



MIDNIGHT MARAUDER

By

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Chapter One

Monday, May 18, 1863

The stranger in blue appeared out of the magenta Mississippi twilight like an apparition as Evangeline stood looking out the drawing room window. Her heart thudded as the dusty giant loped up the wide marble plantation steps as if the large object he carried was no burden at all. She steeled herself and ran to the vestibule to investigate this new trouble the night was brewing.

"Suh!" Emma, Evangeline's young ward, gave an indignant shout as the entry door was wrenched from her hands by one thrust of a broad shoulder. The man brushed past her without a glance and strode to where Evangeline now stood, chin held high

A Yankee. A damn Yankee, as her brother Jules would have labeled him were he here to shelter her from such intrusions. But Lieutenant Jules Gauthier was not here, nor was anyone else save ten-year-old Emma. They were alone with the Yankee

Of course, it wasn't that Evangeline Gauthier hadn't been expecting the Yankees. The rumble of cannons in the east had jarred her awake early yesterday morning, so she knew the battling was coming closer. She and Emma had dressed and driven the two miles to Vicksburg to attend church as usual, however. Rumors flew that Pemberton had been repulsed at Champion's Hill, so the minister had forgone his usual sermon and instead offered a prayer for the safety of General Pemberton's Confederate troops. He requested that the womenfolk begin to gather lint and bandages for the wounded and be prepared to open their homes and larders as well. Evangeline was certain he hadn't meant them to open them to Union soldiers.

The horrors of war that had shadowed the area for months had finally come to Vicksburg, the fortified city high upon the bluffs overlooking the Mississippi River which was known as the Gibraltar of the Confederacy.

Evangeline and Emma rushed home to gather up the Gauthier plate and other valuables. They left the drawing room, the library, the music room, the ballroom and even the master bedroom bare and plain. They had just finished caching the hoard in a shallow hole in the family plot when the first thud of hooves and creak of wheels were heard passing by the plantation house on the Jackson Road. Soon the trickle of tired and dusty rebel soldiers became a flood, and she and Emma hurried to the edge of the plantation's wide drive to find out

what was happening.

"Where are you going?" Evangeline asked a hollow-eyed corporal flanking a caisson. The man looked pained, and he seemed disinclined to answer her.

"Can anyone tell me what's happened?" Evangeline worriedly pressed the men with him.

Another soldier gave her a surly glance and finally muttered, "We are running."

"Running!" So the rumors were true.

"The Feds have overrun us, ma'am."

"How terrible!"

"An' some think it's all Pem's fault," another soldier interrupted with disgust. "Some think he's more a damn Yank than a rebel the way he runs things. Yesterday we were routed at Champion Hill, today the Big Black. Now all that's left to hold is Vicksburg, God willing." The men trudged on.

More gray-clad soldiers followed, and by nightfall the stream of retreating Confederates degenerated into a panicked flood, all desperate to reach the fortifications of Vicksburg ahead of the advancing wall of Grant's forces.

Yes, she had been expecting the Yankees--but as conquering, burning, looting hordes--not in the form of one huge, unshaven Yankee.

As the uniformed man halted in front of her, Evangeline saw that the burden he carried was another man who was also clad in Union blue.

"Show me to a bed!" the Yankee thundered. Evangeline stood rooted to the spot, startled yet mesmerized by the light-haired man's odd copper-colored eyes. She had sipped several snifters of bourbon throughout the afternoon to fortify herself, but he still loomed huge and menacing, making her feel quite small and vulnerable in spite of her stature.

"Lead me to a bed, or by God, I'll find one of my own choosing. And if it's your own sweet, soft bed, that will be all the better, madam." The Yankee fixed his strange eyes on her, and as the silence grew, their hue darkened to mottled terra-cotta. She was captivated by the maroon flecks that prismatically studded his pupils. Such odd eyes--truly the eyes of a Yankee viper!

The big man gave a shrug, then turned and strode purposefully through the foyer to the wide hall that angled to the right. Evangeline gasped and flew after him, her silk slippers barely whispering over the carpeted floor in the wake of the man's large, black-booted feet.

The Yankee glanced into each open door as he passed, ignoring the ballroom, the library and the cluttered plantation office as he headed directly to the last room in the wing. Curse his blackguard soul! How had he known to go directly to her room?

A mere closed door was no barrier to the man. He burst into the room and strode to the canopied bed where he laid the wounded soldier down. He took no

notice of the delicacy of the embroidered ivory coverlet and the feminine lace-edged pillow slips.

The Yankee's face was grim and dust-streaked, with tiny rivulets of sweat coursing through several day's growth of sandy beard. He looked crude, raw, and dangerous to Evangeline.

"Fetch me a basin of cold water." The order was issued as if Evangeline were chattel to be pushed to and fro at his command.

But Evangeline was tall herself, at 5'8" a full head taller than most Mississippi women, and she was not chattel. The thought of the man's arrogance filled her with anger. Thrusting back her high, proud shoulders, she took a deep breath and said, "Fetch it yourself, Yankee"

The Yankee's powerful body froze mid-movement and his grim look turned deadly.

"Pampered rebel bitch," he swore succinctly, fixing his cold, coppery gaze on her and making her skin crawl. "As much as I appreciate your southern hospitality, I've had about as much of it as I can take. Fetch me a basin of water, or you'll see what happens to women who don't take orders well."

Evangeline shrank inwardly at the threat underscoring his words. He was so plainly used to ordering women about. Thankfully, she was a child of the Deep South, where men treated women with the utmost respect. This rude Yankee could use a lesson in courtesy, and she would be proud to be his tutor.

Removing her right hand from the folds of her gown, she withdrew the British Tranter pistol warming in her fingers. Using both hands to steady the silver-filigreed stock, she pointed the barrel at the Yankee and cocked the lower trigger. The metallic sound echoed dully off the pale yellow walls and ivory curtains.

The Yankee looked surprised for only the briefest moment.

"Out, Yankee! I want you and the other man out of my house. Now!" Evangeline hoped she sounded authoritative enough. She raised the barrel of the revolver until it was trained directly on his heart.

The Yankee hadn't moved, save for a slow, almost imperceptible narrowing of his eyelids. His eyes, instead of showing fear, seemed to be measuring her with a slow, deliberate precision that created a shiver of revulsion up and down her spine. He was a copperhead, ready to strike.

She held her ground steadfastly, trying not to let the tip of the barrel wobble in spite of the trembling of her fingers.

After a few silent moments, he had obviously decided to take another tack. "Ma'am, this man is wounded and unconscious. See the bruise on his head?" He nodded toward the man on the bed, where indeed a nasty purplish bruise rose from the man's left temple. "Would you, a woman who seems to be untouched by the violence of this war, refuse aid to an injured man? Surely your God is more

just than that."

She was not swayed. "I cannot give aid to Yankees, and how the war has affected me is none of your concern," she declared. "Now go, or I will insist on calling my men." To emphasize her words, she cocked the upper trigger as well. He should now be able to see that she knew very well how to deal with the double-action lock of the unusual pistol and realize that she meant business.

Long moments of silence followed. Evangeline was shaken when she realized that the man staring at her had an expression that seemed to border on a smile. Had he no fear of death?

"What is your name, miss?" He queried with what almost sounded like amusement.

How could that be? Had these Yankees no fear of guns?

"Don't underestimate me, sir, for I will shoot. I will give you to the count of five before my finger releases this trigger."

Evangeline could swear the man was laughing at her, even though his lips had never curved upward in the slightest.

She barely had time to stammer 'two' before he broke in. "There are no men on this plantation, ma'am. My advance scouts saw only you and the little dark girl."

Damn his Yankee smugness! What now?

"I can still shoot you," she replied. She wished she had been able to sound a little more threatening.

"I don't think so. If you had bothered to look out the window you would know why I believe I have the upper hand in this situation"

Look out the window? Why? She dared a glance out of the corner of her eye. Nothing seemed amiss.

The Yankee sighed and placed his broad hands on his lean hips. "The window facing the main approach."

"Don't move!" With a wave of the gun, Evangeline sidestepped to the large front windows of the room and looked out. There, swarming like ants over the tree-lined drive and the broad expanse of lawn, was what seemed to be an entire regiment of Yankees: most walking, some riding, all quite at home on Gauthier property.

The sight nearly made her faint. Even if she shot and killed this Yankee, he would soon be replaced by a hundred more.

"Your name, ma'am?" The Yankee crossed the room and held out his hand to take her gun. She gave it up without a struggle, acknowledging the Yankee had the advantage for now. But he didn't need to know the true depth of her fear. She threw back the cascade of black curls that had tumbled over her bosom and gathered her nerve about her.

"Evangeline Gauthier. And yours?"

"You're French?" A sandy eyebrow rose in amused inquiry.

"My grandparents were Acadians. But I am a citizen of the Confederate States of America," she answered proudly.

"Is that Miss Gauthier or Mrs. Gauthier?"

Evangeline thought about asking why it mattered, but she decided the time was not right to antagonize the Yankee any more than she already had. "I am engaged to be married."

"Ah. I see. To a Confederate soldier, no doubt. I'm Wolffmann Ulbricht, Captain, United States Army." The Yankee stuck out a huge hand, but Evangeline ignored it. She didn't clasp hands with Yankees. After a long moment, he let it fall. Turning back to the man on the bed, he ordered over his shoulder, "Now that we have been properly introduced, get me that water. Quickly."

She hurried from the room, shame reddening her cheekbones. How she hated the Yankees--and this one in particular! In mere moments he had reduced her to slave status.

"Emma! I need a bucket of water," she snapped to the small black form that huddled against the hallway wall. "Hurry!"

"Is that man going to hurt us?" Emma's eyes were large and round with fear.

"No, dear, but there are very many of them, and it is very important that we pretend that they are our masters. Bring the water to my bedroom, please."

Evangeline picked up her skirts and ran. The house was large, and the linen closet was adjacent to the servant's quarters in the opposite wing. When she finally reached it, she grabbed a clean sheet and tore it into sections, then headed back to the east wing. She nearly bumped into Emma in the hallway, who was struggling with a full pail of water from the laundry.

"Thank you, Emma. Now you go keep watch from the attic and fetch me right off if anyone else tries to come in." Evangeline turned her toward the vestibule and gave her a pat on her back. She didn't want Emma to be present if the Yankee decided to take advantage of her female vulnerability, as they were rumored to do. The thought made her shudder.

When Evangeline returned, Captain Ulbricht was sprawled wearily in the upholstered occasional chair next to the bed. The chair was dwarfed by the huge, muscular bulk of his body. Although he appeared to be unconcerned, his coppery eyes followed her every movement as she approached.

"I need to get a basin from my dressing room," Evangeline assured him hastily, not wanting to arouse any unwarranted suspicion. The en suite dressing room was convenient, and she had enjoyed having her own self-contained quarters in the busy plantation home before the war. She opened the louvered doors to the small attached room and reached for the basin atop the mirrored dressing table. She couldn't help but see the reflected brightness of her cheeks in the mirror as she halted in front of it. Why couldn't she manage at least a small

degree of composure in the presence of this man?

"You look fine," muttered the Yankee dryly. Evangeline glanced up, horrified to see him watching her in the mirror. "But would you mind tending to your personal toilet later? I've got an injured man here, and no time to wait while you preen."

As if she cared how she looked to a brute such as him! Cheeks now flaming, Evangeline ignored him and stalked to the bed, where she splashed water into the basin from the pail and stepped back.

"Put a cold cloth on his head," directed the Yankee from the chair.

Evangeline bit back a retort. The wounded man's head injury was a bad one, all right, judging from the pallor of his face.

She drew back the golden hair that fell over the man's forehead and placed a folded wet cloth over the bruise. There was something about this man--something about the evenness of his features, the high, wide, Aryan cheekbones and forehead, the large build--why, he was almost the exact mirror image of the man sprawled in her occasional chair! The seated Yankee's hair was a shade lighter, but the resemblance was eerie. She turned to the captain with a silent question.

"My brother Karl." Captain Ulbricht nodded. "You understand now the need to take very good care of him."

"What caused this?"

"Not that it is any of your business, miss, but he was knocked down by a rebel cavalryman on the way from Black River. I think the horse may have kicked him in the head. He also has a small saber gouge under his right arm that needs to be cleaned and dressed."

Reluctantly, Evangeline unbuttoned and removed the man's coat. She lifted his right arm and caught her breath as she saw the smear of blood that surrounded a small, dark, even-edged hole. She dampened a cloth and gingerly began to clean it.

"It needs soap, damnit. Surely an elegant lady like you has soap."

Frustrated, Evangeline crossed to her dressing table and found the expensive French-milled soap she had been hoarding. To have to waste any part of it on a Yankee galled her, but she lathered the cloth and carefully cleaned the wound, then rinsed and dried it. Folding another section of sheet, she tied it over the wound with a long strip of cloth and stood back once again, waiting for the Yankee's dismissal.

"Well done," he growled, eyeing her from under hooded lids. "I see you have some experience in nursing the wounded. Have you been taking good care of your shot-up Johnny Rebs?"

"Our Johnny Rebs have been taking very good care of themselves, until now," Evangeline shot back. "And my nursing experience is none of your

concern."

"So you haven't any nursing experience."

"No," she lied. Actually, she had taken care of her father in his long illness. It was the reason she hadn't been on the marriage market until recently. "Perhaps you would rather a more capable nurse be called in for your brother."

"Perhaps," the Yankee mused, rubbing his whiskered cheek with large, rough fingers. "If there were any more capable women available. You seem to be the only woman around these parts."

Evangeline knew that was true, but she couldn't care about or for Yankees. "No good southern woman would tend your brother unless forced."

The Yankee shrugged. "I'm afraid it'll have to be you." He leaned forward in his chair. "I could use a bath. We've been on the road bedeviling your damned Pemberton for eighteen days."

She gave him an incredulous look. "I'm to heat and carry your water now?"

"Yes. I know such menial work may be foreign to a fine lady such as you, but the days of slavery are over. I think you are the best person for the task," he said insolently.

This would be the perfect time for General Lee and the Confederate Army of Northern Virginia to appear, thought Evangeline to herself. But she had had no word of where Lee was headquartered lately, and he was surely too busy to come to the aid of one lone Confederate woman and a small black child. Perhaps the Yankee would let her go once she had prepared his bath. She hurried to the laundry to fill the large copper kettles and light the kindling under them. When they were hot, she dragged a large copper tub into her bedroom to fill it.

Captain Ulbricht was still in the chair and his eyes were closed. He was not sleeping though, she found as she tried to leave after she had filled the copper.

"Miss Gauthier," the Yankee called her back and waved her confiscated pistol lazily. "I am too tired to move. Take off my uniform and shoes for me. You can't give a man a bath with his clothes on."

Evangeline looked at him aghast. "I cannot bathe you. It's not proper!"

The Captain laughed grimly. "War is not proper, my lady. Don't you know that all rules are suspended during wartime? Now hurry because I am pressed for time."

Evangeline, red with embarrassment, removed his jacket. He emanated a rather unpleasant odor, she thought, nearly gagging as she removed his boots and stockings.

He stood and, to her horror, started to shuck his uniform pants. She averted her eyes quickly and as he sat down in the copper, she hurried toward the door.

Captain Ulbricht cleared his throat. "I haven't given you permission to leave, Miss Gauthier. Since I am a guest in your home, I am sure you will afford me the luxury of washing my back."

Evangeline bit back a scathing retort. It wouldn't do to make this Yankee angry. Who would take care of Emma? Who would see to Darlington Oaks until Jules came back? Reluctantly she sank to her knees and picked up the washing cloth. As she swirled the cloth over his back, she couldn't help noting the smooth way the muscles rippled reflexively under his skin as she touched him. She had never seen such musculature except in the field slaves.

When she finished his back and started to get up, the Captain stopped her. "I am enjoying this too much to allow you to stop, Miss Gauthier," he said, ignoring the look on her face. "I'm in such a state of ennui I would like my entire body bathed, stem to stern."

Did he really expect her to wash even his private male parts? Horrors! But a true Southerner had to be willing to make sacrifices out of loyalty, she reminded herself. This was a very small sacrifice compared to what some Confederate men were giving. She began washing his chest, but soon her eyes were inevitably drawn downward. She couldn't help noticing the Yankee's manhood slumbering in its nest of fine golden fleece. She didn't know the normal proportions of men, but this Yankee was undoubtedly large. She looked up to see the Captain watching her. He had a decided smirk on his face. Bastard! The redness again crept up her cheeks. Never had she used such profanity, even unspoken!

Throwing the cloth into the water and giving the Captain a deadly glare, Evangeline marched from the room. Yankees be damned! He could wash himself!

* * * *

Wolff wiped the tears of laughter from his eyes. Damn! The southern wench was naive! From the awestruck look on her face, she had probably never seen a naked adult male.

He finished his bath and drew on his uniform. He listened to Karl's breathing for a moment, then gently raised one of his eyelids. Karl's pupil contracted with the light as it should. Good. Although he had one hell of a concussion, his brother would probably live.

His mind wandered back to the subject of Miss Gauthier. No man would deny that she was stunningly beautiful. She had a lithe, graceful body, a narrow waist, slim hips, and breasts that would plump right into his hands like a pouter pigeon. And that hair. It could only be described as raven black, long, curly and lustrous with highlights, framing the face of an angel. High cheekbones, eyes of a perfect, natural blue and a smattering of fine freckles over her nose and cheeks made a most pleasing sight for sore, war-weary eyes. Too bad she was such a devout rebel vixen. He wasn't about to fight her tooth and nail to gain the utmost in southern hospitality that only a fine-looking female such as Evangeline Gauthier could give.

Strange that she was alone on this plantation, with only a young black girl for company. How had she managed to keep the place up as well as she had?

Maybe she hadn't been alone that long. Some of these rebel planters had only now joined Pemberton when faced with the destruction of their homes.

He gave the bedroom a second look, noting the feminine appointments, the expensive furniture, and the soft pastel hues of the room. Only a family with a great deal of money would have a home such as this, he knew. In fact, he had never seen a mansion of such monstrous proportions, nor one so elegantly furnished. It made his own modest brick family home in New Ulm seem very humble in comparison.

His stomach rumbled. He hadn't eaten since this morning when his company had been engaged in hot pursuit of the rebels at the Big Black. Where would the kitchen be in such a house? This time he didn't have the telltale eyes of Miss Gauthier to lead him to his destination. He drew on his boots and set out to explore the mansion.

Chapter Two

Evangeline edged the lacy curtains of the parlor aside and surveyed the grounds of her home. So many tents; so many soldiers. How would Darlington Oaks survive such a hostile invasion?

Half an hour ago she had watched the rape of her vegetable garden by a group of soldiers with greedy hands and careless feet. The garden, planted only two short months ago, had barely begun to bear. At least they wouldn't get much, for hearing of Yankee thievery elsewhere, she had hidden what remained of last year's bounty under the floor of the coach house. These Yankees truly deserved to starve for the way they had pillaged and destroyed the beautiful Mississippi countryside.

She closed the curtain, wondering where Captain Ulbricht was. She had tried to avoid him in the hour that had passed since he had forced her to bathe him. The all-seeing Emma had reported glimpsing him in the kitchen and stalking through the servant quarters, an aide at his side.

"He said you mus' be a goddamn rich woman!" Emma giggled.

"Emma!" Evangeline scolded, mortified to hear the language Emma had picked up from the Yankee soldiers. "Mind your tongue! And for heaven's sake, don't tell them that Jules is fighting with General Pemberton. They'll burn the house for certain when they've finished with it."

There was no guarantee that they wouldn't burn it anyway, but she would rather not dwell on things she couldn't change. She leaned wearily against the paneled library wall and closed her eyes for a moment. Her bed was beckoning more strongly with each passing minute. There was nothing more to be done tonight.

Then she remembered that her bed was already occupied by a Yankee, so she would have to sleep in one of the guest rooms on the second floor. But first, she needed to claim her nightwear and clothes for the morrow from her own room. She crept down the east wing hall and listened at the closed door of her former room. Silence met her ears. She knocked, but there was still no response. Bravely, she opened the door.

Karl was still lying unconscious on her canopied bed, his body under the coverlet. She tiptoed over to him and listened, noting the slightly improved rhythm of his respirations.

Suddenly she realized that the muted sound of Karl's breathing was interspersed with louder, slower, breath sounds. Where were they coming from?

She rounded the end of the bed and stopped in her tracks. There, sprawled untidily on a bedroll spread on the Oriental carpet was the large, half-nude body of Captain Wolff Ulbricht. He was sleeping soundly, a gentle rasp emanating from his lips in time to the rise and fall of his broad, bare chest. He was clad in only his snug-fitting woolen trousers.

Good, thought Evangeline, observing the sprawled form. At least she could get her clothes from her closet without bother. She crossed to the standing wardrobe and selected a gown for the morning, then quietly opened the top drawer of the mahogany chiffonier and removed her nightclothes and fresh underpinnings. The drawer squeaked in annoyance as she closed it. She froze, waiting for a sign that the Yankee had heard, but he lay still and unmoving except for the rhythmic rise and fall of his chest. She started to tiptoe around his sprawled length, when, to her horror, a huge hand suddenly snaked out and caught her ankle. She shrieked and tried to dance away.

"Stop! Leave me alone! I only wanted my nightclothes!"

He opened one amused eye. "You come sneaking like an Apache into my bivouac area and expect me to believe that you are only fetching clothes? Come now, Miss Gauthier."

"Let go of my leg," Evangeline demanded. "For what other reason would I be here?"

The Yankee giant was silent for a moment as if he were strongly considering something. "Perhaps you wanted to bathe me again," he drawled.

"Oh! Vous êtes une bête noir!" In a fury, she spat out the worst French phrase she could think of.

He gave no sign that he knew she had called him a black beast, but simply gazed at her through lazily hooded eyes. "Well then, seeing we've taken over your room, perhaps you would like to bed with me."

She kicked at him, nearly upsetting herself, but her ankle remained firmly held in his iron grip. "I can't stand to look at you, let alone bed you, brute!"

The Yankee was undeterred. He sat up, still grasping her ankle. "Where will you sleep, Miss Gauthier?"

"I will no doubt find a place," she retorted angrily. "And I'll sleep with one eye open for roaming Yankees."

"My men have been instructed not to bother Karl's nurse, Miss Gauthier, and I have decided to give you that role regardless of your reluctance. But here, take this just in case." He released her ankle and produced her British Tranter from under his pillow on the floor. He handed it to her, butt first.

"I cannot be Karl's nurse. And what makes you think I won't sneak in here and use it on you?"

He shrugged his bare shoulders, and Evangeline couldn't help again noticing the way his skin slid so smoothly over his hard musculature. "Perhaps you are too

tenderhearted. If you couldn't shoot me earlier, why would you shoot me now?" He began to grin, revealing two rows of white, even teeth. "Besides, I am a light sleeper. Are you?"

"I am now."

He lay back down on his pillow and put his arms under his head, revealing downy blond wisps of hair under his huge, muscular arms. Evangeline stared, mesmerized by the sight of the powerful, rippling muscles of his chest yet repulsed by the possibility that this man could have killed her own brother.

"Good night, Miss Gauthier," Wolff said wearily, dismissing her.

* * * *

Wolff tossed and turned restlessly on his bedroll atop the elegant imported carpet. The carpeted floor was a damn sight softer than what he was used to on the march, but tonight sleep eluded him. It wasn't concern for his men, for they were safely bivouacked on the plantation lawn, stomachs full and clothing dry. And it couldn't be the thought of tomorrow, for his tomorrows had all been equally unpredictable since he had joined the war effort.

It was that damn Southern belle. He knew it just as surely as he knew that General Grant would conquer Vicksburg. She had been in his mind all evening, with her haughty airs and her foolish bravado--but it wasn't her demeanor he was thinking about. It was the soft roundness of her breasts, the long, riotous fall of her jet-black hair, the sway of her hips under her gown, the trim shape of the ankle he had grasped. Hell, he'd seen several women on the road and never thought of them beyond the appraisal and the passing. Why should one black-haired rebel witch cause him to lose sleep? He tossed a while longer, then cursed in frustration and got up and went out into the hallway.

The house was completely dark, for lantern fuel had to be carefully conserved in the embargoed South. By the moonlight slivering in through the windows, he made his way to the grand staircase and put a tentative foot on the first riser.

His left foot followed his right, and before he knew it he was on the second floor landing peering down a long hallway. He edged his way down the unlit hall, trying to feel the aura of each room as he passed. Why did there have to be so many rooms in this godforsaken monstrosity of a house?

He heard the muted squeak of a bedspring to his right. It had to be her, for other than Karl and himself, the house was empty. He had checked it himself before retiring. Soundlessly he pushed open the unlocked door and stood on the threshold a moment to hone his night vision. Then he approached the tester bed in the center of the room, seeking the sight of the warm female body he craved.

There was not just one female body on the bed, but two. One long, slim white body, and, tucked into the downward curve of her arm, one small black body. The haughty Southern belle shared her bed with a slave girl. He shook his

head bemusedly.

His visual acuity sharpened even further, and he could see that her nightgown was of the sheerest cotton, leaving her arms bare and outlining the roundness of her breasts. Her hair was spread over the pillow in wanton invitation, begging him to caress a strand of it between the roughened pads of his fingers. He did so and could only compare its texture to the finest silk.

She moved, and murmured something in her sleep. Was it a lover's name? He straightened, cursing her for failing to realize the sensuality she exuded which aroused such stark desire in him. When she had started to wash his chest it had taken all the inner strength he possessed to will his body not to respond to her deft strokes.

He grinned ruefully, and then, after one last gaze of longing, turned away and tiptoed soundlessly across the carpeted floor.

He stopped short as the unmistakable double click of a Tranter being cocked raised the thin, downy hairs on the nape of his neck. How had she sensed his presence?

Slowly, slowly, Wolff raised his hands even with his shoulders and turned toward the bed. Evangeline was sitting up, her hair in wild disarray about her shoulders, the pistol pointed unerringly at his chest.

"Don't shoot," he exhaled softly. "I was only checking to see that you were all right."

Evangeline could barely make out the shape of his massive chest in the blackness of the room. "Liar. You touched my hair," she accused him flatly.

"You seem to have a penchant for pointing that pistol at me."

"You and all other Yankees who intrude on my privacy," Evangeline hissed. "Now get out!"

Wolff smiled and lowered his hands. "Pardon me if I fail to share your urgency, but the gun's not loaded," he informed her. "I knew I couldn't trust a true rebel like you, so I removed the bullets."

Evangeline shrugged and coldly returned his smile. The man had underestimated her greatly. "Knowing that I could also never trust a Yankee dog like you, I reloaded it." She pointed the pistol at the ceiling and, to prove her point, released the triggers

Out of pure habit, Wolff hit the floor at the sound of the explosion, lying very still and quiet where he landed as the plaster dust sifted around his head.

Bitch! She could have killed him.

Emma began wailing in the darkness, and Evangeline murmured soft sounds of comfort to the child.

Wolff began to feel very foolish in his position on the floor, hoping desperately that none of his men would come running to his aid and see his ridiculous circumstances. There he lay, a battle-wise Yankee captain held at bay

by one slender Southern belle with a shaky hand and one old, oddly designed English pistol.

"I'm getting up now," he informed her, forcing himself to use restraint. He could feel the tension in the air as the pistol was again trained on him.

He slowly rose to his feet and dusted the plaster off his woolen trousers. "Foolish woman," he said softly but contemptuously. "My men would have torn you apart with their bare hands had that bullet hit me."

"I had no intention of shooting you, Captain Ulbricht. But if I had, at least I would have had the satisfaction of sending one Yankee to hell where he belongs. Now leave!"

Wolff didn't feel like arguing with the totally unreasonable female any longer. She would soon enough come to realize, in spite of her feeble struggles, that Captain Wolffmann D. Ulbricht's company, under Colonel John B. Sanborn's Fifth Minnesota regiment, part of General Grant's Army of the Mississippi, was bound to be victorious, not only on this plantation, but in Vicksburg and Atlanta and Richmond and, indeed, throughout the entire rebel South. And if he, Captain Ulbricht, had any luck, he would be there to witness it. Giving her a stiff nod, he turned and strode out of the room.

Chapter Three

Monday, May 18, 1863

"Rough night in the mansion, Captain?"

Wolff opened his eyes to see the grizzled face of Sergeant Otto Hauchstein looking at him with a curious smile. Had he fallen asleep? He'd only meant to rest his eyes for a moment as he sat leaning against a Corinthian column that supported the Darlington Oaks portico, and now the Warren County sunrise was already gilding the hazy sky. The pungent smell of smoke from the smoldering ruins of homes along the outskirts of Vicksburg rode lazily on the still air. Wolff knew it wasn't the Union soldiers who had fired them but the Vicksburg defenders trying to get a clear shot at the invaders.

He stretched his arms and rose stiffly to his feet, cursing his body's refusal to settle in for a decent night's sleep last night.

"Anything from Colonel Sanborn yet?" he asked Sergeant Hauchstein.

"No, Captain. But word from the rear is that he's bivouacked just back the Jackson Road a piece. The 72nd Illinois is mustering just beyond that field, ready to move in, so we should be gettin' our orders real soon. You don't suppose Sanborn would let us dig in here?" he asked hopefully.

"No. We'll be moving in closer. Knowing General Grant and his preference for strong offensive tactics, I would wager we'll be initiating an all-out assault within a short while."

"Damn me if you won't turn out to be right. I could have stayed here a while without complainin', though." He gave Wolff a side-long leer. "The scenery ain't too bad, is it?"

Wolff shrugged. The "scenery" was deceptively beautiful from a safe distance, but up close it was full of brambles and thorns. He had been pricked twice now, and the second prick had almost drawn more than a drop of his Yankee blood.

"I wouldn't mind fightin' a'tall if I had a woman like the lady of this plantation waitin' at home," Sergeant Hauchstein continued. "Did ya ever find out where the man of this place is?"

"I didn't ask."

"Why not?"

"What's the difference? Even if she didn't have a man, she'd just as soon board a nest of rattlesnakes as me and you, Otto. I nearly got my head blown off

just for trying to make sure that she was all right."

"To hell you say! Maybe you should rescind that order about leavin' her and the house to hell alone. We could teach her a few things about being nice to the boys in blue," Otto grinned.

"No, the order stands. I've never held with destruction for destruction's sake, and this situation is no different. Besides, Karl's in there."

"He awake yet?"

"Not yet."

"That boy is going to have the granddaddy of all headaches."

"I'm not sure what to do with him if we have to pull out. With all the fast troop movement, the Sanitary Commission is too far behind to link up with."

"Why not just leave him here?"

Wolff's head jerked up. "What? Leave my brother at the mercy of a female rebel fanatic? Are you half-slewed already this morning?"

"Ain't touched a drop. It was just a suggestion. We can't be totin' him around, you know. He needs rest. I'd hate to see his brains scrambled any more than they already are. Hey, I've got to get the slapjacks and salt junk on the fire. You think about what I've said, Captain." Otto ambled off through the jumble of white tents that littered the once-elegant lawn.

Wolff lingered a moment, leaning on the column. The thought of leaving Karl on the plantation bothered him. He couldn't spare a man to guard him, and who knew what would happen if he left him there alone?

On the other hand, the Gauthier woman did seem to know a little about nursing care and she had been very gentle with Karl as she dressed his wound. If only he could somehow convince her how highly he valued Karl's life and good health.

After all, it was his fault Karl was part of this war. If Karl hadn't wanted to emulate his older brother so badly, Karl would be farming his new quarter section in New Ulm right now instead of lying in a stupor on enemy soil. Before the war, the act of turning over a piece of virgin sod gave Karl as much pleasure as delivering a well-prepared legal argument gave Wolff, and as the older brother, he wanted to assure Karl a future which fulfilled his simple dreams. Karl needed to stay put.

Wolff removed his lop-brimmed Hardee hat and ran a weary hand through his hair. It was time to have a serious talk with the plantation's mistress.

* * * *

Evangeline was in the kitchen removing a skillet of hot johnnycake from the top of the stove when Wolff found her.

He strolled in, sniffing the air appreciatively as if he had never faced her over the wrong end of a pistol last night. He noted that a small table against the wall had been set for two, with serviceable enameled tin plates and cups instead

of the fancy china he expected her to dine on.

"Morning, Miss Gauthier." He nodded sociably. "That cornbread is the best thing I've smelled since I last sat in meine Mutter's Küche in Minnesota. May I join you?"

Evangeline, flushed from the heat of the stove, smoothed a damp, jet-black curl from her cheek. How could he seem so nonchalant, as if complimenting her on her cooking was the most natural thing in the world for him to do?

"I hadn't really planned on company. And I don't speak that language."

The rebel woman was an eyeful, even to a Billy Yank, Wolff admitted to himself. He was so unaccustomed lately to the sight of female beauty, Evangeline Gauthier seemed the rarest of specimens. He drank in the pale yellow gown that clung to her tapering ribcage and flared out at her narrow waist, following its trim lines first down and then upward. Her hair was tied simply at her neck with a matching yellow ribbon and left to undulate in ebony waves down her back, emphasizing her high cheekbones and the slight upward tilt to her blue eyes. In spite of the light film of perspiration that sheened her cheeks, she looked the picture of pastel freshness as if she had just emerged dripping from a soapy, scented bath. She was perfectly composed, too. Unlike himself, she probably hadn't missed a wink of sleep after he'd left her room last night.

"I was referring to my mother's kitchen in Minnesota--pardon me for offending you by so blithely revealing my heritage. Where is the slave girl?"

"The girl's name is Emma, and she's my ward. I sent her to gather eggs. I was hungry for a boiled egg."

"I doubt if there are any eggs, nor any chickens, for that matter. The Union supply line hasn't quite caught up with us yet, so my company has to make do as it can."

Evangeline angrily planted her fists on her hips. "Your Yankees have stolen my chickens? What do you expect Emma and me to eat now that my garden is ruined too?"

Wolff shrugged. "This is war. In contrasting the welfare of hundreds of fighting Union troops against the welfare of one rebel woman and her slave, the troops take precedence. Nothing is sacred when it comes to preserving the Union."

"I'm beginning to see that," Evangeline retorted "And now that you've destroyed my food sources, you expect to sit at my table and empty my cupboards, too."

Wolff slid into one of the wooden chairs and placed a linen napkin on his lap. "Yes, ma'am."

Evangeline slapped the spider of johnnycake down on the table with disgust. It was useless to argue, for how could one argue with a man who had neither morals nor conscience?

"Join me?" Wolff asked politely.

"I don't consort with Yankees."

"I insist."

"I have work to do." Evangeline turned to leave, but was detained by a gentle but firm grip on her wrist.

"I'm afraid I have to insist with a little less subtlety," Wolff said. "Do sit down. I need to discuss something with you."

Evangeline sat, but her appetite was ruined. She couldn't eat a bite with the Yankee watching her every move. His presence unsettled her. It was obvious that he had made use of some of the feminine accoutrements in her dressing room this morning. His face was smooth shaven, revealing a strong, tanned jawline, and his hair had been washed and parted stylishly on the left to fall over his wide brow. The thought of the Yankee running her jeweled comb through his hair made her cringe. She would boil it in lye before she used it again.

Wolff lounged in the chair, his long legs stretched out in front of him. He was the very picture of Yankee indolence.

"My brother is still unconscious," he began. "I don't know how long it will be before he wakes up, not having a doctor's opinion. My company will probably be moving out this morning, so I'm afraid I must leave Karl here under your care for a while."

"Under my care--no, I couldn't! I would never willingly care for a Yankee."

"It's not a question of willingness, Miss Gauthier. I am ordering you. You will provide nursing care for Karl until he is able to care for himself, whenever that may be. And you will do it cheerfully and unselfishly, with unstinting attention to his needs."

"You ask too much of me, Captain Ulbricht," Evangeline cried. "I'll be branded a traitor!"

"No one need ever know."

"But I would know, and I could never live with myself."

Wolff's lips thinned in a grim smile. "It isn't as if the rewards will all be mine. You will have the satisfaction of seeing a yellow hospital flag flown over your door. It may very well save your house from destruction."

"You would hold Darlington Oaks hostage to force my compliance?"

"Without a second thought."

"And if I still refuse?"

Wolff frowned, unhappy that the discussion had to end this way. He sighed loudly and rose to his feet. "Miss Gauthier, I didn't want it to come to this, but what value do you place on your personal safety?"

"I'd rather die than be a traitor to the South." That said, she eyed him warily.

Wolff closed in on her, grasped her wrists with hard, strong hands and pulled her full-length against him. She went rigid in his arms.

"Even if it means this?" His eyes were glittering russet orbs.

Evangeline glared at him with loathing.

Suddenly his hand twisted in her hair, painfully pulling her head back until she thought her neck would snap. She gripped his upper arms in mute protest.

"Now?" His words were softly intoned, terrible in their deception.

She glared at him but remained silent. His body was huge, hard and warm.

Abruptly his mouth smashed against hers with a force beyond passion, and he drank from her lips like a man dying of thirst. He moved tight against her, the heat of his body scorching her through the thin gauze of her summer gown. She struggled to get away, but he held her pinned against his body with shameful ease.

Evangeline managed to free her mouth long enough to spit, "Beast! Yankee brute! You may rape me but I'll never be a traitor!"

Wolff's unexpected passion instantly turned to hard-edged anger. So she was willing to sacrifice her lovely, desirable body on the altar of Confederate loyalty? Damn her. He would refuse her idiotic offering!

But now he was forced to reveal his trump card, one that he had a hunch would sway her but one that he also had considerable distaste for.

"Isn't the ante high enough? Are you so hard and uncaring that you lack any concern for the fate of young Emma? A child?" The thin smile did not reach anywhere near his eyes.

Evangeline gasped in horror. He was indeed a beast, a craven, Godless beast. How cruel to use little Emma as a bargaining piece! To even consider forcing a mere child!

Hot tears spilled over her lower lids and her hands clenched in tight white fists. "All right. I ... I will care for your brother. But you must give me your word to leave Emma strictly alone!"

Wolff was satisfied that it was enough. He found her unused napkin and handed it to her, secretly chagrined at the flow of tears he had caused. He really had no intention of allowing any harm to come to Emma, but Karl needed to be cared for by someone with skill and compassion.

"Now come with me and I will tell you what I know about head wounds," he commanded her. As if she were a child, he took her hand in his and led her down the east wing to her bedroom where Karl's still body awaited.

"You seem to know the basics of nursing, so I won't bore you with the personal aspects of Karl's care. But you must continue the cold compresses and check his pupils every now and then to make sure they contract to light. If they don't, that means his brain is hemorrhaging again. I don't want that to happen, so make sure you keep him very still and quiet, even if he wakes up." He wasn't a

doctor, but his Turner upbringing had emphasized health and fitness, and he was glad for it now.

"What if Karl should wake up? What then?"

"Entertain him." There was an unmistakable twinkle in Captain Ulbricht's eye. "He is easily amused."

Was he trying to say his brother was simple? "How old is Karl?"

"He's twenty-four, two years younger than me, as I said before. I should warn you--you'll have your hands full when he wakes up. Karl has a rather, well, a winning personality, and he doesn't hesitate to use it to his advantage with the ladies."

"It won't work with me. I have a natural immunity to the charms of Yankees," Evangeline retorted. "What should I tell Karl about you? Will you return?"

"Hopefully. Don't let him leave, no matter what, for I want to make sure he's well enough before he jumps back into battle."

The war. Evangeline thought about the fierce tug-of-war for Vicksburg that was to come, for Pemberton would surely not give up without a fight. The prospect of death and destruction so close to home was frightening. As if to punctuate her fear, the loud boom of a nearby cannon made her jump nervously.

"You should be safe enough at this distance, Miss Gauthier, and the yellow hospital flag will protect you from intentional shelling. As for food, the hospital will receive supplies as soon as they're available."

So he was not completely heartless. But a Yank, nevertheless. "Goodbye, Captain Ulbricht." She couldn't wait to be rid of the man.

Wolff chuckled softly. "Goodbye, my little rebel witch. Keep my brother safe." He turned and was gone.

Chapter Four

The Yankees picked up camp and moved on during the course of the day, and Evangeline saw nothing further of Captain Wolff after their encounter in the kitchen.

The day turned into a scorcher, and by dusk Evangeline was a limp bundle of crinoline with a damp crown of flying, frizzy hair. She and Emma sought shelter in the drawing room where they had set up a gauze mosquito screen, starting at the ceiling and filling almost the entire room.

She was glad that there was also netting around the unconscious Yankee's bed. The mosquitoes and other night insects would be relentless in this moist, dank heat, and Captain Ulbricht wouldn't take kindly to finding his brother a mass of oozing, itching welts.

The man named Karl was now safely ensconced in the guest bedroom next to hers in case he should require assistance in the night. What a time of it she and Emma had had trying to transfer him! They'd dragged him at least part of the way on a quilt, and then it had taken all of their combined strength to hoist his large naked body onto the narrow bed. Emma had giggled behind her hand when, at the start of their journey, Evangeline hastily thrust a pillow casing over the man's freely bouncing private parts.

Emma held a large rattan fan which she waved slowly back and forth over both their heads as they lolled on the green-striped Hepplewhite sofa, gazing over the now empty but rutted lawns of Darlington Oaks. The not-too-distant cannons and Parrott guns were quiet for a change this evening, but the sharp crack of Yankee sharpshooters went on interminably, it seemed.

"Think that Yankee wake up soon?" Emma asked.

"I don't know. Sometimes I hope so, just to get it over with, and other times I hope he stays asleep. I'm not sure I'm up to being ordered about by another Yankee yet," Evangeline replied, sighing.

"He sure is a big man. He probably eat a lot of food if he wake up."

"I'm afraid so. We'll just have to do the best we can. Tomorrow I'm going to try to force a little broth down his throat. If we don't replenish his bodily fluids soon he will surely die." His fluid output was certainly dropping, she acknowledged, thinking of the narrow-necked wine decanter she had so strategically placed.

"Hear that?" Emma jerked to attention.

"No. What?" Evangeline hadn't heard anything.

"That whistle!"

"What whistle, for heaven's sake?" Evangeline rose to her feet worriedly.

"I think it's a signal!" Emma ran over to large window that was open to the veranda.

"There he is. Over by that tree!" A black man was hunkered down under the laurel oak, intently watching the house.

Emma gave a low whistle, and the man stood up. "Here in the window," Emma called softly. "What you want?"

"It's Jude. Any Yanks in theah?"

Jude! Jude was Jules Gauthier's personal slave, a former resident of the plantation. Perhaps there was news of her brother!

"Yankees are gone!" exclaimed Emma. "Come on in."

Jude hurried over to the drawing room window, keeping a very low profile. "They's some Confederate officers out here who would like to come in, if you're sure they's no Yanks about."

"There's no Yankees," Evangeline assured him. "They were here but they're gone." The unconscious one didn't count.

"I'm supposed ta wait until dark and let them in the servant entrance," Jude informed her. "Your brother is one of them."

Jules was here! "Is he all right?" asked Evangeline worriedly.

"He fine, but he need to get into Vicksburg real bad."

"Is it dark enough to let them in now? Where are they?"

"They in the stables. Lieutenant Gauthier still has his horse."

Evangeline and Emma arranged to meet Jude and the officers around the back of the plantation house in ten minutes. They waited tensely at the door of the servant quarters.

"Vangie, what you gonna tell Jules about that Yankee?" Emma questioned worriedly.

The same question had also been looming large in her own mind. The best thing would be to say nothing, probably. Jules would be very upset to learn of the big Yankee's command and the penalty for not obeying him. But there was nothing Jules could do about it with the pitifully few men he had with him. If she was very careful, she could keep Karl's sleeping form a secret for the short time Jules would be here. "I don't think we should say anything about the Yankee to Jules. He'll be angry and want to kill him. Then Captain Ulbricht will burn Darlington Oaks." Not to mention what he would do to Emma.

"Oh! I sure don't know nothin' about no Yankee, then." Emma grinned conspiringly.

"That's my sweet girl." Evangeline gave her a quick hug.

The rebel officers were dark shadows dodging from tree to tree on their way from the stables. As they approached the rear entrance, Evangeline could

already smell the sweat of the road that clung to them and see the dusty, bedraggled condition of their clothing

"Vange! You're all right! I was so worried about you!" Jules clasped her warmly in his arms, then stood back to examine her from head to toe. "Jude said Union troops were here earlier. Did they harm you?"

"Only my pride, dear brother." Evangeline gave Jules a peck on the dark-whiskered cheek. "They came last night and left this morning."

"Christ! What's left of the place?"

"They didn't do any damage to the house at all. But they stole my last chickens and plundered the garden."

"The bastards! Thieving from women and children! How do they expect you to get on now?"

"Don't worry, Jules. We'll manage somehow. I hid some things before they came. Not much, but enough to get us by for a while."

Jules smiled. "Didn't I tell you my sister was an enterprising female?" He turned to the men accompanying him. Only one, a dour, reed-thin second lieutenant nodded dolefully. "Speaking of food, Vange," Jules continued, "We're famished. Can you spare anything for us? It's been days since we've eaten decently."

"Of course, Jules. Emma, why don't you fetch some water so these men can wash up in the meantime?"

Evangeline watched Emma lead the group to the servant's quarters to clean up. Jules' tall gray-clad form was a dear, welcome sight, one that she had almost despaired of ever seeing again. Jules was six years her senior, but as the only two living children of Pierre and Phillipa Gauthier, they respected and appreciated each other. No less than five of their siblings lay in the Gauthier family cemetery beyond the coach house, never having lived a week beyond their birth.

Later, as the group sat around the oblong table in the heavily curtained formal dining room, Jules questioned Evangeline about the state of her and Emma's health and living conditions and about what information they might have gleaned from the Yankees' visit.

"Only one officer, a captain, came in the house, and he was very close-mouthed," said Evangeline. "He said they were pulling out and moving closer to Vicksburg today. Oh--and the lines of supply hadn't caught up with them yet."

"That only stands to reason. Van Dorn's troopers burned Grant's supply base at Holly Springs in late December. They put a million and a half dollars worth of food and ammunition to the torch. Grant's been scrambling ever since to reestablish the supply lines."

"Tell me, Jules, are the Yankees winning this fight? The Yankee captain said he had been chasing rebels for days. And thousands of rebel soldiers have passed along the Jackson Road in the last two days. They said they were running

from the feds."

Jules leaned back in his chair and examined his nails, a familiar pose which brought back to Evangeline memories of her father. Pierre Gauthier was also tall, and he was undeniably the source of his son's curly, jet-black hair and amethyst eyes.

Jules deliberated a minute before answering. "I won't say they're winning, but they have got us in a bit of a spot. There's at least 40,000 of them, and only 30,000 of us. They gave us a fist in the eye at Champion Hill Saturday and at Black River yesterday. We were routed so unexpectedly that many of us were caught within the lines, I'm sorry to say. But once we're in Vicksburg we'll be able to regroup and hold them off, Vange. We've got the trenches and breastworks ready to tumble into, and there isn't a Yankee alive who can take that city once it's fortified. Vicksburg is the rock of the Confederacy! I expect the Yankees will have to learn that the hard way, though."

"Miss Gauthier, I've been wondering about the yellow flag flying on the portico," broke in the gangly second lieutenant.

"The Yankee Captain did say something about a yellow flag, but I wasn't paying much attention, I'm afraid," Evangeline lied.

"A yellow flag means that the place is a shelter or treatment area for the sick and wounded. Both sides generally agree not to shell a place designated as such by a yellow flag."

"It certainly won't be a Confederate hospital behind Yankee lines," Jules frowned. "Perhaps they are anticipating many Union casualties in the coming days and are hedging their bets. This would indeed make an ideal spot, far enough from the shelling to be relatively safe yet close enough so that the wounded could be transported quickly. At any rate, the Yankees intend to use this house, and I can't say I want my sister here when they return." He turned toward Evangeline and took her hand. "Vange, I want you to go to Aunt Therese's in New Orleans until this is over. You're in dire peril here."

Evangeline started to protest, but Jules stopped her with a hand on her arm. "I know you can't bear to see anything happen to Darlington Oaks, but when it comes down to a choice between your safety and a mere house that can someday be rebuilt, your safety comes first. I really wish for you to go, Vange. As soon as the sun comes up in the morning."

"But Darlington Oaks is your inheritance, Jules. I couldn't leave it to be shelled or burned!"

"Nonsense. If it's sacrifices God wants us to make for the salvation of the South, then Darlington Oaks will be offered up first."

Evangeline stiffened. "And your second offering?"

"You know the answer to that, little sister."

"No, Jules! I need you!"

"You're a grown woman, Vange. You'll survive. As soon as we chase the Yankees from Vicksburg, you and Quentin Thurston can be married. By the way, I ran into Quentin on the way from Jackson. He sends you his love and seconds my wish for you to go to New Orleans until he can send for you."

"Q-Quentin?" The heir of the neighboring Thurston plantation had been far from her mind lately.

Jules nodded and gave her a wry grin. "You haven't forgotten your engagement, have you? After all my difficulty in wrangling a proposal out of that impossibly dense man?"

Evangeline shook her head, slightly chagrined. She had indeed almost forgotten her promise to wed Quentin as soon as the war was over. How could she forget ruffled, shy Quentin so easily? "Is ... is Quentin in good health?"

"He's a little thin and ragged around the edges from all the hard riding we've been doing, but the last time I saw him, he was fine. I imagine he's safely entrenched in a comfortable Vicksburg home by now. He's attached to Pemberton's headquarters, you know."

"Yes, I remember. Please give him my regards, Jules. You will all be spending the night, won't you?"

"At least half the night, dear sister, and then we have to be up and away before dawn, because sneaking into Vicksburg's back door won't be as easy as sneaking into Darlington Oaks'."

"Let me go prepare the guest rooms. Will you sleep in your own room, Jules?"

"Yes, I have a deep hankering to sleep in it at least one last time before I die. You know--relive old boyhood memories and all that." Jules' eyes crinkled up at the corners, and Evangeline realized with a sigh of relief that he had been teasing her.

Later, quiet had descended over the house and Evangeline was sitting at her dressing table brushing out her hair when she heard a light tap on the door to her room.

"Who is it?"

"Jules. I want to talk to you."

"Come on in. The door's open."

Jules entered and took a seat on her bed. He was so handsome in his gray uniform, with his curly black hair curving gently over his collar. "Vange, I don't remember getting a definite answer from you about going to New Orleans."

"Oh, Jules, I just can't go," Evangeline cried, turning to face him. "I promise to keep myself safe, but don't make me leave you and our home!"

"Do you have any idea what the Union soldiers could do to you? I've heard stories about Yankees that would curl your spine. There is virtually no respect for southern womanhood in the Union ranks."

"Emma and I will hide in the attic."

"And if they put a torch to the place?"

"We'll live in the overseer's house."

"I wish it were that simple. Just go to New Orleans, Vange."

"Oh please, Jules!"

"Vange." He was growing stern.

"Oh, all right," Evangeline sighed heavily. "I'll go, if only to make you happy."

"Vange."

"For heaven's sake! I'll swear on mama's Bible!"

That seemed to satisfy him for the moment.

"Who's sleeping next door, Vange? I saw light coming from under the door."

Good Lord. Did he suspect something? "I put Emma in there, just in case she becomes frightened." She had actually put Emma in there just in case the Yankee woke up and raised a fuss.

"Good. I'll be upstairs. Will you see me off before dawn?"

"Would I miss bidding my dear brother goodbye?"

"Splendid. Good night, Vange." He closed the door softly.

* * * *

"If we ain't goin' to New Orleans, why we pack this stuff?" Emma asked.

"Hush, Emma! I had to promise Jules we would go. But I didn't swear! I can't leave now, especially when Jules is going to fight right here in Vicksburg and might need me," she said, appealing to Emma's logic. "Besides, who would take care of the Yankee so his brother doesn't burn the house?"

Emma nodded sagely, as if Evangeline were the wisest woman in the world.

Emma at her side, she struggled back to her room with the valises she had made Jules carry out on the portico. Luckily, Jules had departed before dawn so he hadn't insisted on seeing them down the road.

"You gonna be in big trouble when Jules finds out."

"I suppose," sighed Evangeline. "It won't be the first time, however. Speaking of that Yankee, when we finish unpacking we better make that Yankee some broth."

"I can do it. I'll bring it to you. He was kind of jumpy last night. He done said some words once even."

"He did?" That was a good sign. "What did he say?"

Emma shrugged. "He say mootee."

"Mootie? Oh, mutti--mama, I suppose. The Ulbrichts seem to be of German origin."

"That big man call for his mama?"

"Well, he's injured and in pain," Evangeline said with a chuckle. "Maybe you would too." As suddenly as she said it, she regretted it. Emma had no parents, for her father and her mother had died of yellow fever when Emma was only three.

"Yeah, sometimes I do wish for my mama, I guess. And I pretty big."

"Yes, you are. You are growing very big, and so very, very helpful and brave," Evangeline reassured her.

When she had replaced her clothing in her wardrobe and chiffonier, Evangeline slipped next door to check on the injured soldier. He had definitely had a restless night, from the careless sprawl of his body and the way the quilt was tangled in his long, bare legs.

Emma came up beside her as she regarded him. "Heah some broth. How he gonna' eat it if he ain't awake?"

"We'll have to spoon it into his mouth. We won't get it all down his throat, but at least some will go down." She tugged the man's body up until his head was lying once again on the pillow, replaced his wine decanter urinal, covered him, and then pulled a chair alongside the bed. The broth was still warm, so she blew on a spoonful before putting it to his lips.

The first spoonful went down the side of his cheek onto the pillow. "Oh!" Emma exclaimed. "He ain't gonna get none."

Evangeline realized that she would have to open his mouth somehow if she wasn't going to waste the whole bowl. Claspng his cheeks on either side of his lips, she pressed firmly until the man's mouth formed a rather ridiculous-looking "O" which made Emma laugh. Most of the next spoonful did go down, in spite of his gagging and his poor swallowing reflex. She dipped the spoon into the bowl again and placed the bowl on the bedside table.

"Don't."

"Hmmm?" Evangeline turned to Emma to see what she had said.

"I didn't say nothin'. He did. He say *don't*."

"He said don't? He talked?" She looked at the still form with disbelief.

Emma shrugged. "I guess he don't like that stuff."

"He needs to have more. That wasn't enough to keep a bed bug alive." She put the spoon to his lips and dribbled it in.

"Don't." This time she saw his lips move herself.

"You don't want any more?"

"No." His head moved slightly on the pillow.

"But you have to have nourishment, sir, or you'll d ... grow ill."

