

Chapter One

Charlotte MaCausland sat curled upon the intricately carved sofa, her nose, stuck in a book. She pushed her reading glasses back up, lost completely in the world of Charles Dickens. The front door closed loudly and heavy booted steps crossed the dark oak floors.

“Charlotte, Charlotte! Where are you?”

She raised her chin and replied to the familiar voice. “In the library, Father.”

Major John MaCausland stepped through the door wearing his army uniform. Beneath the brim of his hat, deep brown eyes peered at her from under coffee colored eyebrows accented with gray. He tugged at his long beard.

“The cadet reception is this evening. I’m sure I need not ask, but are you finished with preparations?”

She gave her father a smile. She had been running his household for more than three years and never yet failed to preside over his every need and comfort. Responsible to a fault, all was ready for tonight’s reception, just in time to give her a moment to lose herself in the writings of Mr. Dickens.

She placed her book on the ornate mahogany side table and set her glasses on top. Rising from the sofa, she apprised him of the situation. “Everything is ready. How many cadets do you expect to attend?”

Major MaCausland removed his hat and ran his hand through his thick wiry hair. “Each professor will be hosting twelve of the top matriculating cadets. I believe I told you to prepare for twenty just in case.” He placed his hat upon the rack in the hallway. “I will leave you to it then.” She gave her father a slight curtsy as he turned up the staircase and on toward his bedroom. This was John MaCausland’s first year as mathematics professor at the Virginia Military Institute. His first posting at the University of Virginia, was now done, his career progressing nicely at VMI.

Charlotte was only a baby when her mother died. Two brothers much older than she, were grown and married with families of their own. Jerry lived in Nottoway County and Fred in Lunenburg. Charlotte rarely got to see either of them. They were practically grown by the time

she had been born. The burden of adulthood came early to Charlotte but her serious nature was well-suited to it. She was bookish, solemn and ran her father's household with amazing precision and maturity, far beyond her seventeen years.

She loved the Shenandoah Valley of Virginia and looked forward to the display of color that would soon be appearing across the mountains. Was there ever anything as lovely as the change of leaves in Virginia? She was sure there was not. Her father employed a local woman, Anne Smithson, to help out with cooking and cleaning. Charlotte insisted she could certainly run the household alone, but her father wouldn't hear of it.

"You are my daughter, not my maid." Charlotte smiled at his protective authority. She was used to it and it was nice to have Anne help out, especially when there were functions such as this cadet reception. This was only the beginning of a long list of expectations the formality of residing at the institute would require. The regimentation and sameness of every day, the routine of quiet afternoons and the manners of military life was a comfort.

Though a young woman, Charlotte remained unimpressed with the male population surrounding her. The University of Virginia had put her in contact with young men all the time and the Virginia Military Institute would do no less. It was always at a distance however, within the propriety of society. Major MaCausland cast a very large shadow in her life and Charlotte never had eyes for anyone else... just yet.

Everything was ready. Anne was just taking the last of the apple pies out of the oven. The smell of coffee and cinnamon filled the air. Charlotte stirred the big pot of spiced cider heating on the stove while the Major moved to answer the knock at the door.

"Good Evening, gentlemen, won't you come in?" The door opened wide and the Major stepped back to make room for the group of cadets. Charlotte stepped into the hall and gave a small curtsy as they removed their hats. A look of sympathy shone from her eyes. Each one of them sported the same buzzed hair cut given to all 'rats,' as the freshmen were called. Dressed alike and sporting the same lack of hair, she had no idea how she was going to tell them all apart.

The Major waved his hand toward her. "May I introduce my daughter, Miss Charlotte MaCausland."

Mumbled sounds of, "How do you do, ma'am," rang out.

Charlotte presented the nervous students an encouraging smile as she greeted them. "How do you do, gentlemen? You may hang your hats on the hat rack here in the hall if you

please.” The rumble of boots sounded as the pack of first year cadets tromped across the front porch and into the house. The hat rack was soon full and the Major ushered the students into the front parlor while Charlotte left to help Anne.

She could hear her father quizzing each cadet and asking after their families. She quickly sliced several pies in extra-large servings and placed them on her mother’s silver tray. She knew they would enjoy it. The mess hall certainly didn’t serve apple pie like this. Earlier, Charlotte had brought the dining room chairs into the parlor and arranged enough seating for fourteen.

