

## Excerpt from Pieces of Sky by Kaki Warner

As Jessica Thornton came around the corner of the cabin at the stage stop, she found Brady Wilkins bent beside the pump, water streaming from his mop of shaggy dark hair. Slowly he straightened, apparently unaware that his shirt was open and his upper person was exposed, or that he further exposed himself by lifting the tail of the shirt to dry his face. The man was built like a blacksmith. A very tall, very strong, blacksmith. With a streak of dark hair running from his exposed parts straight down to...to his unexposed parts.

"You come to ogle or poke me again?"

"Wh-what? I—" Mortified to be caught staring, Jessica whirled to present him her back. "No—yes—I mean, that is, if you have completed your ablutions, I—"

"Ab-whats?"

"Washing yourself." Had she truly said that? "Perhaps I should return later."

"It's all right. I'm done."

She hesitated, flustered and unsure what to do. He must have recovered from her earlier attack. His voice no longer sounded strained, although it retained a husky quality as if the dry climate had eroded the mellower tones, leaving him permanently hoarse. It was disconcerting. Like a whisper in the dark. She dared a glance. Thankfully he had covered himself. Yet he still watched her, an odd twitch at one corner of his unruly black mustache. Her gaze slid to the trough. Despite the scum coating the inside walls—the only greenery she'd seen in days—the water looked so...wet. And she was so very hot. She should leave. That would be the proper thing.

Oh, rot proper, she thought with sudden and uncharacteristic defiance. It was too hot to be proper. Besides, after that reeking facility she was desperate for a wash. Refusing to be intimidated by Mr. Wilkins's looming presence, she set aside her reticule and parasol, stripped off her gloves and tucked them into her skirt pocket, then removed her traveling cape and placed it on the ground beside her other belongings. After carefully folding back the lace-edged cuffs on her gray bombazine, she dipped her fingers into the water. It felt heavenly against her parched skin.

Mr. Wilkins continued to stand there, gawking. Ignoring him, she scrubbed the grit from her wrists and hands, then dampened a hanky, squeezed it out and pressed it to her cheek. Bliss.

"I didn't push you."

She stiffened, taken aback by the denial and unsure how to respond. Slowly she turned. He wasn't as old as she had originally thought, perhaps in his middle thirties. Like his voice, his face bore the mark of this harsh Southwestern climate, his skin darkened by the sun, his features as harshly chiseled as the wind-carved bluffs. But his eyes were beautiful. A vibrant shocking blue that perfectly matched the turquoise gemstones so favored by indigenous Americans—pieces of sky, they called them. They were much too beautiful for that weathered face. At least the unswollen one was. She turned back to the trough. "You did grab my arm."

"To warn you. About the saddle."

"Ah." She shot him a glance. "The one left in the middle of the floor? How thoughtful."

"I was coming back to get it."

"Indeed. Well then. I accept your apology. Please accept mine for striking you with my parasol. I certainly did not intend to injure you." Pulling a clean linen from her pocket, she wet it in the trough and held it out. "Perhaps this will help. Or if you would permit, I could tend it for you."

An odd look crossed his battered face. "Tend what? What the hell are you talking about?"

Since the man seemed somewhat agitated, although she couldn't fathom why inasmuch as it was only a trifling injury, she allowed the profanity to pass unchallenged. "You are bleeding, sir."

"I am?" He glanced down at his belt buckle, then up at her. "Where?"

She motioned with the linen. "There. On your cheek."

"My cheek?" After a moment of confusion, realization dawned in those startling eyes. "Sonofabitch." With a long sigh, he sank onto the stump at the end of the trough. "I thought my luck was finally changing."

Jessica eyed him with disapproval. Granted, manners were more relaxed in the Colonies than at home in England, but this was too much. After stuffing the wet hanky back into her reticule, she drew the strings closed with a snap. "Would you please refrain from using profanity in my presence, Mr. Brady? I find it most offensive."

"Do you?" He tugged off his right boot.

"I do." She quoted from Pamphlet Two: "A gentleman should never use foul language in the presence of a lady. It is indicative of poor breeding and an affront to all within hearing."

He responded by removing the left boot.

