

Dangerous Indenture

By Kelli A. Wilkins

Sample Chapter

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* *A Deceptive Match* and *A Secret Match* are related titles with shared characters. However, each novel can be read separately.

** These titles make up the *Royal Desires* series. Although connected, each book stands alone as an individual read.

*** These novellas complete the *Naughty Nobles* trilogy. It is recommended that they are read in sequence.

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PROLOGUE

Pennsylvania Colony, 1723

“You don’t wanna be goin’ to Stewart House. It’s got more haunts than the Tower of London.”

The carriage driver’s words echoed in Shauna’s mind as she stared at the two-story stone building. The house didn’t look haunted. Why had the driver tried to scare her with tales of murder and madness? She had come to the colonies to do a job, and she wasn’t about to be put off by a batch of superstitious nonsense.

She walked up the path to the front door, passing her trunk where the driver had dropped it in his haste to flee. She rapped with the brass knocker, waited a moment, then knocked again. There was no answer. Was anyone home? She didn’t fancy waiting outside all day.

The scent of cherry tobacco filled her nostrils as she opened the front door and stepped into a tiled entryway. “Hello? Anyone ’ere?”

Curious, she peeked into the parlor on her left. The room was decorated with a horsehair sofa, an assortment of chairs and tables, and a thick wool carpet. “Oh my,” she muttered. Was everyone in Pennsylvania Colony so well off?

A colorful painting of a garden filled with yellow roses drew her into the room. She admired the painting for a moment, then strolled around the parlor.

Upon closer inspection, she noticed cobwebs dangling from the ceiling's open beams, a gray tinge to the lace curtains, and stains on the light blue carpet. She frowned. The coach driver had been right about one thing—the house needed a servant. She recalled the rest of his strange story.

“The Stewarts can't keep servants, ya know. They tried to hire local girls, but folks in town know better than to let their daughters go there. Nobody stays at Stewart House after dark. Not after what happened to that Purdy girl.”

She hadn't asked who “that Purdy girl” was, and she didn't care. It was none of her business. Besides, even if the house *was* haunted, she had no choice but to stay.

“Who are you and what the devil are you doing in my parlor?” a deep voice thundered.

She whirled around. A tall man with dark hair and a heavy beard towered over her.

“I asked you a question. Who are you?”

“I'm the new servant. Me name's Shauna Farrow.”

“You were supposed to be here three days ago. Where the hell have you been? I paid the driver a good bit to fetch you. He'd better have done his duty,” the man snapped. “I am your master, Joshua Stewart. You are not allowed to use the front

door without permission. You are a servant. Use the servants' entrance."

"Aye, but you see—"

"Do not argue with me, girl. I own you. Address me as 'sir' or 'Master Stewart.' Understand?"

She nodded.

"Do you have your papers?"

"Aye, sir. They're outside in me trunk."

"Get them."

She went into the foyer, then stopped. Was this a trick? She turned back. "Sir, pray I use the front door to fetch 'em? The driver—"

"Are you mocking me?"

"Nay, sir. I wanna be sure I'm doin' the right thing. Me trunk's at the edge of the walk," she replied, forcing herself to sound meek. Joshua Stewart was a big bear of a man, and she didn't want to make him angry.

He waved her off. "Hurry."

She rushed outside and opened her battered brown trunk. Her indenture papers were stacked neatly on top of her clothes. She picked up the papers and paused. Having second thoughts now would do her no good; it was too late to turn back. As soon as she handed these documents over to Master Stewart, she

would belong to him for five years. It already seemed like an eternity.

Part of her was tempted to march back inside and give her new “master” a piece of her mind, but she couldn’t. A fiery Irish temper and a loose tongue had caused her more problems than she could count. She didn’t need to start any new troubles here. As long as she lived at Stewart House, she would have to do as she was told. Besides, she had nowhere else to go.

She returned to the parlor and saw Joshua leaning against the stone fireplace, tapping pipe ashes onto the hearth. She handed him her indenture papers and flinched as his cold hand touched hers.

“We’ll discuss the rules as I take you through the house.” Joshua lit a candle, then led her up the main staircase. “The room at the end of the hall is mine.”

She followed him down the dark, musty hallway, catching glimpses of cabinets in the shadows.

Joshua pointed to three closed doors. “My son Colin’s room and two guest rooms.” He strode down the carpeted corridor. “Missus Stewart’s room.” Joshua’s gaze bore into hers. “Colin’s wife has particular needs. She always keeps her door locked.”

Joshua gestured at a small door on the opposite side of the hall. “That leads to your room. You have the attic space.” He walked to the end of the corridor and opened another door. “These are the servants’ stairs. You are not permitted to use the main stairs.”

She trailed behind him as he made his way down the servants' narrow steps. It looked as if the stairs hadn't been used in years. Ropy gray cobwebs draped from the beams. Dust whirled around her skirts, tickling her nose. She coughed as she crept down the creaking staircase and found herself standing in the kitchen.