As she entered the room, the cadets stood. “Oh please, gentlemen, do have a seat. Anne and I have made some apple pie. I do so hope you enjoy it.” Major MaCausland lit his pipe as Charlotte passed out the pie. Anne followed with coffee and cider. The cadets murmured their appreciation and quickly riveted their attention on Major MaCausland. They hung on his every word. Most of the young men looked nervous but they managed to dig into the pie and enjoy the beverages. Charlotte didn’t even notice the cadets’ faces. She was too busy being careful not to upset the tray as the young men helped themselves. She returned the tray to the kitchen and took a place beside her father.

“The rat line is rather difficult to navigate, my boys.” Major MaCausland’s pipe glowed red as he took a deep pull. Fat smoke rings floated round his head as the fragrant aroma of Virginia tobacco filled the room. “It doesn’t last too long though. Come spring, the upperclassmen will let you out and all this will be just a memory.” The cadets would have to endure the stress of the rat line until spring. They would be instructed and abused by the upperclassmen for seven or more long months. In addition, they would have to memorize and follow intricate rules designed to separate the men from the boys. The rat line would forever bond them as a group. Friendships made during this year would last their entire lives. The graduating class of 1859 would decide the exact date that the freshmen rats would ‘break out’ and their time in the rat line would come to an end, usually in March or April.

Charlotte sat primly holding her hands in her lap. She wore a plain brown dress with lace collar. Her mother’s cameo broach sat at her throat and her light brown hair was parted in the middle and pulled to the nape of her neck in a bun. It was certainly a style that many women wore, but for a girl of seventeen, it made her look rather plain.

Lost in her own thoughts, she jumped when one of the cadets spoke out. “What do you think of the rumors of secession, sir?”

Another cadet spoke up. “My father says it’s only a matter of time. There’s going to be a war.” The other cadets murmured in agreement.

Charlotte noticed one cadet sitting in the corner. Unlike the others, he looked completely at ease. His gaze flitted occasionally to her father but she had the distinct feeling that he was staring at her. She finally gained the courage to look his way. Her breath caught in her throat. This young man was exceptionally handsome. The lack of hair did not dim his chiseled features a bit. Stormy eyes, the color of the Atlantic, stared back at her. The intensity of his scrutiny caused her stomach to give an uneasy flutter. Charlotte quickly looked away. She had never had a man stare at her with such openness and didn’t quite know what to do. Out of the corner of her eye, she could tell he continued looking.

John MaCausland kept talking. “Young men, I wouldn’t worry about secession if I were you. The issue of war will be decided soon enough. Between your studies and surviving the rat line, you’ve enough on your minds to keep you busy.”

Charlotte could feel her face getting hot as the corner of the cadet’s eyes remained on her. She wished she had a fan. She felt terribly uncomfortable. An annoying trickle of sweat made its way between her breasts.

The talk turned to the topic of mathematics and Charlotte politely listened. She tried to ignore anything else going on around her. She had been tutored in mathematics by her father, himself. In fact, she knew more about the subject than most graduating cadets. It was a point of extreme pride for the Major. He once told her, “You’d be a big help to me as a tutor, if I trusted those scallywag cadets, that is.” He had sighed deeply and continued. “Even if I did trust them, t’wouldn’t be proper.”

Charlotte wiggled in her seat. The corner cadet splayed out a leg in a most impolite fashion. She absolutely refused to look at him again. His rude behavior was quite shocking. She looked at her father to see if he had noticed the cadet’s impudence. Major MaCausland continued to drone on about mathematics and the use of it in warfare. Charlotte couldn’t help herself. Her gaze was drawn to the corner cadet like a moth to a flame. As soon as her eyes met his, she knew she’d made a mistake. The cadet gave her a wink. Her intake of breath was audible.

She stood in a most unusual fashion and interrupted the Major. Her voice overly loud, she shouted, “Can I get anyone another slice of pie or another cup of coffee?” The cadets all nodded in agreement. Oh Lord, I hope there’s enough to go around a second time. She’d forgotten how

much young men could eat. Charlotte rushed to the kitchen and quickly closed the door behind her.