"Later," the man rasped.

"I suppose I could wait a while before giving you more. But only a couple of hours. And then I'll be back." She put the spoon on the table and watched the man for a moment. He still appeared to be sleeping.

"Karl." He gave no indication he had heard her.

Louder. "Karl!" Still no response. He seemed to have slipped back into his dreamlike state. Perhaps this would be the way of it then; waking and sleeping for a time until he regained full consciousness.

Now would be a good time to wash his uniform and dress his saber wound, Evangeline decided. He would probably be wondering where his clothes were, and she wasn't about to let him put on that filthy blue uniform without washing it, damned Yankee or not.

Two hours later, Evangeline entered the bedroom to find Emma perched on the chair next to the bed, watching the Yankee spoon broth into his own mouth.

"He takin' it now," Emma informed her.

"I see!"

"Where am I?" the man asked raspily. Suddenly a nearby howitzer erupted, loudly hurling a load of grape shot into the Vicksburg trenches. The Yankee nearly jumped clear out of the bed. "Are we under fire, for God's sake?"

"You're at Darlington Oaks, a plantation just outside of Vicksburg," Evangeline informed him, placing a calming hand on his shoulder. "Don't worry, you're safe for the moment. The guns are all pointed away from us. Your brother brought you here."

"My brother? Wolff?" His voice was hoarse from lack of use.

"Yes, Captain Ulbricht. He was worried about you and I promised to take care of you. I'm Evangeline Gauthier, and this is Emma. You're Karl, aren't you?" His hard stare was beginning to unnerve her.

Karl glanced down at his bare chest and arms. "Where's my clothes?"

"They're hanging to dry. They were too filthy to wear."

Karl made as if to get up, then sank back onto the bed with a groan.

"Please don't try to get up! Your brother said under no circumstances were you to move until he had a chance to look you over."

"He did, did he? Was he responsible for this headache?"

Evangeline smiled at his attempt at humor in spite of his pain.

"You were attacked by a Confederate cavalryman." She told him what she knew of how he was injured and where his brother was now.

"You're very ... kind, Evangeline," he said haltingly. "You will let me call you Evangeline, won't you? My German tongue sort of stumbles over that French name."

"That's fine, Karl."

"You're a Reb, aren't you?" She thought she detected a hint of amusement in his eyes.

"Yes. I'm a ... Reb. And I don't apologize for it."

"I didn't ask you to," he chuckled huskily. "I suppose you have to be what

you have to be. If there weren't two sides to this argument, there wouldn't be a war."

How simple he made it sound. "I'm going to leave and let you rest now. Emma will stay here with you if you need anything."

"Where will you be?"

"Fixing something to eat, if I can find anything."

"Times are hard, aren't they? Especially when we Yanks come and clean everybody out, right down to the rats."

At least he had a sense of humor about it, Evangeline thought. His brother would have been proud of cleaning out the rebels.

"You rest now. I'll be back with something solid to eat in a while." She pulled the quilt over his chest and closed the mosquito netting around his bed.

"See you soon, Evangeline," Karl said. When the door had closed behind Evangeline and Emma, his lips curled into a grin. "Maybe I'm a lucky man after all," he whispered.

Chapter Five

Tuesday, May 19

By late afternoon, Karl, clad in a too-small duster that once belonged to Jules, was able to sit up in bed and watch Evangeline as she moved about the room straightening and cleaning.

Karl dispensed with tact. "Are you married, Evangeline?"

"No," she glanced over at the bed. "I am engaged to a Confederate soldier though."

"Damme!" Karl chuckled. "Pardon me. Why are all the pretty women taken?"

Evangeline frowned, but it was hard to be curt with an injured man. "As if there were even any possibilities between you and me. And you're very bold for a helpless, wounded man, Karl."

"I can't resist a woman who speaks her mind," Karl said, grinning. "Emma told me that you undressed me and bathed me. Perhaps you find me ... er ... unappealing now that you've seen me naked."

Trust Emma to tell him that "What I found, Karl, was that under your clothes ..."

"Yes?" Karl's grin widened in anticipation.

"Under your clothes you were still a damn Yankee!"

Karl erupted into laughter, which Evangeline quickly tried to shush. "Sh-h-h-h! You're supposed to be kept quiet! Your brother will be furious!"

"My brother? Don't be afraid of Wolff. Wolff's a pussycat when you get to know him. All hiss and no claws."

"I didn't find him amusing. You should know that I'm not caring for you willingly, Karl. I'm quite sure your brother's threats were real."

"Wolff? Just what did he say?"

"He assured me that if I didn't care for you properly he would torch Darlington Oaks and" Should she reveal how the Captain had threatened her? Karl may as well know what the stakes were. "He said he would rape me."

"What!" Karl ejaculated. "Wolff said that? Oh, Evangeline, my dear. Just a ploy, I'm sure. He was probably thinking about how he'd have to face Mutti if something ever happened to me."

Evangeline smiled faintly at the thought of Captain Ulbricht being intimidated by anyone, much less a female. She had to know more.

"This Mutti of yours," she said, perching herself on the edge of Karl's bed, "she must be very important to both of you."

Karl's gaze softened. "To all of us. There are three boys and a girl in my family. Wolff and me, of course, with Wolff being the oldest, and Emil--he's a blacksmith in New Ulm. And last but not least there's pretty little Lore, the youngest. She's married and lives near New Ulm. Just tell me if you don't care to hear all this."

But she did care to hear it, even if they were Yankees. Evangeline envied him his closely-knit family. Her mother had been dead for ten years, her father for almost two. She and Jules were all that was left.

"And your father?"

"Vati died of apoplexy in 1860, two years after we moved to New Ulm from Cincinnati." He saw the sympathy in her eyes and said, "It wasn't so bad as that. At least he realized his dreams before he died."

"And what were his dreams?"

Karl shrugged. "To have a home of his own in a friendly German Turner community, I suppose; to see his children educated and established."

"A Turner community?"

"Ah, I see there are no German communities in the south. Turnerism is a philosophy founded in the motherland that a healthy body and a sound mind go hand in hand. There are other aspects of Turnerism, of course--political ideologies that abhor slavery and support the equality of men and women of all races."

"Oh, I see. Very progressive," Evangeline murmured. How could Karl's brutish brother be a Turner and treat women the way he did?

"I was able to buy my own quarter section in the Minnesota River valley shortly before I left New Ulm, you know," Karl told her proudly. "I'm going to build a house on it when I get back."

"Why did you leave, Karl? I mean, with your own dream about to be realized, why would you join a war over something that has nothing to do with you?"

"I wouldn't say that, Evangeline. My convictions may not be as strongly held as Wolff's, but they're there," he said sincerely. "And someone had to tag along to keep an eye on Wolff," he added with a wink.

Evangeline changed the subject. "Is Captain Ulbricht also a farmer?"

"Wolff? Call him Wolff, liebchen. No, Wolff is a lawyer. He was always the smartest one of us, you know. He entered law school in Ann Arbor, Michigan about a year before we left Cincinnati to move to New Ulm. Opened up an office in New Ulm, then up and left a few months later when President Lincoln made a plea for troops. Left a good job and a good woman behind."

"Captain Ulbricht ... uhh ... Wolff ... left a woman behind?"

"Ja, Annaliese Schmidtke. What a fraulein!"

"This Annaliese," Evangeline said, frowning, "does he order her around as well?"

"Ach, no!" Karl shouted with laughter that faded quickly to a grin because of the sharp ache in his skull. "Ouch. Annaliese is a good German woman. Actually, it is she who leads Wolff and all other men around by the ear."

"How can that be?" whispered Evangeline.

"If you would ever see her, you would know. Annaliese is a tall, very beautiful woman. A virtual Hun, however." Karl's face sobered and darkened. "I shouldn't be telling you this, but Wolff confided something to me that explains why, as a gentleman, he is bound to her."

"What?"

"He took her virginity before he left."

Evangeline gasped in horror. The brute had ravished another woman? "He told you that?"

"Yes, one night when he had a little too much beer he told me all about it," Karl said, his hands clenching into white-knuckled fists. Evangeline saw that Karl did not approve of his brother's actions either. "She offered it, really, according to Wolff. Insisted on it, as a gift from a woman to a man about to go to war. It happened after a dance at the Turner Hall. He took her down to the riverbank."

"Oh, spare me the details, Karl!" Evangeline interrupted. She had no wish to hear about the Yankee's lovemaking prowess. She couldn't imagine anyone wanting to give her body to that man. "What about you? Have you a sweetheart?"

"Several. But none so beautiful as you, Evangeline."

Evangeline couldn't help smiling. "Your brother warned me that you had a way with women."

"Did he now? I'll have to thank him for that," Karl said dryly. "I wonder why he should care?"

"You should rest a while now before supper. Too much excitement is not good for you."

"You'll come back after while?"

"Yes, I will," Evangeline sighed. It was strange, but she found this Yankee to be quite a pleasant distraction.

Evangeline had no sooner left Karl than a loud pounding sounded on the massive front door and Emma came hurtling into the hallway.

"It's more Yankees, Vangie! Thousands of them!"

Evangeline had barely reached the vestibule when a throng of blue-coated men surged through the door.

"What are you doing in my home?" she cried.

A slim, muscular man with dark hair and a heavy mustache detached

himself from the group and approached her. He had a rather haughty air. "I'm Lieutenant John Blodgett, hospital attaché of the Fourth Minnesota Regiment. I'm afraid your home is no longer a personal residence, ma'am. Upon orders of Colonel Sanborn your claim on the property has temporarily been usurped for the establishment of a Union hospital."

"But .. but ..." Evangeline stammered

"Would you look at this place!" One of the men had already entered the drawing room. "Captain Ulbricht said it was a good location, but he didn't mention what a palace it was. No wonder these rebel planters don't want to give up their way of life. They live like royalty."

Evangeline clenched her fists. So it was Captain Ulbricht who was responsible for sending these ruffians here.

"Corporal Helder!" The lieutenant's voice rang out sternly. "There's no time for sightseeing now. We've got wounded to unload."

Several of the men left the house at the lieutenant's command to return carrying stretchers loaded down with human cargo.

"Put them in here," Lt. Blodgett motioned to the broad expanse of the drawing room. "Private Larson, help Romer move that furniture against the wall to make room."

Evangeline stared in dismay at the groaning, bloody men who lay on the stretchers. One, a mere boy with fiery, tangled red hair, clutched what was left of his mangled arm to his chest. He was barely conscious, but he seemed to be interested in her.

"Caroline?" he whispered. "Is that you?"

Evangeline swallowed and nodded mutely. The poor, poor lad!

"They got me, but not before I shot me a Johnny Reb." he whispered conspiratorially, just before his eyes drifted closed. Was he dead?

"Ma'am, if you have water at your disposal, we would appreciate your pointing it out," stated Blodgett. "We could also use some clean rags or other material for bandaging."

In no time a soldier carrying two pails took her by the elbow and escorted her down the steps. She pointed out the cistern, then hurried back into the house before the Yankees could tear it apart.

Emma appeared in the vestibule, her small arms loaded down with clean white sheets. "Where y'all want these, Yankees?" she bellowed. Emma's bravado in the face of this assault on their home was so admirable, thought Evangeline.

A soldier took them from Emma, directed by Lt. Blodgett, who then approached Evangeline again.

"I hope I can trust your sense of humanity to help us? There is much to be done, and too few men to spare to do it. The Sanitary Commission will be here soon to take over the nursing tasks, but we could really use your help right now,

Madam ... Madam"

"Evangeline Gauthier. Miss Evangeline Gauthier," Evangeline corrected him. She had changed her mind about her marital status. She had decided she didn't want these Yankees to think she had a husband off fighting for the South.

Lt. Blodgett stood and appraised her with a noticeable gleam in his eye, as if he took her announcement to be a clear signal of availability.

"I am engaged to be married, however," she added.

"Well," he cleared his throat. "I am very pleased to make your acquaintance." He looked her up and down quite lewdly. "But I suppose we had better be at our tasks. Let me introduce you to Doctor Switzer. You'll be taking orders directly from him."

He led her to a tall, extremely thin man who was bent over a stretcher and introduced her. Dr. Switzer responded properly but hurriedly.

"I'll leave you to the good doctor now, but I certainly hope to enjoy your company later this evening," he added with a sinister smile.

Evangeline gave him her back. Even if he wasn't a Yankee, his greasy, snake-like manner repelled her.

"This thigh needs to be cleaned up before I try to sew it up," said Dr. Switzer. "Miss Gauthier? Are you up to the task?"

"I don't know," Evangeline replied honestly. The thigh was gored as if the patient had stumbled into a bullfighting ring by mistake. Blood oozed from the deeply torn skin, and she could see the layer of thick yellow fat globules underneath. She had never been squeamish, but

"You'll be fine," murmured Switzer. "Better get to it. We need all the help we can get." He moved off to another waiting stretcher.

The man with the torn thigh was only half-conscious. He mumbled a prayer and then he muttered a curse as Evangeline touched a damp rag to his wound. Was mere water sufficient to clean it? She decided to go get a sliver of her soap.

Returning with the soap, she knelt to the man and lathered the cloth she had dampened. Gingerly she washed the rim of the horrible gash. "What happened?" she asked the wounded man. She had to know what horrible weapon of war could make such a wound.

"Bayonet," said the Yankee through clenched teeth. "We tried to storm a rebel parapet and I got a mite too close. Those damn rebels are some fighting sons of ... cusses, don't ever let anyone tell you different."

Evangeline was glad Pemberton's men were at last giving these Yankees what they had coming to them, but at the same time she was saddened to see the results.

* * * *

Through a pair of field glasses, Wolff scanned the irregular crescent shape

of the entrenchments which curved around the city of Vicksburg. The fortifications were so badly engineered in places that an enfilading fire might sweep whole regiments in length, while others, such as the rifle pits bordering the gentle slope of the ridge directly in front him, were nearly impregnable. He handed the field glasses to the major, who examined the lay of the fortifications carefully.

"They have abandoned the advanced line on the left and closed to the right to make their line more complete," Major Welch noted. "I believe we should debouch in force from that gorge at the center front of our position." Major Welch was a cautious man. "The regimental flags show them to be the 26th and the 27th Louisiana. Any experience with them?"

"None," responded Wolff. "Although the 26th does contain the Allen Rifles, a crack volunteer militia outfit, I understand."

"Well, we shall soon test their mettle."

And what fine mettle it was, the Fourth Minnesota soon discovered. At 1:00 p.m. a Union column charged from the cover of thick woods in front of the Confederate fortifications, only to be driven back by stinging fire from both regiments. The men broke and fled for cover, but after a short time were rallied and sent back in greater force. Firing continued until dark, with the loss of several Union men taken prisoner, a stand of colors, and numerous stands of arms. Confederate losses were also heavy, but the rebels stubbornly stood their ground.

* * * *

By nightfall, Wolff was exhausted. He was grimy with sweat and smoke and temporarily deaf from the close discharge of heavy weapons. His company had been ordered to fall back for the night, which they had gladly done.

Wolff inspected the damages and assigned men to repair those portions of the works torn down by enemy batteries during the long day. Rations were distributed, and several men designated for sentry duty. At long last Wolff was able to mount his horse and turn him toward the rear, headed down the Jackson Road.

* * * *

Wolff stood outside the large French veranda doors peering into the room. The dark shape on the bed must be Karl, for this was the room they had settled him in. He picked the lock deftly and approached the bed.

"Evangeline Gauthier," murmured Wolff, taking a deep breath to steady himself. He'd forgotten how utterly beautiful she was when she slept. She had thrown off her embroidered coverlet as if to let the night air cleanse her skin. Her body was spread invitingly, arms thrown out in a welcoming embrace, legs spread slightly so that her gown boldly hugged the outline of her thighs. Inky lashes fringed the violet smudges above her cheeks, and her lips were parted as if waiting for a kiss.

Wolff leaned over and brushed his lips against hers. It was the lightest touch, with only the weight a feather, but it made Evangeline's eyes snap open in alarm. She sat up hurriedly and clutched the coverlet to her chest.

"What is it?" she gasped. "Captain Ulbricht! What are you doing in my bedroom?"

Wolff gave a short, low laugh and sat down on the edge of the bed. "I should ask the same of you. What are you doing in my brother's bedroom? Where is my brother, by the way?"

"This is my bedroom," Evangeline said crossly. "I moved Karl next door."

"He was well enough to move?"

"He is awake and talking," Evangeline responded curtly. "Although I would imagine that right now he is also sleeping, as I was before I was so rudely awakened. I don't think you should interrupt his sleep."

"Fine, fine. I see your house has truly become a hospital."

"Thanks to you. My services have been commandeered as well. I was washing and bandaging wounds until midnight."

"I'm sorry. But as I said, the Union comes first. You have to admit, the place does make a fine hospital with all its accommodations."

"Tell me, did you advise your Lieutenant Blodgett that my services go along with it? Did our agreement mean nothing to you?"

Wolff's eyes narrowed. "What has Lt. Blodgett done?"

"Nothing," Evangeline shrugged with distaste. "But he stares at me as if I'm his next meal."

Anger erupted in Wolff's brain. Damn that Blodgett! If that pretty son of a bitch ever laid a hand on her, he'd propel a bullet neatly through his gray matter. He and Blodgett had tangled before over a young girl at Iuka, Blodgett figuring that the use of southern women was a natural spoil of war. Wolff had grabbed the sobbing young woman out of Blodgett's clutches in the nick of time. Apparently the man hadn't learned his lesson well enough, and Wolff couldn't wait to refresh his memory as soon as the opportunity presented itself. But he couldn't let Evangeline be privy to the internal problems of the Union army.

"I'll take care of Lieutenant Blodgett. Tell me more of how Karl is doing."

"He seems to be none the worse for the wear, other than an occasional sharp pain in his head when he tries to move too fast. He is eating and drinking."

"Is his memory restored?"

"Yes, his memory is very sharp."

"I'm relieved to hear that. You have been spending a lot of time with him, then?"

"Before Blodgett's arrival, an inordinate amount of time, Captain Ulbricht, considering that Karl is a Yankee." Evangeline stifled a yawn. "Are you satisfied

that my care has been sufficient?"

Wolff nodded at her. "Enough for now. I will leave him to your care for a while longer until his headaches are gone."

Evangeline raised a shoulder to shrug again and the unsecured coverlet slid to her waist, revealing the high, rounded shape of her breasts beneath the thin, damp gown. As quickly as it fell she snatched it up again and Wolff knew she had seen the expression of raw hunger on his face.

It was too late, however.

"Don't," muttered Wolff huskily. "Let me look." He stretched out a tentative hand and rested it lightly over her collarbone for a moment, then let it slide inexorably down, down until his palm completely covered her breast.

He could feel Evangeline's body freeze.

"Don't fight me, Evangeline," Wolff groaned, ignoring his inner turmoil "I need this. God, it's been so long since I've been with a woman." He leaned over her, gently but relentlessly forcing her down onto the pillow with the heavy weight of his broad chest. His lips descended to hers.

* * * *

Evangeline tried to lie very still, hoping if she didn't respond Wolff would tire of her. It was hard to ignore lips that were so full and very, very warm, Evangeline realized. They rustled softly against her own lips, moving with a gentle tractability which she found very odd, given the overwhelming strength and power of the man. As before, he seemed to be tasting her, testing the sweetness of her lips with patient restraint.

Evangeline stiffened and tried to stave off the unwelcome feelings that were suddenly rising within her.

The blunt stubble of his chin made her face tingle as Wolff rubbed her cheek, back and forth, back and forth as if he were bewitched by the feel of her skin. Then he turned his attention to her ear and pressed soft kisses in the gentle hollow underneath her lobe. He nuzzled the inner curve with a thorough tenderness, and then, when she had been lured into complacency, his tongue shot hotly and deeply into her ear canal. Her breath caught in her throat, and Evangeline became aware of a tingling awareness in her breasts and in the shadowed triangle of her thighs. Oh, God. Something strangely pleasant had come over her. She couldn't remember ever wanting the Yankee giant to stop.

His palm swept her breast, so featherlight that her nipple rose up and begged for his touch. He obliged, tracing a tiny circuitous route over her small, pink areola with the tips of his fingers. His hand moved to her other breast and ministered to it for a while with the same thrilling delicacy, then she felt him slide downward, leaving a hot trail of kisses across the rise of her breast. His lips touched her nipple, and her hips, of their own volition, arched against him wantonly. How could he make her feel this way when she hated him?

Her breasts were high and full, yet Wolff drew fully half of her right breast into his mouth as he suckled and teased her with his tongue for long, torturous moments. Her hands gripped his shoulders, her nails digging into him fiercely with each delicious tug of sensation.

He returned to her mouth and nuzzled it insistently until she was forced to allow the tip of his tongue between her parted lips. Evangeline had never felt such an erotic sensation as the one that swept over her when his tongue slowly, inexorably, pushed its bold way into the depths of her mouth. Once fully inside, he dueled gently with her tongue and swept the inside of her cheeks, then began a subtle thrusting that grew bolder and faster and harder with each thrust.

When Evangeline couldn't help but moan aloud, Wolff seemed to reach the end of his feeble restraint. He vaulted the barrier of her knee and planted his hips between her parted legs, his manhood a heavy, hard ridge against her soft thigh.

Evangeline recognized the shape of him and realized what was about to happen. She couldn't, absolutely couldn't go through with this, no matter what her traitorous body wanted! To think that she had been about to make love with the Yankee who had shamed and taunted her only a few days ago! A man whose sworn duty was to destroy her homeland and overrun the very city that sheltered her own brother! What had come over her that her body could betray her like this? She wailed aloud, and pressed her palms against the Yankee's chest, trying futilely to dislodge him.

"What the hell?" mumbled Wolff. "You wanted this as much as me."

"Get off! Get off me, you damnable Yankee," Evangeline shrieked. "How could you, you brute?" She began to cry, "Karl! Karl!" at the top of her lungs. With a swift lunge he covered her mouth, nearly smothering her with his broad palm.

"Shut up! Shut up, damn you! What the hell's the matter with you? Why do you have to bring Karl into this?"

Eyes wide with horror, Evangeline tried to speak, but his wide hand prevented it.

"I'll remove my hand when you can discuss this quietly," Wolff gritted. "I don't know what the hell has come over you, but I know you wanted this as much as I did. Tell me, Miss Gauthier, have I suddenly lost my male intuition? Was I wrong in thinking you were enjoying it too?"

Evangeline sniffled, refusing to answer him. He removed his hand.

"Well?" He eyed her intently.

"I am afraid! I've never been with a man before!" Evangeline sobbed.

"A virgin? I could have sworn..."

Evangeline nodded and wiped a tear that was sliding down her cheek.

"Lady, I..."

Fresh tears flowed. "And you promised to leave me alone if I cared for your brother. You are a liar and a monstrous brute!"

Wolff sighed deeply, then took the edge of the coverlet in his hand and dried her cheeks, one after the other. "I don't understand you at all, Evangeline Gauthier. You arouse me like no other woman ever has, and I felt your response. How could I be so wrong? At any rate, it seems I've lost control with you again. I can't blame you for thinking the worst of me."

"Come here, Evangeline," he sighed. As she stared mutely, he placed an arm around her shoulders and drew her close, quelling the shudders that shook her body. "I .. I don't know what to say, Evangeline, except that I'm sorry. I made an assumption I shouldn't have." He ran a hand gently up and down her spine.

Evangeline sniffled in frustration. She was beginning to feel rather foolish under the unexpectedly tender ministrations of the man. He was so confusing--one minute a frightening savage, the next the most loving, tender man on earth. She felt guilty that she had lied about enjoying his touch, and the thought of it was deeply disturbing. Still, he couldn't be trusted. He was a Yankee, and it was well known that by whatever devious means Yankees could they would infiltrate and destroy the enemy.

"Would you please leave my room, Captain Ulbricht?"

Wolff released her with another tired sigh, then ran a heavy hand through his hair.

"If I die on the battlefield tomorrow, Evangeline, please know that I am sorry. I don't want to go to my grave with this on my conscience."

Dearest heaven! Why was he speaking of dying tomorrow? The guilt weighed even heavier on her shoulders. "Just go, please," she said weakly.

Wolff rose from the bed, retrieved his Hardee hat and stood, hat in his hands. "I'll bid you goodbye now, Evangeline Gauthier." He had a sad look on his face.

Evangeline dissolved into tears as he turned and strode toward the French doors and left as silently as he came. What was it about that man that struck such a deep emotional chord in her? Damn him! Damn all Yankees, for that matter!

Chapter Six

Wednesday, May 20

The shelling of Vicksburg continued, the heaviest of it proceeding from the Federal mortar battery which opened at dawn from the far side of the DeSoto Peninsula. On the east side of Sky Parlor Hill, one of Vicksburg's highest hills, Evangeline could see several civilian tents pitched securely away from the crash of Admiral Porter's mortars. Their hoarse roar was frightening, especially when joined by the sharp report of small arms and the shrill scream and explosion of every other variety of deadly missile imaginable.

She had slept little last night. The heat was intolerable, and by morning she was drenched with perspiration and fraught with irksome thoughts, not the least of which concerned Captain Ulbricht's midnight visit. And today, there was still the inescapable stench of blood and the pitiful moans of the suffering in her parlor.

"Evangeline?" Karl poked his sunny head into the kitchen.

"Karl! You shouldn't be out of bed!"

"I heard the commotion and I had to investigate. Looks like I'm not the only patient you have any more." He padded into the room, and Evangeline saw that he wore the old duster she had given him. He was broader in the shoulders than Jules, so he could barely make the ends meet over his chest. Thankfully, he was narrower in the hip than her brother. Under the duster his long, muscular legs and feet were bare and smooth-looking, save for the sparkle of a myriad of tiny golden glints. "I'm sorry, Vangie. I am sure you never expected this."

"You're right, Karl, I didn't. Darlington Oaks is now a sanctuary for wounded Yankees, thanks to your brother," Evangeline responded.

"Smart man." Karl winked. "Where else would one find such a good looking nurse? And Lieutenant Blodgett is part of my regiment. At least you know whom you're dealing with. What's for breakfast?"

"Sow bosom and hardtack." Evangeline sighed. "Sieved beef broth for the wounded. Blodgett has no imagination."

"That's about all we get anywhere," said Karl with a chuckle. "Where did you get the beef?" He sat down at the small table and watched Evangeline at her tasks.

She shrugged. "I suppose Blodgett cashiered it from some hapless southern plantation owner like myself. What will you have, Karl, broth or....."

"Johnnycake," Karl said, giving her another wink. "Emma says you make the best in the world."

She blushed at the compliment. "Well, I suppose I could, since cornmeal is the most plentiful thing around here. I wish you would go back to bed, Karl. You shouldn't risk further injury to your head."

"I'm glad you're worried about me, Vangie. Er, may I call you Vangie like Emma does? It's much less taxing on my brain as well as on my tongue."

"Call me whatever you like. I have a feeling you will anyway. Go back to bed and I'll bring in your johnnycake."

"Can't beat that," said Karl with a grin. "Do you have any sorghum molasses?"

"Very little," Evangeline said. "But you may have what there is of it."

"Thanks. You spoil me. Could it be you do like me the least little bit?"

Evangeline shooed him from the kitchen. Compared to his brother, it was hard not to like Karl, Yankee or not.

As soon as the johnnycake was fully cooked, Evangeline placed several wedges of it on a plate and took it, along with a small pitcher of molasses, into Karl. Karl was sitting up in bed reading a book that Emma had given him.

"I can barely read this book," said Karl with a sigh. "It feels like my eyes are crossed." He lay the book down on the bedside table.

"You've had a serious head injury. It will take quite some time for you to completely return to normal." She pulled a chair up to the bed and handed him the plate. He set it down on his lap, and then, to her surprise, he grasped her fingers and wouldn't let go.

"Thank you, Miss Evangeline Gauthier, for the kind way you have taken care of me." Karl's midnight-blue eyes held genuine appreciation.

She averted her eyes, embarrassed at his effusiveness.

"Vangie--look at me. It takes a special woman to be able to care for the enemy like you have. Wolff must have seen that special quality in you and knew you would help me in spite of my uniform color."

"Wolff? Your brother? The only quality he saw in me was vulnerability."

"Vulnerability? What do you mean?"

"He knew he could force me to do this--that's all. I'm sorry, Karl," she added faintly. "I'm not the woman you think I am. I'm a loyal southerner, for heaven's sake. I wouldn't have agreed to take care of you were it not for ... certain things."

Karl stared at her a moment, until a look of stunned realization suddenly took over his face. "You meant it when you said yesterday that Wolff threatened you, didn't you?"

Tears sprang to Evangeline's eyes and she quickly wiped them away with her sleeve.

"Meine Gute, Vangie--I didn't believe you," Karl apologized. "I thought I knew Wolff better than that."

"He .. he came to my room again last night."

Karl groaned. "Why didn't you call me?"

"I tried to, but he covered my mouth. I couldn't breathe." Tears began to course down her cheeks.

"The foul ... Did he succeed, for God's sake?"

"N-no .. I .." she said between sobs. "He stopped."

Karl became silent and brooding, as if he were considering something distasteful. At length he sighed, and said, "Do you think he'll be back?"

"I don't know. He seemed upset that I tried to call for you, and he--well, he did sort of apologize."

"Apologize! How does one apologize for almost raping a woman? The contemptible bastard. I'd beat the living tar out of him if he were standing here right now. I thought I knew my brother, but apparently the war has changed him more than I realized. I've got to keep you safe from him, plus any of the other potentially misguided Yankees that are in the house. From now on, Vangie, you're sleeping in here," Karl announced.

"What? I can't sleep in the same room with you."

"You can and you will. Don't tell me you are afraid of me too, Vangie."

"No, I'm not afraid of you, Karl. Just afraid of the impropriety of it."

Karl threw back his head and laughed. "I'm not asking you to share my bed, sweetheart. I'm not Wolff, remember? I'll move to the floor. After all, I'm more used to that than a bed, and I feel like I'm getting soft all snuggled up in this cozy mattress."

Evangeline smiled at the thought of Karl snuggling. Like Wolff, his height was imposing, but Karl's shadow threw only light and laughter, not pain. She would sleep much sounder, knowing his big, safe body was nearby.

"Is it agreed, then?" Karl asked softly.

"Yes. Agreed." She wiped the last of her tears from her cheek and smiled bravely at him.

Sleep eluded her for hours, however. She went over and over the bedroom scene with Wolff in her mind. It made her very uncomfortable that he had brought forth such a passionate response in her, one that she hadn't even known existed. She could never again allow Wolff any contact. The man was simply too dangerous.

* * * *

More wounded arrived in horse-drawn ambulances throughout the afternoon, and Evangeline was kept busy running for her fast-dwindling sheets and tending to the men Doctor Switzer had already patched up. The drawing room was now overflowing with stretchers, and the ballroom across the vestibule had

also become a hospital ward. The upstairs bedrooms as well as those in the servant's quarters were all taken by Union soldiers attached to the hospital unit, most of them five and six to a room. The Gauthier house was literally swarming with Yankees. Jules would be angry, Evangeline knew. And angrier yet if he knew she was aiding and abetting them, and even more horrified if he found out she planned on sleeping with a Yankee tonight.

She was spooning broth into the mouth of the man with the badly gashed leg when Lieutenant Blodgett brushed her skirts with his thigh.

"I wish you had the inclination to give me just as much of your undivided attention," he leaned over and whispered in her ear. "I would appreciate it far more than any of these half-groggy unfortunates."

Evangeline colored. How she wished she dared give him a good tongue lashing!

"Blushing? How becoming" His breath was hot on her cheek. "Last night I dreamed of seeing you sitting on your bed wearing nothing but that beautiful blush."

She bit her cheek painfully, trying to hold her tongue in check.

"Where do you sleep, my dear?" She could barely make out his furtively whispered words.

Evangeline could withstand his attentions no longer. "I've already got a sleeping partner, Lieutenant," she bit out. "I'm afraid you've come too late."

Lieutenant Blodgett's surprise quickly turned to anger. "You southern women are all so quick to jump into bed with anyone who comes along. Perhaps when you tire of your sleeping partner? Or when he tires of you?" His mustache twitched.

How she longed to slap his face! She quickly fed her patient the last spoonful and fled the room. She couldn't--wouldn't--listen to his hateful words any longer.

The night was late when Evangeline finally shooed Emma to her pallet in the attic and sought out Karl, who lay in a restful sprawl on his bed.

"Karl, I think we should move into my room. All my clothing and my personal items are in there. I'm too tired to transfer it all tonight, and I don't want any of it tampered with."

"Excellent idea. I'm getting tired of the view from here anyway." He hauled himself to his feet and closed Jules' duster around him as well as he could.

Evangeline hoped that her room was still empty. She didn't relish trying to chase someone out of it.

It was. The bed was still in the same dishabille she had left it in this morning, too tired to even smooth the coverlet. She grabbed her nightshift and closed herself in the dressing room to change. When she emerged, she saw that

Karl had already spread a blanket on the floor and lain down. He was so close to the bed, she had to step over him to climb in it.

Evangeline doused the lantern, then pulled up her coverlet and laid her head down on the pillow, trying to ignore the sight of Karl's smooth, muscled chest as its golden sheen spread apart the too-small duster. She had never seen so much male flesh in all her years!

Her eyelids soon grew heavy with sleep. She managed to stay awake long enough to murmur, "Goodnight, Karl. Thank you for all you've done."

"My pleasure, Vangie," whispered Karl. And truly, it was, he thought to himself. Evangeline was a beautiful, caring woman, no matter what side of the Mason-Dixon Line she lived on.

* * * *

The moon had ripened fully and was shining directly through the French doors of Evangeline's room when Karl awoke with a start. Someone was crying. There, close by, on the bed. Vangie? He leaped to his feet and worriedly leaned over her.

She seemed to be still asleep, yet the whimpering that came from her was hauntingly pathetic. She twisted as if she was in pain, then murmured an unintelligible word. It must be a nightmare, Karl decided.

Unwilling to wake her, for he knew she was exhausted, Karl wrapped his arms around her and lay down beside her, crooning soft words of comfort into her ear. At last she lay still and quiet, and Karl fell asleep holding her.

* * * *

The shadow of the moon had widened only a sliver more when the locked door to Evangeline's room rattled softly.

"Damnit! Locked!" cursed Lieutenant Blodgett under his breath. He knew she was in here, for one of the men had seen her emerging from this room this morning. He wondered if his skill at lock-picking was still as good as it once had been.

He drew a hairpin from his pocket, fiddled for a while, and then smiled with satisfaction as the door gave soundlessly.

He slipped into the room and closed the door behind him, lest someone still be abroad in the hall to see him enter the rebel woman's room. He wanted their meeting to be clandestine, for he knew that Wolff Ulbricht's brother was somewhere in this same house, and he knew through experience Captain Ulbricht's foolish stance on a victor's right to certain spoils of battle.

He reflected back on that night, only hours after the Union victory at Iuka. He had entered one of the houses, looking for warm female flesh to ease his need, for indeed, his intestines had twisted in horror at the first sound of combat. He spied a very young, thin blonde girl huddled under a table. Dragging her out, he slapped her until she stopped struggling, then tore off her childish dress. He

assumed she hadn't known a man before, for she was sobbing in helpless terror. He had never had a very young virgin, and his loins burgeoned at the thought of taking her.

Suddenly the girl was torn from his grasp, and he looked up into the angry visage of Wolff Ulbricht. Ulbricht, greatly superior to him in size and strength and rank, hadn't even given him a chance to explain, but had knocked him off his feet with one blow to the jaw. He woke up to an empty house and a very sore mandible, cursing Ulbricht and vowing revenge. So far, he hadn't achieved it.

As soon as his eyes adjusted to the moonlight, Blodgett gingerly approached the bed. By its outline, it was occupied, and he could hear the sound of rhythmic breathing. He leaned over to get a better look at the woman he had known for so little time yet desired with all of his body.

He jumped back away from the bed with a muffled curse.

The woman hadn't been lying when she claimed to already have a sleeping partner, for she lay wrapped in the embrace of Karl Ulbricht. The slut! But he had no desire to tangle with Karl, for one Ulbricht was the same as the other. Huge, powerful men, utterly formidable in hand-to-hand combat. He'd have to bide his time and wait until there were no Ulbrichts around to protect Ms. Gauthier. Blodgett pulled the door shut softly after he left.

* * * *

At dawn, Karl rose and returned to his blanket on the floor. He himself had no regrets about lying wrapped around Vangie's soft, warm body all night, but Vangie might not see things his way. It was best if she didn't know what had transpired. He pulled his blanket securely around him and went back to sleep.

Chapter Seven

Saturday, May 23

Wolff was exhausted; his eyes red-rimmed from smoke and lack of sleep; his platinum hair dulled by a thick layer of dust. Throughout the night his company--or what was left of it--dug zigzag trenches within two hundred yards of the rebel redan on Jackson Road, giving the rebel defenders an ugly surprise when the sun revealed their nocturnal activity.

But the sun also revealed what the Federals had left behind after yesterday's massive, ill-fated assault: rifles, ammunition boxes, canteens, as well as hundreds of their dead comrades. Some of the men lying between the opposing fortifications were still alive, Wolff could see, and they lay unprotected under the hot sun with the flies swarming over them. One wounded Union soldier, about seventy five yards from the rebel redan, could be seen continually raising and lowering his arm, then his leg, as if trying to keep the circulation flowing in his limbs--or trying to get the attention of his comrades, Wolff thought grimly. To try to drag the wounded man to safety was asking for certain death, though, a fact which was made painfully evident when a scrawny, confused dog had wandered between the lines. A hundred or more rifles went off at the same time from both sides of the line, and the dog had slowly and gracefully bowed, then fell over dead. Anyone foolish enough to succumb to the pitiful cries of "water!" or "help me!" was sure to meet the same fate.

Yesterday had been disastrous for the Union army, Wolff conceded. The assault, scheduled to begin at 10:00 a.m. had been thwarted so thoroughly that it was a disgrace to General Grant's name. Although the Federals had succeeded in planting a few battle flags on the rebel parapets, they had been unable to work their way in any further. By sunset, there were 3,200 Union soldiers wounded, captured or killed, but less than 500 of the stalwart Vicksburg defenders, it was rumored. Grant would have to rethink his strategy, giving much more credence to the claims about the infallibility of the city's defenses.

About 14 of the 150 men in Wolff's company had been wounded, and 6 killed outright. Ambulances were still snaking their way back and forth between Federal lines and the hospitals which had been quickly set up by the Sanitary Commission. He was glad that Ms. Gauthier's plantation was now a bastion of the Sanitary Commission as well. Colonel Sanborn had ordered the wounded of Company D to be taken there before dusk last night. That was beneficial, Wolff

acknowledged, for while he was determining the conditions and dispositions of his wounded men, he could check on Karl's welfare. And--damnit--the rebel wench's.

Why he should give two hoots about Evangeline Gauthier was beyond his understanding. But she was a fever in his blood, and like Grant and the city of Vicksburg, he had a craving to keep at her defenses until he succeeded.

* * * *

Evangeline was in the ballroom administering whiskey to a patient awaiting an amputation when she felt a prickle in the damp, downy hairs at the nape of her neck. Someone was staring at her, and although the feeling made her very uncomfortable, she didn't look up. Whoever it was could just go away. She was tired of being the object of rude Yankee stares.

Doctor Switzer strode up. "Had enough, corporal? Think you can stand it now?"

The gallant corporal nodded faintly, although inwardly he quaked at the thought of the blade of the saw rasping through his bone.

"Too bad the chloroform hasn't arrived yet, but with any luck, your body will take over and shut everything out," Switzer said. "There've been very few men who remained conscious for the whole thing. Damned strange men they were, too," he reflected. "Most of them merely sweated and never let out a peep. Imagine the courage that would take." He turned to Evangeline. "Will you be helping to hold Corporal Brown here down? If you don't think you can do it, you have my permission to leave the room at once."

Evangeline left and fled to her bedroom. She had no wish to witness such a painful, horrid procedure, even if the subject was a Yankee. No one deserved to undergo such an ordeal.

Karl was nowhere to be found, so she poured a basin of cool water and freshened the skin of her face and neck, then removed her ebony hair from the confines of her ribbon and brushed it down her back. She removed her bloody apron and smoothed the pink and white muslin gown beneath it, then stretched out her body on the bed. She felt almost human again.

Although she hadn't planned on sleeping, the stream of wounded last night had left everyone exhausted. She intended to close her eyes for only a moment, but within minutes she was sound asleep.

An hour passed, then two. Evangeline slept dreamlessly until a light tap on the door roused her. She lay there with her eyes shut for a moment, adjusting to her surroundings, but whoever was at the door didn't wait for her summons. Evangeline felt the breeze of a body moving past the bed. Her eyes snapped open.

"Ms. Gauthier." A tall, broad figure stood at the end of her bed, the blond head inclined in polite but chilly greeting. "It seems like we're forever greeting each other across your bed."

Evangeline bolted upright. Captain Ulbricht stood like a live oak at the foot of her bed. He was dusty and road-weary, yet he still managed to look very formidable. Angry at his bold intrusion, she couldn't let it go unchallenged. "Who gave you permission to enter, Captain Ulbricht? A gentleman never enters a woman's bedchamber without being invited." Where was Karl when she needed him so badly?

"It seems you forgot to include me when you issued invitations. Did you merely overlook me?"

Evangeline glared at him. He was huge, sweat-streaked and unshaven, yet standing there with that insolent smile on his face he exuded an unadorned virile charm that started a thumping in her chest. How could her traitorous body still be attracted to the man?

"I haven't issued any invitations to my bed. And if I did, you would be the last man on earth to receive one."

Wolff pulled back the mosquito netting and sat down on the end of the bed. In defense, Evangeline pulled her knees up to her chin and wrapped her arms around them protectively.

It was then that Evangeline saw that Wolff's eyes had grown icy. He seemed very angry at her, and she had no idea why. Hadn't her care of Karl been good enough? She smoothed her skirt over her legs self-consciously.

"Why do you deny having men in your bed?" Wolff demanded. "I have it from Lieutenant Blodgett that you've been sleeping with my brother. You rejected me, only to accept Karl into your bed."

Evangeline darted a look at him, noting how his lips stretched into a thin, grim line. What was he accusing her of? Allowing Karl the liberties she denied him? "It's none of your business, Captain Ulbricht, but I don't sleep with Karl, merely in the same room with him. Karl is my means of protection from men like you."

Wolff gave a short, harsh laugh. "Why do you bother to lie, rebel vixen? What reason has Lieutenant Blodgett to concoct a story about your nightly accommodations? He said he himself saw you lying in Karl's arms a few nights ago."

Evangeline's temper flared. "Karl has never been in the same bed with me! He sleeps on the floor! How dare Lieutenant Blodgett say that? And how would he know?"

"I can't give your denial much credence because I've caught you in lies before. I asked you to take care of my brother, but I didn't expect such all-encompassing, enthusiastic compassion for the man. Tell me, why did you refuse me and then take my brother to your bed? Is there that much difference between us? Some women would say there isn't. I can be every inch the man that Karl is, perhaps more. Allow me the chance to demonstrate."

He was suggesting that she was a whore! "Never!" She gasped out. How she longed to slap him!

Wolff slid up the side of the bed until his hip nudged her waist.

"Evangeline," he said softly. "Look at me. Under my uniform, I'm only a man. A man with the same wants and needs that Karl has. And I can promise you consideration and gentleness. I'm not the brute you insist I am."

Evangeline buried her face in her hands.

He reached out and pulled her palms away from her face, but she averted her eyes.

"Damn you! Is this coy, timid act supposed to deter me? And why would you even want to? I admit I want you with craven desire."

Evangeline held her breath as Wolff's head came nearer. Once again, he had ignored her pleas. She sat dispassionately still. She would not respond to him, no matter how magnetic his pull. She wouldn't.

Wolff kissed her gently at first, his lips touching and forming to hers with an almost tender respectfulness. Evangeline sat there woodenly, refusing to respond, but Wolff ignored her stiffness and pressed on. His lips began teasing and nibbling at hers as if they had all the time in the world to gain a response. It was maddening, thought Evangeline. Why didn't he just kiss her and get this sordid business over with?

Soon though, her lips softened of their own volition as Wolff patiently wooed her with his soft, full lips and tongue. Trills of sensation bloomed in her nerve endings and her traitorous mind focused on obtaining the forbidden pleasure this man was offering.

Wolff began to caress her shoulders and upper arms with smooth, long strokes, as if he was urging her muscles to loosen for him. When they did, he inclined his head to allow the kiss to deepen, and began to gently thrust his tongue into her mouth. Evangeline couldn't help emitting a tiny moan. She grasped his shoulders to bring his chest flat against her breasts.

"God, you arouse me, woman! I am throbbing in anticipation of what is to come when I slip off this gown and whatever fancy garment is beneath it, liebchen," Wolff whispered fervently.

Suddenly the door flew open with a bang and Wolff's head jerked up. The barrel of a pistol was pointed straight at his head.

"Karl." With obvious reluctance, he withdrew from her.

Karl's eyes were midnight blue and deadly calm. He was dressed in his uniform for the first time, and his size and demeanor were very imposing. He gripped the pistol in one large, steady hand, and Evangeline suspected that its aim would be true.

"Weren't you expecting me, brother? In my own bedroom no less?"

Wolff regarded him forthrightly, and Evangeline could not detect a single

trace of fear in spite of his disadvantage. "Haven't we always shared everything between us, brother? I'm sure Ms. Gauthier does not mind."

"I'm not willing to share any woman with you. And unlike you, I have never tried to force a woman. I'm glad that Lieutenant Blodgett let me know where you went. I wouldn't have wanted to miss out on this," Karl spat.

Wolff's eyes narrowed. "You believe I'm forcing Miss Gauthier?"

"Get away from the bed, dear brother, or I'll blast a path through your conniving skull."

Slowly Wolff obeyed Karl, never taking his eyes off him.

"Vangie told me you had tried to rape her, but, knowing my own dear brother so well, I didn't believe her at first. I do now, Wolff."

"She was willing. Ask her."

Evangeline tried to cry out a heated denial, but the words stuck in her throat when Wolff shot her a glance of pure contempt, which Karl didn't miss.

"You don't have to stoop to respond to that, Vangie. Let me get rid of this ugly, low-life bastard, and I'll come back to you."

"Undoubtedly," Wolff muttered under his breath. Karl prodded him sharply with the pistol and herded him into the hall.

They had gone a dozen steps when Wolff said, "It won't do for anyone to see you with a gun on the captain of your company, Karl."

Karl realized that he was right. He would be court-martialed and thrown out of the army if he were caught at what he was doing now.

"I'm willing to let you go, *Captain*," he declared. "But I want you to stay away from Miss Gauthier. You don't deserve the likes of her."

"And you do?" Wolff said mockingly.

"No," said Karl honestly, lowering the pistol and tucking it in his waistband. "But at least I treat her with respect."

"I'm going to demand a little respect from you too, now, Karl," Wolff gritted. "It's apparent to me that you have been able to resume normal activities, including a few rather strenuous physical ones. Your sick leave is over as of 7:00 a.m. tomorrow morning. I want you to report to Company D's rifle pits across from the Third Louisiana's redan on the main Jackson Road."

Karl regarded Wolff with a fierce look. An order from a superior officer was an order, regardless of whether or not that officer was your brother. He had to obey it. "What about Vangie? Who will protect her?"

Wolff sighed. "Evangeline can take care of herself, I'm sure. She's been very resourceful at finding protectors. Perhaps Lieutenant Blodgett will prove very helpful in that regard." He turned to leave, then tossed Karl a curt reminder. "Seven a.m. tomorrow, Karl. Keep the goodbyes short and sweet."

Karl swore succinctly at Wolff's departing back, then returned to the bedroom to check on Evangeline.

"What happened, Vangie?" She was still huddled on the bed, her face blotchy and red as if she had been crying. "What did he do to you, for God's sake? If only I had come sooner!"

"Nothing happened," Evangeline sniffled.

"Thank God! If Lieutenant Blodgett hadn't told me he saw Wolff come in this room, I might not have got here in time."

It seemed to Evangeline that Lieutenant Blodgett had been very busily directing the affairs of the Ulbricht brothers. He had pointed out her whereabouts to Wolff, then pointed out Wolff's whereabouts to Karl. It almost seemed that he had choreographed a certain finale--one that pitted two brothers against each other and ended with him, Blodgett, the winner. Of all the horrors of war, the horror of brother fighting against brother lay the heaviest on Evangeline's heart. And now she, with her exaggerated accusations was the cause of a deep brotherly rift. Could anything be done to mend it?

Chapter Eight

Monday, May 25, 1863

Wolff was relieved when General Pemberton asked for a short armistice so that both sides could bury the dead that littered the no man's land between their fortifications. After three full days in the heat, the bloated carcasses were putrid and swarming with flies. The odors so assailed the noses of the men in the rifle pits that morale was low, especially when one could still now and then hear a whispered cry for help.

When the temporary truce commenced at 6:00 p.m., both Confederate and Union soldiers formed a burial detail to throw a simple bank of dirt over the bodies to cover them. Others thronged the breastworks, calling invitations to the other side to come and chat or play cards, some of which were blithely accepted. Wolff, however, had no wish to parlay with men he fully intended to kill should the opportunity present itself.

He had caught a glimpse of Karl's golden hair tonight as his brother hunkered down bareheaded in a rifle pit, catching up on his sleep during the unexpected hiatus. Karl still hadn't spoken to him since reporting for duty at precisely 7:00 a.m. yesterday morning. It had pained him to do it, but didn't Karl realize that it was all for the best that he had ordered him away from the rebel vixen? After all, it wasn't as if anything could come of an ill-fated alliance between enemies. And Wolff couldn't afford to have even one of his men distracted by lovesickness in the rifle pits, where the slightest wrong move could mean instant death. Karl would just have to come to terms with his order, like it or not.

Suddenly a cry went up from the burial detail which was working about 50 yards from where Wolff stood.

"We got a live one!" a soldier shouted excitedly. "God bless it, he's alive!"

Wolff loped to the spot and inspected the poor creature the men had found. Gott im Himmel! Was the man really alive? It was damn hard to tell from the flies that buzzed at the openings of his nostrils and mouth and huddled at the corners of his eyes. Even worse than the flies, maggots crawled freely amid a huge, gaping hole in his chest. There was no fresh bleeding nor even old blood, for the maggots had done their work well. The man, who had probably been slim to begin with, had lost all the moisture from his body and his skin resembled brittle, waxy paper around his sunken eyes and claw-like hands. Wolff's stomach crawled at the sight.

"Get a stretcher!" he barked. The stretcher appeared in record time, and Wolff accompanied the man as he was carted off to a waiting ambulance behind the lines. Oddly, he felt obligated to see this soldier safely ensconced in a hospital, for the man had endured what no human being was ever meant to endure, even in a godforsaken war such as this one.

Wolff jumped into the horse-drawn ambulance beside the man's stretcher and bounced uncomfortably along the rutted Jackson Road, averting his gaze only when his stomach complained. It was a distance of less than three miles, but it seemed forever before he saw the imposing brick structure of Darlington Oaks.

The ambulance drew up and Wolff alit with a feline leap, shouting commands at the waiting orderlies. He strode up the steps alongside the stretcher to make damn sure his orders were carried out. There was to be nothing but the best treatment available for Private Henry Kerrigan!

* * * *

Evangeline was bent over pen and paper in one of the three spacious hospital tents set up on the front lawn of the plantation, so engrossed in her letter-writing task that she didn't even see the ambulance arrive. Lieutenant Blodgett had sent her to spell Lida Webster, the head Sanitary Commission nurse, so that Lida could go to her room on the second floor and take a nap. Evangeline didn't mind, for the tents were airy and cool compared to the close, sultry air of the house.

"Won't you be telling your mother about your injury, Corporal Kellogg?" The young man had come to the end of his letter and hadn't even mentioned that his right arm had been amputated above the elbow.

"Nah. She'll just cry and fret like she did over Earl."

"Earl? Who is Earl?"

"Earl was my older brother. He was killed at Bull Run. He was a color bearer, you know." His voice was full of pride.

Merciful heavens--to have one son killed and another son grievously wounded. The sacrifices these Yankee mothers made so needlessly.

"Just tell her I'm all right and hope to see her soon. That will do. Oh, and tell her that a purty rebel woman is writing this for me." He grinned.

Evangeline gave him a wry smile. These Yankees were always flirting with her, even the most debilitated of them. "But won't your mother wonder how that can be? She'll think you have been taken prisoner."

"Oh, I never thought of that," Corporal Kellogg mumbled. "Well, just say a purty ..." His eyes widened as they lit on something behind Evangeline. "Captain Ulbricht!" He tried to struggle to his feet.

"At ease, Corporal." The voice was deep, rumbling and familiar. Evangeline swiveled on her stool and looked up at the tall, imposing figure that stood just behind her shoulder. He was dirty and sweat-streaked, his hair so caked

with dust that its normal flaxen color had been dulled to a tawny ash. His eyes were so red-rimmed and bloodshot from lack of sleep that Evangeline almost felt pity for the man.

"Miss Gauthier," he nodded politely. "Still doing your part for the boys in blue, I see."

Evangeline inclined her head but remained seated. He wasn't her senior officer by any means, and she didn't have to sit and take his slurs. "And only you, Captain Ulbricht, can fully understand the motives behind my willingness," she retorted.

"Miss Gauthier is writing a letter to my maw for me," injected Corporal Kellogg. "I can't write no more, see?" He held up his bandaged stump.

"Very kind of her," said Wolff. "I suspect she is more warm hearted than she lets on, Corporal. Why, I hear the men can't say enough nice things about her."

The corporal agreed wholeheartedly. "I don't care if she is a rebel, Captain. She's right nice--and mighty purty," he added, red faced.

"Mighty purty," echoed Wolff. "And real accommodating, too."

Evangeline had had enough of his insinuations. It was time to call him out. "To what do we owe the pleasure of your visit, Captain? Surely you didn't come here just to remark on my appearance."

He grinned broadly. "No, no, although the thought did cross my mind. I accompanied a severely wounded man over in an ambulance. Perhaps you'll have the privilege of caring for Private Kerrigan soon. I warn you, he's not pretty. But anyway, I also have a message for Lida Webster. Lieutenant Blodgett thought she might be in one of the tents."

Lida Webster? What business could he possibly have with her? Lida was the head Sanitary Commission nurse, one of a dozen or so nurses who arrived two days ago to take over care of the wounded. Although nurses were supposed to be plain looking, Lida's flaming red hair, overlarge nose, generous mouth and large, shelf-like bosom made her look far from plain. Evangeline had already learned to dislike her, not only for her haughty attitude, but for her constant subtle jabs at the southern way of life, Evangeline's in particular.

