



EXCERPT, CHAPTER ONE

It seemed impossible that as the country stood on the brink of war, she'd married a man she barely knew. The clash and roar of battle had been raging from Virginia to New Orleans for more than a year now, and she'd not seen her husband since the morning after their wedding, when he had ridden off to join the army – but that would change very soon.

Catherine heard the train before she saw it, heard the hiss of its engine and the rumble of tracks as it slowly crossed the trestle high over the James River. Her green bonnet shielded her from the faint drizzle of rain – and from the sympathetic look she knew was on the face of her uncle, Martin; not that she didn't want his sympathy, or need it.

"No doubt his wounds are serious," Martin said. "I think you'd better prepare yourself, my dear."

Catherine felt her stomach tighten. A whiff of cold wind stirred a few strands of russet hair from beneath her bonnet and brought a flush of pink across the high cheekbones and slim nose. The green fabric of her bonnet and cloak deepened the grayish-green shade of her eyes to emerald, but they were troubled in expression, almost fearful. She closed them for a moment, trying not to remember things she'd read in the newspapers, things she'd heard whispered during social gatherings, things she'd seen herself in the city's hospitals.

Cannon balls, exploding shells, flying bullets – all had horrific effects upon the human body. It was bad enough to observe these effects on strangers, but one's husband – Catherine stopped in mid-thought as the realization struck her again that the man who would soon accompany her home was practically a stranger.

With a screech of brakes, the train rolled into the station and stopped. Passengers, mostly women and children, began climbing down the steps. They must be refugees, she thought, the most recent victims of the war. She'd heard nearby Fredericksburg had been evacuated in anticipation of yet another attempt by the Union Army to capture Richmond.

She knew they ought to at least offer someone a ride, but somehow she couldn't move, could hardly think.

A woman disembarked, very thin in a gray dress and white apron, with dark hair pulled severely back beneath a black bonnet. She turned to await someone else, extending her hand. A man's gloved hand descended upon her arm.

Catherine heard her own involuntary gasp of surprise as she watched the man lean heavily on the woman in gray. She saw that his other hand grasped a slender black cane. As her gaze moved upward, she stifled another gasp, only vaguely aware of Martin taking her arm.

There could be no doubt he was her husband, though his frock coat hung more loosely about his tall frame. It was the same pale yellow coat he'd worn as he rode away to war, before he'd acquired his uniform. Beneath it he wore a black shirt and black trousers. Around his entire head was a black hood or scarf, covering even his eyes. Though he leaned on the woman, he held the cane out before him, as if—

"He's blind," she heard Martin say, his voice reflecting her own awed sense of disbelief.

The two advanced slowly. The woman held a large black umbrella over their heads. Perhaps forty or more years of age, she was plain and unsmiling, with an air of steely determination. Her owl-like, slate-gray eyes swept Catherine grimly from head to toe.

Catherine stared at her husband. He seemed taller than she remembered, perhaps because a certain heaviness had fallen away; he looked lean and fit but for his obvious weakness. The black scarf completely enshrouded his head and neck. Two small holes had been cut where his nostrils must be. Black gloves made of soft leather concealed both hands.

The pair stopped. Catherine stood speechless, finally turning toward her uncle with a look of helplessness.

"Hello, Andrew," Martin said, too loudly, too cheerfully. He reached out to shake the man's hand, realized his mistake, and let his own hand fall.

"It's Martin," her uncle went on, less enthusiastically. "Catherine is here."

"Hello, Catherine," Andrew said, in a voice barely above a whisper. "Thank you for coming, Martin. Is Sallie with you?"

"No, I'm afraid...that is, I regret to say she was unable to come."

"This is my nurse, Mrs. Shirley."

"How do you do?" Mrs. Shirley extended her free hand in an almost mannish fashion. Catherine took the proffered hand, noting absently its firm, almost painful grip.

"If you don't mind," Andrew said, whispering, "I'm tired. I'd like to go home."