully. "I mean it, now. I've dreamed of kissing you for so long that if you even make one teeny, tiny apology for kissing me I swear I'll scream." Kay squirmed against him and was amused when his uneasy expression grew even more awkward. Behaving as if they were simply a man and a woman and there was no uniform, no sidearm hanging at his hip and no war at all was a liberating experience. Kay suddenly felt brash and free to do the things she'd only dreamed of doing for so long.

Marsh grinned and kissed the tip of her nose. "I wouldn't think of offending you in such a manner, Katy-did. I've heard your screams and I wouldn't want to be the cause of one of them." Reaching up, he tipped his wide-brimmed hat back on his head and brought his eyebrows together. "Although if I recall correctly, the last time you screeched it was over some

repugnant garden creature. I'm not in the same class as an ordinary toad or garden snake, am I?"

"Let's not get started discussing snakes, Lieutenant. That," she said, pressing suggestively against him, "might lead to more than discussion. Perhaps later, but right now I want to hear about why you're here. What brings you out on a night like this? And do you know there are fugitive bounty hunters in the area? A great deal of them, apparently."

His expression grew serious.

A tall man, he had curly black hair, firm, rugged features and eyes that were so dark as to be nearly navy. When he laughed, his brow crinkled in such an endearing manner that it never failed to make Kay's heart lurch.

He had been one of the town's most eligible bachelors until he'd made his affection for Kay known. When he'd done so there was a nearly-perceptible communal sigh from the less-fortunate women in Chambersburg. Everyone knew that a man like Marsh didn't come along every day.

Even now, with his eyes growing dark, his face unshaven and smelling decidedly of horse and sweat, he was sinfully handsome.

"Yes, I've heard that as well. It is, I admit, one of the reasons I took this small detour. I wanted to be sure that you're well, that no harm has befallen you because of your ... activities."

During an earlier visit Kay had confided in Marsh about her duties as stationmaster. He'd told her he worried about the danger should she be discovered but understood her desire to do her part to further the cause of freedom.

"Really, there's no need for you to be so concerned about what I'm doing." She shook her head. Her hair fell forward, over her shoulders and Marsh ran his fingers through it as she spoke. His touch sent sparks of warmth to her center and she trembled as he wound a long, loose curl tightly around his fingertip. His movements made concentration difficult but she continued. "We all have to do our part to get this whole embarrassing chapter in our great nation's history over and done with. And if this little thing I do, this small sacrifice to my own safety, can move things along more quickly ... well, then, it's a chance I'm willing to take. I only wish there was more I could do, Marsh. I feel so damned helpless sometimes."

He pulled her closer, running his hand through her hair as she placed her cheek on his shoulder. They stood silent for several heartbeats, just holding each other as their breathing synchronized. When she couldn't stand being close to him without trying to get still closer, Kay turned her head and kissed him. They both knew that this was neither the time nor the place for feminine wiles or social maneuvering. Their love dictated that they spend their meager time together well.

Marsh's body betrayed his sense of decorum yet again, but this time he made no pretense regarding his state. Pressing his hips to hers, he moaned.

"Inside," she urged, speaking against his lips and pulling him toward the open doorway. "Marsh, please. I want you, my love—with or without a wedding band. Please, let's go inside."

One step was all he took. One step toward the door and the promise of fulfillment that waited just beyond it. One step that sent Kay's heart soaring. But one step did not a journey make, and with an anguished groan Marsh reached out and pulled the door closed.

He removed his jacket, placed it around her shoulders and swept her off her feet. In his rush he practically leapt from the porch and set her onto his horse's back. When he mounted and whirled the horse back toward the lane, Kay had no idea where they were going—but she didn't care.

Anywhere with Marsh was somewhere she was willing to go.

* * * *

Kay hadn't slept, the hours were too dear to waste in slumber. Marsh would have to leave before the sun rose, while he had a chance to slip between any Confederate reconnaissance troops that were in the area. He was on his way back to his unit's temporary headquarters, past the Scotland Bridge up near Greencastle. It was a day's ride, at best, if he didn't meet with any trouble along the road, but there were those who awaited the information he'd recovered from his visit to Boston.

Firelight danced across his broad chest as her fingers stroked the lightly-furred skin. He shivered, pulling her closer. The feel of his bare skin against hers was much more sensual than Kay had imagined. She stretched, pressing her breasts against his side and possessively draped her leg over his.

This was worth waiting for. If I had known how heavenly it would be to be claimed as yours I would never have been able to wait as long as I waited. I would have forced myself on you a long, long time ago, darling.

"Mmm ... If you keep doing that, Mrs. Nolan, I'll never be able to leave." A wicked grin crossed his handsome face as her hand dipped lower and caressed his manhood. "Really, my dear, I don't know how much more of this delicious loving I can take. You're going to wear me out so fully that I may just melt in my saddle before I make my way back to headquarters."