"Lida is napping in her room right now and I'm spelling her. Is there something I could help you with?"

Abruptly she wished she had chosen her words more carefully.

"Not right at the moment, no, but--never mind, Miss Gauthier. Perhaps you could tell Lida that Colonel Sanborn has decided to place Company D on hospital detail to help with cleaning and transporting. One-fifth of the company will be here each day on a five-day rotation, starting tomorrow. If you would, please, tell Lida that I will be here tomorrow to smooth out the details with her."

"I'll pass that on to Lida, Captain," Evangeline didn't try to conceal her

sarcastic tone. "Will your brother also be included in the rotation?"

"Karl?" Why couldn't she forget about Karl? "I'm not sure I can spare Karl." It wasn't true, for the fighting in the trenches had settled into a predictable, humdrum routine. He could spare half his company if necessary.

She should have known Karl wouldn't be allowed to visit her and Emma. "What about you, Captain Ulbricht--will you be rotating through?"

Ah, that was more like it. Perhaps the woman did have some feeling for him after all. "Probably," he conceded. "Just to keep an eye on things. But as much as I'd like to stand here and chat, I have to be going. All units are to be back in the trenches at nine when the truce ends. I do appreciate your concern, Miss Gauthier, and hope it carries through to the next time we meet."

Evangeline felt the lightest touch on her shoulder, so light it could have been the lazy breeze instead of the caress of his fingers, and then he was gone.

* * * *

Half an hour later Lida returned to the tent, and Evangeline gave her the Captain's message.

"Wolff was here?" Her brown eyes contained obvious pleasure. "I'm sorry to have missed him. He is such a fine specimen of northern manhood, wouldn't you say? So large, so incredibly virile," she said, and Evangeline could have sworn that she saw Lida shiver with passion. "You know, Wolff kept me company at Iuka until he was transferred here. I dare say the man would be one of my suitors were I home in Pennsylvania. The war keeps coming between us, however."

"I thought Captain Ulbricht was already engaged," muttered Evangeline.

"Wolff? Engaged? I hardly think so, Miss Gauthier. Wolff would never be so ungentlemanly as to withhold that information from me. He's a very polite and courteous man. Wherever would you get the idea that he was engaged?"

"His brother Karl told me."

"Karl is here too?" Lida said, preening. "And have you had many conversations with Karl?"

"No, I helped to take care of him when he was unconscious with a head injury last week. Captain Ulbricht brought him in."

"How unfortunate. Karl is such a dear man, too. So lively and full of fun. Very manly, too."

Good Lord! Did she dally with both the Ulbricht brothers?

"You may return to the house now, Miss Gauthier. I'll take over here now. By the way, I'd appreciate it if you didn't get too personally involved with the Union troops. It's so bad for morale when they are expecting a loyal Union nurse and get only you instead. Please try to keep contact at a minimum."

"You won't hear any quarrel from me over that, Miss Webster."

Evangeline muttered angrily as she swept from the room. As if she was helping

these men because she wanted to. How she longed to tell Lida about her precious Wolff's threats! Then she'd see just how courteous and gentlemanly he was!

* * * *

It was Friday before Evangeline had contact with either of the Ulbricht brothers again.

She was out in the laundry shed behind the main house, a low, brick outbuilding which had been erected near the cistern for ease in carrying water. Lieutenant Blodgett had recently removed her from direct contact with most of the patients except those who were able to defend themselves, a result of Lida Webster's loudly voiced ridiculous fear that Evangeline might smother the more helpless ones with a pillow. It suited Blodgett's purposes well, for he believed that keeping Evangeline away from all other men made his own suit look more attractive to her.

Mornings she still accompanied Doctor Switzer on his rounds, for he had insisted that she write his orders since her handwriting was the neatest and most legible. For the rest of the day she was banished to the kitchen or the laundry or to any number of menial cleaning tasks. She didn't mind, because she would rather be alone than have to listen to Lida Webster's snide comments.

The laundry shed contained a huge copper, a wash kettle that was built into a brick surround with a fire grate underneath. Evangeline had just placed an armful of bloody sheets to soak in lye and was preparing to fill the kettle when a tall, blond figure ducked through the low doorway.

"Vangie!" The man grasped her around the waist and twirled her around so that her pails clanked together in a merry jingle.

"Karl! What are you doing here?"

"I came to see my favorite rebel captive. Aren't you happy to see me?" His eyes revealed his own obvious delight.

"Yes, truly. I didn't think you would be coming."

"It was a bit of a problem, but Otto--Sergeant Hauchstein--finally convinced my brother that my platoon needed supervision here, too. In fact, since I am supervisor, I've given myself laundry detail today. How's that?" A wide smile creased his handsome cheeks and brightened his dark blue pupils.

He released her waist and stood back to look at her, his appraisal bold and approving. "You look great, Vangie. They must be feeding you, at least. Not overly much, mind you, but enough to keep your body rounded in all the right places."

"Karl! Stop that!" Embarrassed, she turned her back to him and pretended to be absorbed in arranging the small oak chunks on the grate.

He stepped up behind her and wrapped his arms around her just below her breasts so that her back was fitted closely to his chest. His warm breath disturbed the tendrils of hair on her neck.

"M-m-mmm. You smell like clean sheets and soap," Karl murmured. "Vangie, you should never have made me leave without kissing you the other morning. It's all I've thought of since. Even when I'm in the middle of reloading my rifle, I think of how your lips might taste."

Evangeline was a bit surprised at his exuberant boldness, but she wasn't afraid of Karl. She turned around and unclasped his arms from her ribs, which he allowed with obvious reluctance. "Is that supposed to please me?" Evangeline asked him with a smile. "Your thinking of me while you reload to fire at the defenders of my country? You know I don't consort with the enemy, Karl. Not even with you. Besides, I told you I'm engaged."

"That sort of complicates things, doesn't it? But it's not an insurmountable obstacle, Vangie. For one thing, I don't think you're all that serious about this fellow."

"Why would you say that?"

Karl shrugged. "Just a feeling I have."

"There's nothing wrong with Quentin Thurston. He's very handsome, just a little--well, shy."

"There it is, Vangie. Shy. What you really mean is that he hasn't attempted to take any liberties with you, as I have. I'm right, aren't I?" Karl's grin dared her to deny it.

"That's hardly something I would discuss with a prying Yankee soldier," she murmured, lashes fringing her cheeks. Of course, it was true. Quentin seemed at times almost afraid of her. His kisses had been cold, fish-like gyrations that never failed to leave her worried about her desirability.

"You're right. It's none of my business. But I hope you don't think of me as just any old Yankee soldier. I demand a bigger spot in your heart than that."

Evangeline couldn't help laughing at his insistent and outrageous flirting. "I can't fill this copper with conversation, Karl. If I don't finish these sheets this afternoon, Lida will parade my rebel head on a stake."

"Oh, Lida. Pay no attention to her. In all the ways that count, the woman is all air and no substance. Unlike you, my rebel princess."

Evangeline began to remove the dripping sheets from the lye and transferred them to the kettle with a wooden stick. "Strange that you would say that about her, Karl. She seems quite, er-r, substantial. And she has such a high opinion of your manliness."

"Hardly a firsthand opinion, Vangie." Karl chuckled. "Besides, Wolff has staked temporary claim on her, and I have no desire whatsoever to infringe on that one. Here, let me help you with those. In fact, why don't you take a seat over on that overturned washtub and let me entertain you the rest of the day? No one will see us."

Without waiting for her answer he lifted her easily about the waist and set

her on the washtub. "There. The queen of the laundry perches on her throne, surveying her kingdom and her loyal subject." He smoothed her skirts about her and bowed low. "At your service, milady. What do you wish first? A kiss?"

"Karl!" she laughingly protested. "No kisses. Let me help you. I'm not an invalid!"

"I don't want you to be too tired to dance with me tonight. Did I tell you about the fiddlers Lieutenant Blodgett has arranged for tonight in the ballroom?"

"Fiddlers in the ballroom? Tonight?"

"Yes, tonight. We deserve a little music and dancing to take our minds off the war. And I would like to escort you, Miss Evangeline Gauthier."

"It sounds wonderful, but I wouldn't dare attend."

"Why not?" Karl's sandy brows creased in a frown.

"I couldn't. It would be consorting with the enemy."

"Oh, nonsense, Vangie. It would be fun. Just think about waltzing in my arms until the sun shines on us through the skylight."

She shook her head. "No. I'm sorry. Not even for you, Karl."

It was Karl's turn to sigh. "All right. I suppose I can make do with Lida. I hope you're happy that you're throwing me to that man-eating shark," he added primly.

"I'm sure you can hold your own against her. If you really want to, that is," she said with a sly smile.

"It's time to change the subject. I'll go fill these pails if you will point me in the direction of the cistern, your highness."

The afternoon passed quickly in Karl's company. It seemed no time at all before all the sheets were washed, dried and folded, and ready to go back to the linen closet. Before Karl left, he filled the copper again. Although lately she had been limited to sponge baths in her room because of the lack of time, she had an urge to enjoy a full-body bath. With everyone at the dance, her privacy would be assured.

"I'd like to at least see you tonight, Vangie," Karl said in parting. "Where can we meet?"

"I have things to do until at least ten o'clock, Karl. Maybe another night would be better."

"Vangie, I may not be alive another night! All I'm asking is to see you--to talk to you. Please?"

How could she resist him? "Oh, very well. Meet me on the rear terrace at ten. But don't expect more than I can give, Karl." She tried to smile at him.

"I'll settle for anything from you, sweetheart. A crumb. A touch of the hand. A...."

"Sh-hhhh," she whispered and left the laundry shed, only to later ponder at length why she had agreed to a meeting with a charmer like Karl. It could be

asking for trouble.

Chapter Nine

Friday Evening, May 29, 1863

Evangeline could hear the reedy strains of the fiddles from her bedroom, and couldn't resist creeping down the hall to peek through the wide door's side light at the assembled dancers.

There seemed to be a hundred uniformed men in the crowded ballroom, but only a few women. One of the gaily-clad females was Emma, who was obviously enjoying herself. Evangeline had helped her dress earlier in a bright red silk, one that had come from her own closet only last year and had been remade to fit Emma's small frame. It was the very first time Emma had worn hoops, and she was so proud of her grown-up attire that Evangeline didn't regret in the least allowing her to attend the dance. After all, it wasn't as if little Emma was the enemy--she was merely a pawn of the war. She smiled as she saw Emma's tightly corn-rowed head bobbing up and down in the gentle but awkward grasp of one-armed Corporal Kellogg.

Evangeline's gaze swept the length of the ballroom and she noted Karl standing against the wall talking to a non-commissioned officer. He looked very dashing standing there in his freshly washed and pressed frock coat and trousers, with his golden hair newly trimmed. He had obviously been very busy after he left the laundry that afternoon. How she wished she could dance just one waltz with him!

Her gaze traveled on and suddenly landed on Lida Webster. Lida was gowned in pale orange brocade, with a ruffled neckline that barely contained her large bosom, and with hoops so wide she resembled nothing less than a round, faded pumpkin, Evangeline thought sourly. Lida's short form was nearly dwarfed by the large blue-clad frame of the soldier she was dancing with. Wait--was that Wolff? Yes! And what an elegant, polished dancer he was, she acknowledged. He dipped and circled and swirled the roly-poly Lida as if she were light as a feather, as if he were the most lithe, limber man in the world in spite of his size.

Suddenly Evangeline couldn't bear to watch any longer, for her thoughts were transcending her good sense. Why should she care who Wolff danced with, or how wonderfully he danced, for heaven's sake? She herself had whiled away many hours in the arms of handsome southern men on the dance floor. Before the war, that is. Before the Yankees.

She fled back to her room before someone spotted her peeping, and after

reading for a while to pass the time, readied her things for her bath: her hoarded lilac-scented soap, a drying cloth, her nightgown, her robe and her slippers. It would feel so good to slip under the soothing hot water and soak away her troubles.

Clad in her robe and carrying a small lantern, she left her bedroom by the French terrace doors and headed for the laundry outbuilding. The evening was quiet and warm save for the distant sound of fiddles and laughter, and the air was heavy with the scent of honeysuckle and jasmine. It was a lovely evening, one that in another time would have been shared with one's sweetheart by strolling through the bright profusion of summer flowers in the now-neglected gardens.

She started the already-laid fire under the copper and dragged the tin bath into the center of the room. It wouldn't take long at all before the water would start to boil and bubble. Luckily, the only windows in the outbuilding were high under the eaves, so high that only a man of the Yankee President Abe Lincoln's height could peer through them. Besides, everyone was in the ballroom, weren't they? She peered around the room nervously, just the same.

Soon the water was ready and she carried it by the bucketful to the tin bath, filling it nearly half full so that the water would rise to her shoulders. Quickly she removed her robe and slippers, stepped in and sank down wearily. Ah, the ecstasy of it.

She let herself slip down until the water completely covered her head, then soaped her hair and rinsed it until it squeaked cleanly between her fingers. She lathered her entire body a limb at a time, until soon the tub was a mass of suds. Then she perched her toes on the rim, let her arms trail down the sides and lay there, basking in the bliss.

* * * *

Evangeline had filled the copper in the laundry shed and was enjoying the luxury of a thick layer of suds. She sank so far down in the copper that only her toes, shoulders and the tips of her breasts peeked through the soapy water.

When she had finally had enough, she rinsed herself off as best she could, and stepped from the tub. She wrapped herself in the large drying cloth and dried herself leisurely, making sure every crease and hollow of her body was dry. Then she donned her nightgown, robe and slippers, ready for the return trip to the house. She didn't dare spend any more time in the laundry, for she had promised to meet Karl on the terrace soon. She would empty the tin bath tomorrow.

She raced through the laurel oaks as fast as her feet would carry her, her hair flying in long black ribbons behind her head, her bare legs flashing white against the dark of the evening. She felt heady with the pure, dark sensuality of the night and the prospect of her clandestine meeting with Karl.

Back in her room, she dressed in a simple pale-blue day dress, leaving off her corset and hoops, for she didn't plan to be seen in public any more that

evening. She brushed her hair until it hung in damp, heavy waves to her waist, then threw a light shawl around her shoulders to disguise her uncorseted bosom. There. It was nearly ten o' clock. Would Karl be there yet?

The terrace was empty, save for the tiny glow of a cigar not far from the French doors to her room. The man smoking it was large enough, but she'd never known Karl to enjoy a cigar. But then, how well did she really know any of these Yankees?

"Karl?" Evangeline inquired softly. She stepped closer.

"Not Karl," the deep voice rasped. "If you've planned a rendezvous with Karl, I'm afraid that you will be disappointed."

That was unmistakably Wolff's voice. "Where's Karl?"

"Karl was called away, back to the trenches. I don't know why."

"If that's the case, it was probably you that arranged it," Evangeline said hotly, suddenly realizing that she had been set up by Wolff. "I'm surprised that you even let Karl come today."

"I had to, or be made to look like a tyrant in front of my men. But I didn't like it, not one bit, my sweet temptress."

"Why not? Do you think I have designs on your brother? Is that it?"

"I admit I don't like the idea of an alliance between you two," Wolff said. "But I had nothing to do with Karl's departure. Ask Lieutenant Blodgett. He's the one who gave him the message."

"Why aren't you in there dancing with Lida Webster, Captain? You seemed to be having a very good time earlier."

Wolff sighed. "There's enough of Lida to share with everyone. You, however, are only a single serving. And I wouldn't like to share you with anyone--except my very own brother, of course."

"How dare you!" Evangeline was shocked by his frank speech. "I'm not one of the spoils of your war. I'm nobody's *serving*. Not Karl's, not yours!"

"You could be mine," Wolff murmured. "Easily. Come closer, sweetheart, and I'll show you just how easy it would be."

"No."

"If you won't come to me, I'll come to you." He took a step toward her, but she held her ground. No Yankee giant would intimidate her!

All at once there was no more space between them. Evangeline grew dizzy from the proximity of his powerful, menacing body.

"How beautiful you look tonight, Evangeline Gauthier," Wolff whispered, taking a long lock of her hair and smoothing it between his fingers. "I can't resist you. Why do you deny the attraction between us?"

Evangeline stood mute, overwhelmed by the spicy male scent that filled her nostrils, by the nearness of his broad, muscled chest. Why couldn't she move, for heaven's sake? It was dangerous to stand here any longer.

In one fluid motion, Wolff's smoldering cigar was ground beneath his heel and his hands were free. "Come here, rebel wench," he commanded, and swooped to kiss her.

Ah, but his lips were so full, so warm, Evangeline thought to herself. This--this was what she remembered about Wolff. Not his cruelty nor his threats, but this. His kisses.

Wolff raised his head. "I could go on kissing you forever, but tonight I can't settle for just a kiss, my sweet flower. Ever since I watched you in your bath--yes, I was peeping in that high, dusty window--I've wanted to inhale your scent and touch your sleek skin." He buried his face in her hair and inhaled deeply. "Tonight is the night I brand you with my passion forever, Evangeline. You were made for me, and I will possess you, body and soul."

Evangeline's shock at hearing he'd watched her bathe was muted by the warmth of his hands caressing her back, lingering pleasantly on her bare skin beneath the dress.

"You're not wearing laces," Wolff murmured. His hands moved to her waist, then crept up her ribcage toward her uncorseted breasts.

Her murmur of protest was silenced by his tongue, which now swept her mouth in a fierce, pulsating cadence.

"Vange, I'm lost," he rasped. "Help me."

Evangeline tried to shake her head no, but his hands suddenly left her breasts and swept down her sides to her buttocks, and she felt herself pressed so firmly against him that she could plainly feel the outline of his desire. In an instant, she was flooded with an acute sense of longing. God help her, she wanted this Yankee!

"Let's move to your bed, Vange," Wolff muttered huskily. He placed an arm under her strangely rubbery knees and lifted her to his chest, pausing to rub her cheek with his smooth-shaven chin. "Rebel vixen mine, you don't know how much I've wanted this."

Within the space of a heartbeat, Evangeline was lying on her bed, Wolff's heavy, hard body poised atop her. She was lost in the sensual heat of the moment and had no strength to resist.

"Too many clothes, Vange. Lift your arms." With one motion, her dress was a puddle of blue on the floor. She heard his fingers rustling about at the buttons of his frock coat and then his waistband, and within moments his smooth, male skin was cooling her own heated body.

He rose to his knees above her, and she could see he was trembling with desire.

"Never have I been so lost in desire, rebel witch," he gasped. "You've ensnared me."

His hands swept her breasts and her hips, tracing the lush softness of her

body, then moved to the cleft of her thighs. He touched her woman's place with light, searching fingers, and Evangeline was hypnotized by the sensual delight he wrought. She hadn't known such pleasure was possible

"Wolff," she whispered his name.

He began slowly caressing her woman's nub with a circling motion, while his other hand found a taut nipple and stroked it.

"Please ..." Evangeline cried softly, not knowing what it was she wanted.

"Say you want me," Wolff whispered. "Me, Wolff." The heat of his breath in her ear drove her to near wildness.

"'Tis you I want, Wolff," Evangeline whispered. She did want him. It had always been Wolff she desired, she realized.

He wrapped his large hands wrapped around her buttocks immediately, and he raised her hips slightly to accommodate him, then parted her thighs.

"Vange," he murmured hotly. "How I have wanted this."

Evangeline felt his throbbing male member poised at the entrance to her femininity and suddenly shied. He was so large, so demanding. Just how was this to be accomplished?

She tensed as he pressed himself a very short distance into her then stopped, as if gauging her reaction. She felt stretched to the limit and arched her back to try to retreat.

"Honey, I ... relax, sweetheart. It can be done, I promise." His tongue slid seductively into her mouth.

If only it was that easy. Obediently she tried to relax her legs and abdominal muscles, but it seemed as if he were permanently wedged into the entrance, with no room to withdraw nor advance. What now?

He groaned something into her ear, and then, without warning, he pushed into her with a force that created such a sharp, tearing pain that hot tears sprang to Evangeline's eyes. She tried to push him off her, but it was a useless motion. He was staying, melded to her by a pain that blotted out all the wonderful desire she had felt only moments before.

"No!" she cried, but his mouth only swallowed her protest in a deep, demanding kiss. Tears of pain and frustration were nuzzled away by his searching, scorching lips and tongue. His hips were moving, forcing his member ever deeper into her womb.

Suddenly she felt him tense and utter a hoarse, guttural phrase, and she was flooded by a warm liquid. Oh please, let it be over! Please! Whatever had made her think this was so desirable?

Wolff lay atop her, collapsed in a panting heap. He was still for a while, then slowly, he rose on one elbow above her.

"Vange, honey, I ... were you ... I mean ...?"

"Yes! Get off me, you oaf!" She tried to shove him off again.

"Oh, no." He rolled off her and groaned. "I couldn't stop, Vange. I didn't realize you hadn't ever done this before."

"What did you think? That I bed every Yankee that begs me?"

She was angry now.

"But I thought Karl--I see not. Lieutenant Blodgett obviously lied about Karl. You were indeed a virgin, Vange. But I had no power to stop."

"Let me up!"

"But wait, Vange. I ... I don't want you to think that's what it's like for a woman all the time."

"Perhaps it is--with Yankees," Evangeline retorted. "But I have no way of comparing, remember?"

"I can't leave you like this. I won't. When I leave, you're going to know everything that's possible between a man and a woman, even a Yank and a reb. Everything."

"I doubt if anything's possible between you and me, Captain Ulbricht. You've had your pleasure--now leave!" She edged up the headboard until she was sitting upright. Why wouldn't he just go? She was chagrined at her cooperation and she needed to have a good cry. But not in front of this Yankee.

"I had my fun, true, and now it's time for yours. Come here, Vange." He pulled her down beside him and nestled her into the curve of his legs and chest.. His hands wandered idly over her breasts, her stomach, her thighs. Evangeline knew her resistance was once again waning.

"Vange, let me show you," he crooned in a low, raspy tone. "You'll see how beautiful it can be."

Was he telling the truth? Could he really bring her pleasure this time?

"Let yourself go, sweetheart. I am going to please you and make you cry my name again."

Oh, curse his mortal soul! She had no power to refuse him. Evangeline hid her face in his neck and gave herself up to his caresses.

Gently he turned her on her back and kissed her, taking all the time in the world. His lips traced a moist path to her breast, and he suckled it tenderly at first, then with increasing demand. His palm swept down her abdomen to the now-moist refuge between her thighs, and he caressed her there.

"Do you feel the passion, Vange?"

"I--I don't know." Did he mean that throbbing that had begun where he touched her?

He slid the tip of a finger into her moistness, and the throbbing became more insistent, more demanding.

"Touch me," he demanded. "Think of me inside you and imagine that I can only bring you pleasure this time. Vange, please."

Evangeline reached down and touched his hard velvet manhood. She ran

her fingers up his long, strong length, slowly discovering him. Then she heard him groan.

Wolff removed her hand from his manhood and placed it on his chest. "You see, it is nothing to be afraid of, Vange." She realized he was close to losing control.

With long, lithe fingers he played with her, toyed sensuously with her breasts, her ears, her hair, her inner thighs until her senses were rolled into a tiny, tight ball ready to explode. When at last she cried, "Wolff, please!" then, and only then, did he enter her.

Ever so patiently he wrapped his large hands around her buttocks, parted her slim thighs and pressed himself slowly and gently into her narrowness. She gasped, but it was not a gasp of great pain, merely a reaction to the feeling of fullness. When she realized Wolff was holding his breath, thinking he'd hurt her again, she thrust her hips upward to meet him, trying to take him deeper.

But Wolff held himself back, even when she began to grind her hips wantonly against him. When at last he had filled her completely, he slowly withdrew at a maddening pace. Only when Evangeline moaned as sudden ripples of pleasure begin to widen and course through her did he increase his pace and complete the race with a galloping, triumphant finish.

"Wolff!" Evangeline cried out in the thralls of ecstasy. It seemed to spur him on to his own completion, and as the giant waves of pleasure coursed over him he grasped her buttocks tightly as if to bind her to him forever. "Vange, Ich liebe dich!" he cried as he spilled into her.

Evangeline was lost in a world where contentedness reigned supreme. She reveled in the weight of Wolff's body, for it was that big lithe body that had brought her to this exquisite state. Her fingers traced an idle path across his wide back, and she laughed out loud when he shuddered over a ticklish spot.

"Wolff?"

"Yes, liebchen?" he murmured sleepily against her ear.

"You pleased me," she admitted shyly.

"I am most honored, Ms. Evangeline Gauthier," he said, smiling widely.

"But the pleasure was mine."

Evangeline was silent for a while, contemplating the enormity of the act of love. She could never have imagined such extremes of passion and pleasure. Wolff was obviously an expert lover.

"Wolff? Have you made love to many women?"

"Sweetheart--no, not many," he replied. "At least not many compared to some of the men in my unit."

"What was that you said--you know--at the end?"

"Just ... an endearment, Vange. We Germans are a talkative lot."

The answer seemed to satisfy her, for she mentioned it no more.

They lay there quietly, absorbed in their contentment, until at last Wolff raised his great head and sighed. "I've got to go, sweetheart. If I don't show up in my tent, Otto will come looking for me. I don't want to compromise you, either."

She was already compromised, Evangeline thought dismally to herself, but thank heaven no one knew it save the man who had done it. Compromised and fallen. Not to mention the fact that she now realized she cared about this man way too much for comfort. She felt stunned by the overwhelming desire she had for him.

"I'd like to stay and make love to you all night, liebchen, but I can't. At least, not tonight. It's back in the trenches tomorrow, bright and early. At least if I die now, Vange, I'll have had a taste of heaven on earth beforehand." Evangeline could feel his teasing smile against her ear.

"Don't ever say that, Wolff! I ... I can't bear it. Please be safe."

"Can it be you do have some sort of feeling for this crude Yankee?" Wolff teased her.

He rose from the bed and began putting on his uniform, and as soon as he was fully dressed he bent and kissed her, a kiss even more sensual and deep than the ones he had given her in the heat of passion.

"It was beautiful, meine liebe. Take care of yourself."

She smiled brightly at him after furtively brushing off the single tear that slid down her cheek. It was only after he had gone that she remembered Lida Webster and Annaliese Schmidtke and wondered what lovely, romantic words he had uttered to them in parting.

Chapter Ten

Saturday, May 30, 1863

Lieutenant Blodgett was furious. All his carefully laid plans to get himself into Evangeline Gauthier's bed last night had gone awry. The fiddle music, the waltzing, the gay atmosphere--all had been planned with the utmost attention to detail in order to place himself in the most romantic light possible by evening's end. Even the man who had supposedly required Karl Ulbricht's presence in the trenches had been paid to do it in order that Karl's attentions might be drawn away from Evangeline. With Karl removed from the picture, it should have been clear sailing.

Something had gone wrong, however. By the time he realized that Evangeline had no intention of making an appearance in the ballroom, her bedroom door was already closed and locked. Worse yet, he could swear he heard unmistakable sounds of passion from the other side of the door. The jealous anger that raged through him had nearly killed him. Who had dared to cross him? He stalked through the halls of Darlington Oaks, searching every male face for a sign of guilt.

He was descending the grand staircase when he came across Evangeline just as she was tiptoeing up, probably headed for the attic to help her slave girl dress as she did every morning. Her defensive posture and averted gaze angered him.

"Miss Gauthier," he said, reaching out an arm to block her passage. "Where are you going in such a rush this fine morning?"

"I was just going to rouse Emma," she said, fixing him with a distrustful violet eye. He noted the still-tousled condition of her hair and the red patches on her delicate cheeks which looked like whisker burns. Anger coursed through him afresh.

"Did you enjoy yourself last night?" he asked through gritted teeth.

"I-I'm not sure I know what you mean, Lieutenant. I didn't attend the dance." It was an effort to be polite to him.

Blodgett stared at her, a mocking smile curling his lips. "I am referring to your nocturnal activity."

"My ... my bath? I always enjoy my bath."

"Not your bath, damnit. Stop pretending you don't know what I mean. I'm asking who partnered you in your bed last night!"

He must have been listening at the door! Now he would surely think she was a slut, and she couldn't very well deny it, for what she had done with Wolff was definitely not blessed by holy matrimony. But it was none of his business who she was with.

"I ... I don't recall."

"You slept with a man and you don't even remember who it was?" He caught her arm and leaned in close, so close she could see the dark hint of whiskers on his jaw. "If it had been me, you would surely remember it, Evangeline Gauthier. I'd give you a night you would never forget!"

"I would never stoop so low as to allow you into my bed, Blodgett," she retorted, her eyes flashing with anger.

"Ah, but you will, Evangeline. Especially if you want your life to continue on an even keel here. Have you ever heard of what happens to southern women who become Union collaborators? Your people don't take too kindly to them. One word from me to the right person, Evangeline, and your life will never be the same--not now, and especially not after the war, regardless of which side wins. Do you understand what I mean?" He searched her eyes intently.

With dawning horror, she realized that Blodgett would indeed do anything to gain her acquiescence. He would even ruin her life without a second thought. She could do nothing but give in to his demands, detestable as they might be.

"Y-yes. I understand," she murmured, an embarrassed, angry flush rising hotly to stain her cheeks.

"Splendid! I have to travel to Holly Springs for medical supplies tonight, but I will return tomorrow. I will expect your door to be unlocked tomorrow night and your body willing." With that, he released her arm and continued down the stairs.

* * * *

The rest of that day and night passed in a haze. Evangeline was so fraught with confusion that she moved through her duties like an automaton, barely noticing the time or the people around her. She chastised herself for not going to New Orleans to stay with her aunt. She cursed the Yankees. She had always considered herself a strong, intelligent woman, able to take care of herself, but somehow these damn, damn Yankees had gotten a noose around her neck, and if she didn't obey their commands, they tightened it painfully. What was she to do?

Karl. Karl would help her if he only knew. But Blodgett ruled the hospital compound, and by a single command he could rid himself of any problems with Karl. And then there was Wolff. Although Wolff had appeared to greatly enjoy her body, he had given no indication that he would mind if Lieutenant Blodgett also wanted to avail himself of it. After all--isn't that what the rebel women were for?

If only she could take Emma and leave. But the city was now surrounded

by tens of thousands of Union soldiers, and who knew if whatever situation she fell into might not be worse than what she already had? And at least Emma was safe here at Darlington Oaks--so far. She could find no solution. Nothing.

As the night of Lieutenant Blodgett's homecoming drew near, Evangeline's dread grew. He was a cruel, cruel man, and the thought of his hands on her body repelled her as she dressed for bed. Nothing he received from her would be willingly given. She drew on her plainest, oldest nightgown and crept under the coverlet to wait.

* * * *

Although the firing from the rifle pits had ceased for the night, the roar of the mortars continued, making Wolff wish he could somehow be transported to a quiet, grassy meadow near New Ulm. He was restless tonight but he couldn't blame it all on the mortars, for they had been a part of his sleep for almost two weeks now.

No, it was something else. Something vague, something strange. A feeling that if he didn't respond to it, something in his life would change forever. But what was it?

Perhaps something was wrong with Karl. He rose from his cramped position and walked the line of rifle pits, craning his neck to see who each pit contained. No--there was Karl. Sleeping soundly again, something he seemed to do a lot of since his head injury. His heart went out to his brother, for he loved him dearly, even though Karl still avoided him because of that spat over Evangeline Gauthier.

Vange. The thought of her pricked his loins, as if his body went on full-scale alert when reminded of the short but greatly pleasurable time he had spent in her bed. It had been two nights ago, but the delicate scent of her still lingered on his skin, and her kisses were still warm on his neck and face. With chagrin he remembered the flaming desire that had caused him to override her objections, for it was the first time in his life that he had ignored a woman's wishes.

And to find her a virgin. A virgin, for Christ's sake. He had been so sure he was only treading where his brother had gone before, but how wrong he had been! And then he had almost ruined lovemaking for her forever. But he had been able to rectify that. With any luck, she would now go to her future husband with anticipation instead of dread.

Just because he had been the first, it didn't obligate him in any way, especially when he was smack in the middle of a war on enemy soil. Besides, it was impossible. All too soon they would go their separate ways--he to more bloody battlefields and she to a reunion with her family, if there were any left. He had a feeling that the reason she lived alone in the mansion was because her menfolk were part of the Confederate army, perhaps even here in Vicksburg with Pemberton. That would explain her overblown distrust of Yankees and her

resentment at the invasion and use of her home. Hell, he couldn't really blame her. He'd feel the same way.

He wondered what she was doing tonight. Was she sleeping? Alone? Or, now that he had initiated her into the pleasures of sex, was she spiritedly kissing some other man's neck, stroking some other soldier's back? She couldn't be. Vange wasn't like that, for she had been a virgin. It was he--Wolff--that she preferred. He knew it--sensed it from the moment he touched her the first time. His lower body reacted heatedly when he thought of it.

"Otto," he hissed to the man sleeping in the pit in front of him. "Otto! Wake up, for Christ's sake!"

"What the hell...." Sergeant Hauchstein grumbled sleepily. "What the hell is it?"

"I've got to be gone for a while. Take over for me, will you?"

"Good God, man. Where can you be off to this time of night?"

"I'm going to the Jackson Road hospital to check up on that Wisconsin private we found on Monday. Private Kerrigan."

"What! Now? You just checked on him day before yesterday!"

"Yeah. But I can't sleep for worrying about him. See you later, Otto."

Otto dragged himself grumpily out of the pit just in time to see Wolff lope off through the darkness. What the hell was that young man up to now?

* * * *

In spite of her feelings of dread, Evangeline had somehow managed to fall into an exhausted sleep. She awoke with a start when a hand reached out of the darkness to touch her cheek. She started to scream, but the hand quickly clamped down hard on her mouth and she felt a hard body move to cover her own.

The hand on her mouth was released.

"B-Blodgett?" she stammered. Somehow the man felt too heavy to be Blodgett.

"Blodgett!" The growl was deep, rumbling and angry. "Were you expecting Blodgett?"

"Wolff--what are you doing here?" She tried to struggle to a sitting position.

"I came to see you. Through the terrace doors." He held her down.

"W-why?"

"I was thinking about you." His warm mouth began to move against her neck, and she felt the familiar tingle that her body already unerringly associated with Wolff's touch. "I couldn't stay away."

Evangeline could summon no resistance to his advances. It was uncanny the hold this big Yankee had over her body.

"But aren't you supposed to be in the redans?"

"Yes." His palm slid to her breast and circled the nipple gently while his

lips moved to stop her questioning.

He kissed her deeply, demandingly, and found that her mouth welcomed his with tiny, delicate murmurs of joy. He probed her with his tongue until he knew all the sweet secrets of her lips, then moved to take a thrusting nipple deep into his mouth and suckled it hungrily. Her abrupt moan of pleasure was nearly his undoing.

Unable to stand the wait any longer, he lifted his upper body to look down into her violet eyes. His question was unspoken, as was her response, but Wolff knew by the flutter of her lashes and the quickening of her breath that he was welcome and wanted in her arms.

He had just rolled to the side of the canopied bed and was standing to remove his uniform when the handle of her door was jiggled, as if someone was trying the lock. Wolff quickly stepped into the shadows against the wall to see what would transpire as Evangeline hurriedly drew the coverlet over herself.

When the lock was finally breached, the door opened and a blue-clad figure stepped quietly into the room and over to Evangeline. Wolff was furious to see that it was Lieutenant Blodgett, but he remained out of sight against the wall. Had the woman tricked him?

"I thought I told you to keep this door unlocked tonight!" Blodgett said angrily, throwing the coverlet back off Evangeline's body.

"I-I forgot," murmured Evangeline. Wolff could physically sense the fear in her.

"Forgot? Just like you forgot who shared your bed the other night? I don't believe you, Evangeline. But I hope you haven't forgotten your promise to me. Your arms had better be warm and willing or I'll see that you're shamed as a Yankee collaborator."

Blodgett angrily jerked on the buttons of his uniform shirt. How dared she try to lock him out, as if she had a choice of bed partners and he wasn't her choice!

"Slut," he muttered. "You think that Ulbricht is so wonderful. I'll show you what a real man is like." His boot hit the floor with a thud.

Wolff could stand no more. A slur against Vange's moral character was bad enough, but a slur on his own manhood was never to be withstood. As he stepped from the shadows, Blodgett froze.

"So you think you're a better man than I am, Blodgett?" he asked softly. "Maybe you'd like to step outside and prove it to me."

"Ulbricht! I ... I ..." Blodgett's face held an incredulous, fearful expression. He had been referring to Karl, not Wolff!

"Still terrorizing the women and children? One would think you would have learned your lesson at Iuka. But apparently not."

Wolff advanced on him, and a wild terror shot through Blodgett's heart as

he remembered how easily Wolff had humiliated him the last time.

"I ... she invited me here! She's only a rebel slut! You can have her, too. Ask her!" He backed toward the door.

"Vange? Is this man here by invitation?"

Words failed Evangeline, but she shook her head in denial.

"I believe you are mistaken, Blodgett. From now on, you are to leave Miss Gauthier strictly alone, and all the southern women like her, for that matter, or I'll see you demoted to private. And if I don't see the backside of your yellow-livered body immediately, you'll find your head rearranged on your kneecap. Now get out!"

Blodgett left in a flurry of flying shirttails, one boot on and one boot off, and Evangeline heaved a sigh of relief.

Wolff turned to her, angry with her for not telling him about Blodgett's threats and angry with himself for not realizing the humiliating things she had to cope with.

"Vange, why didn't you tell me about Blodgett?"

"I did tell you. You said you would take care of it."

Wolff silently cursed himself for forgetting that important task.

Evangeline reached under her pillow and came out clutching the British Tranter. "This is what I had waiting for Lieutenant Blodgett. I would have used it, too."

"Blodgett would have easily disarmed you, Vange, and he would have accused you in front of the others of trying to kill him." He grasped her shoulders and pulled her to him with a gentle but firm strength, then cupped her chin in his wide palm and forced her eyes even with his. "Promise me you won't resort to something so foolish again."

After he'd easily extracted her promise, Wolff got up and discarded his clothes. He lay down beside her and drew the coverlet over them both.

Evangeline heard him chuckle and saw the lightweight coverlet tented steeply over his erect manhood.

"Someone has obviously given the order to stand at attention" Wolff laughed.

Evangeline smiled. She could almost fall in love with a man like him--a caring, protective, passionate man with the most wonderfully erotic body in the world.

She reached her hand out to lightly touch his chest, to reassure herself he was real. Yes, he was warm, pulsating flesh and coursing blood.

She slid closer, drawn by his earthy male scent. Her fingers brushed his small masculine nipple, feeling it harden and draw taut. Only then did he turn to her.

"Liebchen," he whispered, catching her wrist. "Love me."

And she did. She concentrated all her senses and abilities on exploring and arousing his body; her fingers swirled in the light sprinkling of hair on his chest; her tongue explored every exciting crease and crevasse he possessed. When at last her moist lips and tongue slid to the only place she had yet to explore, he groaned. He was hot, silky and heavy with need, and the taste of him was salty and exquisite. Evangeline was heady with a wanton disregard for her own needs, but she welcomed it when he abruptly groaned and rolled her underneath him.

This time his entry was eased by her warm moistness. As he slowly inched to his goal, Evangeline moaned with pleasure, loving the mixed pain and pleasure of his full length inside her. She urged him on with light sweeps of her fingernails on the smooth skin of his broad, muscular back--but, really, he needed no urging.

There was only him, his want, and the lovely, willing rebel woman beneath him. The uncontrolled thrusts of her hips excited him further, and suddenly he could no longer hold back. He pounded into her, his weight a huge force that pinned her to the bed and made her a prisoner of his lovemaking.

"Wolff!" gasped Evangeline as the shudders of pleasure began to sweep over her, inundating her with brilliant shooting stars and plunging her into a vast sea of ecstasy. In the space of a heartbeat, Wolff joined her, wildly spilling his need in a rough, rapid, erotic dance that gained him quick entrance into her secret world of pleasure.

* * * *

Wolff stole away before dawn, and Evangeline neither heard nor felt his leave-taking. She felt strangely bereft when she woke to find him gone. Although they had only come together twice now, the physical attraction between them had been overwhelming, the lovemaking exquisitely etched with pain and pleasure. She cared little now about the women he had pleased before her, only knowing that for at least a time he was hers to enjoy. But for how long? And how would she endure it when he left?

* * * *

Wolff reached his bivouac before sunrise and shook Otto awake. "I'm back," he announced.

"Goddamn it, Wolff. Can't you let an old coot like me sleep for a while? Damn it, look what time it is!" He consulted his watch. "What did you do? Crawl into bed with that private?"

From the smile on Wolff's face, Otto almost believed that he had.

Chapter Eleven

Wednesday, June 3, 1863

A deserter from Pemberton's army in Vicksburg had been discovered in the stables of Darlington Oaks and was now sequestered in the plantation office with Colonel Sanborn, Major Welch, and Wolff, who happened to be at the hospital anyway on his second cleanup duty rotation.

Evangeline longed to hear what the man had to say about the welfare of those besieged in Vicksburg. Was Jules still alive? Was he starving, as rumors claimed?

But she could only putter in the hallway near the office for so long before arousing suspicion, and having expended that time, went to her bedroom to change her sheets. She was just tucking in the last corner when she heard a light tap on her door.

"Vange? May I come in?"

She opened the door to find Wolff's large body nearly filling the doorway. He didn't wait but strode in and boldly took her in his arms, kicking the door closed with his foot.

After kissing her soundly, Wolff held her at arm's length and looked her over. "Happy to see me?" he asked, noting her pleased smile. "After all, it's been all of three days. I missed you," he admitted rather huskily.

"I ... I missed you too," Evangeline stammered. She was not used to such candor and openness when it came to revealing emotions, except with her own family, of course.

"I thought about you all day Monday and all day Tuesday. And all night, too. Especially the nights. They're hard, Vange, when I think of what I'm missing here."

Evangeline nodded and, rising to her tiptoes, pressed a warm kiss to his cheek. Why had she once thought him a monster? He was a fine, gentle man. And she had missed him greatly. She succumbed to temptation and pressed her nose to his uniformed chest, breathing in the fresh, summery scent of him.

"Here now! I promised myself none of that--until tonight, that is." He smiled at the way her eyes widened the tiniest bit in sensual anticipation. He drew her down onto the bed to sit beside him. "Know something? I can play you like a harp, Vange. I like that. I can pull a string here and you vibrate with happiness, pull a string there and you weep with anger. I haven't found your deepest

heartstring yet though," he said, gazing at her. He was quiet for a moment, as if contemplating something. Then he added, "But when I do, watch out!" He bent to give her a gentle kiss on the end of her nose. "Has Blodgett been giving you any problems?"

"No, not at all. In fact, Emma and I are almost free to do what we want again. Emma still takes letters and reads to the patients, mostly. She loves the attention they give her."

"And you, Vange? What do you do?" He didn't like to think of her as the object of such attentions.

"I've taken up walking."

"Where do you walk? Not around the fieldworks, I hope," he said, frowning.

"No. I go west across Darlingont Oaks' empty cotton fields. I used to ride over them all the time, and it feels wonderful to be out and about again."

"I'm glad that life has become a little more bearable for you."

"Thanks to you."

Wolff smiled wryly. "I have a confession to make, Vange. You might not believe it, but I'm a peaceable man at heart. I would never have harmed you or Emma. I only said those things because I was desperate for Karl's sake. He needed care, and I knew that you were my only hope."

"You must care very much for him."

"Yes," Wolff said huskily. "He's my brother."

"How is Karl, by the way? I haven't seen him since he helped me in the laundry the day of the dance."

"He's ... he's fine." Was her nonchalance a little too forced? After all, it was Karl she was looking for on the terrace that night, Karl she had nursed. "He seems to sleep an awful lot, but his brain is up to snuff. There's no permanent damage."

"That's good news, Wolff. I like Karl."

"I gathered that," Wolff drawled.

She glanced up at him. Did he think there was something between her and Karl? Perhaps it would be best to change the subject.

But Wolff beat her to it. "I'd like to set up a tête-à-tête with my favorite Acadian temptress. What time can we meet?"

"I normally retire at 11:00 p.m., Wolff. For you, I will retire at 10:00." She blushed at her own boldness.

"I can't wait," Wolff whispered against her cheek. He held her for a brief moment, then rose to go.

"Wolff?"

"Yes?"

"That deserter you were interrogating. Did he give you any idea of the

condition of the city?"

There it was, just as he suspected. She did have family in Vicksburg. She could have no other motive, for surely she wasn't a spy for the South. "He did. Are you sure you want to hear about it, Vange?"

"I'm sure."

"Well, their ranks have thinned considerably from the heavy hailstorm of lead we've been throwing at them, but morale is still quite good. This corporal apparently was assigned to the commissary under Major General C. L. Peterson and decided to leave because of an anticipated shortage of food."

"Are they starving?" She looked worried.

"Not starving yet, but rations have been reduced quite severely. Enlisted men are at one-quarter of their usual rations, and that's only pea meal, flour, bacon and rice. I'm sorry, Vange."

Evangeline thought of Jules. He was already slim and rarely carried any extra fat on his bones.

"Who do you know in Vicksburg, Vange? Don't be afraid to tell me," Wolff queried gently.

Should she tell him about Jules? If she did, would that give him power over her--more than he already had? She gazed at him sadly.

Wolff waited a moment, sensing her internal battle. "Ten o'clock. Your room," he said, then turned to leave. Why couldn't she learn to trust him? He would never do anything to hurt her, never reveal her secrets to anyone. She held his heart in her hand, for God's sake. What more did she want?

* * * *

Wolff came to her room as scheduled that evening, as soon as the hallways were dark and the moon bright enough to light his path to the terrace. He was met at the open French doors by a vision in clingy white gauze, a pale surreal maiden whose black hair floated behind her as she walked with a sensuous sway of her slim hips.

For Wolff, time stood still as she took his hand and led him to the softness of her bed, then offered her warm, pliant body as a sacrifice to the god of war.

Wolff was bewitched by the wealth and beauty of her charms, and took her time and again to high starry plains where she found the utmost in erotic delights. Over and over he cried out guttural words of endearment as she urged him to share in the bounty of sensations her body discovered. When it came time for him to leave shortly before dawn, Evangeline nearly cried over the loneliness she knew she would feel until she saw him again.

He stood beside the bed pulling on his trousers, bemused by the way her hair hung in glossy black waves about her face and the sight of her rosy, bee-stung lips. She looked so delectable he nearly tumbled back into bed with her when her sad violet eyes pleaded with him not to go--not yet.

He bent to place a kiss on her lips. Why was it getting harder and harder to leave this woman? She haunted his daydreams, his night dreams. He had no desire whatsoever for any woman other than the enchantress who lay before him. It could be merely the excitement, the danger inherent in sleeping with the enemy. Or the victory in winning her away from Karl. He didn't know. He just didn't know.

* * * *

Karl was waiting for Wolff outside his tent on the Darlington Oaks lawn when he returned. The cool breeze of early morning lifted his golden hair and teased the sulky tautness of his face.

"Where have you been, brother?" he asked quietly.

Wolff eyed him warily. "I think by your look you know very well where I've been."

"Are you forcing her? I'll kill you if you are."

"No." Wolff stared off into the distance.

"She hated you, Wolff. I can't believe that she suddenly welcomed you into her bed. And she was probably a virgin, wasn't she? I could tell. And you were hot to deflower her with your big Yankee prick. It's true, isn't it?"

"Yes," Wolff whispered hoarsely.

"What did you threaten her with this time, Wolff?" Karl's face was stony with suppressed rage.

"I didn't. She ... she wanted it, too."

"I don't believe it!"

"I guess you'll have to believe what you want. I'm sorry, Karl." Wolff drew a weary hand over his face. "I didn't ask for this to happen. It just happened."

"Only because you ordered me away from here! I should have known it was only so you could get her to yourself. And the night of the dance--did you have her that night, too? Did you, Wolff?" Karl snarled.

"Yes."

"Bastard! How can I compete when you don't play fair? When you misuse your authority and sneak around behind my back to steal the woman you knew I wanted." Karl smacked Wolff's chest with the back of his hand, hard, but Wolff never flinched. "I used to admire you, Wolff. You're bigger. You're smarter. But you have to show me up in everything, don't you? Well, this time I'm not going to be such a good sport about it. You might have won her for a while, but I'm more persistent than you. I can wait. And if you hurt her, brother, I'll kill you. I promise."

"Karl, Karl." Wolff attempted to appease him. "This fight is not worth killing each other over. She's a Mississippi Confederate, a woman neither one of us will likely see again after Vicksburg falls."

"You see--already you are planning to leave her!"

"This is war. What else can I do?"

"Let me have her--now. At least I would marry her," Karl said bitterly.

"No, Karl." Wolff couldn't meet Karl's eyes. "I can't."

Karl didn't recognize this new stubbornness in Wolff. As brothers growing up together they had their differences, but Wolff had always been generous to a fault with Karl. This territorial claim of Wolff's was unlike him, and Karl didn't know how to deal with it. He turned on his heel and left.

* * * *

The fever in Wolff's blood for Evangeline grew ever hotter and thirstier throughout the month of June. Never an hour passed that he didn't think of her smile, her slim figure, her answering passion for him. Slipping away from the rifle pits became an art, and Otto, ever helpful, covered for him. And then there were the delicious full days when the rotation allowed him to watch her hotly from afar as his duties found him in and around the plantation house. On the occasions when they managed to pass close enough without an audience, Wolff would greet her demurely, then slip a quick hand inside the bodice of her dress or under her petticoats, giving her a bold wink and whispering promises to be fulfilled later. He loved it when Evangeline blushed furiously at his daring, but he knew she secretly adored his furtive caresses.

Like magnets they were drawn together, always in the still of the night, for Wolff had no desire to brand Evangeline as a traitor. Many nights she awoke to a light, sweet kiss on her cheek, others to a warm palm on her breast, and still others to a bold caress on the font of her womanhood.

Evangeline had never imagined the positions and manipulations possible for quenching their heated desires. One hot, still evening, as she hovered on the very edge of sleep, Wolff crept naked into her bed and thrust a heavy, demanding hand between her thighs.

"I want you, rebel witch," a voice growled huskily into her ear.

"Go 'way," Evangeline mumbled, pretending to be asleep. She would never have actually let him leave, however.

"Tell me--who are you dreaming of, sweet woman of mine, that you can't wake up to greet your lover properly?" He began to massage her slowly.

"Is that you, Blodgett?" Evangeline threw out a searching hand and patted Wolff's nude groin.

"Blodgett!" Wolff spat, springing from the bed. "Blodgett, for Christ's sake?" He faced her angrily, fists clenched, his body a beautiful, bold outline in the moonlight.

Evangeline giggled and sat up. "Oh, it's you, Wolff. I'm sorry. I thought it was Lt. Blodgett."

Wolff, suddenly realizing that the wench was teasing him, decided to play

along. "You can't tell me from Blodgett? Give me your hand, Vange. Here, feel this." He drew her hand to clasp his manhood, which stood proudly at attention as it always did around Evangeline. He drew a deep sense of satisfaction from her gasp of pleasure.

"Does this feel like Blodgett?"

"N-no. I mean, I don't know." She had never felt Blodgett's groin, but she was certain no man alive could ever compare to Wolff.

"Come here, woman."

Evangeline rose willingly and stood in front of him, close enough to see the russet flecks darken in his coppery eyes as he drank in the sight of her long, lithe body.

He stood for moments just gazing at her before finally bending his head to her high, full breast and touching her nipple lightly with the tip of his tongue. She moaned deep in her throat, wanting more.

"I barely touched you, Vange," he whispered. "Can Blodgett make you respond like that?"

She shook her head no. Never.

One large thumb slid slowly down her belly to rest motionless on the delicate bud of her womanhood. Evangeline's lips parted and she leaned toward him, wanting--always--more.

The thumb's neighboring finger slipped between the delicate folds between her thighs and probed her gently. Evangeline moaned aloud.

Wolff was watching her intently, his hunger growing by leaps and bounds as pent-up passion glazed her violet eyes.

Suddenly his finger thrust deeply into her. She uttered a cry, a deep husky cry which seemed to emanate from the very core of her. Still, she obeyed his order and did not move.

"Who am I, Vange?" His finger began to slide sensuously up and down, and Evangeline found she could barely stand for the erotic torment he wrought. He had to ease her. Now!

"Wolff! You're Wolff!" She clung to him, panting.

Wolff had to seek his own relief, and quick. He backed her against the wall and, grasping her hips, hurriedly raised her to waist level.

"Wrap your legs around me, liebchen," he gasped. "That's right. Oh, honey, I need you." With one huge thrust, he entered her fully, aware only dimly of the small, panting cries she gave. He paused a moment to catch his breath and regain his fast-slipping control.

Her arms circled his neck, and she rained hot kisses on his lips, his eyes, his smooth-shaven jaw, his neck. Impatiently she squirmed against him, unable to establish a suitable rhythm in the position she was in.

"Help me," she whispered against his ear. "Love me."

Wolff was only too willing. He plunged into her with heated fervor, and with deep, rapid strokes quickly brought them both to a wanton state of wild abandon. When all too soon Evangeline dug into his back with her heels and began to breathe in short little pants, he stopped, taunting her with the promise of release just out of her grasp.

"Tell me you love me, Vange," he demanded in a rough, raspy voice. He had to hear her say it at least once.

At that moment, Evangeline realized she would tell him anything. "I love you, Wolff," she cried softly.

Pleased and overwhelmed, Wolff poured himself into her, filling her with a deep, thrilling ecstasy that went on and on until at last he succumbed to his own pleasure. "Liebe!" he groaned, and then he could offer her no more.

Panting heavily from his fervent exertion, he held her against the wall until he could breathe again, and then he kissed her deeply, as if to seal her wonderful sense of fulfillment inside her.

Evangeline, realizing the depth of the emotions Wolff brought out in her, was shaken. Their lovemaking was intense, powerful, and all-consuming. No other man could inspire similar emotions in her, she knew. The way he made her feel--was it love? She contemplated it silently.

Slowly, Wolff let her slide down the wall and released her. He sighed, a sigh that signaled his own deep contentment. He wanted to say something to Vange, something that would reveal the happiness, the sense of rightness that he felt when they made love. He searched for the words, but found none that could quite explain the feeling. He sighed again.

"Are you all right, Vange? I didn't mean to get so carried away."

"I love you ... your lustiness, Wolff." I love you, she thought to herself.

