



# SPOILS OF WAR

CAROLYN  
FAULKNER

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**BY  
CAROLYN  
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# CHAPTER ONE

"Auuu-garrrrr-ahhhhh!"

The never ending chorus of screams and 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 and 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, and 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 conspicuously 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 abdominally, even through his drug induced haze. That thought was enough to make his heart clench in start 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, seeing that the field that had once been full of her father's prized tobacco was again ablaze with smoked Yankees 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 dirty 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, although 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, with 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 and 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. Pappa 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, but 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 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 with in 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 fervently, 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, and was also such a pushover for his onliest 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 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, where her daughter wasn't the grubby stranger standing before her, but rather the much sought after belle of every ball in Torrin county, and 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, saying 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, and enjoyed hunting in the acres and acres of 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 for 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 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 and urine and 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 and 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, although 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, he'd bet – 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."

## CHAPTER TWO

He couldn't see it, but Celia's eyes flared in indignation at that threat. She'd never so much as been spanked in her life. Her parents had cherished and coddled their only daughter to just shy of the point of spoiling – although her father had argued on occasion that they'd crossed the line into spoiled, like when she'd decided to paint over the wallpaper in her bedroom with some red paint she'd found in the barn. Or when she flooded the low lying kitchen accidentally by damming the small stream that fed the kitchen garden, and decided to alleviate the problem by drilling a hole in the wooden kitchen floor to let the water leak into the crawl space below.

Her parents had never so much as laid a hand on her in anything but love, and she was damned if she was going to let a filthy Yankee manhandle her in any such way.

It appeared that she had taken his threat to heart because she took to standing stock still within his hold. Satisfied that he had control of her, Aaron reached down carefully, keeping one eye on his trembling bundle at all times, and one handedly lit the precious lantern he carried tied to his worn bag. Then he decided to turn her around – he wanted to get a good look at the little field mouse he'd caught.

But a blinding pain in the meat of his hand belayed that idea. He couldn't get his hand away from her fast enough, but he still managed to retain the arm around her waist until she bent down and leaned a little and bit him there, too, taking a huge chunk out of his arm, he was quite sure. She took off running mindlessly as soon as she could pull free, but even with his game leg he caught up to her in only about five strides, his being easily twice the length of hers.

He'd had to break into a slight trot, though, and that added to the continuous throb in his leg which was aggravated by his new twin injuries. Angry, tired, cold, and hungry, he didn't think, but merely reacted, using her thin shoulder to flip her around and hitting her midsection with his broad shoulder, hefting her up onto it as if she was one of the logs he used to haul around the lumber mill at Pine Knoll, carrying her determinedly up the front steps of the shell of a house and striding in towards the back, opening the first door he found.

Celia was far from quiet about being manhandled like this, and she realized that, having been caught after biting him twice, she was in trouble deeper than she'd yet encountered. This man wasn't one to be trifled with, but she wasn't about to just hang over his shoulder like a sack of grain. If she was going to be killed – or worse defiled somehow – she was going to go down swinging.

She battered at his back with her fists, knowing in her heart that she was about as effective as a gnat against a charging bull elephant. Every uneven step he took jarred his shoulder into her soft middle, and she was afraid she was going to throw up long before they got to wherever he was taking her. It didn't occur to her that he'd take her into her own house until the jarring got worse as he mounted the grand staircase up to the front door. Celia saw more of the scuffed, cracked, and in some cases charred remains of the hard wood floors her mother had fussed over than she ever had when they had been in their glory as she stared down from her odd perch, arms flailing then failing her completely. No amount of wiggling or twisting even made him shift her weight. He was carrying her as if she weighed no more than a feather, locked down tight to his shoulder with that iron hard right arm of his.

Celia knew exactly where they had ended up – her father's study, or rather, what was left of it. She hadn't been in here in a very long time. It hurt too much. She could see her father's treasured books

strewn on the floor, muddy boot prints stamped on the orphaned pages of some, along the covers and spines of others.

She wondered when he was going to put her down, but he seemed to be looking for something he couldn't find there, and walked with her into what had been the dining room to grab a chair. While the oak and Italian marble topped table had originally seated eighteen at once, every chair had long since been broken down for firewood. So he tromped back to the study and hauled her father's comfortably padded leather chair from behind the big desk, which had, surprisingly, survived multiple occupations from either side, and positioned it in the middle of the bare floor.

Celia's eyes filled with tears when she remembered how proud her father had been of this room – it was his sanctuary – a place of knowledge and learning and quiet comfort. She could remember the smells of it – the particular musk of the floor to ceiling stacks of leather bound volumes mingling and marrying with his mellow pipe and the occasional cheroot. He'd gladly let his wife have the run of decorating the rest of the house, but this room was pure Gib Weston, through and through, from the guns and swords that had lined the darkly paneled walls to the small, finely stocked portable bar hidden within the mild mannered globe.

Of course, all the liquor and weapons were long gone and the room was a shambles, but Celia could still see her father standing there in front of his desk. It was the last time they'd all been together – the last time they probably would ever be together. Papa had called them all into his study, and they had all – to a man, including Mama – drunk to the health and well-being of the family, with impossible promises made that they would all come back to Trey Rivers again and carry on once the war was won by the triumphant Confederacy.

Lost in her achingly real memories, it took Celia a moment to realize that he had yet to set her down. Then, suddenly, he swung her off his shoulder but not onto her feet. Instead, he seated himself on that big chair as he maneuvered her over his long legs, reaching under those caked skirts of hers – whose condition was humiliating enough in and of itself – to yank them up and over her head. Her tattered drawers – which were really not much more than rags hung around her bare flanks from a grimy drawstring – were unceremoniously ripped from her body, and she felt her first touch of a man on that intimate area.