Kay propped her head on her hand and looked at him. They'd made love for hours already but she wagged an eyebrow at him in what she hoped was a come-hither look as she let her fingertips dance lightly up his firm, rippled stomach and back to his broad chest. "Since you put it like that I suppose I'll let you rest—for now," she said, giggling. Holding out her hand, she examined the gleaming gold band on her finger. "But don't forget you're my husband, do you hear? I'm going to want this kind of treatment every time we're together now—and don't think I'm-plumb-tuckered-out routine is going to work very often, either."

Marsh chuckled, a low, deep sound that made Kay's newly-discovered womanly senses tingle. "Have no fear, Katy-did. I promise to provide an acceptable demonstration of my husbandly duties at all times. In fact, if you're serious about this very instant, I'm sure I could be coerced into cooperating." He turned on his side and propped his head on

his hand. Grinning, he looked deeply into her eyes. "What do you think? Are you game?"

"You know I am, but we haven't spent one moment talking since we got back from seeing Reverend Price. Goodness, Marsh, whenever I think that he married me wearing nothing but my night dress—oh, it's too much to think about." Kay closed her eyes and smiled at the memory. She'd stood barefoot before the Reverend's fireplace and sworn to love, honor and obey this man, in this life and all that followed. It wouldn't be long, she knew, before the town's grapevine was buzzing about the less-than-decorous event.

Let them talk. I've got Marsh and he's got me—what else really matters?

"I know I was a bit fatigued from the long ride," Marsh said, tracing a line down her body with one fingertip. He moved along her jaw, over her lips and down the curve of her neck. As he traced the slope of her breast he said, "But I don't rightly recall seeing the Reverend wearing your night dress. When did this happen?"

Her laughter filled the air. "You're too much. You know what I was trying to say, I know you do."

"Of course I know," he admitted, placing his hand on the curve of her waist. "I believe you and I have known what the other has been trying to say since the very first second our eyes met. I feel, my darling wife, as if I've known you forever. It's a relief to finally be able to say these things to you—the things I have kept buried in my heart for so long."

Her hand on his shoulder seemed to be a natural fit and she closed her fingers around the firm, muscular man and

squeezed. "I understand," she said, nodding. "I, too, have wanted to speak freely and oh, how I've regretted that we didn't do so before..." It was too difficult to speak of time lost, moments squandered, so she fell silent.

"Before the war, you mean," he finished. Kay nodded and her hair fell like a thick, brown sheet over her face. Sweeping it back, Marsh lifted her chin until her eyes met his. "I know how you feel for I share your feelings. But what's behind us, whatever we didn't do or say, is lost—it's over. We have now, and whatever comes to us from this time forward."

"You're right, I know. This is all that matters." Forcing a smile to her lips, she turned her head and kissed his palm.

"But Kay, if anything happens to me—"

Her back stiffened. "Don't! Don't say the words, Marsh. I forbid it, I absolutely do not want to hear them—I don't think I can stand to hear them. Please." A log cracked in the fire, as if to underscore her point.

"As you wish," he conceded, cradling her head in his palm and rubbing her cheek with a lazy thumb. "Just promise me one thing."

"Anything."

"Promise me you'll never forget that you are loved. You are loved more than anyone can ever conceive, with the fullness and completeness that surpasses all imagination. In this moment, and in every single one of the moments left to me on this earth, I love you, Kay."

"And I you, Marsh." Her voice caught and he pulled her into his embrace and held her tightly, waiting until their bodies stopped trembling and their hearts ceased racing.

When Marsh got up, he poked at the fire. Its light chased away the gloom and bathed the room in a soft glow. Kay watched as he tended the fire, the glow looking like a halo around his body.

How will I ever bear to let you leave now, Marsh? How will I ever be able to breathe without you by my side every minute of every day? Oh, I hope I have the strength to smile when you go.

"We've yet to discuss ordinary affairs. For instance, how is Arden? Frank and Mr.—oh, Frank and my father-in-law will want to hear." He grinned as he spoke, settling himself on the edge of the raised hearth with his back to the fire.

"She's fine. Tell them both that she continues to do well. The baby moves less often now, but the midwife says that's normal." Kay had a fleeting vision of herself in Arden's condition but it passed quickly.

"Good, I'm glad to hear that. And the store? How goes it there?"

Apparently, Marsh was determined to discuss everyday issues before he left. Kay shrugged. She noticed his gaze drop to her nakedness and his look pleased her. "We're not making any money so it's more for appearances than anything else that I keep the doors open. That, and it gives us something to do. The days would be so long—especially for Arden, I think—otherwise. Father would want it open; I know he would, so I do what I can. I only wish the shop made enough money to contribute more to the cause. You know—the cause." she emphasized, knowing Marsh was aware of the activities that went on in the hidden compartment.

