

Spoils of War
By
Carolyn Faulkner

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Chapter One

"Au-grr-ah!"

The never-ending chorus of screams, cries and gut-wrenching moans woke him from his laudanum-induced sleep to a nauseating stench that made him wish he'd stayed unconscious. Where the hell was he? Aaron tried to lift his head and peer around him, but only had marginal success with either move. None of his muscles seemed to want to cooperate much, but he caught a blurry glimpse of his surroundings. His nose screamed a putrid confirmation, as his neck refused to hold his head up any longer, and it flopped back down onto the ground.

A shudder ran through him. He was in a field hospital. It was the rough equivalent of Hell on Earth, just shy of being in a Confederate prison. Some would say it was worse, because although the Rebs would starve and torture you, they wouldn't come along and haphazardly saw off various appendages, while you begged and pleaded to the good Lord to retain them.

But the Lord was conspicuous, only by his absence from hospitals. Aaron made a quick inventory of his body parts, realizing that it was his left leg that was beginning to throb abominably, even through his drug-induced haze. That thought was enough to make his heart clench in fear, clearing his mind of the cobwebs that had engulfed it. If his leg was wounded, the chances were pretty near ten out of ten that the surgeon would be by, if not now, then when it began to exude that sickly sweet rotting smell, with the tools of his trade that were more befitting a carpenter than a man of medicine.

Aaron would have none of it. He would not lose any part of his leg. He forced himself to sit up, nearly falling back over again from the wooziness that threatened to overtake him. But he steeled his spine and stayed erect, moving the dirty blanket away from the bandage on the outside of his left shin and confronting that which scared him the most—the bloody, swollen mass that was his leg.

His teeth clenched to the point of pain, the grating of enamel against enamel distracting him from the haphazardly wrapped wound. At times, he thought his jaw would break from the effort it took to keep it closed, rather than scream bloody murder and rail against God, as he unwrapped it to get a good look at exactly what he was facing.

It was not a pretty sight, but, Aaron thought, he'd seen worse on the horses he'd taken care of at home. Not gunshot wounds, of course, as his was, but wounds in general that he'd had some success in treating, enough success that he'd been more sought after than the vet in Hancock County by a long shot when a horse or a cow took sick. He consciously began to detach himself from the pain, and from ownership of the problem itself. He would treat this as he would have before the war, or as closely as he could under these conditions, and hope for the best in holding off what was probably an inevitable visit from the surgeon.

But not if he could help it.

He would not hobble back one-legged to Pine Knoll and have his father, and everyone else, look at him with pity. As the youngest son, he'd joined up to make his own way in the world. Fighting Johnny Reb was just an added bonus. There was nothing in this world that could make him go back to Maine and his family without first making a success of himself.

And that was the end of it.

Aaron knew he didn't have a lot of time. At least, since it was a hospital, he wasn't being guarded, but he still decided that it would be best to wait until night to leave. Until then, he set about learning as much about the place as he could.

* * *

Celia Weston awoke abruptly to the acrid smell of smoke filling her nostrils. It wasn't quite dark, but she crawled across the dirty floor of her hiding space to peer cautiously out the window. She saw that the field that had once been full of her father's prized tobacco was again ablaze. Yankees were digging into whatever leavings they could scrounge up from the remnants of what had once been the jewel of the county.

Celia felt tears seeping into her ever-swollen eyes as she turned and leaned back against the wall, burying her smudged face in her dirty hands.

Trey Rivers had been the apple of her father's eye, besides his only surviving daughter. Celia's rascal of an Irish rogue father, Gib, had founded the place after a particularly profitable turn at a poker table, fulfilling a promise he'd made to his incredibly patient wife that once they had enough money to buy a goodly parcel of land, they would settle down and raise a family.

The huge property of lush, rolling fields and forests was both cradled and split by three streams, which Gib generously promoted to rivers when naming the property. He had tried to come up with something fitting that used his wife's name as a tribute to her, as family legend had it, but "Nora" didn't lend itself to being particularly melodic.