And it was far from a gentle touch. The flat of his hand crashed down onto her bottom with a force she thought was going to split her in two – and she very quickly came to pray to God that it would, so that he wouldn't be able to spank her any more. There had been very little pain in Celia's life – and certainly none of it purposely caused by anyone. She'd had more than the usual cuts and bruises for a little girl, considering how she roughhoused with her brothers, and had had the occasional sprained ankle.

But none of that was anything like this! She was bottom up over the lap of a complete stranger in the shell of her former house, being thoroughly thrashed. When she realized she was almost screaming with the pain of that horrid tattoo he was beating into her bottom with the flat of his hand, she clamped her mouth shut. Celia didn't think Mama could hear her, but she didn't want to take the chance. Nor did she want the slaves in the woods to hear their Miss crying like a baby at the hands of a scoundrel Yank.

"Let me go!" she hissed, looking for any way to bite him again, but there was no part of him near enough – or small enough – for her to bring to her mouth.

Aaron could barely speak. He was grinding his teeth with anger at this Reb brat. All he could see was the color of red he intended to make her bottom. He'd thought that all Southern women were prone to the vapors, the faint of heart kind who wouldn't put up much of a fight for anything, but he was wrong, especially about this one, he guessed. He whacked her bottom good and proper, making every contact count, finding the screams and cries she'd been issuing when they'd first started quite satisfying when he normally wasn't given to hurting the hair on any woman's head. But that rigid code of manners his mother had raised him with had faded with the realities of war, and he would be damned if he'd let this bit of fluff get away with branding him not once but twice within a space of less than five seconds.

"Not until I've taught you to keep your teeth to yourself. You are in sore need of a lesson in manners, Missy, and I'm just the man to teach you."

Manners! Celia almost shrieked. Her manners were – or rather had been years ago, when they'd truly mattered – impeccable. Her mother wouldn't have tolerated anything less. She renewed her struggles, but found herself completely unable to wrench free. Her bottom stung unbearably, and he was showing absolutely no signs of stopping or even slowing. Celia wasn't at all sure that she was going to be able to keep her mouth shut as she wanted, and just as that thought entered her mind, and long, slow wail left her mouth.

Aaron redoubled his efforts, smacking the same spot twice in a row, making her scream continually long and low as he decorated her bottom from stem to stern, even venturing down the milky white backs of those slender thighs.

She had just drawn a deep breath and begun an ever louder, truly agonized scream when two Negroes burst into the room – one a skinny, older black man with a short, sharp knife drawn threateningly, and behind him, a solid colored woman of the same age, wielding a long limb like she intended to use it. "Don't you hurt the Missy!"

A thoroughly mortified Celia was bound and determined to get up, but he didn't let up a bit, didn't miss a beat, his speech punctuated both by the reverberation of the solid slaps he delivered onto her upturned rear and her short, sharp cries of humiliation and pain.

"You two back out of here and go back to where you came from. I'm just delivering some well deserved justice to the backside of a Johnny Reb."

Celia barely got out, "Patsy – Ben – help me!"

She didn't know what he'd reached for at his hip until she heard the gun cock. She'd become frighteningly familiar with that sound of late, and it brought everyone up short. She heard but didn't see both the knife and the limb clatter to the floor. "We don't want no trouble, Sir." It was Patsy's soft voice.

"Kick the weapons over here." They scuffed along the floor and apparently he was satisfied with that, because he immediately returned to her spanking. "Did you know you're free? The war's over. You're free." Apparently he didn't get the jubilant response he'd expected. Celia couldn't hear that they'd said anything, but it was hard to hear over her own moans and cries as he wore out his palm on her bottom. "I suggest you mind me as readily as I'm teaching this one here to do. Come back in the morning and I'll have work for you. Paid work. Bring whatever friends you can find."

Celia was able to nudge aside the hem of her skirt and sneak a look at the two standing in the door. She'd never seen anyone look as befuddled and surprised as them. You'd have thought he'd told them to get ready to meet their maker. "Help – me!" she barely choked out, not really wanting to call attention to herself in this situation, but she didn't know just how much more she could take, and it didn't look like she was going to have any choice but to lie there and take how much he decided to dish out.

She knew as soon as the words were out of her mouth that she should have kept quiet – now she could feel their eyes on her nakedness, and she knew with a humiliating certainty that the color of her face matched the color of her rear.

"Quiet!" he ordered, accenting the word with a horridly hard smack. Then he turned back to the gawkers at the door. "Go on, unless you'd like to get some of your own back out of her hide."

Celia wished she'd just dissolve into the ground. How could he offer to let the slaves her family had owned for all of their lives have at her helpless bottom? She was certain she was going to die of mortification – she knew she didn't want to live through the embarrassment of it all.

Thankfully, they withdrew, but Celia could hear them chattering all the way out the door, and she knew she was going to be the talk of whatever folks there were left in this part in no time at all.

"Do you think you'll be able to keep from biting me, woman, or do you need a taste of my belt?"

It was the first time anyone had referred to her as a woman, and Celia regretted that he was the one to do it. Hating the groveling tone her normally strong voice had taken on, she answered through thick sobs, "Yes."

"Yes, what?" He laid his hand on her roasted cheeks in clear warning.

Would it never end? "Yes, Sir," she whispered.

"I can't hear you."

"Yes, Sir," she repeated with disheartening quickness, the only thought in her head not her dignity or even her modesty, but the pure need to keep him from spanking her again, even once more.



## CHAPTER THREE

It seemed like an eternity before he finally decided to let her up, an eternity spent taking liberties with her raw red bottom, running the same hand that had set it aflame up and down the expanse of her backside that her upturned skirts revealed, from hip to the dimpled insides of her knees, patting that sore flesh as if he had the right to it.

