



Silk and Magic

Presents

Sweet Surrender

by Brandy Lee

Lafayette

PIRACY WARNING

If you purchased or received this book from a source other than ImaJinn Books, contact ImaJinn Books immediately by e-mail at legal@imajinnbooks.com, by calling us toll free at 877-625-3592, or by writing to us at: ImaJinn Books, PO Box 545, Canon City, CO 81212-0545.

Please note that reading this book without first purchasing it is illegal, could result in heavy fines and has deprived the author of royalties.

It is illegal to copy and/or distribute copies of this book, and doing so could result in legal prosecution to the full extent of the law.

Thank you for your patronage, and please contact us at customers@imajinnbooks.com if we can help you in any way.

Sweet Surrender

Brandy Lee



Sweet Surrender

Published by ImaJinn Books, a division of ImaJinn

Copyright ©2004 by Brandy Lee

Printed and bound in the United States of America. All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced in any form or by any means (electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise) without prior written permission of both the copyright holder and the above publisher of this book, except by a reviewer, who may quote brief passages in a review. For information, address: ImaJinn Books, a division of ImaJinn, P.O. Box 545, Canon City, CO 81215-0545; or call toll free 1-877-625-3592.

Adobe PDF Format: No ISBN Assigned

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

PUBLISHER'S NOTE:

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events or locales or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

Books are available at quantity discounts when used to promote products or services. For information please write to: Marketing Division, ImaJinn Books, P.O. Box 545, Canon City, CO 81215-0545, or call toll free 1-877-625-3592.

Cover design by Patricia Lazarus

ImaJinn Books, a division of ImaJinn
P.O. Box 545, Canon City, CO 81215-0545
Toll Free: 1-877-625-3592
<http://www.imajinnbooks.com>

Prologue

April 5, 1862

Logan Jackson ran his hands over the girl's body, caressing breasts barely visible beneath the muslin chemise. He bent his head, drew a pink, cotton-covered nipple into his mouth, wetting the fabric. She moaned, hands moving to clutch his hair, holding his head to her breast.

“Oh . . . God”

After a moment he pulled the chemise to her waist, cupped both her breasts in his hands, teasing the nipples between his thumbs and fingers as he kissed her deeply. It was almost time to go. He really shouldn't start something he couldn't finish, but God only knew when he'd be back. Or if he'd be back.

He lifted his head, looked into glazed green eyes, tried to recall her name and couldn't. It was something like Mary, he thought, a girl hired for the night, sent to his upstairs attic room by his friend, no doubt. Billy always thought of details. And he'd know how to get a woman past the disapproving ladies of the house. Billy Smith was married to Logan's cousin Lucy, but he'd left early that morning to rejoin their ranks, barely getting away before the Yankee scouts arrived. A battle loomed at

Pittsburg Landing on the Tennessee River, and he and Billy had only come to Cedar Hill for one night, a brief interlude before fighting the Yankees.

“I’ve got to go,” he muttered after a moment, pulling slightly away, but the girl held him fast, hands digging into the bare skin of his arms.

“Wait . . . God . . . You can’t do this.”

“Do what?”

“Do . . . this”

He pushed her back against the wall, held her there with his body, and slid his hand into the opening of her pantalettes, touching bare skin between her thighs. She was wet. He was instantly aroused. Hard, throbbing. He pushed against her, saw her eyes widen in the dim light, thought about what lay ahead of him, then unbuttoned his pants. He entered her with a sudden thrust and her body closed around him, damp heat, exquisitely tight. He groaned. She lifted her legs and straddled him, and he shoved harder into her, the thrust and drag bringing them both to a quick climax.

This time when he pulled away she didn’t protest, but let him go. She’d heard the horses outside, too. The Yankees were gone. He had only a brief opportunity to leave unnoticed, down the back way and out into the yard beyond the cistern. He dressed quickly and left. A horse was waiting for him, and he had important news to give to General Johnston.

It was a moonless night, clouds obscuring the sky. Rain threatened. He found his mount and rode along a narrow track. The spicy scent of sassafras hung in the air, and the wind was

cool and brisk. The Confederates were forming lines beyond the little Shiloh Church, readying for an attack on the Union forces they expected to arrive next week. But they'd be here sooner than that, and he had to warn the Confederates of their numbers and plans.

Ducking beneath a heavy oak limb, he rode along the track that led from Cedar Hill to the Tennessee River. If he could reach them in time, they'd be able to surprise the Union Army and maybe turn the tide of the war in their favor. He had to reach Johnston with the information.

He broke free of the thick woods, entered a small clearing, and was halfway across when he was challenged. A Sharps rifle gleamed dully in the light of a torch, and he recognized the man holding it as one of the Union scouts he'd ridden with earlier.

"Who goes there?" The man came closer, while another man caught his horse's bridle. Sergeant Caldwell stared at Logan for a long moment.

"He's wearing Rebel gray," Reed said flatly, and both men looked at him with dawning realization.

Logan recognized his doom in their suspicious faces. He spurred his horse forward, taking a chance, desperate to reach Johnston with the information about Yankee forces. He heard the shot ring out, saw trees and torch blur, felt nothing but a sense of urgency. He leaned forward over the neck of his horse. Sweat dripped into his eyes, warm and salty, smelling rusty. He put up a hand, felt it gushing from the side of his head, and knew then it wasn't

sweat. His vision went blurry but he pressed on, spurring his mount as voices shouted behind him. He had to make it. He just had to

Chapter One

April 4, 2003

“Are you sure this goes on next?” Laura Linden held up a linen chemise trimmed at the neck with a small bit of lace. She already wore a pair of pantalettes from the 1860’s, and bulky cotton stockings secured at the knee with tied garters. “It seems that a corset would fit under this instead of on top.”

“It’d bite into your skin too much. Here. You can wear these stays. They’ll be much more comfortable than a whalebone corset, and besides, your waist is already small. You won’t have to lace too tightly.” Sharon Smith held out a smaller undergarment, with light reinforced stays and long laces. Graying hair curled around her square face, and her smile was grateful. “It’s not often we get volunteer tour guides willing to go the extra mile like you.”

Laura took the stays and looked at them doubtfully. “I’m just thrilled to be included. I’ve spent so much time studying this house and the Jackson letters, it seems like I belong here.”

“Maybe you do.” Sharon shrugged slightly when Laura looked up. “It’s funny, but there are times I feel this old house has been just waiting to be reborn, that it’s welcomed me and wants me here. Oh, I know how silly that

sounds, but this place is more than just wood and brick and paint. It's a grand old lady. I'm delighted to find someone else who appreciates it as much as I do. My grandmother would be so happy to see it like this, repaired and painted and very much as it was in her grandmother's day."

Laura glanced around the upstairs bedroom with appreciation. "It's wonderful that it's back in your family again. You and the historical society have done an excellent job in restoring it to its former grandeur."

"Oh, it was never really grand. Just—beautiful, like a spring flower."

Laura glanced out the bedroom window at the lawns newly sprouted with green grass. Flowers bordered the drive, still damp from a recent April shower. A cool breeze filtered in the open window, fluttering the period lace curtains. The two-story house had four white columns along the front porch, and a wide hallway called a dog trot down the center, with rooms on each side and a kitchen in the back. Bare wood floors gleamed after a recent repolishing and finishing, and the sloping original oak planks creaked slightly with each step.

"This gown is lovely, white with green sprigs. It belonged to my great-great grandmother Lucy," Sharon said, and held out the garment. "With your auburn hair, you'll be so pretty in it."

Laura took the gown and held it up to her, fingering the fine cotton that was only a little frayed in places. "I can't believe it's in this good

shape after a hundred and forty years.”

“Everything we found in that trunk in the attic is in surprisingly good shape. That’s where the letters were found, you know.”

“Yes. The Jackson letters. They’re so wonderful, and they paint a vivid picture of what war was like, how disruptive, how devastating. I wish we knew what finally happened to Captain Jackson. All we have is the claim by two Yankee scouts that they’d seen him flee the area.”

“We’ve searched all the archives, prison records, military executions, but there’s no clue as to his fate. He was Lucy’s cousin, her mother’s sister’s son, and he was accused of deserting right before the battle at Shiloh.”

“Unusual, that a celebrated Confederate captain would be charged with desertion, don’t you think?”

Sharon smiled. “One legend says Logan Jackson posed as a Union officer in order to get information to pass on to the Confederates, but that’s unlikely. He most likely met with a fatal accident or perhaps was shot by the two Yankees on his way to Shiloh. What is known for certain is that his cousin and best friend said he stayed the night at Cedar Hill before vanishing. His body was never found, but that’s not so unusual in those days. Many men went to war and were never seen or heard from again.”

Laura shivered. She’d never tell Sharon, but after reading his letters she’d found herself falling in love with Captain Logan Jackson, a man dead for over a hundred years. How was it

possible? Maybe it was because the letters were so personal, his handwriting strong and bold, telling his cousin about her husband and his boyhood friend. It'd been so obvious that he was conflicted, torn between love for his country and his belief that the Confederacy was doomed, yet he'd done what he felt was right. She'd even dreamed of him at night, feeling as if she'd known him. Sometimes she'd wake in tears for the man she'd never met, mourning his loss. No, that was not something she intended to share with anyone else. She'd end up committed!

"So you found the trunk in that closet?" she asked, pointing to a closed door, but Sharon shook her head.

"No, we never have been able to find the key to that cupboard. It's probably very shallow, and we just haven't gotten around to getting it open yet, with so much else to do. I think someone said it's probably a false door anyway, as the house was remodeled some time in the early fifties. Eighteen-fifties, that is. They were taxed on each room in those days, and of course, that'd mean closets too, so armoires held clothes and cupboards were boarded up. One of these days we'll get it open just to be sure there's nothing stored in there, but we will probably have to tear up the door to do it."

Sharon glanced outside, pulling aside a lace curtain. "Ah. Here come some of the other volunteers. Just put on whatever you find, and if you need anything, I'll be back up shortly."

Left alone, Laura moved back to the trunk and lifted the lid again. She'd seen some cloth

shoes earlier, and they looked like they might fit. She'd save the dress for the tour. It was already warm and humid, and there was no point in risking stains.

She knelt beside the trunk, shoved a hand through her hair, pushing dark auburn strands behind her ears. It was just long enough to wind into a braid atop her head for the tour, and she'd spotted some kind of hair ribbons in the trunk as well. Tonight she'd lay everything out so that when she got up in the morning, all she'd have to do is dress.

The shoes lay on the very bottom of the trunk, with cloth uppers and thin leather soles. They were simply fashioned, stitching evident, a delicate design embroidered on the toes of the pumps, with ribbons to fasten them around her ankles. She marveled at their survival through the years. Perhaps dried mint branches liberally strewn in the old leather and wood trunk had kept moths and mice at bay. A very faint remnant of spicy mint clung to cotton and linen.

Sitting on the floor, Laura slid one of the shoes on over the cotton stockings she wore. It fit perfectly, almost as if it'd been made for her. Delighted, she tied the ribbons around her ankle and reached for the other shoe. Apparently, nineteenth century shoes had neither a left nor right designation, but this shoe didn't fit as well. Something hard kept her toes from going all the way in, and when she removed the shoe and reached inside, she was startled to find a small brass key.

It must fit the trunk latch. She tried it, but

the key was too large for the lock. It could fit anything, she mused. Looking up, her gaze fell on the locked cupboard. Could it be—? Probably not, but there was no harm in trying.

Laura rose to her feet and crossed to the small door. It was probably only four feet high, and indentations in the wood floor in front of it marked a faint rectangle, as if something had once been placed in front of it. A table, perhaps, or washstand.

To her amazement, the key fit perfectly. She turned it, but the lock didn't budge. Maybe it wasn't the right key for the door after all. Disappointed, she jiggled it, and after a moment, it turned with a grating, metallic rasp. Hinges groaned a rusty protest, and the door swung inward.

Exhilarated, Laura didn't hesitate. She stuck her head into the dark space. It was larger than she'd expected. This was no cupboard, but some kind of room. An attic space, perhaps. It smelled rusty, stale, the air of a hundred and forty-one years closing around her when she stepped just inside. She had to bend to get through the door, her five-foot-six frame much too tall for the four foot opening.

Something sticky and flimsy drifted across her face when she straightened up; cobwebs. Shuddering, she hoped spidery occupants had long since abandoned the web. Dense shadows obliterated the far end of the room, but slanted light from the bedroom picked out a washstand and the iron footboard of a bed. This had been some kind of room at one time, perhaps a hiding place for family heirlooms. During the war years,

people had often built false walls and dug holes to hide the family silver and expensive paintings. Wouldn't it be wonderful if she'd stumbled on just such a treasure trove of antiquities?

Heart beating fast, she eased a few feet further into the room, peering into the darkness. It wasn't unusual for her to crawl around old houses looking for family papers, peering into dusty cupboards, prying open lock boxes, sifting through moth-eaten newspapers looking for old letters and documents. She found it exciting to transcribe old letters and documents, like having an open window into the past.

She ran her fingers along the steeply sloped ceiling; it was only five feet high in one part of the room, but she sensed a higher pitch to the roof. This room must be disguised as part of the eaves. Dust hung thickly in the air and she sneezed several times. She needed a flashlight, and to tell Sharon about her discovery. Oh, this was so exciting!

Laura turned back toward the door, stumbled slightly over something on the floor, and barely caught herself from falling by grabbing hold of a rafter. The shoe and key she'd still been holding went flying, and the open door swung suddenly shut, plunging the room into darkness.

Oh great. Now she had to feel her way in the shadows. Gingerly, she made her way toward the door. There was no knob on this side, only the keyhole. How the devil did she find the key in the pitch blackness surrounding her? More irritated than frightened, she knelt to search for the key, her fingers sliding over rough wood

floor boards in the dark, retracing her first steps. She found a shoe but not the key, her fingers encountering more cobwebs and dust.

“I need a light,” she muttered, and to her shock a masculine voice said behind her, “I’ll find another lamp.”