"And I love your response, rebel witch." He fell silent.

"Wolff?"

"Yes?"

"Why did you want me to tell you that?"

"What?"

"You asked me to tell you I loved you."

"Did I? We Germans like to hear a lot of ... well, a lot of talk when we make love. It heightens the senses, quickens the blood. Don't you like it too?"

Evangeline was confused. Why did he close himself off to her after his passion had been expended? It was as if she had been offered a tantalizing glimpse of the inner man that was Wolff, only to have the shade rudely drawn as she drew near. "Yes. I only wish I could speak German. I'll have to ask Karl what some of those words you've been saying to me mean."

"No!" He hadn't meant to protest so vehemently. "They're just sweet nothings. Karl will only laugh at you. I'll try to stick to English from now on."

Evangeline swung her long, heavy hair back over her shoulders, strode over to the bed, and flounced down.

"Are you angry over something, Vange?" Wolff sat down beside her.

"Oh, no. No. I'm just kind of tired."

"We do manage to exert ourselves a little bit. We're good together, aren't we?"

She could hear the pride in his voice. "Yes, we're good."

"You sure nothing's wrong, Vange? You're pretty quiet for a woman who's just been shown the difference between Lieutenant Blodgett and a real man." He was trying to lift her mood.

"I never doubted you for a moment, Wolff." She laid her head on the pillow and watched him with a bemused detachment.

"Where's your enthusiasm? Maybe you need another demonstration." He stretched out beside her and gave her a superior smirk.

"Maybe," she replied noncommittally.

"Vange, I'm trying my best here!"

She smiled and rolled over to face him. "It was magnificent, you damnable Yankee. But I do think I need another demonstration anyway."

Wolff laughed and clasped her tightly to him. "Rebel witch," he whispered hotly. "Wait till you see my next demonstration."

In truth, she couldn't wait.

Chapter Twelve

Monday, June 29, 1863

The mail had finally caught up with the Fourth Minnesota, and Wolff had quite a few letters to read. Three from his mother, one from his brother Emil, two from little Lore, and no fewer than five delicately scented missives from Annaliese Schmidtke. Wolff had sprawled out under a large laurel oak to read them.

Mutti's letters were newsy and optimistic, as were Lore's. Lore had just been to the doctor and found she was pregnant again. Her husband Kurt demanded a little brother for tiny, year-old Trinkä. Wolff smiled as he thought about Trinkä's winsome, gap-toothed grin and the way she always thrust her chubby arms up to him to be held. Someday he'd have a little Trinkä of his own.

Emil had a new apprentice in his blacksmith shop, but the man was not exactly what he had in mind. Most of the able-bodied, hard-working men were off to war. Emil would be too if he hadn't smashed a red-hot slab of iron down on his trigger thumb and finger three years ago.

And Annaliese. Like her, her letters were bold, to the point and--well, voluptuous, with large, flowing letters and thickly dotted "i"s. Wolff's eyes were treated to a feast of subtle, understated longings and bold, overstated remembrances. One passage in particular caught his eye.

"Vati's beer has greatly improved since he started the new process in his brewery," wrote Annaliese. "You remember the last time we drank it, don't you? I certainly do. I could never forget that wonderful, glorious night on the banks of our own Minnesota River."

"It was not the fault of the beer, no matter what you may think, Wolff. I gave myself willingly to you, as you gave yourself to me. What a romantic, passionate evening! I can't remember ever experiencing such beautiful feelings. As you recall, I extracted no promises from you, for I know your future is not yours to promise right now. I do know that you will follow your heart, however, and bodily linked to mine as it is now, it cannot stray far from home."

Wolff smiled as he read the flowery prose. He too would never forget that night when Annaliese had lured him to the river bank and offered him her virginity on a platter. And how could a poor German lad who was on his way to war deny the blonde goddess who lay naked at his feet, refusing to let him go? Ah, Annaliese. He could still feel her bold, lusty bucking underneath him. He had

learned to ride well that night, for, not expecting such enthusiasm, he had almost fallen off. No one could beat Annaliese when it came to pure, unadulterated enjoyment of the sex act, Wolff conceded with a grin. Except, perhaps

He frowned, stared off into the distance for a moment, then rose and stuck the letters in a pocket of his uniform to be read and reread later when he had more time.

Later that day, Wolff was still trying to shake off the feeling of restlessness that had come over him. He sat in his and Otto's rifle pit, gazing out over the intricate webwork of redans that the Confederates had thrown up against them. Little was going on, for the firing lately had lost its briskness and spirit, as if the rebels were at last caving in to the starvation and disease that dogged them.

The end of the siege was near, Wolff could sense it. Soon he and the Fifth would be raising the Stars and Stripes at the Warren County Courthouse that still stood so proudly amidst the greatly marred beauty of Vicksburg.

The end. He would be leaving, he knew, as soon as an occupation force could be brought in. No more uncomfortable rifle pits, no more mosquitoes, no more ceaseless cannonading. No more Vange.

How could he tell her he was leaving soon? With a little peck on the cheek and an "Oh, by the way, I won't be back tomorrow"? No, he didn't think so. She would need comforting, that he knew, for he had already seen the glint of tears in her eyes lately when he took his leave. The hardest part would probably be convincing her that life must go on. It was regrettable that he had so callously deprived her of her virginity, but with her lovely face, her curvy figure, her undeniable intelligence, she would have no trouble at all finding a male replacement for her affections.

She'd cry. Oh, yes. That was to be expected. She'd protest, too. Perhaps she would even declare that she'd wait for him. Not possible, but how could he tell her he would be going home to Annaliese Schmidtke when the war was over? How? Wolff kicked a clod of dirt with his boot.

Tomorrow night. He was due at the plantation on regular rotation tomorrow. It was settled in his mind. Tomorrow night would be the last time he would ever make love to Evangeline Gauthier, the last time he would hold her, the last time he would spend the night in her bed. And then he would tell her goodbye.

Wolff muttered a curse and reached into his pocket to reread his letters from home.

* * * * *

Evangeline had only brief glimpses of Wolff on Tuesday, even though she had been furtively looking for him all day. He spent most of his time in the tents in the yard, and she had no idea why. There were very few patients left at Darlington Oaks, for most of them had been transferred to the permanent Federal

hospital complexes or returned to duty. Many of the Sanitary Commission nurses also stood idle a good deal of the time, but they would remain until summoned to another front.

Evangeline could sense the cloud of doom that hung over the city of Vicksburg. More and more deserters fled the city, and she had heard the increasingly sad tales of a proud but starving people forced to eat their mules, and when they were gone, their rats. Was Jules reduced to such desperation?

Evening fell, and after a boring but sturdy supper of bacon, biscuits and gravy with the hospital officers and nurses in the formal dining room--during which she had seen neither hide nor hair of Wolff--Evangeline retired to the library. As she browsed through the vast collection of leather-bound volumes, a thought struck her. An unpleasant one. Was Wolff avoiding her?

It seemed so. He had had plenty of opportunity to sneak a few minutes with her, for she had made sure that she was alone in the laundry much of the afternoon. Karl had stopped by for a friendly chat, but she had brushed him off rather brusquely, not wanting Wolff to think she was flirting with his brother.

But why was he avoiding her? Was he simply tired of her? They had been rather close lately. Perhaps he needed a breather. That she would freely allow him, for actually, she could use one too. She would welcome the chance to stand back and assess her relationship with Wolff from a distance. With him so close all the time, it was difficult to gauge ... to gauge how deeply she had fallen for him. Oh God. Oh, God, she had fallen so hard!

He was leaving. She knew it. That's why he had been avoiding her--he didn't want to say goodbye. He didn't want to hurt her, didn't want a scene full of bitter recriminations. The joke was on him, however. Didn't he know she loved him so much she would let him go? But at least she deserved a goodbye from the man! She turned and started to run blindly from the library, only to run smack into a huge, hard wall of male flesh blocking the doorway.

"Vange," Wolff said softly, catching her wrist. "I was looking for you. Have you got a minute?"

Evangeline stood back and explored his face, noting the deep russet speckles in his solemn, coppery eyes, the combed and parted flaxen hair, and the earnest expression on his tanned face. Had he come to tell her what she feared?

She nodded.

He shut the door behind him and led her to an upholstered mahogany sofa beneath one of the large, south-facing windows. They sat, not touching, and as he turned to face her, she noted the stiffness in his body and the tense muscle that twitched in his jaw.

"What is it, Wolff?" She couldn't bear the waiting.

He sighed and took her hand and held it for a while, softly caressing the inner flesh of her wrist.

"You've come to say goodbye, haven't you?" He looked up in surprise, then nodded curtly.

"I confess, I was beginning to think you would leave without even telling me. You owe me that much, you know."

"I owe you more than that, Vange. I owe you Karl's health, perhaps even his life. And I myself owe you for weeks of an intensely pleasurable experience."

"A pleasurable experience." She repeated it softly, as if trying the words out for the first time. Her time with Wolff had been reduced to a three-word phrase.

"Uniquely pleasurable. The best few weeks of my life." His voice had dropped to such a soft, drawl that Evangeline had to lean closer to him to hear.

Without warning, his arm closed around her. "I'm going to miss you, Vange. A lot. More than you know."

She stared at him, wondering how he could say goodbye forever if he had had such a wonderful time and would miss her so much.

"Aren't you going to say anything? Won't you even miss me a little?" His arm pulled her close, and he nuzzled her ear.

"I'll ... I'll miss you. Goodbye," she said, pulling away from him.

"That's it? Just goodbye?" He caught her arms and pinned her to the couch. This was not going the way he planned. Where were the tears, the declaration of love, the protests?

"Goodbye, Wolff. I wish you a very good life." She leaned her head back against the couch and closed her eyes.

Wolff studied her. She didn't look devastated. In fact, she looked quite at ease with his revelation. What the hell was going on here? Had it all been an act?

He shook her roughly, wanting her to open her eyes so he could see the expression in them. Yet when she did, he suddenly wished she hadn't, for the haunting violet beauty of her gaze was nearly his undoing.

But no. He had to go through with this the way he had planned.

"I'm not leaving right away, Vange, but I know I'll be going soon. I'd like to part friends, if possible. We'll have a little time before I leave to get used to the idea."

"Friends? You want to be friends?" How repugnant it would be to reduce the special relationship they had to mere occasional chit-chat.

"Yes. Is that so bad?"

"I really don't want to be your friend, Wolff. I have enough friends." At the moment, she didn't, but she couldn't imagine Wolff as anything other than a lover.

"Goddamn you, Vange. Why are you being so difficult? Can't you see I'm trying to make the best of the situation?" He pulled her atop his lap and started to absently-mindedly stroke her hair. "I don't want to leave, but what else can I do?"

Desert the army? No. Take you with me? Hell, no! I'm caught, sweetheart."

"I've never asked for those things, Wolff," Evangeline murmured from where he held her head against his throat. She could feel his swallowing motion.

"Well, what the hell do you want then? Tell me!"

Why was he becoming so angry? Because she refused to throw herself at his feet, sobbing? "I don't need anything from you. Nothing at all." She blinked her eyes rapidly to hold back the hot tears.

He sighed, a great, rasping sigh that shook his body heavily. "I'd hoped to make love with you one more time before I left."

She couldn't speak, lest he detect the rising emotion in her.

"God damn you, Vange!" he shouted. "I want more from you than this ... this god-awful silence."

Please go. Please go now, Wolff. Oh, God--had she said it aloud?

He was listening now. Intently. She had to quell the flood of emotion, quickly. She buried her face in his collar and squeezed her eyes shut.

"I can't go. Not without touching you." His voice contained all the sadness she felt.

His hand began to sweep gently up and down her spine, caressing each vertebra on its tender journey.

"Please don't. I have to go now." Why wouldn't her voice cooperate?

"Shall we go to your bedroom?"

"No. I'm not going anywhere with you."

"Don't talk now, sweetheart." Both his hands cupped her breasts and caressed them. She felt the answering tingle between her thighs. She wished fervently that he would leave her in peace.

"No, Wolff. I'm not your whore. You can't just throw up my skirts any time you want."

"No, you're not my whore. But you're mine. At least for a while yet, you're mine." His tongue slipped hotly into her ear canal, and the tingling in her pelvis became a heavy throbbing.

"No," she whispered, but she knew she didn't mean it. As did Wolff, who neatly flipped up her petticoats and pulled at the flap of her one-piece chemise.

"Sorry, honey. I can't wait." He lifted her by her waist until she was kneeling in front of him on the sofa, and then he held her there with one hand while the other fumbled with the front of his trousers. "Oh, God, Vange." He bared his full length and felt for her moistness.

She was ready, willing or not. He drew her arms around his neck, and, with a quick movement of his broad hand, gently spread her thighs.

At the first tentative touch of his throbbing hotness, Evangeline melted. He could do what he wanted to her. It made no difference what his lips said--she would enjoy his lovemaking. And this, this desperation in him, made her all the

more wild. She looked into his fox-colored eyes and saw the pleading there, saw that he too needed this final contact of their bodies to seal their passion for all time. She was creating a memory, not only for herself but for him.

Frozen with need, he pulsed at her entrance, waiting for some silent signal from her.

The signal was never sent, however, for tonight Evangeline was taking the lead. Never taking her eyes from his, she slowly sank down on him, absorbing him inch by silken inch, until he groaned with pleasure. Her hands went to his chest, to toy with the tiny golden whorls that surrounded his male nipples.

She rose as slowly as she had sank, leaving him moaning for her tight warmth.

"Vange," he whispered. "Sehr, sehr gut, Liebchen." His tongue flicked out to catch the rosy tip of her nipple.

It drove her mad. As she rose and fell in a quickly increasing rhythm, he caught her breast in his mouth and suckled it. The intensely pleasurable sensation shot straight to her pelvis, and she moaned aloud.

Wolff made no move to help her. He was helpless himself, caught in her sensuous web, unable to move without spilling himself.

Evangeline's movements, attuned to sensations deep in her core, became rapid and wanton. She caught his head by his hair and yanked his face tight against her breast. "Wolff, Wolff, love me, love me."

He didn't hear her, for he was hanging by a mere thread, all his senses concentrated on the rough, raw eroticism of her movements. Suddenly he was diving headfirst into a hot pool of joy, his love splattering into the woman who had brought him there.

His guttural cry overshadowed Vange's sharp little gasp of pleasure, and soon, all too soon, they were trembling in each other's arms.

Wolff groaned and adjusted his buttocks on the couch. "Ahh, Vange. That was magnificent," he muttered. He meant it. Much more elegant, more giving than that crude coupling with Annaliese. He longed to tell her that, but he didn't want to bring up Annaliese's name.

Evangeline scarcely heard him, for she had already begun mourning. It was over. She wished fervently that she could stay and hold him to her all night, but now she had to prove that she loved him enough to let him go.

Gently, she clasped his cheeks between her palms, examining the familiar planes of his face, now slack with satisfaction.

"Open your eyes, Wolff," she commanded. He did, and she marveled at the stark nobility of his Aryan nose, his high cheekbones, his full, sculpted mouth.

This had to be the most difficult thing she had ever, ever done.

She pressed a final chaste kiss to his lips, and murmured, "I love you, Wolff. Ich liebe dich. Goodbye."

With that, she sprang from his lap, straightened her clothing, and walked hurriedly from the room, never once looking back to catch the surprised expression on his face.

Chapter Thirteen

Saturday, July 4, 1863

Vicksburg had lain in silent wait since the hour of midnight when General Grant had received a message from General Pemberton accepting his terms of surrender. The morning of Independence Day promised another scorcher, but in the rifle pits all was quiet.

Regular duty had been suspended, and Wolff's company was under orders to black their boots and put on all the finery they could muster. Just before 10:00 a.m., Colonel Sanborn gave the order to enter the city, and the shouts of "fall in!" could be heard up and down the lines.

At last they were entering Vicksburg. It had taken longer than he thought, thanks to the stubbornness of these Johnny Rebs, but today he would walk on those forbidden streets he had so long desired to see up close.

A brigade band broke into "Hail Columbia", and then "The Star-Spangled Banner" as his company marched proudly past the high stacks of rebel guns, past the silent gazes of the defeated confederates, past the ragged and thin citizens. As they reached the courthouse, a cheer went up from the 45th Wisconsin, who had just placed Old Glory where it should have flown 48 days ago.

Wolff joined in the merrymaking by clapping Otto on the back with such hearty force it nearly toppled him. He was loath to demonstrate any further jubilation, however, for he had great sympathy for the men who had so bravely defended the city. To say that they had bowed to anything other than starvation would be to lie.

He wondered how Vange would take the news of the surrender. With a certain amount of anger and resentment, no doubt, but also with an equal amount of grace. He would never forget the bravado she had exhibited when he had come to her to say goodbye. All the things he had expected had never come to pass. In their stead, she had beaten him to the punch, blithely saying goodbye as if he meant nothing to her. He had almost had to physically force some feeling from her. He knew it was there, and at last he had found it hidden deep in the mechanics of their lovemaking. And what a session that was, he remembered with a smile.

In the end she had gone quickly and without tears. The only thing that saved him from jumping up and running after her, trousers about his knees, were her parting words "I love you", spoken in a cool, low voice. She loved him. Now

why had he so badly wanted to hear that? He didn't love her. No, he couldn't. Their affair had only been a very pleasant respite from the humdrum routine of war.

What he didn't understand is why she had bothered with the words. She must have known that he wouldn't be giving her anything in return. Had she wanted to shame him? To show him she was the better person?

Perhaps she really did love him. It was hard to imagine, but stranger things had happened. A lovely, refined Confederate woman falling for a rough and tumble Yankee Captain. Imagine it. He shook his head bemusedly.

"Captain Ulbricht, Colonel Sanborn requests that you join him for a dinner this evening to celebrate the Union victory," said the messenger from headquarters, rousing him from his reverie.

"And where is this dinner to be held, Lieutenant? In one of Vicksburg's finest restaurants?" Wolff asked, smiling.

"Oh no sir! The dinner will be held at Darlington Oaks hospital compound, 7:30 p.m. sharp. All of Colonel Sanborn's regimental officers are to be there in dress uniform."

"Fine. Will there be female escorts provided?" Wolff asked with a grin.

"Some," said the man. "The Sanitary Commission nurses are also invited."

"Well, well. In that case, you may give Colonel Sanborn my acceptance." He winked broadly at the young lieutenant.

* * * *

Hours later, as Wolff sat in the stifling heat of the formal dining room, he wished he hadn't come. Oh, the conversation was lively, the bourbon and rum flowed like a river, and the women were attentive and entertaining. It wasn't that. It was just that Vange's absence from the picture left it flat and unexciting. How dare she not show up for what would probably be the last evening he would ever set foot on Darlington Oaks?

"More rum, Wolff?" Lida Webster sloshed several fingers of the potent liquid in his glass without waiting for his answer. She appeared to have several glasses under her own belt already, Wolff noted, from the way her words were daintily formed as if her lips were a bit uncooperative.

"You look so dashing tonight," Lida trilled. "I have never seen you in your dress blues before. Not even the night we ...," she trailed off with a guilty smile. He knew very well what night she was referring to. The night before he'd left Iuka.

"You look lovely yourself tonight, Lida. Pink always brings out the best in redheads, I say."

"Rum brings out the best in redheads, Wolff" Lida gave him a slow, exaggerated wink. Then she leaned over far enough to allow him to gaze down into her deep cleavage and whispered, "You bring out the best in this redhead."

Damn. She'd had more rum than he thought. He changed the subject.

"Where's Miss Gauthier tonight? I didn't think she'd let a little thing like the fall of Vicksburg keep her from entertaining her guests."

Lida's lids dropped to half-mast and pouted sullenly. "Forget that Confederate woman for one night, can't you? One would almost think that you preferred her over the hard-working, loyal northern women present. I don't know where she is and I don't care!"

"Lida, Lida. I was only wondering! You know very well I prefer fine Union woman-flesh."

"I guess I do," Lida giggled and tossed her bright mane of hair, which she wore in loose ringlets down her neck. "It's so dreadfully hot in here. Let's go walk on the terrace where it's cooler." She hooked his arm and nearly dragged him to his feet.

* * * *

Evangeline was indeed in her room. She had not been feeling at all well today, and with the news of the city's surrender, she felt even worse. Dizzy, weak and tired. Even nauseous at times like she was coming down with something.

She lay on her bed and listened to the sounds of revelry coming from the main rooms of the house. They were certainly celebrating. She hoped they all felt miserable tomorrow, just like she was feeling tonight. She got up to wet a cloth in the cold water of her basin and place it on her forehead.

Suddenly the tinkling laughter of Lida Webster floated in through her open but curtained terrace doors.

"Oh, Wolff! Don't do that! You know I can't bear it for very long!"

Evangeline froze. Wolff was on the terrace with Lida? Doing something with Lida? Her stomach clenched tightly as she crossed to the French doors and edged the frilly lace curtain back.

There the pair stood, only a few yards from her door. Wolff seemed so tall and powerful-looking next to Lida's short form. He was dressed nattily in a short-jacketed uniform Evangeline had never seen him wear before, and he looked so utterly handsome and overpowering that he nearly took her breath away. She almost started to run to him when she saw his arm clasp Lida tightly around the waist, and Lida's face tilted up at him expectantly. Was he going to kiss her? Evangeline gasped in horror and then threw a hand over her mouth when she realized Wolff had heard her.

He looked straight at her, and his eyes narrowed into a fathomless expression that Evangeline couldn't read. For a long, helpless moment his eyes met hers and held. Then he turned toward Lida.

Her presence had made not a whit of difference to him, Evangeline realized with dawning horror. He had Lida now, and she was part of his past. His head inclined towards Lida's, slowly, inexorably, until their lips were touching.

She saw Lida sink willingly into his embrace, wind her hands around Wolff's strong neck, and deepen the kiss. Oh, it was torment to watch!

Ignoring the urge to fall on Lida and tear her eyes out, Evangeline wrenched the curtain closed and ran to her bed, throwing herself upon it in a hot temper that was full of tears and anguish. Wolff! She had truly meant nothing to him! She sobbed helplessly into her pillow, beating at it with her fists as if she could ease her torment that way. How could he be so callous? To bring another woman right to her very doorstep and taunt her with behavior that should have included her instead of Lida Webster! The Yankee scum! The damned Yankee scum!

* * * *

Out of the corner of his eye, Wolff saw the curtain drop and breathed a mental sigh of relief. Good. That awful moment was over. Vange would have good reason to hate him now, and that is what he intended. But that horrified look on her face! That she loved him was written so plainly on her lovely features. He knew he had to be cruel in order to erase that look from his mind, to erase her love from both his heart and hers. If only she hadn't admitted she loved him, he could have gone without looking back. But she had, and now he couldn't leave with the guilt her declaration wrought hanging over him. Yes, he had to make her hate him. Loathe him. He pulled Lida to him and held her tightly.

* * * *

Still later, as Wolff lay covering Lida's plump naked form, he discovered he hadn't succeeded at all in erasing the rebel witch from his mind. As Lida urged and fondled him to frantic completion, and as he erupted into her lush body, the name that came hotly to his lips was not Lida's. "Vange!" he had gasped into the sweltering darkness "Liebchen!"

Evangeline slept little that night, for the visions she conjured up of Wolff's big, beloved body entwined with Lida's taunted her until the early hours of the morning. Finally, a deep exhausted sleep claimed her, and she slept until the sun was high on the horizon.

On awakening, she was gripped by an intense wave of nausea. She raced to her basin and lost the entire contents of her stomach in a violent, lengthy upheaval. She was ill, too ill to leave her bed. Luckily, Emma came soon to check on her and emptied her basin and brought fresh water.

"What's the matter with you, Vangie?" Emma inquired, gazing at her stricken face with wide eyes.

"I don't know, Emma. Just a touch of colic, I guess. I'll be fine if I can just sleep for awhile." She tried to smile but she felt too weak.

"Should I go get Wolff? He here. I saw him in the dining room at breakfast." Although Emma had never seen her and Wolff together, she had somehow sensed the attachment between them.

"No! I .. I don't want to see Wolff any more, Emma. We're no longer friends--if we ever were. It's all right. I don't need anyone."

Emma reluctantly left the room.

After sleeping until shortly past noon, Evangeline felt better. The wave of nausea had passed, and aside from a little weakness, she felt fine. She still didn't want to leave the sanctuary of her room, however, until she was sure that Wolff had gone. She couldn't face him without breaking down, not after last night, and salvaging her pride was the most important thing right now. When Emma came in to check on her again at three, she hoped he had finally departed.

"Have the Yankee officers gone, Emma?"

"Colonel Sanborn, he gone. And Major Welch and Major Becht, too. Wolff, he still here, sittin' on the portico. He ask me about you, Vangie."

"Whatever did he want?" The nerve of the man!

"He asked where Vange, he want to talk to you."

"And....?"

"I said, 'She sick. And she don't want to see you no more. You ain't her friend no more.'"

"What did he say then?" Her curiosity was getting the best of her.

Emma shrugged. "Nothin'. He still sittin' there."

That was not good news. She was ready to get up and face the day finally, but she dared not leave her room lest he try to confront her. Well, fine. She could outlast him. Besides, what more could he possibly have to say to her? He couldn't hurt her any worse. She had received his message already, loud and clear.

"Let me know when he leaves, Emma." Emma left, happy to play the clandestine role of spy.

He didn't leave the plantation until after 5:00 p.m., and by that time Evangeline was more than ready to leave her room. She breathed a sigh of relief when Emma finally told her the coast was clear.

She gathered up her and Emma's gowns and undergarments that were waiting to be washed and headed straight for the laundry.

It was a mistake. Just as she approached the door, she heard the voice of Lida Webster from within. It seemed like a conspiracy against her lately, these chance meetings with people she didn't want to see.

"Nancy, could you toss me that bar of soap? I don't know why, but I am so exhausted today I could barely drag myself out of bed. I swear this heat will be the death of me someday."

Evangeline could well imagine why she was so exhausted. How she longed to be the death of Lida herself!

"Could it be that exhaustion is limited to a certain part of your body?" asked Nancy good-humoredly. "I heard some sounds coming from your room last

night that didn't sound much like snoring. Tell me, Lida, was he as virile as he sounded?"

"Oh, my stars, Nancy. Must you be so blunt? And must you know all my secrets? I never kiss and tell, you know."

"Just this once?" Nancy pleaded.

"Oh, all right. But it must never leave this room, Nancy. The man is insatiable! And of monstrous propor ... Well, let's just say he's very virile. Why, I--" Evangeline could bear no more. Cheeks flaming with anger, she stalked into the room and threw her garments on a table.

"Miss Gauthier," nodded Lida, acknowledging her "You are still with us. Why, there were men inquiring for you last night and I had to tell them I had no idea where you were."

"I was ill," muttered Evangeline, not turning around.

"That's a shame, for some of those Yankee officers are very good company. You missed a very entertaining time. We did manage quite well without you, however. Have you recovered now?"

"I'm fine."

"Splendid. Perhaps you will be able to grace the table with your presence tonight again. Unfortunately, it won't be the same company as last night. Isn't that a shame?"

Evangeline spun around and ran from the laundry before she lost her temper and set upon the woman. Lida enjoyed taunting her! If only Lida didn't have the victorious Union troops behind her, she'd show her! She'd

Lida's eyes followed Evangeline's departing figure jealously for she was still angry over the name Wolff had cried out. It was her body he was availing himself of, her bed, her lips he had kissed. Why couldn't the name have been hers?

Chapter Fourteen

Colonel Sanborn could have knocked Wolff over with a feather that morning when he announced to the officers present that he had received the regiment's orders from General Grant just minutes earlier and learned that the Fourth Minnesota would be a part of the occupation forces of Vicksburg. Wolff's company was to be billeted in several of the bombed-out warehouses on the outskirts of the town, and duty would include dismantling the Confederate defenses and establishing order in the city.

Duty would be light, with at least every other evening free to do as he pleased, maybe more. Free evenings, with nothing to do other than play cards, imbibe, entertain females.

Occupation forces. Gott im himmel! What had he done? He had purposely alienated the affections of the only female he desired. He had done it well, too, and there was no going back. There was no mistaking that horrified look of anguish on Vange's face. And then to make sure that she would hate him with every ounce of her being, he had spent the night in Lida's bed, knowing full well Lida would spitefully make sure Vange heard about it.

He had to see Vange, to throw himself on her mercy and try to explain why he had done what he had. His actions were reprehensible, but surely she would see that he had only acted out of a sense of duty. The ties between them had somehow become too strong.

And now he couldn't face the long months ahead, knowing she was in close proximity yet not being able to touch her, to make love to her. He didn't dare go to her room any longer, however, for he had lost that right--had given it up last night.

He had to find a way to earn it back. But how? It was something he would have to ponder on for a while.

* * * *

Karl thought it strange that Otto had returned from Darlington Oaks shortly after breakfast, yet by late afternoon Wolff still hadn't returned. Wolff didn't know it, but Karl had been keeping close tabs on Wolff's movements ever since the morning of their confrontation.

"Did Wolff find Colonel Sanborn so interesting that he sent you away, Otto?"

"Hell," Otto harrumphed. "I don't think it's Colonel Sanborn that has

Wolff's interest, unless Colonel Sanborn has sprouted a head of red hair. Goddamn, I thought that boy had more sense than to be sucked in by that so-called Sanitary Commission nurse. Man could pick up all sorts of diseases."

"Wolff is with Lida?" Karl was shocked, but he pretended to be only mildly interested.

Otto nodded. "Spent the night with Mizz Lida. Seen them two on the terrace after supper, and you couldn't have shoved a matchstick between him and her. Showed up for breakfast lookin' a mite drained, too. Don't know what the hell is taking him so long to get back here now, though."

Karl forced a smile at Otto's description, but inside he was seething. Lovely, gentle Evangeline Gauthier, a woman who had been seduced and compromised by his brother, had already been blithely discarded in favor of a woman who paled in comparison. His brother deserved no less than a fully loaded firing squad at close range. And Evangeline deserved--yes, why not? Evangeline deserved him. Karl.

* * * *

Evangeline was ecstatic when on July 6th Lieutenant Blodgett tersely informed her that the Sanitary Commission's headquarters would be moving to a large house right in Vicksburg itself. The move would start immediately and should be completed by evening, barring any unforeseen complications. He thanked her politely on behalf of General Grant and the Union army and told her he hoped the occupation hadn't been too much of a trial. The recitation was repeated as if by rote, and was not at all typical of the Lt. Blodgett she knew.

But, oh, she was happy! Darlington Oaks would once more be a private family sanctuary, free of Yankee domination. It was a wonderful feeling! She danced Emma around in a joyful circle when she passed on the good news.

Soldiers and wagons came and went all day, and by evening, she and Emma were the sole occupants of the plantation. The house seemed so empty, and her footsteps echoed loudly in the halls. But the emptiness merely reminded her that she was alive, Emma was alive, and Darlington Oaks still stood!

The next morning, after Evangeline had recovered from another brief residual bout of nausea, she and Emma started putting the house to rights. The task was a gigantic one, for every square inch of the woodwork and floors had to be washed and polished to bring back the former luster. The paintings and valuables that she and Emma had buried could once again be displayed, for now that the city was under Union control, General Grant had promised to promptly and amply punish all looters and thieves.

Evangeline was glad to have her hands busy, for it kept her from dwelling on what had happened with Wolff. She was determined to put the episode behind her, to think of it in the future as merely an aspect of the cruelty of war that had enveloped Darlington Oaks. With time, the horrible memory would undoubtedly

fade. Perhaps someday she would even smile at her gullibility.

She was polishing the sterling silver and ivory tea service for the formal dining room when she heard a team of horses draw up to the portico and stop.

"Another ambulance!" Emma declared from her vantage point at the window. "How come they bring someone here?"

Why, indeed? Evangeline hurried to the vestibule and arrived in time to greet two Union soldiers bearing a litter. The litter held the figure of a man--a dear, familiar black-haired man dressed in Confederate gray.

"Jules!" Evangeline cried, and raced to throw her arms about him. Suddenly realizing that he must be wounded, she stopped in her tracks. "Jules?"

"Vange. They told me you were here," Jules said weakly. He tried to raise his head, and Evangeline saw the heavy growth of black beard, and the dark circles that outlined his eyes. He didn't look at all well.

"What happened, Jules? Have you been shot, for God's sake?" She searched his body frantically for bandages but saw none. He still had all his limbs, too.

"Nothing so courageous, I'm afraid. I've been laid low with dysentery for several days. In fact, I'm sure we wouldn't have surrendered if I hadn't been too ill to fight." The blue-clad soldiers bearing his litter guffawed impolitely.

"Where do you want him, ma'am?" asked the tall, rangy corporal at the front of the litter. "We have orders from Doctor Switzer to bring him here and leave him. He's all yours."

Evangeline led the way to Jules' old room in the west wing, glad that she and Emma had already finished cleaning it.

When the soldiers had gone, and Jules had been given water and food, she sat holding his hand, happy to be able to look on her brother's dear, sweet face once again.

"Why didn't you leave, Vange?" Jules asked. "All this time I thought you were safe with Aunt Therese in New Orleans. Then I find out from a Yankee doctor yesterday that you were here all the time, and that the house had been overrun with Yankees and turned into a hospital. I would have been worried sick had I known."

"It's just as well you didn't know then, isn't it? But everything turned out all right in the end."

"You are all right, aren't you Vange?" Jules looked at her intently. "When I think of the things that could have happened to you--"

"I'm fine," broke in Evangeline. "Doctor Switzer was very kind to me. But you, Jules. You've lost so much weight. Tell me what it was like in Vicksburg."

The two spent several hours talking about the siege and its effect on their city. Jules told her about the deprivation, the rampant destruction from Union

shelling, and the courage that the men in his platoon had displayed. Evangeline wept with sorrow and admiration for the rebel lads who had so bravely defended her city.

Later, after she helped Jules to wash and shave, she found him some of his civilian clothes to wear. "This parole you have been placed on. Is it permanent?" she asked him.

"It could be. As part of the terms of surrender, Pemberton's men have been allowed to go free as long as they promise not to fight until an equal number of Yankee prisoners have been paroled. It could be a long time before I can fight again, Vange."

Evangeline secretly breathed a sigh of relief. Jules was home and he was safe. Her life could now resume its former pleasant complacency. Couldn't it?

Chapter Fifteen

Saturday, July 11, 1863

A week later, Wolff had not come up with a solution to his problem. He desperately wanted to see Vange, but short of riding out to the plantation and confronting her, he hadn't found a way. Now that the hospital had been moved into the city, he had no business at the Gauthier home, especially since General Grant had forbidden Union soldiers to enter any residence other than that in which they were quartered. But he missed his raven-haired rebel witch fiercely.

The warehouses his company had been billeted in were old but structurally sound, and once they had been freed of the layers of dust and grime that encased them, they provided suitable quarters for his men. Wolff himself had a room in a clapboard house nearby, as did Major Welch and several other officers of the Fourth. His room was spartan and small but comfortable enough given the hard accommodations he was used to in the trenches.

Days were spent tearing down the rebel works and dismantling the huge guns that had been used against them. Those who didn't have street patrol duty in the evening were free to use their time as they saw fit, and most of them wrote letters, gambled at cards or shot the breeze.

Wolff was unused to the inactivity. In the weeks past he had been so wrapped up in Vange that he hadn't had a minute to himself. Now all his nights were long, endless affairs, the boredom unbroken by the sweet smile of the rebel wench he craved. Lida Webster and the Sanitary Commission nurses were billeted just two blocks down, but he found he had no desire to keep Lida company in spite of the notes she sent, the broad hints she dropped. Lida had been a mistake--if only he could turn back time.

Late Saturday afternoon he sat enjoying the breeze on the open veranda of the house where he was billeted when a sudden hooting and whistling caught his attention. Another young rebel woman going for a stroll down the city streets? The noise rippled in a northerly direction up the street, as if it were being caught up from one block to the next. This had to be a very attractive female to attract that much attention, Wolff decided.

He saw the reason for the noise as she appeared around the corner at the end of his block. She was young, black-haired, and very fetching in her pale lavender gown, black sash, and matching black parasol. Her hair cascaded in ringlets down her back to her slim hips, which swayed sensuously as she walked.

He knew that walk very well. He knew that woman very well.

Evangeline Gauthier was walking with Emma, and both were carrying large parcels as if they had just been to the market for supplies and were on their way home. Yes, that was logical, for this street linked with the Jackson Road. She was having a difficult time holding her parasol and balancing the packages she carried, and Wolff thought he'd jump up and help her, but he was not quick enough. A soldier from the warehouse had already come to her aid. Not just any soldier, but Karl.

Karl. Wolff's stomach tightened as he saw the way Vange greeted his brother with a bright, welcoming smile, the way Karl leaned toward her as if she were his to protect, his to help. Karl took both their parcels under one arm, and with the other he circled Vange's waist and walked along beside her, smiling down at her all the while. And she was smiling back, damn her.

If so many of his men hadn't been watching, Wolff would have ordered Karl away from her. But he couldn't afford to lose the respect of his men that way. He hated to watch Karl touch Vange like that. But what could he do, other than upbraid Karl when he got him alone? For now he had to watch Karl walk away with his woman.

* * * *

"Am I glad to see you two," Karl declared, placing a strong arm around Evangeline's waist. "What a stroke of luck! I was beginning to wonder if some Yankee carried you off. I've been wanting to ride out to the plantation, but I wasn't sure if I'd be welcome now that you've got your home back again. Am I?"

Evangeline frowned. Would Jules get upset if she received a visit from a Yankee? "I don't know, Karl. My brother Jules is home now. He's been paroled."

"Your brother? I didn't realize you had a brother. And you think he would toss me out on my ear?"

"Perhaps not if I tell him what a good friend and helper you were to me and Emma when we needed one so badly. Emma will be happy to vouch for you, won't you Emma?" Emma nodded happily, glad to see Evangeline in a good mood for once. Lately she had been crabby and out of sorts.

"Why don't I just tag along with you now? I'm done for the day and I don't have anything better to do. You could use some help with these parcels, anyway."

"What about General Grant's order?"

"Who is going to see me, Vangie? And if you don't want to, you don't have to allow me inside. It's entirely up to you."

So Karl walked home with Evangeline and Emma, heedless of the pair of hot eyes that burned a hole in his back from the veranda nearby.

* * * *

Emma ran ahead to warn Jules to stay calm, that Vangie was bringing a Yankee home. A good Yankee, she emphasized. Not one of those bad ones that

fired the guns.

Jules was feeling strong enough now to shuffle into the parlor to sit and wait for them. It was hard for him to imagine his sister bringing a Union soldier to meet him when she knew very well how he felt about them. But, as always, he would give her the benefit of the doubt.

He was surprised at the formidable size of the man Evangeline brought into the room, but any doubts he may have had about the Yankee were dispelled immediately when the man strode up, shook his hand and greeted him warmly.

"This is Karl Ulbricht," said Evangeline, omitting the 'Lieutenant' on purpose. No need to remind the men that they were in opposite armies. "Karl is from New Ulm, Minnesota. He's a farmer."

Jules looked him up and down, curious of the man's intentions toward his sister. "Emma tells me you were a great comfort to them during the siege," he stated. "Thank you for helping to keep my sister safe in spite of her stubborn nature." He gave Evangeline a broad wink, which did much to dispel her nervousness. "So you farm, eh? What do you raise up there in that cold country? The growing season can't be long enough to ripen cane or cotton, surely."

"Minnesota is wheat country," said Karl with a smile. This was his favorite subject and he warmed to it quickly. "Up in the Minnesota River valley the grains grow as tall as cane, and there's nothing else in the world that can fatten cattle and hogs any faster."

"I've always wondered how you northerners manage to farm your land without slaves. The land here at Darlington Oaks lies idle this year because there is no one to work in the fields."

"Our crops are smaller but more valuable. A man and his sons can manage a farm very well. And without the expense of the care and upkeep of slaves, our profit margin is wider. Did you know"

Evangeline felt slightly let down as she realized that the two men were already so absorbed in their farming conversation they had forgotten about her. With a light, reassuring pat on Karl's arm, she drew Emma from the room and set about putting away their purchases. It wasn't long until supper time.

Surprisingly, Jules invited Karl to stay for supper, and then the four of them retired to the drawing room for a spell to allow their food to settle. Jules was still weak, but growing stronger every day, and it was apparent that he enjoyed Karl's good-natured company by the way he kept snagging Karl into lively but friendly discussions. Jules was plainly lonesome for male company, even if it was Yankee.

It was just before dusk when Karl rose to leave.

"I've got to get back to my billet before dark," he told them. "But I can't recall ever having such a fine meal and such pleasant conversation since leaving Minnesota. Vangie, will you walk with me to the end of the main entrance?"

Evangeline nodded, curious about what Karl would have to say about Wolff. He said his goodbyes to Emma and Jules, promising to return when duty allowed.

Karl took her arm in his and walked very slowly, as if savoring every moment with her. He was silent until they were out of sight and earshot of the plantation house, and then he turned to her.

"I don't know how to say this, Vangie, but I have to know something. I'll just blunder about, and you tell me if I'm prying too much in your affairs." He took a deep breath and went on. "Forgive my bluntness, but I happen to know that you and Wolff were seeing each other on an intimate basis for a while. I don't know for sure if that is still going on, but it doesn't seem to be. Am I right?"

"H-how did you know about that?" She thought they had been very discreet.

"I went by Wolff's rifle pit one night and saw only Otto. The next night was the same. Knowing my brother, I just put two and two together. One morning I asked him, and he admitted spending the night in your bed."

"It's true," murmured Evangeline, turning her face so that Karl wouldn't see her embarrassed flush.

"Oh, Vangie, don't do that!" He tucked a finger under her chin and forced her to face him. "It's nothing to be ashamed of. My brother is very experienced in seducing women, and you were no match for him, that's all. I'm not here to chastise you."

"Then why are you asking?"

"Because I care about you, Vangie. I don't want to see you hurt. From the way you look, however, I think I'm too late."

Evangeline couldn't respond or she would break into tears. And she couldn't let Karl see her cry.

"Oh, my dearest woman! I'll kill him. I told him I would. You saw him with Lida, didn't you?"

Evangeline was openly sniffing now. "H-he told me he was leaving, and that he wouldn't be--well, he wouldn't be spending any more nights in my bed. He said we could be just friends until he left, but I didn't want to be just friends. I didn't want to see him anymore. It hurt too much!"

"And then he turned around and flaunted Lida at you, didn't he?"

Her fists clenched. "I hate him for that. He made sure I saw him with her right outside my terrace doors. And then the next day I heard her bragging about how wonderful it was making love with him. I could have died, Karl!" The tears were now flowing freely.

Karl stood in front of her, his face white and angry-looking. "Mark my words, Vangie, I'll make him pay for hurting you some day. I don't care if he is my brother. He has disgraced the Ulbricht name." He placed his arms about her

shoulders and drew her close until her head was pressed against his chest. His hands gently swept her back, not in passion but in comfort.

They stood that way until Evangeline's tears subsided, then he clasped her face between his palms and asked her earnestly, "May I try to make it up to you, Vangie? Would you mind very much if I come to call on you? I must show you that all Ulbrichts are not like my brother."

"You may visit, Karl, for I'm sure that Jules will want to see you again, and Emma too. You brightened Jules up considerably tonight and I thank you for that. But I'm just not ready to receive any male callers yet. I don't know if I ever will be."

"You can't just stop living, Vangie," Karl said softly.

"But I'm ruined, Karl!" she suddenly cried in anguish. "No one will want me now. Least of all my fiancé!"

"Now, now, that can't be true, Vangie. You're a beautiful woman. No one will fault you for one mistake under these circumstances."

"Jules had a difficult time persuading my fiancé to accept me in the first place, and now he will probably welcome an excuse like this one to back out of our engagement."

"Why ever would Jules have to beg anyone to take you, sweetheart? You're the cream of southern womanhood."

"I'm twenty-one, Karl. I spent my social years nursing my father. Most women my age are married by now."

"Not in the North," Karl declared staunchly. "We don't have such ridiculous standards. I'd marry you myself right now if you'd have me."

Evangeline looked at him from under her lashes. Was he serious?

"I mean it, Vangie. I've had my eye on you since I woke up in your house and saw you. You are a lovely, desirable woman, and I wanted you long before Wolff ever seduced you. I'm just not as fast and forceful as he is, I guess. If I was, you'd be my woman now." He looked at her intently, awaiting her response.

"I am certain I don't want to be anyone's woman now." The color rose in her cheeks.

Karl laughed. "At least you know where I stand now. I find you desirable and I want to call on you."

"Karl--don't ..."

"It's all right, Vangie. I just wanted you to know. I'm not demanding anything right now. Except a kiss, that is. One kiss." His midnight blue eyes held hers.

Evangeline sighed. She shouldn't, but Karl had been so kind ...

Karl embraced her deftly. "Vangie," he whispered as his lips swooped down to meet hers.

The kiss was--sweet, Evangeline decided. Full of charity and warmth.

Karl was an expert kisser, just as he was an expert dancer. His tongue traced her lips lightly, as if memorizing their outline. His lips gently moved against hers.

Karl felt a lot like Wolff in her arms, powerful, hard and totally male, but something was missing in Karl's kiss--some obscure ingredient that only Wolff could provide. Missing was the passion and seduction of Wolff's hot caresses, the demand for satisfaction. Wolff had ruined her forever for another man's kiss.

Still, she was comforted, knowing another man desired her. Even though she had no intention of having a physical relationship with Karl, it helped to know that although Wolff had scorned her, another man of Wolff's caliber was ready to take his place.

Karl halted the kiss with a quick smack on her cheek and drew back to assess her reaction. Had she enjoyed it as much as he had?

"Vangie?" Her inky lashes fluttered up and he thought he saw a brief flash of pleasure in the depths of her violet eyes. Good. That was all he was after tonight. There was plenty of time for passion later.

"I'll be back tomorrow evening" He left, whistling a happy tune as he walked down the Jackson Road toward Vicksburg.

* * * *

It was dark when Karl finally found the cot that had been assigned him in the dimly lit warehouse. He undressed in near darkness, not noticing the large form that perched on the cot next to his until he had already slid under his blanket.

"Did you have a pleasant evening, Karl?" Wolff's copper eyes gleamed in the darkness like cat's eyes. His muscles bunched tautly as if he were angry.

"That I did, brother." Wolff would never intimidate him. "A very enjoyable evening."

"An enjoyable evening with my woman." It was a statement, not a question.

Karl laughed harshly. "She's not your woman any longer, Wolff. Maybe she never was."

"I suppose you're laying claim to her now? You just couldn't wait to get into her bed, could you? Her pillow was still warm."

"Her pillow was still a little damp from the pain you caused her, but she's over that already. I helped her to see that you didn't deserve her." He faced Wolff calmly. "I'm going to start calling on her, Wolff. She gave me her permission tonight. As for you, you can continue to pay your attention to Lida Webster."

"You know damn well that business with Lida was only because I had to make a clean break with Vange. She was falling in love with me, Karl! I thought we were leaving, and I didn't want her moping around for months over someone who would never come back."

"Vangie didn't appreciate your thoughtfulness in that regard, Wolff. You hurt her badly, and she'll never forgive you. She hates you, in fact, and she would

never trust you again. Thank God she has me to turn to."

"I won't stand for it, Karl." Wolff towered over Karl's reclining body, fists clenched. "She's mine and has been from the very first. She'll see that soon enough."

"Why must you torture her? Even if you could get her to take you back, which I doubt, what would it gain you? You have no intention of marrying her. You don't even love her!"

Wolff stared blankly at Karl. Love her? He couldn't afford to love her. Marriage just wasn't feasible because of the war. That didn't mean he would allow Karl to take his place, however.

"Nevertheless, Karl, I can't stand the thought of you touching her," Wolff growled through tightly clamped teeth. "If I can't have her, no one will." He turned on his heel and stalked from the warehouse.

After Wolff had gone, Karl sighed and stretched out on the cot. He could almost feel empathy for his brother, for Evangeline Gauthier was a prize of great worth. But Wolff had relinquished claim to her now, and it was his turn. And this time, Wolff couldn't stop him.

Chapter Sixteen

Wednesday, July 13, 1863

Evangeline and Jules were sitting in the office several evenings later discussing what to do about the declining affairs of the plantation.

"I just don't know," said Jules, his black brows knitted in a frown as he studied the bound ledgers. "Without our slaves there is no crop. I can't possibly do the labor we used to have one hundred slaves perform. I'm afraid we are ruined, Vange."

Evangeline put a finger to his lips to still his words. "Don't say that, Jules. There must be something we can do to make Darlington Oaks profitable again. How about cattle? You could hire hands to help you."

"I don't think so. There are very few able-bodied men left in Mississippi, if you haven't noticed. So many have been killed or taken prisoner, I don't know what is to become of the South. By the way, I can't figure out what's become of Quentin Thurston. He should have also been paroled just as I was. We should have heard from him by now."

"Perhaps being part of General Pemberton's headquarters staff was more punishable than being ordinary cavalry like you," Evangeline offered. "Some of the higher-ranking officers were sent to Mobile, weren't they?"

"That's true, but I hadn't thought that a second lieutenant like Quentin would rank among them."

"Are you still certain he wasn't killed, Jules?"

"No, but we should have been notified of that by his family, at least."

"I thought the Thurstons all fled to Jackson. If so, there's no one here to notify us."

"Tell me something, Vange. It seems like you should have been the one to bring up Quentin's name, not me. Could it be that you really don't have as much regard for the man as I would like you to?"

"I ... I like Quentin. He's well-mannered. Rather shy."

"But ...?" prompted Jules.

"But ... things have changed, Jules. I'm not the same woman I was when Quentin asked me to marry him. All that seems so long ago now."

"How have you changed? You're still single, still pretty."

She couldn't very well tell her brother that she had given her maidenhead to a Yankee. And Quentin would never want her now. "Perhaps the war has

jaded me, Jules. The thought of being Quentin Thurston's wife doesn't appeal to me any longer. I'd rather stay here at Darlington Oaks and take care of you, Jules."

"Vange, what's wrong with you? You can't just stay here and become a spinster."

"But I like it here, and I don't want to leave. Emma and I will take care of the house as we always have."

"Darlington Oaks will always be your home if you wish, Vange, but I just can't understand" He trailed off.

Emma's elfin face peeked around the door, wreathed in a smile. "Karl here!" she sang out. "He in the vestibule."

"Show him into the drawing room, Emma."

Jules noted Evangeline's pleased smile. "That's his third visit this week. If I didn't know better I'd think he was calling on you, sister."

"Oh, nonsense, Jules. He merely enjoys our company. It's you he spends most of the evening conversing with." In truth, even though she did enjoy Karl's company too, it was the sense of still being linked to Wolff that she enjoyed the most.

Karl greeted them warmly, with a handshake for Jules and a kiss on Evangeline's hand. He swung Emma up into the air until she screamed with gleeful terror.

"Put me down, Yankee!" she shrieked.

Karl tickled her and she shrieked louder until he finally stood her on her own two feet.

"I have something to show you, Vangie," he announced, beckoning her to step out on the portico with him. She obeyed, and clapped her hands together in delight when she saw what Karl had brought. A horse! A real live horse!

"She's yours if you want her, Vangie. They were going to put her down because of her age, but I managed to bribe the corporal who was assigned to do the nasty deed. About all I can say good about her is that she has four legs."

"Thank you, Karl," Evangeline breathed. "You are such a thoughtful man."

"We used to have dozens of horses," said Jules with a trace of bitterness. "Horses for field work, for driving, for riding. Well-bred horseflesh, too. That was before the Confederate Army confiscated them."

"We didn't mind so much, Jules," Evangeline reminded him.

"No, but you having to settle for a tumble-down nag like this one is the ultimate irony. We gave so much, only to have our sacrifices be in vain." He turned his head away, and Evangeline suspected it was so that no one could see the unmanly moisture that filmed his eyes.

She went to him and placed her arm around his shoulders. "Someday

Darlington Oaks will have a hundred horses again, Jules. You'll see. We'll find a way."

Later the four of them were enjoying the slight breeze that drifted through the drawing room when Karl decided it was a good time to broach the subject he had come to discuss tonight. "What happened to your slaves?" he asked Jules.

"They ran off to join General Grant on his Yazoo Pass Expedition," Jules answered.

Karl nodded. "Many did. They thought the Yankees were their salvation. Unfortunately, there was little the Union Army could do for them except provide them with a little food. Most of them are still hanging on to the Army's shirttails. That brings me to what I want to propose to you tonight, Jules. I've been thinking about a way to keep Darlington Oaks going, and I think I have hit upon a solution if you'll hear me out."

"I guess it can't hurt to listen," Jules said glumly. "You Yankees have been very successful, at least here in Vicksburg."

"The slaves have been set free, but they still need housing, food and clothing. They need work. Why not hire them back, Jules?"

"Pay them? But I have no money left. I couldn't afford it."

"Then how about allowing each of them to lease ten acres or so of Darlington Oaks cotton fields? You would be the landlord and they the tenants. They would each raise their own cotton, and you as landlord would receive a share of their crop, which you could sell for a profit. You, of course, would provide the quarters, which you already have available. They would now be responsible for their own food and clothing. You've got land enough to give them each a garden plot."

Jules frowned. The plan sounded logical in principle, but would it work?

"How would I contact my former slaves?"

"That's where I come in," declared Karl. "I can easily spread the word among the slaves still with General Grant's army. If you treated them at all well, which I gather you did, there shouldn't be much problem with persuading them to return."

For the first time in days Jules looked optimistic. He and Karl spent the rest of the evening discussing the various aspects of Karl's plan. When Karl rose to leave, Evangeline was only too happy to walk him to the main road.

"Thank you, Karl," she said as the big house disappeared from sight.

"You have given Jules hope again. I can't thank you enough for that."

"I don't need your thanks, Vangie." Karl stopped and turned to face her.

"I wanted to do it, for both you and Jules' sake."

"Why? Why would you want to do these things for us? We are the enemy. You have nothing to gain."

"Don't I?" Karl whispered. Suddenly, his arms were about her hips,

drawing her to him full-length.

“Karl!” She tried to draw back but his arms quickly circled her shoulders and held her trapped. His face was only inches from hers.

“You’ve allowed me only the briefest of kisses, Miss Gauthier. Very unsatisfactory.” His hot breath warmed her cheek and she felt a sudden thrum deep in the pit of her stomach remembering how Wolff’s fervent whispers had tempted her so. But this was not Wolff.

“Please, Karl. Please don’t,” she breathed. “It’s of no use. You and I can’t possibly have a future together.”