Once she'd recovered her feet again, Celia reached down for the shredded remains of her drawers, only to be brought up short by his sharp command.

"Leave them. You won't be needing them."

She stayed bent over, despite the innate hazard of the position, her fingers still grasping the rag, her mind rebelling at the thought of what he'd just said.

His next words sent a chill down her spine to live in the still stinging flames of her freshly spanked hind end. They weren't yelled or even spoken above much of a deep whisper. But they chilled her to the bone. "Do I need to repeat myself?" He took a step towards her, and Celia, thoroughly ashamed of her cowardice, dropped it immediately and stood, swallowing hard and doing her level best not to look him in the eye. Somewhere, someone in her past had mentioned that it was best not to look a wild animal in the eye, and he definitely qualified.

He was glad to see that she'd lost that awful knit cap somewhere during her struggles, and he could see from the loose tendrils of her hair that it should never be captive like she'd had it. If he had anything to say about it – and he intended to have everything to say about it – she would never hide her hair like that again.

He circled her as he spoke, pulling out the pins one by one she'd carefully used to keep her hair up. "What's your name?"

"Celia."

"Celia what?"

"Celia Weston."

He didn't bother to sit down again, just bent her forward, holding her skirts up with his arm around her waist and planting ten excruciatingly hard swats on her already tenderized bum. Then he stopped and let her go. "I suggest you remove all traces of sarcasm from your voice, young lady, or your bottom won't make it through the next hour."

"Yes, Sir." She said it as softly as she dared, not quite willing to be openly defiant, as was her want, considering the deplorable condition her poor butt was already in.

"Speak up when you answer me, Celia, or I might miss an answer, and you won't like what happens when you don't answer me, either."

"Yes, Sir." Fear, she discovered quickly, was a great help in stripping any trace of sarcasm from one's tone. And closing one's eyes was an enormous help in keeping one from screaming from said fear.

Thus she stood in front of him, back ramrod straight, in the bedraggled rags of a dress that had seen much better days, eyes screwed tightly shut. But still, somehow, she managed to retain the aura of the princess of the South that she must have been, in another time that would never see the light of day again. She was a painfully thin bit of fluff with wet blue eyes he remembered from before she'd closed them, gaunt cheeks that wanted an ounce or two more of flesh on her to fill them out to an apple

roundness, although her breasts, pressed as they were against the thin veil of material that kept them from his eager gaze, were as round and healthy as he could ever have wanted in a woman.

She was much smaller than he, barely reaching his shoulder, and he could see her toes peeping out from the tops of her well worn boots.

"Is this your house?" he asked suddenly, pausing to stand in front of her.

Celia knew she had to decide quickly whether to lie to him or not. She decided that lying was not a good idea – especially considering the method he was likely to use to punish her if she was found out, and it seemed a likely thing that someone somewhere along the line was going to tell him the truth. "Yes, Sir." She did decide that she wasn't going to give him one speck more of information than she absolutely had to. She wasn't at all sure she believed him that the war was over and the North had won, and she was loathe to do or say even the smallest thing that might help him or his cause. She did heartily wish that she could keep herself from referring to him as "Sir" since he'd hardly proven himself worthy of the respectful title.

She wasn't wearing a wedding ring, but considering the condition of this place, he would bet that that would have been long pawned for whatever foodstuffs she could get, anyway. "Where's your husband?" he asked, already knowing the likely answer and watching her closely as she spoke. He considered himself a pretty good judge of character, having worked shoulder to shoulder with men of the woods from the time he was ten or so, despite his mother's objections. His father, Big Red Denehy, wasn't going to let the youngest of his three surviving sons grow up to be a lollygagger, so even though the boy was no more than a bother all day in the beginning, getting under everyone's foot and into more mischief than any three of his kind, he'd been there every day next to his father and his nearly grown brothers, pulling as much weight as he could and working sun up to sun down.

Red had managed to carve a small kingdom in the northern wilderness of Maine using nothing but the sweat of his brow, a team of oxen, and his big, booming voice. His three strapping sons were each born into the business and raised through it. All of them took after him in stature – the four of them standing shoulder to shoulder were as impenetrable as any brick wall built. Hell, one of them was usually more than enough to do the trick against man or beast. Eric was the eldest, and would eventually inherit all that Red had wrought as he cut a swathe through the age old timber in the County. Stone was more the scholarly sort – despite the fact that he was the tallest of the bunch – and he was already sitting at Harvard learning everything his mind could absorb.

Aaron was the youngest, but the biggest of them all, overall. He used to rib his brothers that their father had saved the best of them for last, which regularly got him beat up for his efforts, until he grew big enough to beat back. He had the smallest stake in the business, and thus the least to lose by going into the Army when the call was made for recruits. His father could easily have paid commutation rather than let his son be drafted – Stone was excused from the extremely unpopular draft due to his student status, and Eric because he was over thirty five – but Aaron wanted his chance to see what the rest of the world looked like, to make his own mark on the world, and his father, who had done just that by staking his claim in Maine, away from his stuffy Massachusetts family, could hardly say him nay.

So here he stood, with a most intriguing and exciting development standing directly in front of him, fervently wishing, he was sure, that the Earth would open up and swallow him whole.

"I'm not married, Sir." Now why would revealing such personal information to him tear a strip off her inner hide nearly as bad as what he'd done to her bottom?

"Where's your family, woman?"

"Gone in the war, Sir." Well, she was three quarters right with that. She only had to hope that her mother would stay put until she got back to her, somehow. That wasn't too much of a long shot, considering that Nora didn't like to go out and run smack dab into the reality of what was left of her life.