She froze. A scream locked in her throat. Her heart thudded, nerve-endings tingled, and she curbed the desire to claw her way out through the closed door. Crouched on the wooden floor, she huddled in the shadows and wondered how on earth someone else had gotten in here without her seeing them.

Then a light flared, caught, and a small glow spread outward. In the shaky illumination, Laura saw a tall man standing in the very center of the room, his head bent to avoid the rafters. He stared at her, eyes slightly narrowed.

His voice was low, husky, as he said, “No need to look so frightened. It’s only a broken lamp.”

“Broken— who are you?”

He moved toward a small table set under the slanting eaves on the outside wall and put down the lamp. He wore only a pair of gray trousers, the top two buttons unfastened. Light played across his bare chest, gleaming on ropes of muscle and smooth skin. Her gaze riveted on the broad expanse. Unexpected heat flashed through her, and her nipples tightened in response. He was quite possibly the most attractive man she’d ever seen. And somehow he seemed vaguely familiar

A faint smile lifted one corner of his mouth when he turned back to look at her. “Who am

I? I ask myself that question too many times, and have yet to find a good answer.”

“Suppose you try again,” she managed to say despite the nervous quiver that seemed to be hung up in her throat. “You must know the reason you’re here, at least.”

He gave her a strange look. Strong brows dipped low over eyes that looked dark blue. A muscle flexed in his suddenly clenched jaw. “North. South. Loyalty and honor demand I follow my countrymen, logic and fatalism bid me realize the odds are too great to win. Not that any of my doubts matter. I’ll do what I must.”

For some reason, his words sounded very familiar. She’d heard that very phrase used in similar context, and not so long ago. Oh wait. The letters. Yes, he must have read the Jackson letters. This man had to be a reenactor, another volunteer come to Cedar Hill to play the part of a Confederate soldier. She relaxed slightly. If he had studied the letters enough to quote from them, he was probably as caught up in the drama and history as she was.

“How’d you find this room?” she asked after a moment. “Sharon said it’s been locked for years.”

“Sharon?” He shook his head. “I’ve not been introduced to her. The door is usually locked for obvious reasons.”

“Well, sometimes the obvious isn’t.” When he just looked at her, she said irritably, “Why should it still be locked after all this time? Archivists, historians, even the Smiths haven’t been able to get in.”

“Billy is the one who brought me here,” he said after a moment, “just as he brought you. I don’t think anyone else knows it’s here. Except now you do. Are you to be trusted?”

Confused, she stood up, swinging the shoe she’d recovered by its ribbons. “Of course. I’m completely trustworthy. Sharon checked my university credentials thoroughly, just as she’s done yours, no doubt.”

He stepped closer, bare feet padding across the floorboards. For a large man, he moved as silently as a cat, with a lithe stride and curiously graceful balance. It was slightly intimidating. It was— arousing.

Laura’s throat tightened when he stood within arm’s reach of her. She was fully aware of him, felt the strong attraction despite the strange situation. Probably just her long abstinence. Not since her ex had she allowed herself too close to a man, keeping them all at arm’s length. Jerry had been bad enough, had left her spiritually and emotionally drained. She had no desire to risk another failed love affair, much less another marriage. Intimacy of any kind was avoided like the plague. At the ripe old age of twenty-six, she’d opted for celibacy.

Yet there was something about this man that made her heart beat a little faster and the blood rush through her veins, made her vividly aware of him as a man. It wasn’t just that he was handsome, though that was certainly true. He had the dark good looks of an actor, with black hair and electric blue eyes, tanned skin and a body that had to be the result of hours working out in a gym. No, there was something else that

drew her, a heady, mysterious force that left her giddy.

Feeling slightly foolish, she took a step back and bumped her head against a low rafter. He put out a hand, ran his fingers into her loose hair, rubbed the spot gently. Just his touch sent shivers down her spine, made her skin tingle, left her weak-kneed and trembling.

This was crazy. He was going to kiss her. She saw it in his eyes, the sudden dark intent, the way his lashes lowered, the way he moved in on her. Invading her space.

“Mary,” he muttered thickly, “I’ve not much time left. Let’s not waste it with talk.”

Focused on the heat he sparked by dragging his fingertips along the line of her jaw and down her throat, it took her a moment to realize he’d called her by another woman’s name. She opened her mouth to say something but he took immediate advantage and covered her lips with his, a hot, fierce kiss that went all the way to her toes. Jesus! This man was potent.

As if he sensed her sudden weakness, he slid his hands from her collarbone to the lace on the edge of the old chemise, then lower, dragging the linen down to bare her breasts. Cool air made her nipples knot into hard buds. He cupped her breasts in his palms, fingers and thumbs on her nipples, tugging with exquisite torment. Laura wanted to tell him to stop, put her palms out to shove him away but found herself clinging to him instead, fingers digging into smooth flesh and hard muscle. Insanity prevailed. She arched her back, closed her eyes and shuddered when he bent to take a nipple

into his mouth, tongue lashing it with erotic sensations. God, it'd been far too long. This felt . . . so delicious. So . . . right, somehow.

A pulse throbbed between her thighs, insistent and spreading. With unerring instinct, he slid a hand down to touch her through the linen pantalettes, rubbing her, sending electric sparks spiraling to every nerve ending in her entire body. She moaned.

“Oh . . . God”

After a moment he lifted his head, looked down at her, his eyes as glazed as hers must be. Passion drew his features tight, skin taut across high cheekbones, his mouth a harsh slash.

“We have until just before dawn,” he said huskily. “So I’m glad you’re not wearing stays that would only delay our pleasure.”

All night? *Stays*? Was this guy kidding?

She locked her arms when he tried to pull her closer, found a thread of sanity somewhere in the muddled haze of need. Her voice came out a shaky squeak, but she held him at bay.

“Stop right there, buddy. Enough.” She drew in a steadying breath, far too aware that she stood there with bare breasts and no sign of resistance. Collecting her dignity as best she could, she pulled the edges of the chemise back up to cover herself, saw his eyes narrow even though he didn’t speak. “Look,” she said after a moment, “just who are you? I mean *really*? What’s your name, your hometown, why are you here— not that any of that’s important. But I don’t usually let strange men paw me. This is just— an odd situation. We’re both going to be

embarrassed as hell when we meet again in the morning out on the front lawn, I'm sure. And don't think I'm not aware that I'm just as responsible. Apparently, I gave signals that I wanted you to kiss me. But a little kissing and petting is as far as this goes, buddy."

"My name's Logan," he said shortly. "Not Buddy."

Logan? She blinked. That was a little too—eerie. Too convenient. Too—suspicious.

"Logan. Right. Sure. I believe you. Look, isn't this awkward enough? Do you have to make it worse?"

"You came here willingly. Didn't Billy tell you what's expected? If you've changed your mind, you should give back his money."

"What are you talking about? Who's Billy? And stop playing a damn game. It's obvious you've read all the Jackson letters, but that still won't get you into my panties. You're taking this reenactment stuff way too seriously."

"If by *panties* you mean these," he said, and reached out to jerk the waist string of the white pantalettes, "you sold the right to refuse when you took money for your favors. Not that I have any intention of forcing you. Repay the money, and after I'm gone in the morning, you're free to leave as well."

"No, I'm leaving right now. Don't even think about trying to stop me."

He caught her arm, held fast, fingers like iron digging into her wrist. She looked up at him with real alarm. Determination stared back at her. His voice was rough.

"Are you a spy? Because if you are, you're in

the wrong company. There are two Yankee scouts sleeping downstairs, and when they leave in the morning, I'm leaving right behind them. I have no intention of allowing you to give warning."

"A . . . spy? I'm not a spy. No. Look— are you all right? I mean, you seem so serious, but you do know this is just a game, right?"

"War is never a game, despite what men in government may think." His mouth twisted in a bitter smile. "It seems that by coming here, you chose unwisely, Mistress Mary."

"Laura. My name is Laura Linden. I live in Memphis, Tennessee on Poplar Pike and I only came to Cedar Hill to help Sharon Smith reopen the house. Now. Who are *you*?"

He drew the back of his free hand along her cheek, then deliberately lower to tease her bare skin above the lacy chemise. She shivered. There was something so intense about him, so . . . dangerous. The warmth of his hand over her skin made her shiver again. He smiled.

"Mistress Laura, it seems that we are both in an awkward situation. You cannot leave, and neither can I. The door is locked. We're both stuck in this room until near morning."

She stared at him. He sounded so certain. After a moment she whispered, "I have a key."

"But I won't let you use it. There's another way out, a hidden passage. One that won't draw the scouts' attention. One we'll use just before first light."

Something wasn't quite right. She glanced around the attic room and was struck by the absence of spider webs and dust. It'd been so

thick when she first entered. But maybe that was just the area by the door. She hadn't seen this far into the chamber until he'd lit the lamp.

Her gaze fell on broken glass scattered near the sloped wall by the washstand. The shattered lamp. A small puddle of oil held shards of glass and a cotton wick. This was all so very strange. She felt odd. Out of place. Out of time

"When the lamp is shattered," she murmured, quoting Shelley, "The light in the dust lies dead—"

"When the cloud is scattered, The rainbow's glory is shed," he replied softly, quoting the following line of the poem, and Laura looked up into his eyes.

Her breath caught. Pain lurked in the depths of his gaze, something fleeting but sharp, an emotion quickly masked. He caressed her skin, a slow sweep of his hand that made her tingle, a deliberate distraction. She caught his hand, held it against her breast, snared by some emotion she didn't understand.

"When the lute is broken," she murmured, quoting the poem's next stanza, "Sweet notes are remembered not; When the lips have spoken, Loved accents are soon forgot."

He closed his eyes. "As music and splendour Survive not the lamp and the lute, The heart's echoes render No song when the spirit is mute"

His voice faded into a husky whisper, and prompted by something beyond comprehension and sanity, she lifted to her toes to kiss him. He reacted instantly.

It was crazy, and the rational part of her

brain recognized that even as she gave herself to the kiss and the moment. But how could she not respond to a man who quoted Shelley? There was only this night. Tomorrow they'd go back to being who they were, her a staid archivist usually hidden in some dusty back room transcribing old letters, and he probably a computer technician or history professor in some obscure junior college.

But tonight— right now— they were lovers from a former time, yielding to desire and echoes from a day long past.

“Yes,” she whispered when he pulled down the chemise again, hands cupping her breasts and sending heated shivers through her, “oh . . . yes . . .”

Chapter Two

Strange girl . . . seductive, with cat-green eyes and dark fire hair, wearing nothing but her linen yet protesting innocence of the reason for her presence. In the end, it wouldn't matter. She knew why she was there, just as he did, despite her pretense. Billy was not foolish enough to send a girl likely to be a spy, not even a harlot.

Testing the gentle weight of her breasts, he flicked his tongue over a taut nipple, drew it into his mouth, relishing the taste and feel and scent of the woman. She smelled faintly like roses, a delicious fragrance. Heady. Enticing. Arousing

Blood rushed to his groin, swelled his cock into a hard pressure against his trousers, and with a free hand, he reached down to unbutton the next two buttons. Freed from confinement at last, he pressed his turgid length into linen at the apex of her thighs. The sensitive head grazed soft cloth, seeking entrance, finding moist heat beneath the flimsy material of her drawers. The open slit in her garment gapped wide when he nudged her thighs apart with his knee, and he pushed forward in a swift motion that must have caught her by surprise. She gasped, her breath rushing past his ear.

Before she could pull away, he lifted his head

to capture her mouth, jabbed his tongue between her lips to simulate the sex act while at the same time he pushed harder between her linen-clad legs, scraping across bare skin. She was wet, slick, the lips of her sex ready for him despite her vague protests.

Bare breasts pressed into his chest, her nipples hard as tiny pebbles, and soft little moans escaped when he finally released her mouth. There was something so different about this woman, different from any harlot he'd ever encountered. She handled like a virgin but he knew better. It was only a part of her act, no doubt, meant to lure him into some masquerade where she was the aloof princess and he the conquering knight. Some men liked that, perhaps. He had little time for it. Especially tonight.

When she turned her face to look up at him, he saw from her glazed eyes that she was far more aroused than he'd thought. He pushed his hands into the soft, silky hair that curtained her lovely face, crushing it in his fingers, reveling in the lush feel of her naked breasts against his chest and the slick heat between her legs. Pressing her backward, he leaned into her, pumped his hips so that his cock slid against her wetness, back and forth, slowly, leisurely, prolonging the pleasure. Ceiling beams were inches above her head, the wall at her back bracing her. He didn't think he could wait to get her to the bed across the small room. Not this first time.

"Do you have protection?" she asked in a breathy little moan as he lifted her in his arms

and spread her legs wider with his palms beneath her thighs so her knees were on each side of his waist, and he nodded.

“Of course.” His Army Colt lay on the bedside table, close and ready should anyone find them here. It was all the protection they needed in these close quarters.

“Oh . . . my . . . God,” she said a moment later when he parted the slit in her drawers and slid his cock against the soft nether folds between her legs. She was light in his arms, an easy weight with her legs spread wide. He bucked his hips forward.

Exquisite sensation ripped through him. He paused just inside her, throbbing, then gripped her round, firm bottom tightly and rammed all the way in to the hilt. She was hot, deliciously wet and soft, like velvet. She tightened around him, rhythmic contractions that milked his erection. His balls tightened, explosion threatened, but instead of taking his pleasure like he would have done any other time, he slid his hand between their bodies to find that tiny nub at the top of her cleft. It was suddenly important to him that she reach fulfillment before him, that she was pleased as well.

Rubbing the pad of his thumb against the swelling nubbin, he heard her incoherent plea, felt her body tighten around his cock so that for a moment he lost focus. Her hands clung to his shoulders, fingers digging in. He pressed his thumb harder, raked it back and forth across the nub until she spasmed, until her hips moved frantically against him and she cried out.

“God no . . . yes . . . right there . . . oh yes!”

