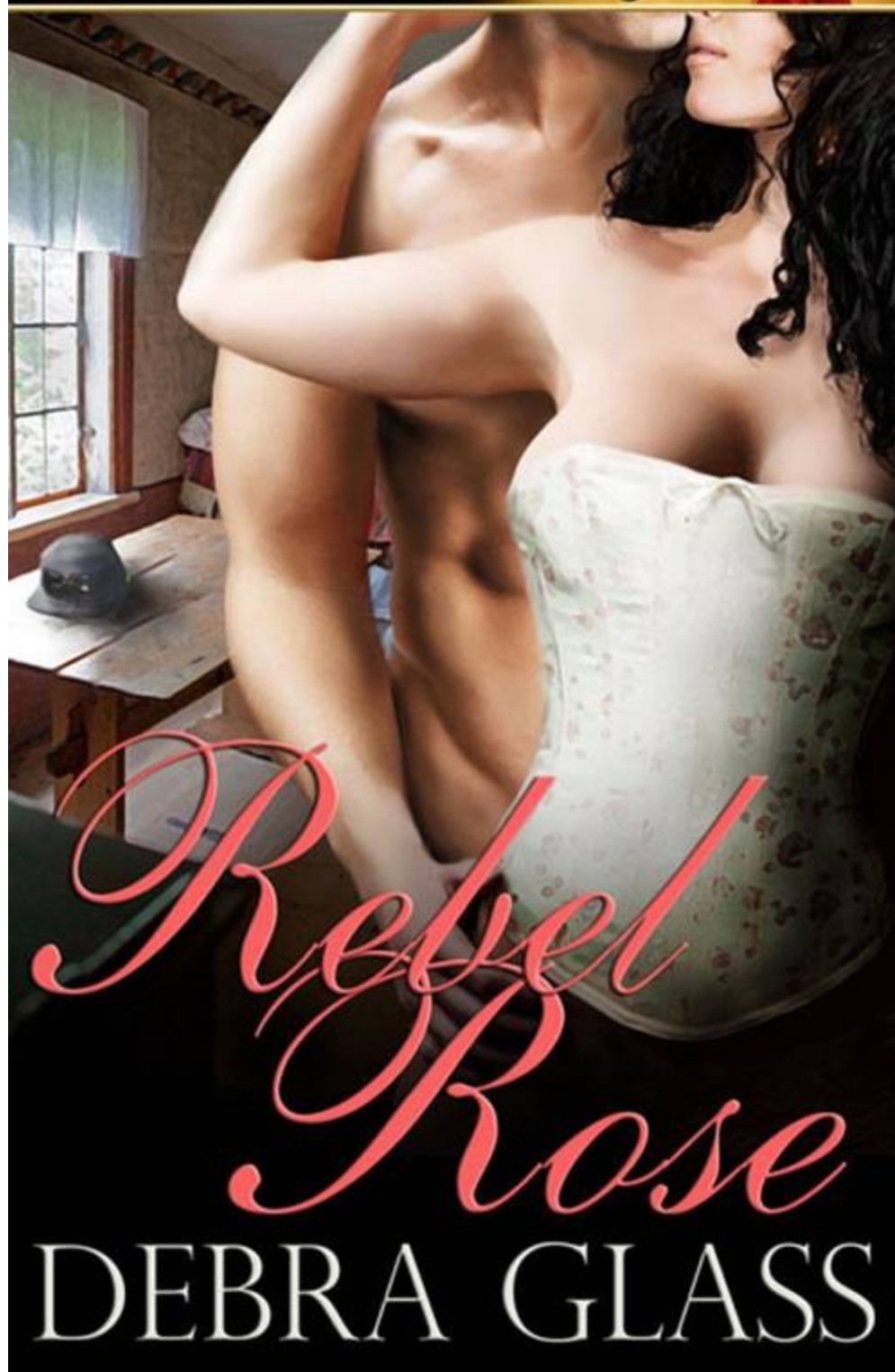


ELLORA'S CAVE *Legend*



Rebel Rose

Debra Glass

They say she's a Rebel spy...

Rosalie O'Kelley is not above using her feminine wiles to secure much-needed supplies for her fellow townspeople. But when Union Colonel Eric Skaarsberg is put in charge, Rose's usual tactics fail miserably. In exchange for supplies, she comes to a scandalous arrangement with him. She agrees to become his willing plaything—to fulfill his every physical need, eagerly and without hesitation.

Eric is duty-bound to ferret out the spy who has been leaking information to the Confederates. All evidence points to the passionate belle who readily responds to every touch and taste he metes out. One by one, he strips away Rose's secrets, but Eric is not satisfied with owning the she-Rebel's luscious body. He must uncover the truth of her past at any cost—even if it means the destruction of them both.

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Rebel Rose

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REBEL ROSE

Debra Glass

Dedication

This book is dedicated to Stormy. Your friendship has enriched my life immeasurably. Thank you for reading, plotting, encouraging and conspiring with me.

Prologue

General Sherman's Headquarters

September, 1864

Colonel Eric Skaarsberg knocked the mud off his boots before he ducked into General William Tecumseh Sherman's tent at the Federal headquarters near Atlanta.

Poring over field maps, the general did not seem to notice Eric, who took the opportunity to study the man he had not seen since the fighting at Pittsburgh Landing in 1862. Then, Eric had only been a lieutenant in the Union Army, a youngster assigned to the field hospital where Sherman had been brought after some Arkansas boys had put not one but two bullets in him.

Eric was stunned at the general's hardened and aged appearance. A greasy shock of chestnut hair interspersed with gray clung to Sherman's forehead. The skin on his face was as sallow and lined as a well-traveled saddlebag. One hand trembled as if he'd been stricken with palsy.

After Shiloh, rumors circulated that Cump Sherman was insane. To do what Sherman had done these past few years, Eric knew the man would have to be somewhat insane. But no one seemed to spread that gossip anymore since Grant had made Sherman commander in the West—and since he had pushed the Confederate Army completely out of Georgia.

Eric had heard of the letter Sherman sent to President Lincoln in which he vowed to "make Georgia howl" and Eric knew Sherman's hard-won victory had also secured another four-year term for the president.

Twisting his slouch hat in his hands, Eric cleared his throat to get the general's attention.

Sherman twisted in his chair and looked over the top of his spectacles to eyeball Eric. "Colonel," he greeted.

Eric gave him a smart salute. "You asked to see me, Sir?"

"You're being sent to northwest Alabama."

"Yes Sir," Eric said. "To Florence."

Sherman tugged at the collar of his shirt. "It's hot as hell down here."

Eric agreed. It was already the third week in October and still, the stifling Southern heat clung like stubborn cockleburs.

"That little corner of Alabama is a hotbed of bushwhacker activity," Sherman said, dragging his spectacles off and tossing them on one of the maps he'd been perusing. "The worst I've seen."

Eric had been told Florence was friendly to the Federals. He was not, however, going to disagree with his commanding officer. "Yes Sir."

"Those folks up there will kotow to you, give you anything you want, and then stab you in the back with a smile on their face. Do you understand, Colonel?"

"Yes Sir."

"The women are worse than the men," Sherman continued.

Eric's spine stiffened. No one had to tell him women could be deceitful creatures.

Sherman pinned Eric with such a stare that a twinge of dreaded expectation fluttered inside him. There was more to this meeting than he had anticipated.

"It's my belief there are several smugglers up in that area," Sherman said.

"Smugglers?"

"Somehow, the Rebels are getting their cotton through to somebody who's been paying a pretty penny for it. And that area ain't hurting for nothing." Sherman drummed his fingers on the map as if he were in thought. Then, the tone of his voice dropped as he murmured, "I fell prey to her, myself."

"Her?" Eric shifted his weight from one foot to the other. Yes, there was much more to this meeting than Eric had assumed.

Sherman drew in a deep breath and then blew it out slowly. "There's a she-Rebel who lives there by the name of Rosalie O'Kelley. I want you to keep a close eye on her, Colonel Skaarsberg. General Pike tried to ferret out her secrets last year but Pike is well – not a man of your...shall we say, stature and fine looks."

Eric's lips parted to utter a refusal or a request for anything except what he worried Sherman would say next.

"I know that you, better than anyone, can spot a spy. You did good work in Nashville," Sherman commended him.

"Yes Sir," Eric said but the blood in veins turned to ice. Although his commanders had applauded him, Eric did not feel like a hero. Not in the least.

He had been fooled by a woman—a woman he had not known was one of the most infamous prostitutes in Nashville's bawdy house district known as Smokey Row. She had vowed she loved him. She had undressed for him, all the while playing the innocent Union sympathizer. She had collected information, which she passed on to the Confederates and Eric had only realized it at the last moment. His unbridled lust and foolishness ended in the loss of eight Union lives. While the army regretted these deaths, the leak of information had led Eric to realize his lover was a spy.

No, he did not feel like a hero.

Nor had he felt like a hero when he'd watched her being taken into custody or when he'd personally written eight letters to eight grieving families.

Sherman came to his feet and took a step that closed the distance between them. "Rosalie O'Kelley is a blockade-running Jezebel. She will stop at nothing to get what she wants from you. Permission to travel through the lines, special privileges, whatever she wants."

"Has she taken the oath?" Eric asked in reference to the oath of allegiance all secessionists were required to take before they were granted services from the Federal Army.

"Of course she has." Sherman's eyes narrowed. "And in spite of it, the Widow O'Kelley is also a Confederate spy."

"Why hasn't she been arrested?" Eric knew the tremor in his voice betrayed emotion he thought he had long since quelled.

Sherman scratched his rust-colored beard. "That's what I need you to do."

"Arrest her?" Eric asked.

Sherman's eyes flashed. "Find irrefutable proof that she's a spy."

"Forgive me, Sir. But spies have been arrested for much less," Eric said.

"Rosalie O'Kelley is the sister of Brigadier General James Ross Brownlow."

Eric stared. General Brownlow had been a war hero—for the Union Army. He'd fallen at Shiloh in the same Rebel rout where Sherman was wounded. "I see," Eric said.

"Do not tarry, Colonel Skaarsberg," Sherman said. "Right now, Hood is knocking on the door of the Tennessee River in Decatur. We're holding him fast but I don't doubt if he's thwarted in Decatur, he'll move west to cross at Florence."

Despite the Indian-summer heat, a chill swept up Eric's spine. If the twenty-thousand strong Confederate Army of Tennessee got across the river, they would have no trouble retaking north Alabama and most of southern Tennessee. If they took Nashville and possession of the Cumberland River, the entire fate of the war might turn.

Men fighting for their own homes were a fiercer lot than men who fought because they'd been drafted.

"If Mrs. O'Kelley can get information to General Forrest, heaven help us all," Sherman said. "Many lives depend on you, Colonel Skaarsberg. You don't want the blood of our men on your hands. Again."

Chapter One

Florence, Alabama

October, 1864

Rosalie O'Kelley inhaled the crisp fall air. Dread settled in her tightly corseted stomach as she gazed up at the castle-like façade of the college building the Yankees had established as their headquarters.

"You ain't goin' in there by yourself."

Rose glanced at the freedman servant who'd borne her husband's corpse all the way back from Shiloh battlefield. Rueben was as dedicated to the cause of getting much-needed salt, sugar, medicine and fabric to war-torn north Alabama as she was but he did not approve of her methods. "I shall be just fine," she said.

Rueben shook his cane in her direction. "You don't know this Yankee. He might not be as...generous...as the last one." Rueben was only thirty-two years old but he had the demeanor – and the gait – of a man twice his age.

"I haven't come across one yet who wasn't...generous," Rose said as she deftly unfastened the top two buttons of her black mourning gown.

"I don't like it." Rueben shook his head. "I don't like it at all."

Rose remained silent. She didn't like it either but her only other choice was conceding defeat and that was not in her nature.

"Neither would Mister Billy," Rueben muttered.

Rose drew in a sharp breath. "Mister Billy's dead and I am only doing what I have to do."

Rueben's head dropped and he continued to murmur unintelligible words about Rose's deceased husband. Rose missed Billy too but her heart went out to Rueben. After all, he and Billy had been half brothers. Although on paper, one had owned a brickyard

and the other had been his slave, the two had always acted as brothers. And when Billy's father had died, leaving Billy everything he owned, Billy's first act as heir was to free Rueben.

Billy had signed the papers before his father's body had been interred in the Florence Cemetery. Rueben had been the only family Billy had left besides Rose.

The two men had grown up a year apart in age. Since Billy had donned a gray uniform and was killed fighting for the Sixteenth Alabama Infantry, Rueben was the only family Rose had left. Then, the soldiers had been confident of an early victory, of chasing the Yankees out of the Confederacy.

Rose's heart twisted when she thought that her own brother might have fired the bullet that had made her a widow at nineteen. Or perhaps, Billy had fired the bullet that had killed the brother. Either possibility was the stuff of her nightmares.

Darkly, she wondered if the stress of both deaths had been the reason her baby girl had died in her womb.

It had been two years since she'd become barren and widowed. Now, at only twenty-one, she felt as if her life was over—as if her life had ended instead of her husband's. The war had toughened her as it had most of the soldiers and civilians who'd shared dreams of glory. Rose sighed. There was no use in looking back. What had been done was done and all she could do now was make the best of her youthful good looks to make the lives of Florence citizens easier.

Now that the entire Confederate Army of Tennessee was headed this way, she, and others like her, were stockpiling all they could get from the Yankees in order to replenish the Confederates' supplies.

If it meant brandishing her bosom to get laudanum for a suffering soldier, Rose was ready to do it. What did her reputation matter any longer? She never intended to marry again anyway. But bleakly, she recalled how wonderful it had felt to lose herself in Billy's arms, to come utterly undone at his touch, his kiss.

She inhaled. What man would want to marry her now? The doctor had told her when she lost the baby that she'd never be able to get pregnant again. It was just as well that she was barren. This was no kind of world to bring a child into.

A shudder ripped through her as she climbed the stairs into what had once been—and hopefully would be again—Wesleyan College. Now it served as the headquarters for the Yankees.

Well. Despite what she thought about sex, Rose understood the mere innuendo of the act was a vehicle through which she could obtain most anything she wanted from women-starved soldiers.

"Wait here," she whispered to Rueben as one of the Yankee guards nearly tripped over his own boots to be the first to open the door for her.

"Miss Rose," he greeted, blushing profusely. "How nice to see you."

"You too, Sergeant Poole. My, my, have you done something different with your whiskers?" Rose asked as she gave the youth a pat on the cheek.

"No, ma'am."

"Well, something about you looks different. I swear, you look at least five years older."

Out of the corner of her eye, Rose saw a scowl cross Rueben's features. She ignored him and instead, dazzled Poole with a smile as she swayed through the door. "I'm here to see the new officer in charge. I believe I was told his name is Skaarsberg."

Rose hoped he was less portly and ancient as the last staff officer in charge of issuing permits for goods.

As Poole directed Rose up the stairs, he walked as closely as he could despite the wide sweep of Rose's hoop skirt. She was grateful for the two feet of space the skirt kept between them. Poole stank of soured wool and that tangy stench that clung to unwashed bodies. Still, she smiled and flirted as if he were the most handsome, clean-smelling man on the face of the earth.

"Colonel Skaarsberg," Poole said, standing in the doorway of what had once been a classroom.

"Yes, Poole?"

The voice that came from the other side of Poole did not sound like that of a decrepit old man. Instead, Rose intuited the speaker was educated and bearing little evidence of the harsh, nasal accent she associated with the Federals who'd been here before.

"Mrs. O'Kelley is here to see you, Sir," Poole said.

"Send her in," a whisper-quiet voice replied.

Poole stepped out of the way as he turned to Rose. That broad jack-o-lantern grin spread across Poole's face once more and Rose gave him a gracious nod as she passed into Skaarsberg's office.

The colonel did not shoot to his feet as the Federals—even the notorious Sherman—had done. Instead, he kept his head down so that the only thing visible about him was the wealth of golden waves covering his head.

Rose dampened her lips with the tip of her tongue. She toyed with the drawstring on her reticule. Waiting. Waiting.

Anger welled at the audacity of this man. Did he not have proper breeding or gentlemanly manners?

Finally, he raised his head and when he did, Rose suppressed a gasp. He possessed the face of a sculpted angel. His skin was nearly as golden as his sun-kissed hair. He was as fair as Rose was dark. Where the sun brought out her Cherokee heritage by turning her skin a burnished brown, the outdoors made this man glow.

He slipped off his spectacles and as he came to his feet, it seemed as if he would go on forever. Rose swallowed as he towered and when he stepped out from behind his desk, she resisted the urge to take a step backward.

A giant of man, he looked like one of the Norse invaders she'd read about in history books. His very presence caused her knees to quiver. He was handsome. Far too handsome. She reminded herself that she was here to work her wiles on him, not to behave like some shrinking ninny just because he had a handsome face...and a comely physique.

Rose cleared her throat, waiting for his gaze to travel downward, to linger on her open bodice and then her narrow waist before lifting once more to her eyes. No man had ever resisted her. Instead, his gaze briefly met hers and almost immediately, he turned his attention to some lint on the sleeve of his frock coat.

"How may I be of service to you, madam?" His voice was cool.

"I...I need a permit for six barrels of salt," she blurted. With the others, she had flirted, been coy, swished her skirts and batted her eyelashes. Their reaction to her beauty had made it easy for her. Skaarsberg's reaction was...nonexistent.

His gaze grazed hers again. "May I ask for what reason you need six barrels of salt?"

None of them had ever asked why! Rose stared, trying to think. A breeze blew through the open window, bringing the colonel's scent with it. Rose breathed the clean, spicy fragrance in. There was no lingering odor of cigar or pipe tobacco. No stench of damp wool or horse sweat. Instead, he smelled as heavenly as he looked. Rose realized she was trembling. What must he smell like up close?

"Ma'am?" he asked, shaking her out of her reverie.

"I...I have several servants. It's coming upon the time of year when I will need to salt down a good deal of meat and —"

"Six barrels is more than one woman and a handful of servants need."

Anger roiled. Rose clenched her fists. "Sir, would you have us starve this winter? Would you have what we have worked hard for this past year go to waste because we have not enough salt?"

"I'll write you a permit for three barrels."

Rose took two steps toward him, forcing him to look her in the eye. Green. His eyes were the palest spring green. Rose stared for a steep second before she remembered what she was there to do. "Your own Colonel Cornyn carted off my livestock and produce but a year ago. I have struggled to restock my spare larder." She took one more calculated step closer. "I have faith a good Christian man such as you would not deny me." She took a deep breath, knowing her breasts rose and fell seductively with it.

His gaze never wavered from her eyes. "Three."

Rose shook. She resisted the petulant urge to stamp her foot. "I need six." Her voice rose in pitch and she realized she was about to lose control of her temper.

"I am authorized to write you a permit for three," he said.

"Very well," Rose said, daring to take another step closer to this giant of an angel. Her black skirt swept over the toes of his polished boots. "Then write me two permits. Each for three barrels of salt."

"Madam, rhetoric and pretty persuasion are regrettably lost on me. I could not write you more than one permit—for three barrels of salt—if I wanted to. Surely you realize how tight the reins are on rations in these trying times."

"There would be no trying times if you Yankees would just go back where you belong." Rose wanted to kick herself. Hard. What the devil was she doing? She should be smiling, batting her eyelashes, even working up tears. Instead, his denial and blatant rejection of her had transformed her into a snappish shrew.

She breathed as deeply as she could, wishing she had not asked Queenie to lace her stays so tightly. Obviously, a slender waist—or any of her others wiles—had no effect on this man.

"You wouldn't want my servants and me to starve with winter coming on, would you, Colonel Skaarsberg?" she asked, looking up at him with what she knew was the perfect pout on her rouged lips.

His gaze flicked to her mouth and then he averted it again. A small triumph welled in her breast. Rose did not miss a trick. She moved so that she was once more in the line of his sight. "Please, Colonel. It's only three more than you have agreed to give me."

He merely stared.

Rose inhaled, summoning courage. She'd never stooped this low before but with the Confederates nearby and the threat of losing her hard-earned provisions again, she felt she had little choice. She leveled her gaze on his. "I...I would be willing to...offer you a trade."

"A trade?" he asked. His eyes were so cold, like green ice.

She cleared her throat. "My...services for your supplies."

"Services? What type services? Are you a seamstress?"

He was making this very difficult.

Rose forced herself to hold his gaze. "No."

"Then what?" he asked impatiently.

Her chest rose and fell with her deep breaths. What if he agreed? She didn't want to think about what she'd do if he didn't agree. Her mouth was so dry she could hardly form the words. "I...I realize you are far from home. Far from female...companionship. I could offer you that."

"Female companionship?"

Rose wanted to scream. "Sex, Colonel Skaarsberg. Sex with me for your supplies."

A muscle in his jaw twitched before he promptly spun on his heel and went back to his desk.

Victory was close. Rose watched him dip his pen in the bottle of ink on his desk and scrawl something on a piece of paper. Her heart pounded but she made sure he saw the dimples in her cheeks as he handed her the permit.

"Good day, Mrs. O'Kelley."

Rose's gaze fell to the paper. Her spirits plummeted. Three? "Three? But—" she began but he quickly cut her off.

"Good day, Mrs. O'Kelley," he said tersely.

Rose stammered, trying to think of words that would not come. She could not believe he had refused her so coldly. She stared as he returned to his seat, donned his spectacles and went back to the task he had been performing before she had entered his office.

Heat flooded her cheeks. She wanted to rail at him, to throw the permit back in face. She did neither. Instead, she spat out an insincere "thank you," spun and stalked from the room.

Her skirt swept the floor as she descended the staircase. Poole caught up with her as she fled the building. "Always good to see you, ma'am," he fawned.

Rose was in no mood to charm the sergeant. "Tell me, Sergeant Poole—is the colonel always so disagreeable?"

"Disagreeable? To you?" Incredulous, he glanced back toward the stairs.

Rose burst through the open doorway. "Let's go, Rueben," she said as she continued moving to the street. She could not get away from this place fast enough.

"Did he give you the permit?" Rueben hobbled to keep up with Rose.

She clutched the permit in her hand so tightly it crumpled. "He gave me a permit for three barrels," she said practically spitting the words out.

Rueben glanced back at the gothic brick building. "That him?"

Rose stopped in mid-stride and whirled so quickly her heavy hoop swung her slightly off balance. She sidestepped to right herself before she trained her gaze on the window where Colonel Skaarsberg stood, staring down at them with his expressionless face.

"Yes," Rose said, jerking her chin at him as she turned her back on him once more. "That's the blue devil." The irony was not lost on her that only moments ago, she had pictured him as an angel.

How could he have been so unresponsive to her entreaties? She'd offered him her body and he'd dismissed her as if she had been an old crone instead of an Alabama belle in her prime. And a widow at that. Didn't widows have the reputation as being a bit more amorous than their maiden counterparts?

She slowed her pace to match Rueben's. He'd been wounded in the fighting where her husband was killed. Rueben did not talk about it but Rose had read letters that detailed how Rueben had been so grief-stricken at the loss of his brother, he'd taken up one of the new Enfield rifles and single-handedly put five Federals in Tennessee graves that stormy April day.

"I guess Hood's army will just have to make do with what we have," Rueben said, resigned.

Rose sighed. "Not if I have any say so in the matter. I'll get that salt. Just you wait and see."

The colonel was just harder to persuade. That was all. And he did not have any idea just how persuasive Rose could be when she wanted something.

Chapter Two

Eric inhaled. The she-Rebel's fragrance still lingered in the air. She was everything Sherman had warned him about and more.

He gritted his teeth and shook his head. It was apparent that she was not accustomed to being denied. Anything.