Although they'd spent the first year or so in a slap-dash, one room house that was little more than a mud hut, Gib had always excelled at anything he'd turned his hand to, and they quickly had enough of a fortune amassed, through both legal and illegal means, to build a house in a style to which Gib wished to become accustomed. He let the long suffering Nora have free reign at designing and furnishing of the place; his only requirement was that it have big white columns in the front, which smacked to him of that which he so dearly coveted: class, style, and gentility.

The big house ended up being much bigger than Gib had intended, but although he could be quite strict with his wife in some areas, he was quite liberal in others and couldn't find it in his heart to squash her every whim about the place. It was white, of course, with emerald green shutters on the myriad windows. A rounded, columned portico covered the intricately beveled and engraved front doors, which lead inside, where a mahogany staircase spilled onto the Italian marble floor of the cavernous foyer. There was an enormous ballroom lined with fresco paper in a mahogany pattern that mocked paneling but was much easier to change when the whim struck

Nora. It also sported custom built-in cabinets and gilt fixtures, even down to the keyholes. A large, maroon appointed dining room was tucked into the back corner, with a solid oak, marble topped table that sat eighteen people quite comfortably. Her father had maintained an office in town as well as on the first floor at home, across from the sitting room where the family gathered daily after dinner every evening to play games and argue and laugh. The formal living room, which was on par in size with the ballroom, was only used for special guests or occasions. It was always kept pristine by her eagle-eyed mother, who could spot a speck of dust at a thousand paces, especially on the treasured antiques she'd purchased and displayed in that room just for show.

The bedrooms upstairs were all enormous and were almost never filled, although they, too, were maintained such that if a pack of guests should suddenly descend on them, they wouldn't have to be turned out to sleep with the slaves. Being the only girl in a family of six children, Celia's room was bigger than everyone else's, except her parents' and the heir apparent, her oldest brother, George. She and her parents had the only water closets in the state, although they were, of course, for private use only.

Celia's room was done in a robin's egg blue with cream and gilt accents throughout. Her bed was the size of her parents', with a lace canopy over the mahogany frame and matching lace curtains surrounding it that were drawn closed every evening by her Negro maid, Charity.

Now, hiding herself away from sudden and sure death, or worse, at the hands of the brutish Yankee soldiers, it was all Celia could do to force herself not to dwell on those languid, happy days. They seemed a lifetime ago. Now, nearly everyone was gone—everyone but herself, Mama and Patsy, who had held the exalted position of housekeeper at Trey Rivers, and was almost as trusted as a member of the family. Papa and all of her brothers—George, Cam, Pierce, William, and even the youngest, Gerald, who was barely fifteen—had gone off to fight in the war, leaving Nora and Celia here to carry on as best they could.

Before he'd left, Papa had sat the two women down and set down the cold hard facts that some or all of the men might not return, which, of course, had Mama in tears immediately. Gib had grabbed her by the shoulders and shook her. It was the only time Celia had ever seen her father treat her mother with anything but the utmost respect and affection. The sight had put the fear of God into Celia, who paid more attention to her father than she might have, while her wide eyes searched his face and realized the truth of his words.

It was because of Papa that she'd even known of the existence of this little hideaway. Once the grand new house had been built, the couple had wished to put their meager existence behind them and had just let the small cottage be claimed by the moss, weeds and willows surrounding it. It had been built up against the side of a knoll, anyway, and was easily and almost immediately camouflaged by the ever-encroaching foliage.

She and Mama had done their level best to carry on without the men, and, subsequently, three quarters of their slaves, who had left to pursue their own freedom away from the war or to fight for one side or the other.

But then the soldiers came, first the brave Confederates, to whom they eagerly offered as much food, shelter, and clothing as they could, a few of whom they knew, but only one who could give any word about their loved ones. They were dirty men who wore ragged uniforms, some of whom were injured or sick, but they were polite and respectful and kept their hands to themselves; they kept their distance in general.

Word of mouth was the only way to find out anything about the brave fathers, sons, brothers, and uncles in gray that had left their women to fight a war they expected to be done and over within a matter of months. Rumors abounded of mass graves and bodies stacked up like cordwood, dead, either from the Tennessee quick step that ravaged camps on both sides, or the deadly aim of a Union soldier.