Arching backward, her breasts lifted so that he caught a nipple between his teeth, bit it lightly, rolled it against his tongue, sucked hard on the sweet peak as he kept his thumb against her sensitive sex. He felt her climax, the hard, rapid contractions inside her squeezing his cock of juice, draining him as he exploded inside her.

For a moment he couldn't move. He just stood there with her draped in his arms, braced against the wall, his breath coming fast and heavy. Incredibly, he was still hard, rigid, aching. It'd been too long since his last woman. And this woman was unique, half-demure, half-wanton.

After a moment, he slowly backed away from the wall, still holding her legs around him. She'd buried her face in the angle of his neck and shoulder, and said against his skin, “What are you doing?”

“Taking you to bed. But not to sleep. Not tonight.”

Soft laughter greeted his words. “Good.”

Oh yes, a contradictory, special woman indeed. She probably thought he wasn't serious. She was about to find out differently.

Laura didn't resist when he crossed to the mattress made of soft feather-stuffed ticking. A quilt had been spread over a rather rough sheet, and the pillow was plump. The iron bed had ropes instead of box springs, and creaked slightly beneath their combined weight. He lowered her slowly to the bed.

The chemise tangled around her waist. She

thought one of her stockings may have come loose from the garter and was probably around her ankle. This was by far the craziest, most impulsive thing she'd ever done— a one-night stand when she'd given up on any kind of relationship. Maybe this was the best kind. No recriminations later, no emotional scenes, no betrayals. Just the joy of pure, simple sex.

"You don't need these any longer," he said, and before she realized his intent, he had the soft linen pantalettes stripped away and tossed to the floor. Now she wore only the stockings and garters, with the chemise still wadded around her waist. He sat back, legs folded under him, his pants still unbuttoned and his rampant sex jutting up against his belly.

Lamp light danced across the room, softened the hard edges of the eaves, seemed to wrap them in warm shadows. His head was bent, face half hidden from her as he stared down at her. When he looked up, the breath caught in her throat at the searing heat in his gaze.

Raw, animal sexuality emanated from him, and the earlier impression that he could be dangerous flitted through her mind again. A coiled tension vibrated in his touch, made her think of suppressed anger, of a man capable of violence. She shivered.

"No," he said when she started to cross her arms over her bare breasts, feeling suddenly exposed and vulnerable. He caught both her wrists, pulled her arms up over her head, pressing them down into the pillow. "I like looking at you. You're— you're beautiful." His mouth twisted slightly. "I imagine you've heard

that before.”

“Yes.” It was true. Jerry had said it frequently when they first started dating, and even for a while after they married. But love always made the loved beautiful. Betrayal turned everything ugly.

Holding her wrists in one hand, he pulled her legs over his thighs. The rough brush of his trousers against her bare skin was oddly erotic. He leaned forward, caressing her breasts, fingers teasing her taut nipples, tracing a light path over her ribs and lower, until he reached the nest of bright red curls at the juncture of her thighs. He plucked gently at the curls, then slid a finger down and over her still sensitive clit. She sucked in a sharp breath and he looked up at her again.

“You like that.”

“Yes,” she managed to say, and he smiled wickedly. A heavy pulse beat between her thighs as he stroked her, sliding his thumb over her in a slow circle. Heat spread, engulfed her in a sensual haze, and she arched into his hand when he paused. *Close, so close*

“What do you want?” he murmured, and when she couldn’t answer, he bent to suckle her breast, drawing the nipple into his mouth, rolling it between his tongue and teeth until she strained blindly upward.

Sweet torment, to have release hovering just out of reach, the sense of urgency growing higher and hotter. Her legs spread wide, a silent invitation, and he ignored it. He still held her wrists imprisoned in his grasp so that she couldn’t twist free, sucking and biting her

nipple, his other hand working between her legs, sliding over her, spreading moisture in an erotic friction until she could bear it no longer.

"Please," she breathed, "please . . . right there."

"Here?" His thumb found the spot, circled it, skimmed the sensitive nub until she almost screamed.

"Yes, oh yes"

"What do you want, my lovely? Say the words. I want to hear you say them."

Oh God, he was going to make her tell him, make her say words she never said, things she thought but had never dared say aloud. She'd never be able to face him tomorrow, would have to leave Cedar Hill before the tour.

He moved to her other breast, drawing the nipple into his mouth with deliberate leisure, his thumb raking over her clitoris in ever slower circles.

"Damn you," she groaned, and he laughed softly, nipped gently at her nipple before his head moved lower, tongue wetting a path over her ribs, dipping into her navel, traveling ever closer to where his thumb still tormented her. She sucked in a sharp breath, and he looked up at her with a faint smile.

"Shall I stop?"

"No. Oh God, no! Touch me there . . . yes, like that . . . oh please don't stop"

Arching upward as his mouth closed over her, the release was shattering. Instant. Just the lash of his hot tongue washing over that tiny bud of flesh sent her over the edge. She convulsed, crying out, hips lifting to meet him,

the climax like none she'd ever known before.

Then, somehow, she had her arms around him as he lifted to cover her, spreading her legs even wider with his body, his hard shaft nudging at her still convulsing vagina for just a brief moment before he was inside. He filled her, powerful, potent, a driving force that rammed into her with increasing friction.

It didn't take her long to catch up. Surprising herself, she met his thrusts with lifted hips, spread her legs wide to take him all, hands sliding down his bare back to his buttocks. She dug her fingers into his skin, urging him deeper and deeper, until exquisite pressure battled with searing pleasure. He was so big, so hard, slamming into her until she cried out.

"Sweet Jesus," he muttered against her ear, the words more like a prayer than a curse, and he lifted to stare down at her, sheathed by pulsing flesh, buried so deep he filled her completely. Holding her gaze, he rocked back and forth, then closed his eyes, head tilted back as he gave a final, savage thrust, then went still. For a long moment, they both quivered on the edge, then he slowly leaned forward until he rested atop her.

Exhausted, she lay there with her arms around him, legs bent over his back, until their breathing slowed and he shifted slightly to one side. Time drifted. Perhaps she slept, for when she opened her eyes again he was kneeling beside her with a damp cloth, dragging it over her breasts, down her stomach and between her thighs. It was such an unexpected kindness that she didn't know what to say, only watched

silently until he finished and covered her with a sheet.

Then he crossed the room with the wet cloth, and when he came back to stand beside the bed she looked up and met his gaze. He smiled slightly. "There's wine. Here."

Surprised, she took the cup he held out, drank from it as she studied him over the rim. It felt suddenly awkward. God, she'd been an absolute wanton, nearly attacking him. A flush heated her cheeks and she looked away. What had she done? But it felt so right somehow. Being here with him like this. As if they'd known each other forever when she knew she'd never seen him before tonight. Odd, that while she'd never met anyone like him before, she should feel that she'd been waiting on him all her life

As if he knew what she was thinking, he reached out and turned her face up to him, his touch gentle. "I've never met a woman like you, Laura."

"Thank you. I think."

He grinned, and amusement transformed his face, made him seem less dangerous, made him look more approachable. "That was a compliment. For a woman as lovely as you, it seems you're not used to hearing such things. Or perhaps you're just not used to believing them."

"A psychoanalyst? How handy."

"A what?"

She gave him back the empty cup and changed the subject. "What's your real name?"

"Logan. It was my mother's maiden name."

That sounded more plausible. Maybe it was just coincidence he had the same name as the man who'd written all those letters. A man she'd half-fallen in love with even though he'd been dead for a hundred and forty years. If she told anyone that, she'd end up in a psych unit.

"So, Logan," she said, and tried not to notice that he still hadn't buttoned his pants and that she had only a light sheet pulled up to her breasts, "what do we do now? How do we get out of here?"

"I told you. We don't. Not until just before daylight."

"Right. I wonder what time it is now. There's no clock in here."

"If you listen carefully, you'll hear the case clock in the downstairs parlor strike the hour. It last struck seven."

"Seven! Sharon probably thinks I've deserted. This is such a mess. Are you sure there's no other way out?"

He didn't answer. Something flickered in his eyes but she couldn't identify it. After a moment, he stood up and hooked his fingers in the waist of his pants and shoved them down. It took her by surprise. When he reached for the sheet over her, she curled her fingers into the thin cotton and held on.

"Don't turn shy on me again," he said, and gave the sheet a sharp jerk. "We've all night, remember?"

"I thought you were kidding."

"If you mean lying, no. I wasn't. I fully intend to make good use of your lovely body all night long, my green-eyed little cat."

“That will require a lot of stamina.” She inched toward the far edge of the bed, reaching for the hem of the sheet. He caught her hand.

“Oh no, little cat. We’ve a bargain, and I mean to see that you keep it.”

“I don’t recall any bargain!”

“But I do.” He put a knee on the bed. The mattress dipped beneath his weight. He’d gone suddenly dangerous again, predatory, stalking her.

Laura’s heartbeat escalated. The heavy pulse between her legs beat slowly, and heat rose in her cheeks at the sudden fierce need in his eyes. Caught between anticipation and nervous reaction, she stared up at him, waiting.

Chapter Three

This might be his last night on Earth, and he intended to make the most of it. Logan didn't dare sleep, unwilling to risk missing the Yankee scouts' departure. They'd shown up at Cedar Hill so quickly there'd been time enough for only one man to escape undetected. He'd sent Billy ahead and stayed behind. Fortunately. For then he'd overheard the scouts' conversation, details that might prove invaluable to Confederate forces.

Before the scouts sudden arrival Billy had provided him with female companionship to pass the time, and now she was trapped here with him as well. Lucky for him. Laura looked up at him, eyes wide and uncertain. Her lips were slightly swollen from his kisses, and he'd left faint marks on her breasts and belly with his two-day beard. He should have shaved, but hadn't anticipated Billy's unexpected gift.

Unbelievable, but his cock stirred again at just the sight of her bare body, the pouty pink nipples, firm breasts, slim waist and flat belly, dipping down to a thatch of coppery hair between her thighs.

She looked down, her gaze fixing on his cock. He didn't move, aroused even more by her gaze on him, and when she reached out to touch him he bit back a groan. Her fingers fluttered

over his rigid length, feather-light, teasing, caressing skin still damp from the recent washing. He closed his eyes, clenched his teeth as she circled him with her fingers and flexed her wrist. The rhythmic motion made him even harder. Then she paused, scratching along the underside of his shaft with her nails, a teasing caress that took him close to the edge. He heard her move when the bed ropes creaked, but didn't expect her next act.

Kneeling on the bed, she took him in her mouth, tongue flicking over the swollen head of his penis, hot and wet and arousing. His eyes opened in shock. Her dark red hair brushed against his bare thighs, and she cupped his balls in her palm, gently squeezing. He groaned.

She sucked him deeper into her mouth, a steady rhythmic pull. He couldn't believe it, didn't know what to do, just knelt with one knee on the bed. When he could stand it no longer he put his hands lightly on her head, fingers raking through her hair, resisting the urge to hold her as best he could. Sweet Jesus, he didn't know how much of this he could take without release! He wanted to ram his cock deep into her mouth, again and again, but somehow held back.

Reaching down, he found her tits, his fingers kneading them, then tugged at her nipples until she began to groan as well. She sucked harder on him, writhed beneath his hands as he pinched and stroked, his hips bucking forward despite his best intentions.

"Jesus," he said finally, and tangled both his hands in her hair to pull her away from his

throbbing cock, "I'm ready to explode."

"So?" She looked up at him, eyes glistening and lips wet and parted. "Isn't that what you want?"

"Not yet. Not if I intend to do this all night."

It was a promise he meant to keep.

Pushing her back on the bed, he spread her legs wide, slid his hands beneath her hips to lift her, to open her for his touch. The glistening pink folds looked like an opening flower. He slid a finger over the tiny bud at the top of her sex, and heard her gasp. It quivered beneath his hand, and after a moment, he took her in his mouth just as she had done him, sucking greedily, tasting her, his tongue delving into the deep recesses of her body until she squirmed, until she bucked against him wildly. He reached up, found her breasts, the swollen nipples tender and so ready for him, teasing them between his thumbs and fingers as he sucked on her tiny sex.

He didn't stop until he knew she was right at the brink, until he heard her throaty groan signal imminent climax. Then he paused, prolonging the torment. She arched her hips in open invitation. He flicked his tongue over the turgid bud, felt her quiver, and slid two fingers into her cleft. She was deliciously wet. He moved his hand back and forth, in and out, raking his thumb across the sensitive nub as he did, his other hand teasing her hard nipples. She gave an impatient sound, reached down to curl her fingers into his hair and draw his head closer to her sex.

He held back, slid a third finger into her, a

tight fit. His cock ached, throbbed, and still he waited. He wanted to hear her say what she wanted. For a woman supposedly experienced, she had curious reservations. He'd spent time in New Orleans, visited the elegant houses with half-clad demi-mondes draped over chairs and couches, cynical and world-weary, and this woman bore them no resemblance at all. Yet she'd given herself freely to him, so what else was he to think?

"Oh God," he heard her say a few moments later, the words torn from her. "Please . . . You know what I want"

"Tell me." He blew softly against her cleft, flicked his tongue once more over the hard nub, then took it gently between his teeth. She went still, quivering. He sucked it into his mouth, relishing the salty sweetness of her, then paused. "Tell me," he said again, "say the words."

"I can't! Oh God, I just can't say . . . those nasty things!"

He blew on her swollen nub, then lifted his head. "You can do them but you can't say them?"

"Yes . . . *no*. Damn you! Fuck me then . . . just do whatever you want with me . . . oh God, I can't believe you're making me say these things!"

Satisfied, he did just what she asked. He slid his fingers from her hot cleft to move up and over her, turning her onto her side as he lay on his back. "Get on top, kitten. That's right. Just like that. Now straddle me."

Long hair draped on each side of her face,

and perspiration gleamed on her breasts and torso as she straddled him. She poised over him, staring down into his eyes as he rubbed her slick little cleft with the head of his penis, then slowly lowered her down atop his hard cock, hands on her waist to control the rhythm. Her eyes widened as he impaled her inch by inch, and when he suddenly pulled her down hard to shove all the way inside her she cried out, hands reaching for him.