And now, Eric could easily see why. During his time in the South, he had learned that there were two types of women referred to as Southern belles. One was the naturally pretty and sweet-tempered blonde or redhead. The other was a dark beauty whose hair and eyes evidenced a native heritage.

Rosalie O'Kelley was the latter.

When she had first entered his office, Eric had been aware she was wearing mourning. So many women in the South were these days. He'd purposefully not looked up, simply to gauge her reaction to his indifference. But when he had...

His insides seized at the memory. Rosalie O'Kelley was the most stunning widow he had ever laid eyes on. It had taken every ounce of iron will he possessed not to go slack-jawed and gape at the woman. Her hair was the same black as her dress and gleamed like a crow's back in the sun. He recognized the stain of rouge on her fuller-than-fashionable lips and, although he was not one who approved of paint on women's faces, the hint of color on her high cheekbones gave life to her pale olive complexion.

Graceful as a black cat, she had floated toward him and that's when he had noticed the color of her eyes. From across the room, they appeared an indistinguishable brown. Up close, he could see they were the color of summer leaves at twilight, deep, dark green – and just as mysterious.

He knew, of course, that she was playing him but when the smile formed on her lush lips...he'd wanted only to grant her every desire just to see those dimples deepen at the corners of her mouth again.

General Sherman had assured him that Rosalie O'Kelley was a virtuous woman despite her wiles but Eric found himself wondering if it were true—and hoping it was not. She'd offered herself to him but only as a last resort. Doubtless the other quartermasters had fallen at the first bat of her black lashes. In spite of the fact that he knew better, it would be to his advantage if the widow was the spitfire she seemed.

She had unwittingly played right into his hands and although he'd prepared himself to do anything to discover her secrets, the thought of taking her offer terrified him to the core. But he had learned from the best and now he would do anything to stop more Union soldiers from dying.

After the bewitching widow disappeared from sight, Eric moved from the window and began writing out a permit for three additional barrels of salt. He took a deep breath and blew it out as he returned his pen to the holder. This permit would be hand delivered—when he informed the widow he would be quartered in her house.

* * * * *

"I'll have to check with Miss Rose before you come in here!" Queenie's voice echoed in the foyer.

Rose brushed a loose strand of hair back with her wrist and then wiped her hands on her apron. She twisted from where she had been cleaning with a feather duster and glanced at the clock on her dresser. It was nearly six in the evening. Who would be coming to call at this time of day?

From the tone of Queenie's voice, Rose realized it was certainly no one she knew. Dread settled in the pit of her stomach. It had been nearly a year since the Yankees had quartered in her home, forcing her to sleep in the servant house out back with Queenie and Rueben.

And as far as Rose knew, the only new Yankee in town was —

She darted into the upstairs hallway just in time to see Colonel Skaarsberg ascending the stairs. Two soldiers followed, wagging a trunk.

Rose's heart plummeted.

"Good evening, Mrs. O'Kelley," the colonel said with an insolent nod of his head.

"I told him he couldn't come in here," Queenie called from the ground floor.

"It's all right, Queenie," Rose said, glancing to make certain her servant was indeed *all right*. Queenie was expecting a baby within the month and Rose knew full well what excitement could do to a woman in a delicate condition.

She turned to Skaarsberg. "What are you doing in my home?" she demanded although it was very obvious what he was doing here. Her pulse accelerated and she took a step back as he reached the top of the stairs.

His gaze raked her in blatant appraisal making Rose regret that she'd spent the entire afternoon cleaning. Her hair was askew. Her apron was dirty. Mud spattered the hem of her dress and the worst of it all, was the smug gleam in Skaarsberg's eyes.

Rose truly hated this man.

"I will be quartering here," he told her with a lopsided grin that made Rose ache to slap him.

She swallowed thickly. "There are a good many other houses in town which are less...modest...than mine."

"This one will do nicely," he said, his gaze leaving hers to scan the three upstairs rooms which were visible from the small hallway at the top of the stairs.

Twisting his slouch hat in his hand, he brushed past her and Rose took two faltering steps backward. Once again assaulted with his clean, masculine scent, she wondered why he had to be so fine-looking. Her heart felt as if it were beating in her throat.

Once he reached the center of the bedroom, he turned to her. "Is this your room?" The tone of his voice dropped and there was no mistaking his unspoken implication.

A surge of heat flooded Rose's cheeks and radiated to the back of her neck. "Yes," she said, moving inside to run her fingers over the cool marble top on her dresser.

He stared as if he were debating claiming it as his own. Rose could not read him well enough to know what he would do if she protested. Begging certainly had not gotten her anywhere with him. But would he take her room—and her bed—just to spite her? Dominate her?

The abrupt thought of him dominating her in her own bed intruded into her thoughts and shocked at herself, she lowered her lashes. She'd never had such indecent thoughts about her husband. Why this man? This hateful Yankee! She forced the unwelcome thoughts away and lifted her gaze to his. It was time to try a different approach. "The other beds in the house are not large enough for a man of your...size. You should take my room."

Something flashed in his eyes. Surprise? Triumph? Rose could not tell. *Please don't take my room, you Yankee bastard.*

The tiny muscles at one corner of his mouth twitched. After a steep silence he said, "How very generous of you. Again."

With a wave of his hand, the two soldiers carted his trunk into the room and put it at the foot of the bed before they left.

Rose's heart sank. There was little she could do about Skaarsberg quartering in her home—and sleeping in her bed—and she knew it. For the time being, she would have to feed him, do his laundry and even entertain him. Spite for him welled and she clenched her fists so hard her nails bit into her palms. She fought to keep from lashing out at him.

"Oh, by the way," he began as he started toward her. "I have reconsidered your request."

Without warning, he took her hand in his and lifted it. Rose resisted the impulse to jerk away from him. Instead, she stifled a gasp as he put a piece of folded paper in her palm. His hands engulfed hers, lingering uncomfortably long. Rose drew back and he released her but when she looked down to see what he had given her, the victory was not as sweet as she would have thought. It was a permit for three additional barrels of salt.

She knew she should thank him but it was the very least he could do given the circumstances. She shoved the paper in the pocket of her apron. "I suppose I should take back those hateful things I said about you," she told him as she swatted an errant strand of hair away from her forehead.

"What hateful things?" he asked.

"The things I said about you as I left the college," she snapped. "And suppose my offer has been withdrawn?"

He laughed outright and God, what a laugh. The sound of it filled the room and her ears, reverberating in her head. His laughter was disarming and in any other place, she would have found the sound of it attractive, charming even.

Heavens, he was so close. His presence made Rose acutely aware of everything—her thundering heartbeat which caused her open bodice to flutter, the subtle movements of her skirt, the rise and fall of his shoulders and feel of his gaze on her face.

More obvious, was a pack of folded papers peeping out of the pocket of his uniform jacket. Permits? Rose gulped. If only she could get her hands on those. She tried very hard not to stare at the papers.

As it was, she was pinned between him and the dresser and if she moved first, she would have to venture even closer to him. Heat radiated from his body. And that scent. She inhaled. Leather. Man. Soap. Did he know what he was doing to her? Because if he did, he was even more reprehensible than she'd first thought.

"I...I need to collect my things," she said briefly looking into his eyes before pretending to have great interest in a speck of dirt on her apron.

He made no move to step out of her way.

The windows were open. It was October. Why was it so miserably hot in here? A bead of perspiration trickled downward between Rose's shoulder blades. "Sir, I shall have to retrieve my...unmentionables from this chest. Now, if you don't mind –"

And then, he did the unthinkable. Rose froze as he took his own handkerchief, slipped one hand under her chin and lifted it so he could wipe a smudge off her cheek. The act was so presumptuous and so intimate that all Rose could do was gape. Every ounce of decorum she possessed screamed at her to accuse him of lechery but she did not.

No. She needed to use his obvious change of heart to her advantage. Perhaps he had reconsidered his harsh treatment of her earlier. Something warm and liquid unfurled inside her.

"You had a bit of dust on your cheek," he murmured, caressing her chin as he released her.

Rose displayed her dimples. "I thought you Yankees liked to see us Southern girls covered in grime and sweat."

Eric stared, trying to figure her out. The voice in his head urged him to say ribald things to her. *Take your clothes off, right now.* He fought the impulse. "Grime no. Sweat, now that's another story entirely," Eric told her.

He stepped back and turned away from her so she would not notice the cockstand pushing against his trousers. He shut his eyes briefly but the image of her brilliant smile was already branded on his brain, sending blood pumping straight to the area where he least needed it to go right now.

He drew in a deep breath and blew it out, trying to forget the beautiful spitfire who was standing behind him. What Herculean task had Sherman asked of him? Sakes alive, he was only human. Finally, he cleared his throat. "I will give you a few moments to collect your things."

"Queenie should have supper ready by now," the widow said, her tone reverting back to the intruded-upon Southern sympathizer.

"Thank you," he said, turning to quit the room—and the widow's bewitching presence. His gaze found hers and he struggled to remind himself that she was a spy whom he was here to catch and arrest. He hadn't missed how she ogled the fake orders in his pocket he'd placed there just to lure her. "I am grateful for your...er...*hospitality*, Mrs. O'Kelley."

Her eyes narrowed. "And I am grateful for the permits. Thank you, Colonel Skaarsberg."

With her dusty apron and hair in disarray, she seemed small and fragile. The mourning gown gave her the illusion of being a victim of this war—and of himself. Eric could easily see why so many men had given her whatever she desired. Sherman had called her a Jezebel.

Eric's gaze ventured from her face to her open bodice where just the slightest swell of one breast was visible. Although she'd offered the trade herself, he still wondered just what she would do if he slid his hand inside, searching until he found her nipple. What sounds would she make? Would a look of ecstasy come over her face?

He bit the inside of his cheek to keep from moaning aloud. And then, as if he had no will of his own, he took a step toward her intent on acting out his fantasies.

"Miss Rose?"

The voice jolted Eric out of his trance and he spun to discover the black man with whom he'd seen her walking earlier. The man looked much younger than he had seemed from the window and Eric guessed him to be about his same age.

"Rueben," Rose said. "This is Colonel Skaarsberg. He will be quartering in our house." Her tone was so flat Eric could not tell if it was edged with spite or resignation.

Rueben's eyes narrowed into threatening slits. "There are a good many other rooms in this house. Why are you taking the missus' room?"

"She offered it," Eric said but a pang of guilt swept him. Truthfully, he had tricked her into offering it. He'd not really intended to stay in this room—at least not all night. He had only wanted to gauge her reaction.

"I don't care if she offered you the crown jewels of England. You ain't staying in this room," Rueben said. "This is Miss Rose's room."

Rose said nothing but victory gleamed in her steady gaze.

Rueben limped into the room and took up one side of the trunk. "Colonel, if you'll just get the other side, I think the two of us can manage it."

Eric repressed a smile. The only thing with more spit and venom than a Southern woman was a Southern black. This particular one was not about to back down and see his mistress's room confiscated by a Yankee. No matter how much he had longed to sleep in Rosalie O'Kelley's bed, Eric knew the prudent thing to do was to take up his side of the trunk and relocate to one of the other rooms.

He grabbed the handle and with a grunt, he and Rueben hefted the trunk and moved toward the door with it.

"Come down for supper when you're settled in," Rose called.

This time, the smug tint of triumph sang in her voice.

* * * * *

Queenie waddled into the dining room and set a plate on the table in front of Eric.

"Thank you, Queenie," he said. "This looks delicious."

"Queenie is the best cook in Florence. I don't know how we'll make do when the baby comes."

Queenie grinned and patted her swollen belly. "Ain't no baby gonna stop me from cooking."

"You might be surprised," Rose said grimly. She sipped a cup of coffee.

Eric studied her. Before the mention of Queenie's baby, Rose had been talking in an almost jovial manner. Now, she seemed pensive. Distracted.

"Do you have children Mrs. O'Kelley?" he asked.

Queenie nearly dropped the plate she had for Rose.

Rose hesitated before she replied. "No, Colonel. I do not have children."

There was something bleak in her eyes and in her tone that made Eric wonder.

"Colonel, if you don't mind, I will bless our food." Rose bowed her head and muttered a quick, rehearsed prayer.

At the risk of being sacrilegious, instead of closing his eyes and bowing his head, Eric watched Rose.

Her dark hair gleamed in the lamplight. Her lips moved quickly as she spoke and Eric could not help but wonder what it would be like to feel those very lips moving over his mouth, his skin.

His cock lurched against his trousers. He inhaled. He'd never been so physically attracted to a woman before. Although Rose wasn't the most beautiful woman he'd ever seen, she was easily the most alluring.

She had been flirtatious that morning but now she was icy. Reserved. Was it because she'd gotten what she wanted? Or because Sherman had been wrong about her? No. Eric could tell that Rosalie O'Kelley was a woman of her word. She'd offered a trade. Her body for supplies. And before the week was through, Eric had no doubt she'd make good on that trade.

"Amen," she said and her eyes opened.

Eric's face warmed when her gaze collided with his. "Amen." He cleared his throat and slid his napkin into his lap, shifting to relieve the pressure of his trousers on his swollen cock.

"So, Colonel Skaarsberg," Rose began. "Where are you from?"

"Ohio," he replied.

"Do you have a family there?" She cut into her fried chicken.

"My...my parents are both deceased," he said, driving down a torrent of memories.

"I'm sorry to hear that," Rose said and then her eyebrow arched. "You're not married?"

He shook his head. "Before the war, I worked as an apprentice for an attorney. I plan to open my own law practice when this war is over."

She swallowed the bite of meat she'd taken. "It seems as if a good many people plan to do a good many things when the war is over."

"What about you, Mrs. O'Kelley? What are your plans?" he asked before he took a bite of Queenie's creamy mashed potatoes.

Rose stared. "I've stopped thinking in terms of a future."

Eric's heart twisted. On the exterior, she seemed so strong and confident. She possessed all the wiles and independence of a stray cat. But although he'd only known her for a few hours, something about her filled him with the inexplicable urge to shield her from the world.

He sorely reminded himself he was here to do a job. Sympathizing with Southerners would only get him into trouble—and God knew he'd known his share of trouble at the hands of secessionists.

Rose nibbled her food, hardly tasting the blend of savory spices in which Queenie had breaded the fried chicken. A sense of melancholy descended on her and she realized she hadn't thought past the war.

Right now, she felt as the damned thing might never end. Since her husband's death, her life had consisted of finagling goods and supplies out of the Yankees, trying to hold onto what worldly possessions she had left, and trying to keep food on the table.

She'd never dropped this low, though. She'd never offered more than the promise of a peck on the cheek for a permit. Now, she was willing to trade her body for a few barrels of salt.

Times were different. Times were worse. The Yankee only had a week or two left to remain in Florence at the very most. General Hood's entire Confederate Army was assembling just across the Tennessee River and when they crossed it, they'd be ragged and tired and hungry – and frightfully low on supplies. They'd take everything Rose had in her stores. And while she didn't begrudge the soldiers who were fighting for her independence, she realized this war was all but over. Why should she smile and hand over everything for which she'd sold her soul?

And what about after the war?

How would she make ends meet? Would she marry again?

What else was there for a woman to do?

She glanced at Eric. Despite their decadent agreement, he was the first man who'd actually caught her attention. Realistically, Rose knew all too well there was more to a man than a comely appearance. Still, she wondered what it would be like to be naked in such a handsome man's arms, to feel his body moving over and into hers.

The muscles in her thighs tightened in dark anticipation. She squeezed her legs together but the motion only made the throbbing between them worse.

Her hand trembled as she reached for her cup so she held it with both hands as she brought it to her lips. She had to talk, to say something. The tension hung taut between them and she could tell by the way his gaze moved over her body that he was thinking the same thing she was.

She hadn't realized until now exactly how lonely she'd been or even how much she needed a man's touch. Certainly, she touched herself in the dark but fantasies could not replace the feel of strong arms and warm kisses.

Her cheeks warmed and she hoped the colonel didn't notice that she was blushing. But even at the risk of giving away her lurid thoughts, she scandalously wondered when he intended to demand payment for their *trade*.

* * * * *

Rose pulled her threadbare shawl close and gazed up at the brilliant stars. Even though there was a chill in the autumn air, she enjoyed sitting outside at night. The insects from summer had gone away with the first frost earlier in the month and now there was no chirping or buzzing in the darkness. There was only silence.

In fact, the only sound that disturbed the quiet was the intermittent kiss of Rueben puffing on his pipe. Oddly enough, the colonel didn't smoke. Most soldiers did. Billy had.

Queenie rested her head on Rueben's shoulder as he rubbed a palm over her back. The sight of them together, so easy with each other, made Rose miss her husband. She heaved a silent sigh.

Two long years. Briefly, she closed her eyes. It seemed more like a thousand years since she'd felt safe, since her only responsibilities consisted of managing the household. Now, it seemed as if the whole town depended on her. The others weren't brave enough to demand stores from the Yankees but they were willing enough to accept her charity.

She gazed across the street at the imposing façade of the Irvine house. No lights shone in the window. They were either all abed or spying from within to catch a glimpse of the new Yankee quartermaster.

Even the Foster house at the head of Court Street was dark. Before the war both houses had been grand mansions. Now they were as ragged as everything else in the South. There wasn't a house in Florence that wasn't in need of a fresh coat of paint.

Rose imagined she was very much like those once grand houses. Long ago, it seemed, she'd been vibrant and beautiful. Now she was only tired and ragged.

Dark and sad.

She cut her eyes at the colonel. He sat with his feet propped casually on the porch railing. His body stretched so long that with his chair rocked back on its hind legs, he could rest his head against the exterior wall of the house. She wondered what the neighborhoods looked like where he was from. Did the houses need paint? Were the women garbed in old, tattered dresses because there was no fabric or need for new garments? Were the people weary, widowed and cheerless?

"Where are you from?" she asked suddenly overcome with curiosity.

He put the chair back on all four feet and sat up straight. "Originally from Connecticut," he said. "But currently from Ohio."

Rose had never traveled any farther north than Kentucky. "Is it cold there?"

"Bone-chilling," he said. "The winters here are just as bitter. Don't let anyone tell you differently. They simply don't last as long."

"It astounds me that a country can have such different climates and landscapes," Rose mused. "Have you been west?"

"No farther than Arkansas," he said. "Rough country, that."

"I was hoping maybe you had tales of the Indians to share," Rose said.

"My mammy remembered when the Indians were here," Queenie interjected.

Rose never spoke of it but her own grandmother had been a Cherokee woman who'd been forced to leave her home in Tennessee to join the infamous Trail of Tears. She'd fallen ill near Florence and had been taken in and nursed back to health by Rose's grandfather. After that, she'd changed her name from Gahlilahi, which meant pretty in Cherokee, to Gillianna and claimed she was Black Dutch instead of Cherokee. When enough palms were greased, the authorities tended to look the other way where marriage between whites and natives was concerned.

Queenie stood, bracing her back with her hands. Her swollen belly jutted, straining the homespun fabric of her dress.

"Are you turning in?" Rose asked.

"Yessum," she said, patting her stomach. "This little fella makes me powerful hungry and powerful tired."

Rose smiled, recalling the odd, joyous, terrifying sensation of a baby growing inside. "Good night," Rose whispered.

Rueben puffed his pipe and cast a watchful eye at the Yankee. "You want me to stay up awhile longer, Miss Rose?"

"That won't be necessary," she said.

After the couple disappeared around the corner of the house, Eric turned to his pensive hostess. "What about you?" he asked. "Are you originally from here?"

"Yes," she said.

"How did your brother come to fight for the North?"

"He settled in Kentucky," she told him. "And I suppose he felt an allegiance to his West Point classmates from up North."

"More than family?" Eric prodded.

She shot him a glance he could not read. Was that spite or remorse? "He married a girl from Massachusetts. She became his family." She stared into the darkness. "She's a widow too, now. Just like I am."

"I did not know your husband but I was acquainted with your brother. He was a gallant man."

Her gaze swiveled to his again and she stared a moment. "Sir, I am wise enough to know that no one is truly gallant. Not Billy. Not my brother. It was kill or be killed in that Tennessee peach orchard. I've grown weary of talk of courage and gallantry. What it is, is stupidity and stubbornness."

With that, she stood and went inside. "Good night, Colonel Skaarsberg," she called as he heard her footsteps ascending the staircase.

Chapter Three

Rose awakened the next morning to the sound of hammering. Bewildered, she got out of bed and pulled on her dressing gown. The way the sunlight streamed through the window told her she'd grievously overslept.

She stepped into her slippers and then, holding her robe close, she ventured into the hallway. Out here, the hammering was even louder.

The colonel's door was ajar. He was already up.

She looked toward the ceiling. The hammering was coming from the roof. She blew an exasperated breath through her lips. Rueben had no business on the roof. After his injury, he wasn't as able as he had once been. And especially with Queenie in a delicate condition! She didn't need to be nursing her husband and a baby.

Gathering up the long skirt of her robe, Rose rushed down the stairs. "Queenie?" she called but got no answer. "Queenie, where are you?"

The screen door creaked and Rose darted toward the back of the house. "Queenie?"

But it was Rueben who stood at the door and yet, the pounding still continued.

"What's going on?" Rose demanded. "It sounds as if someone is tearing the house down."

Rueben's eyes lifted and Rose stepped out onto the back stoop. Someone had leaned the ladder against the house. Her gaze traveled up the rungs to where two black boots appeared over the eave. Rose darted off the porch and shielding her eyes from the sun with her hand, looked up to discover the Yankee colonel descending the ladder with a hammer lodged in his belt.

Were it not for his blue uniform trousers, he would have looked like any other man. Rose swallowed thickly. Not *any* other man, she thought. Without his frock coat and

vest on, every muscle in his shoulders and back was delineated underneath the perspiration soaked, cotton shirt he wore.

"That should take care of those loose shingles," he said cheerily as he reached the bottom of the ladder. He turned, wiping the sweat from his brow with the sleeve of his shirt. "Oh, good morning, Mrs. O'Kelley," he said and flashed her a smile.

Rose gaped. "What were you doing on the roof?"

He withdrew the hammer from his belt and handed it to Rueben. "Nailing down the loose shingles. You could use a bit of tar up there to reinfor—"

The last time the roof had been patched, Billy had done it. Inexplicable rage flooded Rose at the memory. She cut the colonel off. "We are perfectly capable of fixing our own roof, thank you, Colonel Skaarsberg."

"Miss Rose," Rueben began.

But it was the colonel's turn to interrupt. "Would you have me believe you'd send this man up a ladder with that game leg?"

"I—" Rose started. She closed her mouth. "No."

"And her?" the colonel asked, gesturing to Queenie.

"Of course not." The back of Rose's neck grew hot.

"I think fixin' the roof is the least he can do if he's gonna sleep in our house and eat our food," Queenie interjected.

Rose's gaze darted from Queenie to Rueben and then to the colonel. He was dividing and conquering. He'd won the others over with his glib tongue and misplaced generosity. Well, he wouldn't get under her skin. Rose wouldn't let him.

His dimples deepened.

But, oh dear Lord, that smile!

Resigned, Rose sighed. "Thank you."

"You're welcome," he said and then turned to Rueben. "I'll see if I can scare up some grease for that stubborn pump handle, too."

Clutching her dressing gown close, Rose watched the colonel amble into the shed. She crossed her arms over her chest. *He must really be looking to make good on our agreement.*

“Miss Rose,” Rueben scolded once the colonel was out of earshot. “There’s a long list of things that needs to get done around this house. Do I need to remind you that you can catch more flies with honey than vinegar?”

She stared at the shadowy opening to the shed—the last place she’d seen the colonel. “No. I don’t need reminding.”

