

# EMILY'S CAPTAIN

by

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## Chapter One

*Adairsville, Georgia*

*May 16, 1864*

"Where the hell is she?" Captain Jared Randall Hunter grumbled to the descending dusk. He snapped shut his gold pocket watch and slid the keepsake into his trousers pocket. From habit, he reached beneath the ill-fitting gray uniform coat for a cigar, then decided to abstain. The glow of a burning cheroot might alert someone to his surveillance site.

He glanced north, distracted by a distant burst of cannon fire that bounced through the Appalachian Mountains of northwest Georgia. Fighting had eased within the past hour, as the Union army prepared to bivouac for the night, holding its elevated position. If the Confederates kept to recent tactics, they would use the cover of darkness to retreat south a few miles and dig in again. The Rebs might slow the Yankee advance, but—lacking men and fire power—they hadn't a prayer of stopping the Union army from capturing Adairsville.

The townspeople had either sensed or been warned of the impending defeat. From this wooded knoll on the edge of town, where he could observe Miss Gardner's house, he'd spent the afternoon watching a trickle of refugees leave town. Many walked, carrying carpetbags. Others rode in wagons burdened with baggage and furniture. Those who had nowhere else to go would stay in their homes and pray for Yankee benevolence.

Emily Gardner's house seemed abandoned, but feminine clothing fluttered from a rope strung between the house and a small oak. Confident that the sign of everyday routine ensured her return, Jared waited, though he couldn't wait much longer. He wanted to be as far from town as possible before the battle ignited in the morning. Problem was, the object of tonight's mission wasn't cooperating. She wasn't home.

At the sound of a galloping horse, Jared shifted to see around a stand of pines. He came to full alert when a man rode up, dismounted and led the horse through the side gate, near a shelter behind Miss Gardner's house. A few minutes later, the man sprinted back across the yard, yanked the clothes off the line, then entered the house through a side door.

Mentally flipping through possibilities, Jared accounted for the known males in Miss Gardner's life. Her brother and a former fiancé were both reportedly in North Carolina with their Confederate cavalry unit. Neither should be visiting Emily. Her father, Colonel John Gardner, was definitely in Washington, the Union capital, anxiously awaiting word from Jared.

Had Emily Gardner recently married? Or taken a lover?

Jared ran a hand through his shoulder-length brown hair, wondering if he should wire her father for instructions. But Colonel Gardner's guilt-laden worry had prompted this unofficial mission. Having learned from coincidental information in an intelligence report that Emily was alone in Adairsville, in the path of a Union invasion, the colonel had asked Jared Hunter to fetch his daughter—actually, to kidnap his daughter—and bring her north. No, a message to the colonel about this complication would only burden an already distraught father.

Flickering light now danced from a downstairs window, probably from a hearth in the parlor. A few minutes later, someone lit a lamp on the second floor. As he watched the upper window, to Jared Hunter's amazement, a woman appeared.

She had to be Emily Gardner.

From this distance, he couldn't see her face, could only see a female in a prim white nightgown, her dark hair flowing down over her shoulders. She turned her head right, then left, as though watching for someone on the road. The ethereal quality of the vision enchanted him, and the strong protective rush he felt surprised him, until he realized he

*should* feel protective. She was his mission. He would guard Emily with his life, if necessary, until he delivered her to the colonel.

Strange, though, that Emily was in the house. The house had appeared unoccupied.

She closed the curtains. The jolt of her disappearance allowed him to refocus on how to accomplish his mission—if he still had a mission.

Jared searched his saddlebags for Emily's picture and a piece of jerky. He again studied the picture he'd pulled out often on the trip south. The picture dated back three years, taken before the war. Sausage curls framed Emily's pixie face. Dark eyes sparked with impending mischief. The jut of her chin suggested a stubborn nature.

Colonel Gardner had reluctantly relinquished the picture to Jared during a late-night planning session in the colonel's office.

"Are you sure she won't come with me willingly, if I explain who I am and that you've sent me to fetch her?" Jared had asked his worried commander.

