
HIS SOUTHERN BELLE

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Prologue

MISS CHARLOTTE LOUISE PRESCOTT had been just shy of seventeen when the war between the states started. To this day, she still remembered the day the war had been announced and she doubted it would be something she would ever forget.

It had started a month before her birthday and exactly five weeks before her debutante ball where it had been expected that she would wear an extravagant and costly white gown as she was introduced to members of the best families in Orchid Valley, located thirty miles outside of Augusta, Georgia, and eventually marry one of their sons.

Charlotte had been sitting by the small writing desk in the blue parlor writing to one of the friends she had made at her finishing school in Atlanta when her older brother, Alfred, then twenty-one, had run into the room nearly causing her mother to faint.

She remembered how blindly, and now she realized stupidly, excited Alfred had been at the mention of war. Charlotte remembered how her brother had talked about

doing things to Yankee soldiers that caused her mother to say, "Alfred Prescott, watch your tongue!"

Seventeen-year-old Charlotte had turned to her mother with a worried frown on her pretty face and her blue eyes wet with tears as one of the many maids quietly deposited a tray with tea and cookies on the fine antique tea table. "Oh, Mother, what about my ball?"

Everything had been ordered and prepared for Miss Prescott's ball, from the hand-stitched pearl and gold thread decorated gown imported from France to the flowers which had been chosen for the centerpieces. Everyone had been working at all hours trying to make sure her ball was the most talked about event in Augusta before the summer whirlwinds of parties, barbecues, and harvesting started.

"Do not worry, my darling girl," Mrs. Prescott assured as she used a fan to wipe away the perspiration which had begun to cling to her forehead. "The war cannot last for more than two weeks if it even begins. You will still have your party. I will make sure of it."

Alfred winked at her, nearly bursting with excitement. "Yes, little sister, we'll send those goddamn Yankees flying to wherever the hell they came from."

"Alfred, please remember you're speaking to a lady even if she is your sister. I most certainly raised you better than that." Mrs. Prescott scowled at her only son as Harriet, her personal lady's maid and constant shadow, pressed a cool cloth to her forehead.

"Sorry, Mother." Alfred didn't look very sorry as he kissed Charlotte on the cheek. "Where is Father? I need to speak to him."

"He is in the fields like he always is. Lottie, be a sweetheart and bring me my smelling salts after all." Her mother closed her eyes. "The cotton season is starting soon, and your father wants everything to be perfect, as it wasn't a good

harvest season last year. I don't know how we will be able to manage everything, the cotton, little Lottie's debutante ball, and now this dreadful war."

Charlotte handed her mother the small bottle of smelling salts. Alfred chose that moment to disappear from the room. She smoothed down her pink dress with the black bows and thick ribbons across the skirt in horizontal lines. "Will two weeks be enough for a war to start and end, Mother?"

"I don't know, Charlotte," her mother replied tensely. "Why don't you finish your letter in the yellow parlor. I need quiet. Harriet, close the curtains."

"Yes, Mrs. Prescott."

The war was not over in two weeks. It was over in four long years in the same month that it started. For Charlotte Louise Prescott, that lazy April day marked the end of her childhood and lavish lifestyle. She never had her debutante ball. The cotton never grew that year because there was no one to plant it. The slaves who had been forced to be there and work for her family for generations had deserted the plantation. Some joined the Union army, others fled north, and others simply left as far as their legs could carry them.

For Charlotte, it was one tragedy after another. Her brother was killed in the First Battle of Bull Run and her father had died from a heart attack from the shock shortly after receiving the telegram.

After her father and brother's deaths, Charlotte and her mother were deserted and Hydrangea Hill Plantation—named after her great-grandmother's favorite flower—slowly began to fall, money became scarce, and food hard to find. It seemed, every day, Charlotte and Mrs. Prescott learned of another battle, another death, until Charlotte felt she would never get rid of the smell of blood even if she had never been in the battlefield.