“You like that, don’t you?” he whispered, lifting her slightly, and she whimpered with her head thrown back, tits thrust out and nipples tight little beads. Her fingers curled around his arms for balance. He pulled her down hard again, plunging deep inside her. His arms flexed to lift her again, but this time she took control. She slid up his shaft then down again, faster and faster, and after a moment, he rocked his pelvis up so that her clitoris rubbed against it. She gasped. He put his hands on her breasts, tormented her swollen nipples, tugging at them lightly. She bent forward and he greedily sucked a nipple into his mouth as she rocked back and forth, scraping her clit over him until he felt her quiver with impending release. He sucked harder on her tit, teased the other nipple, then pushed her full breasts together to fit both nipples into his mouth at the same time. She shuddered violently.

“Yes!” she cried, “Oh God, yes . . . !”

They both came at the same time, his hot seed gushing into her vagina, and she rocked fiercely on his hard cock until he was drained. Then she collapsed atop him, moaning.

He put his arms around her. Oddly enough, he felt a strange tenderness for her, for this woman spending what was probably his last night with him. He had a dark sense of fatalism about his chances of getting through the Yankee lines alive, though damned stupid hope lingered.

And if this was to be his last night alive, he was glad Laura would be his final memory.

Drained, exhausted, sore and aching and yet fully sated, Laura lay beside him and tried to rationalize her behavior. She was supposed to be logical, rational. Yet she'd had wild sex with a total stranger.

Never in her life had she dreamed she could feel, do, *say* the things she just had. That had been one of Jerry's biggest complaints. He'd even suggested she was frigid. He should see her now! She almost laughed at the very thought. He'd never believe it. But now she knew it wasn't her lack of passion, but Jerry who had made her ashamed of her body, embarrassed by her needs.

This man calling himself Logan Jackson had shown her an entirely new world. She felt free. Bold. Emancipated. She'd revealed her needs, her secret desires aloud, and the world hadn't ended. Amazing. Maybe there was something to be said for one-night stands. Not that she'd ever do anything so foolish again. She'd been caught up in the moment, in the fiction of another time.

It'd been enlightening to enjoy playing the part of a prostitute, but all good things came to

an end eventually. Tomorrow would be awkward enough, even if they left this room right now. How could she ever explain to Sharon what had happened? There was no decent explanation. None that she could come up with, anyway. Maybe Logan had a more fertile imagination. God, he had everything else!

A sense of urgency prodded her. She had to leave, had to get away before he woke. If not, she may not want to ever leave. In the space of a few hours, he'd somehow managed to touch her emotions as well as her body. It was impossibly crazy. God, she had to leave now or risk losing her heart as well as her mind.

She stole a glance at him. He slept, chest rising and falling in regular rhythm. Gently, she slipped from the bed, found her scattered garments and dressed clumsily. Her shoes . . . they were here somewhere. Lamplight stretched almost to the small door, and she found one shoe against the wall, the other in the shadows of the eaves. It took her only a moment to slip on the shoes.

With a final, slightly regretful glance over her shoulder, she moved to the door and used her fingertips to pry at it. To her surprise, it swung open quite easily, and she slipped through into the bedroom on the other side. After moving aside a washstand, she pulled the door shut behind her and moved the washstand back in front of the opening. It hid it perfectly, but she didn't recall it being there before. She glanced around the room. It was quiet, a single lamp burning.

Daylight had faded. Beyond the lacy curtains

over the windows, night had fallen. She let out a sigh and hoped she could come up with something rational for Sharon. This was so damned embarrassing!

Breathing another sigh, she raked a hand through her hair and looked for her small overnight bag. It should be here somewhere, with her toothbrush and other toiletries. There was no sign of it. Damn. Maybe she'd been moved to another room. Even her jeans and sweater were gone. Only the white dress with green sprigs remained, draped over the high tester bed. She managed to get it on, fastening the side buttons, hoping she didn't get it rumpled before the tour.

Then she left the room in search of Sharon.

On the second floor landing, she heard the buzz of conversation below and paused. Male voices drifted up the stairwell. Hard, clipped tones were followed by the deprecating drawl of a female voice.

"Surely, Sergeant Caldwell, you do not think that I would hide a Rebel soldier here in my own house? I am not that foolish, to invite trouble. My husband is gone, my brothers enscripted, and I am left with only my sister and two servants."

"You mean slaves. Mistress Smith, we are not so naive as to think the darkies we've met here remain of their own accord."

Laura blinked in confusion. Was there a play she had missed? This was most unusual. She could recall nothing about a drama being enacted. Moving down several steps, she reached the first floor landing and heard the

voices more clearly now, coming from the parlor across the wide dog trot, or hallway.

“Fie, sir! How can you say that?” a woman playing Mistress Smith replied with asperity. “Interview them yourself, if you so please. Sarah and Gully are quite old, and cannot withstand the rigors of the kind of freedom granted them by the Union, I fear. Have you not seen the shanties in the woods filled with bewildered, hungry women and children emancipated without proper preparation for their care? They have no jobs, no money, no food, just promises that do little to fill empty bellies or offer shelter.”

There was a moment of tense silence. Laura’s heart thumped in alarm. It seemed so real. The emotion so valid.

“Admittedly,” the man said gruffly, “there has not been adequate care provided for the freed slaves. But once the war is over, President Lincoln will see to their care.”

“Those that survive, you mean.” Scorn laced the woman’s words, though her soft drawl remained cool and cordial. *Excellent acting!*

“I see that we will not come to an equitable accord in this matter,” the man said finally. “It’s grown late. Corporal Reed and I must leave before first light in the morning, so will relieve you of our presence. Your hospitality was not exaggerated, Mistress Smith. Dinner was most delicious. I hope you enjoy the small gift we brought you. It fell unexpectedly into our hands. Oh, and give our regards to your cousin.”

“My cousin does not visit,” Mistress Smith replied coolly, “as you must well know. He’s in Virginia with his regiment.”

A short burst of sarcastic laughter greeted that comment. “Yet we had word he and your husband were seen in this area. Would they be so close and not come to visit?”

“I have no idea, Sergeant. Should we be fortunate enough to see either my husband or my cousin, I’ll mention your concern.”

“If you are found harboring Rebel soldiers, ma’am, things will go harshly for you.”

“I shall keep that foremost in my mind, sir. Thank you for your gift. Even a two-day-old newspaper is still new to us. Good night, Sergeant, and farewell.”

Laura quickly skimmed the last few steps to hide in the shadows when footsteps sounded on bare wooden floors. Pressed back against the wall, her heart thudded erratically. This was so strange. Yet something told her that everything had changed. That she wasn’t where she thought she was— that somehow, she’d stumbled into the incomprehensible. The unbelievable. Was it a dream? A hallucination? Or— *no*. It couldn’t be. Her gaze fell upon a newspaper lying on a table against the hall wall. *April 2, 1862* read the date on the *Memphis Appeal*. Two days old

Somehow, she had traveled back in time to the night before Captain Logan Jackson had made his fateful ride. Caldwell and Reed were the names of the two Yankee scouts who’d last seen Jackson, though they’d denied executing him. He’d been pursued but disappeared, all the records stated, a brief footnote to history, the tale of one man’s failed effort to change the tide of the war.

But perhaps she could save him. She couldn't—wouldn't—alter the battle's outcome, for even had Jackson reached General Johnston in time it would have made no difference. But she could save one man. She could save Logan Jackson from being accused of desertion. From an untimely death.

And she knew just how she'd do it. In the end, it would save them both.

Chapter Four

Silence cloaked the room when she closed the attic door behind her. Logan still slept. She saw his long, muscled form stretched upon the bed. Quickly undressing, she eased back onto the mattress. Nuzzling close, she slid her hand across the taut band of muscles on his belly, felt him contract beneath her fingers, and smiled. His arm moved to curve around her shoulders and pull her closer against him, cuddling her into the angle of his chest. She rested her cheek against the smooth expanse, felt his heart beat, steady and strong. He stuck his hand into her hair, stroked his fingers gently through the strands, spreading it across his chest.

“Like silk,” he murmured drowsily, “like dark fire silk.”

She’d never thought of her hair like that, indeed, kept it pulled back from her face most of the time, tied in a ponytail on the nape of her neck. It was so straight, heavy, just a thick mass she had never been able to style correctly, that she’d long ago given up trying to do anything else with it. Yet he made it sound . . . beautiful.

Laura glanced up at him through her lashes, saw him looking down at her, a strange half-smile tucking in the corners of his mouth. Was he laughing at her? Amused by her passionate

abandon, her gullible surrender? She started to pull away, but his arm tightened around her and he bent to say against her hair, "Bide a while, sweet Laura. It is not yet time to part."

Bide a while. So . . . old fashioned. Romantic. She sighed.

It was oddly comforting to lie with him like this, to have his arm around her and his hand caressing her hair. To feel— loved. Fiction, indeed, to think that a casual sexual encounter would ever be anything more than that, but at the moment, it was harmless to let herself believe it. What could it hurt, as long as she faced the truth tomorrow? As long as she saved him?

"Yes," she said softly, "I'll bide here with you until the morrow. After . . . after it's ended, we'll each go our own ways without any expectations."

"Sweet Laura, you have a strange manner of speech at times, but I find it— endearing. And I admit, I like it best when you're vocal with your appreciation of my touch and your desire for me."

Heat washed through her at the reminder and she ducked her head slightly, embarrassed. He laughed. She pinched his nipple, then smiled at his surprised yelp.

In a swift motion that startled her, he suddenly rolled over to pin her beneath him, holding her down with his hands pushing her arms up over her head. He gave a mock-growl, dark blue eyes raking over her.

"Vicious little kitten. Do you like to play roughly, then? Is that what you want?"

The breath caught in her throat at the gleam in his eyes, and her pulse raced. Maybe she did. Maybe that was what she wanted, because just the thought of it ignited a fierce throbbing in the pit of her stomach. But she shook her head, playing the game, knowing she must delay him.

“No.”

His smile was wicked. “Yet I think you do. And you must be punished for your trespass. Retribution first, then redemption.”

Intrigued, excited, Laura murmured a token protest when he took her discarded cotton stockings and tied her wrists to the iron bedposts with them. Then he secured her ankles to the footboard, using lengths of drapery sash. By now, she could see that he was excited as well, his penis huge and engorged. He made no effort to hide his arousal.

Spread-eagled on the bed linens, exposed to his gaze and the cool air drifting over her naked body, she waited. Her nipples puckered when he brushed his hand over her breasts, and he sat back between her spread legs and smiled. She felt so—vulnerable. His gaze moved over her leisurely. He touched her open cleft, ran his finger over the hidden folds, flicked her clitoris in a light thump that made her quiver and arch upward. His eyes darkened, and his voice was rough.

“Such a lovely body, tempting, passionate, made for love.”

“Love, or sex?”

He looked up at her. “While not the same, the two are oft entwined.”

“But not always.”

“No.” He reached out to pinch her nipple, watched it tighten, smiled when she gasped at the delicious sensation it provoked. “Not always. On occasion, one can be mistaken for the other, I’ve heard.”

“Yes . . . and it’s always a mistake to confuse just sex with feelings of love.” She hadn’t meant to sound bitter, but saw his brows lift slightly in surprise. “Love and sex don’t always go hand in hand,” she said then, and closed her eyes against his piercing gaze. She knew that well enough. Jerry had wanted only sex, had married her when she refused to sleep with him before a wedding. Fool that she was, she’d mistaken lust for love, but quickly learned her error.

Silence fell between them. She felt the bed move after a moment, and she kept her eyes shut so she wouldn’t betray the raw emotion that quivered just beneath her surface.

“This is just sex, then,” Logan said into the silence, and before she could think of any kind of response, he’d leaned over her, drawing a taut nipple into his mouth, driving the need for words into oblivion. He rolled her nipple between his tongue and teeth, his hand moving to tug at her other nipple. Exquisite sensation shot through her all the way to her belly. A pulse throbbed fiercely between her legs, igniting an empty ache.

When she was at fever pitch, moaning, he lifted his head, sucked her other nipple into his hot mouth, ran his hand down over her ribs, belly, and between her legs to stroke the wet folds. Restrained by the silk drapery ties and

cotton stockings, she could only arch her body into his hand, seeking relief. He played with her, teased her clitoris with his thumb, slid his fingers into her hungry cleft, then out again. Just when she thought she would explode, he stopped. Opening her eyes, she stared up at him with frustration. He smiled.

“Not yet, little cat. Retribution, then redemption.”

He moved away from her, and even though she turned her head, she couldn't see what he was doing. After a moment, he returned to the bed. Dreadful anticipation made her stomach knot.

“What . . . what are you going to do with that?” she managed to whisper.

“Nothing that will hurt you. Or that you won't like.”

Holding up the frayed end of a silk drapery cord, he flicked it against her nipple in a light stroke. She gasped in surprise. He watched her from beneath his lashes as he flicked it over her other nipple, then over her breasts, again and again as she writhed. It was arousing, hot pleasure that didn't cross the threshold into pain. He moved lower with the silk, soft blows that tingled on her skin, down over her ribs and belly to her mound. She caught her breath.

“*Nooo*”

“Oh yes, little cat. Sweet punishment.”

Sweet, indeed. Silken blows raked her sensitive folds, across her swollen clit, oddly arousing. She bit her lip, head thrashing from side to side on the pillow, hips helplessly arching up.

“Do you like it, little cat? Is this punishment what you need?”

“No . . . *yes.*” The words came out a harsh groan. Throbbing heat from the silk and her own need wracked her. He must have known how close she was to climax, for he paused and she choked back a plea for him not to stop.

Then he was putting something beneath her, a folded pillow that lifted her hips higher, left her even more exposed with her legs spread so wide and ankles tied to the footboard. A wash of embarrassment flooded her as he sat between her open legs again, inspecting her folds with a finger that stroked idly over the wet lips of her vagina. She should be humiliated at being so fully exposed, of having him watch her while he made her react with the silk on sensitive flesh.