She raised her voice a notch. "It is also written that profanity is the mark of a limited imagination and an untutored intellect." Abruptly she lost her thought when he pulled the stained sock off his huge foot. "What are you doing?"

"Blisters. Written where?"

"What? I...." Words deserted her as the second sock came off. He gingerly lowered his feet into the trough. "You're not from around here, are you?"

She didn't—couldn't—respond.

"I'll take that as a no." Shading his eyes with one hand, he squinted up at her. "Since you're new, I'll make it as simple as I can. I didn't use profanity. 'Sonofabitch' isn't profanity. It's cussing. Profanity would be like 'goddamnit' or 'Christamighty' or—What's that in your hair?"

"My hair?" Caught off-balance by the abrupt change in subject, she started to lift her hands then froze as visions of crawling things slithered through her mind. "What is it?"

"I'm not sure. It's just hanging there."

"Hanging there? In my hair?" She swatted at her head. Was it a bat? A spider? One of those tarantula things? "What is it?"

"Quit yelling. It's not alive."

A dead thing? In her hair? "Get it!" she cried, arms flailing. "Get it off!"

Snagging an arm to hold her still, he reached up, pulled something from her hair then sat back. He stared at the object in his hand. "What the hell?"

Heart pounding, she inched closer to peer over his shoulder. Her hair form! Almost dizzy with relief, she raised her hands to find her hair in disarray. Between the hat tossing and her fall, her twist had come loose, and now curls ran riot and pins poked out every which way. Irritated to be found in such a state, she snatched the form from his hand and stuffed it into her skirt pocket. "Thank you."

"You're keeping it? A wad of hair?"

"It is not a wad of hair," she said, striving for a semblance of dignity. "It is a hair form."

"Made of a wad of hair. Damnedest thing I've ever seen."

More cursing. Or was it profanity? She was so rattled, she scarcely knew. In full retreat, she pulled her gloves from her skirt pocket, yanked them on with such vigor a thumb seam snapped, then snatched her belongings from the ground. She must have fallen into the fifth ring of hell, for undoubtedly, Brady Wilkins was the gatekeeper.

"By the way...." He looked up, his narrowed eyes moving over her person in a wholly unacceptable manner. "It wasn't an apology. It was an explanation. There's a difference."

Awareness skittered along her nerves. She knew that look, and she would have none of it. Not again. And certainly not from this man. "I was unaware you were so discerning," she snapped. "But thank you for the clarification." A poor set-down, but the man had her so addled, it was the best she could do. Resisting the urge to bloody his other cheek with her parasol, she whirled and marched away. Impertinent bounder.

Brady waited until the Englishwoman rounded the shed, then laughed so hard he almost fell off the stump. He hadn't been dressed down like that in years. Maybe never. Not even his brothers dared do that. Then he pictured her hopping around with that hair wad flopping like a dead rat and that set him off again.

Laughter faded. She seemed familiar and he wondered why. He would have remembered a woman with red hair and a funny accent. And tall. Being tall himself, he admired height in a woman. It made for a better fit all around.

After shaking the water off his feet, he dug two fairly clean socks out of his saddlebag and pulled them on. It hurt like a sonofabitch to cram his blistered feet into his boots, but he persisted. As he rose, he caught his reflection in the trough and realized how beat up he looked.

It could have been worse, he supposed. It could have been him with a broken leg instead of Bob, or she could have been swinging a hatchet instead of a ruffly umbrella when she caught him in the balls. At least his cheek had quit bleeding and he could see out of his eye again. He ran a palm over his bristly jaw, wondering if he should shave, then wondered why it would matter, and finally decided it didn't.

He was refilling his canteen when it came to him where he'd seen her. Not her, but a drawing of her, on a poster outside the sheriff's office in El Paso. He frowned, trying to remember. Something about a lost Englishwoman with red hair. And a reward for information. A big reward.

Lost? Or on the run? Either way, somebody wanted her back real bad. He wondered why. The woman was stark crazy. As he walked toward the cabin, he pictured her holding out that lacy doo-dad, offering to tend his injury. Damned if he shouldn't have unbuckled and let her have at it. That would have been a fine way to apologize.

The idea of it made him laugh out loud.