"I know, and I agree. I have met a good many stockholders, fine people who aren't as brave as you are but who still want to make the freedom trail easier for those who travel it."

Twisting a lock of hair around her finger, Kay stared into the fire. Without the generosity of those that gave money to the cause, far fewer fugitives would find refuge.

"Thank goodness for their open wallets. They keep us going, in so many ways. But truly, Marsh, I wish I could do more," she said. Tears glistened in her eyes when she looked at him.

"You do enough—more than enough. And if you could only see what horrible conditions, what deplorable practices these people are running from. It is ... it is far too loathsome to discuss with you, my love."

Kay's eyes dried as she studied the set of his lips, the veiled look in his navy eyes. "Tell me, please."

Marsh appeared to wage an internal struggle but finally he held out his hands, palms up. "I cannot tell you other than what I have seen with my own eyes," he began quietly. "You know I travel quite a bit, sometimes down as far as the uppermost part of Virginia. As part of the Army of the Potomac I speak to certain regiments where I can, gather evidence and progress reports and return to Washington, and then Boston, with the news. So I suppose I see a bit more than most soldiers. On this last trip I was on the coast of Maryland for a few hours and saw something quite beyond words." He stopped, raked his fingers through his black curls and stared down at the wide pine floorboards.

"How do you evade capture? I mean, how do you just go freely among the Rebels, Marsh?"

Lifting his head, he met her concerned gaze and smiled. "Disguises, my dear. There are 'safe houses' along the way where a Union soldier may trade his regimental gear for other garb. It enables us to gather information without fear of discovery," he said, chuckling when her expression grew dubious. "You did not know I was a spy, did you?"

"You persist in surprising me," she admitted, slowly shaking her head. Despite his admission, she wanted to know what he'd seen in Maryland, so she inclined her head. At her silent urging, Marsh continued his story.

"While I was there I had the misfortune to witness a slave auction."

"No, you didn't!" Kay's hand flew to her breast. A slave auction? So then they were real, not simply myths intended to rile abolitionists and those who flocked to hear them speak. She'd never known anyone who had witnessed such an event and was intrigued by the prospect of hearing about it.

Nodding, he said, "I did. The degradation was overwhelming, Kay. I was revolted, truly so repulsed by what I was witnessing that I felt a desire to retch. Men, women and children were taken to a platform and auctioned off like so much livestock. Families were separated, mothers torn from children and men from the women they very obviously loved. Some—some of the women, they were stripped of their clothing. There was no modesty, no kindness. It was..." He pushed his hair back off his forehead and took a deep, shuddering breath. "I tell you, in that horrible instant that

was repeated over and over again, when the auctioneer called out 'Once—twice—gone!' I knew that all the heartache and suffering, all the death and misery that this war brings to us—oh, my dear, it's all worth it. There is no way to describe how it feels to see a human being deprived of dignity and freedom. I know that if I die for the cause of someone else's freedom my death will not be in vain."

"Oh, Marsh..." Kay moved to hold him close, tears running freely down her face. "How awful, how gut-wrenchingly despicable."

"Exactly," he said, patting her gently. The room was beginning to grow lighter and the time for his departure was near but he pulled her tightly against his shoulder and held her while she cried. "So know, Katy-did, that all we do—and all *we can do*—is not done without just cause."

Chapter Four

Marsh managed to visit twice more before summer's arrival. Both times their hours together were brief, passing far too quickly, but the visits were precious. Kay was thankful for any time they had together.

Arden grew more ungainly with each passing day. By the time they began to feel the summer heat, she was uncomfortable, her feet swollen, her back aching and her nerves raw. Frank hadn't been home in months. The last letter she'd had from him was a month old and hinted at the elder Frank having caught a gripe.

Between thinking about their husbands, the ailing patriarch and the babe's arrival, the two women spent many sleepless nights. But that was par for the course and had anyone ventured to peer out a window into an ordinary night's gloom, they would have seen many fretful women silhouetted against their window panes.

Come daylight, though, those selfsame women forced smiles to their tired faces and pretended they'd slept the previous night away in the arms of some blissful dream.

No one was fooled. No one was exempt. No one was comforted. But all were wary. The first touch of summer on the land brought an increasing feeling of unrest. Where it came from or where it was headed, no one knew. But all were watchful.

"How can they march down our streets so brazenly?" Arden stood near the front window, her belly protruding so fully that it nearly touched the glass, and scowled. "Have they

no shame? Do they not care how we feel about them being here?"

Kay came out from behind the counter. She'd been tallying receipts, a job she'd been putting off doing. To think they were doing little business was one thing. To actually know, and be faced with the dismal columns of figures, was quite another. Happy to leave her pencil and paper behind, she walked across the floor.