Silently, he flicked it against her again and she couldn't help a needy whimper. Her hips bucked up eagerly, seeking the sweet torment, seeking release that hovered just beyond her reach. Again he slapped the strands against her, while two fingers of his other hand slid deep inside her, stretching her to the limits, working a rhythm that sent her into a frenzy. Pleasure coursed through her in rolling waves.

Just when she thought she couldn't bear it another moment, the silk moved away to be replaced by the heat of his mouth on her, sucking her clit between his teeth, his breath cool on her fevered flesh. She cried out, strained upward in mindless ecstasy as he alternately sucked and blew on the tiny nub, prolonging her climax, holding final release at bay.

Shuddering when he rammed his fingers deeper inside her, she heard her own voice begging him to fuck her, not to ever stop. She said it over and over, in a litany of need.

He laughed softly against her wet folds, tongue lashing against her clit just like the silk had done. "Sweet surrender," he murmured, and finally let her reach a shattering release. Waves of ecstasy washed over her and her body convulsed around his fingers as he shoved them deeply inside her wet slit. Again and again she came, crying out.

When she collapsed bonelessly, weak from the force of her climax, he sat back again and watched her with a faint smile. "That's much better, little cat. Maybe you have more in common with the ladies of New Orleans than I had thought. They taught me quite a lot before I left there, you know. Part of my education I'd never expected. I can see you need more training in the arts, however. If you're to ply your wares successfully, you must first know how it feels to be fully pleased."

"Yeah, well I think I'm getting that."

"And the night is young. We have until just before dawn."

She thought of what she had to do, knew that she must keep him here well past dawn if he was to survive.

Giving him an arch look, she purred, "Then I expect you to fully pleasure me, sir. Or is this the best you can do?"

An expression of surprise flashed across his face, then he grinned. "Ah, a challenge. I've never been known to retreat from a thrown

gauntlet, little cat.” He stroked the damp hair on her mound, raked his thumb through the tangled red mat, watched them curl over his fingers. Then he looked up at her again. Something gleamed in his eyes, turned them dark blue beneath the fan of his lashes. His voice was gruff.

“There are more uses for silk than you can imagine, my sweet. I’ll show you a few in the hours we have left to us tonight. And perhaps if— when I come back, you can show me a few of your own.”

Still tied to the four corners of the iron bedstead, Laura watched with a nervous quiver as he rose to rummage in a small trunk against the far wall. Several trunks were stacked in a corner, and a set of saddlebags lay draped over a straight, ladderback chair under the eaves. Logan left her sight, and even when she craned her neck she couldn’t see him, but she heard him, and in a moment he returned, bringing a wet cloth, a bottle of something dark, several lengths of thin silk, and something that clinked lightly in his hand. A shiver rippled through her.

“What . . . what do you have in mind?”

He glanced up with a faint smile. Light played over him, gleaming on his sculpted chest, the ropes of muscle on his belly, and his slim flanks and long legs. He was dark all over, as if he’d spent a lot of time naked in the sun, but she knew that couldn’t be true. She wet her lips with the tip of her tongue, watching him as he made his mysterious preparations.

Working swiftly, he tied knots at regular

intervals in one length of silk that was about a foot long. He tossed it to the bed, then opened the bottle of something that smelled pungent. It reminded her of the stuff her mother used to put on her chest when she caught cold, but of course it couldn't be that.

A little nervously, she said, "You seem to have an entire bag of tricks."

"Improvisation, my sweet. Nothing compared to the ladies in the *Vieux Carré*"

She wasn't at all sure she liked being compared to a New Orleans prostitute, but if it'd keep him here, she'd let it pass for now.

Surprising her again, he knelt on the bed and bent forward to kiss her on the mouth. She closed her eyes, giving herself up to him, and he trailed kisses along her jawline up to her ear. He blew softly and she shivered when his tongue lapped another path from her ear back to her lips. A little breathless, she opened her eyes when he stopped.

He smiled at her, and then fastened a small metal clamp on her right nipple. He flicked a finger against her left nipple and when it beaded, attached a clamp to the taut peak. Then he looped a length of thin silk ribbon between them, and held the free end in his hand. A sudden tug tightened the clamps so that she gasped and arched upward.

"Does it hurt?" he asked, and she shook her head.

"No."

He smiled again. "Good. I want you to feel only pleasure, no pain."

Laura watched as he went to the footboard

and untied her, leaving the silk cords still on her ankles. She scooted up a little in the bed, easing the pressure on her arms, her feet digging in the soft quilt beneath her. Then he untied her wrists, and turned her over on her stomach before he retied them. A nervous flutter in the pit of her stomach made her bite her lip in apprehension. Or was it anticipation?

“Get up on your knees,” he said behind her, and reached his hand beneath her when she complied. He found the trailing length of silk and gave it a tug and hot, pleasurable sensation shot through her nipples. Kneeling behind her, he pulled the silk between her legs, let it rub against her swollen clit as he tugged on the ribbon again. Her fingers curled tightly around the iron headboard and she arched her back. His hand stroked along the curve of her spine, down to her hips, fingers dipping into the crevice. “Spread your knees,” he murmured, then said when she hesitated. “Spread them wide!”

Quivering, she did so, suddenly uncertain. She hadn’t bargained for this. What did he intend to do?

His hands caressed her back and buttocks, and the silk ribbon tugged on her nipples and scraped against her clit, a piercing pleasure that made her writhe. Panting for breath, she clung to the bed frame, legs spread wide, wrists bound to iron and her body left vulnerable to his desires.

Working the ribbon, he leaned over her at last, his hard cock nudging against her slit. She was wet, aching, empty. After several strokes

of his cock against her, spreading heat and moisture, he paused. She wiggled an invitation, needing him inside her, needing release from the sweet torture. Then he put his hand between her legs again, this time smearing something cold on her tender folds. It felt thick, greasy. In just seconds, it began to tingle on her sensitive flesh, arousing and a vivid contrast of heat and cold. She jerked, but he found her clitoris and covered it with the thick stuff.

“Oh God! What . . . what is that?”

“Do you like it? It enhances sensation.”

“No, yes, I think so . . . oh God . . . it’s . . . it’s . . . oh!”

He’d jerked the silk ribbon again so that it scraped across her clit, and she spasmed with delicious reaction. His arm moved around her waist, drew her into position, and just when she thought he might enter her, she felt him delve a finger into her opening. It shocked her.

“Logan . . . what”

“It’s all right,” he murmured, “I’d never hurt you.”

A shiver vibrated through her, but she nodded. The ointment and clamps had her to near fever-pitch, and while vague thoughts of perversion lurked at the perimeters of her mind, all she could think about was finding release. Logan’s other hand moved between her legs, then his cock, and the turgid shaft scraped over her quivering flesh in a leisurely drag.

“Please,” she heard herself whimper, “please”

“Say the words or I’ll stop, little cat.”

Another slow drag, a teasing stroke, the tug

of the silk ribbon on the clamps and over her clit, then a quick smack of his palm against her butt. She cried out, and he surged forward to slide his thick cock against her slit, the head just barely entering her. She wiggled backward to take him, but the restraints and her position kept her from impaling herself on his length. She moaned again. He waited, teasing her, working the ribbon to torture her nipples and clit, barely grazing her hungry cleft then retreating.

She knew what he wanted. The words. The language she'd always hated, had never been able to bring herself to say, the "dirty" sex talk that Jerry had expected and never gotten. But she was supposed to be a prostitute tonight, must play her part and keep Logan Jackson from rushing to his doom, so she said the words again.

"Fuck me, Logan. Please"

The last was nearly screamed, and he slammed his cock into her wet, aching orifice so hard that she nearly hit her head on the wall behind the bed. Only his quick arm around her waist kept her from it. Again and again he shoved into her, tugging the silk ribbon that was attached to her nipples and rubbing against her clit so that shudders raked her.

Mindless with ecstasy, she barely knew when he came inside her, a hot gush that shot all the way to her womb. Slowly, she sank into the feather pillows and mattress, her face pressed into clean linen, her body drained.

Logan relaxed atop her, his cock still inside

her, his arm around her waist and his face buried in the fragrant mass of her hair. Sweet Jesus, he'd never thought anything could feel so good. The little minx. This would teach her to challenge a man. She should know better. A woman in her profession would do better to be bolder instead of playing the shy virgin. No man could ever believe her inexperienced, though he could have sworn her blush was real when she'd said she couldn't say the words he wanted to hear from her.

Words were important, his stock in trade before the war. They were powerful, potent, had started wars and ended wars. Especially this war. He'd tried to persuade his friends to listen to his words of warning, but they'd fallen on deaf ears.

Just as Laura's protests of innocence had fallen on his own deaf ears. Yet still . . . there was something intrinsically naive about her. An honest innocence, if he didn't know better. No hired harlot could be so innocent. Not even this lovely chit with the face of an angel and heaven in her eyes and mouth. A welcome diversion indeed, as Billy must surely have known she'd be. And it may well be the condemned man's last fling.

He just hadn't expected to find emotion as well as physical release. It left him with a faint sense of regret for what he must do, for that meant leaving her behind when he'd just found her. It surprised him that he was reluctant to bid her farewell. Never before had he cared about the women he'd bedded. Yet this one was different. This one— mattered. God, he was

such a fool!

Downstairs, the case clock struck midnight. He had five more hours.

Beside him, Laura stirred, her satin skin soft against his arm. He slid a hand along the sweet curve of her spine, touched the faint red marks his hands had made on her pale skin. She slept. Her breathing was slow, measured. He'd allow her a little more time before he woke her again. He couldn't allow himself the same slumber, for if he overslept, he might miss the scouts' departure. As soon as they left, he had to ride for camp and warn General Johnston.

So tonight he'd spend in carnal pleasure with a woman he'd probably never see again, yet the very thought was daunting. He didn't know why. It was almost as if he'd always known her, as if he'd been waiting for her his entire life. That made him smile. It was the height of illusion to fall in love with a whore. Any man who did that was a complete and utter fool.

Yet there was something so . . . fresh about Laura Linden. A harlot. Scandalous. His family would never understand. His parents were long dead, his only living family were Lucy and Billy and his aunt now, but they loved him and would be grieved were he to shame them.

He closed his eyes. It was just the night talking, the temptations of the flesh. Tomorrow he would ride away and leave her behind and would probably never think of her again, save for a fleeting moment of sweet memory. Yes. That's what he'd do. But not because it was what he wanted.

He had no other choice.

Chapter Five

Laura woke slowly. Light caresses moved down her back, a hand skimming over her in a feathery glide. Her wrists were still tied to the headboard, and pillows cradled her head. She turned to face Logan, and he smiled.

“You have such a tempting body. Men must flock to you in droves.”

She twisted against the bonds that secured her and said sleepily, “No . . . I have no men in my life. Or bed.”

He laughed. “You aren’t pretending to have been a virgin before tonight, I presume.”

She frowned. “Of course not. But truthfully, there was only my husband before you.”

He went very still. A strange expression settled on his features. “Husband?”

“Oh, we’re divorced,” she hastened to explain. “Three years now. Jerry was my— first. My only lover. I’m not very experienced, I know, but I’ve read extensively, and . . . and I guess I have my fantasies. Like this one.”

“You’ve been with only one man?” He looked stunned, then disbelieving. “Divorce. It’s not unheard of, but uncommon. You must have been left alone and unprotected. Is that what has made you resort to selling yourself?”

More awake now, she remembered she must continue the game, so nodded. “Yes.”

“Dammit.”

It wasn't quite the response she expected, and she just stared at him when he looked away from her for a moment, an expression on his face like guilt. Then he looked back at her.

“I misjudged you, sweet Laura. Forgive me.”

“I thought I was the one who's supposed to ask your forgiveness?” She tugged against her bonds. “You know. Retribution then redemption.”

For a long moment he didn't say anything, then he nodded. “Yes. The blame is easier to bear if the fault is not yours.”

That was confusing. He'd gone off-track somewhere, or she wasn't getting it. But then it didn't matter, because his attention returned to teasing her body. He reached beneath her and caught the length of silk ribbon attached to the clamps. He untied her wrists from the bed frame and turned her over to unfasten the clamps. She breathed a sigh, then smiled when he bent his head to kiss each taut nipple.

“Um. That feels good.”

Glancing up at her, he smiled. Her heart thudded. He was so beautiful when he smiled, his eyes lighting up and his sensual mouth as sexy as hell. Dark hair fell onto his brow, brushed over his ears, and grew long on the nape of his neck. A light growth of beard shadowed his face. It was stiff and bristly and abrasive, and she reached up to run her fingertips over it in a scratchy sound.

He caught her hand, kissed her fingertips, then rubbed his jaw over the sensitive peaks of her breasts. Her nipples instantly tightened in

response. He laughed.

“Greedy girl. Have you not had enough?”

She thought a moment, then smiled back at him. “My body may disagree, but oddly enough I don’t think I have. Perhaps I’m insatiable. So now you know. I’m a ravenous woman.”

“That’s not always a bad thing.”

“No? Maybe not. Or maybe it’s just my turn to pleasure you.”

He looked surprised and she laughed. “Oh, do you think me too much a novice? You’ve been such a good tutor, I think perhaps I’ve learned enough tonight to try.”

Lying on his back, he folded his arms behind his head and smiled. “I’m willing to let you try.”

“You’re a brave man.”

“But not a foolish one. No ropes.”

She ducked her head so he wouldn’t see her disappointment. It’d seemed perfect. Tied to the bed, he’d have to stay until it was safe. So now she had to think of other ways to delay him.

It didn’t take her too long. She glanced around the room, saw the washstand and cloth he had used earlier, and a cake of soap. She’d start with that.

The water was tepid, but the room was stuffy so it felt good. She dipped the cloth into the water, then lathered it with soap. When she looked over her shoulder at him, he eyed her with the obvious expectation that she’d bathe him. And so she would. But not right now.