Rueben took a step closer to her. “Mister Billy ain’t around and I can’t—”

Rose’s gaze clashed with Rueben’s. “I don’t need reminding of that either.” She whirled and went back into the house.

* * * * *

Greasing the pump was something Rueben could have easily done but Eric was out to disarm the surly Southerners. He knew from his experience here that if he could win over the servants, they would win Rose over for him—not that it mattered. She had made an agreement with him. An agreement he intended to keep—soon.

There was one thing he did understand. There was a difference between a willing woman and an eager woman. Before he was done with her, Rosalie O’Kelley would be the latter.

Besides, Rueben was right. There were several odd jobs that needed the attention of an able man and Eric liked staying busy.

He’d noticed the tell-tale circles on the ceiling in his bedroom. Given that, he’d been surprised when she seemed angry that he’d done the much-needed repairs to the roof—until he’d overheard her comments to Rueben about her deceased husband.

Eric knew all too well what it was like to have to pick up and keep going when someone who’d taken care of you had died. When his father had passed away, Eric had

been forced to mature before his years. He'd been obligated to take on responsibilities for which he hadn't been ready.

Here Rose was – a woman with two incapable servants – and a bevy of chores only someone with skill and brawn could accomplish.

It was no wonder Southerners resorted to plying their wares to get their hands on otherwise unobtainable goods.

His thoughts hearkened back to Rose standing on the back porch in her dressing gown. He wondered if she realized there was the tiniest gap just under the fist she held against her heart. He wet his dry lips with the tip of his tongue. Even through that gap, he'd seen the luscious swell of one of her breasts. He'd love a mouthful of that succulent flesh.

Even though spite had flashed in her eyes, Eric had not missed the fact that she could not look him directly in the eye. He would have thought her bashfulness was a result of the fact she'd been dressed in a robe but she had been just as coy at supper the night before.

"Hmm," he voiced, unable to quell a grin. What could the lovely widow be thinking?

* * * * *

Rose could not sleep. Instead, she stared into the shadows, her thoughts consumed with the man who slept in the next room.

When she had gone to him to request the permit, he had shown about as much interest in her as a stalk of corn. But he'd come here to her house and made mention of her offer. Last evening, his eyes had roamed all over her body. And this morning...

Before he'd gone to attend army matters at the college, he'd done all sorts of odd repairs that she and Rueben hadn't been able to see to since Billy's death.

The sight of the colonel with his shirt sleeves pushed up, his clothes straining against the taut muscles in his back and thighs welled in her mind's eye. Rose dragged in a rough breath.

He'd even brought meat for their supper tonight and fresh eggs for tomorrow's breakfast.

When they'd first met, he'd been entirely too quarrelsome. What had changed? His current demeanor did not make sense. That first day, he'd hardly looked at her. Now his gaze caught hers at every chance, his eyes holding hers as if in a lover's embrace.

Rose grappled to make sense of it all.

In fact, he hadn't shown any interest in her at all until he'd seen her after a long day of cleaning, exactly when she looked her worst.

He'd touched her that day.

Filling her lungs with air, she rubbed her wrist where his fingers had brushed her skin. When he had made contact with her, a jolt of liquid fire had shot through her limbs and pooled between her legs. Rose knew something sinister and perilous lurked in that touch but she didn't have the power to resist him. For a moment, she'd thought he might drag her against him and press a kiss to her lips. Even now, as she imagined him doing just that, she knew she wouldn't have stopped him, even if she hadn't made him a scandalous offer.

Rose drew in a long, slow breath. Tendrils of desire snaked lazily through her. What would it feel like to have his mouth hard and hot and hungry on hers? To have him inside her?

She'd never known any man other than her husband in the Biblical sense. But she knew her own touch and she knew how wonderful she could make herself feel when she was alone and hidden under the covers.

Rose dragged up her nightgown and circled her fingertips over her clitoris. The handsome colonel looked capable of touching her this same way, of bringing her to the same ecstasy to which she brought herself.

Her heart beat in her throat as she opened her legs just slightly, just far enough to slide her fingertips through her already damp folds. Rose thought about all the things Billy had done to her. Unspeakable things.

Since Billy's death, Rose had fantasized about a faceless, nameless stranger doing such things to her.

Now the stranger had a face. And a name.

At first Rose had thought it was shameful to enjoy having a man kiss her between the legs. But now...

Oh, now Rose imagined looking down to see the colonel's wealth of blonde hair between her legs as his mouth brushed her there. Desire rushed over her and her lashes fluttered closed as she pretended her fingers were the colonel's tongue.

A rough breath left her lungs. *Oh yes, you Yankee bastard. Taste my cunny.*

Her fingers worked faster and faster and —

Without warning, a knock sounded on the front door downstairs. Rose jolted onto her elbows and listened in the darkness.

The doorknob rattled.

Someone's trying to get in the house! Rose's heart thundered. She eased out of the bed and pulled on her dressing gown. Who could be trying to get in at this hour? She hoped to God it was not a Confederate refugee trying to hide from the Yankees.

The pounding shook the house again. Adrenaline raced through her veins as she twisted her doorknob. She winced when the hinges emitted a high-pitched squeak. On shaky legs, she moved to the top of the stairs.

The colonel's door was closed. She debated awakening him but the consideration that it might indeed be a Confederate on the run at her door prevented her. Clinging to the banister, she stole down the stairs, craning to see who was at her door.

Was there no moon out at all? It was pitch black outside and in.

When Rose reached the bottom step, an unfamiliar face suddenly pressed against the sidelight window. A scream tore from Rose's throat.

"Open up, missy!" an obviously inebriated Yankee demanded.

Rose shrank against the wall while her brain raced for something she could use as a weapon if he were to gain entrance into her house.

"Open up!" he yelled again and at that instant, light appeared from the top of the stairs.

Rose's gaze shot to the colonel who stood holding a lamp aloft and wearing nothing but a pair of barely fastened trousers. As he descended the stairs, Rose saw he carried his pistol in his other hand.

"Go to your room," he ordered as he swept past her on the stairs.

Rose hesitated but only for a second. If the drunken Yankee also had a weapon, she didn't want to be caught in the crossfire. Gathering up her nightgown and robe, she rushed up the stairs and pulled Billy's pistol out from under her bed.

Rueben had taught her how to shoot it and she did not doubt she could and would do so if she needed to. Her hands shook as she ventured back toward her bedroom door.

"What's your name, soldier?" Skaarsberg demanded.

The soldier said something Rose could not make out through the closed front door.

"You're at the wrong house. Be off or I'll have you court-martialed," Skaarsberg ordered. "Don't show your face back here. Do you understand?"

Rose blew out the breath she had not realized she'd been holding. She slipped Billy's pistol in her dresser drawer as she heard Skaarsberg start up the stairs.

The knowledge he was coming to *her* room swamped her with terror. Minutes earlier, she had been in her bed with her hand between her legs imagining him doing the most disgraceful things to her and now she was about to face him. Shame heated

her cheeks. She shook, not so much from the fear of the man who had tried to get in her house, but at her own dark desires.

Skaarsberg appeared in the doorway and Rose stifled a gasp.

"Are you all right?" he asked.

She nodded, unable to prevent her gaze from riveting to his bare chest. Illuminated by the light of the lamp, he looked sculpted by one of the masters. Perfect. Hard. Strong. Capable.

Her mouth went dry.

He placed the lamp and his pistol on her dresser. "I don't think he'll be back."

Rose nodded again. Why couldn't she speak? And why, oh why couldn't she take her eyes off him. She hugged her arms to try to stop herself from trembling.

In two steps, he had her in an embrace. Rose stiffened as awareness of him threatened to overwhelm her.

"You're shivering," he said.

Everything inside Rose urged her to open her arms, to return his embrace, to feel his warm skin under her palms. Somehow, she resisted.

His hand swept her hair back from her cheek and Rose tilted her head back to look into his eyes.

"Has he bothered you before?" he asked, concern evident in his voice.

Rose shook her head.

"I'm here," he whispered. "He won't trouble you again."

Rose swallowed. Her gaze fell to his lips—the same lips she had envisioned giving her the greatest pleasure in the world when she'd touched herself just moments earlier. Instinct took over and she uncurled her fist and brushed his chest with the back of her fingers.

It was the merest touch. Any other time it might have been construed as an accidental touch.

Not now.

The colonel sucked in a breath and then all at once, his mouth was on hers, his lips bruising hers in their intensity. Rose melted against him, opening to admit his tongue. One of his hands swept down her back and the other held her head in place as he ravaged her mouth.

Rose could hardly believe it was happening. She'd thought about this. She'd wanted it and now he was kissing her and she did not want him stop. He was a hateful bastard and she despised everything for which he stood but in sharp contrast, she felt that her passion was somehow safe with this man.

All rational thought fled and was replaced with desperate yearning.

Take me. Take me now. Her hands explored his chest, his shoulders, his back. She arched against him, wanting, needing him to assuage this wildfire between her legs.

The hand at the base of her spine ventured lower to cup her bottom and lift and pull her against him. Rose whimpered into his mouth when she felt the sharp stab of his arousal against her abdomen. *Now. Oh yes. Don't stop.*

The hand in her hair skimmed down her arm. His fingers flirted with hers and then he took her hand and pushed it between their bodies and into the fly of his trousers.

He groaned. Rose gasped.

His phallus was ramrod hard. Rose's insides clenched around their own emptiness, aching for him to fill her. Somewhere in the recesses of her mind, she realized this was wrong. He was her enemy and yet if she committed this most intimate of acts with him, she was not simply doing it because she needed favors from him. She truly wanted him. She more than wanted him. She needed him to fill this hole of loneliness and despair in her soul. She wanted to take comfort and pleasure in the feel and scent of a man's body — in her own release.

A shudder tore through his back and shoulders. "Rose," he gasped against her lips. The sound of her name only heightened her desire. She moved restlessly in his arms

and lifted her chin to seek his mouth again but he drew away. His hand caught hers, holding it still.

"Rose," he said again.

Something had shifted. The moment was lost.

He released her and turned away, raking his hand through his hair. "Forgive me."

"No, I—"

"My behavior has been...ungentlemanly...to say the least. Please forgive me, madam," he said without looking back.

"But our...our agreement—" she stammered.

Averting his eyes, he left the room and softly closed the door behind him.

Unsatisfied lust raged through Rose's veins. She couldn't believe this. He'd brought her to a fever pitch and then walked away. She wanted to scream or to throw something. How dare he!

She backed up until she felt her bed at the back of her legs. Trembling, she sat, her eyes fixed on her closed door. Part of her wanted to go in his room and finish what he'd started. Another part wanted to retrieve the pistol he'd left on the dresser and blow his damn head off.

* * * * *

Eric poured water from the pitcher into the bowl and then splashed it in his face. The cool liquid did little, however, to alleviate the throbbing between his legs. His ball sac felt as if it were about to explode.

Worst of all, every time he closed his eyes, all he could see was Rose's kiss-swollen lips, her nipples, dark and hardened under her thin cotton nightgown and the outline of her thighs. His hands recalled the feel of her heat, of her softness.

He groaned.

Her hair had been as long and silky as he had imagined, a thick raven curtain that framed her heart-shaped face and cascaded in wild rivulets over the shoulders of her white cotton nightgown.

Why had he walked away? His cock was hard and ready. She'd been willing.

Hell, she'd agreed to it!

How long had it been since he'd been with a woman? This was more than lust. He ached for release and there was only one way to ease his need. Well, two ways although one of them was not nearly as satisfying as losing himself in the softness of a willing woman. He still wasn't sure why he'd stopped.

Some crazy sense of a conscience had attacked. He'd felt as if he were taking advantage of her. He'd been given orders to use any means necessary to get evidence that she was a spy. She'd even made it easy for him. But...

"Oh hell, who are you fooling?" he asked his reflection in the oval mirror over the washstand. He had stopped because a woman had used sex with him to gain his confidence, to trick him into divulging information she could use against the Union Army.

He knew all too well what it felt like to have your trust chewed up and spit out.

Eric dried his face and took a deep breath. He'd left his pistol and the lamp in Rose's room. In spite of his nagging conscience, leaving the pistol not only gave him an excuse to go knocking on her door again, it also instilled a sense of trust he wanted her to have in him. He wanted her to think he wasn't particularly vigilant. Still, she was probably furious enough with him to use the pistol.

A tap on his own door startled him.

"Colonel?" Rose's voice beckoned from the other side.

Eric twisted the knob and opened the door to discover Rose holding the lamp in one hand—and his loaded pistol in the other.

Chapter Four

Rose's heart thumped against her rib cage. She couldn't believe she'd stooped to... this.

She moved past Skaarsberg and into the room, placed the lamp and pistol on the top of a chest of drawer and then, hands trembling, she shucked her robe and yanked her nightgown off over her head.

Cool air caressed her nude flesh as her gaze locked with the colonel's. Her nipples pebbled. This was a bold move but she wanted to make her intentions perfectly clear.

"Rose—"

"I owe you...for the permits. And for the roof and the pump and...for everything," she said before she lost her nerve.

He hesitated. His shoulders rose and fell with a deep breath. "That's not necessary," he said but his eyes were already scanning down her body, warming, darkening.

Every nerve in Rose's being grew taut with anticipation. Would he reject her again or would he accept her offer? She wet her parched lips with the tip of her tongue. "Believe me, Colonel Skaarsberg, I have never gone this far before but I cannot endure another hard winter—not with Queenie expecting a baby and Reuben lame."

It wasn't altogether a fabrication to make him feel sorry for her. There was truth in her statement. But she wanted him. She wanted to feel his hands on her skin, his lips on hers, his body connected to hers.

"Do I seem like the sort of man who would take advantage of a woman in need?" he asked, his voice low, husky.

"I am a woman in need," she said boldly as she took a step toward him. "I need a man's touch. I need to feel a man's arms around me. I don't care if it is a sin."

"Rose—" he began but she stopped him.

"No. Don't speak. Don't justify this. Please, just don't deny me."

"I was only going to ask you to call me by my given name," he said and dropped his trousers.

Rose gulped as her gaze fell to his thick erection. "I don't...don't know your...given name," she stammered.

"Eric," he said. Then softer, "Eric."

She inhaled, exhilarated by the tingles racing up and down her body in the wake of Eric's caressing gaze. He took a step closer and doubt surged. This was foolish. She should never have acted on carnal impulse. She should get her clothes and go back to her room and forget this ever happened. She should —

She gasped when Eric dragged her against him. Sensation flooded her from head to toe. His heat. His scent. His arousal stabbing her in the belly. His fingers threaded into her hair and he tilted her head back so that he could claim her mouth.

A growl tore from his throat and Rose clung, suddenly afraid of him, of his power. He towered over her and somehow, without his clothes on, he seemed even bigger. One hand whispered down her spine, settled on the small of her back and drew her impossibly closer. She arched, inadvertently lifting her hips to press against his phallus.

The hard sinew and muscle of his arms trembled at her motion.

"Rose," he murmured his voice but a breath. His hand moved around her body, his touch detonating desire within her. She jolted when he reached between her legs.

His fingers prodded and probed. His slow, deliberate exploration was wonderful but all too fleeting. When he removed his hand, Rose did not have time to be disappointed. He dipped, catching her under the thigh to lift her. She clawed to hold onto his shoulders as she went up, up and then back down.

In one fell motion, he impaled her.

Rose gasped.

For a steep second, Eric's passion-clouded eyes widened and then he moved, carrying her to the bed. He stayed inside her as both their bodies came down on the mattress. "Forgive me," he said harshly as he began to pummel her.

Rose dug her nails into his back, dropping her legs open to give him full entry. It had been over two years since she had felt a man inside her. Two damn long years and now...

She closed her eyes as his thrusts pushed her inch by glorious inch across the bed. He seemed intent on assuaging some demon that raged inside him. Pounding. Groin slapping groin. A fine mist of perspiration broke out along his spine and all at once, he withdrew and plunged his hand between his legs. A harsh groan left his lips and Rose felt his sticky fluids spray across her belly.

He sagged onto one elbow, his deep breaths fanning her face. So that was it? Disappointment welled.

Rose shut her eyes against the hot threat of tears. What had she done? Why had she allowed this man to soil her?

The bed shook as he moved down her body. It was over. She knew she should get up and return to her room now but her legs were trembling too badly to move.

But then, she felt something warm and wet between her legs. Something good.

Rose's eyes flew open and she lifted her shoulders up far enough to see Eric's blonde head descending between her thighs. A whimper of protest escaped her lips but only because she could not bear the thought of him being so close to her down there.

"Hush," he said against her nether lips. "Let me taste you. Let me please you. Allow me this."

Before she could answer, his mouth latched onto her clitoris and he laved her, his wicked kiss filled with a man's need-driven hunger to possess a woman's body. Rose fell back on the bed and cried out as Eric's arms locked around her hips, as his mouth drove away the last vestiges of common sense and propriety she held.

The pleasure was overwhelming, chasing away any of Rose's inhibitions. She could hardly breathe as his tongue flicked and teased all the right spots. Staggering shocks of pleasure erupted and skeined through her. She reached for his head and tangled her fingers in his wealth of blonde hair, spreading for him, holding him against her. It was even better than she had imagined. Billy had loved her and she had loved him but this...

This was something altogether different.

Instinct took over and Rose pulled her Yankee lover's hair hard. "Oh yes!" she cried as rapturous sensation pitched her to ecstasy.

Even a soft kiss pressed to her sensitive flesh sent tremors reverberating through her.

He lifted his head and their gazes clashed. Her heart skipped a beat when she saw her glistening cream on his parted lips. "Do you like this, Rose?" he asked silkily. The tip of his tongue darted out to lap up her cream.

"Yes," she said, her voice but a breath.

"Then tell me what you want." His hand moved around her thigh and several fingers toyed with her folds, with both her openings and the sensitive flesh in between.

"That."

One finger breached her channel and slid inside. Rose resisted the temptation to close her eyes. She wanted to watch, to see everything.

"What else?" he asked.

"Your mouth." She could not believe she was uttering the requests aloud. She had never been so bold.

His head descended and Rose trembled as bliss coursed from her core once more, unfurling down her legs, up her body, even to the roots of her hair. His expert tongue coupled with his finger was too much. And when Rose's own hands crept over her breasts and she tugged her nipples, the moment culminated in erotic euphoria.

Every muscle in her body seized taut. Moans she realized were her own emanated from some place inside her she had forgotten existed. The second orgasm rolled through her body like a tempest and still, Eric did not stop his exquisite assault. Involuntarily, she tried to squirm away but his arm clamped tighter around her hip and he continued until the last traces of pleasure eddied away.

Rose was limp and floating as if she'd been magically transported to some other world when she realized Eric had climbed onto his knees and was reaching under her, twisting her and dragging her bottom up. She struggled and protested but her objections fell on deaf ears.

He wedged his body between her legs and with one quick thrust, he was inside her again.

Renewed sweetness radiated from her channel but Rose could not tolerate this shameful position. He was rutting her like a common animal. A beast! But oh, it felt so, so good.

His hands dug into the soft flesh of her bottom. His body slapped against hers and his scrotum pushed up hard against all those still very sensitive parts of her. And all the while, he uttered the most ribald things she'd ever heard.

"Does my cock feel good in your cunny?"

When she did not reply, a sound slap stung her bottom. Rose's eyes widened in surprise as flames licked down her thighs. Her breath caught.

"Does it?" he demanded, his voice harsh and hoarse.

"Yes," she hissed, debating whether to remain silent so he would spank her again. Her passage clenched at the thought and his fingers squeezed her supple ass cheeks letting Rose know he had felt it.

His movements quickened and Rose gripped the quilt in both fists and clung, bracing herself for his onslaught. She'd had no idea her body could accommodate a man this way.

Any thoughts of shame she'd held prior to this moment vanished until all that remained was the mindless joining of their bodies, his hands holding her with bruising strength and the driving rhythm of his loins pounding hers.

Another orgasm took her by complete surprise and Rose sucked a sharp breath in through her teeth. "Eric!" she cried his name as the flutters shuddered through her. "Oh, Eric..."

He braced a hand on the base of her spine and started to pull out again but Rose twisted to look back at him. "Don't take it out," she blurted. "I'm barren."

His eyes flashed and he tightened his hold on her hips and pumped until his body grew stiff. Rose watched over her shoulder as he threw his head back and groaned. A vein bulged in his neck. His muscles gleamed with perspiration. He throbbed deep inside her and up until now, it was the single most erotic moment of Rose's life.

Eric collapsed, dragging Rose down on her side and enfolding her in his arms. As he spooned against her back, every inch of his body buzzed with life but once the sensations subsided, guilt and regret swamped him. No matter what orders Sherman had given him, no matter what *trade* she'd offered, no woman deserved to be played and seduced.

Then again, Eric had walked away. He'd left her room and she'd been the one to follow him. She was the one who'd removed her clothes and had made it apparent what she wanted.

Rose was so still, Eric wondered if she were even breathing. He raked her hair away from her cheek. "Rose? Are you all right?"

Her shoulders shook and a sob tore from her chest.

Panic welled. What a callous ass he was! He'd been too long without a woman. He'd hurt her. "Rose?" He turned her in his arms and cradled her, holding her while she cried softly. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to...to hurt you."

She shook her head. "You didn't."

"Then why are you crying?"

"I don't know," she said, her voice muffled against his chest.

"It's all right," he cooed. "It's all right to find solace in the dark, Rose."

This time she nodded and Eric felt the tension melt out of his shoulders. Thank God he hadn't hurt her. "This war has been hard on us all," he said in an attempt to comfort her.

"Just hold me," she murmured, clutching him tighter.

Eric reached and dragged the quilt over her before he nestled her head on his shoulder. He stroked her hair as conflicting emotions roiled inside him. No matter what Rose had done or had agreed to do, she did not deserve to be used. And yet, the bliss he felt from release inside a beautiful woman made him feel heavy and sated. Strangely whole.

His thoughts drifted back to the eight letters he had written to eight widows. Those men had died because of a woman like Rose. No, he thought. They'd died because of him. They'd died because he had been foolish enough to trust a woman like Rose.

That would not happen again. Not ever.

Rose was a grown woman who knew what effect she had on a man. He recalled how she had come to his office, sweet smelling with her bosom and her dimples on display. Yes. Rose knew.

And as long as that was the case, he would enjoy what Rose had to offer without a guilty conscience. He did not like being used either.

* * * * *

Rose opened her eyes as the first light of dawn crept through the window. A feeling of total warmth surrounded her and when she focused, she saw why.

Sick realization of what happened hours earlier swarmed over her. She'd thrown herself at the Yankee colonel like a wanton fancy woman! Shame flooded her. Heat welled in her cheeks. And worst of all, she had cried in his arms.

What had she been thinking?

She had to get out of here. Now. Before he awakened and she was further debased. Oh, how could she ever look him in the eye after this?

She'd been weak the night before. Weak and lonely and frightened. Fury raged that she could have been so foolish.

A soft groan rumbled in his chest as she worked her way out of his arms and off the bed. He stirred and his forehead furrowed as if he were displeased. Rose knew she should snatch up her clothes and get out of the room as quickly as possible but she hesitated.

He was even more resplendent with his mussed hair and his long, lean body partially covered by a quilt than he had been in his impeccable blue uniform. Rose's body tightened and swelled in all the wrong places when she thought about the things she had done with him the night before. She wanted to do those things with him again. Right this minute.

She reached for him but stopped short when she heard the sound of Queenie shuffling downstairs. Rose suppressed a gasp. Queenie could never know!

As quietly and quickly as possible, Rose slid out of bed, plucked her nightgown off the floor and tiptoed from the room. Thank heaven Queenie had not ventured upstairs. Servants, even loyal ones, were the worst gossips in town. If Queenie found out, everyone in Florence would know.