Colonel Gardner had run a hand through graying hair. The silver strands were a result of a Southern heart in conflict with a Northern conscience. Jared empathized. His own decision to remain in the Union army hadn't been easy.

"I'm sure Emily blames me for her predicament," the colonel had said. "I was the first to abandon her, though I didn't know it at the time. I thought she would marry Lewis Roth and spend the duration of the war at Twin Pines, the Roths' mansion. I'm afraid you'll have to force her to come north, to her Yankee father."

Jared bit off a chunk of jerky and discarded his plans for a late-night kidnapping. He hated abrupt changes of strategy, knowing from experience that the practice was unwise. However, his victim had company, male company, and that made revision necessary.

He glanced at the upstairs window. The light had gone out. Emily must be in bed, with that man, whoever he was—husband or lover.

Would passion flare in the upstairs bedroom? Would the man's hand slide under her prim nightgown, stroke her breasts and between her thighs until Emily begged for release? Would the man take her to her zenith? Would she cry out?

A tightening in his groin shook Jared from his musings. Shoving the ignoble thoughts aside, he buried Emily's picture deep in his bag. At daybreak, he decided, he would scout the house, and on some pretext, talk to Emily Gardner. Any further course of action

would depend on her answers.

If Emily Gardner had married, Jared wouldn't remove her from Adairsville. With a clear conscience, he could leave her in a husband's care, return to Washington and ease Colonel Gardner's guilt over his daughter's well-being.

Jared spread his bedroll, the thought of abandoning this mission becoming more and more appealing.

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Rising with the sun, Emily slipped into her dressing gown and pushed aside the bedroom window curtain. In vain, she scanned the road for a lanky Negro driving a cart.

She briefly considered remaining in Adairsville another day to wait for Sam, but she might have waited too long already. If not for Rusty, a treasured Thoroughbred mare, she might consider waiting still longer for her brother's slave, who'd been scheduled to arrive two days ago with supplies. But the mare was a prize the Yanks couldn't have, and from what she'd seen yesterday, the Yanks would soon overrun the town.

She should have left yesterday. Instead, she'd ridden into the mountains to gather personal items from the abandoned shack that had served as a refuge from the glares of the townspeople, who'd unjustly labeled her a spy. At first she'd fought their suspicion that she spied for the Union, that she sent messages to her Yankee father. Unable to sway opinion, she'd stopped proclaiming her innocence and sought escape.

Yesterday she'd seen the Yanks she'd been accused of aiding swarming through the mountains like ants over an open picnic hamper. Only by sheer luck and a thorough knowledge of her surroundings had she avoided Yankee patrols.

If she didn't leave today, some enterprising Union officer would seize Rusty as a battle trophy.

Emily ran a quick brush through her hair before going downstairs. In the parlor, she checked the clothing she'd left drying over a chair in front of the now cool hearth. The trousers' waistband was moist, and the shirt's cuffs were damp, but both garments had dried enough to wear.

A light breakfast helped calm a stomach quivering with anticipation. Nibbling on a heel of bread, she inspected the saddlebags lying on the kitchen table. Ammunition for her shotgun filled one bag, and in the other she would pack food.

She was going home! How ironic that the Yankees had provided an excuse to leave Adairsville that even her brother couldn't criticize. Two years ago, when forming his cavalry unit, Terrance had thought it prudent for her to leave the family's country estate, Rosewood, and live in town. His reasoning had sounded wise at the time. Of course, neither of them had suspected that she would be accused of spying for the Union, that friends would shun her for fear of suffering the taint of the traitor.

At a knock on the front door, Emily smiled, thinking Sam had finally arrived. Then her smile faded. Sam never used the front door. He always drove the wagon into the side yard and used the kitchen door.

Puzzled, Emily moved to the parlor window and pushed aside the drape. A Confederate officer stood on the stoop.

She let the drape fall. The knock came again, more insistent. Could the officer be from Terrance's cavalry unit? If so, she didn't want to open the door. As much as she'd grown to dislike her brother, she didn't want to hear that he'd been wounded, or worse.