Standing beside Arden, whose hand on the small of her back was a silent announcement that she was yet again uncomfortable, Kay put a hand on her shoulder and gave it a squeeze. "That's the thing. They don't care—what we think, how we feel. They don't care whether or not we want them here. And no, they have no shame, Arden. Why should they?"

With more speed than anyone would have credited her with, Arden whirled to face Kay. "Good Heavens, Kay—why should they *not*?"

She reached down and rubbed a hand soothingly over the other woman's back, making circles on the tight, tense flesh. Matching her voice to her movements, Kay said, "Think of it from their point of view. We're trying to change their way of life, corrupt their economy, and smash their will beneath our own. Goodness, most of these men had no intention of lifting a firearm to any of us until they were, to their way of thinking, pushed into it. No, they care not what we think, Arden, because they believe we have no regard for them. And that, I fear, is what turns brother against brother, friend into foe. It's the idea that one simply does not care for the other."

Kay felt Arden's tension ease as she relaxed beneath her massaging fingertips. Moving her hands to the shoulder area, Kay continued to speak. "As long as there is a lack of feeling, there will be strife. For really, it is the southern depravity regarding their slaves, their unwillingness to see those people for what they are—people, just like you and I—that has brought this terrible calamity to us all. It is the southern opposition to seeing that segment of the population as feeling that—well, you know. It is all due to lack of feeling, an absence of care. And it is all so very, very sad."

Arden inhaled deeply and exhaled slowly, the sound filling the silence.

"Feeling, the absence of care," she said quietly. "Oh, Kay, how desperately I understand those things. To feel Frank beside me—it is the thought that consumes my every waking moment. It is, I own up to it, my most debilitating sadness. Do you understand?" Turning to face Kay, Arden smiled, the marching troops beyond the glass temporarily forgotten. "You *do* understand, don't you? Now that you are married, there is nothing about missing a man you don't comprehend. Oh, dear sister-in-law, I am so pleased that you and Marsh wed. Although I do admit I would have liked to witness the ceremony with my own eyes." Laughing, she waddled over to a chair and sat down with a groan. One hand cradled her stomach while the other fanned her pink face. "It must have been more than Reverend Price has ever seen, you in your night dress. How downright romantic!"

With one eye on the columns of Grey-coated soldiers who streamed down the street, Kay went to get a glass of sweet

tea. Not cold, not even cool, but it would quench the thirst that was upon Arden so often now. She poured, and then held it out. Arden drank most of it in one long swallow.

"I don't know how romantic it was," Kay said, grinning. She went back to stand behind the counter and took up her pencil. "But I will say that, much to the Reverend's credit and my never-ending gratitude, he did not laugh nor indicate that my choice of wedding attire was anything out of the ordinary. No, he performed the ceremony with the utmost decorum—while he was wearing his house slippers."

To laugh the way they laughed, the peals resounding off the walls and filling the empty spaces in their hearts, at least temporarily, was a luxury. The two women laughed until their sides ached, until tears ran down their cheeks and their noses streamed. Then they laughed some more, wiping their eyes on the back of hands and their noses on the hems of their aprons, as taking the time to dig for their handkerchiefs would have taken away from the delightful exercise of laughing.

When the Captain entered, the tinkling bell was no rival for the sound of the women. As he made his way across the floor to them, they struggled to regain some semblance of restraint. It was difficult, but not impossible, although a few hiccupping gasps took time to quell.

"Ladies, please don't let me interrupt your jolly moment. We all know we have far too few of those now, so please, indulge yourselves. Your joy is without a doubt the most harmonious sound I've heard in ages." The Captain removed his hat and blotted his forehead with a neatly-folded square of

linen. As she watched him withdraw the fabric from his waistcoat pocket, Kay stifled another peal of laughter. She couldn't help but remember her recently ill-used apron hem.

"We're only being silly." She picked up her pencil, hoping the short stubby piece of lead would give her a more businesslike deportment. "A bit of summer heat, perhaps, washing over two fanciful women. But it is a pleasure to see you today, Captain. To what do we owe this gift?"

Watching the man blush, the skin beneath his white whiskers growing the pinkest, was a joy nearly as great as the laughter had been. Kay smiled broadly as she watched him shuffle from foot to foot before he placed a hand on the hilt of his sword and affected a serious expression.

"I only came in to be sure you two ladies are well," he said. "It seems our small town is in the path of some military action, that we are but a trail on the way to somewhere larger. I know that seeing these ... these ... *secessionists* in our midst is disturbing, but I wanted to assure you that this too will pass. I believe that if we just let them go on their way, our troops will take good care of them. My hope is that they will be dispatched in another venue, not right in the center of Chambersburg." The gnarled hand tightened on the sword, leaving no doubt to their minds that he'd like nothing more than to be in on the "dispatch."

"We are well," said Arden from her chair. "But, I must admit, Captain, I am a mite uneasy at the scene outside. It is unsettling, to say the very least."