Aaron took a step closer to her, looking her up and down as if she was a slave at auction. "You wouldn't be lying to me, would you, woman?" He pulled her skirts back over her head again, right then

and bent her over where she was standing, his arm around her waist to hold her in place while he delivered a series of good, sound swats that had her yelling her innocence so loudly the angels in Heaven could hear her.

"And the slaves?" He asked, letting her back up. Aaron indulged himself a little, touching her hair there, her hip there, reminding her with every intimate connection of his body to hers exactly who was in control here, and it certainly wasn't her, noting her flushed face and the slight tear trails from the spanking she'd just received.

"I don't know how many of them are left – not many. Most all of them left, Sir."

"Except the two who were just here?"

Celia nodded. The longer she stood there, even with her eyes closed, with him staring at her, circling her, touching her here and there when he truly had no right to even speak to her. But she knew – somehow, in the pit of her stomach where she bottled all those fears and tears and aches until just before dawn when Mama was asleep and no one would hear her snuffling and bawling like a baby – that this man was her future.

And it scared her more than the thought of looking down the barrel of a Yankee rifle.

"I feel in need of a bath – and you look in need of one." That roving hand piled insult upon insult by cupping her cringing bottom as he spoke. He grabbed her hand and began dragging her behind him, stopping only once to light a "This is quite some place – is there a stable where there might be a horse trough or something we could bathe in?"

Her mind raced ahead of him to the barely standing barn where some of the finest horseflesh in the state had once been housed. All those beautiful horses – amongst them her own Adina – had been confiscated by the first troop of soldiers that had shown up at the door, Confederates, to whom they were only too glad to donate anything for the cause. The barn had become so rickety that she hadn't been in there in quite some time – it seemed to be the first place all of the dirty, smelly men who'd since come through looked for kindling, and some of them had even had at the support beams.

Apparently, however, someone else had had the idea of bathing during one of the various occupations, because one of the big water troughs was already stationed just outside the barn doors.

"Ahhhh. We're in luck."

Celia wasn't at all sure just who it was that he was including in his "we", but she had no intentions of bathing within fifty miles of him, to say nothing of bathing out in what amounted to the middle of her back yard. Besides, there wasn't any water to be had at the house – none of the pumps worked any longer; the shallowly dug pipes were long since broken by the heavy artillery that had been nearly constantly dragged over them.

Glaring fiercely down at her, he said, "Stay. If you move, I'll find you, and what little you just got laid across your bottom will feel like tickles in comparison." He didn't hang around to see if what he'd threatened had had the desired effect, but darted into and almost immediately out of the barn carrying a broken bucket, which he handed to her. "Fetch me some water."

As resentful as she was about having to fetch and carry for him, Celia recognized that this could possibly turn into an opportunity to escape – until he positioned himself between the trough and the small stream, and she remembered that he wasn't holding just the threat of another spanking over her head; the picture of that familiar looking gun in his hand flashed through her mind. As she stretched and bent down to fill the bucket she realized to her horror and shame that that was probably quite enough to subdue her for a while as the skin he'd scorched was pulled even more uncomfortably taut by her movements.

The gun was holstered on his right hip at the moment, but she knew as surely as she knew that her parents loved her that he wouldn't hesitate to use it if he deemed it necessary. This was not a man she wanted to challenge. If she wanted to live and save her mother, she needed to bide her time and watch and wait for the right opportunity to escape – and not get caught again.

So she filled the makeshift tub after innumerable trips to fill the bucket. By the time it was half full and just about right for occupation, her already ruined hands were raw and red and fostering blisters across her palms.

"That's enough," he said sharply, having followed her back from her last trip.

Celia put the bucket down and rubbed her hands nervously.

Aaron considered her for a moment – what a tiny woman she was, but still so strong to have survived the horrors this war inflicted upon the innocents. He smirked a bit, lumping himself amongst those horrors as he was quite sure she would. But he was probably not the first man who took what he wanted from her; he would just be the only one who made sure she enjoyed it, whether she wanted to or not.

Just thinking about bringing her to screaming pleasure – even against her will – made his loins expand with a fierce ache, making him want to tuck her under him right there and then. But he held himself in check – just barely. He wanted more from this bit of fluff that just a roll in the hay. Aaron looked around him at the house – whose roofline was still ramrod straight, like its mistress's back – the barn and the ravaged, neglected fields. He wanted all of this, and more, and since he was a member of the winning side in this Godforsaken conflict, he intended to keep it for himself, hell or high water.

His fiery gaze returned to that small woman of whose body he'd already had intimate knowledge, and in a guttural tone he couldn't control, he ordered, "Come here." He removed his gunbelt in one practiced movement, dropping it to the ground and moving subtly to stand with his foot next to the gun.

Celia's eyes flitted to the gun, but she knew there was no way she could get to it, and hers, hidden in the rucksack, was yards away and empty, and thus of little help to her. Slowly, with considerable reluctance, she meandered his way, hugging herself and glaring at his feet. Aaron reached out and took both of her hands, laying them at the lapel of the shirt he'd stolen off a dead body once he'd slipped away from the hospital. "Undress me."

Celia tried to step back like a scalded cat, but he still held her forearms, in anticipation of just such a reaction, jerking her rudely up against him to encircle her waist with one arm and hold her there, right where he wanted her.

Well, Aaron thought wryly, almost where he wanted her. Aaron brought his spare hand up to tilt her chin so that she had no choice but to look him square in the eye as his other hand wandered a bit to cup those hillocks. He knew they were still quite sore because she started even at his feather light touch, and cried out when he squeezed them in warning. "Don't make me need to repeat myself, Celia Weston . . ."