Smiling, she turned where he could watch and drew the soapy cloth down over her throat, head falling back so that her hair tickled her bare back as she slowly slid the cloth over her

body. He watched intently, sprawled naked on the bed, his penis curled atop the dark hair at his groin. Half-closing her eyes, she sighed audibly as she rubbed soap over her breast, devoting a full minute to her nipple until it stood up in a rigid little peak. Then she moved to her other breast, a wet trail of perfumed bubbles gleaming on her skin. She washed it, dragging the cloth over her taut nipple, then moved it lower over her ribcage. Logan's penis stirred, thickening, and she hid a smile at his swift reaction.

Drawing the ladderback chair close to the washstand, she put one foot on the seat, slid the cloth slowly down her leg, bending over so that one breast brushed against her thigh. She washed her foot and ankle, pushing aside the silk cords still fastened, and then straightened slowly and repeated the process with the other leg. Now she had his rapt attention. His cock was harder, a rigid shaft rising from the nest of thick black curls.

She looked up to meet his gaze, saw his breath quicken so that his chest moved rapidly. It was a lot easier than she'd thought. Her lips parted, she kept her eyes half-closed, and with her foot resting on the chair seat and her slit exposed to his gaze, she slid the washcloth between her legs. The soap stung a little on her tender skin as she scrubbed at the ointment he'd used earlier. Sparks ignited, the residue heating up, rough cotton cloth oddly delicious against her sensitive folds. Again she put her head back, moaning softly. Slick soap and ointment combined to arouse her, and the

friction of the cloth against her clitoris made her forget her original intention. She used two fingers to spread the lips of her vulva wide, giving greater access, then abandoned the cloth entirely. Soapy bubbles slid across the tiny nub, her motions grew faster, her hand slipping over the swollen clit until the tension inside her stretched almost unbearably.

Quivering, she moaned, raked her hand faster and faster until the tension snapped and she cried out, her muscles spasming. Her head fell forward, her chest heaved, and she stood still for a long moment without moving, letting the tidal wave subside. When she looked up, Logan stared at her with something like awe in his eyes. His cock stood straight up, his fingers curled around it.

“No,” she managed to say, “you’re not to touch yourself. That’s my privilege now.”

Reluctantly, he took his hand away, and frustration leaped in his eyes. “Then come and take care of it.”

“I will. In my own good time. Retribution and redemption, remember.”

His hand knotted into a fist at his side, but he didn’t argue. She smiled. Men were very visual, and loved watching. Maybe that was how she could buy some time. Apparently, it worked pretty well. And maybe there was more of the exhibitionist in her than she wanted to admit.

Giving him a coy look from beneath her lashes, she bent to retrieve the dropped cloth, then straightened again. She dipped it into the water, wrung it out, then rinsed the soap from her breasts. As if fascinated with her own

nipples, she plucked at them with her fingers until each was hard. Logan cleared his throat. She hid a smile. She rinsed soap from her ribs, her belly, each leg, again putting a foot atop the chair bottom and exposing her slit for him to see. He groaned. It was a lovely sound. Then she spread the lips of her sex again, carefully rinsing away the soap and her own juices, taking her time.

A glance at him showed that his cock was rock-hard, quivering and standing straight up. An impressive sight indeed. The man was hung like a horse.

While she washed, she thought of another ploy to keep his attention riveted on sex and not the passing time. The flickering lamp atop the small table by the bed had given her an idea.

“Come here,” he muttered thickly when she set aside the cloth, and he patted the mattress. “I think I’m ready for redemption.”

“Not yet, Captain. Keep the bargain, please.”

She crossed to the bedside table, aware that his eyes followed her, that he was growing even harder and more impatient. It was only a matter of time before he took control again, but if she could keep him intrigued, she could delay that moment.

A fat tallow candle had been stuck in a brass stand and set beside the lamp. It was unlit, apparently for use if the oil in the lamp ran out. This might work. She’d seen similar acts in the porno videos Jerry had brought home, and it’d certainly worked for him. But could she do it?

Logan stirred, and she took a deep breath as she set the candle and stand atop a small rug on the floor by the bed. He watched her, frowning slightly, and she looked up and met his gaze.

Then she knelt down and put a knee on each side of the candle, still holding his gaze, and began to knead her breasts in her hands. She tugged at her nipples, worked them between her thumbs and fingers, moaned slightly and gave herself over to the shivers that ran from her breasts to her womb. And slowly, slowly, she lowered her body until she straddled the fat candle and brass stand. The tip of the candle nudged against her vagina, and for a moment she thought it would fall over and she'd have to hold it. Then it slipped into the wetness, and she slid lower.

Logan's eyes flickered, and sweat popped out on his forehead, but he didn't touch his red, swollen penis.

Slowly impaling herself on the candle while she plucked her nipples into rigid peaks, she closed her eyes, vagina contracting around tallow, the sensation oddly erotic. Amazed at her own brazen behavior, she told herself it was worth it if she saved Logan. Wasn't it?

After all, she'd never see him again after tomorrow if all went as planned. He'd be alive, maybe his family wouldn't lose Cedar Hill, and she'd find the key and go back to 2003. Nothing else would have ever induced her to play the whore like this.

"Touch yourself," Logan said hoarsely, and when she opened her eyes, he added, "down

there. Rub yourself there. I want to see you come again.”

She smiled. His cock throbbed, pulsed, red and urgent. He may come without even being touched. Swiping her tongue over her parted lips, she moved a hand down to her clitoris and rubbed her fingers over the nub. It was too soon, and she felt only a slight irritation instead of mounting tension, yet she continued, knowing it aroused him to the point of explosion to watch her.

“Work the candle,” he said, this time his voice so thick and hoarse it sounded strange.

She complied, rubbed her clit, worked the candle in and out, up to the hilt of the slender brass stand. Yet she couldn’t come, couldn’t find release, and after a moment, he rose from the bed and came toward her.

Her head jerked up. “No! My rules this time!”

Kneeling in front of her, he said hoarsely, “Just let me touch you. Your breasts. I’ll only do what you allow.”

Relenting, she nodded. “Gently.”

He cupped her breasts in his palms, his gaze moving down between them to watch her hands and the candle, and as he played with her nipples, she felt a now-familiar tension and heat ignite. Her breath quickened. She rubbed her hand faster over her clit, gripping the candle in her fist and pushing it deeper inside her. Moisture seeped around tallow, and she spread it over the dry nub to ease the friction. Logan pinched her nipples and she arched her back to push them into his hands. His rampant cock brushed against her belly, the head wet.

“You can’t come until I tell you,” she said hoarsely, and he groaned.

A shudder raked through her. Tension mounted. Maybe she could climax after all. She’d never been good at faking it, so hoped for a real one. Logan was too close, and he’d know if she pretended.

Suddenly, as she rubbed her clit with one hand and slid the candle deep inside with the other, she bucked into an unexpected orgasm. It caught her by surprise, so that she gave no protest when Logan pushed her gently onto her back on the rug. Her hips jerked, the candle came free of the brass stand, and she rubbed fiercely at her clitoris, spreading her legs wide. Wave after wave crashed over her, and finally she lay limp, panting for breath.

Logan knelt beside her, his proud erection stiff and weeping, and she rose to her elbow and leaned forward, tongue flicking out to lick away the single drop. He moved to catch her head between his hands, and she tapped him sharply on his rigid organ with one finger.

“No. Retribution first, remember?”

“So you keep saying,” he growled. “I’m about to renege on our bargain if my redemption isn’t soon.”

“I didn’t try to renege. Neither will you. You’ve more honor than that.” She slipped the candle from her body and sat up, her face inches from his. “Don’t you.”

His eyes narrowed, and his mouth set in a frustrated slash. “Don’t push it too far.”

“Hm. I’ll keep that in mind.”

Rising to her feet, she motioned for him to

stand also, and when he towered over her, she swallowed the brief flash of intimidation and reminder of danger, and managed a smile. This was his game, after all.

“Since you refuse to allow me to tie you as you tied me,” she said, “I thought we’d work on the honor system. Lock your hands behind your head, please.”

Even though his jaw set, he slowly did as she asked.

“Very good. Now stand with your legs spread far apart. That’s right. You’re rather good at following orders, Captain.”

“Not always,” he muttered, and watched her carefully as she reached for the length of silk cord he’d used on her earlier. His brow lifted. She smiled and slapped the frayed end lightly into her palm.

“Retribution. Then redemption. It will be worth waiting for, I promise. Worth suffering for, too.”

He eyed her narrowly, and his stomach muscles contracted when she slapped the silk on her palm again. Gauging just the right force, she tapped his erection with the ends of the silk and he jumped. A muscle leaped in his jaw, but he didn’t back away.

“Excellent. Redemption is ever closer, Captain.”

She knew she could only go so far, not that she’d try to actually hurt him anyway. Still, it gave her a feeling of power and control that she’d never had before, to slap him with the silk and know it stung slightly, pleurably. Just as he had done to her.

Watching his face to be sure she didn't go too far, she brought the frayed ends down on his turgid length again. It quivered, the blue vein running down the middle pulsing. She used the silk on his buttocks next, harder blows that reddened the skin, expecting at any moment for him to stop her. He didn't. She worked her way around him, flicking the silk in stinging blows on his back, buttocks, thighs, even his belly, then lightly over the head of his penis. His chest moved rapidly in and out, the muscles corded in his arms, veins blue against his dark skin.

Sensing she'd gone far enough, she dropped to her knees in front of him, took him into her mouth and started to suck. He groaned, a deep rumble in his chest. She drew in a sharp breath and cupped his balls in her other hand, cradling them gently. He shuddered. She sucked harder, until she felt his balls contract, then stopped. He bucked his hips forward and she drew back even more so that if he tried to follow he'd lose his balance.

"Dammit," he ground out, "don't stop now!"

"Ah, but this is still part of retribution," she said around his thick length, and took him a little deeper into her mouth. She brought him to the point of release again, and again she halted. His legs buckled slightly, then straightened again. She glanced up. His eyes were closed, lips drawn taut, muscles bunched and quivering with the effort to remain still.

Taking pity on him at last, she teased the head of his penis with her tongue, probing the tiny slit, licking up and down the underside of

the shaft, then gently sucking first one, then the other ball into her mouth. He shuddered. After a moment, she moved to take his organ into her mouth again. He was too big to take all of him without gagging, but she did her best, finding a rhythm that allowed her to bring him to release. It came swiftly.

Logan dropped to his knees, unable to stand any longer. He bent forward, hands on the floor, panting for breath. And when he finally looked up at her, he shook his head. Something lit his eyes, emotion and pain and hope.

“You’re a treasure I cannot lose, Laura Linden. Will you wait for me?”

She couldn’t breathe. This was crazy. She hadn’t known him twenty-four hours—save for the letters she’d read and reread for the past six months. That man she knew. But that man was dead and she—she couldn’t stay in the past. Yet what would it hurt to agree? She could leave him a letter explaining everything. Or at least, come up with something plausible.

Oh, who was she kidding? If she succeeded in saving his life, he’d expect her to be there for him. He’d be angry and hurt at her betrayal. Best not to promise what she couldn’t give.

“I . . . I don’t really know you,” she finally stammered out. “I want to. Oh God, I want to. I just . . . You may change your mind after the war. Want to go back to Six Oaks. It’ll still be standing when the war ends.”

He gave her a strange look, and then eased into a sitting position, one arm draped over his drawn-up leg. “And how do you know that? Or even know where I was born?”

Of course. She knew from her research, but as a prostitute, she should know none of that. It'd been a silly mistake. She looked down at her hands.

"I overheard someone talking. It doesn't matter."

"It matters to me." There was something hard in his voice, and she looked up. He stared at her suspiciously. "You know too much, it seems. Who really sent you here?"

"You said yourself that Billy—"

"Billy Smith is my best friend. He'd never betray me. Who sent you?"

"No one. I swear it!" she cried when his hand flashed out to grab her wrist. Fear made her voice shrill, and she tried to tug free but couldn't. He was too strong. Oh no. She'd ruined it. He would leave in the morning and meet his death somewhere between Cedar Hill and Shiloh. Oh God, what had she done?

He stood up, pulling her with him. Before she could twist away, he'd tossed her onto the bed and retied her wrist to the iron frame, then the other one even though she tried to evade his grip. Hot tears stung her eyes, frustration filled her throat. Naked, she stared at him with blurred vision.

"I can't believe I've been so stupid," he muttered, and raked a hand through his hair, the look he gave her filled with bitter reproach. "I'd even begun to think you were as innocent as you claimed to be, though any woman as adept as you couldn't possibly have been with only one man in her life."

"It's true," she said, voice low and bleak. "Not

that I expect you to believe me. I certainly wouldn't. Nor do I blame you." She let her head fall back into the pillow, her arms stretched up and over her head, bound with silk but firmly imprisoned.

Downstairs, the clock chimed twice. In just three hours he'd leave, and there was nothing she could do to stop him. She'd failed.

Chapter Six

Dawn lurked beyond the shuttered windows, and Logan paced up and down. He'd dressed in his gray uniform, not wanting to risk being shot by his own men. If he made it that far. Laura slept, exhausted after the long night. He glanced at her again, as he must have done a hundred times during the past two hours. Her betrayal shouldn't disappoint him, yet somehow it did.

Foolish, indeed, to let himself be so quickly enamored of any woman, much less a wanton hired for the night. No doubt, it had more to do with the fact that he was riding into probable death than with love. At thirty, he'd long ago abandoned notions of finding one woman to spend his life with. Billy had found Lucy, but they'd known each other since they were all children. It had always been expected they'd marry. It had always been expected that he'd graduate from West Point and go on to a military career like his father. Maybe he would have, had the war not started, despite the fact that he'd wanted to follow his uncle into the newspaper business. Now all hope of a future was gone.