Nodding, he stroked his chin thoughtfully. When he answered, he kept his eyes firmly on Arden's, stubbornly

refusing to allow his gaze to fall on her womanly curves. "I understand your feelings, truly I do. But you ladies will have to endure this march for a day or two more, I suspect. And, I fear, it may become worse before these Rebs all get to their destination, before the flow of grey peters out."

Kay thought she'd never again yearn for the sight of grey after seeing so much of it these past years. She was sick to death of it and all it stood for and knew that for her there would never again be a steel-grey ball gown or a bluish-grey wisp of lace on a hat brim. No more sensible grey coats and gloves and no grey kidskin boots, not even if there was ever again money for such frivolities.

The closest color she could bear to grey was the silver brooch. That, gleaming from the polishing she'd given it this morning, was more an anchor than a reminder and as such could be borne, regardless of color.

She touched it now, lightly, with her fingertip. The Captain's eyes followed her movement but he shook his head, a hint of a movement that wouldn't have been picked up by anyone save those in the shop.

No passengers. Again. My, it's been weeks since I've had anyone at my station, weeks since I've carried lives to freedom. Damnation, these troops won't let any but the crazy or feeble-minded attempt to sneak through! How on earth am I supposed to help people to freedom with these Greybacks milling about? I wish they'd get to where they're going already, and leave us in peace.

"Would you consider closing the shop for a few days? Just until this northbound march has come to an end?"

Shaking her head, Kay smiled a tight-lipped smile. "No, I won't do that. Arden can go upstairs if she wants, she does not have to stay here with me, but I won't be chased out of Father's store. He's counting on me not to run and hide. Marsh is, too, as well as my brother Frank. I won't do it. I won't let anyone chase me away from what is mine, away from where I have a right to be." She closed her fist so tightly around the pencil it cracked, the sound underscoring her words.

"I won't leave you, Kay. The baby and I will stay with you. After all, Frank and your father, they're my family now, too," Arden's voice wavered.

"I know that, dear, I know that," Kay answered quietly. So often now, Arden was moved to tears and she wondered, not for the first time, if that was a normal part of the pregnancy. Turning to face the Captain, Kay managed a bright smile. "You see, Captain, we're quite determined to stay. The marchers will simply have to be on their way and leave us be."

"As you wish," he said, placing his hat back on his head. Tapping his walking stick on the floor hard, he furrowed his brow. "I will return frequently to check on you. Since you will not leave, I will come to you but send word, by all means, if you should require assistance before I return. Either Mr. Parker or myself will gladly come to your aid." He went to the door and put his hand on the knob. Turning back, he added, "And please, ladies, stay inside until these men pass. I don't believe they would harm a woman; they are, after all,

gentlemen beneath their uniforms. But still, let's not tempt them, shall we?"

"Of course not, Captain," Kay said. She knew the man's reference to indelicate activities had been an embarrassing one for him and she was touched by his depth of concern for their safety. "But may I ask ... do you know where these men are headed? They seem to have a destination in mind, their stride is so purposeful. Have you any idea?"

"They are marching to Gettysburg, Ma'am."

Chapter Five

By the first of July the purposeful, steady marching they'd witnessed earlier had deteriorated. The ragtag columns of southern soldiers who streamed through the center of town no longer kept their ranks. Their civility, too, was gone and they created a ruckus everywhere they went, leaving a path of destruction in their wake.

The sound of shattering glass mingled freely with the staccato beat of hoofs on wooden sidewalks as the mounted soldiers abandoned the road to follow their whims. Gardens were trampled, flowerbeds reduced to scattered blooms and nearly every fence in town was toppled.

Arden and Kay were in the store when the worst of the troops rode through town, their uniforms sweat-stained and their grins a telling sign that they'd been at a tavern before coming upon Main Street. The women watched, their arms wrapped around each other's shoulders, from behind the counter.

Thank goodness the farm is so far out of town, thought Kay. So far I've escaped notice, and vandalism. I would hate to see the garden, my roses, any of it misused like this. Why, they're damaging private property for no reason. No one is safe from this mob—no one.

They'd locked the door but an ordinary bolt was no match for the man that pushed against it. The door splintered and a short, reed-thin man wearing a ragged, stained Confederate uniform walked in. His eyes scanned the room before his gaze rested on the women. With a face-splitting grin and a

swagger that befitted a ballroom, he moved across the room with more than a trace of his former graciousness.

Stopping just short of them, he leaned forward from the waist into an exaggerated bow and said, "Ladies."

Kay pressed her sister-in-law behind her and hurried out from behind the wide wooden counter. She felt Arden's grasp on her wrist but jerked free, determined not to appear frightened at the intrusion.

"Sir," she said. It was easy to tell he'd been drinking. The whiskey fumes wafted off him in almost-visible waves. They did little to mask the ripeness of his person, his lack of attention to personal hygiene, and Kay stifled her gag reflex. Her hand rose instinctively to cover her nose but she stilled it part-way. Better, not to offend the offensive. "Is there something we can assist you with?"