One month before the war ended and two months before

Charlotte's twenty-first birthday, the wife of the late cotton plantation owner, Mr. Arnold Prescott, died in her sleep. There hadn't been a doctor to give her a cause as most of them were in camping grounds assisting injured soldiers.

So, with the help of other ladies in Orchid Valley who were all too familiar with death and mourning, she laid her mother to rest in a coffin made of pine wood five miles east from the plantation where the Prescotts had been buried for three generations. Mrs. Prescott was buried next to her husband and to her son's empty casket.

Then Charlotte Louise Prescott, the once coddled daughter of a wealthy plantation owner, was left truly alone.

Chapter 1

GEORGIA. *July 1865*

Another blister was forming, this time in the center of her palm. Charlotte sighed as she rested the hoe against her worn out blue dress with yellow flowers which was so worn out and ragged, it was nearly slipping off her thin frame. *Yes*, she grimaced as she touched the red, swollen blister, *this is definitely going to hurt*.

Her mother and Miss Fawcett, one of her teachers at her finishing school in Atlanta, would more than likely faint if they could see the status of Charlotte's hands. Miss Fawcett and her mother always said you could tell if someone was a lady by their hands.

At some point, Charlotte had been incredibly proud of her hands. They had been soft, pale, and elegantly slender. Now, they had turned almost bony from the weight she'd lost, and they were covered in blisters, not to mention rough and tanned from spending time outside trying to grow a vegetable garden even though she had never planted.

The hot July sun seemed to burn through her worn out sunbonnet as she tied the ribbons limply under her chin.

Her blonde hair stuck to her sweaty, freckled cheeks and her lips felt chapped. She stared at the crooked rows of dirt she had made to plant the tomato and carrot seeds which had been given to her by the reverend's wife in an embarrassing attempt at pity when she ran into Charlotte only last week.

The instructions had been simple enough, but before the war, she hadn't spent much time outside, and she doubted she was doing a good job planting. Charlotte would have preferred to have been given food, but beggars couldn't be choosers and it had only been three months since the war ended, and everyone in Georgia was a long way from recovering.

Everyone was poor and miserable, including Charlotte.

She let out a series of curse words as the sleeve of her dress dropped from her thin shoulder, nearly exposing her chemise. The corsets she had worn before the war were too small on her now and she hardly wore them unless she had company or was going into town. Even with the amount of weight she had lost, her hips and breasts had still expanded, transforming her girlish figure into a more womanly one. Thankfully, it was a thirty-minute walk into town from the plantation, so Charlotte rarely had visitors.

Her stomach growled in protest as the hoe fell from her hands and into the dirt. Charlotte was starving and it was clear she was not making any progress here. She dragged her booted feet back through the small door which led to the kitchen.

She looked around wearily. There wasn't much in terms of food, and even if there was, she had no idea how to cook. Even when her mother had been alive, she hadn't been much help in that department.

Charlotte served herself a glass of water from the wooden pail, sliced a piece of hard, brown bread, and took a

bite out of a cold potato. She grimaced as she thought back to the once fine food she used to eat.

Her blue eyes welled with tears as she took her meager supper into the parlor. Charlotte would cut off her luscious blonde hair if it meant she could go back to the past and have a jolly Sunday dinner with her parents and brother.

Her moodiness did not improve as she entered the parlor. The navy-blue wallpaper was peeled off and nearly faded from the hot southern summers. Three out of the five paintings which had once decorated it had been stolen by Yankees during a small raid after her father died, when they had stolen all of their precious silverware and the family jewels they hadn't hidden.

The chairs and the settees all had large rips in them made from knives and swords from when the Union soldiers had ripped them open in search of valuables. The only lovely thing which remained was the piano toward the back of the room, and if she closed her eyes hard enough, she could still remember her mother playing.

Charlotte was halfway through eating her brown bread when she heard the sound of horses' hooves. She peeked out the window, shielding her face with the golden yellow curtain. Her brows deepened at first before a gasp escaped her lips.