## CHAPTER FOUR

He watched her bite her lip as her fingers clumsily undid the buttons of the rough, homespun shirt. He shrugged out of it quickly, still keeping her in his arms. She stalled a bit then, but he cleared his throat loudly and her hands went to the wide, worn leather belt at his waist. He wished he could say that it was his, and he supposed it was now, but it, too, had been liberated from the body of a gray soldier.

Her movements were growing ever slower, despite his encouragement. It took her forever to work the buttons over his crotch, and he could hear that just that had reduced her to tears although he could tell that she was doing her level best not to give in to them. He was having the devil's own time as her small fingers and knuckles rubbed against him, advancing down his length and crouching in front of him at just the right height for his dirty mind to conjure a filthy fantasy that he promised himself he'd fulfill with her one day shortly, until he thought he might unman himself right there, without ever having felt her direct touch.

When the last button was done, the pants – which were loose on him to begin with – fell to the ground in a dirty heap over his boots. Those worn, red clay caked boots were the only thing on him, besides his union suit, that were actually his. She began again at the top button of the thin red underwear, biting her lip in concentration until she got to his waist, where her hands fell to her side and she began to try to arch away from him, pushing against his chest.

Apparently she needed some encouragement to complete the task. "Do you want me to pull your skirts up and paddle your bottom again, Celia?"

There had been a time in her life when no stranger would have dared address her so familiarly. All one of her brothers or her father would have had to do was glare and take a step towards them and they would have known they'd have cause to regret such a breach of manners.

This oaf of a man was not only using her first name without permission, but had fallen into the habit on very short acquaintance of threatening bodily harm if she so much as hesitated to follow one of his degrading orders. Celia's mouth twisted into an ugly line. There were no more brothers or father to come gallantly to her defense at the first sign of affront. Her mother was more of a child than a parent, and the slaves were more interested in their own health and well being to be of any assistance to her. She was alone, and at the tender mercies of a man who had proven beyond a shadow of a doubt that he had no tender mercies.

Celia locked her fingers together in front of her breasts, wringing and twisting them as if she could pull them off and thus relieve herself of his odious command. She couldn't. She just . . . couldn't. Tears filled her eyes yet again in front of him. They came too easily of late, and much too easily in front of this horrid Northern oaf. "I – I can't. Please don't make me."

In answer, he grabbed those knotted fingers and deliberately pressed them against his tumescence, knowing that he was torturing himself as much as her. Truly, he wanted nothing more in this world right now than to let his eyes roll skyward and throw his head back to groan when those delicate female fingers cupped him even incidentally.

She knew she had no choice but to do what he wanted, and somehow she managed to get through it by closing her eyes and not letting herself think about what she was doing. Thus she didn't see

what she was revealing by opening each of those buttons, didn't see the thick length of him spring out of the opening she'd created like a beast freed from its cage.

Celia reclaimed her hands as soon as she could, wanting desperately to wipe them on her skirts but worried that he might interpret that as the insult that was intended, and she knew with a sense of incredible defeat that she did not want to be spanked again by this man.

She didn't. She couldn't. She wouldn't, and she would do nearly anything to avoid that fate.

When he set her away from him, the union suit joined his pants around his ankles, covering the gun. He had the boots off in a trice, then bent to retrieve the gun first, clothes second, placing the clothes over the boots, then the empty gun belt over the pile. Paying her little mind, Aaron stepped into the makeshift tub, barely flinching at the cold. Once he'd eased himself into that frigid clime, he then proceeded to hook his left ankle over the edge of the tub so that he could unwrap the bandages from his injured leg.

He'd done a pretty good job of nursing the injury along and keeping it clean and clear of infection, if he did say so himself. Better be far than any of those Army sawbones. It was still raw and red – that was to be expected. But there was no pus, and no abnormal swelling, nor any angry red streaks in the flesh near the wound that would indicate infection. He threw away the dirty bandages, which were the last of the one's he'd availed himself of from the hospital the night he'd left.

"Celia," he barked suddenly. "Tear me off some strips from your petticoat for bandages, and another for a cloth to wash with."

Celia had been standing there, stiff as a corpse, entirely flummoxed at her first sight of a grown naked male. She'd been around enough babies to know that there were physical differences between male and female bodies, but she'd certainly never been subjected to the sight of a full grown, more than fully capable man. She found him both incredibly frightening and strangely beautiful – although she'd never admit either. She could see how he handled her so easily – his skin, pale in some areas but practically brown as a Negro's in others, rippled with muscles. Those hard arms were intriguingly curved and roped with them, as well as thin veins that stood out even more when he flexed his arms. His torso resembled the brick wall she'd compared him to in her mind when he'd first captured her, plates of muscles built one on top of the other formed his flat stomach, with two huge slabs of muscles on his chest with a light covering of brown hair dusted over all of it. Small brown nipples poked impudently out of the brush, calling her attention to them until her eyes naturally wandered lower in a move she came to regret. Whatever small, cute appendages she'd seen on her friends' baby boys bore no resemblance whatsoever to the weapon he was currently wielding between his legs.

It stood up out of a dense forest of hair that was darker than that on his chest, as if it was reaching out towards her. She thought it more closely resembled some sort of club than any sort of human organ – about nine or ten inches long, Celia thought, and at least a good two inches around. She wondered what it was for, then blushed that she was thinking about such an improper thing at all.

She was forever grateful when he finally eased into the chilly tub, because that seemed to be the only way to break her fascination with that thing . . . whatever it was that bobbed up and down as he moved but never diminished in size. In fact, she would swear that the thing was growing, somehow, but that was only some flight of fancy, probably brought on by fear.

His sharp order startled her out of her reverie and she did as she was told – not that there was much left of the one petticoat she had remaining out of her huge wardrobe. But she tore the last ruffle off, then ripped a square of it off with her teeth and gave it to him, then rolled the rest up and put it on top of his clothes.