"Assist me? Hell, I'm sure there's something you two women could do for me." The leer chilled her blood but she remained poised, despite the churning she felt in her stomach. "Mind, I'm not impressed w-w-with f-f-fat women, but you'll do. Yes-yes, you'll do just fine."

It seemed senseless to correct his assessment of Arden's condition so Kay kept silent on that front. And his stuttering, coupled with the swaying he was currently doing, gave her hope he'd either turn around and leave or pass out.

Either was, she knew, a stretch but hope was something that did, in fact, reach the farthest.

"What I was referring to, Sir, was your appearance in my store," Kay said, as seamlessly as if he hadn't been insulting. Waving a hand toward the limited assortment of merchandise,

she said, "I assumed by your presence here today that there was something you required, something I could perhaps furnish you with to make your uniform more presentable. A new pair of socks, perhaps? A wide-brimmed hat to shade your eyes when you walk back out into the hot noonday sun?"

A gallon of lye soap and a brush to rid yourself of lice?

A sloppy grin spread across his face. Nodding, he said, "That sounds 'bout right. A h-h-hat, that'd be a good 'un. Yeah, get me a hat, woman, and be fast about it."

Kay reached for the display beside the counter and chose one at random. Holding it out to him, she was amazed her hand wasn't shaking.

"Here, this is the best hat we have in the store. You're welcome to it, Sir. Please take it, with our best wishes, and go. Leave us in peace."

Clapping the hat on his filthy hair, the soldier seemed to consider her words. He stood before her, placed his hand on his holster and fondled the grip of his gun. For a fleeting second Kay thought he might shoot her but he took his hand from his weapon, passed it over his face and adjusted the hat to sit low on his brow.

As he looked at her, his gaze dropped to the silver brooch. She knew before his hand reached for her bosom that he was going to take it.

"No—not that, please," she said, covering the brooch with her hand. The thin wedding band glinted in the light, momentarily distracting him. She pressed hard against her body, not feeling the pain of the pressure against her tender

skin. "Anything else—anything. Take anything else in the store, but please, not this."

His dirt-caked fingernails dug into her hand but she didn't loose her grip on the brooch. Stronger and just as determined as she, the stranger made their struggle brief, pulling the brooch so brutally from her dress that the fabric beneath it tore and the pin, wrenched open, tore across her skin.

"No, please!"

In an instant, it was over. Kay was bleeding but the blood was not a true indication of the wound she felt. The brooch was gone. Her heart was broken at the loss of the link between her past and the hope of the future.

Strong arms held her when her legs became wobbly. Arden cradled her against her body, stroking Kay's hair while they both cried. Their comfort was short, however, as the front door crashed open a second time.

"Ladies, are you hurt?" The Captain and Mr. Parker filled the space completely, their excitement giving their typical characteristics increased presence.

Kay's hand covered the rent in her dress but the bloodstain spread further than her palm could conceal.

"Are you shot? Have you been wounded, Madam?" Mr. Parker's usually-even tone was frenzied.

"No, I'm not wounded." She looked at the Captain and said, "One of the soldiers took my brooch. The heirloom brooch, you know the one."

"I do. What did he look like?"

"Short, dirty, drunk," Kay said.

"Wearing a new straw hat!" Arden said, pointing to the others left on display. "Kay gave him a new hat. He was wearing it when he left."

"Good enough," the Captain said. "Jacob, remain with the women. I shall be back presently—with the brooch."

They watched in amazement as the elderly man moved swiftly from the doorway and out into the chaos on the street. Kay and Arden stood still for a long moment as Mr. Parker attempted to secure the door. Finding it was damaged beyond quick repair, the man wedged it closed with his foot and stood before it with a sidearm dangling from one hand and his large hearing horn hanging from the other.

Finally Kay said, "But he can't possibly imagine he can locate—and reclaim—my brooch."

The man answered without turning his head, keeping his attention focused on the scene in the street. "Ma'am, that's exactly what he imagines."

* * * *

Darkness was falling when the Captain returned. By then the clamor on the street had died down. It had become so calm and quiet that had the evidence of destruction not been everywhere it would have been no hard task to convince themselves the day, and its horrors, had been a delusion. So, too, had their galloping hearts and fractured sensibilities returned to some semblance of normal.

When the door opened they all turned to the sound. Temporarily repaired, it swung easily, albeit noisily, on its hinges. The elderly man entered the room with a triumphant

expression on his face. Having him return at all was reward enough for Kay. Having him return with the purloined hat in hand and followed closely by a man wearing a blue uniform was almost more than she could bear.

Kay flew across the floor and threw herself into Marsh's embrace. Inhaling the musky scent of him, cleaving to the solid muscular form, she thought she must surely be dreaming.