Then, inevitably, it had seemed, came the Yanks. Luckily, they had enough warning about their imminent arrival by the sounds of fife and drum. They were in their hidey hole and Mama was sick by then, but she still dragged herself to the small window to see her hopes of continuing the life they'd had prior to the war crumbling before her eyes. The Yanks didn't ask, they took, and what they couldn't take, they burned behind them. Some high mucky-muck Major had boldly quartered himself in the house for several days, as his troops slaughtered the few gaunt animals they had left and burned the meager fields clean to the ground, but they departed and moved south eventually.

Since then, poor Trey Rivers had been the subject of much quicker, more brutal occupations—always by the enemy—and the house and the fields were much the worse for the wear because of it. Celia only ventured out at night, and only when she knew that there was no one around. One of the things her father had warned her about, over Mama's agitated objections, was that she needed to jealously guard her virtue against the Yankee invaders, who he assured her had a complete lack of common decency and even worse manners.

Before he'd left to fight the good fight for home and family and the preservation of their way of life, Papa had called her into his book-lined study and formally sat her down on the couch. Celia could see her mother wringing her hands not five feet away, her usually pale face an alarming shade of red, refusing to meet her daughter's eyes.

"Gib, you shouldn't, she doesn't need to know about such things," Mama had started, only to be cut off by an unusually angry glare from her husband.

Papa had leaned forward, saying in a deep, urgent voice, "You mustn't let those filthy Yanks touch you, Ceeley." He'd breathed deeply, staring somewhere in the neighborhood of her feet. "You're not for the likes of them. It pains me to think what they might do."

"Gib!"

Papa had harrumphed and sat back in his chair uneasily, rubbing his hands over his eyes. "You must never leave the house, Celia. Stay with the house. We'll come back for you. We will," he'd muttered hoarsely, so that it was almost a wishful groan.

Tears traced clean tracks in her dirty face. It had been over fourteen months' time since the letters had stopped coming. The only thing they knew for certain was that Gerry was gone, fallen at the bloody battle of Gettysburg, according to G.W. Harrison, who was one of the men who tramped through the ravaged fields of Trey Rivers. G.W. had been a suitor of hers at one time. Twin Oaks was a huge spread almost on par with Trey Rivers, and G.W. was the heir apparent, a tall, strong, reasonably good-looking man whose parents doted on their only child, but who, in Celia's eyes, had needed to be taken down a peg or two. He thought anything he wanted was his, including Celia.

But the G.W. that had shown up on their doorstep wasn't the same man who had been among the first to volunteer to fight, sure of glory on the battlefield that he was certain would only add to his attraction. He had been humbled by months of near starvation, watching friends and family mowed down around him at every turn. He'd broken the news to them as quietly and gently as he could, but it had been the last straw laid across the back of Nora Weston's tenuous grip on reality.

Since then, Celia had been working alone to try to keep them from starving, encouraging her sometimes raving mother to sleep during the day, as she did, and only venturing out at night when she knew there was no one else around and neither army was likely to be on the move. She'd hidden as much in the way of provisions, such as they were, as she could in the little overgrown hut. Patsy and several of the house slaves were hiding in the nearby woods, and they would occasionally bring what they could to them, although they were barely getting by themselves. But it was a small comfort to know that there were a few familiar faces nearby, even if they were Negro.

Celia snorted. At this point, she didn't care if the Devil himself showed up on the steps of Trey Rivers, cloven hooves, pitchfork and all, as long as he didn't speak with a Northern accent.

By now, it was growing ever more painfully clear that they were not going to be on the winning end of this glorious war.

"Celia Angelique Weston!" her mother scolded from the dark corner she'd shrunk into more months ago than Celia would like to recount. "Ladies do not snort!" Mama's voice was almost what it had been...before, and Celia almost smiled, startled at how unfamiliar the expression felt.

But she answered dutifully, "Yes, Mama." Before the older woman got a chance to get all worked up about her daughter's atrocious lack of manners in the face of a war and starvation that she didn't recognize, Celia quickly diverted her mother's attention. "Remember Teddie Stuyvesant's costume ball five years ago, Mama?"