Rose swallowed thickly. She had engaged in a forbidden and intimate act – with the enemy. Nothing could justify it.

Once she was in her own room, she poured water into the bowl on her washstand. The best thing for her to do was to wash his scent off her body, his taste from her mouth and figure out a way to get him out of her house.

Before tonight.

* * * * *

Hoping the Yankee colonel was still in bed, Rose crept down the stairs. She wanted to get Rueben and go down to the commissary to get their salt before Eric awakened – and changed his mind about the trade. Hopefully, she would not have to see him before he went his way for the day and she went hers. That would give her time to think up some ruse so he would quarter elsewhere.

She had debated everything from accusing him of soiling her to demanding a marriage proposal from him. Either one would be sufficient to frighten him away. But then, he would not be inclined to issue her a permit for anything, much less a precious commodity such as six barrels of salt.

And then, she would be alone and cold at night instead of finding satisfaction at the hands of a more than capable man. Perhaps it would be in her best interest to continue stealing into his bed at night. Her cheeks flamed at the thought of what he'd done to her last night. His tongue. Oh God. And the way he'd forced her onto her knees. She drew in a deep breath. Common sense tried to intrude. This was stupid. Continuing to have sex with him was wrong – and dangerous.

She had unburdened herself after her physical release last night. She'd cried without reason or warning in his arms like a sniveling child. It was an act she'd thus far been unable to explain to herself. The man was her enemy. He was a part of the army that had left her a widow.

Well. She would simply have to keep her emotions in check. That was all. There was no room for emotion in what she had taken on herself.

As Rose walked through the foyer, the scent of bacon and coffee filled her nostrils. Her stomach grumbled. It was too bad she would have to gulp down her breakfast on the seat of the wagon this morning.

Although the kitchen was a separate building from the house, Queenie had brought breakfast in and had placed it on the dining room table. "Good morning," Rose said as she began wrapping warm biscuits and bacon up in a napkin.

"Where you going?" Queenie demanded. "You not gonna sit down to eat?"

"Not this morning," Rose said. "I've got to get Rueben to hitch up the rig so we can go get the salt."

Queenie arched an eyebrow. "The rig's done hitched up."

"What?" Rose did not wait for an answer. Clutching the napkin containing the biscuits and bacon, she hurried out the back door fully expecting to see Rueben atop the rig's seat.

Instead, it was Eric who was seated on the wagon.

Rose gaped.

"Good morning, Mrs. O'Kelley," he said far too cheerily for Rose's comfort. The mocking way he tipped his hat infuriated her.

She stalked across the back yard to the wagon. "I think after last night, we are on a first name basis, don't you, Eric?"

A lopsided grin tugged at his lips. Rose's gaze lingered there as thoughts of what he had done with those lips just hours ago filled her mind. She swallowed and forced her errant brain back to reality. "Are you confiscating my rig like you confiscated my house? Because Rueben and I were about to use it to go down to the commissary. I have two permits for salt, you see." With that, she flashed him her own smile.

The humor never left Eric's eyes. "Then climb aboard, Rose, because I happen to be headed to the commissary as well."

No! Rose tried to keep her face devoid of emotion. "Really, Colonel. I couldn't take you away from whatever it is you're supposed to be doing for the Union Army."

"Trust me, my dear," he said. "You're not. Now climb up."

Any further protest would only serve to make her look as if she were up to something. Her mind grappled for some solution.

Eric held out his hand to her. Rose stared at it. How would she be able to get the salt to the cave where she and Rueben had been hoarding supplies for the Confederates

and citizens of Florence? With Eric, she would be forced to bring all six barrels of salt back here. What would he think when he saw her meager stores in the shed?

He was not a stupid man. He would know she was trying to hide something and that would prevent him from issuing her future permits—despite their trade.

“Rose?”

She snapped out of her trance and took his hand. For now, she had little other choice than to climb onto the wagon with him. Gathering her skirt in the other hand, she stepped onto the running board and allowed him to pull her up. There was no mistaking the interest in his eyes at the sight of her stocking-clad calf. And Rose could not deny the lightning that coursed through her hand where he touched her. She swallowed thickly as she sat and arranged her skirts.

Rueben stared from the shadows of the carriage house. The way he shook his head alerted Rose that Eric was not the unwitting interloper he pretended to be. He’d staged this little wagon trip, no doubt to see where she planned to store six barrels of salt.

Damn him. She hadn’t anticipated him quartering with her—just as she hadn’t anticipated going to his bed the night before. If he was as quick-witted as she gave him credit for being, he would know she was lying about needing so much salt. Rose cast a quick glance at him as he clucked to the pair of draft horses hitched to the wagon. She had an idea he already knew what plans she had for the salt.

She clenched her fists in her lap as the wagon lurched forward. She half-wondered if he hadn’t paid that Yankee to stagger up to the door and pretend to be drunk so he could play the conquering hero.

No matter. She had no one to blame but herself for what happened last night. Shame heated her cheeks when she recalled how she’d gone to his room and stripped off her nightgown like a slattern. Oh, what must he think of her!

Eric steered the horses onto Court Street. *Oh no.* Her heart sank straight to her toes. He was going to parade her right down the main street of town for all to see. By now,

every old pea-hen and gossip in Florence would know he was quartering with her — sleeping in the same house. Was it obvious they'd slept in the same bed?

Wouldn't the old hens talk if they knew that? The ingrates. They would have their hands out for the supplies she could get for them but they would gossip about her behind her back to no end.

Three girls ogled the colonel from their upstairs window. Damn. Why did he have to be so handsome? And just when she believed it could not possibly get worse, she spied the minister of the Presbyterian Church leaving his house. Her stomach turned over hard when he gave her a wave. She shrank.

Eric seemed to notice her reaction because he leaned infuriatingly close. "Is your sour disposition because I'm the enemy or because you don't want to be seen with me?"

Rose gulped. "Both," she snapped, inwardly rankled that he had noticed her prickly attitude.

He chuckled and waved at the minister. Most men would have taken offense to her sharp tongue. Not Eric Skaarsberg.

"Does it not bother you to be so maligned?" she couldn't help but ask.

"I've been in the South long enough to expect such reactions," he said. He turned his head so that he was looking at her.

Rose tried to keep her eyes straight ahead.

"So far, I've found the locals friendly." He grinned. "Very friendly."

Hot blood infused her cheeks and she snapped her head in his direction. She parted her lips to speak but his smile stole the words from her mouth.

"You—" she ground out, unable to think of any retort scathing enough.

His smile faded slightly. "Don't think I'm insulting you, Rose. Quite the contrary. I found your hospitality...a welcome respite from the war."

Rose stared.

"Certainly two adults can enjoy the benefits of each other's company. Do you understand my meaning?" he asked, his voice as low and soft as the leather reins he held in his hands.

Rose shook. Her thoughts ran wild. "You sound...as if you've had experience with this sort of thing before."

"Haven't you?"

She gasped. "I told you I had not."

Mrs. Stewart, one of the staunchest secessionist women in town, stopped sweeping her porch to glare as Rose's wagon passed.

Rose nodded curtly to her. Inside, she cringed. "Sir, what happened between us... last night..."

No lady would ever bring such a subject up but he seemed intent on discussing it so she continued. "I have been without my husband a long time. I threw myself at you."

"Yes, I know. For the favors I can provide you."

She inhaled sharply. "You know that good and well," she hissed.

His gaze dropped to her lips and then lifted once more to her eyes. "But your response was so...amorous that it makes me wonder. Was it favors or sex, Rose? Sex with me?"

Her channel clenched at the thought. Images of him inside her, behind her, kissing her, claiming her, filled her head. She gripped the edge of the seat to keep from swooning.

"If that's what you need to think," she snapped.

Again, he let out an infuriating chuckle. "I want to make certain I understand. You're telling me that you had sex with me because you wanted to, not because you want me to continue issuing you these phony permits?" he asked.

He'd seen through her. He knew she'd been using the permits as an excuse for her wanton behavior and now he thought she was a...a whore. Rose shuddered but then

instantly reprimanded herself. What did it matter what he thought of her? And above all else, why did she care what he thought as long as she got what she wanted and needed?

Eric flashed a smile at a shopkeeper who was opening his store and then he turned back to Rose. The smile faded from his mouth and eyes. "Answer me."

Rose stared, hating him, wanting him. "I don't care what you think." She crossed her arms over her chest but when the wagon hit a pothole in the road, she lost her balance and pitched sideways.

One strong hand caught her arm and he easily prevented her from toppling into the muddy street. His heat scorched her through her mourning black. His fingers dug into her flesh, reminding her painfully of the previous night. He did not let go. Panic welled. People were staring.

"Answer me, Rose," he said, his eyes never wavering. "Tell me you want me to come to your bed again. Tonight."

Her breath left her lungs in a heated rush. "Yes. Yes, I do. Now, please let me go."

Oh God, she'd admitted it and when he finally released his hold on her arm, the tension drained out of her shoulders. What had she done? Why on earth had she admitted she wanted him again? She bit her bottom lip and stared ahead but the thought of opening her bedroom door to him and welcoming him into her bed, her arms and body, filled her with dark, delicious expectation.

Eric kissed to the horses and snapped the reins, encouraging the animals to quicken their pace.

In the morning light, her eyes were true green. Clear and honest. But he knew better. She was as practiced at lying as the prostitutes on Smokey Row in Nashville.

Only this time, he would not be blindsided.

And tonight, when he joined her in her bed, there would be no illusions between them.

Chapter Five

Rueben's eyes widened as the wagon rolled toward the barn with all six barrels of salt and one bag of flour jostling in the bed. Rose averted her gaze, knowing her face would grow hot with color if she made eye contact with him.

Eric had practically flaunted their *trade* at the commissary. Guiding her by the arm, he'd introduced to her to every Yankee in the place and smiled as the rude devils had winked while he walked her around the supply shed asking her what she needed.

Rose had been so mortified she'd only agreed to take one bag of flour. Now she wished she'd gotten more. They could have used some sugar and cornmeal.

Eric pulled the reins and dragged the brake into place. In one easy motion, he swung out of the wagon, his black boots kicking up the dust when his feet landed on the ground.

"We'd better get this salt stored away, Rueben," Rose said as she stood and began gathering her skirts so she could climb down but her breath caught when she saw Eric's outstretched arms. She hesitated.

"Come," he said motioning to her with his fingers.

"I can get down myself," she told him.

"Nonsense. Why should you risk twisting your ankle when I am offering to assist you?" He snatched her around the waist, half dragging her toward him.

Rose all but fell into his arms and while a plea hovered on her lips to order him to release her, her body responded differently. Her shoulders softened. Her hands gripped his broad shoulders. Her hips tilted into his body ever so slightly. Wild images of him lifting her and impaling her on his cock the night before roiled in her head. And when he let her slide down his torso until her feet made contact with the ground, Rose's desire flamed.

He'd told her in no uncertain terms that he intended to join her in her bed this very night and suddenly, despite everything, she could not wait for that moment to arrive.

His eyes held her whole before he released her. Rose stumbled a step backward until her spine made contact with the wagon.

"Careful," Eric said. The smirk that played on his lips riled Rose but she clenched her fists at her side to keep from lashing out at him.

He knew exactly what sort of effect he had on her! The hateful bastard.

Rueben eyed them from where he was busy unhitching the back gate so he could attach the wooden ramp they used to roll the heavy barrels off.

Eric hopped into the wagon ahead of Rueben. She'd seen both Yankees and Confederate soldiers alike ignore Rueben's obvious wounds while he labored to complete everyday tasks. Not Eric.

Rose swallowed, trying to figure out what his ulterior motive could possibly be for helping Rueben and for doing other odd repairs around the house. His kindness stemmed from more than their agreement and Rose could not help but be suspicious.

Rueben braced himself to climb into the high wagon bed.

"I'll get them from up here," Eric said. "And then we can roll them down together."

Rueben's gaze met Rose's. She gave him a tiny shrug and gestured with her head toward the barn that doubled as a carriage house.

As soon as Eric helped put away the first barrel, he would know this had all been a scam. Then what? Would he refuse her any more supplies or would he continue writing her the permits because she allowed him into her bed?

Despite the chilly October morning, a fresh wave of heat swept up from her loins.

She couldn't just stand here gawking and she didn't want to answer Eric's questions. Doubtless, he would try to question Rueben about the supplies but Rueben was a damn sight shrewder than anyone knew. He could take care of himself.

Eric laid the barrel on its side and as the two men rolled it down the ramp, Rose went back inside the house.

Queenie dried a plate on her apron and slid it into the cupboard. "That colonel sho' do seem like a nice man."

Rose snorted. "He's the devil and don't you forget it."

"Bible says the devil was God's purtiest angel," Queenie muttered with a grin.

Rose tilted her head as she watched Eric hop back into the wagon to get a second barrel. "I won't argue you that, Queenie. Not at all."

* * * * *

Eric dusted his hands on his uniform trousers. "So...Rueben, is it?"

"Yes Sir."

"Where is all this meat Mrs. O'Kelley wants slaughtered? You don't have hog one here." He eyed the bony cow in a stall. "And that old cow doesn't look fit enough to produce milk, much less eat."

Rueben eyed him. "We'd be foolish to keep the livestock where the soldiers could get at it."

The man lied without so much as a blink. Rueben was definitely smarter than the average slave. He turned and started out of the barn, limping as he walked. "How'd you get that game leg?" Eric asked.

"Shiloh."

"You were at Pittsburgh Landing?" Eric inquired.

"Yes Sir," came Rueben's short reply.

"Stray shrapnel?" Eric prodded.

"Nope."

Eric resisted the urge to sigh aloud. Rueben had obviously been instructed to say as little as possible. "An injury? A fall, perhaps?"

"Nope." Rueben's lips clamped shut.

"Then how?"

Rueben turned and pinned Eric with a stare that sent an icy shiver up his spine. "When Mr. O'Kelley fell, I took up his weapon and took up killing Yankees where he left off."

Eric stared. "I'm certain you were quite fond of your master."

"Mr. O'Kelley wasn't my master. He was my brother." With that, Rueben turned and walked away.

* * * * *

Eric paced. Dinner had been tense. Rose had scarcely said two words to him all evening. Instead, she had sat coiled like a cat ready to pounce. Eric had enjoyed his food and knew that Queenie had prepared an extravagant meal because Rose had shot her a look of disapproval when the succulent fried chicken had been put on the table.

He'd caught Rose watching him when she thought he wasn't looking. What was she thinking? He'd give his eyeteeth to know.

Jezebel.

He was beginning to think Sherman was right. One moment, Rose was soft and supple, unguarded. The next, she hissed and spat like a cornered feline.

Eric's gaze drifted to the doorknob. Just across the hall, she was in her own room. He'd told her he would come to her bed tonight. Would she welcome him or would her door be locked?

There was only one way to find out.

And yet, what if he was wrong about her? The fake orders were still in his uniform pocket. He'd carelessly left his jacket in his room, arranging the papers so that he would know if they'd been touched. Although there had been ample opportunity, the papers had not been so much as breathed upon.

Hoarding supplies was one thing. Spying was something altogether different.

If he were a gentleman, he would interrogate her about her need to hoard supplies rather than make some sort of sham agreement with her for sex. On the other hand, if she were a lady, she would tell the truth.

Eric swallowed. He had no illusions. He was no gentleman and Rose O'Kelley was certainly no lady.

He twisted and looked out the window. A light glowed from the room over the kitchen where Queenie and Rueben lived. There was no one else in the house. Eric inhaled.

His cock swelled when he recalled how warm and willing she'd been the night before. He wanted that again. He wanted it so badly he was willing to face rejection for it.

Two strides carried him to the doorway. Two more propelled him across the hallway. Without ceremony, he twisted the doorknob and Rose's door opened.

She gasped and Eric stopped short. She stood beside her washstand, washcloth in hand, completely naked with rivulets of water dripping down her legs. There was no mistaking what she wanted.

A smile pulled at his lips. "You were bathing yourself for me."

Her eyes flashed. "What if I was?"

"Get on the bed." God, the woman drove him to the edge of reason.

Her hands shook as she laid her washcloth over the edge of the bowl.

"Get on the bed, Rose." This time, it wasn't a request.

Avoiding his eyes, she moved to the bed. Eric brushed his hand over his swollen cock as his gaze roamed over every kissable curve of her body. He wanted to bury himself in her sweetness and fuck her into oblivion but somehow, he managed to restrain his impatient libido. It was important that she enjoyed it. He wanted her to enjoy it.

He wanted to erase every memory of any other man out of her head. He wanted — no, *needed* — to hear her sigh his name in the dark, to feel her rise to meet his thrusts and to know she thought only of him.

She climbed onto the bed and sat facing him. How vulnerable she seemed with her jet hair falling over her shoulders to obscure her breasts. He swept it away and admired her.

Dusky nipples hardened under his gaze. Each breath she took lifted them, enticing him to brush his thumb across one of the succulent peaks. When his hand dropped lower, the soft curve of her tummy tightened. Candlelight illuminated three tiny, silvery marks on her hip. Eric recognized them as the marks of childbearing. He thumbed them and lifted his gaze to hers.

Had she lost a child? Is that how she knew she was barren? Although he had never known that kind of pain, his heart twisted.

She shifted and jerked her chin at him. "Get on with it."

Holding her gaze, he reached between her legs and explored her folds. Instinctively, she opened her thighs. A tendril of triumph weaved through Eric. He moaned. *Get on with it, indeed.* Her center was already creamy. Ready. He licked his lips.

She whimpered when he withdrew his hand but her eyes widened when he brought his fingers to his mouth and tasted her cream.

The breath left her lungs in a quick rush. "You're indecent."

Ignoring her, he moved closer, parting her knees with his breadth of his thighs. "Spread your legs, Rose."

Her legs flew open wide and she dropped back on her elbows as his hand delved again. When he found her opening and pushed inside, her lashes fluttered halfway closed. "How does that feel?" he asked huskily.

She made a mewling sound.

"Tell me in words. Tell me how it feels."

"Good," she gasped. "Really good."

"You feel like velvet inside. Like warm, wet velvet," he said.

Her elbows collapsed so that she lay flat on her back. Her hair framed her face, the balance swirling around her head and meandering in stark contrast over the white coverlet. God in heaven, she was beautiful and voluptuous and Eric knew if he didn't take her this second, he would explode.

Still, he waited. He wanted to watch her come undone first. Leaning over her, he tongued one taut nipple and then sucked half her breast into his mouth. She cried out and arched toward him. Fingers threaded into his hair, kneading, pulling, holding his head in place.

The finger inside her cunny worked in and out and in and out until she was writhing and rocking her hips against his hand. He moved to the other breast and suckled it as well and then she was pushing his head down.

"Taste me, taste me," she murmured.

Eric dropped to his knees and dragged her bottom to the edge of the bed, throwing her legs over his shoulders as he buried his face in the soft sweetness there. She bucked when his tongue circled the hardened nub at her center and then flicked downward between the folds to where his finger slid back into her channel. Spurred on by her reaction, he repeated the motion until he felt the tell-tale flutters around his finger. Her body tensed and her legs stiffened and he latched onto her clit until she breathlessly begged him to stop.

He wasn't done yet. He removed his finger and held her thighs in place as he gently kissed her swollen nether lips, wedging his face into her folds so he could lap up every bit of her sweet cream.

His cock ached and he knew it wouldn't take long to find release. Fighting his own urges, he slowly kissed his way back up her body and then claimed her mouth as he slid inside her.

She trembled beneath him. One silky calf wrapped around his waist. Eric wanted to plunge into her over and over but he stilled. Her lips nipped at his and her hips rocked up, entreating him without words to continue.

Jezebel...

Had she moved like this under another man? The thought repulsed him. Angered him.

He shifted a hand under her bottom and moved her bodily across the bed, following her with one push of his knees. He wanted her in a way he had never wanted another woman. He wanted to own her. He wanted to master her pleasure, to ruin her for any other man save himself.

Propping on his elbows, he looked down at her. Was it him she saw or merely the means to an end? He needed to know. When he remained still, her forehead furrowed.

"What are you doing?" she asked. "Move! Move inside me."

He searched her eyes.

"Move!" she cried, striking his arm with her fist.

Memories of Sally rushed into his head. She had been a practiced whore. She had known just how to look at him, just how to entice him. His pleasure had always come first and she had never sought her own in return. He shook his head to dispel the unwelcome images.

Rose's flushed face drifted back into focus and Eric realized she was pushing at his shoulders. With a fierce growl, he dropped to nuzzle and nibble her neck while he ground his groin into hers.

Wild, animalistic moans emanated from deep inside her as she stopped fighting him and clutched his head to her, opening her legs to his violent thrusts.

Rose clung in an attempt to withstand the crazy physical sensations rolling through her body. Something fused between where his mouth tantalized her neck and her channel and then exploded, sending riotous ripples of pleasure to her toes, her

fingertips, her scalp. Her consciousness sank deep within until there was only this insidious bliss, until the world and the war melted away and there was only the peace of mindless physical release. For what seemed like an eternity, she felt as if she were drowning in desire and then, without warning, she surfaced.

Her eyes snapped open just in time to see Eric rearing above her, his face contorted into a look of rugged ecstasy. His shoulders tensed and then tensed again before he groaned and collapsed on top of her, breathlessly drawing her into his arms.

Rose relaxed into the haven of his embrace. For the first time in years, she felt safe. Closing her eyes, she relished the warmth and strength of this man's body. He was her enemy and yet here in her house, in this bed, the outside world disappeared.

His big palm cupped the back of her head and he drew her close to press a kiss to her forehead. The urge to kiss him suddenly overwhelmed her and she lifted her mouth to his. When her tongue sought his, he returned her kiss with bruising force. She'd thought her body – her desire – was sated.

She was wrong.

He rolled onto his back, dragging her with him so that she was suddenly astride his hips.

"I'm still hard," he told her, his voice rough and blatantly sexual. "Ride me."

Rose reached between their bodies and guided his cock inside her. With a sigh, she sank onto him, loving the way he filled and stretched her. She'd never before been in this position and the idea that he could so easily see her body and face, both thrilled and terrified her. His gaze roamed down to where they were connected and then back up again. Inhaling, he swept her long hair behind her shoulders and then he admired her breasts.

Rose swallowed.

"You're beautiful," he murmured.

Again, his eyes fell to her hips where he brushed the pad of his thumb over the only evidence she had ever carried a child inside her body. Grief and gut-wrenching memories surged. Faraway voices that would be forever burned into her brain. *"Why isn't she crying? What's wrong?"*

Rose sucked in a breath and Eric pulled her body down to his. "Hush, darling," he cooed in her ear. His hands trailed down her sides and he began to guide her hips.

Only then, did Rose realize tears streamed unchecked down her face. Forcing herself to chase the past away, she buried her face against his shoulder intent on finding release once more.

* * * * *

Rose twitched restlessly in her sleep. A frustrated whimper alerted Eric that she was having a nightmare. He touched her face. "Rose?"

Her forehead furrowed.

"Rose. Wake up," he said firmly.

Her eyes snapped open. Confused, she stared and then realization relaxed her features.

"You were having a nightmare," he said, brushing her sweat drenched hair away from her face.

Without leaving his embrace, she turned so that her back was to him. Eric twisted to spoon against her. "It was just a bad dream."

Her body tensed.

"Do you want to talk about it?" he asked softly.

She inhaled. "I dreamed about *her* again."

Eric pursed his lips. *Her* could refer to many people but Eric felt he knew Rose had dreamed about the baby she'd carried. Pity for her tightened in his chest along with the sick need to say something comforting. But what?