*Coward.* Emily squared her shoulders and opened the door. The officer, his hand poised to knock again, was clearly annoyed by the delayed answer to his summons. Emily watched his arresting features smooth as irritation melted into appraisal, his gaze skimming over her in flagrant assessment. He clearly liked what he saw.

Even as caution sprouted at his insolence, she felt the thrill of his boldness, and for just a moment, Emily basked in the hypnotic lure of the officer's dark-as-midnight eyes. Over six feet tall, from the top of his rakishly angled hat to the tips of his dusty boots he exuded masculinity.

His face and hands glowed with the deep tan of a man who spent his life outdoors. Broad shoulders strained the seams of his uniform coat, whose sleeves barely covered his wrists. Deep brown, almost black, hair wanted trimming, a lock of which rested on a high, noble forehead.

Then artillery roared from the mountainside, warning of a new day's battle. But instead of yesterday's far-off turbulence, today each burst from the cannons jabbed sharp, distinct. The Yankees were closer to town. She must flee.

Emily glanced at his collar. One stripe slashed through the yellow background that labeled him cavalry. "Is there something I can do for you, Lieutenant?"

Jared knew the genteel greeting wasn't an invitation, but then, he wasn't feeling gentlemanly. In fact, it took an inordinate amount of willpower for him not to say yes, she could take him up to her bedroom and do with him as she pleased.

The reaction, undoubtedly, stemmed from last night's wayward thoughts and subsequent dreams. His musings on her exploits in bed hadn't ended upon his falling asleep. When he woke this morning, he'd told himself that reality never measured up to fantasy. He'd been wrong. She looked utterly regal, and damn enticing, despite the frayed green wrapper, with her prim, buttoned-to-the-neck white nightgown peeking from beneath.

In his dreams, Emily had worn the pixie face from the picture. The woman before him bore only the faintest resemblance to a pixie. Shiny brown hair flecked with red highlights framed her face. Her skin was a creamy white across her smooth brow, over high cheekbones and around a delicate yet firm chin. Doe-soft brown eyes peered from under velvety lashes. No mischief sparked those eyes. A shame, that. Three years had etched maturity into her face and added fullness to her figure. Emily's stunning beauty could bring a man to his knees.

"The name's Randall, ma'am, Jared Randall," he said, removing his slouch hat. "I was on my way out of town when I noticed the fine piece of horseflesh you have in back. I was hoping to speak with the owner, find out if she's for sale."

Her body stiffened. "The mare is not for sale. Rusty belongs to my brother. He is cavalry, like yourself. I keep the mare in reserve, should he lose his stallion."

Jared silently congratulated himself. He'd guessed right about the horse, at least. The mare was indeed a fine animal, one of Colonel Gardner's prize Thoroughbreds, a horse the colonel would be delighted to see again.

"My loss, but understandable," Jared said, then glanced north. "Others, however, might not be so understanding. As I'm sure you are aware, Mrs.—?"

"Miss," she said. "Miss Emily Gardner."

No husband. That meant the man he'd seen enter Emily's house last night was only a lover, and probably no longer in the house, having left before daylight to protect the lady's reputation.

Jared smiled. "Pretty name—Emily."

Emily couldn't help but return the officer's charming smile. "Thank you."

A cart rumbled by, loaded with furniture, crates and people. Emily flushed with embarrassment at the disgust evident on Mrs. Potter's face. Naturally, the county's biggest gossip *would* pass her door. The news would spread that Emily Gardner had entertained a man at her front door, in her nightclothes. Never mind that Mrs. Potter was leaving town, or that the Yankees were poised to overrun Adairsville. Mrs. Potter would efficiently transmit the tale.

"It seems I'm the unwitting cause of a dent in your reputation," the soldier commented.

Emily almost laughed. Most people in town already thought her a spy, and would now label her a harlot. To her surprise, Emily found that the injustice of their condemnation no longer mattered. She was going home. To hell with them all.

"My reputation, Lieutenant, is the least of my worries. If you will excuse me, I have preparations to make."