But that might be a good thing. Did he really want to live in a world that would be so drastically changed? He had no illusions about

the prospects life would ever return to its former grace, for that way of life had been for only a few anyway. And it should change. He had his own ideas about that, ideas that were unpopular with most of his acquaintances. Truth may lie silent in the face of his own personal convictions, but never his loyalty.

For all the good it would do.

Despite himself, his glance strayed again to Laura. Another truth that would remain silent. He closed his eyes. *God*. Impossible but true. He'd somehow fallen in love with her in only a few hours. Fate had put them together, and now fate would divide them. It seemed that was to be his lot in life—to lose all he loved before he was smart enough to appreciate it. Bitter irony.

Bed ropes squeaked as Laura shifted on the mattress, and he turned to look at her. Green eyes stared back at him, shadowed by long lashes, mute reproach in her gaze.

"It's almost first light," he said after a moment, and his voice sounded much too loud in the soft stillness of the tiny attic room. "I'll set you free once I'm well and away from here."

Laura's lashes fluttered slightly, but other than that she gave no sign she'd heard him. The silence stretched into several minutes before he moved, floorboards slightly creaking beneath his weight. He halted at the side of the bed and stared down at her. So lovely—cat-green eyes and hair the color of dark fire, a silken mass spread over white linens. Emotion clutched at him, an inconvenient and unwanted weakness.

"Do I have your word you'll make no outcry,

or must I gag you?" he asked more harshly than he'd intended, and her lips curved into the faintest of smiles.

"I'll not betray you, Logan Jackson. I swear it."

He stared at her. Intense sorrow swept over him, as if she also knew that he'd never return to Cedar Hill, that he risked all for a Cause he wasn't even certain he believed in but was bound to honor by loyalty for his homeland. She couldn't know. Not really.

It was time. He untied Laura from the bed, watched silently as she dressed. When she had once more donned the muslin gown and tied her shoes, he nodded briefly.

"The exit is well-hidden. To protect my cousin, I must blindfold you."

She submitted without protest as he tied a length of silk around her eyes. The faint scent of rose-water washed over him as he stood so near to her, and it was all he could do not to pull her into an embrace. There was no time for that now. No time for anything but the mission he'd set for himself when he'd first overheard the Yankee scouts discussing army plans and size. He couldn't turn back. Wouldn't turn back.

It was still cool in the early-morning hours when the scouts departed. He waited until the hoofbeats of their horses faded, then slid aside the wooden panel disguised to look like part of the eaves under the roof. A ladder led between the walls by the chimney, down to the root cellar. It was pitch black, and he dared not light their way with a candle for fear it could be seen

through tiny cracks in the outer boards of the house. Warm chimney bricks kept it from being too cool in the narrow space as he guided Laura down with a hand on her arm. Still, she shivered.

Once in the cellar, he put an arm around her shoulders to share body heat, felt her shudder beneath his hands. Putting his mouth against her ear, he said softly, "When we reach my horse, I'll set you free."

She nodded, hair grazing his cheek. "Yes. I know."

Dim light filtered through a transom set at ground level. It was partially open, and the air smelled of earth and grass and damp wind. Moving swiftly now, time urgent upon him, he went to the cellar door and opened it to peer out. Little stirred but the wind and Sarah in the kitchens behind the house. She'd never betray him.

A horse should be waiting for him in the small copse beyond the clearing that edged the fallow cotton fields. He had only to reach it and ride to Pittsburg Landing before the Union army reached their objective. The element of surprise may well turn the tide in Confederate favor. For now.

Fingers of light spread tentative fingers against the still-dark horizon, and he eased out the door and pulled Laura with him. She made no sound of protest, no resistance, just allowed him to guide her over dew-wet grass and rutted furrows toward the woods' edge.

A soft whicker greeted him, and the jangle of a bridle mixed with the sleepy murmur of

birds greeting the day when they reached the copse. The silhouette of a tall mount grew sharp in the growing light.

“Here is where we part, sweet Laura,” he said at last as he untied her blindfold, then despite his doubt and better judgment, drew her to him to kiss her deeply. Her lips parted beneath his mouth, and her arms went round his neck as she pressed her body against his to fiercely return his kiss.

“Do not go,” she whispered when he finally lifted his head, and he let out a ragged breath.

“I must.”

“No” She curled her fingers into his gray coat and held tightly. “You’ll be killed! Oh God, I know you won’t believe me when I say this, but if you leave now you’ll simply disappear and never be heard of again. No one will ever know your fate, your body will never be found.”

“That’s probable,” he said grimly, “but not yet a certainty. Release me or I’ll be too late.”

“Don’t you see? It doesn’t matter! The South loses anyway. Not just this battle, but the entire war. It’s a lost cause. Oh God, I don’t know how to explain this, and you’ve no reason to believe me—I know a lot about you, Logan Jackson. You were born at Six Oaks in June of thirty-two, and your parents died of a fever when you were only fifteen. You lived here at Cedar Hill until you went away to university in Virginia, contemplated West Point but leaned more toward a career in journalism like your mother’s brother. You wrote beautiful letters to your cousin Lucy because your best friend and her husband William Smith hated to write

home. So you filled the void— no wait, listen to me! Please!”

He'd taken a step back, dumbfounded, but her grip on his coat tightened. Desperation rang in her voice and gleamed in her eyes, luminous even in the shadows.

“You must know the family,” he said, and gently pried her fingers from his lapel. “None of these things are exactly secrets.”

“Sergeant Caldwell and Corporal Reed will intercept you in the woods before you reach Shiloh Church. Later, they'll claim not to have knowledge of your fate and you'll be branded a deserter from the Confederate Army. That's how you'll be remembered. Except for your letters to Lucy, there will be no one to speak for you, Logan Jackson. Your legacy will be one of shame.”

Anger burned his throat. “No one has ever dared question my loyalty!”

“But they will. When nothing is heard of you again and you don't rejoin your troops as you're supposed to do, they'll claim you deserted. You're already late in returning. William left yesterday. You stayed behind to spend the night with a woman— or so they all think. Who'll ever know the truth?”

“You.”

“Yes, and all I'll know is that you left here soon after the scouts and were never seen again.”

“What do you expect of me?” he demanded angrily. “To stay safely here while my men fight and die? Then I would indeed be a deserter and deserve the name.”

When he put his hands atop hers to pull free, she pressed closer to him, whispering. "I've thought of that. I have an idea that may work, and you'll still be alive to fight."

"Forgive me, but I've no reason to trust you."

"And you've no reason not to trust me."

"No." He lifted her with his hands under her elbows and set her to one side, away from the restive horse. "But I've no time to waste in argument either. Farewell, Laura."

He pulled the reins free of the sapling and swung atop the bay gelding. He wouldn't look at her. He couldn't. Nudging the horse forward, he'd gone only a yard when a piercing scream rent the air. The gelding snorted and shied, and he whirled it around.

Laura stood watching him. She met his gaze calmly. "If you don't allow me to come with you, I'll scream again. If they didn't hear me that time, those scouts will certainly hear me soon."

She looked determined. He hesitated only a moment, then swore under his breath as he spurred the horse toward her. He bent slightly from the saddle and caught her arm to swing her up behind him. Madness. Utter madness.

So much for a plan. Laura certainly hadn't counted on him being so damn stubborn. Now she might well end up captured or dead. But maybe she'd changed fate just by being with him when he'd been alone before. Maybe somehow she'd altered things enough to change it all. He'd stayed all night.

Tree branches slapped at them as he turned the horse along a narrow track through woods

thick enough to blot out the rising sun. Laura had to duck several times to keep from being knocked off the horse, and held more tightly to his waist. Tension vibrated through him—anger. He was furious with her. She couldn't blame him, but had been desperate. All she could do now was pray she'd been able to circumvent doom.

The wooded path finally ran out, stopping at a wide dirt road. Silence settled around them as he halted the horse in the thick brush. A breeze smelled faintly of smoke. Her hands tightened on Logan's wide leather belt. The feeling of danger thrummed deep in the pit of her stomach.

Sunlight gleamed on wagon ruts and dew-laden milkweeds growing on narrow verges. It glinted in her eyes and Laura blinked, then realized that the light had bounced off something else, something—metallic.

Logan saw it at the same time, or maybe he saw it first, because by the time she realized what she'd seen he was already spurring the horse forward, the big hooves churning up dirt as the muscled beast stretched out in a dead run. Laura clung to him wordlessly, heart pounding in time with the thudding hooves. A shot rang out behind them, and then a man burst into view in front of them on the road, weapon raised.

Logan immediately reined to a halt, cursing softly. The horse pawed the rutted road and snorted, dancing to one side. Jolted, Laura stared with wide eyes over Logan's shoulder at the man in the blue uniform. The moment he

spoke, she knew who he was. Sergeant Caldwell.

A cold chill shivered down her spine and her arms clutched convulsively around Logan's waist. She felt his muscles tighten beneath her hands, felt his tension. *No no no no . . .* This couldn't happen!

"Throw down yer pistol and dismount, Reb," Caldwell ordered, and jerked the muzzle of his rifle in warning. "Git that li'l gal down, too."

Logan slowly withdrew the pistol from his belt and tossed it to the road. "Let her go. I just gave her a ride. She's innocent."

"Like hell. She's ridin' with the enemy so she's guilty as you are. Reed," he said to the man coming up behind them, "git that gal off that horse. Reckon he'll come quietly if we got her in custody."

The horse shied sideways when Reed reached for her, and Logan dug his heels hard into the bay's flanks. It half-reared, hooves flailing out so viciously the corporal had to leap back to keep from being struck. Laura clung desperately to Logan, and he grabbed her arms.

"Bend down!" he shouted, and as the horse's forelegs hit the ground again it lunged forward in a hard run, both of them bent low as possible. Instead of keeping to the road, Logan steered the horse into the woods again. Something bit her ankle, hot and stinging, and angry bees seemed to swarm around their heads. It started to rain, warm drops splashing against her face and she blinked them away. Everything was a blur, the world narrowed to thick undergrowth and the slap of branches, the jangle of bit chains and thudding hooves, and over it all, a loud

popping like fireworks on the Fourth of July.

Finally, the horse slowed. Laura's sides hurt. It was hard to breathe, but the popping had faded and except for the bay's wheezing, it was quiet. They'd gotten away! She'd saved Logan from being killed—in spite of everything, she'd done it! She wanted to laugh aloud with relief.

"You're safe," she said when she could speak, then grabbed at him when he reeled.

Red smeared her hand. For a moment she didn't understand, but when she looked up, she saw blood streaming from the side of his head. He looked at her, his eyes unfocused, but his tone firm.

"Go to Cedar Hill. You'll be safe . . . there"

Then he pitched from the saddle to the ground, landing in a thatch of violets. She stared down at him, panic welling. She'd changed nothing. She hadn't saved him at all.

Chapter Seven

It was hot. Summers were always hot. Humid. Miserable at times. Logan tried to open his eyes to see where he was, but his eyelids were too heavy. Still, he struggled, thrashing from one side to the other, seeking relief from the heat. Seeking a breeze. A cool river wind or a shady spot in the woods. Anywhere but . . . here.

Then something cool drifted over his chest, his arms, down over his torso and legs. Soft hands, gentle murmurs, a voice he should recognize but couldn't quite place. The hands though . . . the hands were so familiar. Soothing. Touching him like . . . like before. Like she had in the small attic room. That memory was fleeting, a vision of green eyes and fiery hair flashing swiftly before fading. But his body remembered. Remembered and welcomed the touch, rose beneath a heavy blanket, ached for release.

When fingers brushed over him he groaned. He knew what he wanted, knew that he had to feel her touch again. And knew that he was dying and didn't want to leave yet. Not without telling her— Laura. Yes. Laura. He had to tell Laura how he felt, that she was precious to him, that he'd done what he could to save her, choosing her over his country. He'd die a traitor,

but as long as she survived he could die without the greatest regret of all.

Her voice drifted down to him as if from a great distance: "Rest. Your fever is fading."

No. He was burning up, like the fires of hell had already swallowed him. It didn't matter. Not anymore. He'd lost all. His family. His home.
Laura

Someone held up his head and put something cool against his lips. "Drink." He did, and in a few moments, soft shadows crept up to claim him even as he struggled against them.

Laura sighed. Three days, and finally his fever had broken. Thankfully, the bullet hadn't done too much damage, tearing away a chunk of scalp and scaring her half to death, but avoiding anything vital. The major concern was fever and infection. Basic first aid had come to the rescue until she'd managed to get him back to Cedar Hill and hidden in an outside shed.

Then Lucy Smith had caught her, and for a little while Laura had wondered if everything was ruined. She confided only what she had to, and Lucy had helped her get Logan upstairs and hidden back in the attic space.

Concern furrowed her brow, and soft brown hair fell into her eyes as Lucy stared down at her cousin. "He keeps saying your name. Are you sure you only found him on the road?"

"He . . . he'd been kind enough to give me a ride. Then we ran into the Yankee scouts. Have they come here looking for him?"

"Yes. But I'm sure I was quite convincing."
She looked up with a smile, her blue eyes

crinkling slightly at the corners. "You're very kind to take such good care of Logan. He'll be grateful to see you when he wakes."

Laura only smiled. When he was safe, she'd step through the door and back into 2003 if the key would still work. She'd found it caught between two floorboards, and tucked it into her pocket. Once Logan was awake and she'd assured herself he'd live . . . Then she'd leave.

Rising to her feet, Lucy said, "I leave him in your care now. It's risky to come up here too often. But I'll leave food for you on a tray in the next room each night before I retire."

"Thank you. And . . . bless you."

"And you, my dear. May God be with us all." Lucy bit her suddenly quivering bottom lip and tears welled in her eyes. "I've not heard from my husband. So many dead . . . so many. Our men have fled to the south, to Corinth . . . the dead of both armies still lie upon the field. Early in the morning, I go to search for my William. I pray I do not find him there."

Impulsively, Laura put a hand on her arm. "He's alive. He'll return to you at the end of the war, and your children's descendants will one day restore Cedar Hill to its former glory. You'll be happy again."

