

Dangerous Liaisons

by Tanaqui

Heather pulled the gig to a halt outside the rough hunting cabin and hitched the reins. The cabin's owner, who had been waiting anxiously on the porch, hurried across and took her gloved hand in his to help her down. Heather reflected that it was a procedure that, in the ridiculous fashions of the day, was difficult at the best of times. It was doubly so in her present circumstance.

Reaching the ground and smoothing down her skirts, she glanced up at her host and, as always, thought what a fine figure of a man he cut. She had considered it to be the case from the first, when his timely arrival had rescued her from an unhappy fate: the horse pulling her gig had bolted at a musket shot in the distance, and she might have been upended—cart, crinoline and all—if he had not helped bring the frightened animal to a halt. Though what she remembered most from the occasion of their first meeting were his warm, brown eyes, and the way he had looked at her, she believed, with more than passing interest as he introduced himself.

It was only later that she had learned, from the gossip whispered at the tea parties that she reluctantly attended, of his somewhat shady reputation. Mr Johnston Jacob Green was, it seemed, a no-good bootlegger who had skipped Jericho before the War over some unpleasantness resulting in the death of the brother of the other schoolmistress, Miss Sullivan. Since he had returned at the outbreak of the War, however, his illicit activities had been more cordially welcomed, not least for keeping the ladies of Jericho in the tea they were drinking.

If anyone saw them together—her thoughts lingered on Major Beck; she would be sorry for many reasons if he discovered her consorting with Mr Jake Green—her reputation would be ruined. Nevertheless, it was safer to meet at the cabin than visit him at his house in town.

He still had hold of his hand. As she withdrew it coolly from his grasp, she informed him curtly, "I have the ammunition and medications." He started to head for the rear of the gig, but she shook her head. "Don't be so foolish, Mr Green. Do you think I would carry them so openly?"

She preceded him into the cabin, and indicated he should close the door. While he did so, she stripped off her gloves. As he turned back to her, she scrunched up her crinoline and reached for one of several cloth bags attached to the upper hoops. Unhooking it, she offered it to Jake, only to find him blushing furiously and looking anywhere but at her and her ankle-length pantalets and under-petticoats.

"Oh Good Heavens, Mr Green!" She pushed the heavy bag at him. "Surely you've seen a woman's legs before?" When he mumbled something indistinct she added, "The quicker you help me, the less you'll have to look at them."

With a brusque nod, he acknowledged her words and knelt down to help relieve her of her burdens. Looking down at his dark hair, a little longer than fashionable, she sighed. She had once entertained the hope that—. But no, it did no good to think of such things.

Her musings were interrupted by the door being flung open. Jake, still on his knees, had a pistol in his hand like a flash. Heather hastily dropped her skirts and reached for the small revolver she carried in her reticule.

A thin, strained-looking black man stood in the doorway. "Beggin' your pardon, Massa Green...."

Jake laughed and put the pistol up. "It's all right, Hawkins. This is Miss Lisinski. Miss Lisinski, this is Mr Robert Hawkins, our friend from the North."

Hawkins nodded at her, and said in an accent that wouldn't have been out of place in the smartest of Philadelphia drawing rooms, "Pleased to make your acquaintance, Miss Lisinski."

"And yours, Mr Hawkins." Heather smiled as she went back to helping Jake unhook the last of the bags from inside her skirts. "That's a mighty fine act you have there, sir, if you don't mind me saying so."

"Thank you, ma'am." He executed a smart bow. "It has been my experience that if you give Southerners most of what they expect, they don't look for more. At least, not where black folks are concerned."

Heather laughed as she lowered her skirts and patted them back into place. "Which I would consider a grievous fault, if it did not suit our present purposes so well."

She turned back to where Jake was opening the bags and inspecting their contents, arranging them on the table so as to divide bullets from bottles and powders. "You will have to make what is there last, I fear. Mr Turner says he is sore pressed to find morphine or quinine in the territories where he is permitted to trade. And Sheriff Taylor says he durst not raid the supplies further until there be some incident where he may be reasonably supposed to have used what was already issued to him."

Jake looked up at Heather, his mouth quirking in that half-smile that she found so appealing. "Then I suppose we must arrange such an incident."

"Later perhaps." Hawkins tone was abrupt. "We have other business to attend to."

Jake nodded, his grin replaced by a frown. He turned to Heather. "Miss Lisinski." He took her hands. She had yet to put her gloves back on, and the gentle touch of his warm fingers on her bare skin made her heart flutter. "You have already done so much for our Cause. May we ask another favor? One even more dangerous than smuggling goods past our Southern friends?"

She raised an eyebrow. "More dangerous?"

Hawkins had settled himself on a chair. "Mr Green tells me that you work for Major Beck as his housekeeper."

"And as governess to his daughter, yes." Heather withdrew her hands from Jake's and began putting her gloves on.

Hawkins leaned forwards. "Major Beck has some documents in his possession that would prove of great use to the Cause if we could lay our hands on them."

She stopped, the second glove half on. "You wish me to steal papers from Major Beck's office?"

Her mind conjured up a vision of the major in his wood-paneled study, reading dispatches or poring over maps in the circle of light cast by the single oil lamp. The soft glow from the glass mantle would lend a softer aspect to his normally stern expression. Sometimes she would watch him for a

moment, trying to puzzle out the strange contradictions he presented, before she tapped shyly on the door he left half open, coming to discuss his daughter's progress in her lessons, or to receive direction regarding her duties as housekeeper.

It was in that study that she had told him about the cholera raging amongst the slaves laboring to build a new City Hall. He had coldly told her it was a matter for the overseer, before sending the Army physician attached to his division to assist in treating the outbreak. When she had confronted him regarding his kindness, he had spoken obliquely of the loss of his wife, his dark eyes filled with grief.

Realizing that Hawkins had carried on speaking, Heather dismissed the memory and the conflicting emotions it raised in her breast, and brought her attention back to the present situation.

"We have news that the major will shortly receive a report of the movements of men and armaments planned for the next three months." Hawkins' face twitched with a brief, wry smile. "If we could obtain a copy...."

"He trusts me...", Heather said slowly, looking from Hawkins to Jake and back again. "I live under his roof."

"We know." Jake was leaning back against the table, watching her closely. "If there were another way, I assure you we would take it. But you are so well placed...."

"He is a good man, you know. Major Beck. Even if...."

"Even if he fights for the wrong side." Hawkins finished the sentence for her. "We know. And we know that you don't wish to betray him. But if good men like Major Beck are not to go on misguidedly serving a cause which is wicked, then we must use every means to defeat his masters."

Heather considered his words as she deliberately finished pulling on her glove and buttoning it. She looked up at Hawkins, and then at Jake, his gaze turned imploringly on her. She took a deep breath. "Very well."

Disclaimer: These stories are based on the Junction Entertainment/Fixed Mark Productions/CBS Paramount Television series *Jericho*. They were written for entertainment only; the author does not profit from them nor was any infringement of copyright intended.