His lips found hers immediately and they were not bashful with each other. Their kiss was long and deep and had there not been so many other emotions to deal with there would have surely been passion present in their clinch.

"What are you doing here?" she asked, putting an arm's length between them. She grasped his shoulders firmly, not willing to release him. "What's going on, Marsh? How did you get past the Confederate soldiers?"

A chuckle came from near her shoulder and she turned. Captain Conrad held out the hat to her and inclined his head. She saw the beautiful craftsmanship of the ancient circle pinned to the brim of the hat. Wasting no time, she removed it from its position with one hand while she held her husband tightly with the other.

"Your husband, Madam, was kind enough to help me divest the would-be thief of his booty. We met up a few miles from here on a farm where the ... uh, *gentleman* who took your brooch was getting set to find some slumber," Captain Conrad said. The grin he wore made it easy to view a hint of the young man he'd been. His eyes gleamed and his color was up, and indication that he'd enjoyed his mission.

"The Captain had the drunkard cornered, the tip of his sword pressed against the man's belly," Marsh allowed. A huge grin crossed his weary face as he went on. "I almost think that I saved the Rebel."

"Saved him?" Arden's voice was breathless.

"That's right, *saved* the fellow," Marsh said, nodding. "I fear the Captain was ready to run him through. Although the man shook so fearfully it's a wonder he didn't shake the brooch from the brim of that hat."

Kay's gaze dropped to the precious piece clutched in her trembling hand. It had come to her through the generations, passed from hand to hand and worn above heartbeat after heartbeat, a sign of the strength and unity of the women who walked in this world before her. It was, too, a symbol of her connection to those women, and to the ones she'd hoped would follow. She loved the brooch, the lore and laughter that came with it and the strength and conviction she'd always felt when holding it. The piece was dear to her, certainly. But there were things in this world far more valuable than any possession, no matter how cherished.

The decision was instant. It came from her heart and was emblazoned on her soul. It was perhaps the most difficult decision she'd ever made, and also the easiest.

Holding the brooch in the palm of her outstretched hand, she looked deeply into Marsh's eyes. "Take it."

Silence wrapped around them for several heartbeats. No one dared move, no word was uttered.

"Excuse me?" Marsh's eyes narrowed, but his gaze held hers. There was no mistaking her intention yet he couldn't move. "What did you say?"

"Take it," she repeated, pressing the brooch into his hand. Marsh had removed his riding gloves when he'd entered and now she felt his warm flesh against hers as they cradled the piece, the instant before she let it go and the second before he took it the one time when they'd hold it together. It was as if the brooch bound them, if only for a heartbeat. Then she pulled her hand away, leaving it in Marsh's wide palm. "Take it. I know you've met people who can turn the brooch into cash, or supplies, or something else that will help secure freedom for those that deserve it. Use it to further the Union effort, to make the passengers on the Railroad more comfortable. Hell, use it to put an end to the *need* for the Railroad. Just use it, my love, to bring freedom and peace to this land of ours."

Marsh's fingers remained open. The brooch reflected the wavering flame from the oil lamp, looking luminous in the soft glow. He held it up to her and inclined his head.

"Are you certain, Kay? This brooch has been in your family for centuries. Are you sure you want to part with it?" His voice was low and even but in the stillness of the store it sounded loud.

Kay nodded. A lock of hair fell forward over her shoulder, covering the torn, bloody spot where the brooch had been pinned.

"I'm positive," she said. Her voice was strong and steady as she closed his fingers over the precious item. "I'm surer of

this than I have been of many other things I've done. Truly, Marsh, this is the right thing to do—for all of us."

Placing the brooch in his chest pocket, he nodded. "As you wish. Time grows short and I must be getting back to the regiment. I had a missive to deliver, which I have done, and a desire to see you, my wife, if only for a moment. That, too, I have done, so I must go now." Marsh looked up and smiled at every person assembled there. "To you, my dear family and friends, I give my best wishes. There is a battle about to begin, very near here, so I bid you all take care. Take care of yourselves and take care of each other."

Marsh pulled Kay close and kissed her tenderly, his lips touching hers for far too short a time. Whispering in her ear, he said, "I love you, darling. Remember that, always."

"And I you."

When he was gone, swallowed by the night, Kay felt his loss as fully as if a piece of her heart had been carried off with him.

Epilogue

July 1881

With summer upon them, the days were long and sultry, the air moist and sticky and the grass was alive with all sorts of humming and buzzing insects.

The ground beneath the sweeping willow tree was almost cool. Marsh pulled crabgrass from the graves of his father and grandfather, pausing for a moment to let his eyes linger on the names chiseled into the tombstones. Marsh Nolan. Frank Howe. They were good names, strong names. Names that he and his cousin carried still.