"Gretchen, the cook, prepares our meals. She returns to town after supper."

She hurried after Joshua as he marched through a swinging door and into a pale green dining room.

"Meals are served here. You eat in the kitchen."

She barely had time to glance around the room before Joshua returned to the parlor. "That is the main house. The dependencies—barn, stable, smokehouse, and springhouse—are none of your concern. Any questions?"

Questions? She had a thousand but dared only one. "The room there, sir, on the other side of the foyer... what's that?" She pointed to the closed door.

"My study. I often conduct business at home." Joshua scratched his beard. "You will take your orders from me and Missus Stewart. Understand?"

"Aye, sir."

Joshua crossed his arms over his barrel-like chest. "You are indentured to me for five years. That means no payment and no leaving the house without my permission. You obey me or else. If you steal anything or slack off in your work, you will be

punished. If you run away, you will be brought back in irons and suffer legal penalties. Understand?”

“Aye, sir.”

“I expect you to bathe at least once a week and look presentable. I will not tolerate a smelly or unkempt servant. Do you have anything else to wear?”

Shame washed over her, and she glanced at her dull black skirt and threadbare blue shirt. There hadn’t been many clothes to put in her trunk. “Aye. Some, sir.”

“I’ll arrange for you to receive new dresses next week. And meals are provided, of course. I couldn’t expect you to go five years without food, now, could I?” Joshua chuckled.

She jumped, startled by his laugh. Was that a joke? “I hope not, sir,” she answered, her voice trembling.

“Very well, then. Get accustomed to the house. Your work begins in the morning,” Joshua said, then left the parlor.

She glanced around the dusty room and sighed. What had she gotten herself into? Leaving Ireland to start over in Pennsylvania Colony had been the worst mistake of her life. Yet she had no choice but to begin her servitude in the morning. Joshua Stewart, master of the house, had spoken.

Ashton rolled over and winced. His head ached as if a spike had been driven into his skull. He blinked a few times. Where the hell was he? The air smelled stale. The scent of sweat

combined with rum and perfume made his stomach lurch. He looked at the woman sleeping next to him. He was naked in a bed, but where? He couldn't tell one place from another anymore.

Hazy memories from the previous night flashed back to him. He had gotten into a fight and lost the last of his money in a card game. This came on the heels of last week's fight that had landed him three nights in jail. His father had used his influence to spare him a public flogging for drunken and indecent behavior, but then two days later, he had caused the incident at Mr. Campbell's house.

He studied the fair-haired young woman half covered with a green quilt. In the dim morning light, she appeared ordinary and featureless. Why had he been attracted to her? Perhaps it was the wanton way she had teased him with her tongue each time she kissed him or the sinful promises she had whispered in his ear. In any case, it didn't take long for her dress to come off once they were upstairs.

What was her name? He searched his fuzzy memory. Jane? Joan? It didn't matter. He had nothing to pay her with.

Now what? He closed his eyes. *The letter.* Father's scathing letter had arrived yesterday, ordering him to return to Stewart House before he "disgraced the family's reputation further." He had no choice but to go back to the Stewart madhouse for a while. He would endure the torment for a month or two, or perhaps the entire summer, if he could stand it. Then what? Repeat the pattern again?

He licked his dry lips and rubbed his eyes. Stewart House held too many memories. It always reminded him of his mother. She was in his thoughts quite often these days. She would have wanted him to be respectable and not a drunken whoremonger. He groaned. At least she was spared seeing what a failure her only child had become.

Last night, he had been tempted to go down to the docks and sign on to a ship leaving for England or Ireland. In his drunken state, he'd reasoned that if he left the colonies, he could start over and begin a new life.

But all the liquor in Boston couldn't help him take such a bold step. Eventually, he'd admitted the truth to himself. It was easier to crawl into a bottle and ignore the world than to face reality. Besides, what did he have to look forward to?

He sat up and grimaced as a sharp pain shot through his head. Who cared about the future? Right now, he needed food and headache powder. Everything else could wait. He pulled his rumpled breeches from a pile of clothing on the floor and dressed quickly.

As he buttoned his vest, he felt something hard tucked into an inside pocket. A coin! He fished it out and ran his thumb over the edge. It was enough to buy a morning meal. He glanced at the still-sleeping girl and felt a tug at his heart. Lord knew she deserved to be paid for what she put herself through every night. He placed the coin on the edge of the dresser and slipped from the room, ignoring the rumbling in his stomach.

Shauna pushed her empty dinner plate away and sat back in the wooden chair. It had been weeks since she had eaten a decent meal. Her full belly made her sleepy, and she stifled a yawn. After spending seven weeks aboard a crowded, stinking ship, she could hardly believe she had finally arrived in the colonies.

She sipped her tea and looked around the kitchen. Iron pots hung on hooks along the fireplace. Shelves were lined with jars of spices, jams, and butter. The kitchen, like the rest of the house, was huge, but it didn't seem unmanageable.