Lucy stared at her, and Laura almost regretted her words. Perhaps she shouldn't have said anything. But Lucy looked so sad . . .

"Thank you," Lucy said then in a whisper, and gave her a swift hug. "For your faith and your kindness."

Then she was gone, slipping out the small door and closing it behind her. Laura heard

the washstand scrape back across the floor to hide the opening. After a moment, she sank down to the foot of the bed, weariness leaching her of energy. She was so tired. If she closed her eyes for just a moment, just a few minutes of sleep

A cramp woke her. She jerked up, groaning. The lamp had burned low, providing feeble light. Rubbing her ankle where a branch had slashed her, she stretched to relieve the cramp in her back. Then she glanced down at the bed and her patient. His eyes gleamed up at her. Instead of a glazed sheen, there was sleepy awareness looking back.

"You're awake," she said softly, and he smiled.

"Yes. And alive."

"You sound surprised." She leaned over to feel his forehead. It was cool to the touch. He lifted a hand to lightly circle her wrist with his fingers.

"Amazed more than surprised. How long . . . have I been like this?"

"This is the fourth day."

"God . . . I wanted to warn Johnston. It's too late."

"Yes. It's too late." She sat on the edge of the bed. Maybe she should wait until he was stronger, but the look in his eyes and his tension told her it'd be better to say it all now. "He's dead, Logan. Mortally wounded on the first day of the battle. Confederate forces have fled toward Corinth in Mississippi."

Logan sucked in a sharp breath. He didn't say anything, then murmured, "They'll make a

stand there.”

“No, by the time Union forces arrive, they’ll all be gone. Listen to me. I know this may sound completely alien to you, but nothing you could have done would make any difference. It’s a . . . a hopeless quest. The ending is already written.”

He looked at her strangely. “Nothing is certain.”

“This is. And though I love the South, believe me, a country divided cannot stand against outside forces. There will come a time when this entire country will have to unite and fight, and if it were not whole, we would not prevail.”

“Laura— why do I feel that you know more than you’ve told me?”

“Because it’s true. I do, but I can’t tell you how I know it. Just— believe. Please.”

“I do believe you. God help me, I do believe you, but you sound almost as if you can tell the future.”

She looked away, and in a moment, he reached up to cup her chin in his palm and turn her face back to him. It was time to leave. She knew it, but dreaded the parting. How could she go the rest of her life without seeing him again? Knowing that he’d lived and died long before? It’d be the hardest thing she’d ever done in her life.

“Laura,” he murmured, “tell me about yourself. I know nothing of you, yet feel as if I’ve known you forever.” His fingers caressed her cheek, slid down the slope of her throat, warm and oh so tender. She closed her eyes, shivering.

“There . . . there’s nothing to tell. My parents

are dead, and I work at the university.”

“You *work* there? Which university?”

“It . . . it doesn’t matter. What really matters is that you’re recovering from your wound. It’s all okay now. You’ll live.”

His hand paused, palm resting against her chest. “Okay? Funny little thing. You speak so strangely at times. Come. Lie beside me.”

Oh no. She couldn’t weaken now. She had to stay strong, or she’d be tempted to stay. It’d never work. She wasn’t cut out to live without modern conveniences. She had her work. She had the Jackson letters . . . Oh God, if she stayed she’d have Logan, but what if it upset the delicate balance of time? This rift in time that had allowed her to come back to rescue him might not last, or if she did something that changed everything, it might well cause a domino effect. How could she take that risk? But how could she leave?

And she didn’t even know yet if she could step back into her own time, didn’t know if the key would work. She wouldn’t know until she tried it, and then it’d be too late.

“Laura?”

Logan was looking at her with a puzzled frown, his vivid blue eyes gleaming slightly in the low light, and she managed a smile.

“I’m just so tired. It’s been difficult these past few days. You need to get your rest. Sleep, my dearest, and when you wake we’ll talk.”

“You won’t leave? The Yankees will be everywhere, and—”

“They’ve already been here. Lucy is quite sensible and managed to convince them she’s

not harboring any fugitives.”

“Damn. I feel so helpless lying up here in the dark. I should be with my troops. Billy’s probably wondering what happened to me—” His gaze darted to her. “Is there word from him?”

“He survived. He’ll survive the war and return to Cedar Hill.” She didn’t add that the house and lands would be lost in Reconstruction when taxes rose too high for them to pay, but said instead, “He and Lucy will be happy, I promise you that.”

A faint smile curved Logan’s mouth. “That’s what I mean. You speak as if you know these things, as if you have a window into the future.”

“Perhaps I do. Rest now or you’re liable to have a relapse.”

“Yes. There’s something . . . important . . . I must tell you,” he said drowsily, and his lashes drifted down over his eyes, exhaustion claiming him. His muscles slowly relaxed, his breathing growing slow and regular.

After a moment, she pulled the edge of the sheet up over his chest, her hand lingering. He felt so familiar, so precious. And she had to leave him to save him. Staying in the past might ruin it all.

How long she sat there watching him sleep, she didn’t know, but finally she rose. It was time. When he woke, she’d be gone.

It was the hardest thing she’d ever done.

Laura frowned. Lamplight played over the open book. No, there should be something in this book to tell her what’d happened to him after the war, something that would tell her his

fate. After all, she'd rescued him, hadn't she? Cedar Hill history should reflect that.

A light tap on the door made her jump. It was probably Sharon checking on her again. Oddly enough, when she'd used the little brass key and stepped back into the bedroom, it was as if only a few minutes had passed. Only Sharon seemed to notice anything amiss.

"Are you all right, Laura?" she asked, pausing in the doorway. "You seem so—upset."

"Just tired," she replied, and smiled. "And excited about the tour tomorrow."

Sharon nodded. "The others are downstairs if you'd like to join us."

"I . . . I'm trying to catch up on my reading. I enjoy it."

"A local history of the Civil War? That's work, girl!" Sharon laughed. "Still intrigued with the Jackson letters, I presume?"

Laura nodded. "Yes. But they seem to stop in May of 1863. I wonder why?"

Sharon looked at her strangely. "I thought you'd read them all?"

"Well, I have. All that I found," she added to explain why she'd only just read these last few letters to Lucy. "After Shiloh, it says he fought under General Pemberton."

"Yes," Sharon said after a moment, "and was besieged with the army in Vicksburg. After being taken prisoner, nothing was ever heard of him again, but that's not especially surprising. I think there's a footnote about it on page two-sixty-four. That prison camp was a hell. Men died agonizing deaths there."

A cold chill went through her. "Perhaps . . . It

seems I missed reading that.”

“Pemberton surrendered his starving army to General Grant the day after the battle of Gettysburg. A terrible time for men on both sides. Captain Jackson’s name was on the roster of Confederate prisoners, but his death was never recorded. Common enough, unfortunately.”

God. She’d condemned Logan to a slow death in a prison camp by saving him from being shot by the scouts! What had she done? Oh dear God . . . what had she done?

She hadn’t realized she’d stood up until Sharon gave her another odd glance, and Laura managed to shrug. “I guess I’m more tired than I thought. It’s late, and we have a long day ahead of us tomorrow.”

“Yes. Well, goodnight. See you at seven in the morning for breakfast.”

“Yes. Yes, that sounds wonderful. Thank you. Goodnight.”

As the door shut behind Sharon, Laura glanced at the small locked door. She had to go back and warn him. But would he listen? He hadn’t last time. And what could she say? That he’d end up dying in a Yankee prison camp? Would that deter him from fighting? He wasn’t the kind of man who’d willingly retreat. Not even in the face of certain death.

She paced back and forth for a moment, uncertain if she should try the key again. What could she say to him, if it even worked a second time? Maybe this was all just a dream, a vivid, too real dream and she’d wake up at home in her own bed in her own apartment.

She looked down at the floor and saw the bandage still on her ankle. The injury she'd received from a tree branch while fleeing the Yankee scouts. It throbbed. No, it'd been no dream. Strange, improbable, but real. And if she delayed too long, Logan might go off to an agonizing death.

Taking a deep breath, she pulled the key from her pocket and went to stand in front of the door. She wore her sweater and jeans instead of Lucy's old gown, but didn't take the time to change. Urgency made her hands shake slightly as she inserted the key into the lock.

The key turned slowly, and she eased open the door. Darkness and cobwebs greeted her like before. Ducking, she slipped inside and let the door close behind her, heart pounding as she waited. Nothing. Only shadows and that closed, musty smell remained. Maybe she just hadn't gone far enough.

A few more steps deeper into the attic space took her to the edge of the bed. She felt the cold iron frame against her outstretched hand.

"Logan?"

No reply. Nothing but dense, dark, silence. Empty and daunting.

The disappointment was crushing. She'd failed. She'd lost him after everything. Tears stung her eyes, and she backed slowly away, coughing a little at the thick dust stirred up by her feet.

Too late, too late . . . He was long dead now, but she'd still failed him.

Her toe caught suddenly on a loose board and she fell forward, flinging out her hands to

catch herself. She landed hard on her hands and knees, but managed to keep a tight hold on the key this time. Coughing violently, she sat up, wheezing.

“So you’re back. Are you hurt?”

Her head jerked around, and in dim light afforded by a lamp, she saw Logan. He sat up in the bed, staring at her with a faint frown. “What are you wearing? Do you intend to disguise yourself as a boy? It won’t work.”

Relief battled with the rising sense of urgency. “You’re— awake.”

“Yes. Where have you been? It’s dangerous to leave here for too long. Yankees will be back just to check for stragglers.”

So he’d woken and missed her. She paused, wondering how to say what she wanted to say, knowing she had to think of something if she wanted to save him.

“How are you feeling?” she asked, rising to her feet and dusting off her jeans.

“Hungry.”

She smiled. That was a good sign of recovery. “Is that all?”

A slow smile curved his mouth. “No. I’m just not sure I’m able to do what I’d like.”

“Logan— will you trust me if I ask something of you?”

He looked at her a moment, then nodded. “How could I not? You risked your life to save me, then stayed when you should have had sense enough to run. I still don’t know how you got me back here without being caught.”

“It wasn’t easy.” She shuddered at the memory of the hours spent hiding until dark.

She'd had to run off the horse just to keep the Yankees from finding them, then had to drag Logan back with her.

"But you did it. Come here, love. Lie beside me a while."

"Come with me instead," she said. "If you trust me, come with me."

"Where?"

She sucked in a deep breath. He'd think she was crazy. She went to him, took his face between her palms and looked deep into his eyes. "There's nothing left in this world for you. I want you to come with me into the future. Our future. Do not doubt me now. Please."

At first he only smiled, then it faded as he looked into her eyes. She held her breath, tense and waiting, knowing if he refused there was nothing she could do. It was asking a lot for him to trust in her, to put his life in her hands.

Finally he said, "Doubt thou the stars are fire; doubt that the sun doth move; doubt truth to be a liar; But never doubt I love . . ."

Shakespeare. Yes. Perhaps it would work after all.

Epilogue

Light hovered just outside the bedroom window, waiting to burst upon the world. Logan turned over in their bed to look at Laura. His wife. Every day was a marvel, a new experience, but the most marvelous of all was that they'd found each other even through the corridors of time. He still didn't quite believe it, still expected to wake up to his former world.

It was much easier now that they'd moved to the country, not so very far from Cedar Hill. This was more familiar, civilization not as encroaching. It was here in this old farmhouse that'd been built when he was a boy that he'd finally finished writing his book. A history that was more fact than fiction, the story of a man caught between two worlds in the conflict of the Civil War. A publisher had already paid a sizable advance for it. No one would ever believe that most of it was drawing on experience more than imagination.

Laura murmured something in her sleep and he smiled. Leaning forward, he pulled aside the light sheet over her, drew it down to gaze at her bare body. The light fragrance of roses teased him and he bent to kiss her. She sighed.

Nuzzling her breast, he drew her nipple into his mouth and sucked gently, and after a few moments, she arched her back like a cat. He

smiled against her soft scented skin and sucked a little harder. She moaned. He turned his attention to her other breast, rolled the tight little bud of her nipple between his tongue and teeth until she shifted restlessly.

“Logan”

“Yes, my love?”

“Um . . . I like that.”

“And this?”

Pushing her legs wide, he slid his hands beneath her hips to lift her, to open her for his touch. Glistening pink folds opened like a flower. He touched the tiny bud at the top of her sex with his tongue, and heard her gasp. Then he took her into his mouth, sucking, tasting her, his tongue dipping into the deep recesses until she bucked wildly. Reaching up, he found her breasts, her taut nipples begging for his touch.

She writhed, panting, saying the words he liked to hear, telling him what she wanted him to do. Arching her hips in open invitation, she slid her fingers into his hair to hold his head still but he flicked his tongue over her until he felt her quiver, poised on the brink of surrender. Then he paused and slid two fingers inside her. She was hot and wet. As he moved his hand back and forth, he raked his thumb across her sensitive clit until she moaned impatiently.

His cock throbbed, yet he waited. Then he bent to blow softly against her, flicking his tongue across the tiny nub in rapid motions. She arched into his mouth, crying out as she reached her climax.

“Yes . . . Oh God, yes!”

Before she'd stopped shuddering, he

straddled her, his cock poised at her wet cleft until she opened her eyes again to smile up at him. Then, slowly, he slid inside her, saw her eyes widen as he filled her inch by inch.

Curving his hands into hers, he drew her arms up over her head and pressed her hands down into the pillows. "Do you like that?" he whispered, and she almost purred.

"You know I do."

"Show me."

He released her hands. Reaching between their bodies, she cradled his balls in her palm, caressing him as he pounded into her, until suddenly it seemed that the sun burst into the windows with blinding light as he buried himself inside her as far as he could. She rocked against him, crying out as they both came together.

Then he held her, and when his heartbeat slowed, he said with a faint laugh, "I think we just made a baby."

Looking up into his eyes, Laura smiled. "And now my world is complete."

"Now *our* world is complete. I love you, Laura Jackson."

"And I love you, my love, my life, my past and my future"

The End