As she turned to walk a safe distance away from him, he caught her arm and tugged her back. "Where do you think you're going?" He handed her the wet cloth. "Mind my leg." Aaron watched her carefully, almost smiling at the rebellious look on her face that she somehow managed to tamp down.

"I can't," came the small whisper as she fixed her eyes on some spot well past the tub he was sprawled naked in.

"I'm quite sure you can and you will, Celia," he returned calmly, producing a small nub of strong smelling lye soap then reclining against the back of the trough like some sort of liege lord waiting to be serviced by a peasant maiden.

Celia took the cloth and the soap and set about the task with as much delicacy and dignity as she could muster. She tried desperately not to look at that area between his legs, but she couldn't seem to help herself, and her eyes bugged out when she saw that it was now about a quarter of the size it had been – all small and defenselessly looking tucked in on itself against his body.

But then he touched her and she started, blushing madly that he had caught her staring at that part of him.

Aaron, who actually wasn't paying her much mind at all, covered her small hand with his big one and forced her to press harder. "I ain't a delicate Reb flower, Celia." He saw her flinch and knew his deliberate insult had hit home. "I've got miles and miles of mud and dust caked into my very pores. Scrub like you mean business, not like I'm some hot house dandy." She took his direction to heart, almost rubbing his skin clean off in parts, he swore. But it sure felt good to be clean. He'd waded through every stream he could between here and the hospital, in case they were looking for him, which he doubted but he wasn't about to chance it. But that didn't really count as a bath as far as he was concerned.

As she worked gingerly on one arm, he used the other to reach down and grab a cheroot he'd rolled just yesterday but hadn't had a chance to smoke yet.

Celia changed arms, and it was then that he noticed she was bawling again. "What the hell is it, woman? I haven't so much as touched you, and this is hardly backbreaking labor I've set you to - "

Her tears dried as if by magic as she gave him a purely evil glare that almost made him reconsider the idea of letting her wash his privates. He supposed her modesty could be upset at having to touch him like this – he'd heard that these Southern women caught a case of the vapors if they so much as saw a man's naked Adam's apple. But he thought it was somehow more than that.

And he was right, although she wouldn't have let him know that it was the smell of his small cigar that set her eyes to overflowing like a watering pot, sending her immediately back to such wonderful times that her heart literally ached for them – for the safety and comfort of being surrounded and protected by her brothers' love, however annoying they could be on occasion, and tucked safely within the bosom of her parents' house, nothing ever to fear, certainly no hunger, no worry that couldn't be fixed by a kiss and a cuddle from Mama or a slightly wheedling visit to Papa's den.

She was scrubbing him like one would curry a horse and crying fit to flood him out of the tub while she was doing it. "I take it you've groomed a horse or two in your time?" he asked conversationally, hoping it would encourage her to turn off the waterworks.

But his foray had exactly the opposite effect. She started crying so hard she could barely continue washing him. "Confound it, woman, you're an ornery sort. Can't win for losin' with you contrary Southern belles, I guess."

Her eyes flared with anger and before he could catch her she'd thrown the cloth down into the dirty water and stalked away.

But all he had to do was say one word, "halt," and she stopped in her tracks like one of her father's prized pointers.

He let her stay there, with her starched, serviceably brown homespun back turned, while he exited his bath – not a whole lot cleaner, but much better than he was. It would take several tubs full of scalding hot water and a couple of bars of soap for him to feel really clean, he figured, rubbing his pruned hand over his scraggly beard. Somewhere or other he needed to scare up a shaving kit, too. His had been lost in battle somewhere along the line, and none of the poor unfortunates he'd come upon since leaving the hospital had had one on them.

He used his union suit to dry himself off, then stepped into it, detesting the way it clung to him damply in some places, but there wasn't much to be done about that so no sense complaining. As he hauled his pants and, on second thought, boots on – with an eye to being able to run after her if she took it into that head of hers to try to dart away – he said, "Go get some more water."

Celia turned around to protest, just as he tipped the trough enough to empty the contents. Her hands were going to be bleeding by the time she'd accumulated another tub of water for him, and she didn't understand why he'd dressed in between baths. He took up his sentry position between the creek and the tub again, gun in hand.

When she'd finally dumped the last bucket full into the trough, he took it out of her hands, scowling at the redness on the thin handle. "Let me see your hands." He wasn't asking, because he'd already splayed them in front of him, grunting in dissatisfaction when all she'd done was exactly what he'd told her to. "I'll put some salve on them when we're done here," he muttered.

She wasn't any too interested in some home remedy of his that would probably kill her anyway, but she managed to bite her tongue for once.

His hands dropped hers to attend to the button at her neck, then the one lower, then the next one lower as he said quietly, "Wash them carefully while you're bathing. I don't want them to get infected."

Her mind hadn't registered what he was doing until he'd said the words "you're bathing". He meant for her to occupy the tub she'd just filled, out here in the midnight air where all and sundry could see her in the lamplight – especially him.

Celia tried to step back, but he had a hold of her dress front, and as soon as he saw the outraged look on her face, he snaked an arm around her. He didn't bring her closer, because that would have thwarted his intent which seemed to be to render her naked as the day she was born.

He peeled the dress front open and Celia began to fight in earnest, pulling and tugging and wiggling as best she could, but that rock hard arm around her barely let her take a step away, and that step only aided and abetted the enemy when he finally just ripped the dress and her chemise from her resisting body and moving away from him only succeeded in letting the fabric fall away until she was standing there in nothing but her one threadbare petticoat.

All thoughts of escaping left her head immediately in favor of preserving some sense of modesty. Her arms bent in front of her bare breasts, shielding them as best she could and holding them to her to protect them from his gaze. He repeated the same brutal ripping action with her other garments, throwing them away from her so that she had no hopes of covering herself in front of him.