Karl stooped to silence her with a quick kiss. “Stubborn lass. I still have some time, Vangie. I’m not going to give up.” He tipped his hat to her and strode off whistling down the Jackson Road.

* * * *

Karl had traveled only a short distance when a large shape hurtled from the tangled brush at the edge of the road and hit his knees in a rolling tackle. He hit the ground with a hard thud, so hard the wind was temporarily knocked out of him. The huge body was sitting astride him when he finally got enough air into his lungs to speak.

“Congratulations, brother. You caught me unawares. But I should have realized you’d be skulking in the bushes. No fair fights for you,” Karl panted.

Wolff ignored his dig. “What were you doing out here?” he demanded, his voice hoarse with anger.

“Visiting my friends, Wolff.”

“Visiting Vange, you mean.”

Karl shrugged. “I can’t deny it. She does have a certain magnetism.”

“Bastard! Have you touched her?”

“Do you mean to say you weren’t watching? From your look, I would say you know the answer to that question already.”

Wolff froze. “I’ll kill you! I swear I’ll kill you!” He drew back his fist and Karl knew he was angry enough to do it, but he didn’t care.

Karl laughed. “I’ll die happy, brother. But then you know very well how sensual Vange is. She loves ...”

Karl’s words died in his mouth as his world suddenly turned black.

* * * *

Evangeline slept the sleep of the dead. She was so tired lately that by nightfall she could barely drag her languid body into her bed. She slept without dreaming, without moving. She never heard the creak of the French doors as they opened, never sensed the large male form that silently approached her bed.

The man quickly divested himself of his uniform and boots, then slid under the coverlet. She still didn’t rouse as he took her into his arms.

“Vange. Liebchen?” The man caressed her cheek lightly, then followed

his fingertips with the tenderest of kisses. He kissed her nose, her eyelids, her chin. Still Evangeline slept.

Only now she was dreaming of a large male body that was covering hers, of broad warm palms that slid seductively over her breasts, of a hard insistent presence thrusting against her pelvis. In her dream, her thighs opened gladly to allow the throbbing male length into her. She shivered with joy, for the dream felt so real, the pleasure so attainable. She thrust upward again and again, anxious to find the fulfillment that the dream promised. As the blinding pleasure coursed through her, she felt the male body shudder in response, felt the warm fluid of his love flow into her. The dream was so real

"Karl," she murmured softly in her sleep. Her dream lover had to be Karl, for Wolff was not allowed into her dreams now. Wolff had spurned her and hurt her.

Wolff leaped from the bed and jammed his body into his uniform with furious haste. He left the room and stumbled his way through the trees and shrubbery that bordered the broad lawn of Darlington Oaks. He couldn't see that well, after all. Not only was it a moonless night, but his eyes were blinded with hot, stinging tears. He hadn't cried since he was a six-year-old boy, and now some slip of a rebel woman had tripped the wellspring of his heart, damn her! He blinked the tears back, cursing himself for being a love-struck fool, and headed back to Vicksburg.

* * * *

Karl awoke several hours later sprawled in the dirt at the side of the Jackson road. His head throbbed painfully, and on his jaw swelled a lump the size of a Parrott shell. He remembered that he had taunted Wolff into hitting him, and even now, seeing that look of rage and pain on his brother's face had made it all worth it. Every painfully throbbing inch.

* * * *

Evangeline woke so late that the heat of the day had already settled in. She felt sweaty and exhausted as if she had never really slept at all. The dream of Karl had kept her on the edge of wakefulness for a long time after it ended--strange how real a dream of lovemaking could seem.

She stood and poured fresh water into her wash basin, then ran a cool cloth briskly over her face and arms. The coolness was a balm to her tired, flagging spirits. What was wrong with her lately that she was so tired, so ill?

She pulled her nightgown over her head and stood naked, enjoying the feel of the air against her unclothed body. She washed her breasts, her belly, her thighs, her feet, and lastly her woman's place

Evangeline stood rooted in shock. Her hand darted between her thighs and she felt the still-sticky evidence of lovemaking. The dream of Karl. Merciful heaven, the dream had not been a dream at all!

Chapter Seventeen

Saturday, July 18, 1863

Wolff lazed late abed, conscious that of late he had no great ambition. He didn't even care about the affairs of his company overmuch, for with the help of Otto, the company could run its own affairs. Lately he didn't even care about the continuing news of the devastation at Gettysburg, nor the cry of mail call! He didn't care about much of anything at all, thanks to Vange.

He sighed deeply and rolled to his stomach, placing a well-tanned arm under his cheek. He couldn't believe that he had lost Vange to Karl. To his own brother, for Christ's sake. He was devastated by the fact that Karl was now the one who made Vange sigh in the night.

And it was all his own doing. If he hadn't had such a gigantic ego, thinking that he could make love to her and leave her whenever he wished; if he hadn't told her that he no longer wanted to see her; especially if he hadn't touched Lida Webster that night, it would still be him instead of Karl in her bed.

She *had* loved him. Her parting words that fateful night were the only thing he had to cling to now. If only he had realized then that he also loved her, if only he had told her. He would go crazy if he kept imagining Karl's lips on Vange's pale, full breasts, imagining her fingernails digging into Karl's back. No, no--he had to stop dwelling on such things. It was too damn painful.

Yesterday evening he had met Karl on the street, knowing full well that Karl was headed out to the Jackson Road. Karl's jaw was mottled black and green from where he had hit him with all his pent-up rage. It was a good thing his brother had a hard head, what with all the punishment it had been taking lately.

Karl had nodded at him, as if to say Wolff's assault was only a minor bother and that he was too big a man to let it come between them. He himself couldn't feel as charitable towards Karl. He didn't want to hate his brother, however. He only wanted Vange, damn the lovely rebel witch's soul.

* * * *

Evangeline had also lain abed until late in the morning. She was ill. Without fail, each morning she vomited until her stomach was empty of everything. Sometimes even then she still heaved over her basin, even though nothing remained to be purged.

And then there was the pervasive tiredness, as if she could never get enough sleep. She was ill, but with what she didn't know.

“Vange, I’m going to call that Yankee doctor to come and see you,” said Jules worriedly. “What was his name? Switzer? I can’t let you go on like this any longer. Look at you! You’ve got dark circles under your eyes, and if you lose any more weight we’ll have to tie you to the bed with a rock to keep you from floating off. Karl is here and he knows where to find the doctor. He said he’d go right away. He’s worried about you too, Vange.”

“Don’t go to all that trouble, Jules. It’s just a summer flux. I’ll be fine,” she protested.

“Nevertheless, we’ll ask that question of Dr. Switzer. You go lie down and Karl will fetch the doctor.”

In a few hours Karl returned with Dr. Switzer, and by that time Evangeline was feeling well enough to be up and around. She greeted Dr. Switzer kindly and he suggested she lie on her bed for his exam.

“You’ve lost weight, Miss. Gauthier. I’d say at least ten pounds.” He examined her gently, tapping her stomach, listening to her heart, and then questioning her delicately about her female aspects.

At last he drew back and eyed her quizzically. “You’ve a strange malady, Miss Gauthier. If I didn’t know you were a single woman, I’d say you were pregnant.”

“Pregnant!” Evangeline gasped. She couldn’t be!

“You’ve got all the signs, my dear. Queasiness, vomiting, tender breasts. And you missed your flow last month.”

Evangeline dreaded thinking about the possibility, but of course it was possible. Why hadn’t she even given it a thought?

“Just between you and me, Miss Gauthier, is it possible that one or more of the Union men were insistent with their attentions? I wouldn’t fault you at all.”

“I guess it’s possible,” she murmured.

“One of the men attached to the hospital?” Doctor Switzer frowned. “If it was, I’ll personally see that they never father another child.”

“N-no.”

“Who, then?”

“I ... I don’t know.” That was the truth. She didn’t know. Even though Karl had made love to her only once, the night she had thought she was dreaming, it could still be Karl’s child instead of Wolff’s.

“By the size of your uterus and the day of your last flow, I’d say you were due the first of March. That would mean you were impregnated somewhere around the first of June.”

June 1st--that would make Wolff the father. But she couldn’t admit to an affair with him. It was too humiliating.

“A baby is not the worst thing that’s ever happened to an unmarried woman. What is important is getting you back to your normal self again.”

“But ... but ... the shame, Dr. Switzer. I couldn’t bear it! What will Jules say?”

“The shame is not yours, Miss Gauthier. It belongs to whomever seduced you. I know you are far too much of a gentlewoman to allow males such liberties unless you were under undue stress. This Union occupation has been very stressful on you.”

Evangeline swiped at a tear.

“Will you tell me for my own information, child? I would rather not continue suspecting the innocent. If you would prefer, I won’t reveal it to anyone.”

She trusted Dr. Switzer, having worked side by side with the good man. It would be a relief to have someone to share this shocking secret with.

“It was Captain Ulbricht.”

“Wolff?” Dr. Switzer was taken aback. “Why, I never would have suspected him of such doings. I always considered him to be a fine, upstanding young officer.”

“It ... it was my fault, Dr. Switzer. I fell in love with him, knowing full well nothing could ever come of such a relationship. Not only is he a northerner, but he is engaged to a woman in his home town.”

“That is a complication, isn’t it?” Dr. Switzer commiserated. “But what will you do now, dear? Is there someone you can turn to? Some man who might be willing to marry you in spite of your condition? You are a very attractive woman, Miss Gauthier.”

Evangeline shook her head. “There’s no one. And I really don’t want anyone. And Dr. Switzer, could you please just tell my brother I have a stomach ailment until I decide what to do?”

“Of course.” Before he left, he told her about coping with morning sickness and the tiredness associated with the early months of pregnancy.

Jules watched Dr. Switzer leave impassively. Stomach ailment, indeed, he thought to himself. He had been dealing with the effects of pregnancy on his slaves for years and he knew morning sickness when he saw it. His sister was pregnant, and Karl was likely the father, he surmised. He’d have to have a talk with Karl.

* * * *

Wolff had persuaded Otto to accompany him to the house where the Sanitary Commission nurses were billeted. He had to have a little diversion or he would go stark, raving mad. Several other soldiers were also callers at the comfortable two-story frame house where the nurses stayed. In the large parlor there was plenty of laughter and plenty of female company to take his mind off his woes.

He greeted Lida with a smile, taking in the bright green of her gown which

set off the garish pink tinge of her hair. Lida wasn't much to look at, but she was always happy to see him.

He sat down with her in the parlor, amused at the looks she was given by other nurses. Lida introduced Wolff to them as if he were someone quite special to her, patting his hand and forcing his elbow to sink into the curve of her ample breast. She wanted all to know that Captain Ulbricht was her property.

Otto had cornered a small, drab woman and was regaling her with stories of his exploits and feats of bravery in the trenches. Meanwhile, Lida's hands were surreptitiously arousing him with 'accidental' touches to his thighs.

Wolff was surprised to see Dr. Switzer enter the parlor. Switzer started to seat himself but saw Wolff and frowned mightily. Switzer motioned to him to speak privately, so Wolff followed the doctor out to the open veranda.

"Captain Ulbricht, I should inform you that you are not at all in my good graces at this moment," Dr. Switzer began in an angry whisper. "Is it true that you are engaged to a woman in Minnesota?"

Wolff was caught off guard. Switzer was angry about that? "Well," he responded, "I'm not ... ahem ... officially engaged, if that's what you mean. There is a woman who would like to become Mrs. Wolff Ulbricht, however."

"What are your intentions with Lida?"

"With Lida? I have none. Did you think I was cuckolding this woman in Minnesota? I've made no promises to either her nor Lida."

"You consider yourself to have no commitments."

"Well, as a matter of fact, yes I do."

"You're despicable, Ulbricht," spat Dr. Switzer. "Your kind of man is not what this Union Army is about."

"I'm not sure I follow you, Doctor. You are here to see the nurses yourself."

"I'm not going to let you weasel your way out of further commitments so easily, Ulbricht. I promised Miss Gauthier I wouldn't let on to anyone about her predicament, but when I saw you there with Lida tonight, I couldn't in good conscience let it go on. You should be drummed out of the Army in shame!"

"Miss Gauthier's predicament?" Wolff was even more confused. "What are you talking about?"

"Don't tell me you had no idea that Miss Gauthier could get with child from your attentions. You're a grown man, for God's sake. Plenty old enough to take responsibility for your actions, if you ask me."

Vange was pregnant! Wolff could not believe it. He hadn't even considered such a thing.

"I just came from examining her this very afternoon. She is quite ill with morning sickness and exhaustion, but I have faith that she will soon pass that stage. I informed her that she was probably impregnated around the first of June.

Does that strike any chord in your poor memory, Captain?"

"I"

"Does it?" Dr. Switzer looked ready to strangle him.

"Yes, but are you sure? Karl"

"I'm sure. Miss Gauthier says the child is yours. What do you intend to do about it, Ulbricht?"

Wolff desperately needed time to think. "I don't know, Doctor."

"Don't play simple with me. I'll be waiting for your answer within a matter of days, Ulbricht. If I don't get the response I want, Colonel Sanborn will be apprised of your behavior, rest assured." Doctor Switzer strode angrily back into the parlor.

Wolff could only stand and stare at the doctor's retreating back. He had just received the shock of his life. He was going to become a father!

Chapter Eighteen

Sunday, July 19, 1863

Wolff was walking around in a daze. Last night, after abruptly leaving the nurse's quarters without telling Otto, he had wandered towards his own billet, shaken to the core by the news that Doctor Switzer had revealed. Vange was with child!

He knew how that could be, of course, but he had never thought about it at the time. It was amazing that the physical love he had shared with Evangeline Gauthier would result in something as earth-shaking, as mind-boggling as a child. What a dummkopf he had been!

He could see the child now. A boy, no doubt. A tow-headed little rascal with his mama's violet eyes and his dad's hammy fists. He longed to feel the child with his hands, to listen to its heartbeat through the safe wall of Vange's womb.

He had to think this out. He had to do something, for he couldn't leave Vange an unwed mother and have his child labeled a bastard. He would marry her, that's what he would do. As soon as it could be arranged. This very afternoon, he would calmly walk into Darlington Oaks and announce his plans, laying bold claim to the woman who carried his child. She might be a little angry with him yet, but then he supposed he deserved that. He'd make her swear off seeing Karl, too. She might complain, but in the end, she would see it was all for the best. He swung off to his quarters to bathe and shave in preparation for his marriage proposal.

Later, as Wolff strode purposefully toward Darlington Oaks, he sensed someone walking at a distance behind him. He turned, surprised to see Karl closing the distance between them.

"Where are you headed this fine day, Wolff?"

"I'm going to see Vange. And you?" Wolff forced himself to remain pleasant.

"Why would you go to see Evangeline, brother? Haven't you got the message that she doesn't want to see you, no matter how you might bully her?"

"She'll see me," Wolff replied, tight-lipped.

"It just so happens that I am also going to see Miss Gauthier. Unlike you, however, my presence will be welcomed."

"My presence will also be welcomed once she hears what I have to say."

"What could you possibly have to say that she would want to hear?"

"How about 'Will you marry me, Miss Gauthier?'" Wolff said, smiling coldly.

Karl stopped dead. "You're mad."

"I'm going to marry her, Karl."

"I don't think so, Wolff," Karl drawled slowly.

"Why not?"

"She won't have you. Not only that, but last night I promised her brother I would marry her myself."

It was Wolff's turn to be shocked. Vange had a brother, and he approved of Karl's presence in her life?

"She has a paroled Confederate cavalry lieutenant brother named Jules. He's very protective of her, and he loves her very much, as do I. You see, Wolff, I'm not only going to marry her because I love her, but because she's having my baby." He forced the lie through tightly clenched teeth.

"That's a lie, Karl!" Wolff faced him, ready to tear his heart out. "It's my baby. Vange admitted it to Dr. Switzer."

So Wolff had already been told about the child. "Vangie was merely claiming you as the father to protect me. And Jules prefers my suit to yours, Wolff."

They were at a standoff, Karl resenting Wolff's untimely intrusion and Wolff hating Karl for trying to claim his child. It could have been a clash of Titans, but both knew that a fair fight between the two of them would result in dire injury, perhaps death, and the only one to be really hurt in the end would be Mutti.

Wolff regarded Karl with cold fury. "Tell you what, brother," he bit out, "Let's settle this like gentlemen. You and I will both call on Vange, and we'll let her settle it."

"Fine," Karl retorted. "You seem to have a lot of faith. But I'm warning you now, Wolff. I'm bound to be the winner. Vangie hates you and Jules' preference for me will win out."

"We'll see," muttered Wolff. "We'll see."

* * * *

Evangeline felt so much better on Sunday that she really looked forward to receiving visitors in the drawing room that afternoon. Jules had informed her that Karl had promised to call around 1:00 p.m., so she dressed carefully, selecting an apricot taffeta gown with narrow waist, hooped skirts, and a neckline that bared her shoulders. It was very important that she look her best, for during the long hours of the night she had reached a decision about her life. Thanks to society's dictates, the child she was carrying needed a father and a surname other than her own. If Karl would still have her after she told him of her pregnancy, she would marry him.

She called Emma, who helped her to brush the tangles from her hair until it hung glimmering down her back, unrestrained by anything except for a single apricot ribbon just behind her ears.

She stared at her reflection in the mirror, seeing the shadows under her eyes and the paleness of her cheeks. She needed a little color, so she pressed rouge paper to her lips and cheeks, then wiped most of it off. The final effect seemed almost natural, thank goodness. She didn't like that painted look that some of the more modish southern belles sported.

She sank down in a lavishly upholstered chair in the drawing room and arranged her skirts, assessing her reflection in the gilded girandole mirror across from her. Her illness had lent her skin a pale, translucent quality that heightened the color of her eyes and set off the sparkling highlights in her jet-black hair. She felt a little attractive, at least enough to gain Karl's full attention.

"Did Karl mention that he was bringing someone else along?" Jules said from the vestibule. "He's not alone this time. I wonder who is with him."

Evangeline wondered, too, until moments later Emma apprised them both who it was. "It's Wolff! Karl brought Wolff!"

Wolff was here? "It can't be," Evangeline stammered, clutching the arms of the chair tightly. "He wouldn't dare ..."

"Who is Wolff?" Jules asked.

"He Karl's brother," said Emma. "And he ..."

"I didn't know Karl had a brother here," Jules broke in. "And he what, Emma?"

Emma decided to keep her thoughts to herself for once. And it was just as well, for Karl and Wolff were coming up the steps. They looked--well, angry, Emma decided.

"Come in, Yankees!" She threw open the door and launched herself at Wolff, who caught her with a surprised, pleased look.

"Come in, men," ordered Jules. "I understand this is your brother, Karl."

Karl nodded, and Jules wondered at the curtness of his introduction. He didn't seem all that enthused about Jules meeting his brother.

"Well, come into the drawing room, Wolff and Karl. I'm happy to say that Evangeline is finally well enough to join us."

"Vangie," Karl strode over to her and kissed her cheek possessively.

"You're looking much better. How are you feeling?"

Evangeline had composed herself enough to give Karl her cheek, but she was thunderstruck. Why had Karl brought Wolff into her home? It was beyond all reason! She was nearly trembling with emotion, and it took all her carefully maintained control to force herself to speak calmly.

"I'm feeling much better, thank you. I seem to be over the worst of it. How are you, Captain Ulbricht?" She hoped she sounded gracious enough to fool

Jules.

Wolff hadn't taken his eyes off her since he came into the room. Although she was still an achingly lovely armful of rebel woman flesh, this woman had been sick. He noted the lavender shadows under her eyes, the hollowness of her cheeks and cursed himself roundly for getting her pregnant.

"I've been--rather out of sorts myself lately, Miss Gauthier." He eyed her intently, hoping she would realize that he meant that he had missed her.

"You do look a little worn, Captain. Too many late nights, possibly?"

"Too many lonely nights, Vange." There. He couldn't be more plain than that. He didn't care at all that Jules was eyeing him oddly and that Karl was ready to hit him.

Evangeline held her silence. She settled deeper in her chair and surveyed him from under lowered lashes, remembering all the details of his exquisite body. A faint flutter rose in her pelvis. How was it possible he could he still affect her that way? Even after he had treated her so badly.

Karl stepped nearer and took her hand, but her gaze was still riveted on Wolff. "Vangie? Did Jules tell you my purpose in coming today?"

"No." She barely heard Karl. She only cared about the man standing across the room, sending her tiny signals loaded with erotic images. His hands brushed his thighs, and she remembered the way his muscles bunched when he knelt above her. His tongue licked his lips, and she recalled another time, another place, when the very same tongue had licked her most sensuously.

Karl knelt in front of her, demanding her attention with imploring navy-blue eyes. He looked so handsome in his dress frock coat, his golden hair trimmed and brushed to masculine perfection. She remembered the single dreamlike time that he had made love to her. That had been a wonderful, sensual experience, too, but somehow ...

"Jules has given me permission to ask for your hand in marriage, Vangie sweetheart." Karl broke the spell.

Evangeline started. What was this?

"We know about the baby, Vangie," Karl said gently. "Jules has suspected it since the first day you were sick."

"You know?" Evangeline whispered. "But how ...?"

"Yes, honey, we know. And I won't allow you to have an illegitimate child. Pardon the public nature of my declaration, but I love you. Will you marry me, Evangeline Gauthier?" He studied her face intently.

Evangeline looked frantically from Karl to Wolff to Jules and back to Karl again, wondering what was going on. Wolff's face was impassive, Karl's hopeful. Somehow the whole scene had developed an air of unreality. What was she to say?

"I can't marry you, Karl."

"Evangeline!" Jules ejaculated. "But you're pregnant with his child. What do you mean you can't marry him?"

Why wouldn't Wolff say anything? He must know the child wasn't Karl's, but his. Perhaps he wanted her to marry Karl, and that's why he had come along--to give Karl his support. That way he could at least play uncle to his child and still marry his beloved Annaliese Schmidtke.

"I don't think the baby is Karl's. Oh, it's possible, but not probable."

Jules rose to his feet, shocked by her admission. "The baby might have a father other than Karl? Pardon my bluntness, but how many of these Yankees did you lie with, Vange? Emma, leave the room please!"

"That's hardly any of your business, Jules," Evangeline retorted.

Jules look was fierce. "Then would you mind telling me who the father is?"

A deadly quiet fell on the occupants. Karl was still kneeling at Evangeline's feet while Jules fidgeted impatiently, waiting for Evangeline's response. Wolff lounged against the door frame, smiling invitingly at Evangeline as if he and she were the only two people in the room. If only she could read his mind!

"It doesn't matter who, Jules. I won't force anyone to marry me. I can raise the baby on my own, without a father--or an uncle."

"That's hogwash, and you know it. Where would you go? How would you support yourself with a child?"

"I could go to Aunt Therese in New Orleans."

"Where you should have been all along," Jules snapped. "Then we wouldn't be having this extraordinary conversation."

"Aunt Therese will let me stay with her until I'm on my feet again. I can always claim widowhood. That would be very believable with the war going on."

Jules sighed. "Why won't you accept Karl's proposal? He's willing to take responsibility for you. And I know he would treat you well."

Evangeline shook her head and lowered her eyes to the ornately patterned ecru carpet. She couldn't bear to see the pained look on Karl's face any longer.

"I guess we have reached a decision then, gentlemen," Jules announced regretfully, clearing his throat. "I thank you, Karl. You are a true gentleman, in spite of your Yankee inclinations. I apologize for misleading you into thinking my sister would welcome your proposal."

Evangeline dared to glance up at Wolff who was still leaning indolently against the door frame. He wasn't smiling any longer, however. She was glad she had thwarted his plans. She would be better off without any Ulbrichts at all in her life.

Karl pulled himself to his feet, shook Jules' hand, and without another glance at Evangeline, headed for the doorway. It was over, and Evangeline

couldn't help feeling slightly let down. Her shoulders drooped, and her eyes began to tear up from the gauntlet of emotions she had just experienced.

"Wait," came the hoarse command from the doorway. Evangeline looked up to see Wolff straighten his large frame and take a step toward her. "You won't marry Karl?" His question was directed only to her, a soft caress of words.

"No." Her eyes clashed with his, two bright splashes of violet in the delicate ivory planes of her face.

"Why not?" The question echoed loudly against the ecru panels of the elegantly appointed room where Karl stood frozen and Jules stood blatantly eavesdropping on this very private conversation.

Evangeline released a tiny sigh and bit painfully into her lower lip. Why was he doing this to her?

"Because I don't ... love him." Why must he demand the truth? To punish Karl?

Wolff took another step forward, and only she could see that his clenched hands were trembling.

"Who is it that you do love?" He looked at her with a strange light in his eyes, a look that Evangeline had seen once before--that sultry, dark night when he had taunted her by keeping fulfillment just out of her reach and demanded that she declare her love.

She wanted desperately to bolt, to run from the room and the hot, demanding gaze of the blond giant who held her paralyzed with only his odd, coppery eyes. But now, while she watched, his eyes were softening. He was giving her the freedom to declare her own heart, as if he was certain her heart's desire was him.

It was. "I ... I love you, Wolff." Had she actually uttered the words? She must have, for he released his pent-up breath audibly. As she watched his reaction, his pupils darkened to russet, the flecks to deep maroon. He took three more steps toward her, and just when she thought he would reach down and lift her into his arms he stopped.

"Jules, may I ask for the hand of your sister?"

Jules had watched the entire scene with astonishment. He didn't know what was going on, but he would be very glad to get this matter settled. Permanently. "You may," he said, nodding.

This time Wolff did reach for her, pulling her into his arms and clasping her possessively to his chest. He held her for long moments, as if savoring the soft, feminine feel of her, and then sought out Jules again.

"We'd like some privacy, if you don't mind. The library, perhaps?"

Jules nodded again. The Yankee obviously knew the layout of the house, for he wasted no time in shepherding Vange down the hall. He turned to Karl, who still stood frozen in place, eyes glazed.

"What happened here?"

Karl came slowly to life. "I lost," he said simply. With that, he left the drawing room, crossed the vestibule and descended the marble steps, three at a time. Jules empathized with Karl's pain. The man perhaps did love his sister, but there was nothing he could do to persuade Vange, nothing at all. Vange had made her choice.

* * * *

Wolff drew Evangeline into the library and settled her onto a couch, the very same couch where he had so stupidly told her goodbye in the not-so-distant past. Rather than sit beside her, however, he knelt in front of her and cradled her hips with his hands, then laid his head on her lap. For a long while he remained that way, letting her see the true depth of his feelings.

Evangeline was touched by the sight of the big Yankee prostrate before her. He had always had the latent ability to reach inside and pluck her heart from her chest, and this time he was truly succeeding. She couldn't resist reaching out a timid hand to stroke the hair that feathered over his forehead. He was so touchable.

He looked up at last, and Evangeline was overwhelmed by the hint of moisture that dampened his sun-bleached lashes and reflected from the soft, hollow surface under his eyes as his eyes pierced hers. Oh, good Lord--was he crying?

"Wolff, I can't bear it--" she began, but his fingers touched her lips to quiet her.

"Vange," he murmured huskily. "Can you ever forgive me? I've been a fool. A complete, utter cad. I hurt you, and I'll do anything to make it up to you."

He clasped her hands between his and she could feel the erratic thud of his heart under her kneecap.

"I only used Lida to sever the ties between us, ties that I thought were becoming much too binding for an itinerant Union soldier from Minnesota and a Confederate Mississippi woman. What I failed to realize, however, was that it was too late. I loved you as much as you loved me."

"I didn't see you for a month, Wolff."

"I didn't think I was welcome. I wouldn't have been, would I?"

Evangeline shook her head.

"But Karl was. It killed me to think of you and Karl, Vange."

"It nearly destroyed me when I saw you kiss Lida," Evangeline retorted "It made me physically ill. And then when Lida boasted of your lovemaking skills, I wanted to die." Oh, this was painful!

Wolff looked stricken. "I didn't enjoy it. She meant nothing to me. I only wanted to erase you from my mind, but it didn't work. It didn't work at all. You've haunted me these past weeks, Vange."

He got to his feet and sat down beside her on the couch, then pulled her into his lap. She remembered vividly the last time they had been in this very position.

His arms circled her waist from behind, and his breath whispered against her hair. She could feel the inevitable rising hardness beneath her buttocks.

"Now you, Vange. Let's clear the air and talk about you. I was insanely jealous of Karl. The thought of him with you made me wild with anger. Why did you do it?"

Should she tell him that she had only tolerated Karl because Karl reminded her so much of him? Or was that the real reason? She had responded to Karl eagerly that one night in her bed.

"I wanted to hurt you like you had hurt me. And Karl seemed the best way to accomplish it."

"Thank God," Wolff murmured against her cheek. "I thought that perhaps Karl really did have some sort of hold on you. But let's forget all that now. What's past is past. We've got business to attend to."

He adjusted her so that the hoops of her skirt were pushed to the front and she was perched snugly against his chest, so close that she could inhale the masculine scent of him. She closed her eyes and enjoyed the blissful feeling.

His hand roved over her abdomen, stopping to stroke its burgeoning firmness. "This baby is mine."

"Yes."

"I'd like him to have my name."

"Him?"

"Whatever," Wolff growled. "He, she--I don't care, as long as I can be a part of its life. Will you let me, Vange? Will you marry me?" He stopped his stroking and looked deeply into her violet eyes.

This was hard. Very hard. She took a deep breath. "I don't think so, Wolff. I mean--no. I don't want to."

Wolff froze. "B-but I thought ... when you"

"No. I never promised anything."

"But why?" She could sense the anger growing in him.

"I can't. I don't trust you, can never trust you again."

"Don't trust me! But you said you loved me!" He was gripping her arms fiercely.

"I do, Wolff. I love you with every bone in my body. But I can't marry you. I'm sorry."

"You're sorry!" He thrust her from his lap and leaped to his feet. "What sort of misguided nonsense is this? You're pregnant. You need a husband! I offered to marry you, for God's sake!"

"You're leaving, Wolff. Soon. I don't know where you'll go next. I

couldn't bear it if you were killed. You're a Yankee and I'm a rebel. I think your idea of breaking the ties was the best one."

He stared at her mutely. "You mean it, don't you? You really think that I can walk away from you and my child. Well, I can't, Vange. Don't ask me to."

"You were perfectly willing to walk away from me before. Just pretend that I'm not pregnant, Wolff."

"I explained all that! I don't care if you're pregnant or not. I want to marry you! We'll work something out. You can go to my mother's home in New Ulm until I come back."

Evangeline shook her head. "There are things that you have forgotten, Wolff. Like Annaliese Schmidtke." Even the woman's name was distasteful on her lips.

"The hell with Annaliese! She doesn't need me like you do."

"And Quentin Thurston."

"You don't love him, or you couldn't love me. He's nothing to you. And there is no way in hell I'll let another man raise my child, Vange!"

Evangeline shook her head sadly. No matter how much she wanted or wished, it just couldn't be.

"Stop throwing your love away, Vange. Oh God, what can I do?" He covered his face with his hands, and Evangeline felt ashamed. Why couldn't she just come out and say that she doubted his love? She could never marry anyone who didn't love her enough. And this man's love was weak. Too weak. She would be better off alone.

"I won't let this stand, Vange. I ... I'll win you over, I promise. I won't leave Vicksburg until you are my wife. Do you hear me?" He gripped her shoulders and shook her.

She shook her head again, willing the tears to stay unshed. "Goodbye, Wolff Ulbricht. This time, goodbye for good."

He bent over her and kissed her cheek angrily, as if he were holding himself severely in check. "Goodbye for now, Vange, but damn you, I'll be back." He slammed the library door loudly.

Chapter Nineteen

Tuesday, August 4, 1863

Wolff was in hell. Pure, unadulterated hell. Several days had passed since Vange had flatly turned down his proposal, and still he hadn't figured out a way to win her back in spite of his promise to her to do just that. But then, the woman had tormented him since the day he had burst into her home carrying Karl's unconscious body. Why should he expect anything else?

He had no idea what was wrong with her. Hadn't he apologized? Hadn't he prostrated himself before her and begged her forgiveness? What more did she want? He knew she loved him because she admitted it freely. Then why wouldn't she marry him, dammit?

He had even sought out Karl, wanting to ferret out any clues Karl might have as to Vange's reluctance to marry him. Karl had been sitting on his cot polishing his shoes.

Wolff eased down on the cot across from Karl and cleared his throat, unsure how Karl would take his asking something like this.

"What can I do for you, Wolff?" Karl asked guardedly. "I thought you would be off making wedding plans by now. Come to ask me to be best man?" Wolff could sense the undertone of hostility that ran through his words.

Wolff emitted a deep, regretful sigh. "She turned me down, Karl."

Karl was genuinely surprised. "Turned you down? But I thought she loved you."

"She loves me, yes," Wolff interrupted impatiently. "But she won't marry me. And I sure as hell don't know why. Do you?"

Karl shook his head. "Imagine that. Turned you down. Sorry, but I can't help you, brother."

"You must have some idea."

"Not really," Karl shrugged. "Other than that to her you are the enemy, you are soon to leave the area, and have shown no inclination to abstain from other women. No idea at all, brother. Sounds like a marriage of great promise to me."

Wolff winced at Karl's unforgiving description of his attractions.

"What did you tell her about Annaliese?"

Karl shrugged. "The truth. That you took her virginity and now you feel beholden to her."

"I don't feel that beholden to her. She's not pregnant like Vange. She'll find someone else soon enough."

"Just like Vangie will find someone else soon enough. Can't you just let her be, Wolff? Haven't you done enough damage?"

Wolff shook his head. "I won't let her be. I can't. I love her."

"You love her?" Karl sneered. "Since when? You lust after her; you even have the gall to demand rights to her child. But you don't love her, Wolff."

Wolff looked at him for a moment, surprised at Karl's blunt accusation. How did he become such a villain in Karl's mind? The events were such that no man would have acted differently. Of course he loved Vange. He would prove it to her.

* * * *

Evangeline and Emma were scouring the slave quarters in preparation for new tenants when Wolff rode up that evening.

"Good evening, my love," he greeted Evangeline warmly. "Good evening to you, too, Emma." His big body slid fluidly from the horse and he tethered it, then he strode over to where Evangeline stood above him on the stoop, planting two dusty booted feet firmly in front of her.

"Hello, Yankee!" called Emma, peering out from around the open door. "What you want now?"

"I want Miss Evangeline Gauthier to marry me." He stared intently at Evangeline, seeking encouragement to his suit. Surely she must have forgiven him by now. But she seemed preoccupied as she stood in the doorway, as if she was busy and he was a bother.

"Vange, I do love you," he informed her. "I'll shout it to the world if you want."

She frowned distractedly, and he yearned to kiss her curving lips. He stood waiting at the bottom of the stoop.

Evangeline tossed back her jumble of inky hair, and Wolff was pleased to see that she was looking better. The lavender shadows no longer lurked under her eyes, and her cheeks had regained their bloom. In fact, she looked delectable in the pale yellow gown that clung to her curves without the impediment of hoops. The modest dress had long, fitted sleeves and a bodice that fitted her swelling bosom snugly.

"Emma, would you excuse us please?" she asked politely, and Emma obligingly disappeared into the quarters.

Evangeline cocked her hands on her hips and eyed him.

"Why are you here, Wolff? I thought we said goodbye."

"You said goodbye. I didn't."

She sighed and began to wind a long tendril of hair about her finger.

"What do you want? Emma and I are quite busy these days. We haven't much

time for visitors."

"This won't take long. All I want is for you to say yes."

"I can't. I told you that."

"Your so-called reasons didn't ring true, Vange. If we love each other, we should be together. Forever." He mounted two steps until he was eye to eye with her.

"I don't know how to say this, Wolff. I wasn't going to, in fact, but since you keep forcing my hand, I will. I don't believe you when you say you love me." She met his eyes with candor.

So that was it. Karl was right, and it hurt. "Why not?"

She shrugged. "Just a feeling I have."

"Just a feeling? That's not nearly a good enough reason to send me away, Vange."

"All right, then. If you must have a complete enumeration, I'll give you one. This is the way I see things now that I have had the time to distance myself and look at our ill-fated affair in retrospect." She closed her eyes. "You came to my home, overran it, forced me to care for Karl in an ugly way. You continually forced your attentions on me, completely ignoring my feelings. Of course, I may have enjoyed them, but you rode rough-shod over my common sense because you think your wants are more important than mine." Wolff placed a hand on her arm and started to speak, but she shook him off. "Please let me finish, Wolff. You showed no sadness at all when you said you were leaving. In fact, somehow you thought it best that I see you with another woman so I could hate you. You made me pregnant, although I do realize that it takes two to make a child. You ignored me for a long, terribly lonely month. You made sure that Karl and I can no longer be friends without you and him being enemies. You claim to be willing to marry me, but only because now that I'm pregnant I need you more than Annaliese Schmidtke does, and besides, your sense of duty demands it. You want to send me away from my home to live in a strange state where I would know no one," she finished. "Pardon me if I fail to see where the love is in your way of doing things, Wolff Ulbricht." She was near tears, but relieved that she had finally spoken her true feelings.

Wolff was silent. Gruss Gott, she made him sound like a scoundrel. He knew he had made mistakes, but ...

"I never meant to hurt you, Vange," he murmured sadly. She was still standing with her eyes closed, a single tear coursing down her cheek. "I'm only human. And in spite of everything you've said, I do love you. I want to marry you because you are the most beautiful, most desirable, most compatible woman in the universe to me."

Evangeline's eyes opened. It was so tempting to finally believe that he loved her and would always be faithful.

Wolff mistook her silence for another refusal. He had come to the end of his patience and he was unused to not getting his own way. Time to change tactics.

"Since you think I'm such a bastard when it comes to you, you'll know that I mean it when I tell you what I have decided. I want you to be my wife, Vange. And I'll do anything to make that happen, including spreading around the entire city of Vicksburg that you entertained countless Yankee soldiers while they were billeted in your home, that you shamelessly turned your back on the Confederacy and the brother that was besieged in Vicksburg, that you are even now pregnant with a Yankee bastard."

"You wouldn't!" Evangeline gasped. Why had he turned on her like this? Just moments ago she had been ready to marry him willingly.

His gaze held steady. "I would. You may as well marry me, Vange, because you will no longer be welcome here in the South. The only thing that will keep my tongue from wagging will be my ring on your finger."

Evangeline felt deeply betrayed--and murderous. Her cheeks flamed; her eyes emitted violet sparks of anger. It was true she had consorted with Yankees, but only when forced to, and only with Wolff and Karl. And never had she betrayed the South in her heart! How could he do this to her?

Wolff moved up another step, put a hand to her flaming cheek, and forced her to look at him. "Now do you believe me Vange? Now do you believe that I love you so much I would do anything to keep you mine? Including making you my captive wife?"

Evangeline shook her head, the tears falling freely now. "That's not love, Wolff. That's possessiveness. If you really loved me, you'd be willing to let me go."

"No!"

Evangeline nodded mutely.

"Please don't ask that of me, Vange. Please," he murmured hoarsely, his lips only inches from hers. She could see the anguish that flooded his coppery eyes and made a thin, grim line of his mouth. But the silent moments passed, and at last Wolff dropped his hand to his side. His husky voice echoed dully in the confines of her head.

"All right, if that's what you really want. You're free of me--forever. But never doubt that I truly loved you, Vange. Not any more."

His booted feet made quick work of the steps and the distance to his horse. In an instant he was gone, without once looking back. Evangeline pressed a hand to still her wildly protesting heart, wondering already if she had unwisely sent away the only man she would ever truly love.

August turned into September, and Evangeline began to feel

uncomfortably bloated in the Mississippi heat and humidity. She was only four months pregnant, and although Jules and Emma claimed that there was only the slightest roundness to her belly, she felt as big as one of Thaddeus Lowe's Union observation balloons. Within a week, Emma and she would be leaving for New Orleans and Aunt Therese's. It didn't matter that New Orleans was also enemy-occupied, what mattered was that at last she would be away from Vicksburg and away from the torment that claimed her body and spirit each night.

She hadn't seen Wolff since the day at the slave quarters, and it bothered her immeasurably, although she knew it was only what she had asked for. He was proving his love by staying out of her life--forever. And doing a very good job of it, too. Why didn't that please her?

Grim news had come from Quentin Thurston's mother who was still sitting out the Yankee occupation in Jackson. Quentin had indeed been sent to Mobile, where he had suddenly and unexpectedly succumbed to one of the fevers that plagued the southern coastline. Evangeline was sad, but the news was not as devastating as it might have been. She was in too much pain already.

Evangeline had saddled the old mare Karl had given her and ridden past the Thurston plantation one day. The Yankees and marauding slaves had not been kind to the Thurston family. All that was left of the house was a burned-out shell, and the once-elegant yard had grown up into weeds and brush. Thurston had been so proud of his home and had once even ventured to remark--timidly, of course--how he looked forward to bringing Evangeline there one day. Now it would never come to pass, Evangeline realized sadly.

The former Darlington Oaks slaves were filtering slowly back in, thanks to Karl spreading the word, and the Union army was provisioning them until crops could be harvested next year. Most had readily agreed to Karl's shareholder idea, and those who didn't wish to be cotton farmers were installed as paid servants in the house, with the promise of monetary pay as soon as next year's crops were harvested. Household duties had lightened considerably for Evangeline and Emma.

But still, Evangeline couldn't help feeling empty. Her days were full and demanding as Darlington Oaks once again became a vital, active community of people, but her nights were long, endless hours spent yearning for the strength and passion she had found in Wolff's arms. She was beginning to deeply regret sending him away. But what could she do about it now?

* * * *

The sleeping giants Bragg and Rosecrans had played a lazy game of flank, touch and retreat near the border between Tennessee and Georgia during the month of August, and by the first week in September General Rosecrans' army was spread out over a 40-mile front, straggling after General Bragg who reclined in supposed retreat in Lafayette, Georgia. Wolff had heard rumors, however, that

Bragg was still very full of life and was even now being reinforced by Buckner and Hood. Therefore, he was not in the least surprised to find orders awaiting him when he returned to his billet on Monday, the seventh day of September.

He sat down on his bed and read and reread the paper that ordered him away from Vicksburg and the woman he loved. The Fourth Minnesota was to leave Saturday for Chattanooga to reinforce Rosecrans' flagging rear as he engaged the CSA's Bragg in Georgia.

Damn the war! He threw the paper on the bed and slammed his fist into his thigh. He knew it was coming, but still, it hit him hard. This was the end. He was leaving, and there would be no returning to Vicksburg, at least not soon. And certainly not after the war. Imagine returning only to find Vange happily married to a rebel planter and his child sporting a southern planter's name like Thurston! No, his heart couldn't take that.

He had to go relay the news to his company and to Karl. Karl and he had haphazardly patched things up between them when it became apparent that both of them were losers in the game of love. Karl still occasionally let fly at him, especially the time when Wolff had told him about that final parting scene with Vange, but Wolff withstood it gladly, if only because he was so happy to be back in his brother's good graces.

He found Karl hunkered over a game of cards in the warehouse. Otto was winning, from the looks of the pile of worthless Confederate script he had amassed. The money made very good gambling material, since it looked impressive yet had little actual value.

"Confound it, Karl! You couldn't have no ace. We already played four of the dang things!" Otto growled. "Wolff, tell your brother here that we Turners never cheat at cards. Your Mutti would tan your hide if she knew how you was trying to cheat me."

"We only played three aces, Otto, and you know it. Your own Mutti's probably turning over in her grave to hear you call a Turner a cheat!"

"Both your Muttis are probably wishing they never birthed such gambling, quarreling dummkopfs," enjoined Wolff. "But enjoy it while you can. Orders came today."

"Orders?" Both Karl and Otto reacted simultaneously.

"To Chattanooga. We're leaving Saturday."

Karl threw his cards down on the table and pushed his chair back.

"So we'll soon be leaving Vicksburg," he echoed.

Wolff nodded.

"Goddamn it, just when the duty was becoming tolerable. I'm actually going to be sorry to go for once."

Wolff commiserated silently.

Karl scrutinized Wolff closely. "Wolff, I hope you don't mind, but I'm

going to say goodbye to Vangie tonight."

Wolff was surprised--and not a little envious--but he wasn't going to forbid Karl to say goodbye, for God's sake. Karl had been her friend.

"Want to come along?" Karl asked.

Wolff shook his head. "We said our goodbyes already." He turned away. "Well, I guess you might tell her again that I love her," he muttered, then, embarrassed at giving in to such a display of emotion in front of Otto, fled the warehouse.

* * * *

Evangeline was surprised when Emma informed her that Karl was waiting for her in the drawing room. Somehow she thought that she had seen the last of the Ulbricht brothers.

"Evening, Vangie," Karl said breezily as he unfolded his large body from the chair where he waited. "You look as lovely as ever. Surprised to see me?"

"Yes, very surprised. I had thought that I would never see you again." She accepted his quick kiss, then sank into a plump upholstered chair and tucked her hoops down around her.

"We Ulbrichts aren't all that easy to get rid of," Karl said with a wide grin. "But this time I've truly come to say goodbye."

"Goodbye?" Evangeline swallowed.

"We received orders. We leave for Chattanooga on Saturday."

"W-Wolff too?"

"Wolff and the whole Fourth Minnesota. I just wanted to see you before we leave, Vangie. You know, make sure you're going to be all right and all that. And extend sincere apologies on behalf of the entire Ulbricht family for making your life miserable while we were here."

Evangeline forced a laugh. "It wasn't all misery, Karl."

"Wasn't it? I'm glad to hear it. Unfortunately, you will have a lifetime reminder of one of the times that weren't so miserable."

"Yes," she said, glancing down at her faintly rounded abdomen. A living, breathing reminder. "I'm glad you came, Karl. I'm leaving for New Orleans in two days, and I was sort of hoping to say goodbye, too. I did enjoy the time I spent with you, in spite of how it turned out."

"Oh, hell. I can't believe this is the end." Karl looked pretty miserable, and Evangeline began to feel a snuffle or two coming on herself.

"I still can't believe you turned Wolff down, either. I thought that love conquered all. But now, here you are, leaving shortly for New Orleans while he is packing for Tennessee."

"Yes," murmured Evangeline.

"He, um, told me that you two have already said your goodbyes, but he did ask me to tell you once more that he loves you." Karl was fidgeting with the

buttons on his frock coat.

"T-thank you."

Suddenly Karl was on his feet, running an angry hand through his golden hair. "I can't stand this, Vangie. I hope that I'm not the stumbling block between you two. I'm not, am I? Because I goddamn well don't want to be any longer."

"No, you're not. It's not you."

"Then what is it? I'd be willing to settle for being brother-in-law. There's got to be other black-haired women in the world. Tell me, what is this godforsaken invisible barrier?"

"I don't think he truly loves me."

"I know my brother like I know myself, Vangie. He's never loved a woman before, but he loves you. It's killing him, Vangie."

Evangeline was openly weeping now. "Maybe there isn't a barrier any longer. Oh, Karl--what have I done?"

Karl crossed to her chair and enfolded her in his strong arms, then gently began smoothing the damp tendrils from her tear-spangled face. "It will be all right now, Vangie," he crooned. "Everything will turn out fine. You'll see."

Chapter Twenty

Monday Evening, September 7, 1863

Wolff stood nervously on the terrace outside Evangeline's French doors, listening to the faint call of night birds and the rustle of the September breeze through the laurel oaks. He placed damp, nervous fingers on the handle of one of the doors, then removed them, wishing he could see through the curtains into her room. Damn it all! What if Karl's suggestion that he visit her had been wrong? What if she didn't welcome him?

But he had to give it one more try. He turned the handle and found that it gave easily. Good Lord, didn't she even know enough to lock her doors? Or maybe she had left them open on purpose for another midnight marauder. She couldn't possibly be expecting him, for he hadn't known himself he was coming until just an hour ago.

He entered the room, savoring the familiar scent of lilacs. She must have just completed her bath, like that other time ...

His thoughts were jolted back to the present by a rustling movement on the bed. She had turned on her side to face him, blinking her eyes as if testing to see if she was still asleep.

"Wolff? Is that you?"

He exhaled with relief. At least she hadn't said Karl's name.

He crossed to the bed and took a warm, delicate hand. "Yes, it's me." He had no idea what else to say other than he loved her, and she already knew that.

"It's good to see you, Wolff." Her voice was husky and soft, as haunting as a mourning dove's. He loved the way her hair streamed out on the pillow, providing an ebony frame for her high cheekbones and oval chin.

"I had to see you one last time." His voice nearly broke with the effort of holding back his emotions. "I just had to hold you once more before I go."

She stared at him silently for a time, and Wolff marked with sadness her lack of response to his plea. So this was really the end.

"I'm ... I'm sorry. I'll leave." He blindly turned to go but was stopped by a delicate hand on his sleeve.

"Wolff?" She tugged on his arm. "Come here." Obliging, he sat on the bed in the semicircle of her hips, absorbing the feel of her soft warmth through the coverlet.

Her hand plucked at his frock coat. "You have too, too many clothes on."

This was an unexpected turn of events. "I do, don't I?" he whispered with a smile, then began to quickly divest himself of every stitch he had on. Soon he stood naked and proud at her bedside, relishing her wide-eyed appraisal.

"You're too far away, Wolff. I can't touch you."

"That's true. I am." Quickly she made space for him to lay down, and he wasted no time in enveloping her snugly with long, muscular arms and legs.

"Touch me now," he whispered into her ear, and for emphasis followed his words with a hot stab of his tongue that sent a promise of pleasure straight to the silken juncture of Evangeline's thighs.

She touched him, moving lightly over his length with searching, discovering fingers, marveling at the hard, heavy thrust of him against her thigh. He was everything she remembered, and more.

"Touch me," she demanded in a suddenly throaty voice, knowing instinctively that she wouldn't have to ask more than once.

"But you have on too, too many clothes, Vange," he muttered, then helped her to easily solve the problem. Soon, her pale, rounded body lay wholly revealed by the platinum September moon.

His seeking hands slid to her breasts, surrounding the high, full globes easily. Her nipples peeped erotically through his fingers, and he couldn't resist leaning down to punish them both with wet lashes of his tongue.

"M-m-mmmm," she sighed. Pregnancy had made her nipples extraordinarily sensitive, and his was an exquisite torture.

"Do you like that, Miss Gauthier?" He gave her a smug grin, and she made it widen further by thrusting a suddenly bereft nipple toward his mouth. He lowered his mouth over it, laving it sensuously, worrying her taut nipple with his teeth, then drawing her breast deeply into his mouth.

"Wolff," she moaned. "I need you. No more torture." Her hips molded themselves to his hard-muscled thigh.

"The torture is on purpose, Vange. I am discovering ways of making you say what I want to hear." His hand swooped down her belly and cupped the womanly mound between her thighs, testing her moistness. She was ready, and he'd barely begun. It was heady knowledge.

He slipped a gentle finger between her delicate folds.

"Wolff," she pleaded.

But his finger merely sank an inch deeper, while his thumb began an indolent rotation above it, ignoring her quickening pants.

"Please make love to me!"

He vaulted her leg and knelt above her, grasping her hips to pull her to him. He was hanging on to his own control by a mere thread.

She moaned loudly as he pushed himself a fraction of a distance into her, then lay still, waiting.

"Wolff, don't stop! Please." Her hands twisted in his hair and tugged sharply.

But he knew his goal, and nothing was going to sway him from it.

"Will you marry me, Vange?" he gritted, barely able to contain his acutely flaring desire.

Evangeline moaned.

He slid a slow, torturous inch further. "Marry me tomorrow, Vange. Say yes."

"Tomorrow. So soon!"

Wolff pushed himself in another inch, then stopped. It took all his control.

"I love you, Vange. I have always loved you and always will," he whispered. "I want to share my love with you every day and every night. There will never be another woman for me. Say yes, Vange!"

Evangeline knew that he had at last admitted to himself that he loved her. It was finally enough.

"I will marry you, Wolff. Tomorrow. For forever!"

He clasped her tightly to him and surged into her wildly and joyfully. With each deep, full thrust, another word rasped at Evangeline's ears. "I .. love .. you," he growled. "You are mine."

"Yes, yes, yes" Evangeline was consumed in his flames. Yes, she would marry him. Would love him. Would treasure him forever with each waking breath. Oh God, yes!

Together they spun into a whirling spiral of ecstasy that carried them far beyond the troubled horizon; then threw them up onto a sweet, thrilling plateau hidden high in the night sky over Mississippi. The night was theirs; tomorrow was theirs. As they paused at the pinnacle and looked down from their erotic heights, the war was only a dark speck on an endless horizon.

* * * *

"Vange," Wolff whispered much later as he lay spent beneath Evangeline's flung-out body.

"Yes?"

Wolff clasped her smooth, nude body to him tightly. "I will love and treasure you always, meine Liebchen."

* * * *

For once, Wolff stayed the entire night in her bed. He awoke at dawn, conscious of Evangeline's tempting left nipple in close proximity to his tongue. He reached out and flicked the mauve tip wetly, smiling at the way it pebbled in quick arousal.

Her eyes sprang open, and he was gratified to see pleasure leaking into her violet gaze. "You stayed," she whispered. "I can hardly believe you stayed the whole night."

"Every night, from now till I leave," Wolff whispered back. "I'll never leave willingly, Vange."

"And I won't let you go so easily this time, Wolff."

"I hope not, sweetheart. But let's not waste time talking. There's only an hour until I have to be back at my billet." He planted a solid smack on her chin.

"Wait, Wolff. I have one question. How did you know to come here last night?"

"I learned it from a generous, warm-hearted man who, deep-down, really cares about his older brother's welfare."

"Karl told you?"

"Karl said that you asked about me. He thought you might like a visit from me."

"We owe Karl so much, don't we?" she murmured.

"That we do. And one day we'll find a way to repay him."

"I love you, Wolff."

Wolff tilted his chin, and saw she was smiling down at him with a world full of love in her eyes.

"Und ich liebe dich, Vange. I love you."

Wolff breathed a silent prayer of thanks to whoever was directing the rambling course of his life. Once again, he had taken the right road. And this one seemed headed directly to paradise.

Jules had been blithely informed by a smiling Evangeline that she was due to be married that evening, but he was still a little surprised to actually see Wolff and Karl Ulbricht arrive with the Reverend Peter Halle, Chaplain of the 113th Illinois Infantry, in tow. He didn't even know for sure which one of the big Yanks she was marrying, for it was Karl who had called on her last evening. Then when he had attempted to question her further this morning she had merely placed a silencing finger on his lips and smiled benignly. Thankfully, he had been wise enough to have one of the servants steam and iron his gray Confederate dress uniform just in case Vange decided to actually go through with this wedding. He had decided to support her in whatever decision she made, as long as her safety wasn't threatened.