Perhaps life at Stewart House wouldn't be so bad once she adjusted. All she had to do was avoid grouchy Joshua and—

Joshua pushed open the swinging door and stuck his head into the kitchen. "My son, Colin, and his wife, Minerva, have returned from town. Come meet them."

"Aye, sir." She followed Joshua into the parlor and stopped as she spotted the short, brown-haired man standing near the sofa. Something about him made the hairs on her arms prickle, and she stepped back.

"Shauna, this is Colin," Joshua said.

She looked Colin up and down. This was Joshua's son? There was hardly a resemblance. If Joshua reminded her of a bear, then Colin reminded her of a rat. He had a scrawny build with narrow shoulders, a pointy face, and a thin nose.

"Good evenin', sir," she muttered.

"And this is Minerva, Colin's wife."

She smiled at the woman seated at the far end of the rose-colored sofa. Missus Stewart's hair was held back in a tight bun, and her lips were pursed as if she'd just eaten a lemon. Her faded complexion matched her gray dress. If Shauna hadn't been told otherwise, she would have guessed this was the elder Mister Stewart's wife.

"Evenin', ma'am."

An awkward silence hung in the room, and she waited for someone to speak. Colin stroked his thick mustache and locked his rat-like eyes on her bosom. Unsure of what to do, she glanced at Joshua for guidance.

"You're dismissed."

Shauna curtsied and left the room, grateful to be released from the tension-filled parlor. She stopped in the dining room doorway as she heard Minerva's voice.

"Joshua, you've got to get rid of that girl, right now. I don't want her in this house another second."

WANT MORE HISTORICAL ROMANCE? DON'T MISS...

Redemption from a Dark Past

Lord Sebestyen Adrik has an unsavory reputation as a madman, murderer... and worse. Lonely and searching for love, he seeks the companionship of local young women, hoping one of them will ease his torment and bring him the happiness he longs for. Katarina is his last chance—but will she fear him like all the others? Or is she the one who can lift his curse?

Desperate to avoid a forced marriage, Katarina agrees to become Lord Adrik's latest companion, despite the rumors she has heard about him. She discovers the "Dark Lord's" secret past and realizes he's not the monster everyone thinks he is.

As their love blossoms, she renews his passion for life—yet they cannot escape the ghosts of the past.

When a meeting of the nobility goes horribly wrong, Sebestyen's world unravels, and his enemies plot to destroy him. As all seems lost, a mysterious stranger arrives at the castle. Sebestyen must decide if he is a friend or a foe...and if he can find redemption in his love for Katarina, or lose her and everything else that he holds dear.

Loving a Wild Stranger

*A woman running from her past... straight into the arms of
an untamed man*

In a moment of desperation, Kathleen Stanton flees her pampered life in Kingston, New York and ends up stranded in a small town in the Michigan Territory. Out of money and forced to rely on her instincts, she impersonates a handsome stranger's mail-order bride.

Committed to her deception, Kathleen calls herself Michelle and starts her new life with Luther in an isolated cabin in the wilderness. Luther can't believe his luck when his beautiful bride arrives, but something doesn't feel right about his new wife. Michelle has terrifying nightmares involving a man named Roger and is reluctant to talk about where she came from.

Luther's friend, Redfeather visits and tries to convince Luther to send Michelle back east. Distrusting Michelle, he warns Luther that his bride is not what she seems. But Luther is in love with Michelle, and he is harboring a secret of his own—one that might force Michelle to reject him when she learns the truth.

Michelle falls in love with Luther and adapts to her new way of life. Together, they face off against brutal townspeople and overcome harsh living conditions. When they finally give in to their desires and agree to become a proper man and wife, a dark figure from Michelle's past resurfaces and threatens to destroy everything.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Kelli A. Wilkins is an award-winning author who has published more than 100 short stories, 19 romance novels, 5 non-fiction books, and 2 online writing courses. Her romances span many genres and heat levels, and she's also been known to scare readers with her horror stories.

She published the second half of her flash fiction series, *Cupid's Schemes*, in early 2019. These two volumes of lighthearted mini-romances are perfect reads for a quick lunchtime escape or an after-work indulgence.

Kelli released her latest Teachable mini-course, *Fiction Basics: Finding Ideas* in February 2019. She authored *Fiction Writing for Beginners* through Teachable in 2018. These courses are perfect for anyone who wants to learn how to write. Visit: <https://kelliwilkins.teachable.com/> for more details.

If you like horror fiction, don't miss her latest novella, *Nightmare in the North*.

Kelli posts on her Facebook author page: <https://www.facebook.com/AuthorKelliWilkins> and Twitter: www.Twitter.com/KWilkinsauthor.

Visit her website www.KelliWilkins.com and blog <http://kelliwilkinsauthor.blogspot.com/> to learn more about all of her writings.

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