"I'm sorry," was all he could muster.

Rose turned her head to search his eyes. After a heavy silence she said, "Thank you, Eric."

"I...I'm not certain what to say," he said.

This time, she rolled back over so that she was facing him again. "No one ever does." Her eyes grew dark and glassy. "It's the people who tell you they know how you feel that infuriate me. They didn't carry her for all those months. They didn't worry about her."

She cast her gaze downward. "They didn't...love her...before she came into the world."

Her eyes filled with such grief, Eric's insides knotted.

She sought his gaze again and shook her head. "Nobody ever loved her but me," she managed to squeak out.

At that, he cradled her head to his chest. Rose curled her fists against him. "I keep wondering if it was something I did wrong. I keep thinking that—"

"Hush," Eric whispered. "I'm sure you didn't do anything wrong."

"Everyone I've ever loved has been taken away from me," she sobbed.

Eric could do nothing to comfort her but hold her. He thought of Sally. He'd been heartbroken when he'd discovered that she was a prostitute and spy. He'd lost too. But unlike Rose, the love he'd lost had never been real to begin with.

Although she'd gotten angry at the mention of him, it was doubtless that Rose had loved her brother who'd fought and died for the Union side. And her Confederate husband...

Eric took a deep breath. Mixed emotions that he did not like roiled inside him whenever he thought about her husband. He'd been sent here to find out if she was a spy, not to become infatuated with her.

Already, he was on too slippery a slope. She snuggled closer against him, entwining her legs with his. But as her breathing grew even and she drifted once more to sleep, Eric wondered how he could ferret out her secrets before becoming even more dangerously involved than he already was.

* * * * *

Rose stared at her sleeping lover. She'd heard the clock strike five and she knew it was just before dawn. The fire in the hearth had burned down to smoldering embers and although the room was chilly, Eric slept with the covers skirting his waist.

Rose trailed her fingers across the fine, blond down meandering along his breastbone. Without clothes, he looked every bit like a Viking warrior of old. His hair was a tad longer than was fashionable. His jaw looked as if it were chiseled out of marble rather than flesh and bone. She'd never known another man who appealed to her the way Eric did.

Asleep, he was beautiful. Awake, he was magnificent.

She wondered what he would have been like if she had met him in another time and place. Away from this world. This war.

Could her attraction to him have turned into something deeper? Her stomach tightened. He had been so wonderfully tender with her last night. No one had ever held her while she grieved for her dead baby. She swallowed thickly realizing that last night was the first time she had even mourned the loss.

She hadn't cried when they'd told her the baby was stillborn. She hadn't cried when they'd buried the tiny body in the city cemetery. Someone had placed a rock on the grave to mark it and Rose had told herself that it was best the baby was never named and that the rock was the only evidence of her existence on the earth.

She pursed her lips. She hadn't visited the grave until Rueben had brought Billy's body home.

Now, she suddenly had the desire to name the child and to have a proper stone erected at the gravesite. "Mary Alice O'Kelley," she whispered the name aloud.

Eric's eyes fluttered open and the tiniest of smiles claimed his lips. "What time is it?" he asked, his voice thick with sleep.

"After five."

He yawned as he rolled toward her. Rose searched his eyes while he brushed stray tendrils of hair away from her face. Her heart twisted. Why couldn't this be real? Why couldn't he be looking at her with love in his eyes instead of —

Her heart skipped a beat when his thumb brushed her bottom lip and without thinking, she kissed it. Something shifted in his eyes and then inhaling a deep breath, he dragged her body underneath him. As he moved over her, he guided his cock into her channel. Rose cried out but opened her legs wider, welcoming the invasion.

Closing her eyes, she breathed in the warm fragrance of his body. Her own body softened and countered his slow, tender thrusts. The rough hairs on his chest raked her breasts. One big palm cradled her head and the other scooped her bottom up so he could penetrate her a fraction of an inch deeper.

Rose wrapped her legs around his. What was this wild heaven he touched deep inside her body — her soul?

Without words, he made love to her and Rose lolled in the slow, thunderous roll his movements created in her body until it built and budded and then crashed.

Her fingers tangled in the hair at his nape and she tensed as ecstasy thrummed through her veins. While she rode the pleasure, she heard Eric's moans join hers and felt him pulsing deep in her center.

He stilled and when Rose opened her eyes, she found him gazing at her. *What are you thinking?* She was dying to know but she didn't dare utter the question.

And then his mouth was on hers. Soft and sweet and tender. His tongue teased through the opening she left for him and then plundered inside, ever deepening to

flood her with fresh desire. She rocked her hips against his and when he withdrew his cock, she moaned a protest into his mouth. Her cunny clenched around its own emptiness but came alive with sensation once more when his fingers delved between them to find her sweet spot.

Still kissing her, he dipped his fingers to coat them with her wetness and then he rubbed in a circular motion until Rose was gasping and writhing in his arms.

Her eyes opened and her heart skittered at the sight of his smile. Why did his smile affect her like that? As if he were her love instead of her lover. A warm blush infused her cheeks. How did he find her so easily? How did he bring her to the edge time after time?

“Good morning, Rose,” he said and he pecked her lips one last time before he crawled out of bed.

She watched him, in all his naked glory, collect his clothes and then boldly stride out of the room.

Chapter Six

Rose wiped her hands on her apron as she stood.

Ford's Roadhouse, which had been turned into a hospital for wounded soldiers, was full to bursting. She hadn't thought there was room for one more injured or dying man. In fact, they'd been turning the lesser wounded away and sending them to homes accepting injured soldiers.

But when Euphrates had brought his wounded master, James Martin, all the way back home from Georgia, no one had the heart to turn him away. It wasn't so much Captain Martin as it was Euphrates. Well over six feet tall, he towered over most men. His shoulders were so broad, and arms so big, the seams of his shirts strained when his Herculean muscles flexed. But when he cried, the whole world cried with him. Euphrates was incapable of concealing his feelings.

Rose glanced through the crack in the curtains into the room the medics were using for an operating room. She swallowed. They were getting the instruments ready. One of them complained about how little morphine they had left. Her gaze drifted out the window above the pallet where Captain Martin lay in fevered delirium.

Euphrates stood, twisting his hat in his hands, blubbering with tears pouring down his weathered black cheeks. Not only was Captain Martin about to lose his leg. After the operation, the Yankees had orders to transfer him to Johnson's Island prison.

Euphrates' tears were more unbearable than the misery of the wounded soldiers. He'd moaned that it was all his fault. He'd wanted to bring Mister James home to be with his family in case the worst happened—not to deliver him into the hands of his enemies.

Boots echoed on the wide floor planks. "Give this to Doctor McVay," a familiar voice said.

The back of Rose's neck flamed at the sound. Swiping a loose strand of her hair behind her ear, she turned to discover Eric. She swallowed thickly as his gaze found hers across the room.

"We're ready for him," one of the medics said behind her.

Reluctantly, Rose turned away from Eric and watched as two orderlies shifted Martin onto a stretcher. The stench of his rotted leg wafted up and she held her breath against the scent. She'd worked as a nurse since the first wounded had been brought here after a skirmish at the livery stable but she still wasn't accustomed to the horrid smells and the anguish in the men's faces.

Through the window, Martin's wife had just arrived. Rose watched her try to comfort Euphrates. He clung to the tiny woman, looking as if he might crush her with grief at any moment.

"A good many men have lost limbs in this war," Eric said softly behind her.

Rose whirled.

"Is that his wife?" he asked, inclining his head toward the window.

"Yes," Rose said. "His servant brought him all the way back here from Georgia and now you Yankees are going to send him off to a prison camp. What more good can he do for the Confederacy?"

She hadn't realized just how angry she was about Martin's fate until now.

"Do you think you can convince him to take the oath of allegiance?" Eric asked.

Rose snorted. "No. Before the fever took over, he said he'd die in a Yankee prison before he'd betray his country."

Eric's gaze slid down her body in such a way that it made her self-conscious. Her stomach twisted into a knot. "Stop that," she hissed. "Someone will see you."

"I have influence as to whether he stays or goes," Eric said, his voice barely above a whisper.

"Tonight, then," Rose snapped. "Whatever you want."

One side of Eric's mouth twisted into a grin. "Right now. Meet me in the shed outside in three minutes."

"But I—"

"We have an agreement. Three minutes," he said and spun on his heel to leave.

Rose gaped at his back as he walked away. Three minutes? For what? Surely he didn't intend to have sex with her in a shed? She'd go and tell him just what he could do with his *agreement*.

But then, she remembered James Martin and his grief-stricken family—and miserable guilt-ridden Euphrates. She heaved a sigh. The Martins had already lost a son. At this very moment, James was losing one of his legs. What trouble would it be for Rose to do something she'd already done for much less?

"Miss Rose," a soldier called, shaking her out of her thoughts. "Might I trouble you for a drink of water?"

By the time she'd given water to four wounded soldiers, her three minutes were up. She snatched her shawl and wrapped it around her shoulders as she stole outside and walked around back to the shed where Eric waited for her. She glanced around to make certain no one saw her before she opened the door and went inside.

The carriage shed was dark. The horses had all been turned out but the earthy scent of them mingled with the redolence of weathered leather and damp hay. A shiver rippled up Rose's spine.

Eric stepped out of the shadows.

"This is too risky," Rose protested. "Anyone could walk in here and my reputation would be ruined."

Her eyes dropped to where he was unbuttoning the fly of his trousers. She gasped. "Do you really intend to go through with this?"

"Come here, Rose." His tone was blatantly sexual and as dark as the shed in which they stood.

Bristling, Rose crossed the hay-strewn dirt floor to where he stood. She looked around the shed. "This is hardly a place for...for this."

"The sight of you with that lock of hair out of place and your face flushed was too much for me," he said. "Feel what you do to me."

He took her hand and pushed it into his open fly. Rose gasped as her fingers curled around his steely cockstand. In spite of everything, her channel clenched in anticipation. She couldn't deny it. She wanted him, too. But here? Where they could be caught?

"Eric," she breathed. "Let's go back to my house. Anywhere but—"

"And risk being discovered by Rueben? He'd put a bullet in my back," Eric said with a grin. "We're safe here. If your reputation suffers, I'll marry you."

The erotic desire that had been coiling inside her since Eric had ordered her to meet him in the shed suddenly unraveled. "Marry me? What makes you think I would say yes?"

"You're going to say yes to this," he said, toying with that errant strand of hair she'd been fighting all day. "Get on your knees."

Rose stared.

"Get on your knees," he said again, his face deathly serious. "Take my cock in your mouth."

She couldn't move. She couldn't react. She couldn't believe what he'd asked of her.

She glanced down to where her fingers curled around his shaft just below the plum-colored head. A bead of his lubricant glistened in the dim light. She swallowed. Anticipation welled.

"I've never—" she began.

He stopped her. "Good. I want to be the first."

"Eric, I—"

"Do it. Grant me this and I will make certain your Rebel friend goes home to his warm bed and his family. Do it, Rose." His voice dropped to that palpable sexual

whisper once more. "Take my cock in your mouth. Let me feel the heaven of your lips and your tongue."

She gulped. The lady in her felt it was necessary to protest but the part of her that had become his wanton and willing servant wanted to explore and taste every inch of this man. Furrows deepened in his forehead when she gave his cock a little squeeze.

His thumb brushed across her bottom lip. "Get on your knees, Rose."

"What about my pleasure?" She arched an eyebrow as a coquettish smile played at the corners of her mouth.

"Give me mine and I will see that you are satisfied. Do me this honor."

Shaking, Rose slowly sank onto her knees. His fingers trembled as they threaded into her chignon and pulled her head close. Awareness of the power she held over him at this moment flooded her as her lips touched the head of his phallus. He emitted a soft groan.

She lifted her gaze to his. "What if...what if I do it wrong?"

His face shone with expectation. With something else. Lust? Rose couldn't define it.

"You won't," he said and pulled her head impossibly closer as he guided his cock to her lips.

Instinctively, she opened for him. She'd expected to be shocked by her willingness to engage in such an act. Instead, her body hummed with the longing to please him, to be pleased by him. Her tentative tongue tickled the underside of his shaft and the shiver that tore through him encouraged her.

She engulfed him, gripping his cock with one hand and pulling him toward her with the other. He rocked, mimicking the motions he made when he fucked her. "That's it, Rose. Suck me. Oh God. Yes."

She no longer cared if they might be discovered. She was no longer concerned with Euphrates' tears, James Martin, the hospital or the war. Everything else faded away until there was only this moment and her desire — and Eric.

Mindless, she sucked and laved and worked him with her hand and just when her jaw began to ache so badly she thought she couldn't continue, he moaned her name. "Rose, I'm...oh...oh sweetheart...yes..." he murmured as she drank down every last drop of his salty-sweet essence.

She would have continued suckling him if he hadn't gripped her head and then her shoulders, lifting her to her feet and twisting her and dragging her back against his chest. Her mouth still tingled with him as he began to whisper against the shell of her ear. His hands dragged up her skirts and Rose found herself surrendering, spreading for his inquisitive fingers.

"That's right," he muttered. "Open those legs. God, your cunny's wet."

Rose's head fell back against his shoulder as his fingertips pressed and circled her clitoris. *Sweetheart*. He'd called her sweetheart. Oh, his fingers worked magic. She tilted her hips, giving him full access. His free hand cupped her breast and he squeezed her nipple through the layers of fabric, making her wish she was naked and in her bed with him. *Sweetheart*.

She sagged and would have fallen were it not for his strong arms holding her up, holding her fast against his body. His pressure increased. His fingers worked faster. "Let it come, Rose," he said and then swirled his hot tongue around her ear.

She tilted her head, granting him admission to that sensitive orifice as well. Her thighs trembled and she began to rock against Eric's hand, eager to assuage the flames licking her wherever he touched her.

"My cock felt good in your mouth," he said. "And tonight, I'm going to come to your bed and fuck you until dawn."

That was all it took. Rose's orgasm swept over her so fast and so strong, she cried out. Eric clamped a hand over her mouth but he didn't release her clitoris. He rubbed and kneaded and encouraged her until she grew limp in his arms.

When he finally withdrew his hand, her skirts dropped. She couldn't move. She could scarcely breathe.

Eric turned her and held her, raining kisses across her forehead, her eyelids, her cheeks and finally, her mouth. She opened to his invasion, allowing him to plunder her mouth, to take his fill. Need consumed her. But it was more than sexual need. Eric had just quenched that hunger. This need was something deeper. Something stronger.

Sweetheart.

Rose recognized it as the compulsion to give and receive, to love and be loved. But that couldn't be. It could never be. Not while Eric was her enemy.

Shocked at herself, she dragged her mouth from his and pushed away. "Stop," she said breathlessly. "Stop. I...I more than fulfilled your requirement. Carry out mine. Go tell Mrs. Martin her husband is coming home."

He stared for a moment before he did up his breeches and then strode out of the shed.

Shaking, Rose gathered her shawl back around her shoulders and smoothed down her skirts. What had she done? Her face flamed with shame at the memory of wantonly opening her lips to admit his manhood into her mouth. How could she have committed such an immoral act practically out in the open?

She clapped her palm over her heated forehead. Had she gone completely mad? No, she reminded herself. At this very moment, she had no doubt that Eric was making arrangements for James Martin to go home when he was able – oath or no oath.

But a dark realization entered her mind. She would have capitulated just as easily if there'd been no bargain with Eric at all.

* * * * *

When Eric came to her room that night, Rose met him, already naked, at the door. His arms enfolded her in an embrace and as he crushed her against him, she sought his mouth. His kiss was deep and hungry. His hands traveled over her body leaving her skin flaming wherever they touched her. She thought she would never get enough of him.

And for the first time, she dreaded his leaving.

The Confederates were set to cross the river. Scouts had already brought back word cannons had been rolled into position and Hood intended to lay a pontoon bridge across the mighty Tennessee.

Sherman had wasted time, hell-bent on marching to Savannah, and had allowed the Confederates to regroup. Most of the Southern boys were Tennesseans feverish to march the twenty-odd miles north back to their home state.

But their coming was bittersweet for Rose.

Sherman's obsession to deliver a victory in Georgia to President Lincoln had left the Union troops in Florence scattered and scant. Many of the Yankees had already received orders to pull out and head north to join Scofield's troops. Doubtless, Eric would be among those to leave in the next few days.

He seemed to sense this as well because with a growl, he lifted Rose off the floor and then carried her to bed. After hastily shucking his shirt and trousers, he joined her and made good on his promise to fuck her until dawn.

Well, almost.

Exhausted, Eric had fallen asleep sometime after hearing the clock strike three.

He opened his eyes at daybreak and eased out of the bed to gather his clothes.

Rose didn't move. Eric stared at her. She was beautiful with her black hair trailing across the pillow, with her tiny fist curled against the sheet. He brushed her temple with a kiss before he tiptoed out of the room. After closing the door behind him, he quietly made his way to his own room.

When he opened his door, he stopped and stared. His bed was made. The same clean washcloth was draped over the edge of the basin. Dawn's first rays streamed through the window casting the room in a golden glow and while everything looked perfectly as it should, Eric had the distinct impression that someone had been in here during the night.

The papers in his jacket pocket had been moved.

* * * * *

Queenie shot Rose a knowing glance as she came into the dining room. Heat flamed the back of Rose's neck. Queenie knew. It was obvious in her brown eyes.

"He ain't come down yet," Queenie said.

Rose's stomach turned a somersault. She averted her guilty gaze. "Did Rueben move the salt?"

"Yessum and it w'tn no easy task with his game leg."

Rose retrieved a warm biscuit that was wrapped in a tea cloth. "None of us have easy tasks these days,"

Queenie snorted. "I wouldn't mind trading with you."

Rose nearly choked on her bite of biscuit. She swallowed it as she crossed the floor to where Queenie stood. "Not a word of this, do you hear me?" she whispered. "If you go gossiping at the O'Neals' to Aunt Retta or any of the others, you could endanger all our lives."

Queenie's dark eyes flashed mischievously. "Thought you told me he was the devil."

Rose took another bite of her flaky biscuit. "He is."

Queenie's hands found her hips. She arched an eyebrow. "Then you's playing with fire."

Queenie didn't have to tell her that.

Footsteps sounded on the floor overhead. Rose glanced up at the ceiling as she heard an upstairs door close and then Eric's heavy boots echoing on the steps as he descended them. Her pulse accelerated as he neared and by the time he appeared in the doorway to the dining room, Rose's heartbeat was so erratic she thought her chest would burst.

His gaze found hers and held for mere seconds before he turned his radiant smile on Queenie. "Those biscuits smell wonderful. I'll have to see that you get some flour and other provisions. Make me a list, will you?"

"I can't write but Rue—" Queenie began but Rose quickly interrupted.

"I can. I will make you a list, Colonel Skaarsberg." After what had transpired last night, calling Eric by his last name seemed stilted but with Queenie present, she had no other choice. Besides, Queenie was about to divulge that Rueben could read and write.

While most Florence citizens knew that fact, the less the Yankees knew the better.

His gaze swiveled back to Rose and the flicker she spotted in his blue eyes caused her insides to clench. "Let me know whatever you need," he said softly. "Or want, for that matter."

Rose's corset constricted her sharp intake of air. She resisted the urge to fan her sweltering cheeks. She knew he'd noticed her blushing face because his smile widened. Rose averted her eyes. What was wrong with her? In a matter of days, she had allowed herself to become a fallen woman. Not only was her reputation at stake, now, her soul was in peril because the thoughts she entertained about Eric Skaarsberg were positively sinful.

He drew two biscuits out from under the tea cloth and brought one to his mouth where he bit into it like a ravenous dog.

The sight of his white teeth brought back torrid memories of him biting and suckling her neck while he rooted deep inside her the night before. She gripped the edge of the table to maintain her balance. Why wouldn't he just leave? This was unbearable.

Rose forced herself to straighten. "You could start with some butter and eggs."

Eric gave her a respectful nod and then he turned to Queenie. "Again, my thanks for the delicious biscuits. They don't make these where I'm from."

"Yessuh," Queenie said, preening and twisting.

Rose shot her a nasty look. She was Rueben's wife. She shouldn't be flirting with the colonel. But then, shock swamped Rose. She was jealous of the attention Eric had paid Queenie! No. It wasn't possible.

"Good day, ladies," he said and then stuffed the other half of his first biscuit in his mouth.

As he walked by Rose breathed in the clean, familiar scent of him.

He stepped so close to her that his legs brushed her broad skirts. Instinctively, she took a step backward that put her back against the sideboard. Her quick motion caused the dishes inside its cupboards to rattle.

Eric chuckled as he slipped out the back door.

Rose stared after him, watching him through the window until he was out of sight. When he was finally gone, she turned back to Queenie who was eyeing her and grinning.

"What are you looking at?" Rose asked, angered that she'd been caught gawking.

"You reckon he's really gonna give us them eggs and butter you asked for?"

* * * * *

Eric dismounted once he reached the college that was being used as Union headquarters. The sun was bright and the sky was that deep blue that one only saw during the month of October. A gold leaf fluttered to the ground in front of him but Eric was all but unaware of his surroundings. His mind was consumed with Rose.

She must have stolen out of bed in the night and rifled through his pockets while he slept. His insides roiled when he recalled how he'd made love to her time and time again while she'd succumbed with sighs and ribald encouragements. Had it been real? Or was she playing him for a fool, lulling him with her feminine vulnerability?

His ground his teeth so hard his jaw ached. Last night, he had imagined they were simply two people enjoying the comfort of another's closeness. The outside world had disappeared until there was only the feel of her satin skin, the scent of her hair and her

sex and the sound of her punctuated breaths. But in the morning light, all that had faded.

In its place lurked mistrust and deceit—and the knowledge he would have to arrest his lover for espionage.

The Confederates were already close enough that she could get the information he'd planted to them.

Eric breathed in the autumn air. If Rose was a spy, he would know it within the week.

* * * * *

"Miss Rose, they's a Yankee at the door!" Queenie called from downstairs.

Rose smoothed the strands of hair that had escaped her chignon behind her ears and then wrung her hands on her apron as she descended the stairs. Who could it be now?

Queenie was right. It was Sergeant Poole. He stood on the porch, gnawing his bottom lip and hefting a crate. "Let him in," Rose said.

Queenie opened the door and held it while Poole stepped across the threshold.

"Colonel Skaarsberg asked me to bring this to you."

Rose peered into the crate. At least two dozen eggs sat atop a bed of straw. There was also a block of something wrapped in paper and Rose knew it must be the butter she'd asked for.

"He said to get these to you right away," Poole said proudly. "There's a sack of meal in the wagon."

From where Rose stood on the stairs, she could see the wagon parked out front through the transom over the door.

"The kitchen out back," Queenie said. "Come with me."

"Thank you, Sergeant Poole," Rose called as he followed Queenie through the center hall.

"Yes ma'am," he said and tipped his kepi.

Poole would have had to go down to the commissary to retrieve the eggs and butter. That trip alone would have taken him at least an hour.

She bit her bottom lip. Tonight, they could have cornbread with butter. They could have eggs with their biscuits tomorrow. Rose sighed and felt the tension drain out of her shoulders. For the first time since the war started, she did not have to wonder how they could make do with what they had.

The feeling both irritated and relieved her. Eric's presence in her life was temporary at best. The war would end. Hood's army was already in Tuscumbia, which lay just across the broad expanse of the Tennessee River. Town gossip indicated that the Confederates were a bedraggled, war-weary bunch who didn't have a hell of a lot of fight left in them.

Everyone already knew what no one wanted to say aloud. The war was all but over. The Yankees had licked the South.