Jules's eyes watched Evangeline carefully when the trio of men were ushered into the drawing room, and he noted her quick but loving kiss on Karl's cheek, then the same on Wolff's. As soon as the chaplain had been introduced to everyone, they all moved to the ballroom where earlier that day the parquet floor had been scrubbed to a sparkling finish and the mantel wreathed with late summer blooms.

The chaplain stepped in front of the mantel, hoisted his Bible and cleared his throat. "Shall we begin?"

Evangeline grasped Emma's suddenly shy hand and pulled her to stand beside her, for Emma was to be Evangeline's witness. Then Evangeline smiled in the direction of the two men waiting and to Jules's consternation, both stepped up to stand tall and proud in the wedding party semi-circle.

"Jules?" Evangeline said softly, and Jules suddenly remembered that he was to give his sister away.

The chaplain's discourse was short, thankfully, for Evangeline was nearly trembling with nervousness and wasn't sure how long her feet would hold her up. When the time came to recite the vows, however, her voice rang clear and true, as did Wolff's. Out of the corner of her eye she saw Jules give a start, as if he was surprised to hear Wolff's deep voice respond.

She met Wolff's eyes almost shyly as they recited their vows, and she was relieved to see a reassuring twinkle grace his copper-hued pupils before they turned russet with a deep-seated, overwhelming emotion. She was so absorbed in the myriad of changing hues and expressions in Wolff's eyes that Chaplain Halle had to prompt her to repeat the final words, the words that marked her acceptance of this dear, sweet man as her husband.

"I do," she responded firmly. Oh, I do, I do!

Wolff's eyes were now nearly consuming her with dark hunger and passion, yet his own affirmation rang out strong and firm in the ballroom's floral-scented air.

Without further prompting from Chaplain Halle, Wolff kissed his bride, sweeping back her hastily made *pointe de Bruxelles* lace veil for a lengthy kiss. When Jules finally cleared his throat, Wolff was still reluctant to end it.

"Congratulations, Wolff." Without a hint of rancor, Karl offered his brother his hand. Wolff took it warmly, smiling his thanks, and never moved a muscle when Karl's congratulatory kiss of the bride was full on her lips and, he felt, a trifle overlong.

With the congratulations finally over and with a few minutes to wait for the wedding repast, Wolff finally saw his chance to get Evangeline aside for a moment.

He meant to tell her how lovely she looked in her sweeping gray silk *faille* gown with the opulent rows of fish-scale pearls, but words failed him when she tilted her chin at him and parted her lips with the pink tip of her tongue.

"Mrs. Wolffmann Ulbricht," he uttered hoarsely, as if the words were very important to him. "At last."

"I prefer Vange," she teased. "Vange Ulbricht, that is, if I must."

The light in his eyes reached to brighten even the most remote recesses of her heart.

"And my very own Captain Wolffmann Ulbricht." She clasped his waist possessively.

"I prefer Wolff. Or husband. And I'll offer my personal congratulations to you later," Wolff said succinctly. "But not too much later, my dearest wife."

Wife. The sense of oneness, not the title, was what she had longed for. Not as 'Mrs. Wolff Ulbricht', or 'wife', but as half to a whole. A vital new part of her treasured Wolff. She smiled bemusedly, and Wolff, returning her smile, imagined that he knew just what she was smiling about.

* * * *

Wolff received permission from an astonished Colonel Sanborn to spend his last few nights in Vicksburg with his new rebel wife. At precisely 6:15 each evening Evangeline saddled her mare and rode out along the Jackson Road to meet him, jumping down from the horse and running the last few steps to make a headlong dash into Wolff's open arms. Together they walked the rest of the way to Darlington Oaks, arms entwined, discussing their individual days and planning the evening ahead.

Their time together was poignantly laced with sweet urgency and a feeling that the short time they had left would never be enough to express all the love they carried in their hearts. Wolff had never been gentler nor more caring, and Evangeline had never felt more loved nor more loving.

The final night before their parting came all too soon, and Wolff couldn't fly over the miles separating them quickly enough. He broke into a fast lope as soon as he spotted the dust flying up under the mare's hooves, and within moments his wife was enfolded in the tight circle of his arms. They held each other without speaking for long minutes before heading up the main drive to the plantation.

Underneath one of the most massive of the laurel oaks that lined the shaded drive, Wolff gave the horse her freedom and drew Evangeline down to sit on his lap.

Wolff bent his head and rested it atop Evangeline's, and when eventually he dared to trust his voice enough to speak, the words were a little bit husky and halting.

"I don't want to leave you, sweetheart," he murmured against her raven curls.

"Then don't leave me, Wolff." She was starting to tremble.

"I must. I swore, Vange, swore to protect and preserve the Union. Believe me, if there was any way possible, I'd stay."

"Then you must do the next best thing. Come back to me."

"At all costs," agreed Wolff. "Nothing but death will keep me away."

Her arms reached to circle his neck, and she kissed each smooth-shaven cheek and eyelid in turn before resettling herself on his lap.

"We haven't discussed the baby, Vange. What will you name it? Assuming I'm not back yet, of course."

"We could name a boy after our fathers. My father was Pierre."

"And mine was Klaus," Wolff said, grinning. "They don't seem to go together very well."

"And neither did we, may I point out," rejoined Evangeline with a smile.

"Klaus Pierre it is then. Or Pierre Klaus. I have no preference."

"And a girl?"

"Vivette. After you, my dearest Evangeline Vivette. I hope I can be here for the birth of our child. I'm scared, Vange. What if something happens? I probably throw some mighty big offspring."

"You sound as if we're discussing calves and sires! I'm healthy and active. There won't be any trouble. I suppose I'll be scared witless, but I am going to believe that you'll be here with me."

"Hold that thought, sweetheart." He gave her a hug. "There is one more thing that bothers me. I don't even care to bring it up, but I have to. What if I don't come back, Vange?"

Tears sprang to her eyes at the thought, and she tilted her face to frown at him. "Don't even think that, Wolff."

"We have to face reality, wife. I am not exactly in the safest profession in the world. I may very well be killed. What then?"

"I guess I would stay here at Darlington Oaks the rest of my life."

"Hm-mmmm."

"Is there something wrong with that?"

Wolff frowned. "Somehow I always envisioned my child being brought up within the bosom of my family in New Ulm. We're a close-knit, loving clan, Vange, and I can't help but think that you and the baby would be better cared for with Mutti, Karl, Emil and Lore around to help you. Not that there's anything wrong with Jules, but I had hopes of my child being raised a Turner as I was. Turnerism is sort of my religion, Vange, and I dearly wish my child to grow up with the Turner ideals."

"And this Turner philosophy can only be learned in New Ulm, Minnesota?" she asked neutrally.

"Well, no. There are Turnerbunds in other larger northern cities, too. But my family members are staunch Turners, and soon there will be a new Turner Hall in New Ulm where my child can take classes in gymnastics, health and philosophy, among other things. Vange,"--Wolff sighed deeply--"I just think that a child growing up in the next generation should have a more progressive mind than those I am fighting against today, Vange."

"You mean men like my brother."

"Yes, I'm sorry to say. Times must change."

Evangeline slowly considered what he had said.

"In other words, Vange, I want you to take the baby and go to New Ulm if

anything happens to me."

"That's a lot to ask. You want me to leave my home, travel north, and embrace a philosophy that is as foreign to me as slave holding is to you."

"More than anything in the world, sweetheart." He squeezed her tightly against him and offered up a silent prayer.

Evangeline sighed. "And what will you bribe me with this time, Wolff?"

"I will give you my promise that you will live happily ever after."

"Even without you?"

He kissed her full on the lips. "I'll be there somehow, Vange, if only in spirit. Kiss me back," he demanded. And she did.

When she looked back to that poignant scene under the laurel oaks months later, Evangeline would fervently wish that she and Wolff could have stopped the march of hours and remained frozen in that single, fleeting moment in time forever. But time did march on, and Evangeline was soon to discover that the passing days were not part of the happy-ever-after Wolff had promised her. Indeed, they were the most painful months of her life.

Chapter Twenty-One

November 8, 1863

"The pilot twists the big roun' wheel;
Ah ha-a-a-ah, Oh ho-o-o-ho!
He sings and he whistles and he dances Virginia reel;
Ah ha-a-a-ah, Oh ho-o-o-oh!
'Gineer in the engin' room listenen' fo' the bell;
Ah ha-a-a-ah, Oh ho-o-o-ho!
He boun' to beat that rebel boat or bus 'em up to ..hev'n!
Ah ha-a-a-ah, Oh ho-o-o-oh!"

Evangeline gazed out of the cabin's narrow upper deck window and listened to the sextet of black firemen melodiously trying to attract customers at the St. Louis landing. The voice of the lead singer, perched on the guards of the Northern Dawn, his face caught in the red glow of a fatwood and resin torch, was strong and full-bodied, a little rough around the edges, not unlike the fine Virginia tobacco Wolff had occasionally enjoyed. The sweaty, gleaming skin of the steamer's rousters making final preparations for the morning's departure already made her long for the sights and sounds of the loading docks at Vicksburg, even though barely a week had passed since she and Emma had left Darlington Oaks to meet Karl in Memphis.

When the devastating letter from Sargeant Hauchstein had arrived, she was shocked to find that her newfound happiness with Wolff had been torn from her so soon. It had taken forever for the torrents of tears to slow to tearful sniffles in the loneliness of her bed deep in the night. It had been difficult to think about anything but her loss, but when Karl's letter inviting her to accompany him north to Minnesota had arrived, she decided she must face the future squarely. For the sake of her unborn baby she would fulfill Wolff's wish that his child be raised in his family's comfort and traditions.

In the murky, thickening twilight she spotted Emma clutching the lower rail, her eyes round with fascination as she watched nimble brown fingers flying over taut banjo strings. Emma was so excited about the trip she refused to come to the cabin in the evening until absolute darkness veiled every possible sight on the riverboat's deck.

A short rap at the door drew her attention away from the window, and she

crossed the small cabin to the door.

"It's me, Vangie. Karl." Karl's usually cheerful tone was somber.

"Is something wrong, Karl? Is your leg paining you?"

Quickly, she threw the door open wide so that Karl could make it through the door on his crutches. He swung into the room and sat down heavily on the single chair allowed the sparsely furnished cabin, then adjusted his large body to it.

"No, the leg's as well as can be expected. It's just that I can't get used to these damn things." He propped his crutches against the wall. "First thing I'm going to do when I get to New Ulm is have Rudolph Beinhorn whittle me a new leg out of balsa wood. It can't be nearly as hard to walk around on a wooden leg as it is to try to maneuver on these godforsaken crutches. I hate the way I am now. It doesn't help at all to know that I'm only one among thousands to be sent home minus a limb. It's so goddamn permanent, too!" He smacked the still-powerful thigh above the pinned-up empty leg of his trousers. "I hate it. If only I could go back to that night. If we hadn't been so stupid, mistaking Longstreet's rebels for stragglers from General Thomas's Corps. Wolff would still be alive, and I ... I'd have my leg back."

It wasn't good for him to constantly berate himself over his brother's death, and it made Evangeline's heart ache to hear him. She'd done enough of that already for the both of them. "Karl," she tried to soothe him. "What's done is done. You did everything you could."

"Did I, Vangie? I wonder." Karl's eyes closed and he grimaced. "I keep thinking over and over again about everything that went on that night at McFarland's Gap. We were too complacent. We should have known Old Pete's men would give chase! I think if my squad had only been further up the Gap, we could have at least given Longstreet's platoon the hail of lead they deserved. Wolff and Otto didn't stand a chance the way it was. They already had forty Spencers pointed at them by the time we spotted them, and then we were afraid to open fire for fear of hitting Wolf or Otto. But they fired on us anyway, and even when I went down with my leg I cursed myself for not foreseeing something like that happening."

Evangeline gazed at him sadly, wishing he would stop torturing himself with recriminations. "Please don't blame yourself, Karl. Wolff didn't die at the Gap, remember? He died at Andersonville." Her eyes blurred with tears as she again recalled the shock and horror Otto's sorrowful letter brought. It was difficult to console Karl when she had barely begun to come to terms with her own desolation. She too wanted to rail against fate and even blamed herself for not trying harder to keep Wolff at her side in Vicksburg.

"Died in a Confederate prison. Of malaria. Of neglect, to tell the truth. Do you think that makes me feel any better? Hell no, it doesn't." Karl swiped at

his eyes with the back of his uniform sleeve. Evangeline sucked in her breath sharply. Oh, Karl. This was the first time Karl had finally allowed himself the luxury of revealing the true depth of his feelings, although he hadn't hesitated to provide a generous shoulder to her during the past week.

It hurt to see him so. She clasped his broad shoulders tightly in her arms. He was needy, at last ready to release this terrible pain he felt at his brother's loss.

"Karl," she murmured, running a flat hand over his wide, muscular shoulders in what she hoped was a reassuring caress. It was the first time she had seen Karl cry, and to tell the truth, it both pained and pleased her to know that Karl would allow her to be present during such an unmanly emotional reaction. "We have to let him go. He would have wanted that." She heard herself saying the words, but she wasn't sure she could follow her own advice. The loss was just too devastating.

"It isn't that simple. He didn't want to leave you, not for a day--and never for a lifetime. Leaving Vicksburg was the hardest thing he ever did in his life. I know that. For a while there I foolishly believed that he was just using you for sexual pleasure, or to fill some sort of lonely gap in his existence in Vicksburg, but I know now that I was wrong. He really loved you, Vangie. I can just imagine how he must have felt when he was captured, wondering if he would ever see you again."

Evangeline pressed a kiss to Karl's damp cheek and hugged him tighter. "Thank you for telling me that, Karl," she whispered. "But we can't change the past. Who knows? Maybe Wolff wouldn't have wanted us to. He understood his role in the war, and he accepted it. He knew that it might mean giving his life."

"But he didn't have you when he accepted his commission. It would have changed everything. It would have for me, at least."

Evangeline drew her head back from his shoulder to look at him. "I really don't think anything would have stood in his way, Karl. He was committed. Totally. We have to believe that, or his death will have been in vain." Again, she was saying things she wasn't even sure she believed. How could God be so cruel as to take Wolff from her? It was hard to believe there was any sort of divine motive or pat explanation such as Wolff's patriotism.

Karl sighed, a drawn-out, tired sigh that signaled he was once more in control of his emotions. "I just wish we had something to take home to Mutti. We don't even know where they buried him, damn it. Probably threw him in a trench with a hundred other corpses."

"Don't!" She couldn't bear to think of Wolff's body, the body she had loved, being tossed so carelessly in a dark, airless hole atop his dead comrades.

"Sorry. I don't know why I have to unload all this on you. You have your own pain to deal with. But I miss him so much, Vangie. Sure, there were times when we could have gladly strangled each other, but he was my brother. The best

damn brother in the world."

"He did leave a small memento, Karl." She patted her swelling belly.
"We will always have this precious reminder of him."

"True," Karl murmured.

Suddenly he reached for her and pulled her down onto his lap.

"Oh, Karl, I'm too heavy! Won't I hurt your leg?" She struggled to get up, but it wasn't easy now that she was entering the sixth month of her pregnancy.

"Don't you dare fuss about my leg! You're still light as a feather. A rounded, plump feather, of course, dearest sister-in-law, but still an attractive one." He circled her abdomen with his long, strong arms and gave her a tight, brotherly hug.

This playful, caring man was the Karl she knew. "You flatter me. I feel as big as a sternwheeler, and I still have more than three months left! Can you imagine what I'm going to look like by the end of February?"

"You'll still be very beautiful to me, Vangie," Karl said with sudden soberness, his dark blue eyes catching hers and holding them. He rubbed his palm over the rounded hump of her tummy, circling it. "I can't wait to see this little Wolff."

Tears clouded Evangeline's eyes again as she remembered the moment under the laurel oak when she and Wolff had agreed upon names for their baby. "Klaus Pierre. Or little Vivette," she murmured, the tears swelling. Why was she crying again? One would think she would soon run out of tears.

"Don't cry, Vangie. I'm here. I'll always be here."

"Th-thank you," she whispered.

"That's why I insisted that you accompany me up north, sweetheart. I want to see that my brother's child has all the advantages life has to offer." He grasped her chin and tilted it so that she was forced to look at him. "Do you understand what I'm saying?"

What exactly did he mean? There was such a strange look on his face.

"I want you to marry me, Vangie. I want to be the baby's legal father."

"M-Marry me?" She was shocked. How could Karl or anyone take Wolff's place?

"Marry you," he confirmed. "No, don't turn away. Look at me, Vangie. It's the perfect solution to your problems. The baby will have a legal father, you will have a husband, and I will have a beautiful wife and child."

Evangeline drew a long breath. "But ... but"

"But what?" Karl's hands gripped her shoulders almost fiercely.

How could she say it? "I always thought two people married for love."

"Love?" Karl laughed, a short, wry rasp. "I do love you, Vangie. Oh, perhaps not the glorious, passionate love that Wolff had for you, but I love you in my own way. You can't seem to believe that--or perhaps you choose not to--or

maybe you just don't care. I don't think you loved Quentin Thurston, yet you were willing to marry him. So why not me? As for your returning that love, can't you accept that I'm a lot like Wolff? Except for my leg, you couldn't tell us apart in the darkness of our bedroom."

"Karl, I" She didn't love him. She could never love again in the same way she loved Wolff.

"Think about it, Vangie. I love you, and I want to take care of you. And I'm sure Wolff wouldn't object."

Evangeline reluctantly turned that over in her mind. The only emotions Wolff had ever exhibited toward a relationship between Karl and her were jealousy and anger. But then, that was before she had finally consented to marry him. And Wolff himself had agreed that the two of them owed Karl a lot, and vowed that someday they would repay Karl. Was this the way she was to do it? By pledging him the rest of her life?

"I just don't know, Karl. I need time to think about it." The idea was just too new and too shocking to think about at the moment.

Karl sighed. "I want your answer soon, Vangie. I'd like for us to be very married before we get to Minnesota."

"So soon? Why?"

"Simply because no one knows that you are Wolff's widow."

"He didn't tell your family? Was he so ashamed of being married to a southerner?"

"Hardly," Karl said bemusedly. "Wolff didn't marry a southerner; he married the beautiful woman he loved. Frankly, he didn't have time to write any letters home, nor me either. We left in such a hurry after your wedding and then we were thrown into that business at Chickamauga so soon, there was no time. All they know in New Ulm is that Wolff is dead and that I'm coming home minus a leg." He paused, then drew a deep breath for courage. "Vangie, it would be my heart's desire for you to let everyone believe that I am your first husband and the father of your baby."

"Tell no one that the child is Wolff's? Not even your mother?"

He nodded. "It would be less painful if Mutti didn't have a constant reminder of Wolff. It would also prevent people from thinking that I married you out of pity and a sense of obligation. And--" He broke off.

And what? "And?" she prompted.

Karl shifted uncomfortably in his chair. "And it would spare Annaliese Schmidtke's feelings if she didn't have to be told that Wolff had married another."

Ah. Annaliese Schmidtke. Why must that woman still wield such power? She hadn't even met the woman yet.

"I'd still like to think about it, Karl. It's so sudden. I just don't know."

She glanced around the room, searching for a change in subject. "I better light the

lantern now. It's getting dark in here." She disengaged Karl's arms and rose in an ungainly fashion, stomach first and then the rest of her.

"I'll give you some time then. Not too long, however, even though I am usually a patient man. In your case I have already waited longer than any mortal man should." He too rose, his large body filling the small cabin, and propped his crutches under his arms. She opened the door for him, and before leaving he bent to brush her upraised cheek. "Remember, I'm not asking you to marry me because I feel I have to, Vangie. I'm asking you because I adore you," he murmured. "Think about it, and remember what I said."

As if she could forget.

* * * *

Much later that evening Evangeline lay in her narrow bunk, fretfully straining to identify the night sounds of the moored riverboat. There was Emma's light, even breathing from across the small cabin and the faint sound of lapping water. And in the distance, the hushed murmurs of a late-night conversation. It was late, very late, but she couldn't sleep for thinking about Karl's proposal.

Only two short months ago she had also considered marrying Karl, if only to give Wolff's baby a father and a name. Then Wolff had returned to her and Karl's suit was shoved to the background. But now the circumstances were different. Wolff had died a quick death from a virulent form of malaria in a crude shebang in Andersonville, a new but already despised, overcrowded Confederate prison. His poor stricken body had alternated between fevers, sweats and freezing until during a severe cold phase he had turned blue and ceased breathing altogether. Otto had tried in vain to warm him until the other crowded, deprived prisoners insisted that his body be carted off to the dead house before it started stinking under the hot sun. But not before they had stripped him of his much-coveted boots and the gold buttons on his frock coat, Otto railed in his letter.

Her time with Wolff had been short yet they had blazed with a wild, sweet passion that refused to fade in her memory. Never had the laurel oaks seemed so tall and sturdy, the sky so vividly blue, the beat of her heart so vibrant with life as when she was with Wolff. He was the one true love of her life, and she was sure that there would be no other. Her own heart really had no bearing on her decision of whether or not to marry Karl, for she could never truly love another man. From now on all decisions concerning her life would be made with cold, calculating logic--with the best interests of her child in mind.

But Karl--could she truly marry him, knowing that she could never offer the big, sweet man the same impassioned love that she had given his brother? Didn't he deserve more than that?

And yet Karl kept insisting that she, Evangeline, was his heart's ease, his deepest desire. If she rejected him, would she be hurting him more than she would by marrying him? Would he be better off alone than tied to a woman who

couldn't wholeheartedly return his love?

The questions whirled round and round in her mind and tormented her until the early hours of the morning, when at last she managed to fret herself into a light, uneasy sleep.

* * * *

"You finally decide to wake up now, mister? Land's sake, you slept nigh two days. We were beginning to wonder if you were ever going to wake up. No, don't shut your eyes. Stay awake for a while and keep me company."

The strange voice was low and lilting, a pleasant contralto that Wolff couldn't seem to fit to any face in his memory. It sounded familiar, though, as if this wasn't the first time he had heard the voice. He opened his eyes obediently and found himself staring into the large, avid eyes of the voice's source. She was female, about his own age, with taut, smooth skin the light tawny color of coffee that had been laced with a dollop of cream. Her hair was shoulder-length, waved by myriads of tiny gentle kinks, and her eyes were a startling light blue that provided yet another clue to the woman's bi-racial heritage.

She seemed to be waiting for some sort of response from him.

"Where am I?" he rasped. It seemed as good a place as any to start.

The woman laughed and sat down on the bed beside him. "I thought you might not know that. You were in kind of bad shape when Mauritz brought you here. You've been real sick, that's plain."

"Mauritz?"

"Mauritz, my brother. He hired out to work in the graves, you know--dig the trenches, throw the bodies in, cover them with dirt. You were in the row of corpses dumped by the wagons two nights ago."

"Corpses!"

The woman laughed. "You near killed Mauritz with fright when you groaned just as he was walking by. He thought the dead had come to life!"

"Why was I there?"

"I don't know. They must have thought you were dead. You are one lucky man, Mister ... Mister"

He ignored her attempt to identify him. He still didn't know if the woman was friend or foe. He looked around the room, noting the cracked plaster on the walls, the sparsity and plainness of the furnishings. Only the cast iron bed was large and comfortably bedecked with a red coverlet.

"Anyway, I'm glad you're awake. I didn't fancy trying to lug you off to Mauritz' bed by myself tonight." She saw the questioning look in his eyes and went on, "Mauritz is on the wagons tonight. And I need the use of my bed."

"Who are you?" he asked guardedly.

"You expect me to answer that when you won't tell me your name?" Her laugh tinkled merrily again. "Oh, I don't care. Everybody knows me anyway."

I'm Vesta."

She patted his chest reassuringly and he looked down and realized he was naked under the coverlet. "Where are my clothes?"

"Hah! What you had on wasn't worth saving, Mister. Raggedy and smelly." She wrinkled her nose. "And Mauritz is nowhere near as big as you. I'm trying to let out a pair of his trousers for you but I'm not a very good seamstress," she said with a wry smile. "You'll just have to be patient."

Wolff had so many questions. He still didn't know for sure where he was, nor whether or not he could trust Vesta and her absent brother Mauritz. But right now he would settle for a drink of water and maybe a little food. His lips were dry and his stomach was echoing emptily, as if he hadn't eaten for days.

Maybe he hadn't. He tried to recall where he had been before he had gotten sick. Yes--now he remembered. He and Otto were hunched under the crude shebang they had fashioned of four short sticks and Otto's uniform frock coat. He remembered feeling a little headachy and tired that day, then towards nightfall he remembered growing cold, so cold he thought he would never be warm again. The coldness lasted only a couple of hours, and then the fever set in, spiraling to a temperature that threatened to fry his brain. In the middle of the night he started sweating profusely, dousing his uniform in a river of perspiration. Towards morning he felt better and thought he was over the strange malady. He hadn't foreseen that it would strike again, only with much more malice and deadly intent this time. He had apparently become so ill he'd been prematurely carted off to the dead house, only to resurrect right in front of poor Mauritz.

Vesta returned with a glass and a pitcher of water, and Wolff thirstily emptied half the pitcher before he relinquished the glass to her waiting hand.

"I bet you're hungry, aren't you? You're a big man, and big men need a lot to keep them going. We don't have much, mainly what little meat I can buy and whatever Mauritz manages to steal off the officer's commissary. It's cabbage tonight."

Wolff didn't care what it was. He was ravenous, and he polished off a bowl of steaming cabbage and a chunk of brown bread in less than a minute. He felt better.

"Think you can walk to Mauritz' bed now? He'll be gone most of the night, and by then you can use my bed again."

The strange sleeping arrangements puzzled him, but he decided not to pry. He stood up, steadying himself on her shoulder until the dizzy feeling went away, and hobbled awkwardly through a small hallway and into Mauritz' tiny cubicle. It held only a narrow bed and a wooden crate full of Mauritz' clothes.

"Oh, they're here already! I got to go. You stay in here and keep quiet, you hear? If they find you here we'll all stand in front of the firing squad!" She turned and ran from the room, slamming the door behind her.

Who was here, dammit? He knelt clumsily to the keyhole in time to see Vesta welcoming three Confederate officers into the house.

The four of them stood there, the officers laughing and jesting loudly, until all of a sudden one of them grabbed Vesta around the waist and pinched her buttocks. He was surprised to see that the man's action brought no answering slap from her, only a welcoming smile as she let him paw her for a while, then led him to her recently vacated bedroom. Good Lord! Vesta was a whore for the Rebs? Then why ...?

He had to lay down, for standing up for any length of time was nigh impossible. He must have been very ill, for never could he remember feeling so weak and so unable to participate in his own care. He relieved himself and tumbled to the bed, his last waking thought of a lovely, very pregnant blacked-haired woman who awaited his return to Vicksburg. His wife Evangeline

Chapter 22

Tuesday, November 10, 1863

The Northern Dawn docked at Bellevue, Iowa on the third evening of their voyage north for a one-day stopover to take on freight and passengers. Galena, Illinois, three miles up the Mississippi and seven miles inland from the mouth of the Fever River, was the usual stopping point but the Fever River was so low that Galena could not be safely reached.

The air was becoming colder the farther north they journeyed. Evangeline stood shivering at the rail and wrapped her long cape tightly around her to ward off the chilly temperatures. But she wasn't about to retire to her cabin, because this was the first time she had seen snow. Just think--real snow!

The huge, fluffy flakes meandered lazily down from the leaden sky and she couldn't resist sticking out her tongue to taste them. To her they resembled nothing less than delightful doilies of icy lace, each painstakingly tatted by some far-off celestial tatter and thrown gaily to earth in a fit of heavenly merriment. Her gaze drifted over the peaceful, slumberous city of Bellevue above them. The hardwood forests that covered the hills surrounding Bellevue had lost their leaves, and the city seemed to be lying in naked wait for the silent flakes of snow to blanket and clothe it in winter's white finery.

She felt Karl's broad shoulder brush hers as he propped his crutches against the rail and grasped it to stabilize himself.

"Beautiful, isn't it?" he asked, turning to her. "You should at least wear a hat, Vangie," he admonished her gently. "I don't want you getting wet and catching a chill."

"I won't be out here that long. Oh, Karl, it is so beautiful! I just couldn't resist touching it and tasting it for the very first time."

"I'm glad you like it because it's plentiful in New Ulm all winter long."

"I can't imagine that. Emma will love it. I wish Jules could see it, too."

"He'd like it too, would he? I've learned to appreciate snow, although I don't always like it. Snow's good in a way, because it provides the necessary spring moisture for the soil--and it makes one want to snuggle cozily in front of the parlor stove every evening, roasting hazelnuts and cracking them and singing old German songs until the fire burns low."

He grasped Evangeline's waist and pulled her to him with gentle strength. "Vangie," he growled. "Do you have an answer for me?"

Truly, Evangeline had thought of nothing else since Karl had asked her. She had weighed every option and considered every angle. For her child's sake, she could not turn down Karl's offer. Never had she dreamed that she would be marrying another, but this would be a marriage that would benefit both parties. Of course, Karl could never take Wolff's place, but he was a suitable if pale substitute.

She put on the brightest smile possible under the circumstances. "I will marry you, Karl."

Karl exhaled loudly, then clasped her cheeks between his palms and kissed her square on her frosty, cold-reddened lips.

"Tomorrow?" he whispered eagerly against her cheek. "The riverboat captain can perform the ceremony."

"Oh, impatient man," she said with a smile. "At least allow me a day to get ready."

"Thursday, then. Thursday will be a perfect day for a wedding. We should at least be in Minnesota by then."

"Is that important?" queried Evangeline.

"No, it just makes it all the more perfect to be married in my own home state." His hands moved inside Evangeline's cape and rested lightly on her expanding waistline. She could feel them tremble against her hips. "God, I'm shaking, Vangie. I never thought I'd see this day. What made you finally decide to accept?"

Evangeline shrugged. "Not any one single thing, I don't think. I just finally accepted your conclusion that life must go on, and all your reasons were very persuasive. And I like and respect you, Karl. A lot." Of course, it wouldn't be a marriage of great passion and love, but her deepest emotions had been forever promised to Wolff.

It wasn't a vow of undying love, but it would do--for now. "I promise you won't regret this," Karl said, lightly rubbing her spine with a gentle hand before drawing her close once again. "Let me hold you, sweetheart. It isn't every day a man hears such a wonderful 'yes'. Oh, Vangie, I adore you," he murmured, his lips wandering a sweet-scented path through her sparkling, snowflake-embellished hair.

* * * *

A large, strong hand was shaking Wolff awake in the blackness of the night, but he desperately longed to sleep.

"Wake up, my man," said a low voice in non-threatening but firm tones. "I got to get some rest, too. You can go back to Vesta's bed now."

Vesta's bed? Wolff shook off the heavy mantle of sleep and tried to get his bearings. Oh yes. The small house of Vesta and Mauritz somewhere near Andersonville. And this must be Mauritz. The man loomed tall at his bedside.

"Sorry," Wolff muttered, then sat up and waited until the room stopped spinning.

"Here. Let me help you," offered Mauritz. "Put your arm over my shoulder. It's a damn sight easier than trying to carry you," he added.

But Vesta was already in her bed when the two of them finally made the door. It didn't seem to deter Mauritz, however. He threw back the covers and swatted the empty space next to her. "Here you go," he declared.

Sleep with Vesta? "B-but ..."

"Listen, my man. Where do you think you been sleeping? There's only two beds in this house, and Vesta's is the only one big enough for two. Besides, you were cold and shaking most of the time. Vesta's used to warming up bodies."

Vesta had warmed him? Vange wouldn't be happy to hear that.

"Get in, man! I need my sleep!"

Wolff gingerly got in and slid way over to the edge of the bed, and he heard Mauritz give another low chuckle. "A man would think you'd never slept with a woman before, soldier, from the way you act." Then his footsteps receded across the hall.

Wolff lay awake listening to the soft, feminine snuffles emanating from Vesta. What strange livelihoods this pair of mulatto siblings had. Both provided services to the prison camp, one as a laborer, the other as a prostitute. Vesta was an attractive woman, to be sure, with her willowy body and tawny skin, but a prostitute nevertheless. He shifted to his back and stared at the ceiling for a while, willing sleep to come but finding it elusive.

His mind wandered to ponder what his wife was doing tonight. He pictured her as he loved to, sprawled nude and erotically displayed on her canopy bed. First thing when he got back to Vicksburg, he would sneak in through her veranda doors, creep soundlessly up to the bed, then ravish her with deep, passionate kisses, all the while running his hands over her Good Lord, he missed her. And, hell, not only the wonderful sex blessed finally by marriage, but the closeness the two of them shared in the short time they had had together. He lay staring at the ceiling, calling up Vange's image and remembering with pleasure every little physical detail and every whim and vagary of her vibrant personality until sleep finally claimed his tired body.

He awoke with a start. A warm, delicate hand was caressing his male nipple, and his back was delightfully warm, as warm as if a female body was pressed against it tightly in spoon fashion.

"Vange?"

"Vange? Who is this woman you keep calling for?" a low, contralto voice asked good-naturedly.

Then he remembered where he was. "Vange is my wife," he muttered.

"Your wife?" Vesta sat up abruptly, heedless that the coverlet fell away to

expose her pert, dark-tipped breasts. "So you got a wife. Don't they all?" she added in afterthought.

"Vange is with child." As if that would mean anything to her.

"I figured you for a potent man," she said coyly, again swirling a long, sharp fingernail in the blond hair surrounding his nipple.

Good God. The woman serviced at least three randy men last night and still wanted to go around again?

"I ... can't, Ms. Vesta."

"You mean you're still too sick?"

"Yes," Wolff replied faintly. Actually, his lower body didn't seem all that sick right at the moment, but this woman was not Vange.

"Maybe you'll feel better tonight," Vesta offered.

"Maybe," Wolff replied noncommittally. He didn't dare antagonize the woman and risk being sent back to camp.

* * * *

But by nightfall, his headache and increasing feeling of debility made him aware that he was sliding quickly into another bout of malaria. Ten o'clock found him in Mauritz's bed, heaped with blankets yet still shivering mightily. By midnight he was burning hot and thirsty, then at two a.m. sweating profusely. When Mauritz came home, he could barely stumble to Vesta's bed, even with Mauritz's help. He sank willingly next to Vesta and knew no more.

* * * *

Vesta woke him at noon. "You better tell me your name, Mister, if you're going to die on me. This Vange ain't gonna like not knowing what happened to you. It's not right to let a woman wonder, you know. She has to be able to grieve over you."

"I'm still alive, aren't I?" Wolff responded grumpily.

"Barely," said Vesta, grinning. "Enough to be damn irritable, I guess."

Wolff gave her an apologetic smile. "My name is Wolffmann Ulbricht, and my wife Evangeline Gauthier Ulbricht is from Vicksburg."

"You a southerner?" Vesta crowed. "Then what're you doing in Andersonville?"

Wolff was silent.

"You aren't a southerner. You're a Yank. Look here, Mister Wolffman Ulbricht, your uniform was blue, not gray. And let me tell you something else so you don't commence worrying about us knowing you ain't Secesh. It don't matter a whit to Mauritz and me that you're a Yankee. Between us we couldn't raise enough respect for Jefferson B. Davis to float the Stars and Bars over Richmond."

"Then why ...?"

"Why do I whore for those Confederate bastards? Let's say I take pleasure in hearing them beg," she said with a proud smile. "I have to earn a living

somehow, white man, and it isn't easy for a mulatto. Mauritz and I are freed slaves."

Thank heaven, Wolff breathed. He'd somehow reached the right place. "You'll help me escape, then?" he rasped.

"Escape? You aren't in any shape to escape."

"But I have to get back to Union soil."

Vesta looked at him resignedly. "I suppose you think you're in an all-fired hurry, too. But I refuse to help you until you're well again. And I'll be the one who decides that. Agreed?"

"Agreed. But I am in a hurry, Vesta. I have to get back to my company, see whether my brother is all right. I need to write a long letter to my wife, too."

"Hah. Not too much chance of any letter going north out of here, unless you can somehow get it in the camp mail. They don't let much go out except a few death notices. General Grant would be at the gates in a minute if he knew how these poor men were being treated."

"Then I need to get somewhere where I can send one," he emphasized. "You see, my wife is going to have a baby. I need to let her know I'm all right, that I'm thinking of her."

Vesta sighed. "You're some committed husband, Wolffmann Ulbricht. Your wife is a lucky woman. You know, when I first saw you, even so sick and all, I thought you were a big, handsome devil. I wouldn't even have charged you a thing, Billy Yank. After all, I have to have my own pleasure, and that's worlds apart from what I do to earn a living."

"I'll take that as a compliment."

"You better. And the offer still stands. Any time you need me, Yank--I'm willing."

"Thank you," he nodded, honored but wary. It had been a while since he had made love to Vange, but finding a substitute wasn't something he planned to do.

"Now we better see about filling that bottomless pit you call a stomach," she said. "Sorry, but it's cabbage again. There isn't much variety this time of year."

"Cabbage will be wonderful. I can't remember when cabbage has tasted so good."

"Go on with you!" Vesta smacked his shoulder playfully and left the bedroom.

* * * *

That evening he did not exhibit any signs of an impending attack, so he spent the evening lazing about on Mauritz's bed. He had tilted a chair under the doorknob, so he wasn't really worried about intruders. He lay on his back, listening to the muted sounds of passion emanating from the room across the hall

and wondering what it would be like to be in this particular rebel officer's shoes. The exotic, blue-eyed Vesta, with her small, tilted breasts, her lush hips and her demanding ways would be a handful for any man.

He heard Vesta's low, tinkling laughter and then heard her demand, "Say please."

He strained to hear the low-pitched answer but couldn't.

"Say 'Please, Mistress Vesta!'" Her voice was sharper, more demanding. This time he heard a male voice respond with a whine.

He heard a resounding slap, and right away wondered if the man had struck Vesta. Dared he go to her aid?

Then he heard her laugh again, louder, as if she were enjoying herself greatly. The man with her was pleading with rapid, muted words that he couldn't make out for the echo of slaps and cries. Soon he heard no more pleading, only strange thumps and squeaks and an occasional masculine yelp of pain.

Wolff smiled broadly. Vesta had her own unique way of extracting revenge and bestowing humiliation on her former captors. Vesta was truly a Union soldier of the highest caliber.

Chapter Twenty-Three

Thursday, November 12, 1863

On Thursday evening the Northern Dawn steamed into frigid Lake Pepin, a spot where the Mississippi widened to span nearly four miles for a long, thirty-five mile stretch. Captain Alford, the Northern Dawn's captain, was pleased to reach the lake near dusk, for Lake Pepin possessed rocky cliffs and dangerous capes which were easier to navigate in calm, moonlit waters than in the stronger winds of daylight.

Karl, fretting that the Captain would have to forego the ceremony for tonight in order to captain the vessel properly, went to the pilothouse to seek him out.

"The Northern Dawn knows its own way through Lake Pepin by now, and I trust my navigator thoroughly," Captain Alford reassured him. "I expect to preside over your wedding immediately after dinner as planned, and dinner will be served at precisely 8:00 p.m. In fact, I was just leaving to dress for the occasion."

Karl had been so wrapped up in making sure everything went smoothly he forgot his own preparations. And he wanted to be as pleasing to Vangie's eye as humanly possible tonight.

* * * *

Evangeline had her own nervousness to contend with. She had only a few dresses left which could be let out enough to fit her blossoming abdomen, and the fanciest of those would have to do as a wedding dress for her second wedding within two month's time. The dress was a deep forest green with a full, hooped skirt, a very low, off-the-shoulder neckline, and five tiers of ruffles bordering both. The waist was supposed to be cinched with a wide green satin ribbon, but Evangeline opted to weave the ribbon into the base of the long ringlets gathered at the back of her head.

"Will you give me a hand with these confounded shoe buttons, Emma?" Evangeline asked, irritated over her inability to reach her toes any more.

"Sure, Vangie. You sure are getting fat! How Karl gonna hug you?"

"Not fat, Emma! Rounded. And I'm not any fatter than Fayette was when she had Lacey."

"Yeah, but you ain't ready to have this baby for a long time yet."

"Thanks for reminding me. I'm sure I'll make a very lovely bride with this

thickened waistline. Do you think people will wonder about me getting married looking like this?"

Emma giggled. "Some. But Karl, he don't care. He likes you anyway."

"I hope so. Did I remember to tell you I won't be sleeping in here for the remainder of the trip? I'll leave my baggage in here, though. You won't be afraid here all alone, will you?"

"Nah. Ain't no one to be afraid of here. These Yankees are all pretty nice."

Evangeline's mind fled back to that day in May when Wolff had come bursting into her house. She hadn't thought much of Yankees then. Oh, drat it! She was doing something she had sworn not to do tonight, and that was to think of Wolff. Karl deserved that much, at least.

* * * *

Wolff felt well enough to be up and around for a short while early in the evening before Vesta's guests arrived. He surveyed the dwelling's surroundings through the windows and discovered that railroad tracks ran parallel to the house only a short distance away. This was probably the very same railroad that he and Otto had been shipped into Andersonville on that late September day that now seemed so long ago.

"How often does the train run?" he asked Vesta casually.

"Every other day, 'bout."

"When's the next one due?" he pressed her.

"Wolff," she chided him gently. "The train is usually full of reserve troops going north to Chattanooga. It would be way too risky."

"Even if I wasn't a Yankee? What if I was a Confederate?"

"Now how would you be mistaken for a Confederate?"

"Mauritz has access to the bodies coming from the guard hospital, doesn't he? Aren't they usually buried in their uniforms?"

"I suppose," Vesta sniffed. "But where you gonna find one your size? The Johnny Rebs these days ain't even full grown yet."

"You do have some seamstress ability." He pointed to the makeshift shirt and trousers she had altered for him. "Can't you take two and put them together?"

This tickled Vesta's funny bone. "You'd look kind of strange with four legs and four arms. They wouldn't let you on the train for sure."

"When is the next train due?"

"You asked me that already."

"I'm going to be on it." Wolff informed her obstinately.

"You stubborn Yank. I bet you will. And I may as well help you, because your mind is made up, isn't it? There's a train tonight, but that's too soon. Maybe we can aim for the one night after next."

Wolff heaved a sigh of relief. "Thanks, Vesta," he said. "I don't know

how I'll ever repay you."

"There's a way," replied Vesta, twining a dark curl around her finger and bestowing him with a lazy smile. "But I don't suppose you're interested, Billy Yank."

* * * *

The forward dining cabin was nearly full when Evangeline finally deemed herself presentable enough to accompany the patiently waiting Karl to dine. Captain Alford greeted them and directed the steward to seat them at the captain's table, where he soon joined them.

Evangeline gazed in awe at the array of meats and vegetables which smothered their small table. Such decadence these Yankees displayed. Had they no pity for the plight of deprived southerners? Why, this food could feed a large southern family for a week!

"Is something wrong, Vangie?" Karl asked, frowning.

"No, no. It's a rather impressive feast, isn't it?"

Captain Alford, a middle-aged, white-haired man nattily dressed in a long double breasted jacket with two rows of big gold buttons, a stand-up collar and wrap-around tie, smiled at her. "We like to impress our guests with our hospitality. These are merely the preliminary courses, my dear."

How was she to do justice to such a feast? She wasn't that hungry. Her stomach had been doing flip-flops all day thinking of the impending ceremony.

She took tiny portions of everything and pushed the food that she took around on her plate until she realized that Karl was eyeing her from across the table.

"Wedding jitters, Vangie?" He cocked a concerned eyebrow. He was wearing his short navy-blue dress frock coat, golden epaulets at the shoulders, and the sharply creased, sky-blue dress trousers of his infantry unit. He looked very handsome and dashing, indeed, almost as handsome as Wolff had looked that long ago wedding day in the ballroom.

Stop that! She mentally shook herself and concentrated on enjoying the food and the evening. "A few," she admitted. "But I'll get over them."

"Good. I'm a little nervous myself."

The white-coated steward removed most of the food on the table and progressively replaced it with countless varieties of breads, biscuits, and pies, and when those were sampled, placed no less than thirteen different desserts in front of each passenger. Several varieties of custards, jellies, and creams of various colors and flavors were served in slender glass goblets, along with puddings and ice creams.

At last Karl sat back and patted his stomach. "I couldn't eat another bite. That was splendid, Alford. A wedding feast to remember."

Alford smiled his appreciation, and then rose to announce that the

wedding ceremony would soon take place, if everyone would please be quiet. Evangeline found that she was nearly frozen to her seat with nervousness. She wished that she had been able to down a few snifters of her father's bourbon before the ceremony.

Karl hopped around the table on his crutches and rather clumsily helped her to rise and move in front of the large painted mural that depicted St. Anthony Falls. It was strange to feel him bind her tightly to his side, as if he feared she might try to escape.

There was restrained clapping and cheering as Captain Alford opened his Bible and cleared his throat.

The ceremony was short and sweet, and Evangeline repeated her vows in a barely audible voice that shook with nervousness. She couldn't help comparing the way she felt now with the way she felt when her beloved Wolff's eyes had twinkled at her over the chaplain's outstretched Bible. Karl seemed so solemn. He was taking this very seriously. The only indication he gave that he was aware of her presence was the continuous squeeze of his arm at her waist.

Captain Alford closed the Bible with a snap. "You may kiss the bride," he indicated, nodding at Karl expectantly.

There were oohs and aaahs from the audience as Karl slowly turned Evangeline to him and drew her into his arms. His face drew nearer, nearer and she was sure she would faint from the closeness and lack of air in the crowded cabin.

"It will be all right, Vangie," Karl whispered against her cheek. "Haven't I promised you that?"

His lips descended to hers, enveloping them with a warm fullness. She inhaled the masculine scent of Karl, one that brought to her mind the strong flavor of grapes in her father's small winery. The kiss was chaste, yet Karl seemed reluctant to break it. Finally he raised his head to rousing applause and shouts of encouragement. He grinned at Evangeline. "I'm a little out of practice at such things," he said ruefully. "But I promise to improve."

Then he leaned down to whisper softly in her ear, "I'm honored, Vangie. And I'm damn proud to take my brother's place as your husband."

Evangeline smiled at him with misty eyes and silently vowed to do her best to make him happy.

* * * *

The toasts to the newlyweds seemed to go on and on, and Evangeline was becoming very tired of smiling and nodding. She was ready to retire, but Karl was enjoying himself too much yet. She marveled at the large number of whiskeys he had consumed, each straight up and four fingers deep, and yet he didn't give any sign that the whiskey affected him at all. She'd heard that Germans had a high tolerance level for alcohol, but he must soon reach that level

at this rate of consumption. Perhaps he was drinking so heavily because he felt the need to deaden his mind when it came to the marriage bed. The thought was disturbing.

At last Karl reached over and patted her thigh. "You've been so quiet. You must be tired, sweetheart. Shall we retire to our room?"

"I thought you'd never ask," Evangeline responded, a trifle grumpily for a brand new bride.

Karl merely shrugged off her irritation. "At least I've got you looking forward to our retiring now," he said, grinning. "Shall we?" He offered her his arm, which was quite silly, since he needed it badly to propel himself around on his crutches. Evangeline noted that he was just a tad unsteady on his feet as they left the forward cabin for Karl's.

She opened the door for him and quickly lit the lantern. She had never been in Karl's cabin before, and its smallness gave her a touch of claustrophobia.

She sat down on the bed and tested it softness. "Good heavens, this bed is small, Karl. I don't see how we'll both fit in it!"

"We'll manage somehow," drawled Karl, starting to unbutton his frock coat. Was it her imagination, or were his eyelids drooping, his fingers just a little clumsy?

"Hell. Unbutton me, Vangie. I want you to undress me on our wedding night. And I want to undress you." He was definitely slurring now. He must have been fortifying himself in order to make love to her.

With nervous fingers Evangeline obliged him. First the frock coat, then the stockings and boots, and lastly the trousers. When at last he stood, casting a huge, naked shadow in the flickering lantern light, he sat down on the bed and drew Evangeline in front of him.

"My turn," he said hoarsely. "Christ, Vangie. This moment has been forever in coming." He turned her so that her back was to him and set to the buttons down her back. It took him an inordinately long time, but the dress finally gapped open enough for him to slide it down to her feet. His gaze swept her as she stood in her petticoats and lace-edged chemise.

"None of those damnable stays," he commented, seemingly pleased.

"I'm too far along for stays." She shivered as his hand found the ties to her chemise.

"Ach Gott," Karl groaned abruptly as her chemise fell at her feet. "Look at you." She tossed her hair back for courage and waited his touch.

Karl's hand went to her breast, and he ran a tentative fingertip over one swollen, blue-veined orb. "You're lovely, sweetheart, more than I imagined."

That was an odd statement, Evangeline thought. He had seen her naked before, had even made love to her before that one night that she thought she was dreaming. "It isn't like this is our first time together, Karl," she reminded him

gently.

Karl looked up. Why did she say that? When she had admitted to Jules that Karl could possibly be her baby's father, he thought she was merely trying to save his feelings in front of Wolff. He had no idea how to respond. He decided to wait until later to delve into the reason for her erroneous memory.

He drew her down onto his lap, and the sudden thrust of his erection against her bare buttocks made her pale. "You're shaking, Vangie. There's no need to be afraid. I'll be very careful."

It wasn't that. She knew Karl well enough to know he wouldn't hurt her. It was just that--that this was her first time with anyone since Wolff, and it was damn hard to pretend passion where there was none. What if Karl saw through her? She had to try harder, that was all.

Her hands cupped his smooth cheeks, her lightly trembling fingers seeking the outline of his broad Aryan cheekbones, his noble nose, his strong, proud jaw. It was a face that was dear and familiar to her, but the essence of the man behind it was not.

Karl caught her hand and pressed a kiss to her palm. "Douse the lantern for me, will you Vangie?" he whispered, as if counting on the veil of darkness to hide all his differences in his new wife's eyes--and hers in his.

When she climbed back aboard the bed, Karl was stretched out full-length, and she lay down beside him in the narrow space remaining. Karl turned to her and caressed the high mound of her stomach. "We have to be careful of this little fella, don't we? Nothing too energetic, I understand. I doubt that I'll have any trouble obeying that without my leg," he offered.

"I trust you, Karl."

"Good. Come here, Vangie. Cuddle up against my chest for a while. I just want to hold you first."

It felt strangely comfortable and right to lie within the circle of Karl's arms like this. Evangeline yawned, and might have fallen asleep were it not for the insistent male hardness pressed against her buttocks.

A minute or two passed before she felt Karl's large hand tentatively touch her breast. He cupped it, weighing its new fullness, then began stroking the nipple with lazy, indolent strokes.

"I've heard that these things are very sensitive when a woman is pregnant," Karl murmured, his breath a warm zephyr on her cheek. "I wonder if a woman's response is heightened all together. Wouldn't I be a lucky man?"

She wondered that too, for suddenly the tips of her nipples had hardened into diamonds. He rolled her nipple between his thumb and forefinger, pinching her gently in rhythm to mimic the suckling of a babe.

"Ohh ...," Evangeline moaned.

"Exquisite," Karl murmured. One hand left her breast to explore the rest of

her body.

Karl's languid strokes gradually lengthened to include her belly and upper thighs, and suddenly he was stoking a smoldering fire in the pit of her abdomen into glowing, rising sheets of flame. She was shocked that he could arouse such feelings in her.

He rose on an elbow and leaned over her to take a diamond-tipped nipple into his mouth, suckling the ready fluid of pregnancy from her breast with hard, tugging sucks that elongated her small nipples almost painfully. Hearing his grunt of pleasure mingled with her own, Evangeline melted, and the sharp erotic tugs shot rivers of flame to her pelvis.

"Karl! Oh!" she gasped. She hadn't expected to feel this way.

"I promised you'd like it, didn't I?" he muttered, and moved to her other breast to fan the now-raging flame. Evangeline groped blindly for the instrument of pleasure he had in his possession, the strictly male tool that could ease her tormented nerve endings.

Finding it rigidly upright against his abdomen, her fingers stretched around its tip and slid down to its base, then back up. Karl froze, and Evangeline realized triumphantly she had seriously damaged his control.

"Got to have you now, Vangie," he whispered. "Over you go." To her surprise, he rolled her deftly onto her stomach and slid over her to poise himself at her buttocks.

"What ..?"

"Shhhh, sweetheart. Just a way of making it more comfortable for you."

Sweet Lord! How did he know these things?

She felt him cup her breasts from behind, fondling their sensitive tips until she thought she would cry out with the pleasure of it. Of their own volition, her buttocks rose and thrust back against him, longing for his entry. She could feel the swollen tip of him poised at her entrance.

"Ich liebe dich, Vangie," Karl groaned, grasping her breasts tightly and leaning into her.

Those were Wolff's words. Words he had gasped out when he had-- Evangeline froze. Oh Wolff! How could she betray him this way?

Her muscles tightened in spasm, and Karl, still poised rigidly against her, felt the change in her.

"Relax, honey," he whispered. "I'll be gentle."

He might be gentle, but he could never be Wolff. No! Her body grew even more rigid.

Karl tried once more to enter her, unsuccessfully. He was surprised to find her muscles so tightly contracted.

"You've got to help me, Vangie. Loosen up." His fingers found her and with difficulty he slid a probing finger into her.

"Ouch!"

"Sorry! What's wrong, Vangie?"

"N-nothing."

"Don't lie to me. I'm your husband, remember?"

"I'm sorry, Karl."

"You were enjoying this, sweetheart. I know you were. What happened?"

How could she tell him that the ghost of her dead husband had reared his handsome blond head and spoke to her through his brother's mouth, making her unable to complete this act?

Roughly, Karl flipped her over and looked into her eyes. "Damn you, Vangie. It's Wolff, isn't it? You were thinking of Wolff."

She sniffled a little, then nodded. Why lie to him?

Karl thrust her away from him as if she were on fire, then rolled to his back and threw his arm over his eyes. Evangeline sat up, desperately sorry that it had turned out this way. The sight of him made her heart ache.

"I'm so sorry, Karl," she whispered.

"That's the last thing I want to hear right now," he gritted. "I was stupid to think this would work, wasn't I?"

"No! No, Karl. We'll make it work. I'll try harder." A tear slid down her cheek.

"Yeah, sure. If you have to try, perhaps I don't want you. There are other willing women in New Ulm."

"But we're married now, Karl."