Approaching her home, was a man on a sleek, strong-looking, black horse. Even on top of his horse, she could tell he was strong and big. The kind who could easily overpower her with a mere flick of his wrist, especially in her weakened state.

The man was wearing a dreadfully familiar uniform made out of a deep blue cloth. The uniform of a union soldier. A Yankee.

Charlotte swallowed hard. What was he doing here? The plantation had luckily not been raided since that first attack

years ago and union raids had been almost unheard of since the war had ended three months ago. So why was a man dressed in a Union uniform here?

The last time a raid had happened, she'd had her mother, but now, Charlotte was alone.

He will leave soon, Charlotte convinced herself as she left the parlor and hurried up the nearly broken-down staircase. It would be wise not to be in the man's presence. After all, Yankee men, she had heard, were not gentlemen and he wouldn't treat her like a proper southern lady. *After all, everything of value is gone. He has to leave. Hydrangea Hill is all I have left.*

John Parkington did not consider himself a man who angered easily. His father, the senior John Parkington, would often declare his only son was too passive and easygoing and that it had been a miracle he had made it out of the war with his foolish head still attached.

Yet currently, John was very angry. He had been traveling from New York, after assuring his dour-looking father he was alive and well and had no interest in taking over his father's banking business, when he had been robbed.

John had been boxing since his years at university, and four years of war had sharpened his fighting and defense skills, but he still couldn't take eight grown men, even with his pistol safely tucked away.

In the end, they had taken John's luggage and the small amount of money he had packed, leaving behind only his old uniform which he had brought over for purely sentimental reasons. Thankfully, the money from his inheritance money left from his mother was safely tucked away in the bank and he could get some funds.

Now John was tired, cranky, and in desperate need of a bed, and that's when he spotted a worn-out plantation. He was surprised it still stood given most of them had been sold or destroyed during the war, but he was grateful for it as he hadn't wanted to go into town in search of an inn.

As he opened the door, he noticed the poor state of the mansion that surely must have been abandoned. He took in the dirty floors, the ripped curtains, and the rips made in the furniture. No doubt the work of scavengers who had clearly decided to take advantage of its abandoned state.

Right then and there, John decided he would take over the plantation and bring it back to its rightful glory. He started imagining lush fields filled with cotton and crops, a grand home filled with all the necessary comforts, and maybe if he could find someone he wanted to marry, a wife.

Strangely, the plantation already felt like home. While his father had been born and raised in New York, his mother had been a southerner from Georgia. To this day, John couldn't fathom what his sweet, gentle-spoken mother had seen in his overbearing father to the point that she had agreed to marry him and leave her home state for good. The former Mrs. Parkington had often told John stories about growing up in Georgia, running wild in the fields in the summer, endless barbecues with neighbors, and picking sweet peaches from trees.

After the war had ended, John had decided he no longer wanted to live in the city but, instead, wanted to go back to Georgia where his mother had been from even though he had never stepped foot in the state before the war. Living in Georgia would be another way of having his deceased mother close.

John ran a hand through his thick blond hair and started making calculations in his head. He would have to hire a lawyer to deal with the paperwork of putting the house in his

name, pay any necessary unpaid taxes, and finally hire some good honest people to work on this place on the inside and the outside.

He inspected each of the rooms downstairs, which included a kitchen, dining room, two sitting rooms, a decent-sized ballroom, a study, and a small library all in the same state of shabbiness, indicating that no one had lived there since the war started.

John was too tired to inspect the top floor, but he briefly counted eight bedrooms. He chose the master bedroom to retire in and as he took off his navy-blue coat, he thanked God for his good fortune.

His boots were removed and then every stitch of clothing as he preferred to sleep in the nude. He let out a heavy sigh as he laid his head down on the goose feather pillows. His blue eyes closed slowly in anticipation of a restful, dreamless sleep and it was.

That is, until he awoke with a butcher knife against his neck.