Something in Celia snapped, then, and she had to run. She had to get away from him, no matter that she was buck naked except for her holey shoes. She wasn't even thinking about where to go or she might have run into the house and hoped to barricade herself in a room somehow. But she wasn't that mindful of her situation – she just knew that she was dead mortified and terrified of what this man might do next, so she turned away from him in the split second it too for him to toss away her only civilized protection from him, and bolted towards the woods.

Aaron caught her just as she entered the sheltering forest, just as she'd begun to hope for the salvation the familiar woods could supply. He trapped her against a huge tree trunk and flipped her around to face him.

The rough bark bit into her soft flesh from shoulders to calves, but her delicate front side was pressed against the strength of him, breast to muscle, his belt buckle pressing into her yielding tummy. Aaron grabbed himself a handful of that wild blonde hair and forced her head back, claiming her mouth with his in an act of pure, natural aggression, subduing her in a primordial fashion that had him grinding himself against her and drilling his tongue past her lips to plunder the sweet territory he discovered there.

Finally, he dragged himself away from her, stepping back, not loosing her at all, and looked down into those wet, frightened eyes, growling, "You don't seem to understand the way of things now, Missy. I'm a Yankee officer, and I'm claiming this place for my own, and I'm going to fix it up as I can and make



it a paying proposition again. I'll even put in the paperwork with the new government we'll set up, just so's things are all nice and legal. I'm going to own all of this place, every inch of it, including its former mistress, as spoils of war. I'm going to own you as surely as you ever owned those two black folks and many more, I'm sure. You're mine, and you'll never get away from me. Ever."

With that, he hauled her up onto his shoulder again, which was becoming a habit with her. As he stomped back to the nice bath he'd provided for her, he felt free to bring her bottom back to the fiery redness that had died down a bit since her last spanking. Apparently this woman wanted and needed to be kept on a very tight lead, and he was just the man to do it.

## CHAPTER FIVE

He didn't stop spanking or stomping until he got to the bath and practically dropped her into the cold water. Celia choked and sputtered to the top as she sat up, her hair and shoes drenched, bottom still managing to be very sore and hot despite the frigid water that surrounded her. She sat there fuming for a few minutes, shivering with the cold, watching him as he calmly took down his pants and union suit to dress his wound with the strips he'd made out of her petticoat and drawer remnants.

And he had the most disgusting habit of smelling the cloths before he placed them on his leg, as if he was a suitor drinking in a Paris scent she'd deliberately applied to a handkerchief to curry his favor.

"How old are you?"

She snorted at the insulting question, still sitting there shivering in the cold wetness, although she'd removed her soaked shoes to dump them over the side of the tub. But she knew exactly what he would do if she decided not to answer him. "T-twenty."

It was Aaron's turn to snort. "You should have been long since married with babies at your feet." He finished up the dressing on his wound, which he was very happy with, and shrugged back into his clothes, then turned to stalk to her side. He took up the cloth and soap she'd used on him and began to wash her, despite the fact that she was practically trying to climb out of the tub while he was doing so.

Celia couldn't decide which was worse – to be outside the trough and completely naked to his gaze, or to sit inside it, folded up on herself as much as possible, but having to endure his intrusive, possessive touch. And he was rubbing her as vigorously as she had him – it reminded her of how Patsy used to scrub her as a child, before she'd come to the housekeeper position when she'd taken care of all of the Weston children.

He washed down the slender line of her back, noting how rail thin she was and wondering how she'd managed to survive all this time here by herself. He wet and washed her piles of hair, seeming to take great enjoyment in dumping buckets of water over her head to wash off the meager suds, then he tucked it over the edge of the tub to drip dry. Aaron leaned her back against the wall of the tub to do her arms, then tipped her head back and washing the tear tracks – most of which he knew he'd put there – off her gritty face, and she seemed to settle down some. The fanciful thought that she should be in a gilt, clawfooted tub, surrounded by mountains of bubbles and using only the most finely milled lavender soap on her baby fine skin snuck into his mind and he dismissed it with a frown.

But then the hand with the cloth moved across her collar bone and he gentled his strength some to drag it almost gently over her left breast and she sat bolt upright, trying to shield her body from him with her arms. "Steady, Celia," he whispered huskily, as if he was trying to soothe one of his father's Morgans. But she continued to struggle, and finally, he caught both of her wrists with one of his hands and held them above her head.

It was awkward at best, but it also afforded him an unobstructed view of that beautiful, but too thin, body. He liked a little meat on a woman's bones, but she was more than ample where it counted. Aaron slid his hand in the guise of the soapy cloth over her breast again, cupping it, rubbing gently and carefully, as if she was spun sugar. He watched closely as he deliberately stroked his thumb over her deep mauve, already peaked nipple.

He didn't have any illusions that the nipple was hard because of his attentions. She was still struggling as best she could, arching and writhing, and it was close to driving him crazy to see those tip tilted lovelies bobbing up and down as if they were trying to entice him, and when he dragged his thumb over that peak, she squealed and redoubled her efforts.

He knew he was getting to her.

Celia didn't know why what he was doing had sparked such an intense feeling in her that didn't just make both of her nipples tingle in a manner that completely dwarfed the cold, but traveled down past her stomach to an area on her person that she had never known she owned except when she used the necessary – and that certainly didn't feel anything like this! Her nipples had never ached so, and that awful thumb of his, as it crossed over and over the very tip, only added to the throbbing that seemed to take over more of her entire body with each rapid heartbeat.