"Am I supposed to go without sex? Without love? Even Wolff wouldn't condemn me to that sort of life. Wolff, wherever you are, dear brother, you win again. Do you hear me, you son of a bitch? You win!"

He turned on his side away from her and gave her his back. Soon, aided by his copious consumption of whiskey, he fell into a deep, dreamless sleep, while Evangeline lay awake for hours, wondering if it was at all possible to continue this relationship with Karl. She still longed for Wolff's body, for Wolff's passion, so much that it was affecting her physical reaction to Karl. How could she overcome this barrier, short of pushing her feelings for Wolff in a box and locking them away? Could she do it in order to save her marriage? And would she be a traitor to Wolff's memory if she allowed herself to enjoy Karl's lovemaking? Her new life contained Karl, not Wolff. By morning, she had resolved to focus on Karl and the future. It was time to move on.

Chapter Twenty-Four

Friday, November 13, 1863

When dawn broke, Evangeline eased herself quietly from her unwelcoming marriage bed and dressed, daring to glance only a time or two at Karl's big body sprawled under the quilt.

With the light of day came reason, and the cold, hard realization that her marriage night had been a disaster because she foolishly let thoughts of her dead husband overrun her emotions. Foolish, indeed, she chided herself, given the chance she had of securing a bright, happy future for her child and a peaceful existence for herself.

And she couldn't blame Karl for any of it, except for daring to marry her. What a fool she'd been--she could grow to love him.

She closed the door silently behind her and moved to the rail where the cold, crisp Minnesota air helped to revive her fading spirits. A thin blanket of snow covered the cliff tops rising to either side of the slowly moving vessel, and she saw smoke curling in the distance as they passed a still-somnolent town in her new home state. Karl said yesterday that they would probably arrive in St. Paul Saturday--tomorrow--and after an overnight hotel stay begin the final leg of their journey.

But would Karl still tolerate her company as his wife? Already he was talking of seeing other women, and she was sure there were lawyers in St. Paul who could annul his failed marriage and set him free very quickly. Perhaps he would send her home to Vicksburg on the first boat south. And how would she explain everything to Jules?

* * * *

Wolff lay on his back, dreaming of Vange and some rare, sexual pleasure she had devised and was trying out on him. He lay still and waiting beneath her, his breath bated and his masculine shaft pulsing with need as she rubbed her pert breasts against his chest and whispered odd, ardent commands against his cheek. He lay poised, waiting with lush, erotic thoughts for the moment when she would sink slowly down onto his length as she had that day in the library.

She must have sensed his need, for abruptly he felt her lower herself onto him. She was warm and moist, yet the feel of her was different, somehow.

She shifted her weight to clutch his shoulders with sharp, pointed talons and an upturned nipple prodded his lips. Talons? And had Vange's breasts

changed that much in the two months he had been gone? Ah, hell--it was only a dream. How could he expect his memory to reconstruct Vange with complete perfection? He opened his mouth and obligingly laved the small, demanding breast until it was drawn and taut with need, and Vange moaned low in her throat.

Thoroughly aroused now, he willed the delicious, sensual dream to continue. She sank down further until he was buried to the hilt and as she closed around him in a practiced, muscular embrace, a groan erupted from his lips. Oh, Vange. How did you manage to take all of me like that?

Abruptly he thrust upward, grabbing her hips to steady himself, for he was about to release two months worth of abstinence. But wait--mustn't let that happen yet. Got to please Vange first, he reminded himself, striving for some semblance of a controlled upward stroke. But Vange impatiently increased the pace, uncharacteristically riding him like one would an untamed stallion until he was forced to abandon himself to her demands. Fists full of his hair, she rode him hard, with shocking, bone-jarring jolts and fast friction and a final shout of "Whooo-eee, Yank!" that brought him all too quickly to a wild, thrilling explosion of seed.

Damn! The climax of his dream brought him fully awake--and aware that he might have actually done something he hadn't done since his early days of puberty. He calmed his body gradually, recalling with a grain of humor the dream's peculiar quality of reality. But imagine Vange shrieking "Whooo-eee, Yank!" No, she wouldn't. She'd cry out "Wolff!". That got him every time, when she called out his name as he gifted her with release. No "Whooo-eee, Yank!" for her.

Wolff eyes snapped open in realization. Astride him sat Vesta, her half-closed sapphire eyes glazed with fulfillment as she clung to his shoulders with long, sharp fingernails.

"Well done, Yank," she declared in a satisfied whisper.

* * * *

Karl avoided Evangeline the remainder of the day, and she didn't see him until dinner when he and she were forced to dine at the same table or else set idle minds to wondering and gossiping tongues to wagging. He looked drawn and tired, and responded only in monosyllables when neighboring diners attempted to draw him into a conversation. Most attributed it to overexertion, for land's sake--the man had just been married last night.

He refused to meet Evangeline's eyes, and that bothered her. She wanted to apologize to him, to tell him that she realized she had acted poorly and would solemnly vow to do better. Of course, she had said those very things last night, but he hadn't been willing to listen then either. What was she to do? She sighed, and pushed her food around her plate again until the white-aproned waiter finally took pity on her and removed it.

Captain Alford announced that a special treat was in store for the passengers tonight. Ned Kendall, a talented and renowned cornetist, would play selections in the forward cabin tonight for the pleasure of all listening.

A tall, auburn-haired man with steel-gray eyes stepped to the front of the room and removed a well-worn cornet from a scuffed velvet-lined case. Silently he flexed his fingers, pursed his lips and blew through them, then put the horn to his lips. The crowd waited, breathless with anticipation, and he did not disappoint them. A rollicking burst of sound split the air as Ned took them on a gay, wild ride up two octaves of the scale and down again, hitting every flat and sharp emphatically, as though unwilling to settle for the boredom of common notes. He was wonderful. Evangeline sighed, following his playing with avid interest, for music was something she loved dearly. He titillated the audience with opera selections, then hymns, then wound up his one-man concert with sentimental favorites such as "Home, Sweet Home" and "Annie Laurie". As his notes soared, then sank, so did Evangeline's spirits. His final selection, the Reverend D.H.L. Webster's "Lorena", brought her to tears as she silently mouthed the words and thought dejectedly of Wolff;

"Thy heart was always true to me;
A duty, stern and pressing, broke
The tie which linked my soul with thee."

As the final melancholy notes died, Evangeline realized that tears were rolling down her cheeks. Ashamed, she looked around to see if anyone had noticed and felt herself snared by Karl's midnight-blue gaze. He was staring at her with undisguised irritation, a look that seemed to say that he found her open display of emotion to be quite distasteful.

Cheeks blazing, she met his gaze boldly. Let him stare. Let him frown and disapprove all he wanted. She couldn't change the way she felt. She had been Wolff's wife first, widowed only two short months, and he still held a giant portion of her heart in his cold, dead fist. If Karl couldn't live with that for at least the time it took to heal, she didn't want him either. Let him put that in his non-existent pipe and smoke it! Angrily she rose and fled to Emma's room.

* * * *

The unfamiliar gray uniform fit well enough to pass a not-too-close inspection, Wolff decided, regarding himself in the cracked, faded mirror in Vesta's room. Vesta had worked on it all day, lengthening the trousers and sleeves and letting out the seams in the jacket. Wonder of wonders, the uniform still held the poor dead Confederate's enlistment papers, a stroke of luck that boded well for Wolff's planned escape. If only he could make it close enough to walk into the rebel-besieged city of Chattanooga, he would be all right.

"You make a mighty fine Johnny Reb, soldier," said Vesta, entering the

room with swaying hips, clad only in thin, uncorseted muslin. "I'd almost believe you might have a chance if I thought you could keep your mouth closed the whole trip. Your Yankee accent will give you away, you know."

Wolff frowned. Full of barely disguised sexual fervor, Vesta had been dogging him like a bee to a flower since that little accident in her bed.

"And you sure as hell better not go to sleep. You hold too many conversations with your wife every night," Vesta said good-humoredly.

Wolff had to give that to her. She was certainly good-natured about it all, even though he had virtually ignored her since this morning's fiasco.

"Tonight's your last night here, Yank."

"Yes," he muttered.

Vesta placed her hands on her hips. "Oh, for heaven's sake! Brighten up! I'm not going to force you to pleasure me again. You can sleep on the floor for all I care. You're gonna need your sleep for the trip."

He breathed a little sigh of relief, but not so she could see it.

* * * *

Evangeline slept in Emma's room that night, and the next morning tried to ignore Emma's puzzled looks. But when Emma took to complaining loudly about how crowded the cabin had grown, she caved in and tried to explain the predicament she found herself in.

"It didn't work out with Karl, Emma," she said, frowning. "I tried, I really did, but I guess I still love Wolff too much to have enough love left over for Karl. I don't know what's going to become of us, either, because Karl is not speaking to me."

"Will he leave us on the boat?" Emma asked worriedly. "We don't know where to go without him."

"I hope he wouldn't be that cruel, sweetheart. But we must be prepared for anything."

A knock sounded at the door, and when Emma flung it open, Evangeline was surprised to see a rumpled and tired-looking Karl standing there propped on one ungainly crutch.

"May I come in?"

Emma looked to Evangeline for guidance. She nodded stiffly.

"Emma, may I please have a minute alone with Vangie?" he asked. Emma gladly slipped from the cabin.

Evangeline sat down on the lone chair while Karl sank heavily onto her bed. He looked positively careworn. His eyes were rimmed with red and his jaw was lightly stubbled with gold. Hadn't he been sleeping either?

He rasped, "We'll be docking soon. Is your baggage ready?"

"Emma and I have our things ready, yes."

"Good. I'll find a steward to carry it out for you."

Evangeline painstakingly rearranged a fold of her skirt. "Where will our baggage be going?"

"Why, with us, of course. What did you think?"

"I wasn't sure. I thought it might be going back to Vicksburg."

Karl's nostrils flared. "Is that where you want it to go?"

Evangeline studied the floor. He wasn't making this easy on her. If only he'd give her some sort of encouragement!

"Damn it Vangie. Will you look at me? I'm trying to carry on a conversation with you. We need to talk."

Now it was Evangeline's turn to flare up. "I thought we were through talking. You made that very plain to me yesterday."

"Vangie, I was hurt. Couldn't you see that? What did you expect when you made it very plain to me that I can never replace my brother's affections in your heart? Christ almighty, that hurt! You can't know how much."

"I tried to apologize. You refused to listen."

"Only because I feared what you were going to say. You can apologize all you want, Vangie, but it isn't the same as hearing 'I want to be with you, Karl.'"

She looked at him, stricken.

"But I've come to terms with that. I realize I can live without hearing that." He leaned forward and looked intently at her. "I laid awake last night thinking about Wolff and what he would have wanted. I'm ready to put aside my stubborn pride. I don't care who you'd rather be sleeping with, whose name you cry out when we make love, as long as I can be there with you." He searched her face. "I want to make this work."

Evangeline cleared her throat huskily. "I think you're a wonderful, caring man, Karl Ulbricht, to love me enough to accept me, imperfect as I am."

"Vangie, you don't have to say that."

"I want to, Karl. I love you for being the way you are. It hurt me very badly too to see you so pained yesterday. And if you are willing to put up with my grieving over your brother for a time, I'm willing to give you that opportunity."

Karl reached for her hand and drew it to his lips. "We're both grieving, Vangie. I understand that now. As a living, breathing man I have no right to be jealous of a dead man." He kissed her fingertips one by one.

"No more dark frowns when I get sentimental over love ballads?" she asked lightly.

"Good Lord. You mean you were only reminiscing? I thought you had fallen madly in love with Ned Kendall. I was ready to smash that cornet down his talented throat."

They both laughed, easing the last of the tension from the room.

"If I promise only to hold you, will you share my bed tonight, Evangeline

Ulbricht? Wife?"

"Of course, Karl."

* * * *

Wolff walked with Mauritz and Vesta the short distance to Anderson Station that evening. He was nervous as hell and his palms were sweaty, his knees shaky. If he pulled this off, there was a good chance he could be back in Chattanooga by tomorrow evening. Word from Vange probably awaited him at Regimental Headquarters for the Fifth Minnesota. Lord, he needed to hear from her right now.

"Got your boarding pass?" Mauritz asked.

Wolff nodded. How Mauritz had managed that one was a wonder.

"And your provisions?" asked Vesta.

He patted the crude knapsack she had fashioned him from one of Mauritz's handkerchiefs.

"You do look ratty enough to pass for a Johnny Reb, thanks to my sewing. But remember--don't open your mouth unless it's absolutely necessary," Vesta reminded him. "I don't want all this work to go to waste, then have you end up back here so we have to patch you up again."

"I wish I had some way to repay you two. You've done more than your share."

"Just be safe, Yank," said Vesta softly. "And try to get word to us if you make it, all right? We'll be waiting to hear from you."

Wolff nodded, a lump growing in his throat. These two had given him so much, yet asked for so little in return.

Mauritz clapped him on the back, then herded him to the waiting train. "If you get past this one, you'll be over the worst of it," he whispered.

They approached a surly-looking second lieutenant who was checking boarding passes. Mauritz shook Wolff's hand and said loudly, "Give 'em hell, Johnny Reb," then walked away, hands in pockets, whistling a happy tune. The lieutenant eyed Wolff for a heart-stopping moment, examined his boarding pass, then waved him on. Wolff expelled his breath and settled on a narrow bench at the front of the car, as far down the car as possible from a sleepy contingent of ragged, youthful soldiers who were being sent north to Chattanooga to help Hardee and Bragg in their siege of the Union-held city. Glancing out of the smoke-grimed window of the train, Wolff saw Vesta give him a last frantic wave before the train began creaking down the track. Soon he could see her no more.

* * * *

Evangeline had a bit of trouble adjusting to being a landlubber again, but by the time they reached the hotel, Karl's free arm protectively at her elbow, she had her land legs underneath her once more.

Karl requested two adjoining rooms so that Emma, knowing that

Evangeline was within shouting distance, would not feel lonely in the night. He couldn't help but notice the strange looks the three of them were receiving: him with his golden blond head, Evangeline with her raven tresses, and Emma with her tight black cornrows. Blacks were unusual in European-dominated Minnesota, for although slavery was not tolerated, neither were blacks to any extent. He knew that under the raised eyebrows many a mind was busily wondering why Emma was here.

They ascended the stairs to the third floor of the large but crowded hotel, with Emma stopping at every landing to exclaim over the snowy, busy cityscape until Evangeline herded her on.

When Emma was finally settled in her room for a much-needed nap, Karl and Evangeline were at last alone in their own comfortable quarters.

"I think I could use a nap, too," Evangeline admitted, plopping rather ungracefully down on the large double bed and stifling a yawn.

"By all means. You must be worn out."

"It is a little tiring carrying all this extra weight. In fact it's a lot like carrying a 10-pound sack of flour around all day."

"You think it's going to be a big baby?" Karl asked with concern. Vangie was too narrow in the hip for any baby planted by Wolff. What had he been thinking of?

"Monstrous. And it kicks like a mule."

"Does it really hurt?"

"Not very much. Enough to keep me awake, however. Next time it takes a notion to exercise its limbs I'll let you feel it."

"I'd like that, Vangie. A lot." Karl grinned, lowering his body alongside her. "I won't be a standoffish father who doesn't participate in his child's growth and upbringing. You may have to tell me if I'm becoming too bothersome."

"That's so sweet." She moved to the inside of the bed and turned on her side, yawning noisily again.

"Is that a hint to leave you alone?" he asked wryly.

"Don't leave me. Just lie quietly with me a while."

Karl stretched out his long length beside her and tucked her spoon-fashion into his arms. "There. How's that?"

"Perfect," murmured Evangeline drowsily.

* * * *

"Good God! Take a look through these field glasses!" Corporal Adam Stevenson, U.S.A., took his sentry duty seriously, and this was damn serious.

"What is it?" his fellow sentry asked, gawking. "Looks like a man, but he's damn near nekkid! Great big fella, too."

The glasses changed hands again, and Corporal Stevenson whistled. "He's coming straight on!"

"Should we shoot him?" His Enfield was already at his shoulder.

"Hold your damn fire. Looks like he's flyin' a white rag or something on a stick. Wouldn't look too goddamn good if we shot the Secesh flag of surrender all to hell."

"Why the hell should Hardee surrender to us? We're the ones surrounded by Johnny Rebs! And what if he's a spy sent over by Hardee? He's lying just across that creek, remember. And we're supposed to be ten-ash-us-ly guarding this here morsel of Tennessee."

"How dangerous can a naked man be? We got to give him a chance, at least. Maybe he's some new-fangled courier. Go get Lieutenant Howard, on the double. He'll know what to do."

Chapter Twenty-Five

Sunday Evening, November 15, 1863

Karl and Evangeline ordered dinner from the hotel kitchens and invited Emma to sup with them in their room. The hotel cook was an expert in preparing the dishes of New England, and the appetizing meal left Evangeline feeling languid and comfortable.

It was Karl who suggested Emma make an early night of it. "You'd be well served to retire early, Emma, for tomorrow will be a hard day of travel. We'll take the train to St. Anthony Falls, and then, because of low water on the Minnesota, we'll board a steamer as far as Traverse des Sioux, then take the stagecoach from there. So get as much sleep as possible, Emma, for by Tuesday evening we should be sleeping in Mutti Ulbricht's house."

Emma dashed off and Evangeline shivered with expectation as she thought of finally meeting Wolff and Karl's family for the first time. She felt like she already knew them because of Karl's glowing descriptions, but she still felt a little apprehensive about her reception. Would they welcome a southerner with open arms when their son and brother had died a miserable death in a southern prison camp?

But this was not the time to think of that. This was the night she and Karl would seal their marriage vows with physical union. And yes, now that her memories of Wolff were no longer banished from the marriage bed, she was looking forward to this too. Karl had always held her attention as a virile, handsome man, and now that Wolff was gone, he was second to no one on this earth. She began to ready herself for bed, wondering if Karl, stretched out on a chair beside the bed, was anticipating this as much as she was. If he was as nervous as she was he was hiding it well behind that calm, pleased expression.

Her fingers worked at the few buttons at the back of her neck, taking an inordinate amount of time to undo them. Karl made no move to help her, nor did his expression change until her bodice sagged about her shoulders. The corners of his lips inched upward, but that was all.

She let the sagging gown puddle on the floor around her and stepped out of it, then placed a long, shapely leg on the edge of the bed to remove her shoes and stockings. Karl's eyes narrowed slightly but he didn't move a muscle.

Her chemise was next. She pushed the ribbon straps down on her arms and clutched it at the bottom to draw it over her head. Karl audibly sucked in his

breath but remained in his stretched out position.

Good Lord! Was he impervious to her charms? If she had done this in front of Wolff, by now he and she would be

A trifle annoyed by his nonchalance, she kicked off the pantaloons and faced him squarely with nary a stitch on her body.

His face was expressionless, but she breathed a sigh of relief to see the hard ridge running parallel to his thigh. He wanted her after all. She reached for her nightgown that was spread out on the foot of the bed.

"Let me help you with that," he said abruptly. He struggled to his feet and helped her to straighten the nightgown around her shoulders and hips. "Good Lord, Vangie, if you get any bigger you'll have to wear a Sibley tent with holes cut out for your head and arms."

"Karl, what a thing to say! I realize I'm not the most desirable of women right now, but I thought you liked my body. And then you go and say something like that."

Karl turned her to him and grinned. "I was just teasing you. I love your body, Vangie, truly. Especially the way your breasts thrust out so proud and the shape of your legs. You're a beautiful, desirable woman, and even with your belly full of child I want you. Can't you tell?" He took her hand and held it to the swelling in his trousers.

"Oh, yes." she replied in a small voice.

"And now the real test, Vangie. Do you find me as desirable as I so obviously find you?" He started to unbutton his frock coat, then frowned. "Won't you look at me?" he asked softly, his hands going to the buttons of his trousers. "I'd like you to see me, Vangie. All of me. Perhaps you won't be so afraid."

"I've already seen you, Karl," Evangeline murmured, embarrassed that he might recognize the stark desire in her eyes, and her husband dead only two short months! "I once nursed you, remember?"

"Oh, that. But that was hardly fair, because I wasn't awake to enjoy it." Suddenly a thought struck him. "Perhaps you find my leg distasteful now."

"Oh, Karl, no!" she protested. She turned her head toward him to prove that she didn't, and was met by the sight of a fully nude, wonderfully built Karl. He stood tall and proud, his manhood jutting powerfully from between large, muscular thighs, the smooth skin of his chest rippling lazily as he nervously bunched his fists.

A red flush spilled over her bosom and crept relentlessly up her neck to her heated cheeks. He was golden-haired and masculinely beautiful, just like Wolff.

"I'm sorry if I have offended you, Vangie. I guess I just had to know. I won't subject you to the ugly sight again." He carefully disguised the pain in his voice by deliberately trying to sound lighthearted.

"I wasn't offended, Karl," she replied. "I was admiring you."

"You're hard for me to fathom, Vangie. You better start telling me exactly how you feel or I will misread you."

Evangeline laughed. "At this moment, Karl, I have a backache."

"I could give you a backrub," Karl offered as he slid in beside her. She could almost feel the temperature under the blankets rise from the warmth of his golden skin.

"That sounds heavenly." It was true. Her back was indeed feeling strained from the weight of her abdomen, and the thought of Karl massaging her back sounded quite heavenly.

"Roll over, then," he commanded. He knelt above her and a bottle of liniment appeared as if by magic in his hand. "Karl to the rescue."

He found her strangely unprotesting as he lifted her nightgown clear to her shoulders to bare her back and then straddled her hips. He was growing harder by the minute. He had to do something to convince her that his stump was nothing to be afraid of. He called up all the suave male charm he possessed.

"I'm good at this, Vangie." He leaned down, drew the heavy wealth of her hair to one side and gently bit her earlobe, murmuring, "You'll love it. You'll beg me for more."

Evangeline shivered. She didn't doubt him for a minute. As his fingers worked their circling, soothing magic up and down her tired spine, she began to sink into a deeply relaxed state. She barely noticed when at last Karl stopped.

"Roll over again, honey. I'll do your front." He could hardly get the words out for the hot, nearly painful swell of his groin constricting his throat.

She languidly obliged him.

The warmed liniment lit tiny, tingling fires on the tender surface of her breasts and the taut skin of her swollen abdomen.

"Oh, Karl, that's exquisite," she groaned. "You are quite good at this."

Karl's fingers slid over her, swirling here, caressing there, dwelling on her breasts until her state resembled arousal much, much more than relaxation. She longed to lie there forever and enjoy Karl's every tender touch, especially the way he was now tucking his long, lithe fingers between her thighs.

"Open your legs, Vangie," he whispered urgently. "I can make you feel good here, too."

Oh yes, he could. His fingers whisked gently over her inner thighs, lighting a blazing conflagration in the feminine core of her. Slowly his talented fingertips inched nearer their delicate goal, until at last he touched her intimately.

He dared a look at Evangeline's face and was exultant to see the erotic tension straining her lovely features. Dared he go further? He was heavy and rigid with need.

Her fingers suddenly wound themselves in the sheet, grasping it tightly,

and the pink tip of her tongue peeped from the dark, luscious cavern of her mouth. Karl groaned aloud and willingly placed his entire future with Vangie on the line.

With hurried, jerky movements he lifted her buttocks upward and pulled her down to him, pausing only a second to spread her delicate folds wide before making a single, powerful thrust to enter her fully. She was damp, slick and oh, so warm; a hot, silken tunnel of delight.

Evangeline gasped, not with pain but with pleasure at the feel of him buried deep inside her. Karl's eyes were heavy-lidded and nearly closed with pent-up passion. He seemed to be attuned only to the sensations of his body as he rose to his knees between her thighs and began to move, sparking more wildfires deep in her pelvis.

His eyes opened slowly and fixed hotly on hers, so hotly she feared she would melt if she didn't look away. "Sweet Christ, you're warm," he whispered hoarsely. In the mirror, the powerful muscles of his buttocks contracted rhythmically as he pumped, and Evangeline found the sight to be one of the most erotic things she had ever seen. His large hands were at her hips now, bringing her firmly against him with each potent, beautiful thrust.

"Karl, I ... don't stop." She swallowed a sob.

"I love you, Vangie," he gritted roughly.

She could barely gasp, "Karl!"

The sound of his name spoken in the heat of passion was Karl's downfall. The movement of his hips became a rapid blur and he plunged deeply into her, wildly pumping to a thrilling, magnificent finish.

Evangeline spun off into her own erotic universe. As she climaxed in all her joy and misery, her soaring soul begged frantically for the lover of her heart--for her beloved Wolff--to join her in the paradise they had formerly shared. But her lips remained faithful to Karl.

* * * *

Karl lay slumped atop Evangeline, his chest still faintly heaving, his hands still clamped to her buttocks, his hair a damp, golden skein on her breast. She feathered a light finger through its thickness until he raised his head and gave her a lazy grin.

"It was worth the waiting, Vangie."

"Mmmhmmmm." She was feeling too sated to expend much energy on conversation. Suddenly she winced.

"Did I hurt you, Vangie?"

"The baby just kicked."

Karl laid an ear to her abdomen and his eyes filled with awe. "Hey, there he goes again!"

Evangeline laughed. "He's pretty active this time of night."

"Just like his dad," Karl pointed out with a wry smile. "Maybe he didn't

like my little intrusion on his privacy.”

Evangeline giggled.

“I like to make you laugh, Vangie. That’s the best sound in the world to me. I was beginning to think I’d never hear it again.” He gave her an appreciative squeeze, then looked deeply into her drowsy violet eyes. “I know now why Wolff was so enamored of you, Vangie. You’re a responsive woman.”

“That’s very sweet, Karl.”

They drifted off to sleep still entwined.

* * * *

Wolff was interrogated, dressed, fed, and dispatched to recover his health in the United States Army Hospital at Camp Nelson, Kentucky, all within the space of a week.

The doctors at Camp Nelson poked and prodded him, then asked him numerous questions about the attacks of sickness that had stricken him earlier. He didn’t remember much but he told them what he did remember about the feverish spells.

One of the doctors, a short, barrel-shaped New Yorker, finally approached him as he sat on his cot reading two days after his arrival. “Captain Ulbricht? I’m Doctor Whitson. I am here to tell you the results of our examination. You probably know that fevers are rampant in the southern climes you have lived in over the past year. We’ve lost many thousands of our men to them through illness and death, especially in the states nearest the Gulf. What you have, Captain, is one of those fevers. A malaria. To be specific, a quartan malaria.”

Wolff had heard of malaria, but not the specific kinds.

“Unfortunately, you have been stricken with the most debilitating form of this disease. And I must tell you that you may expect to be stricken with it again without warning. You have the tell-tale symptoms of splenic enlargement and progressive anemia.

Wolff took a deep breath. “Am I going to die soon, Dr. Whitson?”

Whitson smiled. “Did I mention dying? I don’t believe I did. I hinted that you might be very sick. But the good thing about this form of the disease is that previously healthy men rarely die from it. It’s miserable while it lasts, but after a time it seems to burn itself out.”

Wolff was relieved to be given another reprieve from the grave.

“Unfortunately for the Army,” Dr. Whitson continued, “we have no idea how long it will take you to recover from this disease. It could be a matter of weeks, or it could hang on for several years, making you quite unfit for duty. We cannot speculate on the estimated time of recovery. Therefore, when soldiers present themselves with this particular form of malaria, we discharge them with honor and send them home to their families.”

“Discharge them!”

“Yes. After a suitable period of rest and good nourishment, you will be receiving your discharge papers.” Whitson looked at his chart. “You’re from Minnesota, aren’t you? You can plan on being home before Christmas.”

“But ... but my wife is in Vicksburg. I have to get her first before I go up North.”

“I’m sorry lad, but the Army does not approve of roundabout routes. You’ll have to send for her to join you there. Surely she will be sympathetic to your difficulties and your illness.”

“I suppose, but”

“The best thing for you, soldier, is to go straight home. There’s no telling if or when an acute phase will hit again. I want you to be safely home before it does. We have to prevent complications at all costs. Those are the things that kill malaria victims, not the fevers. I wish you good luck and good health, lad.” He rose to go.

Home by Christmas. He would never have imagined that. Maybe if they were lucky Vange could catch the last riverboat up the Mississippi before the extreme northern stretches iced over. He had to fire off a letter to Vicksburg right away explaining to her why he had been unable to write and why he couldn’t escort her north. And of course, he must tell her he loved her and missed her desperately, of course. He decided he wouldn’t write to Mutti about his imminent homecoming, because the surprise arrival of her eldest son would make a very good Christmas present.

Chapter Twenty-Six

The stagecoach ride to New Ulm had been extremely tiring, and Evangeline had ended up sitting on Karl's lap the last few miles in order to save her tender rump from turning black and blue. The feel of his arms around her was comforting as the coach neared the German community where she and he would build their lives together.

Karl seemed blissfully happy to be coming home at last. He talked and joked and reddened Evangeline's ears with whispered suggestive remarks as she perched on his lap. Emma was just too tired to notice anything but the first lights of the city winking on as they approached the outskirts near sunset.

New Ulm seemed to be a city under construction, Evangeline noted as they made their way up Main Street. There were both brick and wooden houses in various stages of construction along the streets. Karl had told her all about the Sioux uprising last year, how the city had been nearly decimated with 42 citizens killed, at least 65 wounded, and almost 200 buildings destroyed by fire--some at the hands of the Sioux, but many at the order of Judge Charles Flandrau in order to destroy the hiding places of the enemy. Now the city's defenses had been strengthened by the construction of an eleven-foot wall around the town and the gift of a little howitzer cannon from the Cincinnati Turner Society.

When the attack began, Mutti, Emil and Lore and family had retreated like many of the residents to Frank Erd's square brick variety store on Main Street. It was one of the few stone structures in the village at that time. After a terrible, sleepless night they joined a train of 153 wagons that Judge Flandrau escorted to the comparative safety of Mankato, a town more than 20 miles away. It was only by the grace of God that the Ulbricht home was still standing when they returned, Karl told her--that, and the fact that it had luckily been situated within the three-block radius that was successfully defended against the Sioux. Of course, their winter's supply of firewood had gone to make part of the city's earthwork defenses, but what did that matter as long as the Ulbricht family had survived? Emil had set about immediately adding a new corrugated iron roof and a thick layer of native stone to the outer shell of the Ulbricht house as soon as possible.

Evangeline recognized landmarks that Karl had described as the team of horses pulling the stage trotted down Main Street. Karl pointed out several buildings in the core of the city that had also survived the uprising.

"That's Dacotah House, one of our hotels," he finished, pointing to a large white clapboard building with neat green shutters and a small balcony above the

double front doors. "This is where we disembark. We'll walk to our house from here."

They unfolded their tired bodies, collected their luggage and trudged down the block, then turned left at a small building that bore the sign 'Robert's Store'. Another block, then a right turn, and Karl stopped directly in front of the second house on the right where a horse and buggy stood waiting. "And this," he said with a wide sweep of his arm and a touching note of pride, "is home."

Bright lantern light streamed from between the louvered shutters of the long, two-story stone dwelling, welcoming them to the warm, safe haven.

"This is wonderful. That is Lore and Ernst's buggy," Karl announced. "I hope Emil is here too. Don't be nervous, dear," he said, seeing Evangeline's nervousness. "They'll love you as I do."

"And me?" asked Emma with round eyes. "Will they love me?"

"Especially you, Emma," Karl declared.

Suddenly the masonry-arched door flew open and a streak of braided blonde hair hurtled itself into Karl's arms. "Karl!" shrieked the plump, definitely female mass.

"Yes, it's me, Lore," Karl said, laughing as he pushed her to arm's length, then pulled her close again to enfold her in a huge bear hug.

"Oh Karl, your leg!" Lore exclaimed with a sudden woeful expression. "Does it hurt?"

"Not any more, Lore. And if you would be so good as to go back into the house out of this freezing cold, I'll introduce you to my traveling companions."

Lore, chagrined not to have acknowledged Evangeline and Emma standing there, gave them a brilliant, apologetic smile and herded everyone into the house.

Karl pushed Evangeline into the house ahead of him, and immediately Evangeline was struck by the homey, comfortable feeling of Karl's home. It was a haven of braided rugs, brightly blooming geraniums and polished, lemon-scented furniture.

A slightly plump older woman, also wearing a corona of blonde braids, bustled into the parlor and stopped short at the sight of the trio. Spying Karl, she whispered, "Gott sei Dank! Mein Sohn Karl!" She turned to an interior door and yelled excitedly, "Emil! Ernst! Karl ist heir!"

"Sprechst du Englische, Mutti," Karl reminded her, smiling. "Not everyone speaks German. Mutti, I want to introduce you to someone."

A slim, curly-haired man of medium height came shyly into the room, prodded playfully from behind by a towering, light-haired man who was obviously another Ulbricht brother, Evangeline saw. This must be Emil, she decided, daring a quick glance at his hands to search for the missing thumb and forefinger. Yes, there it was--or wasn't.

Karl propped his crutches, placed a protective arm about Emma and

Evangeline's waists and gathered them to him, smiling widely at the group assembled before him.

"Mutti, Emil, Lore, Ernst, I'd like you to meet my wife Evangeline and her ward Emma."

Silence reigned and Evangeline nervously bit her lip between her teeth.

"You have a wife, Karl?" Mutti Ulbricht finally murmured, a confused look on her pleasant features. "You have married, my son?"

"Ja, Mutti. I married a Mississippi girl. And she's soon to have a child, as you can see."

Evangeline heard Lore gasp, then push her way to the forefront of the group. "And I too am pregnant," she said proudly, resting a hand on her protruding abdomen. "I am very happy to meet you, Evangeline. Perhaps we can share baby things."

That broke the ice, and Evangeline found herself set upon by warm-hearted well-wishers. She was kissed and patted and hugged by everyone at least twice, and by Emil, three times.

"How did you find such a beautiful wife, brother?" Emil grinned, revealing large, perfect white teeth and a set of deep-set dimples that belonged to neither of his brothers. His hair was worn longer, and it was of a platinum shade of blond that was lighter than either Karl's golden or Wolff's flaxen hair. "I will go there right now and find another just like her!"

The brothers laughed uproariously. "I'm afraid you won't find another woman like Vangie, Emil. She's one of a kind. Besides, Vicksburg is too far away."

"Isn't Vicksburg where you and Wolff were sent?" Mutti queried. Evangeline saw a sad expression flit briefly across her face as she mentioned Wolff. The family had received word of Wolff at the same time she had, she knew. She would have preferred that they knew the truth about her pregnancy and marriage to Wolff as well, but this is the way Karl wanted it, and Karl was her future.

Karl nodded. "We were laying siege to Vicksburg, remember? I was injured and taken to Evangeline's home, where she was kind enough to nurse me back to health.

"And you fell in love? Oh, isn't it romantic, Mutti?" sighed Lore.

"Ja, wunderbar! But I would guess it was difficult at first coming from different sides of the war. Now why didn't you tell us, Karl?" Mutti scolded him. "You could have mentioned in your letter that you were married."

"I wanted to surprise you," Karl smiled. "And I have."

"Ja, but still! Shame on you!"

"When is your baby due?" Lore asked Evangeline. "Mine is to be born around February 20th. We're hoping for a boy." Lore shared a shy smile with

Ernst. "We have one child already, who is upstairs napping. Maybe Karl has mentioned Trinkä."

"Yes, he told me all about his lovely little niece, and I'm due March 7th, to be exact."

"My, you're awfully big! Are you sure?"

"What are you saying, Lore? That Vangie and I jumped the preacher?"

Karl laughed.

"Oh, no, no. Just that, well, that is going to be one big baby. Just like its papa and uncles, I guess. I don't envy you, Evangeline. May I call you Vangie, too?"

Evangeline nodded, and their friendship was cemented.

* * * *

"Do you like my family?" Karl asked as they lay much later on plump feather ticking in Karl's old bedroom on the second floor.

"Ja, Karl, I like them yust fine," Evangeline responded. "So friendly and helpful. And that meal was delicious. What did Mutti call it again?"

Karl grinned into the darkness. "Sauerbraten und Bratkartoffeln. Pork marinated in vinegar and fried potatoes. We Ulbricht boys grew up on that."

"I can now see why you grew like you did. I'm so stuffed I won't be able to eat another bite for days!"

"You must eat enough to grow those kleine dicke Kinder we've been practicing making."

They both laughed and Karl turned on his side and pulled Evangeline close.

* * * *

It was fully light when Evangeline felt Karl stretch and yawn beside her, then, without warning, roll her atop him.

"Karl!" She sat upright, drew a wild strand of hair back from her eyes and balanced herself with a hand on his chest. "What do you think you're doing?"

Karl gave her a lazy grin. "Have I told you how beautiful you are in the morning?"

Evangeline couldn't help smiling. He was such a playful, loving man.

"The only thing on my mind at this moment is finding a chamberpot, Karl."

"Breakfast will soon be ready, too," he said. Lovely smells were coming from the kitchen, and Evangeline could hear Mutti's muted murmur and Lore's rich, vibrant tones. They dressed quickly and descended the stairs.

"Vangie!" Lore greeted her warmly as she fed a spoonful of oatmeal to the plump, brown-haired little girl bouncing happily in Emma's arms. "This is Trinkä."

Evangeline touched Trinkä's cheek and smiled. She couldn't wait to have

a child of her own to care for.

"That's a lovely gown," Mutti complimented her. She'd dressed in a carmine-red gown of serviceable cotton, with long fitted sleeves and a high collar. "Karl, Emil is already wanting to go over to your quarter section to look for a spot to begin building a house in the spring. He said to let him know when you're ready to go."

"I'd also like to take Vangie around town soon and show her off to some of my friends," Karl said.

"Ach! Show her off to your old girlfriends?" Mutti chuckled. "Karl probably didn't tell you, Evangeline, that he had many female friends before he left for the Army. He will be expected to let them know that he's not available any longer."

"Not so many, Mutti," Karl protested. "Emil has more than I."

"Oh, Emil has no serious girlfriends. He's only 23," Mutti told Evangeline, "As he keeps reminding me. I tell him I'm not getting any younger and children only have their Grossmutter for a very short while."

"Emil's more like Wolff was," volunteered Lore. "More down to earth. He wants to get his obligations and his financial situation settled before he gets too serious about a woman. By the way, Vangie, did you get to meet Wolff?"

"Yes, we met in Vicksburg. He seemed a fine man," she stammered, blushing. He was a wonderful, passionate man, she added to herself. If only she could share her memories of Wolff with his family.

"Yes, he was," Mutti drew up her apron and dashed a sudden tear from her eye. "We miss him so much. Some day I will travel to this horrible Andersonville and tell him goodbye. When the war is over, of course--if this terrible war ever ends."

She motioned for Evangeline to sit up to the table and served her a breakfast fit for visiting dignitaries.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Tuesday, November 17, 1863

Karl and Emil came home shortly before lunch, just as Evangeline and Lore were peeling potatoes for the thick potato *suppe* Frau Ulbricht was famous for throughout New Ulm.

Karl put an icy hand to Evangeline's cheek and turned her lips up to his for a quick kiss.

"We found the perfect spot," he announced. "It's 100 yards up a sloping bank from the river so we won't be flooded out every spring, and there's a thick stand of oak and maple nearby for shade and wind protection. You'll like it, Vangie."

"By the way, I am going to see Rudolph Beinhorn this afternoon," he declared. "Soon I'll be tossing these crutches out in a snow bank. I also have another stop to make. I'd like you to come along, Vangie."

By afternoon the outside air had warmed considerably, and Karl decided it would do them both good to walk the few blocks to Beinhorn's woodenware shop, only three short blocks away on Broadway. He took only one crutch because of his difficulty in maneuvering in snow anyway, opting instead to use Evangeline as a steadying hand.

They had walked only half a block after turning the corner on Main Street before Karl stopped. "Emil's blacksmith shop is on the ground floor of this building," he said, pointing at a looming rectangular three-story building with a sign proclaiming it to be the Pennsylvania House. "The second floor is a dance hall and a makeshift theater and lodging rooms for the European immigrants coming down the Minnesota by steamboat in the spring. You and I will probably go dancing here a lot."

"Aren't you being a little optimistic about dancing, Karl?" She looked at him guardedly.

"Lord, no. Nothing will keep me from the Saturday night *Tanze*, not even a wooden leg."

Beinhorn's small shop was only two buildings down from the Pennsylvania House, and a merry bell rang out when she opened the door for Karl. A balding man sat carving at a bench in the corner, and his face lit up when he saw Karl and Evangeline enter.

"Karl Ulbricht? I can't believe my eyes! Last I heard Lore told me you

were in Tennessee!"

"Was," said Karl, smiling wryly. "I had a small problem with my leg at Chickamauga one night. In fact, I never did find the other half before I left. Can you fix me up another one, Rudolph?"

Rudolph burst out laughing, then bent to take a good look at Karl's stump after Evangeline helped him unpin and draw up his trouser leg.

"Have you ever whittled one of these before?" Karl asked. "I need something with a joint, because I don't intend to let this thing make an invalid out of me. I want to be able to waltz again, Rudolph."

Beinhorn frowned and considered the problem. "I made that Wirtz boy an arm with fingers after he come back in August," he allowed. "But a workable knee joint? That'll take some thinking."

"You can do it," Karl urged. "I need something real soon. How long before I'm waltzing again, Rudolph?"

"A week or two, I suppose. Depends on if you leave me alone long enough to do it and don't pester me. Course if I don't hurry, all them women you left behind will be pestering me too to get you dancing again. This here woman you've got with you--she's a new one, ain't she?"

"She's my wife, Rudolph," Karl took her hand proudly. "I found her in Mississippi and brought her home with me."

"Mississippi, eh? A reb?"

"You bet," winked Karl. "She fought hard, but in the end this was one battle the North won."

"Pleased to meet you, Mrs. Ulbricht. Karl here got a real prize, if I may say so."

"Thanks," said Karl, smiling. "We've got to go. Come on, Vangie. There's one more place I want to take you this afternoon, and it's way down on the other end of town. Are you up to it?"

She was, but barely. By the time they reached the north end of Main Street, she was tired and panting from the jaunt. Karl stopped in front of a small, brick-front building from which hung a small sign saying 'Toberer's Jewelry Store'. Why had Karl brought her here?

They entered the small shop, where every wall was filled with glass cases displaying clocks, watches, jewelry, and silverware. A tall, statuesque blonde stood behind a counter polishing a gold bracelet, and Evangeline saw her start visibly when she looked up and saw who had come in the shop. Then a courteous smile curved her full lips, yet Evangeline couldn't help but feel the smile was politely fabricated.

"Karl Ulbricht," she said evenly. "I'm so pleased to see you're home."

"Annaliese," Karl nodded, with a matching wary smile. "How have you been?"

"I've been quite well, thank you," Annaliese murmured even more politely.

So this was the woman Wolff had thought so appealing, Evangeline observed. But so did Karl, by his look. She couldn't miss the way Karl's gaze lingered on her well-formed bosom, hourglass waist and full hips, nor the way Annaliese was returning his gaze with flushed cheeks, wide eyes, and lips parted expectantly. What in the world had come over Karl? Had he forgotten she was here? She cleared her throat.

"How can I help you, Karl?" Annaliese trilled, fluttering long, golden eyelashes and revealing pupils of a startling delphinium blue. Evangeline felt a growing irritation. The woman was so obvious! First she had wanted Wolff, and now that Wolff was out of reach, she apparently wanted Karl!

"I ... I'm here to select a ring for my wife." Karl put his arm around Evangeline's waist.

A ring? He hadn't mentioned it to her.

But Annaliese's reaction was even more startled than Evangeline's.

"Wife?" she asked in a quiet, breathless voice. "You're married, Karl?"

Why did everyone find that so hard to believe? Had Karl been so dead set against marriage that he was considered a hopeless case?

Karl nodded. "This is my wife Evangeline."

Annaliese stared at her and Evangeline could have sworn there was something besides curiosity sparkling in her lovely blue pupils.

"I'm so pleased to meet you, Evangeline," she murmured. "You must pardon my rudeness. I didn't realize Karl had married. Tell me, what is it like being married to Karl?"

What a question! Karl must have thought so too, for he reddened.

"Now, Annaliese, you can't expect my wife to tell all her secrets to a stranger," Karl said teasingly, then changed the subject. "Where do you keep the wedding bands?"

Annaliese gave him an irritated look. "You don't want to give your wife a diamond? Surely the woman who has finally captured your heart deserves more than a simple gold band for her efforts."

"Just a band will do for now," Karl responded abruptly.

Chastened a little by the sharpness in his tone, Annaliese opened a black velvet-lined case and showed Evangeline the selections available. Her hand shook with the tiniest tremor.

Anxious to leave the shop and leave this strange meeting behind, Evangeline picked a plain, thin gold band and gave it to Karl. "This one," she declared.

"But don't you want something more feminine? Something more suited to a delicate female such as yourself? And with child too! How virile of you, Karl."

"Enough, Annaliese! She chose this one. We'll take it."

Luckily the band fit perfectly, and after Karl had finished paying for it Evangeline wore it out of the shop. Karl's hand lingered on the door knob as they left and suddenly he stuck his head back inside. He spoke so softly and quickly that Evangeline couldn't hear what he said to Annaliese. Then he slammed the door so hard she feared the panes of glass would shatter.

"Karl! What has come over you?"

"That woman infuriates me," he blurted. "How rude of her to treat you like that."

"But Karl--I don't understand any of this. What have I done? Surely she couldn't know about me and Wolff."

"No, sweetheart. She couldn't. I guess she's just a jealous old crone, envious of any woman more beautiful than she is," he muttered. "And you, my dear, are much prettier, much more beautiful." Abruptly he stopped, gathered her into his arms and kissed her fervently, right in front of Toberer's Jewelry Shop window and in full view of everyone on Main Street.

* * * *

In the weeks that led up to Christmas, Karl busied himself with drawing up plans for the new house he would soon build and learning to walk on his handsome, lightweight new leg. Many afternoons he limped uptown to help Emil at the blacksmith shop or ran errands for Mutti. Evangeline took to sewing baby clothes and tried to help Mutti whenever possible, although Mutti usually impatiently shooed her away.

"Go get off those poor feet, child," Mutti would order her. "I've never seen any woman so huge as you are, and only in the beginning of your seventh month, yet!"

It was true. Her abdomen was becoming so distended and enlarged that nightly Karl smoothed lard on her stomach so that her flesh would not bleed from the strain. Sex with Karl was becoming a little uncomfortable, and he graciously abstained from causing her discomfort.

On the rare occasions he did assert his husbandly rights, he positioned her on the edge of the high bed, legs dangling over the side, and took her standing up. That suited her just fine, for to have Karl's big body laying atop her was just too uncomfortable. Of course, the position offered little in the way of sharing and closeness, but Karl seemed satisfied with it.

One evening after Karl had spent himself in that way he slid in beside her and took her in his arms.

"Vangie? Are you still awake?" he whispered.

"Yes, I am."

"Will you talk with me? It seems like you've been avoiding me lately."

"Avoiding you? What do you mean?"

"We just made love, or I should say, I just had sex with you. I may as well have been alone for all the togetherness and sharing I experienced. You are pulling away from me, Vangie."

"I don't mean to, Karl, it's just that I'm not feeling very desirable lately. Making love just doesn't appeal to me as it once did." She couldn't help but wonder if it would have been different with Wolff, whom she had loved.

"Whew! It helps to know that, Vangie. I thought maybe it was me. That maybe you didn't find me desirable anymore."

She turned her face to his and feeling chagrined, kissed his cheek. "It's not you."

"I'll be glad when that little critter is born and you're feeling your old self again. I can stand this if I just focus on having you back eventually."

"I didn't realize it had been so hard for you, Karl," she murmured, swallowing guiltily.

"It hurts me to see you in constant pain, sweetheart. I want to help you, but I don't know what to do anymore."

"You do help me, Karl. You rub the lard on my stomach every night."

"This pregnancy scares me, honey. Mutti is worried too."

"I'll survive. Women have been having babies for centuries."

"But not my wife. Oh, God, I wish Wolff had kept his hands off you."

"That same thought may have entered my mind a time or two lately," she replied wryly. Rather than dwell on depressing thoughts, however, she chose to change the subject. "Did you know I was looking for you on the terrace that night? The first time it happened with Wolff, I mean?" Now why had she told him that?

Karl sat up and stared at her. "You mean it could have been me instead of Wolff if only I hadn't been called back to the trenches that night?"

"I don't know. Maybe not. We were just going to talk, remember?"

"But it's possible, isn't it? Oh, Lord, that all seems so long ago." He sighed. "Do you regret what's happened since, Vangie? Aside from Wolff's death, I mean."

"I do like New Ulm, and your family is lovely."

"That's not what I meant. I meant how do you like being married to me? Is it worse than you expected? Better?"

Evangeline forced a laugh. "I really can't answer that feeling as poorly as I do right now. But you're very attentive, Karl."

"Is that all? I'm attentive? I'm an abject failure as a husband then. I suspected as much." He pulled away from her and propped his hands behind his head.

"Karl, you're not a failure!"

He turned and looked at her sadly, a strange light burning in his eyes in the

dimness of the moonlit room. "Do you love me then, Vangie? Can you honestly say you love me?"

She clasped his broad, bare chest, not wanting to say the words yet not wanting him to suffer like this any longer. What did it matter if the words were a little bit premature? She was well on her way toward a loving relationship with him, wasn't she? "Of course I love you, Karl"

Jules Gauthier looked at the letter in his hand and wondered what to do with it. It was obviously a prank, the perverted result of someone's sick, twisted mind. It was addressed to Evangeline Gauthier Ulbricht and was posted in November from Camp Nelson, Kentucky--but it was the name of the sender that got him. Captain Wolffmann Ulbricht, his sister's husband who had died in Georgia three months ago and to his knowledge, had never been in Camp Nelson, Kentucky in his life.

He turned it over and over in his hand, wondering whether to open it and search it for a clue to the sender, or whether to just toss it away and forget about it. He let it sit for a day or two on the mantel and then decided to open it. What he read shocked him. It would shock Vange even worse.

His unsuspecting newly married sister had the most shocking of surprises laying in wait for her at Christmastime. Unfortunately, there was no time now to warn her. No time at all.

* * * *

One evening shortly before Christmas they were all sitting in the parlor absorbing the warmth of the stove, Mutti knitting mittens for Trinkka, Evangeline tying off a tiny, cradle-sized quilt, and Emma and Karl engaged in a loud, boisterous arm wrestling contest on the large braided rug.

"I won that time fair and square!" shouted Emma. "I'm stronger than you, Karl!"

"You had your elbow in the air, Emma," Karl pointed out, laughing. "And you used both of those skinny little arms besides. You didn't have me flat on the floor yet."

"Fretting about such minor infractions, Karl. Really!" Evangeline murmured with a smile. "Is it so hard to admit that Emma is stronger than you?"

Karl sat up and chuckled. "All right, Emma. You won this time. But you better save your remaining strength for the Christmas dance at the Dacotah House Saturday."

Emma clapped her hands excitedly. "A dance? Can I really go?"

Karl nodded. "We'll all go, except Mutti, perhaps. She thinks she's too old to dance."

"Too old, too stiff in the knees. And besides, there'll be too many women already and too few men. I'll stay home with Trinkka. She's too little to be out that

late at night."

"I'll stay with you," Evangeline offered. "I'm in no shape to dance either."

"Nonsense, Vangie! I've been looking forward to showing off my new wife. We'll make a good pair, me with my leg and you with your tummy."

"Mind she doesn't fall," cautioned Mutti. "Nothing too strenuous."

"I'll be lucky to waltz, let alone polka. Between us, we'll manage something. We might look a bit ridiculous, but who cares?"

Evangeline decided not to press her reluctance. Karl had been so kind and attentive lately he didn't deserve a wife who threw cold water on his every little spark of excitement.

* * * *

The second floor hall was packed when the three of them arrived Saturday evening. They spied Lore and Ernst across the hall, and Karl, proudly crutchless, herded Evangeline and Emma through the press of people to them.

Lore greeted them warmly, Ernst shyly, and Lore introduced Evangeline to Hyacinth St. Contourier, a young neighbor woman of theirs in Home Township who had established her own claim in 1857.

Karl gave the dark, slender Hyacinth a hug and kissed her on her blushing cheek. "Save me a waltz, Hyacinth?" he asked, giving her a broad wink. Was Hyacinth one of Karl's numerous old flames?

Hyacinth nodded demurely.

"Hyacinth is Ernst's cousin," broke in Lore. "Karl helped her to add on to her cabin three years ago."

"Yes, Karl has been very helpful," stammered Hyacinth. "Oh, Karl, I'm so sorry about your leg. I was shocked to hear about it."

"I hardly miss it anymore," declared Karl. "Let me show you how little, in fact. May I have this dance, Miss Contourier?" Without waiting for her answer, he grasped her slim waist and swung her abruptly out on the dance floor.

Lore smiled ruefully at Evangeline. "I hope you don't mind sharing Karl tonight, Vangie. Too many of our boys are away at war. And everyone's anxious to welcome him home, of course."

Evangeline smiled thinly. Couldn't he at least have offered her the first dance rather than renewing an old acquaintance right away? Feeling large, ungainly and unloved suddenly, she waddled over to the wall and leaned back against it.

Karl seemed to be having a very good time already. He moved a little unsteadily at first, but before long he was nearly as fast and light on his feet as he had been at Vicksburg. With a hand at his slender partner's waist and the other dwarfing her small fingers, he turned her and glided expertly over the floor. They made a splendid couple. No wonder he had wanted to dance with Hyacinth in stead of his fat, ugly wife!

Then he spotted her watching him over Hyacinth's bobbing shoulder and shot her a wide grin. He was plainly enjoying himself, and that is what they came for, wasn't it? She felt guilty for allowing herself to indulge in such petty jealousies.

Suddenly the waltz was over and Karl was at her side, a solicitous hand at her back "What? No partner? I thought for sure you would be grabbed up immediately if I dared to leave you for a minute."

By whom? The man in the moon? That's what she wanted to say, but gave him a tentative smile instead. The smile lasted only a moment before it faded into a frown as Evangeline spotted Annaliese Schmidtke making her way hurriedly toward them.

Annaliese was cool and fresh-looking in a frilly, light-blue gown that emphasized her curvy figure and prominent bosom. Her platinum hair was swept away from her face in an elegant chignon, and Evangeline felt a twinge of envy steal over her as she watched the woman close in on Karl and clasp his arm.

"Why, Karl, you dance divinely! I hadn't dared to hope. Well, anyway, you must give me a demonstration of your ability. You don't mind, do you, Evangeline?"