Well, Rose thought. She could do a lot worse than befriending one of the enemy. Rueben was always fond of reminding her that she could catch more flies with honey than vinegar.

But what would happen when the war ended and the soldiers came home? There'd be more mouths to feed and no work for the men who'd risked their lives for their homes and country.

Would the Yankees stay behind or would they go home?

An icy chill swept up her spine. Would she ever see Eric Skaarsberg again?

The thought of not having him in her life — and in bed — filled her with dread.

She snatched her bonnet off the wall. Eric had gone to great lengths to see that she got the butter and eggs, not to mention the salt, for which she'd asked. The least she could do was thank him.

Chapter Seven

Rose's pulse accelerated as she climbed the stairs to Eric's office. She had asked the sergeant at the door not to announce her. She wanted to surprise him, to see his reaction when she caught him unawares.

Her black skirts swept the wide planks on the floor as she turned down the hallway. Before, this building had been teeming with Yankees. Today, it seemed quiet. Almost desolate.

She peeped through the open door to the former classroom which was now Eric's office. Her stomach drew into a nervous knot at the sight of him.

Head down, his blond waves fell forward almost obscuring his wire-framed glasses. His ink pen scratched hastily across a page. Rose wondered what he was writing. Under the desk, she could see his shiny black boots crossed at the ankles. He glanced out the window, pursed his lips in thought for a moment and then went back to writing, so engrossed in what he was doing, he didn't notice her in the doorway.

Less than a week prior, Rose had found him to be cold and unresponsive. So much had changed in so little time. She'd thought her life was over when Billy died. Now, she wondered what the future would bring.

She shifted slightly and Eric looked up. His lips parted and Rose could have sworn she saw excitement flash in his eyes but just as quickly, his serious demeanor returned.

He placed his pen back in the holder and snatched a cloth to wipe the ink off his fingers as he came to his feet. "What brings you here?" he asked, his voice cool and devoid of emotion.

Instantly, Rose regretted coming here. "I-I wanted to thank you for the...cornmeal and butter. It was very kind of you to have them sent to us."

He shrugged. "I'm quartering in your house. It was the least I could do."

Dismay flooded Rose's chest. She had hoped he would offer more than that. Coming here had been a mistake. She turned to leave.

"Wait," he called.

Rose stopped.

"Where are my manners?" he asked, all smiles once more. "Come in. Would you like a glass of water?"

Rose walked into the classroom turned office. "No, thank you."

"You came all this way merely to thank me?" he asked.

Rose cocked her head. This was the reaction she had first expected. She nodded. "Yes."

His gaze slithered down her body and then lifted once more to her eyes. "Is that the only reason you came here?"

Her breath caught. Surely he could not be suggesting that she had come here with the notion of coupling with him in broad daylight. She was shocked she had even considered the idea herself.

But she had. She was considering it right now.

He beckoned her with his index finger. The gesture was positively indecent but Rose closed the distance between them. Her pulse pounded.

Eric sank into his chair. "Are you wearing any bloomers under that skirt?"

Rose had never felt so bold. "Why don't you look and see for yourself?" A blush flamed in her cheeks as she lifted her hem.

Eric leaned forward in his chair and reached underneath, all the while holding Rose's gaze. Warm fingers traveled up one calf, pausing to caress the back of her knee. Rose wanted to melt. Her channel pulsed. She'd never done anything this reckless and spontaneous in her entire well-ordered life.

He made a little face of dismay when he discovered she was indeed wearing her drawers but as one hand continued to roam higher, he dragged her even closer with the other.

Rose gasped. "We shouldn't—"

"Hush," he whispered. "I need to listen to see if anyone comes up the stairs. Spread your legs."

She shifted one foot and his fingers found the slit in her under things. Rose held her breath as the inquisitive finger meandered through her folds and then wriggled into her opening.

He pulled her closer so that she was wedged in between his legs and the finger inside her pushed home. She fell forward and caught herself by planting her palms on his broad shoulders.

"Your cunny's wet," he said.

Instinctively, she parted her feet even more and then she bit her bottom lip to keep from crying out as he began working his finger in and out of her.

"Do you like this, Rose?" he asked huskily. "Did you come all the way up here for this?"

She hadn't thought about it that way but there was more truth to his presumption than she wanted to admit. Her legs shook. Her lashes fluttered shut. She whimpered.

"Did you come up here to be fucked?" he demanded.

She clenched around his probing finger.

"Did you, Rose?"

"Yes," she confessed breathlessly.

Clinging, she struggled to stand as her channel spasmed slowly at first and then it was upon her. Rose dug her nails into the rough wool of his coat and dragged in a ragged breath as ecstasy crashed through her body.

"That's it, love. That's it," he cooed as he wrested every last bit of pleasure from her body until she was left trembling and perspiring and gasping for breath.

When he withdrew his finger, her skirts tumbled down and before she could regain coherent thought, she saw that he was unfastening the row of ivory buttons on his uniform pants.

His magnificent cock sprang free and Rose sank as he pulled her down until she was kneeling on the floor in front of him. His fingers worked their way into her chignon and he drew her head toward him until his phallus was against her lips. "Take me in your mouth again."

Eric thought he would explode when her lips closed around the head of his cock. Most women would not take a man's cock in their mouths. Sally had, of course. He inhaled sharply. Sally had pretended to be embarrassed. She'd acted as if she hadn't known what she was doing but she was practiced. Eric could tell.

He watched Rose for the same well-rehearsed techniques. Instead of sucking and handling him with rehearsed skill, however, Rose laved him. Her motions were almost awkward. She was hesitant but her uncertainty did not stem from unwillingness. Eric stroked her cheek. "Touch me," he urged her.

Her fingers encircled the base of his cock.

"That's right," he whispered. "Now work it with your mouth and hand together like you did before."

She complied and Eric's insides melted. Her mouth was hot. Her tongue was inquisitive. Her hand gripped him like a vice.

Eric warred with the desire to lose himself in her body and his need to punish to her. She had never uttered words of love to him. She had never misrepresented herself. She wasn't Sally.

But he was convinced she'd gone through his pockets and sent the information she'd found to the Rebels. Thankfully, it was false information. The very real truth was that if it had been genuine, lives would have been lost, possibly his own.

Sherman had been right. She was a Jezebel.

Lust faded into anger and Eric pushed himself further into her mouth. "Suck me."

She should have bitten him. She should have stopped. She did neither. Instead, she squeezed tighter and sucked harder.

Consumed with passion, she was beautiful. Her face was flushed. Strands of dark hair had escaped her tight chignon. Black lashes rested on her cheeks. Her swollen lips were wrapped around his cock.

His scrotum tightened when her tongue darted out to flick along his length. He watched her — desiring her. Hating her.

He wanted to break her. He wanted to force her to confess.

"Enough," he growled. "Pull up your skirt and bend over the desk again."

Her eyes met his briefly as she quickly did as he'd bidden. Her voluminous black skirt with her lacy white petticoat and hoop skirt arched over her cotton-clad bottom. He wanted her naked but that was impossible right here, right now.

He could at least get rid of those drawers. He wanted that pretty bottom visible. And accessible.

Reaching around her waist, he jerked the drawstring that held up her pantalets and in one swift motion he dragged them down to her thighs.

She gasped but did not protest.

Her ass shuddered as he ran his palm over one rounded buttock. How he wished he could turn her over his knee and spank her into submission. Working his cock with one hand, he teased through her cleft with the fingers of the other.

She tensed.

Yes. Eric's lips pulled into a wicked smile. "Open your legs, sweet Rose."

Tentatively, her feet moved apart. Her cunny lips clenched visibly. Cream glistened at her opening. She jolted when Eric wriggled two fingers inside her to coat them with

her juices. Watching her intently, he rubbed the liquid around the puckered opening to her anus.

"What are you doing?" she demanded.

"Shh."

One of her hands batted at her skirts and she peered at him over the wealth of fabric and hoops. He only grinned and pushed one well-lubed finger into the orifice.

Rose's lips parted. "Eric —"

"Relax."

"Stop. That's...that's sodomy," she hissed.

His grin widened. "So was sucking my cock but you didn't seem to mind that."

Her cheeks turned positively red. Triumph surged through Eric. He patted her bottom with his free hand. "Now relax. I'm going to fuck you here." When she softened a bit more, he pushed his finger all the way inside until his fist was wedged between her cheeks.

She tensed again. "It hurts."

"Relax," he cooed. "Trust me."

He felt a little of the fight go out of her legs.

"That's it," he coaxed. "Spread for me. Wider. Oh yes." His finger began to move easily in and out of her tight, slick hole. She trembled and her head dropped to the desk.

He smiled. "You can't believe you're letting me do this to you, can you?"

"No."

The desire to both dominate her and pleasure her at the same time warred within him. "Does it feel good?"

"Y-yes."

"Tell me where my finger is, Rose."

She whimpered.

Her orifice grew unbelievably wetter and wetter. He'd done this with women before. None had ever responded like this. He reached between her legs with his free hand and tickled her cunny. "Where's my finger, Rose?"

"In...in my...bottom."

"That's right," he said, continuing to slowly fuck her there with his index finger. "Do you want my cock in there?"

"It's too small."

"You'll stretch for me," he said.

"I can't," she protested.

He gave her a low chuckle. "That's all right, Rose. I can fuck you with my finger like this until you beg me for more."

Her body loosened in response and soon, she was on tiptoe and dipping her spine to lift her bottom higher. She was almost ready.

Her cunny was so wet he dipped the cream onto his fingers and coated his cock with it. Rose trembled when he withdrew the finger from her anus. But when he prodded the orifice with the head of his cock, her body grew taut once more.

"Once it's inside, it will feel good," he murmured. "Let me in, Rose."

He gave a little push with his hips and the opening expanded to admit him. She yelped. "It hurts. Eric. Please."

He hesitated, giving her time to adjust. "Please more, or please stop?" Perspiration rolled downward between his shoulder blades. He ached to thrust into her but somehow, he managed to restrain himself.

"Please...more."

Slowly, he urged his cock into her hole. His balls pulsed. He just knew he would blow before he was completely inside. He swallowed and tried to think of anything

except the fact that his cock was embedded at least two inches inside her ass. No man had ever taken her here.

As he entered her to the hilt, she let out a long, low moan. "Does it still hurt?" he asked, shaking.

"No." Her voice faltered.

"Does it feel good?"

"Yes," she said with a wriggle of her ass.

Eric growled and dug his fingers into the soft flesh of her bottom. Now he could punish her. Now he could make her admit she was a spy. He pumped against her, driving her body hard against the desk. The legs grated on the wood floor but Rose braced herself on her elbows. *She's loving it.*

Eric gripped her hips tighter. He thrust harder. Rose's breaths left her body in sharp, punctuated bursts. He all but lifted her feet off the floor as he drove wildly into her. He was beyond caring if he hurt her. All that mattered was satisfying this insane lust he had to dominate her, to bend her to his will—to possess her body and mind and soul.

The muscles in her legs stiffened. Her nails burrowed into the papers on his desk. She moaned helplessly and Eric knew she was in the throes of orgasm. His own release would not be far behind.

Without warning, footsteps sounded on the stairs.

"Eric," Rose gasped.

Goddammit. Eric jerked away and whirled to fasten his trousers. He'd been so close. Frustration welled.

Rose straightened and her drawers fell to the floor. She kicked out of them and booted them under the desk. Before the first soldier got to the doorway, she was halfway across the room and although her face was flushed, she looked every bit the respectable lady.

Eric needed to sit to hide his bulging cock but the act would be unseemly if a woman was still standing in the room. "Won't you sit down, Mrs. O'Kelley?" he said curtly as he pulled his chair up to the desk and sat. He shifted in an attempt to get some kind of relief.

Rose sat gingerly in a chair across from the desk.

"Sir," the soldier greeted with a smart salute. He eyed Rose uncomfortably as he crossed the room and handed Eric a folded piece of paper.

Eric's insides knotted. Instinct told him he would find evidence in this memo that Rose was a spy. Part of him had hoped she wasn't. Part of wanted to explore a future with her.

Hands shaking, he unfolded the paper. Disappointment swamped him. The sigh he heaved hurt his chest. The false information he'd planted had indeed been delivered to the Confederate General, Stephen Lee, and a band of Rebel cavalry had shown up where Eric had stated supplies were being hoarded.

His gaze lifted to Rose's. Her expression was unreadable. She averted her eyes.

Eric pursed his lips. When could she have stolen out of bed and how had she gotten the information to someone who could take it to Lee? There was more than one spy in their midst. Arresting a town lady would be the way to ferret whoever aided her out. This was just the kind of evidence Sherman had wanted.

But God, Eric wished there was some other way.

He steeled himself as his gaze turned on the soldier who'd brought him the note. "Bring me the sergeant at arms, please."

With a salute, the soldier turned and left the room.

Rose emitted a giggle. The sound of it infuriated Eric. Fuming, he stared.

Her dark eyebrows lowered. "Eric? What's the matter?"

"When did you do it?" he asked.

Her head tilted slightly. "Do what?"

He snorted. "You know very well what, Mrs. O'Kelley."

She gripped the armrests on her chair. "Eric, speak plainly."

"When did you get out of bed and go through my pockets?" he asked. His insides burned. "Was it before or after I fucked you?"

Her mouth formed an O. She shot to her feet. "You listen, here, Eric Skaarsberg. We may have comforted one another in the dark but I don't have to tolerate that kind of speech from you."

Eric stood. "Don't pretend you're all high and mighty. I know what you did." He half-wadded the paper in his fist and shook it at her. "I have the memo to prove it."

Rose's eyes darted back and forth. Was she working up a lie? Was she racking her brain to come up with a scapegoat?

"I don't understand what it is you're saying I've done," she argued.

He shook his head. "General Sherman told me you were a Jezebel. Of course, I saw that for myself the first day you paraded in here with your dress half undone."

Rose gasped. Her cheeks colored.

"I suspected you were hoarding supplies," he told her. "But I gave you the benefit of the doubt. I thought you might be accumulating foodstuffs for your friends and neighbors."

"I—"

He interrupted. "How did you get the information to Lee so quickly? Who's helping you?"

She stared. The color drained from her face and her irises blackened.

"There's the look I was waiting for," he told her. "You know you've been caught now. When did you go through my pockets?"

Her eyes narrowed into vicious slits. "Every time you turned your back," she said enunciating each word for emphasis.

Eric felt as if he'd been gouged in the guts with a bayonet. "Just as I thought."

The sergeant at arms strode into the room. Eric straightened. "Take her into custody."

Rose gasped. "Under what charge?"

The sergeant hesitated. "But Colonel —"

"She's a spy for the Confederacy," Eric said as he skirted his desk and came toe to toe with Rose. She trembled. Something twisted inside him that urged him to drag her into his arms. He fought it and grasped at the elusive hope she was not the spy and that this was all an awful mistake. Instinct—and experience—told him differently.

"Rose, are you protecting someone else?" he asked, his voice dropping to a whispering murmur.

Her eyes burned into his. "I did it, you Yankee bastard. Now do what you will with me."

"Take her into custody," Eric ordered, battling the urge to take her instead under house arrest. But that would be a grievous mistake.

"You're not going to...to hang a woman?" the sergeant asked.

Eric had no intention of ordering Rose to be hanged although at the moment, he would love to strangle her himself. Still, he wanted her to realize the severity of the consequences she could face. "That won't be up to me. Now, get her out of my sight."

"Ma'am?" the sergeant said gingerly.

Rose's fingers entwined around Eric's arm. "Eric?"

He jerked away from her grasp. "Take her," he said, turning his back on her. "And don't let yourself be fooled by her flirting."

"Come with me," the sergeant said.

"Bastard," Rose spat the word before she whirled and stormed from the room alongside the sergeant.

Eric sank into the nearest chair and raked his fingers through his hair. This was harder than the last time. He wished he'd refused Sherman's orders. Arresting a spy was his duty to his country.

So why did it feel so terribly, terribly wrong?

* * * * *

Rose's mind raced as she walked in silence with the sergeant at arms. Every step reminded her that she wasn't wearing her drawers and the reason why infuriated her.

Eric had known—or at least assumed—someone had pilfered information from his pockets when he'd bent her over his desk. And yet, he'd persisted in being intimate with her.

Rose clenched her fists at her sides so hard her nails bit into her palms.

Being humiliated by Eric was the least of her worries. Someone had gone through Eric's pockets and had evidently taken what they assumed was valuable information to the Confederates. Rose was fairly certain that someone was Rueben.

The punishment for espionage was death and while Rose didn't believe for an instant the Yankees would hang her, she knew they would hang Rueben without ceremony.

Being confined in a Yankee prison was hardly as awful as watching her friend—her deceased husband's half-brother—be killed. For that reason, she would confess and let the Yankees think she was their spy.

Come what may.

* * * * *

"Colonel Skaarsberg," Brigadier General Pike greeted as he strode into the room.

Eric stared. He had not been informed Pike was coming to Florence. Pike, however, knew the area well. Although he'd only been a colonel himself at the time, he'd been here with Colonel Cornyn, whom the locals hated.

Cornyn had burned all the mills and would have destroyed the town had the locals not pulled strings with Union officials. A tiff with William Bowen, one of the officers who'd loudly protested Cornyn's treatment of Florence citizens, had resulted in Cornyn's court-martial. At the trial, Bowen had pulled a pistol and shot Cornyn.

While Eric was fully aware the North was embroiled in a war with the South, he felt the sadistic measures Cornyn and men like Pike took were unnecessary and cruel.

"I hear you caught the little she-Rebel. Good for you, Colonel," Pike growled.

Eric stood. The general looked even more weathered than Eric remembered. Older than most other officers of his rank, Pike had risen in the ranks from a private. While he'd had some military training, he was hardly a West Pointer. He was the rough frontier type who'd fought in the Mexican War and had earned his way up in the ranks because the men above him had either been promoted or killed.

The fact that he'd already heard about Rose wasn't good.

"And quick thinking about sending her to the jail instead of putting her under house arrest," Pike added as his beady eyes surveyed the office. "This place hasn't changed much since we were here last year."

"Well, Sir, the jail is really temporary. I hoped to frighten her into divulging her accomplices and—" Eric began.

"Frighten her?" Pike blurted. "The Confederates are amassing in Tuscumbia to cross the river any day now."

Eric's stomach churned. "What are you saying? We're going to have to pull out of here. We can't take a woman while we're under fire."

Pike chortled. "We're not taking her anywhere."

"Then what do you propose I do? I can't very well release her," Eric argued.

"We're going to make an example of her to Hood's entire secesh army."

Cold chills swept up Eric's arms. He tried to form words but couldn't.

Pike grinned, displaying a row of grayed teeth. "I intend to hang her before we move out."

Chapter Eight

A chair had been brought from a neighboring house for Rose to sit on in her jail cell. Even the Union guards had thought it ignominious for a lady to be detained in a jail designed for miscreants of the lowest sort.

One of the Union soldiers had even brought her a Bible to read but she had not touched it. Instead, she sat, pondering what she had done with Eric.

When she had told him she'd gone through his pockets every time he turned his back, the look in his eyes had crushed her. What else could she have done? At that moment, she had known Rueben was involved and no matter what her interest in Eric was, she couldn't let Rueben be caught.

Everyone—including the Yankees—knew Rueben had fought and was wounded during the charge at Shiloh. Because of the color of his skin, the Federals would treat him doubly worse than any other man they considered a traitor.

She closed her eyes and the image of Eric's thumb brushing across the silvery marks on her hips rose up hard in her mind. A wave of grief erupted inside her. She shook her head to dispel the image but it was replaced with the vision of his blond head bending to kiss her and the torrid memory of his lips claiming hers.

Rose dug her nails into the armrests. The past days rushed through her as if it had all been a wonderful dream that had turned into a nightmare. She swallowed hard. Tears burned in her closed eyes. She wouldn't cry. She just wouldn't.

"Miss Rose..."

Rose's eyes snapped open. She looked around the cell but there was no one except the Yankee jailers in the next room.

"Miss Rose," the urgent whisper came again and this time, Rose realized it was coming from outside the barred window.

As casually as possible, she stood and moved to the window. "Rueben?" she hissed under her breath. "What are you doing here? Take Queenie and leave. Go to the caves until Hood crosses the river."

"No'm."

"The Yankees won't do anything to me. They can't take me with them so they'll be forced to let me go. I'll be all right."

"No'm," Rueben said again.

The cold fear in his eyes struck terror in Rose's heart. He looked horrified. Had they already discovered he was the spy?

"I'm comin' in there and tellin' them I took those papers out of the colonel's pocket."

"Don't you dare. What would Billy think?"

"Mr. Billy's dead," Rueben said flatly. "And the Yankees say they gonna hang you before they leave."

Rose stared. "They won't hang me," she said more to reassure herself than Rueben. "They're just trying to scare you."

"No'm," Rueben said, glancing over his shoulder to see if anyone was coming. "I heard the colonel and that devil, Pike, arguing about it over at the college."

Eric wouldn't let that happen. Would he?

Pike, however, was another story. Rose shuddered remembering the fear the Missouri troops had instilled in the locals when they'd been here before. Their colonel had even called the college president, Dr. Rivers, a filthy half-breed.

Pike had personally overseen the burning of the Globe Mill and the Martin Mill and had tried to burn several of the plantation houses on the outskirts of town. He would have succeeded had it not been for a skeleton band of locals from Phillip Roddy's cavalry who fought them in hand-to-hand combat out at Cypress Creek.

But worse, Rose recalled her very unladylike rejection of Pike's sexual advances. He'd sworn then he would make her pay.

Her insides hollowed. She had no doubts he would indeed make her pay. Dearly.

A man who would burn women and children and servants out of their homes would certainly have no qualms about hanging a woman as an example. The act would also be demoralizing to the Confederates who would soon take the town.

"There's only one thing to do and that's turn myself in," Rueben said grimly.

"No," Rose said a little too loudly. She glanced back to make certain the Yankee guards hadn't heard her. They were still involved in a heated game of cards. She clutched the bars desperately. "No, Rueben. They're never going to hang a woman. What would Queenie do with you gone and her expecting a baby soon?"

Rueben's gaze dropped.

"We're in this together," Rose told him. "Now go. Hide. And don't come out for anything. Do you understand me?"

He gave an irresolute nod.

"Ma'am," one of the Yankee guards called.

Rose whirled, trying to block the small cell window with her body. "Yes?"

His gaze scanned the cell. "Were you talking to someone?"

"Just praying," she called sweetly.

The guard had the decency to blush. "Pardon me, miss," he said and then shuffled back to the card game.

Rose didn't dare glance back out the window. She knew Rueben was gone. Her knees shook as she moved back to the chair. This wasn't happening. After what they'd done together, Eric would never allow Pike to hang her. But what if Eric had been lying all along?

Rose recalled how he had noticed Rueben's wounded leg and had rolled those heavy barrels off the wagon himself. She bit her bottom lip. The first night Eric

had been quartered in her house, he'd chased that drunk Yankee away. He'd held her and comforted her while she cried. For him to have been acting during those times would be either beyond comprehension or unconscionable.

She tried to take a deep breath but her stays were too tight.

Her mind grappled for an explanation. What if he had been using her to try to find out information? Her sex trade agreement with him was a farce. He'd played her all along. She'd been silly to think that for the first time since Billy's death, she'd felt safe and...cherished.

Now she felt like a fool.

Her shoulders shook and she blinked against angry tears. He'd told her himself that he was not a gentleman. She should have known that any man who would engage in illicit acts with a woman out of wedlock was not to be respected. She clenched her fists so tightly her knuckles burned. The bastard had tricked her and she had been so desperate she'd fallen for it.