"That is precisely what I want to talk to you about. It might be prudent if we finish this conversation inside."

Another wagon rolled into view. Emily stepped back, into the shadows of the doorway. The soldier took a step forward.

"We have nothing to discuss, Lieutenant. My horse is not for sale," she said with growing nervousness.

"So you said."

"Really, sir, this is most improper. I'm not dressed."

"I noticed. I will, of course, have to insist that you not try to seduce me."

"Of all the outrageous, insulting ..." she sputtered.

"Are we to have our first quarrel on the stoop, for the whole town to hear?"

Emily stepped back, intending to slam the door in the persistent officer's face. The door wouldn't budge, blocked by his muscular leg, encased in a calf-hugging black boot.

She glared. He smiled knowingly and shrugged.

Outraged, Emily pursed her lips and drew a deep breath. His arm shot out, wrapping around her waist. Air drawn to hurl scathing words blew out as she collided with his unyielding frame. The door slammed shut.

Fear flashed. She pushed against his chest, but he didn't move, not an inch.

"Let ... me ... go!"

"Only if you promise not to scream or go running into the street," he declared, in such a reasonable tone that her fear ebbed.

She looked up. He was smiling, the cad.

"I promise you nothing, Lieutenant."

His smile widened. "Then what if I make a promise first? I won't hurt you. In my entire life, I've never knowingly hurt a woman, and I don't intend to start now."

"And I'm supposed to believe that?"

"Yes, ma'am."

From the soft, slow drawl of his *ma'am*, she guessed at his birthplace. Southwest. A Texan? If so, he belonged to one of several companies the generals ordered forth when a battle seemed hopelessly lost. Newspaper reporters had described the Texans as deadly shots, bold, tenacious, fearless and strong.

Lieutenant Randall fit the description. He was certainly strong. With one arm in a viselike hold around her waist, he held her so tightly she couldn't move, could barely breathe, much less scream. A firm hold, indeed, but not painful. And though his methods of getting his way were anything but gentlemanly, she sensed no threat of physical harm. She believed his promise.

She'd never been this close to a man before—close enough to catch a whiff of tobacco mingled with leather, the earthy aromas blending with the tang of a fresh spring breeze. She could feel his chest rise and fall, and with each breath a wisp of air teased her ear. She could see the faint shadow of a dark beard, though he'd recently shaved. The warmth flowing through her limbs, clear down to her bare toes, had nothing to do with her now vanished fear, or her waning anger, or the mounting heat of the day.

Agreeing to his terms might be the quickest path to freedom. Besides, even if she screamed, she doubted anyone would rush off Adairsville's streets to her aid.

Her voice thready, she said, "Ladies don't scream. Ladies heap indignities on gentlemen's heads to remind them of their manners. And you, sir, definitely need a lesson in how to treat a lady."

He loosened his hold, tilting his head. "You were about to call me several vile

names?" he asked, humor coloring his words.

"Not vulgar, sir, merely pointed."

"You can now, if you still want to," he offered.

This time, when she pushed against his chest, he let her go. Emily tried to recall one of the several warranted slurs, but without the anger to sustain them, none survived. Maybe he *could* be a gentleman.

"A futile effort at this point, I would think. Nor do I have the time." She waved toward the door. "I would be obliged, Lieutenant, if you would take your leave now. Surely you have something more urgent to do than pester me."

"If you will remember, Miss Gardner, we were discussing your horse. I was about to point out that others, especially the Yankees, may have an interest in her," he said.

"I was aware of that, sir, before you knocked on my door. No Yank will ever touch Rusty. As soon as I finish packing, I'm leaving."

He smiled widely. "Are you nearly finished?"

"Yes."

"Good. I'll saddle Rusty and meet you out back."

Lieutenant Randall sped out the door before she could protest. She reached for the doorknob, then stopped. She would *not* run into the yard in her nightclothes!

Then she smiled. Let Lieutenant Randall *attempt* to saddle the mare. If Rusty reacted true to form, the mare would give that brash lieutenant another lesson in how to treat a lady.