Beside him Frank wore work clothes nearly identical to his own. Comfortable in this place, they'd tossed their hats at the base of the tree when they'd arrived. Frank's thick black curls and rugged features matched his own so well they could have easily been mistaken for brothers. It was a bond where feelings echoed appearances.

Marsh reached behind his father's stone and tugged two fat dandelions from the soil before he focused on a thriving patch of weeds.

"Get out of here, you nasty thing." Frank chuckled as he swatted at a bee that'd lighted on his arm. They watched the striped insect fly off toward the enormous rose bush that sat behind the matching stones. "Last thing I need is to be stung. This day's too fine to be a pincushion for a bee."

He looked up, a clump of weeds in his hand. "You must be sweeter than honey, Frank, for the bees to be after you like that. It's just your luck, to be chased about by bees and

women, eh?" Tossing the weeds to the side, he brushed soil off his hands and smiled.

"Listen, I don't see you attracting any bees but you sure do have Lily Swanson interested, don't you? I don't think she danced with anyone else last night," Frank teased back. "Hell, I think you just about wore her shoes out dancing, cousin."

Marsh grinned. "I did at that, didn't I?"

They finished tending the graves in silence. When their work was complete they stood, put their hats back on and looked down at what they'd done. Tidying the area had been a chore they'd shared for so long that neither of them could recall a time when they hadn't done so. Many confidences had been shared in this quiet spot, many hopes, dreams and fears first spoken aloud. Marsh leaned down and snipped two red-and-white striped blooms from the bush's heavy branches. A spicy, sweet scent filled the air. He laid a rose at the base of each headstone.

Frank was, as usual, the first to speak. He'd been the leader of the pair naturally, having been born first, on that fateful night when Marsh's father headed off to his final battle.

"I can never help but wonder if that rose bush smelled that pretty when it grew in Ireland. Sometimes it's still hard for me to believe a tiny stick of it was carried here hundreds of years ago. But that, we know, is the truth." His dark brown eyes were deep as he looked at the pair of granite stones.

"It must have been. I think an offspring must be so close to the original that it can't help but be nearly the same," Marsh said. Running a fingertip across the words on the older

stone, he said, "How I wish I had gotten to know my father. So many times, so damn many times, I wanted to know him for myself, rather than just hear about him from others."

Frank shoved his hands in his pockets and shifted his weight from foot to foot. "If I were in your place I'd feel the same way." It was never easy to know how to respond to Marsh's greatest yearning since his own father was at the store even now, with his mother and three younger sisters. So how to commiserate with his best friend, his only cousin, about a loss he'd never suffered? It was nearly impossible but he'd decided long ago that whenever Marsh needed to discuss the war or his father's death, he'd listen. It was a vow he'd never broken, one that he intended never to break. "Your father was a great man. Everyone says how wonderful he was and your mother—if he hadn't been so good she wouldn't have loved him so much."

"You're right, I know. Mother's told me many times that he was special, and that after loving him and being loved by him, there was no way she could ever find happiness with another. No, he must have been amazing. I just wish I had gotten to meet him, Frank. I wish ... oh, damn Gettysburg!" Marsh plowed his fingers through his curls. If only he'd known how closely his words, actions and thoughts mirrored those whose grave he stood beside. If only...

"At least she saw him that night," Frank offered. He bent and plucked a long blade of grass. Holding it between his thumbs, he said. "I know it was the last time they were together but at least they had that much. I've always thought it better that she saw him before Father and Grandfather

brought him home in the back of a wagon. Now *that* must have been horrible." Blowing gently against the grass, he made a mournful sound.

"You're right, it must have been awful. Mother said that if you hadn't just been born, right after my father walked out the door of the store and off to the fighting, she would have lost her mind. But Aunt Arden needed help with you. She's always said that's what kept her going. So I guess I owe you from way back, don't I? You kept them going and I'm thankful. And who could have known that I was already on the way?"

Tossing the grass aside, Frank grinned. "I guess it's a good thing I was ornery and you were coming. Life is strange sometimes, isn't it?"

"That it is," Marsh said, picking up the hand shovel and scissors they'd brought with them. "And then there's that whole business with the brooch to be considered, too. Mother gave it to him before he went and Grandfather said—even up to the day he died, remember?—that Father gave it to someone who was to use it to further the cause of the Union."

"I wish we knew who he gave it to," Frank said. He carefully lifted the large bouquets of roses they'd cut to take home to their mothers. Holding them away from him so as not to be pricked, he shook his head and smiled. "It's one of those secrets no one will ever unravel, I suppose."

"I guess you're right," allowed Marsh. They walked toward the edge of the graveyard, their long legs making small work of the distance. "But I wish I knew what ever happened to

that brooch—it was in my mother's family for a couple hundred years, you know."

"I know. But, as I said, there are some things we're not meant to know. And where that brooch is ... well, that's one of the mysteries of life."

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