One hot tear seeped down her cheek and she ferociously batted it away. He'd been inside her just today—and in a place no decent person would ever dare go. Shame flooded her cheeks as she recalled how—that even with him in that place—she succumbed to ecstasy.

Part of her hoped they did hang her because how could she live with herself after being humiliated this way?

* * * * *

Eric raked both hands through his hair. The Confederates had been thwarted a few miles west of Florence when they attempted to put out pontoon bridges at Bainbridge. Now the troops were moving toward South Florence and Eric knew they had not the manpower or force to repel Hood's twenty-thousand strong army.

Pike's attentions would be drawn to the Confederates and he would do one of two things regarding Rose. Reconsider hanging her or make swift justice of the matter and leave her dangling from a gallows for the Confederates to find.

Eric recalled writing the letters which would be delivered to the widows of the men who'd died as a result of his negligence. He kept reminding him that if the information he'd left for Rose to find had been real, it could have cost a good many Union lives.

He sighed.

But it hadn't been real. The information had all been a lie he'd made up to entrap her. No one had died.

And Rose did not deserve to die either. He pushed himself up. With the Confederates congregating to cross the river, there would be enough confusion for him to do the unthinkable.

No matter what Rose had done, Eric could no longer imagine his world without her in it.

"Colonel?"

Eric looked up to discover Rueben. He stood in the doorway, nervously twisting his hat in his hands. He glanced over his shoulder and then stepped into the room. "I was the one who took the information to General Lee."

* * * * *

Rose shot to her feet when she heard a bevy of men enter the jail. Eric had finally come to his senses. She was going to be either freed or taken under house arrest. She started toward the front of her cell but stopped short when an eerily familiar face loomed into view.

Sick dread settled in the pit of her stomach. She hadn't seen this man for over a year but she remembered well the fear and hatred he instilled in the citizens of Florence. When he was here before, he'd been a colonel. Now, he wore the insignia of a general.

Pike twisted his head in such a way that his neck made a loud cracking noise and then a thin smile stretched across his face. "Rosalie O'Kelley."

Rose gulped as Pike's gaze slithered down her body and then lifted once more to her eyes. "Where's Colonel Skaarsberg?"

"He's done his duty for his country, Miss O'Kelley." Pike's grin widened.

Rose ached to slap the nasty leer off his face. A sharp pang stabbed her in the heart. So, her suspicions of Eric were correct. Why should she be surprised?

"You see, my wild little Rose, the colonel was sent here to learn your secrets." His stubby fingers curled around one of the cell bars. "This isn't the first time he's ferreted out a spy. And a whore."

Rose gasped.

Pike let out a mirthless laugh. "You haven't heard what our dear colonel did to the infamous Southern Sally?"

"What are you talking about?"

Pike's watery blue eyes flashed as if he'd smelled blood. "You're not the first fancy lady Skaarsberg has caught spying."

Rose's knees threatened to buckle but she didn't dare grab the cell bars and risk coming an inch closer to Pike. She wanted to blurt that he was lying but she had a sickening feeling he was telling the truth.

"Didn't know?" Pike chided. "I'm not surprised he didn't mention it. He dallied with a whore in Nashville known as Southern Sally. She saw fit to beguile the colonel with her wares." Pike's eyes dropped to Rose's bosom and lingered there.

Even though he couldn't see through her clothing, Rose resisted the urge to cover herself.

"Sally, however, got away with what you did not," Pike continued. "And information she sent the Rebs resulted in eight deaths. Eight."

Now, Rose understood why Eric had been so filled with hate. Doubtless he felt responsible for each one of those deaths.

She took a step backward and then another until the back of her knees found the chair. As she collapsed into it, she gripped the armrests to keep from toppling onto the stone floor.

Even knowing why Eric had been hateful did not lessen the fact that he'd tricked her.

"Ol' Cump Sherman knew what he was doing when he picked Skaarsberg to get you," Pike chided. "Pity. If you'd only shown me your favors, I might see fit to be a little more generous. But as it is —"

Determined to put an end to this madness, Rose lifted her gaze to Pike's. "The Confederates are going to cross the river any day now."

"So they are."

"Don't you think you should be gathering up your little band of invaders and retreating north?" Rose asked.

Pike's ruddy face reddened even more. "All in good time, Miss Rose. You have an appointment with a noose and the sycamore tree across the street, first."

Rose stared. She had thought to force him to tell her what his plans were but she had not expected this. She'd never really believed they would hang her.

"Unlock this cell," Pike called to one of the guards behind him.

Trembling, Rose shrank into the chair as if it could protect her. The key twisted and the mechanism clicked, echoing through the cell.

Pike held out his hand like a practiced courtier rather than her executioner. Rose stared at it. In an instant, all her choices flashed through her mind. Everything inside her screamed at her to bat his hand away and to flee this cell as fast as her feet would carry her. She knew that would be futile.

Ignoring his offer, she pushed herself up and made herself look into the general's eyes. "I do not deny my guilt," she said, surprised that her voice was not trembling.

Somewhere in the back of her mind, she hoped God would be merciful enough to reunite her with the baby she'd never known.

Pike flashed a wicked, gray toothed smile.

As Rose took her first step, she stumbled. Pike reached out to catch her but somehow, she managed to right herself and jerk away from him at the same time. "Keep your stinking hands off me," she seethed.

He only laughed and snatched her arm, digging his fingers in until Rose had to clench her teeth to keep from crying out. The last thing she would do would be to give him the satisfaction of letting him know he'd hurt her.

He dragged her toward the jail door. Rose didn't know if he or another soldier opened the door but all at once, she was outside and blinking furiously against the blinding sunlight.

When her eyes focused, she saw she was being ushered across the street to the lot where the biggest sycamore tree in town stood. The macabre thought occurred to her that she had always loved this particular tree and had often prayed neither army would see fit to cut it down as firewood. She had never guessed she would draw her last breath under its copious branches.

Already, a boy of a soldier was tossing a noose over one of the sturdier limbs. When he saw Rose, he stopped in his tracks.

A boom reverberated in the air and Rose's knees buckled. She would have fallen but for Pike's vice grip on her arm.

"That's just the Confederates shelling the fortifications at the river," Pike said blandly as he kept walking.

Rose staggered to her feet as he dragged her along and searched the sea of blue uniforms for one taller and blonder than the rest. But Eric was nowhere to be seen. The bastard probably couldn't bear to face her after he'd used her and humiliated her.

At least Rueben was long gone. Rose just knew her heart would break if he were stolen away from Queenie with baby on the way. It was difficult making it in these times and Rose knew Queenie would have a hard time without her around, much less Rueben.

The soldier with the noose gaped at Pike. "Sir...you aren't...serious?"

With his free hand, Pike snatched the noose from the boy's hands. "Damn serious. Now stand back if you don't have the stomach to hang a Rebel spy."

"Sir...she's a...a woman," another soldier protested.

Pike pushed Rose into place and slipped the noose over her head.

She balked as the rough rope scratched her face and neck.

"Give me your belt, private," Pike ordered and soon afterward, Rose's hands were swept behind her and leather bound.

Her insides were quickly turning to mush and she feared she'd lose her bowels in front of all these men. Pike was really going to hang her. There was nothing she could do about it now. There were no arguments she could make—not if she wanted to keep Rueben alive.

Her stomach flipped when Pike pushed the knot down and tightened the rope around her neck. Already, her breaths were coming in quick short pants. Terror swamped her.

Pike leaned in close. "Oh yes, wild Rose. You're wondering if you will suffer. I can tell you that you will. I've seen men hanged before and it's not a pretty sight. First, you'll buck and kick and fight for a toe-hold on the ground. A toe-hold you will not find. Then, you'll choke and strangle. Your neck will burn and your head and lungs will

feel like they're about to explode. Your eyes will bulge and the last breath you take will reek of your own shit."

"General Pike," Sergeant Poole intervened. "This is not protocol. She should at least be taken to Nashville for a fair trial."

Rose had never been so glad to see the sergeant in her life.

By now, Florence citizens were gathering—mostly women, children and servants—but what good could they do against a Yankee general?

Pike gave the rope a jerk and Rose reeled backward, coughing and sputtering, held up only by the noose around her neck. "Back down, sergeant, or I'll have you court-martialed."

Out of the corner of her eye, Rose watched Pike twirl a length of the rope around his arm. "Who among you will help me put this traitorous whore to death?"

No one stepped forward.

"Don't have the stomach for it, eh? Well, would you if your comrades had died because of her?" Pike giggled.

"This is an outrage!" Rose saw the long, lanky form of the college president, Dr. Rivers, marching toward them. "Let that woman loose immediately!"

Rose's heart leapt. Rivers was a rational man. A smart man. He had talked Cornyn out of burning Florence homes when the Missouri troops were here before. Maybe he could talk some sense into Pike.

"Keep that half-breed back," Pike said and the temporary lull of denial Rose had slipped into suddenly vanished.

The rope tightened and the branch creaked. Rose's heels left the ground and true to Pike's words, she kicked, scrambling to feel the earth beneath her shoes once more. Her shoulders burned as she wrestled against the leather belt binding her wrists. Searing pain crushed her windpipe. The chorus of protests and the sky became a blur. She gasped for a breath she could not draw.

And just as everything started to go black, she heard the pounding of hooves and Eric's voice over the din of blood pumping in her ears.

"She's not your spy! It was her servant and I've killed him!"

Rueben...

No...

"Let her do—" Eric's voice faded and then there was only nothingness.

Chapter Nine

Eric dismounted while his horse was still at a gallop and he did not stop moving until his fist slammed into Pike's face. Pike staggered backward, jerking the rope entwined around his arm. Eric caught him by the open lapel of his uniform and dragged him toward Rose so that the rope loosened and she was once more on the ground. In one swift motion, Eric yanked the rope off Pike's arm and while Poole and some others took care of Rose, Eric pummeled Pike.

Staggering and holding his arm at his side as if his shoulder had been dislocated, Pike spat out a tooth. "You'll be kot-mashalled," he slurred through bloody lips.

"You nearly hanged an innocent woman," Eric said breathlessly. "Her servant was the spy. He tried to escape across the river but I put a bullet in him. He's dead."

Content that Pike had been subdued, Eric turned to where Dr. McVay was kneeling beside her lifeless body.

Panic surged. Oh no. He'd gotten here too late. Eric dropped at her side and loosened the noose. "Is she breathing?"

"No." The doctor was grim.

Eric dragged her into his lap and patted her tear-stained cheek. "Rose, breathe."

Grief welled so hard and fast, Eric wanted to vomit. "This is all my fault. Forgive me. I should never have doubted you. Oh God Rose, please breathe."

There had to be something he could do. She could not die in vain. He'd seen medics breathing into soldiers' mouths to revive them. He could do that. He had to try. He bent over her and copied the technique he'd seen done in the field hospitals. Covering Rose's blue lips with his own, he blew a breath into her mouth.

Her body convulsed and she gasped.

"That's it, Rose, breathe, darling. Breathe for me. You're too strong to give up. Fight."

She let out a hoarse whimper but her lungs continued to rise and fall with labored breaths.

Joy flooded his entire being but he'd seen enough dying men to know that Rose's life could ebb at any moment.

Pike wiped his bloody mouth on his sleeve. "Good thing you got the real traitor but the world would be just fine with one less stinking she-Rebel whore in it."

Eric tensed and started to lurch to his feet but Dr. McVay's hand on his arm prevented it.

"Save it, Colonel."

"Move out, men!" Pike ordered. "We'll leave this shit-hole to the Rebels."

He kicked dirt in Eric's direction. "You too, Colonel. You have an appointment with a court in Nashville."

Eric was hardly surprised but he no longer cared. What mattered was that Rose was alive.

"Clap them manacles on him and let's get the hell out of here," Pike told the sergeant at arms who'd been standing by.

Eric didn't want to leave Rose. He couldn't without telling her the truth about Rueben himself but he had no choice.

"I'll see that she's properly cared for," McVay said.

Eric nodded and shifted Rose into McVay's arms. He stood and offered his hands to the sergeant.

* * * * *

Rose's eyes focused on an unfamiliar face. A young Confederate removed a damp cloth from her forehead. "Good afternoon, Mrs. O'Kelley."

She blinked and opened her mouth to speak but only a croak came out.

"Be still," he told her. "You've been through quite an ordeal. You don't need to try to talk just yet."

Where was Dr. McVay? Who was this bright-faced fellow? She wet her cracked lips with her tongue. "Where—" She knew she'd formed the word with her lips but no sound came out.

"Hush now," the Confederate said. "I'm Dr. Roberts, the surgeon for the Twentieth Tennessee Regiment. You're going to be just fine but it's going to take some time."

Rose tried to swallow — and to remember.

She'd confessed to being a spy. The Yankees had put her in the Florence jail and then that awful Pike...

She shuddered.

Her memory came back with sickening force. Pike had tried to hang her and then... *Oh God, no.* Eric had killed Rueben.

Panic unfurled through her limbs and Rose tried to sit up but Dr. Roberts urged her back down on the pillows. "You're not ready to get up just yet, Mrs. O'Kelley. Be still."

Another Confederate appeared in the doorway. He looked to be about the same age as the young doctor and also surprised to see her awake. "How's your patient?"

"She's giving me more trouble than one of the boys, General Smith."

The boy general's dimples deepened with his handsome smile. "Mind the doctor, missy. He's a good doctor. My only complaint is that he's a little too fond of being at front for my taste."

The general's humor did little to lighten Rose's worried mind. Involuntarily, her hand flew to her throat as she tried to speak. She discovered a loosely wrapped bandage there. Awful images threatened to overwhelm her but she shook them off. "Ru —"

It was no use. She couldn't form a word. Still, she tried again. "Rub —"

"Rueben?" the general asked, his gaze darting from hers to the doctor's and back again.

She nodded and the room suddenly became a flurry of activity. Queenie burst into the room excitedly. A broad smile stretched across her face. "Law Jesus, Miss Rose. We didn't think you'd ever wake up."

Queenie put down the bundle of clean linen she'd brought up and rushed into Rose's open arms. Rose clung, wanting to say she was sorry, wanting to say she'd tried to save Rueben but she physically could not utter the words.

Hot tears streamed down her cheeks and she sobbed against Queenie's comforting shoulder.

Footsteps pounded up the stairs and into the room. "Miss Rose!"

Rose's eyes widened at the sight of Rueben. He wasn't dead! The last thing she'd heard was that Eric had shot him. But here he stood whole and well and alive. Rose's tears of sorrow turned into tears of joy. She did not bother batting them away but instead, reached for her friend's hand.

Rueben's big coffee-colored hands clamped around her hand.

"I...I thought...dead," she managed, her voice never rising above a hoarse whisper.

Rueben shook his head. "No'm. I told the colonel what I did and he took me straightaway to a boat, put me in it and sent me across the river. He told me not to come back until I came with the Confederates."

Rose stared. Eric had done that? For Rueben? She started to shake.

"Honey, that colonel kept that devil Pike from killing you," Queenie added softly as she dabbed Rose's tears with the hem of her own apron.

Rose blinked as her mind filled with the images and sounds of that awful day. "How...long..."

"It's been a week," Queenie said.

Rose wilted back onto the pillows. "E...Eric?"

Queenie and Rueben exchanged glances that made Rose uneasy. "Oh, he long gone with them Yankees," Queenie said. "They arrested him."

Rose's lips parted. Exhausted and weak, she turned her head and stared blankly at the drapes. Eric. He'd lied to his own men to save Rueben—and to save her. Where was he now? What would happen to him?

If Pike had anything to do with it, Rose shuddered to think of the awful possibilities. Pike was not above fabricating facts to implicate Eric.

She turned and looked at Rueben once more. "Do...the Yankees...know he...let you...go?"

Rueben shook his head. "I only came back across yesterday with Cheatham's division. Queenie was the only one who knew where I really was."

In all probability, she would never see Eric again. Her insides hollowed. She'd thought she hated him. She'd never considered that she might come to care for him. To love him.

Until now.

Rose's gaze slid to the young doctor's. "Is...there...fighting north of here?" It was a foolish question. She knew the Confederates would chase the Yankees all the way to Nashville and then some if they could.

"There's been some pretty fierce skirmishing at Happy Hollow," he said.

Rose bit her bottom lip. She knew the Yankees had fortified the cliff on the other side of Shoals Creek just six miles north of Florence. Hopefully, Eric had not been involved. Squeezing her eyes shut, she cursed the war.

After Billy died, she'd promised herself she would never care for another man—especially one in a uniform. But her heart had given her no choice in the matter.

It didn't seem to matter either that she'd only known Eric a few days before they were separated. Whatever had happened between them had been intense. Dangerously so. But dismally, Rose wondered if it had ever been real.

* * * * *

A bullet whizzed past Eric's head. He shook his hands in yet another futile attempt to wrest free of his shackles. "For God's sake, have mercy and let me fight."

Pike fired his revolver into the acrid bank of gun smoke. Horses shrieked. Men screamed.

A soldier standing less than an arm's breadth from Pike stilled and then slumped to the ground. Blood oozed from a wound over one of the man's eyes.

"Goddammit, Pike!" Eric yelled.

Pike had taken it upon himself to personally guard and chide Eric this last week. Pike had even dragged him out of Florence before he could find out if Rose had lived or died.

Pike whirled, his face inflamed, eyes blazing. He pointed his revolver at Eric.

Eric gaped. The general was a lunatic but surely, he wouldn't gun down one of his own men. But Pike did the unthinkable. He thumbed back the hammer and pointed the revolver squarely at Eric's chest.

"You're mad!" Eric hollered over the din of bullets and voices.

Pike grinned and instinctively, Eric twisted his head as not one, but two shots rang out. The bullet hit Eric's shoulder like a mule kick and as he staggered backward, he saw Pike's wild eyes widen. Portions of the man's brain melted from the exit wound in the front of his forehead.

Mud splattered and Eric realized he'd dropped to his knees. His shocked gaze left Pike and swiveled to his own shoulder where bright red blood contrasted the dark blue of his uniform coat.

Black circles danced in his eyes and the searing pain in his chest eddied away. Images of Rose assailed him and he wondered if he was dying, if her spirit was coming to take his.

Rose.

He'd been sent to Florence to entrap her. He'd ended up becoming perilously infatuated with her. It occurred to him that if he lived through this, he would go back to find her and he would make her his no matter what the cost.

The last thing he saw before he blacked out was the silver moon on Confederate General Pat Cleburne's battle flag charging toward him.

Chapter Ten

Rose sat in the parlor wrapped warmly in blankets. She'd barely been on her feet since the incident but it wasn't so much because she was still weak from her ordeal. Her thoughts were consumed with Eric.

Reports of violent skirmishing poured into Florence every day. Wounded from both sides were brought back by the wagon load and installed anywhere they found a place for them.

The severely injured were taken to the roadhouse where a team of surgeons worked round the clock lobbing off infected and irreparably wounded limbs.

Because Rose was giving quarter to Dr. Roberts and his charming commanding general, none of the wounded had been brought to her house. But if the skirmishing was as bad as they said, it wouldn't be long.

Rose's thoughts drifted to the day not so long ago when Eric had shown up on her doorstep and announced he would be quartering here.

She'd never before met a man whose presence dominated her in such a thoroughly sexual way. At first sight, she'd been unable to wrest him from her thoughts. She had wanted him with such intense passion she'd thought she would die if she didn't have him.

And now, not knowing where he was or what had become of him...

Surely, they had taken him on toward Nashville. But there was little she could do other than write an appeal on his behalf to some superior officer.

Rueben burst into the room, hat in his hands. His eyes were wide and his forehead creased. Instinctively, Rose knew something was wrong.

"Miss Rose," he said breathlessly. "They brought him back. He's at the roadhouse."

Rose did not have to ask who Rueben meant. Instantly, she knew it was Eric. Shooting to her feet, she threw off the blankets. "Is he badly hurt?" she croaked as she and Rueben stole out the front door.

When Rueben did not immediately answer, panic seized her. She stopped and stared. "Rueben—" Her voice was still only a little above a whisper. The doctors had told her she might never fully recover.

"I think you best get down there," he said quietly.

Rose gathered up her black skirts and fled as fast as her feet would carry her the two blocks toward the roadhouse.

She hesitated when she saw the wounded lying on pallets all around the property. Her blood turned icy. A thousand horrible thoughts raced through her head. Was Eric here? Was he alive? Was he badly wounded?

"Where is he?" she asked, knowing only the most severely injured would be inside —and knowing what Rueben's answer was going to be.

Rueben gulped. "They were taking him to the operating room when I left to get you."

Rose shook. She carefully threaded her way through the wounded soldiers and around to the back of the building. Horror-struck, she recoiled at the sight of a pile of severed arms and legs which lay rotting in the afternoon sun. Flies buzzed around the macabre mound. One soldier shooed a mangy dog away.

Rose's resolve wavered but the need to see Eric overrode it. Purposely avoiding the stinking pile, she skirted the roadhouse and slipped into the door of the makeshift operating room. She immediately wished she hadn't.

The sharp tang of blood, cauterized flesh, and the sickening stench of gangrene assaulted her nostrils.

"Ma'am, this is no place for you," one of the surgeons yelled.

She tore her gaze from the bloody man on the table. At least it wasn't Eric. "Colonel Skaarsberg," she gasped, covering her mouth and her nose with the back of her hand.

The surgeon shrugged toward the next room.

Rose glanced back at Rueben. She was trembling so badly she feared she would faint. Thankfully, Rueben stepped into the room, took her elbow and ushered her around the team of doctors.

One of Rose's neighbors, Olivia O'Neal, knelt and covered a soldier's face with the flimsy blanket he lay under. "You can clear this spot," she called to an orderly.

Panic welled. Rose's gaze swept the men lying on makeshift beds on the floor, slamming to a halt when she recognized Eric's blond mane. His face was drawn and pale. Deathly pale. With his eyes closed, Rose feared he'd already died.

"Eric," she cried as she dropped at his side.

He didn't move.

Terror flooded Rose. Her insides hollowed.

Rueben knelt next to him and pressed his fingers to Eric's throat. "He's still alive."

Rose's eyes closed briefly. She brushed his hair back and he stirred. "What happened to this man?" she asked Mrs. O'Neal.

Mrs. O'Neal dabbed her apron against the perspiration on her forehead. "He was shot in the chest. The bullet went clean through."

"He's burning up with fever," Rose said hoarsely. Her gaze searched Rueben's. "Can we move him to the house?"

"I'll go get the wagon," Rueben said and started toward the door.

"You can't take him. When he recovers we're sending him along with these other Yankee prisoners to Andersonville," the orderly interjected.

"But he saved my life," Rose objected. "He saved Rueben's life. He was the quartermaster here and saw to it the Confederate and Union wounded alike got

medicine. He made an exception for James Martin and sent him home instead of to prison."

"Sorry, ma'am. Not my orders," the orderly said.

"At least let me take him home to convalesce," Rose said.

"I'll vouch for him. He's a gentleman," Olivia O'Neal added.

The orderly stared at Mrs. O'Neal for a moment. Her husband was a brigadier general and her word was as good as gold among the Confederates.

"We can carry him on a stretcher," the orderly consented. "We've been moving men out to the surrounding houses all day and it'll free up much-needed space here."

"Yes, please do," Rose said. Her gaze riveted to Eric's lifeless face once more.

* * * * *

The orderlies were unable to carry Eric up the stairs so Rose and Rueben brought her own mattress into the parlor.

Eric rested fitfully. Rose stayed by his side, pressing cool compresses to his head and carrying out the painful task of keeping his bandages changed and clean.

His wound looked angry, although there were no dark tendrils, which would indicate blood poisoning, radiating from it. Queenie had cut up bandages and Rose had finally staunched the bleeding.