She was in a tizzy. “Oh my goodness, Anne. Is there any pie left? I was silly enough to offer all those young men another slice and more coffee and cider too.” Charlotte felt the corner cadet stare a hole in her back as she left the room. She was absolutely mortified she had drawn attention to herself. Why did I offer them more pie? Charlotte touched her hands to her flushed cheeks. Lord, I hope I don’t faint from the heat. She raced over to the back door and threw it open. Taking in a deep breath, she listened as the night creatures chirped in time with one another. The image of that handsome young man appeared in her head. He had a perfectly shaped face, with clear gray eyes and a strong nose. She’d never seen such a square jaw line. Even though his lips were closed, there was an edge of laughter about them. His skin was lightly tanned attesting to hard work and his body was obviously heavily muscled. It was easy to tell, even though it was covered by a uniform. Using a kitchen towel to fan herself, she exclaimed, “I am so hot, I don’t know what in the world is the matter with me! There are too many people in that parlor. We should have opened a window.”

Anne gave a chuckle. “The parlor is mighty crowded. That’s a room full of fine man flesh if you don’t mind my sayin so.”

“Oh for heaven’s sake, Anne.” Little drops of sweat broke out on Charlotte’s nose as she thought about the cadets. “Do we have enough pie?”

“Don’t you worry none, missy. The Major told you to prepare for twenty. There’s more than enough to go around again.” She wiped her hands on her starched white apron. “You might have to make those slices a mite smaller this time.”

Charlotte decided enough was enough. She slowed her movements and loaded down the tray with more pie. Stopping before entering the parlor, she took a deep breath and tried to collect herself. I’m being ridiculous.

“Just take the serving knife and pick you out a piece,” she said as she came around the circle. Dread washed over her when she neared the corner. Despite her best efforts, Charlotte could feel her heart pounding. She couldn’t very well skip over anyone. There was no other choice. She bent over and looked her winking nemesis right in the eye as she offered the dessert. He looked back at her with a serious expression. A piece of flyaway hair fell across her eyes. Charlotte poked out her bottom lip and tried to blow it out of the way in a most unladylike

fashion. The handsome cadet broke out in a crooked smile. Long dimples creased the sides of his face. Charlotte was sure she must be as red as a tomato.

“Well, do you want a piece of pie or not?” She was horrified at the rude words slipping past her lips.

The cadet leaned his large body forward as the parlor chair gave a creak. The discussion of mathematics hummed in the background. He looked down at the pie and then back up at her. His tongue darted out as he moistened his lips. Charlotte’s mouth dropped slightly open as she watched. His nostrils flared a little as he brazenly looked at her from head to toe. “Don’t mind if I do, ma’am.” He said the word ‘ma’am’ as if she were a most delectable treat.

Anne rattled the china coffee pot behind her and broke the spell. “Oh, and have some more coffee too, or is it cider?”

Charlotte straightened from her crouched position. The cadet had the audacity to wink at her again. “Oh!” she huffed. Not knowing what else to do, she continued around the circle until the last man was served.

The evening came to its final conclusion and Charlotte bid the cadets farewell as her father shut the door. She watched them depart and relief washed over her. Placing her hand over her heart, she gave a big sigh. “Thank goodness that’s over.”

Her father frowned down at her. “You seem a bit flustered this evening.”

Charlotte quickly tried to change the subject. “Oh no, I’m just glad there was enough pie to go around.”

“You did very well, Charlotte. Thank you for your hard work.”

“Of course, Father.” She patted her hair and pushed the rebellious flyaway piece under a hairpin.

“I’m very tired. After I finish in the kitchen with Anne, I think I shall retire for the evening.”

“Very well.”

As Charlotte lay awake, she was plagued by the image of the grey-eyed cadet in the corner. His confidence in the face of her very intimidating father was impressive. The look he had given her made a shiver run down her spine. He was so handsome. She thought about his hands as he had taken a slice of pie. Long nimble fingers, and a thick palm. She had never even held hands with a man before. She had watched as the cadet put on his wool cape along with the

others to leave. He bent over slightly and she couldn't miss how the wool britches he wore complimented his slim hips. "Oh!" In a huff, she rolled over. I'm being ridiculous. I'll never cross paths with that cadet again. As she closed her eyes in sleep, she had no idea how wrong she was.