"Of course I don't mind. I was feeling the need for a little fresh air anyway. You two go on and don't mind little old me."

"Are you sure, sweetheart?" Karl seemed genuinely concerned. "I'm sure Annaliese won't mind waiting." Annaliese's fingers tightened noticeably on his arm.

"Go ahead. Really, I don't mind. I'll just go get that fresh air now." She waved him off.

As she made her way through the crowd to the hallway she ran into Rudolph Beinhorn. He grasped her arm, holding up her progress.

"All alone tonight? Where's Karl?" His bald head reflected the gay lights of the dance hall.

Evangeline inclined her head toward the dance floor, where Karl and Annaliese seemed to be dancing very closely, very closely indeed. Annaliese's skirts swirled and eddied around her elegantly, and with their matching coloring they made a lovely couple, she thought.

"Ah, I see," Rudolph said, eyeing her. "Then you are free to dance with me, no excuses accepted."

"I don't really ..."

He held up a hand. "No excuses, remember?" He led her out onto the floor and swung her into a nice, neat waltz that was satisfactory enough but possessed none of Karl's polish.

"So he is trying to make you jealous, is he?" Rudolph observed. "Not to worry. Annaliese belongs to his past. You belong to his present and future."

Annaliese belonged to his past? "I ... I thought Miss Schmidtke was engaged to Karl's brother Wolff."

"Engaged? No." Rudolph emitted a chuckle. "Annaliese had her cap set for Karl. Oh, she had a temporary fling with Wolff when Karl angered her once, but she was merely using him to make Karl jealous, if you ask me. Then, in a fit of pique over her and Wolff, Karl up and enlisted too! It wasn't exactly what Annaliese had planned."

"Oh. I didn't realize Karl had anyone special before he left," she stammered, feeling foolish for some reason. "I understood he left many sad women behind."

"This is a strange subject for me to be discussing with Karl's wife, but I think it needs to be said. Karl liked them all. He showed no inclination to settle down with one, Annaliese included. I think that's why she got mad at him. She thought she had a claim to him, and he flirted too damn much to suit her."

"I ... I see."

"But you don't have to worry your pretty head about it. You're the one who wound up with the ring on your finger, Mrs. Karl Ulbricht. You don't have a darn thing to worry about, what with your looks. Karl is just reminding you now how lucky you are."

She didn't feel very lucky. Hearing that Annaliese had been in love with Karl and used Wolff, her Wolff, to make Karl jealous was disturbing. Why hadn't Karl told her the truth instead of letting her believe that Annaliese had been in love with Wolff? Was it because it hurt too much? Because he was still secretly in love with her? He had looked her over at length that day in Toberer's. And what intentions had Annaliese toward Karl now? Whatever was going on, it certainly didn't include her. Oh, it was all so confusing! Evangeline excused herself from the rest of the waltz by telling a skeptical Rudolph she wasn't feeling well, slipped through the crowd, and donned her cape in the hallway. Lore and Ernst would have to bring Emma home, for she had no wish to stay and watch Karl and Annaliese resume their interrupted love affair.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

The black nighttime sky was beginning to fill with thick flakes of snow as Evangeline walked through the silent streets to the Ulbricht house. Lantern light still shone through the kitchen window, indicating that Frau Ulbricht was still up and about, probably preparing some rich, intricate pastry for tomorrow's dinner, Evangeline surmised.

Snowflakes sparkled in her hair and her cheeks were rosy as she entered the house. Seeing the parlor empty, she walked to the kitchen, her hand working at the ribbon of her cape to remove it as she walked.

Mutti was seated at the kitchen table, briskly cutting the peels off large, yellow-tinged apples into the bowl in front of her. She was talking animatedly with Emil, who lounged in the chair across the table from her. Her cheeks were flushed and it almost seemed as if she had been crying, were it not for the deep, pleased dimples on her face. She gave a start as Evangeline came in. Had she been quieter than she realized?

"You're home!" Mutti gasped with surprise. "Where's Karl?"

"Still at the dance. I wasn't feeling well so I decided to come home early." Emil's head swiveled around. There was something strange about Emil tonight. Evangeline stared at him.

"That boy didn't even have the sense to bring you home?" Mutti frowned. "I'll have to have a talk with him. But never mind that now. I have a surprise for you."

Mutti went over to Evangeline and put her arms around her and squeezed. "Son," she said to Emil. "Here is the surprise I promised you! Karl's new wife from Mississippi. I believe that you met her when you were there. You remember Evangeline? Evangeline, my son Wolff. We've been sitting here catching up on what's happened to him. Oh, son!" she cried, reaching out for his hand and dissolving into happy tears. "I still can't believe you are alive!"

Had Mutti gone mad in the short time she had been at the dance? This couldn't be Wolff. Wolff was dead!

Regardless, there, filling out Emil's blue homespun shirt and brown trousers rather snugly, was the man she had resigned herself to mourning, the man she had relegated to the status of memory. Wolff! It was Wolff!

She stood paralyzed, wanting to run into his arms, yet unsure of the welcome she would receive or of Mutti's reaction to it. Wolff's handsome face provided no clue. It could have been carved of stone, the half-smile frozen in

place on his lips, the eyes narrowed and hammered of flinty-hard copper.

"Wolff?"

"Evangeline," he nodded stiffly, at last.

"I ... I thought you were dead." You were dead! I mourned you!

"Obviously," Wolff gave her a wafer-thin smile. "Of course, the reports were greatly exaggerated. I am surprised to hear that you married Karl, because I was so sure you ... ah ... belonged to another, at least you did when I left. How long have you been married to Karl?" She was pierced through the heart by the cutting edge of his voice.

"Long enough to have a little one well on the way," broke in Mutti joyfully, oblivious to the painful, bitter undertones of Wolff's conversation. "Oh, we have so much to celebrate! Wait till Karl comes home and sees you! Oh, and we have to get word to Lore and Ernst, and"

"They may be bringing Emma home. I didn't want to ruin her evening by making her come home early."

"Wunderbar! What a Christmas this promises to be, ja? But I must run upstairs for a minute and make up your old bed, Wolff. You must be very tired from your journey." She spun around and nearly flew up the stairs.

They were alone at last. The sudden silence was deafening.

"Why didn't you write?" Evangeline found the courage to finally ask. "If only we had known"

"I did, after I made it to the Union lines. Only I foolishly thought that you were still in Vicksburg waiting for me. I would have been too late anyway, it seems."

Wolff stood and stretched. He had lost a little weight, Evangeline noted, but he still had the most exciting male body in the world. His hair was neatly trimmed, but a light-colored lock still managed to feather over his forehead. His face was clean-shaven, his skin a little pale. He looked so wonderful and yet so distant.

He caught her looking and gave her a grim smile.

"I don't know what to say, Evangeline, except that we seem to have some things to discuss. Your undissolved marriage to me and the disposition of my child, if it is my child. I must say I didn't expect to come home and find you married to my brother. Frankly, I'm a little put off." He stood staring at her.

Put off? He was "put off?" Had he never loved her with the overwhelming passion that she had loved him? What happened to loving her forever? What about the horrible pain she had experienced after hearing about his erstwhile death?

Something snapped in her brain that made her purse her lips angrily and cock her own hands on her hips. "A little put off? How do you think I felt, Wolffmann Ulbricht, to receive a letter from Otto describing your death? Do you

think I did cartwheels? Do you think I was happy to be left pregnant and alone?"

"And Karl just conveniently happened to be there to fill my shoes, didn't he? How long did you wait after you found out, Vange? A week? Two? How long, dammit?"

He thought she had always preferred Karl? Suddenly she realized he didn't trust her. He didn't believe in her! All along she had thought that if only Wolff were alive, everything would be all right. Instead, he was not the perfect man she had enshrined in her heart. He didn't care about her future or their child's future. He didn't care that she had needed to make a life for the two of them. All he cared about was this petty rivalry with Karl. She wanted to lay down and die, to forget this entire crazy year in her life. She stared at the floor and willed it to stop spinning underneath her feet.

"Two months," she whispered at last. "We were married on board the riverboat on the way here."

"Two months. That was all I meant to you? Congratulations," he spat. "Remind me to congratulate Karl also. I take it you won't be sharing my room?"

Evangeline stared at him, stricken. How could he expect her to fall into his arms when he had hurt and disappointed her so badly just now? "No one knows that you and I were married. Everyone thinks that this baby is Karl's."

"Even my own family, Vange? Did you deny me and my child even to my family?"

"I didn't want to," she said. "But Karl thought it best if we ..."

"Karl! Why am I already sick of hearing that name?" Wolff exploded. "I wish to God I never met you, Vange. Have the grace to leave this house and this town as soon as you and your precious Karl are able! I want you out of my life. Forever!" He leaped up the stairs three at a time, and Evangeline had never in her life wanted to follow someone so badly, yet feared the consequences so much.

She was still standing in the kitchen, tears coursing down her cheeks, when she heard the front door open and close.

"Vangie? Are you in here?" Karl inquired softly. He stopped short when he saw the shape she was in. "What's wrong? Good Lord, Vangie! Are you really ill?" She shook her head, and he drew her to him, rubbing her back and trying to still her sobs. "Then what's wrong? I didn't mean to hurt you, sweetheart. As soon as I found out you were gone I came straight home. Why didn't you stay to dance with me?"

Mutti came flying down the stairs, and as soon as she saw Karl she got teary-eyed again. "Karl! You will never guess who's here! Did Evangeline tell you? Oh, Karl! It's Wolff! Wolff is alive--it was all a mistake! Wolff, come down here and greet your brother!"

Karl's turned when he realized what his mother had said and saw the proof of it descending the stairs behind her.

* * * *

Later, amid the general hubbub that followed as first Emil arrived followed shortly by the arrival of Lore, Ernst and Emma, Evangeline mumbled her excuses and managed to sneak off up to her bedroom. She was exhausted and full to bursting with pent-up tears. It had been so difficult for her to pretend to be happy over the news that Wolff was miraculously alive, only to know inside that he despised her now. What a fool she'd been to think she'd understood his wishes.

And Karl. Karl had been shocked to the core to see the brother whose widow he had married. He held up admirably, though, she conceded, greeting Wolff as one would a long-lost brother and engaging him to tell his long, detailed story of how he managed to escape and make it home. None of the three of them had even let anything slip about Wolff's previous involvement with her. It was as if, on the surface, everything was perfect now that the family was whole again.

Evangeline changed into her nightgown and slid under the quilt, and as soon as her face hit the pillow the river of tears started flowing. Damn him! Damn him for coming back to life and making her come alive again! Damn him for fathering this child! Damn him for making himself so utterly inaccessible! Damn him for not understanding that she had been pregnant and alone!

After a while she felt Karl slip under the quilt to lie stiffly beside her. The house was dark and quiet at last, so she was surprised to hear a light rap on the bedroom door.

Karl jumped up, threw on his trousers and opened the door, not at all surprised to see Wolff walk into the room. Had they planned this meeting to hash things out privately and avoid any unpleasantness in front of Mutti? Evangeline sat up and clutched her nightgown tightly around her throat.

"Am I interrupting anything?" Wolff asked. He had divested himself of his shirt and now wore only Emil's too-tight trousers which had a way of outlining his virility rather plainly. His chest gleamed faintly in the moonlight as he propped himself on the floor under the window and crossed his arms. Karl got back into bed and sat waiting.

"I guess not," Wolff answered his own question. "Maybe I'm already too late."

Karl sighed. "Too late for a lot of things, Wolff. I wish it were different, but I can't change what's happened, even if I wanted to."

"Do you want to?" Wolff asked guardedly.

"No, I don't think so," Karl said. "Vangie and I have plans, Wolff. The child will be raised as my own."

"And if I choose to claim it?"

"I'll deny it. Vangie will deny it. We're happy together, Wolff."

Wolff fell silent, and Evangeline wished she could find the fortitude to tell

Karl that she could never be happy, knowing now that Wolff was alive yet lost to her! But nothing would emerge from her paralyzed throat.

"If you're so damn happy together, then you won't mind allowing me one small request."

"What's that?"

"Give me an hour with Vange, alone."

"You know I can't do that, Wolff."

"Why not? Afraid? Scared she'll want to come back to me?" Wolff laughed bitterly. "It shouldn't be a problem if she's as enamored of you as you think she is."

"She told me she loved me. Just the other night, Wolff."

"She loved me too, just three short months ago."

"She's almost eight months pregnant. Hell, I can't even touch her myself anymore."

She thought she heard Wolff suck in his breath. "You are scared, aren't you Karl? At least let me hear it from her. You owe me that much."

"I don't owe you anything. I've earned everything I've gotten. Vangie will tell you that."

"She doesn't seem to have a tongue any more. Or perhaps she's afraid, too. Afraid she'll want me again."

"Enough, Wolff! Vangie loves me. True, she loved you once upon a time, but time heals. Time changes things."

"If you're so confident of her love, what's the harm in letting me talk to her? I'm only asking a damn hour, Karl. Not all night."

"Damn you to hell! All right! But you have to promise not to touch her, Wolff. Is that understood?"

Wolff nodded, and Karl slipped on his shirt and boots. He was angry, Evangeline saw, so angry his hands were shaking.

At the door he turned and said, "One hour. And Vangie, so help me, if he touches you" He left the threat hanging and was gone.

Wolff sat quietly for long minutes, arms on his knees, the moonlight glinting off his silver-splashed hair. Was he going to sit there and say nothing for an hour? Did he merely want to make her squirm? She tugged her nightgown closer together at her throat.

"Shit!" She heard the curse explode in the room's agonizing silence, then felt Wolff abruptly ease his big body onto the bed alongside her. "Talk to me, Vange," he whispered hoarsely. "I have a fantasy I need to act out, to get out of my system so I can get on with my life."

A fantasy? "What is it?"

"It's just a simple little scene, Vange. If it bothers or irritates you, we'll stop. Remember when I used to sneak through your veranda doors and find you

sleeping? That's the scene I want, Vange. You all tousled and drowsy and waiting for my touch. Can you do it, liebchen?"

His description had left her breathless. Oh, how she remembered that scene--all too well.

"Ah, that's the look I want. Oh, yes. And now the hard part. The part that only a consummate actress such as yourself can manage. Pretend that you love me, Vange. Pretend I never went away. Oh, God, I dreamed about this. When I was sick, when I was sad. I never lost sight of you. Just for an hour, sweetheart, pretend you are mine once again."

Evangeline gazed at him, wondering if the longing she saw in his eyes was real or feigned. Did he still love her so much? She put a tentative hand on his shoulder.

"That's it, honey. Pretend it's the night we were married. Remember how you loved me? How you told me so over and over as we made love far into the night? And how I told you I needed you? Forever?" Her fingers went to his face and she felt the dampness that now streaked his cheeks. He was crying! She felt the icy walls she had thrown up earlier begin to melt.

"Oh, God," he said, swallowing hard. "You are perfect in the role. I need to touch you, honey. May I?"

She nodded mutely, and immediately he sat up and pulled her down on the bed beside him.

"Take this off, Vange," he commanded, and her nightgown was whisked away. "I want to see how my baby is growing. Jesus! He's big, isn't he?" He placed his hands on her stomach and gently followed its contours. "It's got to be little Klaus Pierre in there. But I suppose he'll have another name now." Evangeline stifled a sob and shook her head no.

His hands slid to cup her breasts, testing their weight and fullness. "Hell, I'm sorry," he said. "I know I promised not to touch you, but I can't help it. I've waited so long, sweetheart, and this is part of my fantasy, after all."

His tongue lashed out and wet an already taut nipple. Impatient, he took it into his mouth and sucked, first one, then the other as Evangeline began to explore his naked chest and back with timid fingers.

He slithered up to take her mouth, latching on to it hungrily and teasing it with a darting tongue.

"I want to make love to you, Vange. I know I shouldn't, but I can't *not* do it." To emphasize his words, he cupped her femininity with a broad, rough palm and she arched up against him.

"What's this? Has Karl been remiss? We can fix that in a hurry, Vange. A damn big hurry." He found her with one gentle fingertip and caressed her lightly.

Evangeline stifled a moan. What if Karl was just outside the door? She didn't want him to know what was happening in here with his passionate, oh-so-

desirable brother.

"Can I go inside? No? Just a finger, then? Two fingers?" he pleaded. She answered him with a thrust of her hips.

Both his hands were busy now, one stroking her womanly bud and one sliding in and out with increasing rapidity. "Vange," he breathed. "Pretend I'm inside you, and you're hot and wet and ..."

"Wolff!" She felt her release coming and clamped her legs together to stave it off, to make the sensations last a lifetime, but he stubbornly thrust a knee between her thighs to hold her apart. In seconds the billowing heady waves begin to undulate over her and his mouth clamped down on hers, smothering her sharp, exultant cry with his lips and tongue.

When it was over, he cradled her in his arms, gently rocking her back and forth until her tears had ceased.

"Thank you, Vange," he murmured. "I'll always remember that. Always." He threw a leg over the side of the bed and went to leave, but Evangeline couldn't bear for him to leave yet. Surely an hour couldn't be up already!

She grabbed his arm and stayed him, and he sank down beside her wearily. "What it is, Vange? I'm kind of tired tonight. Kind of overwrought, I guess. Hey, what are you doing? The fantasy has ended and this wasn't part of it!" His hands grabbed her wild, inky hair as it trailed down his abdomen.

Suddenly her lips were hot on him and she was caressing and kissing his hard, silky length, then opening wide to take him into her mouth. She heard him suck in his breath and was immensely happy to know that she was still capable of pleasuring him. He ran his hands through her hair, urging her, cursing her, begging her to stop. But the motions of her hands and the caresses of her mouth and tongue merely accelerated and within moments she knew he was also near release.

"My God, Vange! You don't know what that does to me!" he husked. "Oh, hell, I can't ..." He clamped down on her head and erupted into her mouth, thrusting and moaning and splattering his ecstasy deep into her throat.

"For God's sake, Vange," he whispered a minute later after he had caught his breath. "Good Lord, honey." He rummaged in the pocket of his open trousers and produced a wrinkled hankie. "I'm sorry. Oh, hell, *Liebchen*."

She smiled as he daubed at her mouth. "I still love you, Wolff," she murmured. His eyes were on her then, hotly intent, curious eyes

Suddenly a soft, insistent knock sounded at the door. Karl! Wolff shoved the hankie into his pocket, buttoned his trousers, leaped to his feet and returned to his spot on the floor, all in one fluid motion, it seemed. Evangeline frantically grabbed her nightgown and thrust it over her head, pulling it down around her knees just as Karl walked in the door.

"Well," he said, eyeing Wolff distrustfully. "I thought I heard noises in

here but obviously I was wrong. What's the matter, Wolff? Couldn't talk her into anything?"

Slowly Wolff got to his feet, slid his hands into his back pockets and balanced himself on the balls of his feet in a challenging stance. Would he call Karl out now? Demand his wife back?

Instead, he said nothing. Nothing! He eased his big body from the room without making a sound, leaving Evangeline stunned. Had he only wanted sex from her just to prove he was more desirable than Karl? Didn't he want her back now that she had been with Karl? What was the point of it? She felt as if the two men were playing a game with her emotions, a game that had no ending that she could see.

* * * *

Minutes later, after Karl had undressed and gotten into bed, he nudged Evangeline sharply.

"I know you're awake, Vangie."

"I'm awake."

"I have to know. Am I about to lose my wife?"

"You seemed pretty confident an hour ago that I would stay with you."

"Just talk to impress my brother. I was shaking inside to think of what he and you were talking about while I was out of the room. Or doing, to tell the truth! Did he ask you to come back to him, Vangie?"

"No." It was the truth, but it seemed to surprise Karl greatly.

"No? What the hell did he want to talk about then?"

"He just wanted to talk about old times."

"Reminisce a little, eh?"

"And he wondered how the baby was coming along."

"Oh. I can't help but feel a little sorry for him, coming back to find his wife married to his brother and his baby not even his anymore. But dammit, Vangie, I have you now! And I'm not giving you up, not even to a brother who's come back from the dead."

"He didn't ask for that, remember?"

"Yes. I forgot. But I haven't forgotten that just a short time ago you told me you loved me, Vangie. I'm going to place my trust in you not to violate or sully that love. You married me for better or worse, and I take those vows very seriously. I hope you do, too."

"But Karl, I am legally married to Wolff! What about those vows? Do they count for nothing?"

He dismissed her by rolling to his side away from her.

She tossed and turned the whole night, somehow sensing that Karl lay awake too. What would the future hold for her? Dare she reach out for Wolff if he would accept her? Could she and Wolff regain the love they once had and lost?

But what about her promises to Karl? And dare she shock the staid community of New Ulm with the news that she was a bigamist committing adultery with Karl? She needed answers, and soon.

* * * *

Ernst, Lore, and Emil returned the next day for a celebration Sunday dinner in honor of Wolff's unexpected homecoming. The day was full and merry as old friends stopped by to cluck their tongues sympathetically over Wolff and congratulated him on his lucky return. Evangeline tried to stay busy in the kitchen with Mutti, for whenever she entered the parlor she felt Wolff's eyes follow her every move, and Karl, never far from either her or Wolff's side, watched them both like a hawk.

By evening she was exhausted from holding her emotions in constant check. She stood at the base of the stair watching Emma play with Trinkä, absently rubbing a sore spot in her lower back.

"I'll rub that for you, Vangie, if you're ready to go up now," Karl announced from the chair where he sat reading a Turner newspaper. "I haven't seen you sit and put your feet up all day. That reminds me. We need more lard to spread on your stomach. Remind me to ask Mutti for some."

Evangeline dared a glance at Wolff, noting the sudden irritated twitch in his jaw. Was Karl deliberately taunting Wolff by flaunting his familiarity with her body?

Wolff sighed and rubbed his chin. "God, it would be nice to have someone to rub my back. I wonder if that tiny Englishwoman down on German Street still does that sort of thing. Or perhaps Annaliese Schmidtke would be willing to do it for me. She's pretty good with her hands, I've heard."

It was all so nonchalant, yet Wolff may as well have thrown a spear into Karl's exposed belly in retaliation for Karl's mere skin-deep dart. Oh, God, was this the way it was going to be? A constant battle over the ownership of one fat and forlorn pregnant woman?

Mutti shook her head. "You leave that Annaliese Schmidtke alone. She's a good girl looking for a husband. Just as you should be looking for a wife, Wolff."

"You mean I'd have to marry her to get a backrub? Hmmm. That might almost be worth it."

Karl was livid with compressed, white lips and a tightly clenched jaw. Why should it bother him if Wolff decided to find a woman to take her place, Evangeline wondered. She was the one it would bother! To see Wolff with another woman would ... would what? She didn't know where she stood with Wolff. He seemed to be battling Karl over her, yet he had not made his intentions known to her. He had made no move to claim her. The confusion was exhausting her.

And, of course, it was Karl who came and rubbed her back and massaged

her stomach that night. And Karl who pulled her next to him on the bed and kissed the very tip of her head. And Karl who whispered, "I love you, Vangie," in the night's deepest silence.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

Thursday, December 24, 1863

Wolff had gone to see Frederick Behnke about renting half of his building on Minnesota Street to reopen his law office. He came back beaming and gave his mother a huge bear hug.

"So you got it, son?" Mutti asked, tucking a loosened braid back into her coronet.

"I got it! Kiss me, Mutti!" He whirled her around. "I'm going into practice again."

"That's wonderful, Wolff. I'm so proud of you."

He looked over at a rapidly rocking Evangeline whose needle was flying furiously through a tiny bib. "Is this good enough news to merit a kiss from my sister-in-law, too?"

"Ja, I suppose. But you better hurry before Karl gets back."

"How long do I have for this kiss? Where is Karl?"

"I think he went up to J. Popp's for a Christmas toddy. Ernst stopped by and insisted that he come."

"Imbibing, eh? Well, I'd best get at that kiss then if I'm going to accomplish it before Karl gets home," he said with an exaggerated sigh. "It's not going to be easy, you know. I've heard sister-in-laws get a mite touchy about that sort of thing. Is that true, Evangeline?"

He was edging toward where she sat. Her rocking stilled abruptly.

"Oh you Wolff," Mutti said laughing. "Leave her alone. Maybe she doesn't want to kiss you."

"Evangeline?"

She shrugged and privately cursed the bright flush that was creeping up her cheeks. Would he really kiss her in front of Mutti?

Wolff reached down and drew her to her feet. "You go on now, Mutti," he ordered. "If you don't see this, you can't be tattling to Karl about it."

"You men!" Mutti waved a disgusted hand and conveniently disappeared into the kitchen.

"A kiss for luck, Evangeline? Luck in my new practice?" he whispered, closing in on her lips.

Evangeline groaned softly. He smelled of fresh air and pine trees, and the feel of his arms about her was delicious.

"Wolff, we shouldn't," she whispered.

"Why, Vange? Don't you want to?" His lips were nearly on hers.

She pushed him away. "I ... can't."

"Why not?" Up close, his eyes were studded with dark flecks.

"Because of Karl. What if he comes home?" *Because you don't love me any longer!*

Wolff shrugged. "What if he does? At least give me a Christmas kiss."

And then he wasn't asking, he was taking. His mouth covered hers, and in moments he had turned her knees to the consistency of Mutti's blackberry jelly. He kissed her deeply, relentlessly, with tiny sucks and nibbles and thrusting movements of his tongue that made her want to melt wantonly against him, to sink into his body and never let go. At last, when she was barely able to stand, he raised his head to catch his breath.

"Christ, Vange. I can't seem to stop when I kiss you. I want to go on and on and touch you all over and bury myself deep inside you," he whispered raggedly, clutching her arms so that the tips of her breasts gently scolded him.

"She caught him studying her intently. "We're alone now, Vange. Just you and me. I want to know if you really love me. Or was that just part of the pretense that night?"

She shook her head. She wanted badly to lay her cards on the table, even if it meant risking rejection. "It was real. I still love you, Wolff. I never stopped loving you. I love you more than ever--forever."

Wolff released his breath in a pleased sigh. "Lord, how I hoped that was so. I even prayed, Vange. Imagine a godless Turner, praying! Will you leave Karl's bed now and come to mine? Become my wife again in truth?"

"But what about Karl?"

"The hell with Karl! I've got to get on with my life, Vange. I can't stay in limbo forever, lying awake at night wondering whether or not Karl is touching you. Have a little mercy on me!"

Suddenly the door banged open and a flushed Karl weaved into the room. He spied the two of them loosely embracing and an angry red flush colored his face. He pointed an accusing finger at Wolff and shouted, "You bastard! Fooling with my wife behind my back! I'll kill you for this!" He lunged at Wolff.

Mutti ran into the room, screeching loudly and throwing her body between Karl and Wolff when she saw Karl lunge. "Karl! It was only a kiss! Wolff got that new office space he wanted, and we were congratulating him!"

"A kiss, Mutti? Only a kiss?" Karl's face was twisted with anger, and Mutti quickly decided that her son was drunk.

She marched over and gave his ear a firm, solid yank and he jumped, rubbing his ear sullenly. "Listen here, Karl Ulbricht! I'm ashamed of you! How dare you go getting yourself drunk and then coming home mean to your wife?"

Now you apologize to your brother and get upstairs until you can sober up. Get going!" She gave him a man-sized shove.

* * * *

At that same moment, Evangeline felt a sharp twinge of pain in her abdomen. She clutched her stomach tightly and moaned.

Mutti forgot about Karl and flew to her side. "Are the pains starting, child?" she asked with concern.

Another sharp pain shot through Evangeline, and she sank into a chair.

Karl and Wolff both stood rooted, looking concerned but unsure what to do.

"Let me help you upstairs, child. You must lie down and try to relax. It's too soon for that baby to come into this world," Mutti said. "And shame on you boys for upsetting her!"

Even though she had no more pains, Evangeline was bundled off to bed, where Mutti and Lori hovered over her like hawks. They didn't allow anyone to talk to her about anything unpleasant, because Mutti felt that she should have no emotional or physical stimulation whatsoever.

Wolff was allowed to read to her from a book by Charles Dickens that had arrived by mail about a poor family's Christmas in England. Evangeline enjoyed those times immensely. She loved how he tried to change his deep rumbling voice into a squeak as he read the dialogue of Tiny Tim.

Karl, too, spent time with her although he spent most of his days helping Emil at the blacksmith shop. Some nights, however, she knew he had been at J. Popp's again from the smell of beer and smoke on his clothes and the false heartiness of his talk. He discussed the weather and goings-on at the shop, but neither he nor Wolff discussed anything but benign subjects. Evangeline suspected that Mutti had given orders to not upset her in any way, and she was thankful for it. Soon, though, the issue of marriage and the future would have to be faced.

The weather turned bitter cold near the end of January, and temperatures plunged nightly well below zero. Evangeline, unused to the cold, asked for her bed to be moved downstairs near the warmth of the parlor stove.

* * * *

One day late in January the weather turned warm enough for Mutti and Emma to travel by wagon out to Ernst and Lore's farm to help Lore clean and get ready for the baby that was due in three weeks. Emil drove the team and accompanied her out there to help Ernst shoe a few horses, leaving Karl to man the blacksmith shop in his absence.

The sun was bright and beautiful for a change, and Evangeline decided to get up and take a stroll up and down the block to get some fresh air. She didn't feel like lying in bed on such a nice day so she did a few light housekeeping

chores, peeled potatoes and carrots for a pot of venison stew that she put on the kitchen cook stove to simmer for supper, then sat down to put her feet up for a few minutes. Her ankles were swollen, her belly huge, and she had trouble breathing at night when she tried to sleep on her back. So help her, if she made it through this pregnancy she would never get pregnant again!

She fell asleep in the rocking chair and when she awoke she noticed with regret the sun had disappeared behind a looming bank of dark, ominous clouds. The mantel clock insisted that it was only minutes before noon, yet it seemed as if the sky had already donned the gray-black cloak of twilight. She shivered from the increasing chill in the air. The temperature must be dropping very quickly, for just an hour ago the room had been pleasantly warm.

As she sat musing a small twinge of discomfort rippled through her abdomen. Was it the baby moving? There hadn't been all that much movement the last few days and it worried her. She got up and shoved a few more chunks of hard maple into the stove, then opened the draft and the damper a crack more to get more air moving through it. The fire popped and crackled cheerily, lending a new warmth to the room.

She was just reaching to put the poker back in its stand when another spasm of pain danced through her belly. She stood upright to see if a change of posture would relieve the pain, but it didn't. The pain was still there, tightening the muscles of her abdomen painfully now. Dear God, was she going into to labor? So soon? She still had more than a month left in her pregnancy!

At last the pain subsided and she paced the room, trying to decide what to do. Everyone except Karl and Wolff were out to Lore's and wouldn't be back until nightfall. Karl was busy at the shop, and who knew where Wolff was? Probably out looking for a wife.

She tried to calm herself and think logically about her situation. If this was truly labor, she wouldn't be needing anyone for hours and hours, according to Mutti. First labors were known to be long and hard. But Dr. Weschke, the only doctor for 50 miles, was so far away--eighteen miles. Shouldn't someone be sent to Fort Ridgely for him right away?

If only Mutti would come home early. She didn't claim to be a midwife, but she had delivered several babies in the New Ulm area before Doctor Weschke was available. But Mutti and Emil weren't due back until at least nightfall.

Another pain hit her, this one nearly doubling her over with its vigorous, unyielding grip on the muscles of her abdomen. It went on and on for a full minute, leaving her hands in tightly clenched fists and her lips etched in white.

As soon as the pain subsided she collapsed on the parlor sofa and looked at the clock. Not even five minutes had elapsed between the second and third pains. Weren't they supposed to start out half an hour apart? Oh, if only Mutti was here to reassure her!

Noticing the increasing darkness of the room, her eyes went to the window above the sofa. The clouds were hanging low and heavy now, and the first few flakes of icy snow were being driven down by the blustery wind. A storm was coming. And she was all alone in the house--in labor!

She tried to remember the close neighbors of the Ulbrichts. Could any of them be of help to her? There was Herr Ganz, a retired schoolmaster immediately to the left of the Ulbricht house, and Julius and Minna Berndt to the right. But the Berndts were in Mankato for a few days, Evangeline remembered, because Emil had been enlisted to keep their stove going while they were gone. There really was no one close.

Another pain gripped her, followed close on its heels by another. The contractions rumbled fiercely through her lower abdomen, overwhelming her with pain. Suddenly she realized that she couldn't walk for help now even if she wanted to, for she was too debilitated by the pain.

She dragged herself up the stairs and changed into a lightweight summer nightgown quickly before another pain came. She was just pulling it over her head when a gush of water spilled down her legs and flowed onto the floor. Oh no, no. Her water had broken. Now she had to lie flat, for she remembered Mutti cautioning that one mustn't walk anymore once the bag of waters had broken. She went into Wolff's bedroom, threw back the quilts and lay down upon the white sheet, hoping Mutti would forgive her for not taking the time to swathe the bed with older ones.

The next pain was sharper. It thundered about her belly agonizingly, making her back arch involuntarily and evoking a shriek of pain. Sweet heaven, this hurt! How had her own mother withstood seven births?

She tried to relax between pains, but soon the time between them was so short it offered no chance for relief. The pains came, they drowned her, they rumbled grumpily away, only to rise up again within cruel moments. She didn't try to hold back the cries that flew to her lips any longer. She was in pain, and she didn't care who knew it.

* * * *

Wolff stared out his office window at the thick veil of snow that was falling. If the sky was any indication, this snowfall would not be light or of short duration. In fact, it had all the signs of becoming a blizzard from the way the wind was picking up. He hoped Emil and Mutti had the good sense to stay the night with Lore and Ernst rather than try to make it home in this weather.

He should be leaving for home himself shortly if he had any sense. Quickly gathering up his hat and coat, he decided to stop down the block and see if Karl was ready to go home yet. Vange was the only one home, and he didn't dare trust himself alone with her yet. He wanted her so badly but didn't want to endanger the baby, so he had to wait--for that, and for the showdown with Karl.

The lanterns were lit in Emil's shop but Karl was nowhere to be found. Maybe he had stepped out for a moment, or perhaps he was in the back room taking a nap. Emil kept a bed back there just for emergencies though he rarely if ever used it.

He walked through the shop quietly, listening for Karl's snoring, but instead he heard the murmuring of a woman's voice and the answering rumble of a man. What was going on in Emil's back room?

He crept on silent feet to the half-open door and stood listening.

"No, Karl! No! I've asked you not to touch me and I mean it! How can you say you love me and still sleep with her?"

"We are not sleeping together any longer, Annaliese. It isn't like you think...."

"It's exactly like I think, Karl. You prefer that she keep her title as your wife and expect me to be content as your mistress."

"Vangie is pregnant, for God's sake! Do you expect me to up and leave her just like that? Have a little respect for my reputation as a gentleman."

"And my reputation has no value? I should lie down and spread my legs at your summons? Be available to you whenever your wife isn't? No, Karl. I won't reduce myself to that."

"Don't put it so indelicately. I merely want to make love to the woman I love. Is there shame in that?"

"Yes, if we are reduced to clandestine meetings and hurried ruttings--yes!"

"Clandestine meetings? Hurried ruttings? Is that how you feel about this? What did you call that little episode with my brother if not a hurried rutting?"

Annaliese sniffled loudly. "I call it a mistake. A stupid, irresponsible mistake. But you, Karl, what you have done is even more hurtful than what I did. You married a woman! And why? To spite me! A simple affair would have done just as well! You still haven't given me a satisfactory answer."

Karl was silent for a moment. "She ... she needed me, Annaliese."

"And I didn't, Karl? I didn't need you?"

"You know the marriage isn't valid any more, liebchen. It means nothing."

"Then why can't you acknowledge me? What is holding you back? Do you love her so much?"

"Hush. Don't cry, Annaliese. Let me hold you for a while at least. You won't begrudge me that, will you?"

Wolff decided it was time to leave. A storm was brewing.

* * * *

A piercing scream rent the air of the otherwise silent Ulbricht house as Wolff struggled to shut the outer door against the fierce wind and driving snow. Sweet Jesus! Was someone being killed upstairs? He loped up the stairs, making a

beeline for the room from which the screams were still echoing.

Vange! Something was wrong, very wrong with his love. She lay on his bed in wild disorder, her hair a river of wet, black silk on the pillow. The hem of her disheveled gown was at her waist and her naked thighs lay pale and exposed on the sheet. Her eyes were closed in pain, her breath a series of ragged, irregular pants.

"Vange," he said softly, not wanting to frighten her. "It's all right, sweetheart. I'm here. Is the baby coming?"

Her eyes flew open at the sound of his voice. She could only look at him pleadingly for a brief second before the pain gripped her again and skewed her face into a tight grimace of torment.

Oh, Christ. The baby was coming and there was no one here to help! And as far into labor as she seemed to be, he dared not leave her. His love was going to die from lack of aid! He wracked his brain for things that Mutti had said in the past about childbirth, things that he had mostly ignored, so damn sure was he that he was never going to preside over any human birth in his lifetime.

She was straining now, bearing down with a force that turned her scream into an anguished, drawn-out squeal. Her abdomen was visibly taut as her body struggled to expel its burden.

Drops of blood now darkened the whiteness of the sheet beneath her. Oh hell! Why had he ever done this to her? He had killed her with his love!

Get a grip on yourself, he admonished himself. The woman needs you calm and sane now instead of babbling and apologetic. At least he could try to soothe her if nothing else.

He placed a tentative palm on her swollen abdomen and caressed the taut, overworked muscles lightly. It seemed to help a little, for her back slowly eased down onto the bed. He took a handkerchief out of his pocket and wiped the beads of sweat off her forehead, murmuring soft, soothing words as the next contraction overtook her.

It was heart-wrenching to watch. If only he could take her in his arms and kiss the pain away.

Suddenly the pain seemed to reach a plateau and she stiffened. Her eyes flew open and in their blue pupils he read her torment and fear. "The baby--it's coming!" she gasped.

Look between her legs, for God's sake, man! He did, and the baby was definitely coming. He was shocked to see the way she was stretched so thinly around the head of his child. Oh, Vange, I'm so sorry, he apologized silently.

She was pushing and straining, her breath the echo of a far-off steam whistle now. It took all her strength, but the head bulged farther. Maybe if he just--no, he hadn't washed his hands. He wouldn't touch her, no matter what.

Suddenly there was a prolonged scream, a wet, slithering sound and the

room grew silent. Dear God, was she dead? No, her eyes were fixed on the ceiling, but he saw her blink. He drew her upraised knees apart, and there on the sheet in a puddle of blood and fluid lay his ... his son! A boy. His small, blue, blue son. Damn it, the child wasn't breathing. Something was wrong!

He grabbed the baby up as far as the still-attached cord would allow and wiped its mouth out with the hankie. The child waved an angry fist, took a wrathful gasp of air, then wailed his bewilderment and irritation loudly to the world at large. Sweet heaven, the baby was alive. His son had arrived.

Another crampy pain seized Vange and she delivered the afterbirth easily compared to the child. Wolff remembered this part. He waited until the cord stopped pulsing, removed the leather laces from a pair of Karl's boots and tied the cord off in two places. Then he rinsed his pocket knife in the basin and cut the cord carefully, ignoring the angry wails of his son. He wrapped the afterbirth in one of Karl's shirts and set it on the floor by the door to be taken out with the chamber pot.

There, finished. He had delivered his own son, and, hell, was he proud! Evangeline seemed stunned by it all.

"It's a boy," said Wolff with a smug, broad grin, taking up the naked child and displaying him to his mother. "He's a little angry with me right now."

Evangeline looked him over from a safe distance, still not sure whether she wanted to mother such an ungrateful son who had caused her so much pain.

Wolff wrapped the baby in another of Karl's shirts and tucked him in alongside her. As soon as he felt her warmth her son fell silent, and she acknowledged a fast-developing maternal pride. This was her son! Or rather, their son. Hers and Wolff's!

"I've got to do some cleaning up here," Wolff said. "The baby, too. I can't even tell what color his hair is."

"Blond," said Evangeline. She had seen the yellow glint on his scalp.

Suddenly her back arched in pain again and she gripped the sheet tightly.

"Vange--what's wrong?" Wolff cried. What the hell was this? They were all through. This wasn't supposed to be happening.

Her abdomen was full and taut, and suddenly Wolff realized that this was another contraction. Gruss Gott, another baby was about to be born!

"I think you're having twins," he managed to announce calmly, seeing the distressed and puzzled look on Evangeline's drawn-up face. "It's going to be all right. We know how to do it now."

Soon Evangeline was puffing and straining again, and the process repeated itself. Wolff was calmer now, but still he felt her anguished pain deep in his own body.

This child was expelled a little easier, and he didn't worry about the blueness of her skin. Her skin, for she was a girl. A fiery little spitball of a girl,

once he had cleaned out her air pipes.

"Our daughter," Wolff said proudly, presenting another wrapped bundle to his wife, who eyed it with bewilderment.

"That's all, isn't it?" she asked hopefully.

Wolff glanced at her flat abdomen and laughed. "I hope so," he declared. "I'm out of shoelaces and shirts!"

The girl was a darling little towhead, too, Evangeline discovered, and she shared her brother's temper. But as soon as she was nestled snugly underneath Evangeline's opposite arm, she too immediately settled down for a snooze.

Several hours later a washed and spruced-up Evangeline and her newly-bathed twins lay atop clean sheets in Wolff's room.

When they were all settled, Wolff lay down beside her with their freshly swaddled newborns between them.

"They're beautiful, aren't they?" he said huskily. "Little blond dumplings with their mama's sweet expression."

"They look a lot like you," she murmured. Couldn't he see that? Was he so reluctant to acknowledge his paternity?

"Is that so? Why don't you try to get some rest now before they wake up and realize there's more to life than sleeping? I'll lie here beside you and keep an eye on them."

The thought of undisturbed sleep seemed like heaven right now. Her eyes were already closed before she could say yes.

Chapter Thirty

It was nightfall before Karl made it home. His face was plastered with wet snow and the force of the wind had nearly bowled him over several times on the way home. He removed his wet boots and overcoat, then followed his nose to the kitchen where he saw the almost-dry stew pot still simmering on the stove.

"Vangie?" he called out, suddenly aware of the quiet in the house. "Where are you?"

Silence greeted him. She must be upstairs taking a nap.

"Vangie?" he called out again.

"She's in here," he heard Wolff mumble sleepily from down the hall.

What the hell was she doing in there? He hurried to Wolff's door, then stopped cold at the sight that greeted him. "My God! Vangie! You"

"We had twins," remarked Wolff quietly. "Try to be a little quiet, will you? She just fed them for the first time, and they shouldn't be disturbed."

"But who--is Doctor Weschke here?"

"No. No one was here. She very nearly had to deliver them herself. Thank goodness I had the good sense to come home before the storm worsened. Where were you, Karl? I stopped by the shop but it was empty."

Karl glanced at him uncomfortably. "I was in the back room for a while."

"Doing what?"

"Taking a nap. What else? Why is Vangie in your bed?"

"This is her room now. And mine."

"The hell! Just because you happened to be present at the birth doesn't give you any rights, Wolff. I'm her husband. And I'm telling you that she goes in my room."

Wolff glanced over at the exhausted, sleeping Evangeline and lowered his voice. "You know as well as I do, Karl, that according to the law I am still her legal husband. Your marriage is not valid. I don't intend to stay quiet any longer about this. I want my wife in my bed. And Vange loves me, Karl."

"So you say, Wolff. What about Vangie? Does she get any say in this?"

"She certainly does. But not tonight nor tomorrow. She's just plain too exhausted. We'll have it out between us as soon as she is up to it. Agreed?"

"Agreed," said a reluctant Karl.

* * * *

It was two days before Mutti and Emil managed to make it home through the deeply drifted country lanes, and even then they had to leave the wagon

behind and travel on horseback. Emma had stayed behind with Ernst and Lore since she was too unskilled at riding yet to accompany them. Mutti's backside was sore and her plump cheeks thoroughly wind-kissed when they finally reached New Ulm.

Wolff greeted the pair at the door with a broad smile, and right away Mutti knew something was up. Wolff's smile was too wide, too secretive to be just a simple smile of welcome.

"Wolff?" she said guardedly. "Everything is fine here at my home, isn't it?"

"Ja, everything is fine. Wunderbar, in fact."

"Then what is going on? Why that smile?"

"What smile?"

"Where is my daughter-in-law? Why isn't she here to greet me? Surely she didn't try to go out in this snow in her condition."

"Her condition has improved greatly, Mutti," Wolff said with a wink at a puzzled Emil. "She's upstairs with Klaus Pierre and Vivette."

"You have guests? Who are these people? And why didn't you let me know? I would have stayed home had I known company was on the way."

"Believe me, we didn't expect them so soon. Their arrival was a little ... ah ... premature"

Suddenly the tiny wail of a newborn lofted down from above, hushed quickly by a mother's murmur.

Mutti gaped at Wolff, thunderstruck. "You mean the baby--babies--have come?"

"Twins," nodded Wolff. "I delivered them myself and, of course, they're doing just fine."

"My Lord!" exhaled Mutti, and within moments she had flung off her coat and headed up the stairs.

"You delivered them?" asked an astonished Emil.

"Of course. They're mine, after all," Wolff pointed out proudly. "But I would appreciate it if you kept that good news to yourself for a while, at least until I have a chance to settle things between Karl and Evangeline."

Emil groped for a chair. He had a feeling that Wolff had something more to tell him.

* * * *

Evangeline enjoyed the next few days greatly. Wolff waited on her hand and foot, and she could see the love in his eyes for her and his twins. She felt that the two of them were well on their way to repairing their relationship, even though Wolff hadn't brought it up.

On the afternoon of the fourth day after the birth of the twins, she felt well enough to dress and groom herself and venture downstairs, even though Mutti

nearly had a fit of apoplexy to see her out of bed so soon.

"I need to be up and around," she protested. "If I have to stare at the walls of Wolff's room another day I'll go mad!"

Mutti finally relented after making Evangeline promise to take a seat in the parlor and not do anything at all strenuous. Soon she joined her and sat chatting as she peeled her apples.

"What are you making now?"

"Apfel Kuchen. We're having company for supper."

"Oh? Who?"

"Wolff has invited Annaliese Schmidtke to dine with us. He told me when he was home for lunch."

"Annaliese! Why?"

Frau Ulbricht shrugged. "Maybe the birth of your twins made him realize what he is missing out on by not having his own wife and family. I suspect that maybe he has developed an interest in Annaliese. Oh, I always used to think that she and Karl would be married some day, but now, with Karl married to you"

Evangeline wondered why Wolff had invited Annaliese. Surely he didn't have any intentions toward her now! She couldn't be so wrong about his feelings for his own wife. She was puzzled.

After taking a short nap and feeding and changing the babies, Evangeline dressed herself for the evening meal with infinite care. She washed her hair in the basin in Wolff's room and as soon as it was dry she finger-curled it into a cascading mass of ringlets at the back of her head, anchored by two jeweled combs. Her middle was still rather thick, but with the help of her corset, it was wonderful to be able to fit into one of her more elegant gowns again. She chose a wine-colored brocade with an empire waistline that hid the vestiges of her pregnancy. Of course, the low-cut bodice was a bit snug for her milk-swollen breasts, but it would just have to do. There wasn't time to let any seams out now.

A sharp rap sounded and Wolff asked, "Vange? May I come in?"

"Just a moment, please." She smoothed her gown, pinched her cheeks and took a deep breath. "All right, you may come in now."

Wolff opened the door and strode into the room.

"I just have to get clean clothes for" His mouth fell open when he saw her. Sweet heaven, she was lovely. Radiant. She took his breath away with her shiny mass of raven curls, her once-again slim shape, her plump, ivory breasts that nearly spilled out of her dress.

He had to get a grip on himself. It was much too soon after the twin's birth to even be thinking of lovemaking. He clenched his teeth and went to his bureau, withdrawing a clean pair of trousers, a vest, and a freshly laundered white shirt. He'd tell her later how beautiful she was and how much he loved her.

* * * *

The meal was delicious, yet Evangeline hardly tasted it at all. She was too intent on trying to stay calm and unemotional in spite of Wolff's flirtatious remarks to Annaliese, the way he made constant eye contact with her, the way his hands kept brushing her shoulders and hips as he seated her and as he reached to pass the various courses of the meal. She couldn't believe Wolff was doing this. And here she thought she knew him!

Karl was overly quiet and oddly flushed, Evangeline noticed. He had barely spoken a word except to compliment her politely on her hair and her gown. Of course, her gown didn't compare to Annaliese's ice-blue, silken wonder, but then, who was comparing? Certainly not she.

"Annaliese, will you help me fetch the Apfel Kuchen in the back pantry?" Wolff asked suddenly.

The pastry had been left to cool in the unheated room at the rear of the house. It was only one flat, medium-sized tin, so why would Wolff need help with it? Evangeline's dander began to rise.

"Well?" he prodded.

"Oh, of course. Right away, Wolff."

"Are you sure, Annaliese?" Wolff asked with a twinkle in his eye. "Do you trust me? Some women might not."

Both Karl and Emil's heads bobbed up simultaneously.

"Absolutely not, Wolff," Annaliese retorted with a saucy smile. "And that is why I am willing to go on one condition only."

"That's my girl! What's the condition?"

"That this time I hold the lantern."

Karl gaped and Emil frowned.

"This time?" Karl repeated.

"It isn't as if we haven't been back there before," Wolff said smugly.

"Who do you think has been fetching the desserts all this time? But if you hold the lantern, Annaliese, then I can't"

Annaliese giggled, a merry, teasing sound that seemed to grate on Karl's nerves like coarse sand on fine china.

"Can't what?" he broke in darkly.

"Can't see very well," finished Wolff lamely.

Even Mutti looked a little concerned now, for this wasn't at all like Wolff to deliberately exceed the boundaries of propriety with any woman, nor at all like Annaliese.

Wolff strolled cockily around the table and pulled out her chair, then took her arm. He gave Mutti a wink. Behind Annaliese's back he mouthed to the speechless group, "Don't wait up."

Karl fidgeted in his chair. Evangeline could see that Annaliese and Wolff's absence was bothering him as much as it was bothering her. Obviously,

she had misread Wolff's feelings. The thought of him with Annaliese made her heart wrench. How could she have been such a fool?

Abruptly, as if he could stand it no longer, Karl stood up and strode back to the pantry, returning a short time later with Annaliese in tow and a grinning Wolff following.

Mutti had a puzzled expression on her face. "What is wrong with you, Karl? And Wolff? I scarcely know you two boys any more."

Wolff pulled his chair back to sit down. "Karl didn't like my going to the pantry with his woman, Mutti," he said.

Mutti gasped. "Annaliese is not Karl's woman!"

"Yes I am, Mutti. Karl still loves me!" Annaliese said proudly, jumping to her feet. "He has always loved me."

A shocked quiet reigned, broken only by another gasp from Mutti.

"Is that true, Karl?" Mutti demanded.

Karl nodded bleakly. "I love her."

"Then why do you torture her by insisting on remaining with Evangeline?" Wolff broke in. "I'll tell you why. Because he hasn't finished wreaking his revenge on me yet, apparently."

"Revenge for what?" Mutti asked in bewilderment.

"Mutti, maybe this isn't for your ears."

"She should be told!" declared Karl. "Wolff took Annaliese's virginity."

Wolff stood stalwart under Mutti's horrified stare. "It was offered," he muttered. Then he drew himself up and pointed at Karl, daring him to deny his next words. "That wasn't nearly so bad as Karl's stealing my wife! And, Mutti, those two new grandchildren of yours are mine, not Karl's!"

Evangeline slumped back in her seat in relief. Thank God, it had all been part of a plan to force Karl's hand.

"Gruss Gott!" Mutti exclaimed. "Ach, mein ears! How did this happen? Karl? Is this true what he says?"

Karl sighed wearily. "I didn't 'steal' Vangie. We thought you were dead, remember? I admit, all my motives weren't admirable. But I sincerely wanted to help Vangie. I just didn't reckon on finding out when I saw Annaliese that I still loved her. "

Karl gave Evangeline a troubled look. "I'm terribly sorry, Vangie. Oh yes, I adore you, but not the desperate, soul-stirring way I love Annaliese. I didn't do it to hurt you, for I truly cared about what happened to you. And it has just been my pride which has kept me from giving you and Wolff my blessing."

"I owe you my thanks you for bringing Vange safely to New Ulm and for not deserting her when your heart was telling you to do otherwise," Wolff conceded.

"I wouldn't have deserted her. It was only when I knew you were alive

that I allowed myself to begin seeing Annaliese again."

"That's the truth," broke in Annaliese. "I will swear to that."

"I never knew you to be spiteful, Karl," Mutti said sadly.

"Karl and I are two people who love with great passion, Mutti," Annaliese broke in. "We are also people who act without thinking of the consequences. But that's certainly not saying Karl is all bad. I find Karl to be kind, gentle, and funny," added Annaliese softly. "In my opinion, the most wonderful man in the world."

Karl gave her a sheepish smile. "Wolff, I am legally free to marry again, right?"

"That's correct," said Wolff guardedly. "Who did you have in mind?"

"Annaliese?" Karl murmured hopefully and opened his arms. All eyes were on him as, with a shriek of joy, Annaliese flew into them.

Wolff turned toward Evangeline. "It's about time I can call you wife, liebchen," he said to her. He drew her from her chair and gave her the sweetest, most heart-warming kiss they had ever shared.

Emil grinned happily at the touching scene. "I think there may be something to be said for bachelorhood. Mutti, shall we leave this unbelievable spectacle and move to the parlor?"

"Ja," said an openly crying but still smiling Mutti. "Truly unbelievable, isn't it?"

Two little voices, crying in tandem upstairs, agreed with her.

* * * *

Later, as Evangeline lay entwined in Wolff's arms, Wolff felt her nuzzle his ear.

"Wolff?" she queried.

"Hmm?"

"Who is Vesta?"

"Why?" he asked cautiously.

"A letter came to the house today for you. It was forwarded from Camp Nelson."

"Did you read it?" Had he regained his wife only to lose her again?

"Yes. Wolff?"

He grunted despairingly.

"Were you very, very ill in Andersonville?"

"Yes."

"I'm glad you found someone to take care of you. This Vesta seemed very concerned with your health and your safety. She thanked you for your kind letter."

"Oh." If that was all--whew!

"I get a little jealous too, Wolff. That's why I read the letter."

"Evangeline Ulbricht, I swear on Vati's grave I'll never touch another

woman as long as I live. I love you. Only you."
And he knew it was true.

The End