They spent the next several hours reminiscing about the good old days, even though Celia was really too young to have any good old days in her experience. She had been just sixteen when they fighting had begun and the marriage proposals had already started to pour in, although her father had been dead set against her marrying too early. He was also such a pushover for his only daughter that he would never think of forcing her into any sort of arrangement. Trey Rivers was more than enough for him to die happy on, he'd say. He wanted his daughter to marry for love—nothing short of the all-encompassing love he knew and shared with her mother would do for his darling daughter.

Now that the conflict was almost over, she was almost a long-in-the-tooth twenty-year-old, not that there was going to be anyone left to care about it much, or to marry, for that matter.

"I declare I don't know what I'm going to do with you, going hither and yon at all hours of the night," Nora stated firmly in a voice that had taken on a fey note as the war, and her particular brand of gentle madness, had progressed. "I'm afraid I'm going to have to talk to your father about him not letting you become a hoyden of a tomboy, Celia. I'm sorry."

Sometimes Celia wished she had more patience with her mother as she wrestled her shiny blonde hair into a knot at the top of her head, then covered it with a disreputable knit cap she'd found on the ground. "It's my tomboyish ways that have kept us alive this long, Mama," she returned sharply, only to immediately regret her tone when tears filled the frail older woman's eyes. Celia squatted down next to her mother and hugged her tight, but Nora wasn't going to have any of it.

"Celia! That is not a proper position for a lady, I can see your whatalls! Stand up this minute!"

"Yes, Mama." Sometimes, just agreeing was the easiest thing to do. Celia sighed heavily. She missed the mother she'd had before this blasted war, the one she would have sworn she could count on, who would be strong in the face of any adversity.

Instead, Celia had ended up having to be the strong one or they would have starved long since. And she hadn't been joking when she had sarcastically commented that her days as a tomboy, following her brothers as far and as much as they—and her loving, if somewhat overprotective mother—would allow, had stood them in good stead these past lean months.

Months... Celia thought to herself as she grabbed an old rucksack she used to carry whatever treasures she might find for them, perhaps an overlooked potato or two if they were very lucky, or even, if God was smiling on them, the unexpected gift of a berry or two, if she could find the patch in the dark and they were ripe enough to eat without making them sick.

She gave her mother her usual lecture, as gently but firmly as possible, about not coming to the door for anyone and to stay away from the windows. Her mother nodded, but seemed to have slipped into that gray area she preferred, the place where her daughter wasn't the grubby stranger standing before her, but rather the much sought after belle of every ball in Torrin county. The place where she was married to the handsomest, bravest, most generous man alive, and her

worst worry this time of year was whether she was going to be able to get the dresses she'd ordered from Paris in time for the annual Harvest Ball.

Had it really been months? Celia pondered the idea as she checked at the window first, then slipped out into the loamy, dark air, realizing with alarm that it had been more than a year that they had been forced to live like animals. In another month or two, it would be her birthday. Celia circled around the big house, staying well into the forest that surrounded it. Papa had only cut those trees he absolutely had to, to accommodate the planting. He liked being surrounded by trees and resisted all attempts to get him to clear them, as he enjoyed hunting in the acres or pristine woods with his sons.

The war had done the clearing for him, Celia thought wryly, not that he would ever see it. Soldiers had cut paths and chopped down trees for wood and kindling. It was fairly clear in a lot of spots, the dilapidated house no longer nestled, protected from the harsh realities of the world by that long-standing thicket.

She skirted around to the back of what once been the largest, most admired plantation home anyone had ever known—anyone of quality, anyway. It had been the jewel of the county, and Celia was heartily glad that her father wasn't around to see what it had become, shutters hanging askew, grand double front doors battered off their hinges, water and mud and worse tracked all over the portico and throughout the house.

She used to go through the Big House every once in a while, when they'd first moved out of it all together to the not-so-luxurious accommodations they were currently enjoying, until it became less of a haven for the wonderful memories it contained and more of a cruel reminder of what they'd lost, slowly and painfully, over these past four years.