She knew better than to think that since he was still alive that he was safe. She'd seen a number of soldiers take sudden downward spirals and die.

By the light of one lamp, he did not look any better than he had when she'd found him at the roadhouse. Despite the number of people in her house, it was deathly quiet. The others were all sleeping—everyone but Rose.

She yawned, the movement causing her throat to ache anew. She winced, recalling how Eric had saved her life. He'd risked his own reputation and his life in order to save her. She'd thought he'd killed Rueben but he'd shown him mercy when Rueben was guilty of spying on Eric's own countrymen.

Why? Why would he do that for her?

Her entire being thrummed with a possibility that might never come to be. But fraught with wonder, Rose did not know if his actions were because he felt guilt that he had compromised her — or because she might mean more to him.

The one thing she did know was that she did not want to lose him.

Something splashed on Eric's cheek and Rose realized she was crying. Sniffing, she batted the tears away.

Eric moaned.

"Eric?" she whispered. She tried to tell herself that he'd moaned in his sleep all throughout the day. It didn't mean anything had changed.

His lashes fluttered open and his eyes slowly focused on her face.

Rose's pulse skittered. "You're with me," she said. "You're safe, now."

Gratitude shone in his eyes. "Hold me," he managed.

At once, Rose slid under the blankets, careful not to touch his wounded chest. "Do you require anything?" she asked.

"Just you, Rose. Just you."

Rose nuzzled her face against his shoulder.

"I'm...so sorry..." he began.

Rose's heart felt as if it were suddenly trying to drum its way out of her chest. "It's all right. I know what you did for Rueben."

His hand seized her wrist and he squeezed. "No. For what happened...to you."

A tumult of black memories swept over her and she blinked, forcing them away. "Don't speak of it."

She had thought about Eric's reasons for turning her in. But she only had Pike's word to go on and she didn't trust him. "Is it true what Pike told me?" she blurted, unable to stop herself.

"What did he tell you?" Eric coughed and winced.

"That you were sent to arrest me," she said, sensing him tense in her arms. She continued. "That soldiers had died because of a spy you'd...known."

His fingertips caressed her wrist. "Yes, Rose. It's true."

She stilled, stunned. She didn't know what bothered her worse. The fact that he had been with another woman—a whore—or that he had thought she was a spy and had come here to trap her.

"I should explain," he said.

Although she was dying to know, she pressed a finger to his lips. "Not now. Be still and rest."

"Rose...I—"

"Not now," she said firmly.

"No. I have something to tell you," he said.

His eyes glittered in the lamplight. "Pike shot me. He intended to kill me and when I thought I was dying...I realized... Damn Rose, I'm in love with you."

Rose's lips parted. She gaped.

"After I heal—after this war—I intend to marry you."

Rose couldn't believe her ears. *Love*? He loved her? He couldn't possibly love her. She couldn't possibly love him.

Could she?

What she'd felt for him was lust. Nothing more. She'd been lonely. She'd been weak. She'd given in to carnal desires.

But love? The knowledge washed over her like a warm, comforting breeze. She did love him. She had loved him all along. She'd loved him from the first moment she'd laid eyes on him.

Words threatened to gush forth but she couldn't utter them. Acceptance was on her lips but still, she hesitated.

"You don't forgive me," he said and brushed his fingers along her neck.

Rose shuddered at the memories she had tried to block.

"I don't blame you," he continued.

She wanted so badly to tell him that she loved him, too, but she knew she couldn't do that. She'd lost her brother and her husband and her child. Their deaths had broken her and not even her passion for Eric could heal that. She struggled to remember the coldness in Eric's eyes when he had summoned the sergeant at arms to arrest her.

Calm washed over her, replacing the panic that the idea of loving him had caused. Briefly, she shut her eyes and took a breath, desperately wanting everything to return to normal. This was the control she needed. She'd only been weak. Lonely. No man's love could mend her wounds. They were too many and far too deep.

Eric grimaced. His heart ached. Rose had not done anything to assure him of her innocence the day he'd had her arrested. In fact, she had stated plainly that she was the one who had gone through his pockets. But he would not remind of her that. Not now. Not ever.

Rose was an intelligent woman. If she realized her part in the tragic events that had transpired, then there was another reason for her reticence.

A reason he could not comprehend.

Perhaps she had used him merely to procure supplies. Perhaps he had been duped. Again.

But he didn't think that was the case.

"Miss Rose," Rueben's voice came from the foyers. His usually dark face had gone ghostly pale. "It's Queenie's time," he said.

* * * * *

Rose was exhausted when she returned to the parlor a day later. She was surprised to find Eric awake and looking much better than he had earlier. She smiled. "Queenie had a boy. They named him Billy."

"She and the baby are both healthy?" Eric asked, propping on two thick pillows.

Rose nodded. "He came into this world hungry."

Eric smiled. Rose wanted to close her eyes, to look away. She did neither. But he had no right to be so devastatingly handsome. During Queenie's labor, Rose had been able to push aside her own tension and concentrate on helping Queenie deliver a thriving baby.

Rose pushed an errant strand of hair behind her ear. Looking at Eric caused their earlier conversation to rush back over her in a sickening wave. Her heart told her to throw herself into his arms and accept his proposal. Her head told her to remain cool and calm and explain to him that she'd traded her body for the supplies he could give her. Their relationship had meant nothing more to her than that.

She sighed. That would be lying.

And yet, this war was not over. As soon as Eric healed, the Confederates would be sending him to the prison camp at Andersonville. There was no one left who would intervene for him. Dr. Rivers might but Rose doubted that Eric's kindness to her and to Rueben would prevent them from carting him off to prison.

Already word of a bloody battle in Franklin with high casualties on both sides had reached Florence. The Confederates were pushing toward Nashville but Sherman had caught up to Scofield and the Union Army far outnumbered the Southerners. It would only be a matter of time before Hood's Confederates surrendered or retreated.

Would they never realize this cause was lost?

Rose felt hopeless.

"Eric..."

"Come, sit next to me," he said, patting the mattress.

She could not resist. Gathering her skirts, she slid onto the makeshift bed beside him. His cool fingers caressed her cheek and she resisted the urge to turn her face into his palm.

"You're a strong woman, Rose," he said softly.

She blurted a laugh. "Strong? Are you mad?"

"I know now why you did the things you did," he said. "I know why you felt you had no other choice than to offer me your body for supplies."

A tear welled in her eye. No he didn't. He had no idea.

"Your love of Rueben and Queenie and that little baby. Your love of this town and its people. Your love for your husband and what he stood for," Eric explained.

Rose couldn't look into his eyes. *My love for you, Eric...*

She hadn't seen this coming. Her emotions had blindsided her. She'd been wrong to think she could welcome this handsome, thoughtful man into her bed night after night and not develop affection for him. She'd tried to resist.

She had failed.

She hadn't been strong at all.

"Why are you crying, Rose?" he asked.

She swatted the tear away. "I'm not."

He tilted her face up so that she was looking into his eyes. "I know your body. I know your eyes. And I know *you*," he said. "You're crying."

She started to shake. She wanted to run, to lunge out the front door and not stop until she fell to her knees. But she knew she couldn't run from him. From *this*.

"Have I upset you?" he prodded.

"No," she snapped, jerking away from him to stand once more. She began to pace. Finally, she whirled and stared at him, clenching her fists at her sides. "Yes. Yes you have upset me. Greatly."

He remained calm. "How so?"

Her voice was still so hoarse she could scarcely form the words. "You came here and...and you wouldn't even look at me when I first came to your office. I needed those supplies. I knew the Confederates were coming. First you...you Yankees took off everything I owned and then the Confederates came through ragged and begging for

anything that was left. What could I do? I'd lost my brother, my husband, my...my child..."

A sob choked her. Her shoulders shook with grief she'd withheld for years. "Everyone I've ever loved has been...had been ripped away from me," she managed. "And I...I can't let that happen to you."

Eric's lips parted. "Rose," he said opening his arms.

She rushed into them, taking care not to hurt his wounds as she sought his comfort.

"That won't happen to me," he cooed into her hair.

"Yes. The Confederates have already taken you prisoner. You'll be shipped off to Andersonville and—" she said, unable to finish her sentence.

He held her close. "If I am, then I will come back to you. I will always come back to you, Rose. Say you'll marry me. Give me a something to come back for." His words were perilous. His embrace was insidious, lulling her into believing his well-intentioned promises.

"I'm...barren," she sobbed into his bare chest.

"I know," he whispered.

"I traded my body to you for...for salt."

"I know."

"I lied to you. I confessed I was a spy to...to protect—"

"To protect Rueben." He finished her sentence. "I know."

She raised her head and leveled her teary gaze on him. "I'm a Southerner."

He scoffed. "A Southerner who took the oath of allegiance to the Union. And besides, that doesn't matter to me. I love you, Rose. I love your spirit and your determination and your passion."

No one had ever made such declarations to her. Even Billy, whom she'd dearly loved, had approached marriage in a very traditional sense. If his parents had done it, then he was set to do it, too. With Eric, Rose felt she could be herself. She could be free

to explore her sexuality and to enjoy being a woman without feeling she was less than her other female counterparts because she could not carry a child to term.

"You were made for me," he continued. "Your body was made to fit mine. Your heart was made to match mine."

Yes it was.

Her resistance melted.

He lifted her chin again and this time, his lips sought hers. His kiss was tender and yet possessive, filled with promise. His tongue entreated her response, teasing and receding until she returned his kisses with reckless abandon. "Say you'll marry me," he said between kisses. "Say yes, Rose."

She swallowed. Hard. "I—"

He groaned. "If it weren't for this damn wound, I would fuck you into submission. Say yes. Say it, Rose."

Desire raged between her legs but it was desire she could do little about. Eric was wounded. He was still slightly feverish. But oh God, he could kiss...

His mouth found hers again. His tongue coaxed its way between her lips, enticing her to open for him. Her head swam. She felt intoxicated. And when he took her hand and guided it to the bulge underneath his nightshirt, Rose's pulse accelerated. Still fondling him through the soft fabric, she dragged her mouth from his. "Eric. Stop this. You can't. You're hurt."

"Ride me."

In spite of his wounds, he drew her across him so that she straddled him. She wanted it more than anything. She wanted him—for the rest of her life. His fingers wrenched her skirts out of the way and slipped through the slit in her drawers.

Rose's lashes fluttered shut as he explored her already damp folds. "Stop..."

"Your body betrays you," he whispered. His words sent chills racing up and down her arms.

She opened her eyes and their gazes collided. "I'm afraid I'll hurt you." But Eric was a man who would either tolerate the pain or ask her to stop. Rose feared hurting herself far more than injuring him.

"Shh," he murmured as he enticed her onto his cock.

The head nudged at her opening. How long had she dreamed of this moment happening again? Of his body taking her to impossible heights of ecstasy? In vain, she tried to shake off her desire, to protest. She failed.

"Fuck me, Rose."

She sank and sighed with pleasure as he filled her. Eyes still locked with Eric's, she laced her fingers with his as she began to gently undulate her hips. Slowly in. Slowly out.

"I missed you," she confessed. Why—and how—did he always render her unable to resist him?

His fingers tightened around hers. "Say yes, Rose."

She stared, still riding his phallus. Could she say no and never experience *this* again? *No*. She could not. Acceptance was on her lips but she bit her tongue to keep from blurting the word yes. Instead, she closed her eyes and allowed herself to spiral inward. To simply feel and enjoy.

Grinding her pubis against his left her mindless to anything except physical sensation. The last time, he'd been rough. Demanding. He'd committed unspeakable acts with her and although she'd enjoyed it immensely, it hadn't been like this. Now, his movements were gentle, almost imperceptible.

The realization that she controlled her own pleasure stunned her. She loosed her fingers and planted her palms on either side of his head as she braced herself to ride him. His hands found her hips through the voluminous fabric of her skirts and he held tightly as she fucked him. Groin slapped groin. With each thrust of her hips, she expelled a rough breath. The intent to find pleasure obliterated the emotions roiling within her. Desire. Love.

Fear.

His fingers clenched. His body convulsed beneath her and Rose opened her eyes just in time to watch bliss claim his features.

“Rose...” he muttered, his voice but a husky plea. “Don’t stop.”

She had no intentions of stopping until...

“Oh Eric!” she cried as ecstasy budded and then burst sending wild tendrils of intense pleasure winding through her body, her limbs, reaching to her scalp, her fingertips and her toes. She dropped onto his chest, burying her face in his neck. “I love you,” she mewled.

His fingers threaded into the thick hair at her nape and caressed. “Then marry me.”

She squeezed her eyes shut against the traitorous tears that seeped through her lashes and disappeared into the shoulder of his nightshirt. *Yes! Yes!* “I-I...can’t,” she blurted. “I can’t get my hopes up and then let you be taken away from me, too.”

Chapter Eleven

Over the next few days, Eric grew stronger and stronger. Queenie and Rueben were thrilled with parenthood. Christmas was coming and Rose felt as if everything were right with the world.

But she knew the lull was temporary.

Word had trickled back to Florence that the Confederates had suffered a terrible defeat at Nashville and Hood was pushing what was left of his army on the retreat south as fast as the war-weary soldiers could march.

Rose had been sad to learn the Twentieth Tennessee's handsome boy general and been grievously wounded at Nashville and shipped north to a Yankee prison. His captain, Tod Carter, had tragically fallen within sight of his home in Franklin. So many of the faces she'd seen on the march north, she knew would be missing from the ranks as they retreated south.

Rose also knew the Confederates would be militant and angry. They would not leave Eric in Florence but would instead drag him off to certain death at Andersonville prison.

Mrs. O'Neal's husband, Edward, had been commandant at the camp early in the war. Conditions had been horrid then but now that the Confederates were starving and shoeless, conditions at the prison were deadly.

After seeing to Eric and Queenie, Rose donned her coat and walked in the spitting snow to the roadhouse to where the ladies of the town nursed the injured being brought back from the battles in Tennessee.

As she walked, she breathed in the cold, fresh air, knowing that when she arrived at the hospital, she'd be assailed with the stench of rot and death and the coppery tang of blood that lingered in her nostrils hours after her shift as a nurse was done.

"Good mo'nin', Miss Rose," Euphrates called, raking his hat off his head as she neared him.

"Good morning," she said and smiled. "How's Captain Martin?"

"He's a sight better but he sho do miss his leg. He say he got one foot in Georgia and that make everybody laugh. But Miss Rose, I don't care what them other folks says about how you got that Yankee to let Mistah James stay home. I 'preciate what you done," he said and nodded for emphasis.

Rose's stomach knotted. So there was already gossip in town about her relationship with Eric. What did it matter anymore? "You're welcome, Euphrates. Colonel Skaarsberg only did what was right by Captain Martin." She reached up and patted his cheek with her gloved hand. "Your tears didn't hurt in persuading him, either."

Suddenly bashful, Euphrates shuffled his feet.

Hoofbeats captured their attention and Rose looked away from Euphrates to discover several Confederates approaching on horseback. A wagon lumbered along behind them.

Panic flooded her when she noticed the rig was a prison wagon. She rushed to the first Confederate lieutenant who dismounted. "What are you doing?" she asked. "Why are you here?"

"We're collecting the wounded prisoners to take them to Andersonville before the army comes back through," he said.

"All of them?" she asked.

He turned to his men. "Get a list of Federals in houses and go round 'em up."

Rose staggered alongside the lieutenant. "All of them?"

"Yes, ma'am," he said annoyed. "All of them."

"Some of these men aren't fit to travel. They'll die on the road," she argued.

"I have my orders," he said tersely.

Horses wheeled around as soldiers spurred them and rode away with their lists. Rose felt as if she were caught in a whirlwind. They would take Eric. Her heart raced. She leaned against one of the posts on the porch in an attempt to catch her breath. There had to be something she could do.

They couldn't take Eric.

Even now, litter bearers hauled out the wounded who were incapable of walking on their own. Other Federal soldiers marched out the door at gunpoint and were summarily clapped in manacles. Rose gaped unable to move. What could she do?

She pushed past the men herding out the door. "Dr. McVay!"

Mrs. O'Neal stood from where she'd been nursing a wounded soldier. "He's in the surgery."

"They're here to take the Yankee wounded," Rose gasped.

Mrs. O'Neal looked around the crowded roadhouse. "Maybe they'll clear up some space. More are being brought in by the wagonload. *More Confederates.*"

Rose felt helpless. She picked her way through the pallets, ignoring the soldiers who tugged at her skirts begging for water and laudanum. "Dr. McVay," she called.

He peeped through the stained curtain of the operating room. With his hands and apron covered in blood, he looked more like a butcher than a doctor.

"They're going to take Colonel Skaarsberg to Andersonville," Rose blurted but she already knew Dr. McVay didn't have the time to help her.

"He's well enough to go." McVay disappeared back into the operating room.

Rose wanted to collapse. She wanted to cry. But there was no time for that. She worked her way back to the door and stumbled as she crossed the threshold onto the porch.

One of the soldiers already had Eric in manacles. *Her Eric.*

"No!" Rose wailed. She darted to the lieutenant in charge. "This man has helped several of the townspeople. Is there no way you can leave him here? He was wounded at Happy Hollow and the journey to Andersonville will surely kill him."

"My orders were to take them all, miss. Now please, step aside."

Rose glanced at Eric. Wearing his slouch hat and standing in his greatcoat with his hands in rusted chains, he seemed resigned to his fate. Rose shook her head and whirled on the lieutenant in charge once again. "You can't take him. Please. Make this one exception," she said, clutching at his gray coat.

He jerked away. "Ma'am! Please step aside."

"Rose." Eric's stern voice carried above the din.

Her gaze shot to his. There was nothing more she could do. Nothing more she could say. Swallowing against the lump in her throat, she waded across the muddy ground to where he stood. She wanted to fall into his arms and sob. She wanted to hold onto him so they couldn't take him. Tears fell down her cheeks.

"The war will be over soon and I'll come back," he said. "I won't take no for an answer then. Do you understand me, Rose?"

Unable to speak, she nodded.

"I'll come back and when I do, you will marry me," he said, holding her gaze. A sad little smile pulled at one corner of his sensuous lips.

Rose shook but it wasn't from the cold. She stared for a moment and then turned once more to the lieutenant. "This man has...has compromised me," she cried.

Everyone stopped what they were doing and gaped.

"Rose—"

Trembling, Rose continued. "He has ruined my reputation and therefore, I at least deserve to be made an honest woman before you cart him off."

The lieutenant stalked toward them. "Is this true, Sir?"

Rose turned and, even though her words were directed at the lieutenant, she looked into Eric's eyes. "I want to marry him before you take him."

Eric's gaze never wavered from hers. "Bring us a minister," he said.

"Shit," the lieutenant cursed, exasperated. "Somebody go find a damn preacher."

While they waited for someone to retrieve the Presbyterian minister, Dr. Mitchell, Rose clasped Eric's chained hands in hers. A courage she had never known flowed through her. Before, she'd been afraid of losing him. Now she only wanted to be a part of him, no matter what happened.

"Are you certain?" he asked. "I may not—"

"You'll come back," she said. She swallowed. "Be sure to keep...to keep your wound clean. And don't let them take your...your coat."

"I promise," he said and kissed her forehead. "I love you, Rose."

She lifted her gaze to his and searched his eyes. "I love you."

"What's the meaning of this?" Dr. Mitchell asked as he traipsed down the muddy street.

Rose turned to discover that he had his Bible in his hand. She was really going to marry Eric. Right here. Right now. Love and fear mingled and rampaged through her veins.

"These two want to get married," the lieutenant said blandly.

Mitchell scratched his black beard. "It's about time."

Rose suppressed a laugh as Mitchell opened his Bible and began to recite the ceremony.

She brushed her thumb over Eric's hands as the vows were read and then delivered.

"What about rings?" Mitchell asked when he got to that part.

"We don't have rings," Rose said. "Yet." She smiled at Eric.

"No rings?" Mitchell asked.

Rose clung to Eric, never wanting this moment to end.

But it did end. It ended when the lieutenant said, "That's enough. Let's get this rig rolling."

Panic swamped her again. "No, please! No."

"Rose, don't do this," Eric said. "I want my memory of you to be with a smile, not crying and shivering in the cold. Do me that honor."

Her shoulders shook. She pursed her lips and batted her lashes trying in vain to keep the tears from falling.

"Step back, Mrs. Skaarsberg," the lieutenant said. "We've got to move out."

"Will you look after him?" she asked.

He rolled his eyes. "I give you my word."

"Thank you," she said softly and then she squeezed Eric's hands once more before she stepped back.

She held her husband's gaze as the Confederates mounted their horses. The driver released the brake on the prison wagon.

"Move out!" the lieutenant ordered.

With a sickening lurch, the horses and wagon began to move. The miserable band of bedraggled Yankee soldiers chained to the back shuffled along behind.

Rose brought her hand to her mouth to keep from crying out. Her stomach churned and she fought the wave of nausea that seized her.

"I'll be back as soon as I can," Eric called stumbling behind the wagon.

"Wait! Wait! Don't y'all leave outta here yet!" a voice called.

Rose reluctantly dragged her gaze from Eric and saw Euphrates running as fast as his feet would carry his giant frame. He waved a piece of paper in his massive black hand. "Wait! I got sumpin' fo' you from Cap'n Martin!"

"What now?" the lieutenant said, reining his horse in.

The rest of the wagon train ground to a halt.

Euphrates didn't stop running until he'd put the crumpled piece of paper in the lieutenant's hand. As the lieutenant read over the letter, Euphrates bent over and braced his hands on his knees in an attempt to catch his breath. "Mistah James couldn't come," Euphrates gasped, "on account o' he's only got one leg but he sent me flyin' with that. He say if you have any questions, you to come see him."

The lieutenant glanced back at Eric and then at the paper again. "Remove Colonel Skaarsberg's cuffs," he told the man who had the key ring looped to his belt.

Rose gaped. She couldn't believe this. Her heart soared as Eric was released. He stood, rubbing his wrists and gave a respectful nod to the lieutenant.

"Seems you have friends in Florence, Colonel," the lieutenant said. "Move out, men!"

Rose rushed into Eric's arms, burying her face against his chest and clinging while the others left.

Euphrates straightened. "Dey couldn't take you. Not after what you did fo' Mistah James. I don't care if you is a Yankee."

Eric laughed.

Rose lifted her head. She couldn't stop smiling. "Thank you, Euphrates. Thank you. Come by the house and I'll get some meal and eggs together for you and your missus."

Euphrates nodded his head. "Yessum. We'd be obliged. But right now all I wants is a drink of water."

"I think we can manage that," Eric said.

"The lieutenant didn't let me finish," Dr. Mitchell said.

Rose arched an eyebrow. "Finish?"

Dr. Mitchell smiled. "I now pronounce you man and wife. Colonel Skaarsberg, you may kiss your bride."

Eric dragged his hat off his head and crushed Rose to his chest. Tears of sadness transformed into tears of joy as she tilted her chin up. He kissed her hard on the mouth

and then lifted his head and brushed the errant locks of hair from her forehead. "Let's go home, sweetheart."

About the Author

Growing up in the south, where the air is thick with stories steeped in legend and truth, Debra came by her love of romance novels honestly. Well...sort of. At an early age, she pilfered from her grandmother's extensive library and has been a fan of the genre since.

A full-time freelance writer, Debra especially enjoys combining history, mystery and a touch of taboo to weave stories with unforgettable, haunted heroes.

She lives in Alabama with her sexy real life hero, a couple of smart-aleck ghosts and a diabolical black cat.

Debra welcomes comments from readers. You can find her website and email address on her [author bio page](#) at www.ellorascave.com.

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