The kitchen garden was within sight in the dim moonlight, but still she hung back in the shadows as much as possible, just in case there was someone lurking around she couldn't see. She'd learned the hard way that she could never be too careful. More than once she'd scurried like a field mouse to gather up whatever vegetables might have grown wild there, since there certainly wasn't anyone tending it at this point, digging away on her knees in the dirt while someone snuck up on her.

She'd had to fight off several attackers, always male. She'd known it by the scratchy feel of a beard or mustache against her tender cheek. They were always filthy and her nostrils still curled at the memory of the stench of whiskey, urine, tobacco and rotting teeth, as they breathed heavily on her. One of them, the filthiest of all, had even had the audacity to lick her cheek as if it was a Sunday sucker.

Celia shuddered with the memory but, with another furtive look around her, took a determined step towards the garden; sure she saw the glowing white flesh of an overlooked—and hopefully not too rotted—potato. If she couldn't overcome her fears, then they didn't eat.

Despite how careful she thought she had been, she never felt or heard him come up behind her, until a huge hand clamped tight over her mouth, pressing her teeth into her lips

painfully while a hard arm wrapped itself around the waist of her dirty, worn dress, pulling her back against what felt like a fleshy brick wall. She dropped her knapsack in fear—and it contained the only real weapon she owned—a Colt 45 that had been her father's. It was the only gun he'd left behind after teaching her how to fire it.

This damned Yankee would never know that it wasn't loaded. She'd had to use it on occasion and had gone through the ammunition her father had left her, but it wasn't going to do her any good on the ground.

Regardless, she wasn't about to accept her fate calmly. Celia became a whirling dervish in his arms, bucking, writhing and lashing out with her hands and her legs. Papa had had Mama show her the secret trick of fending off a man once she'd started her monthlies. Mama had turned several shades of red during the interminable conversation it had taken to tell her that if she was ever in a situation where she was afraid that a man—certainly not a Southern Gentleman, but some man of unnamed and thus suspect origins—might physically hurt her, there was a particular spot she could kick or knee that would disable him long enough for her to escape and get to safety somewhere.

Mama could not bring herself to be particularly specific about what exactly it was she should be aiming for—and was mysteriously vague even about where it was she was supposed to hit him. Her friend, Eva Kelly, was only too eager to assist with the few details that she was able to contribute. She was to target the area between the man's legs. There was something there, something tender and sensitive enough that a good wallop could send a strong man to his knees.

Celia sincerely doubted that it could send her brawny father or brothers, all of whom were well over six-feet-tall and broad as barns, although her father had lent himself to a bit of a gut of late due the overeating and inactivity caused by wealth, could be felled by one well placed smack anywhere on their bodies. They were big as giants, and not likely to be crumpled in one blow, no matter where it fell of their persons.

Even though her back was to him, she could tell that this one was no small, starved man such as the ones she'd been lucky enough to encounter and been able to overwhelm in the past. He was either a deserter or a carpetbagger, or both, and Celia knew that her life and her mother's were in her own small, defenseless hands.

But she couldn't seem to land a blow. He dodged every attempt she made at attacking him, hard as it was when she couldn't see him.

* * *

Aaron couldn't believe the lively bundle he had in his arms. When he'd first stumbled onto the house and subsequently scouted the place out, he would have sworn it was completely unoccupied. He'd been stunned at the magnitude of the plantation and had immediately seen the potential in its revival, deciding he wanted it for his own and would keep it any way he could.

At first, until he'd wrapped his arm around her tiny waist, he'd thought he'd found a young black boy. But the nubile body and outraged, but muffled, shrieks made him change his

evaluation to a much more pleasant conclusion. She was squirming six ways from Sunday, and he just let her exhaust herself. It didn't cost him a thing, as long as she didn't land a blow on his healing leg or his family jewels, and she was so small that it was pretty easy to guard those tender places and just enjoy the feeling of her wiggling her bottom against him.

When she got wise to what he was doing, at least parts of it, she just stood there, panting behind his hand. He leaned forward, putting his lips almost on that shell of an ear of hers. "There, now. It's no use fighting me—I'm about three times your size." His words only seemed to inflame her again. She tried to jump away from him, but he held her too tightly. "Settle down or I'll take the flat of my hand to your backside and give you a reason to be writhing like that."