She was filled with the frightening need to surrender to him, to that big hand as it claimed each tip in turn, teasing and tugging with a gentleness she would have sworn he didn't possess. She wanted to arch into his hand, pressing herself against him, encouraging him to cup and squeeze and twist –

Celia blushed so hot with those thoughts that she was sure the water around her was going to come to a boil. She tried to rein herself in, to slow her panting breaths and calm her galloping heartbeat. But he just stood there, holding her arms captive above her head, taking liberties with her body that no man had a right to, most especially him, and what was worse, making her enjoy it and crave more. No amount of reciting biblical verses – even the hellfire and damnation ones – in her head seemed to keep her mind off what he was doing to her body.

Finally, he whispered next to her ear, "I'm going to loose your arms now – I need to get to the rest of you and get you out of here before you catch a chill. If you don't behave while I'm doin' it, I'm gonna take you out of this tub and paddle your bottom."

With that threat, he set about washing each of her legs, from mid thigh to feet that were caked with the river mud that oozed over her shoes whenever she walked along the banks. Celia closed her eyes against yet another wave of humiliation and shame at the disgusting condition of her feet. She tried to forget what he was doing – and what he had done to her – but for some reason that private area between her legs was aching as bad, or worse, than the nipples he'd tortured seconds ago.

Celia assumed that he was going to stop there – that he'd finished what he'd started and gotten her relatively clean for a quick bath. But when she tried to sit up in preparation for getting out of the tub, he pressed her back down with one hand on her breast and the other lying directly over that shadowy mound of dark hair.

She gulped so hard she thought everyone in the county could hear it; her eyes bugged painfully, and her breath came in short, sharp bursts. This was what her Daddy had warned her about – this was what Yankees did to helpless Southern women, and it was happening to her. She had nowhere to go, and no brave Southern knight was going to ride in and gallantly save her.

Aaron couldn't help himself. He had to touch her. He could see the stricken look on her face in the shadows of the lamplight, but he couldn't help himself. He pressed his soapy, cloth covered hand gently, inexorably into her natural crevasse, the presence of his big hand between her legs forcing her to spread them as much as she could within the narrow confines of the tub.

She had to do something to save herself, so she reached down to try to pull him away from her most private place, but although she was able to grasp his wrist, it was so big that her fingers only fit part way around it. Celia tugged with all her might, but there was no way she could dislodge him. He continued to explore her at will, rubbing that washcloth up and down that womanly furrow, creating a slick lather that remained on his fingers when he abandoned the cloth and felt for that hard button he knew was there toward the very top of her. She made it a point to keep her eyes screwed tightly shut, but she still caught a glimpse thought the fringes of her eyelashes of the way her hand looked perched atop his – it looked as if she was holding him to her, as if she wanted him to violate her this way.

Celia snatched her hand back as if it had been burned.

He knew when he'd hit it – his broad middle finger sliding over the top of her and nearly making her jump out of her skin. His face split into a huge smile as his fingers settled there, plucking and brushing over her until the last of the lubricating soap had dissipated, and she had both relaxed and stiffened, both quite against her will.

As a parting shot, he lathered the swatch of material again and delved deep between her legs to her bottom hole, cleaning it thoroughly as she writhed and actively fought him. Celia couldn't believe that he was touching her between her legs at all, but there? The man had to be truly perverted –

But she didn't have time to heap invectives upon his scraggly Yankee head, because he was busy lifting her out of the bath and setting her onto her feet. For some strange reason that she preferred to blame on the arctic water, her knees were weak, and she had to grab a hold of him to keep from falling. Unlike his characterization of Southern women, neither Celia nor her mother were given to fits of fainting, although she had to admit that she knew more than enough women that would fit his unflattering portrayal, most of whom were given to wearing corsets that were just plain too tight.

She hated to touch him even though she had to to keep from crumpling to the ground, but she let go as soon as she could. She certainly didn't want to give him the idea that she wanted to have any contact with him whatsoever.

But he took the choice about touching him out of her hands, scooping her up into his arms after grabbing the lantern and his other items. He stalked up the back stairs and into what was left of the kitchen. Every cabinet door was open, parts of the stove were missing, and flour and sugar carpeted the floor. Celia had the odd thought that if Patsy had seen her prized kitchen in this condition, she would have keeled over in a dead faint right then and there.

He turned back to shut the door, and his eye caught on something that Celia had forgotten was there – the solid oak paddle that was used – infrequently, but occasionally – on recalcitrant house slaves. It was a damn sight more forgiving than the overseer's whip that kissed the back of many a field slave, but Papa had drilled ten holes in it that raised blisters on the skin it stung. Celia had seen it reduce even the haughtiest among the Negroes to blubbering, pleading messes within the first few strokes.

"Ah, this looks like it will come in handy." To her horror, he added it to the stack he was already barely able to hold on to as he carried her, then he headed into the foyer and up the grand staircase. "Where's the biggest bedroom?"

Oh, Lord, he was going to take her to her parents' room! And she couldn't lie about it – all he'd have to do is open each door – all of the bedrooms were noticeably smaller, although quite roomy in their own right – than the master bedroom suite.

All he had to say was "Celia?" in that expectant, warning tone of his.

"Second door on the left," she mumbled, hoping against hope that he wouldn't hear her.

The lantern swung light wildly against the walls as he sauntered down the hall as if he wasn't carrying a nude woman in his arms. The door was already open, and Celia, who hadn't been upstairs in the house in quite some time, nearly cried at the condition of the room. The imported rose, cream and gold tapestry curtains that had been her mother's pride and joy were hanging – just barely by a thread – in tatters from the rods, the Irish lace sheers patterned with big grimy handprints and also slit from stem to stern.

The huge bed – custom built for Gib because he was such a big man and claimed he was afraid of rolling over and crushing his small wife – had had the same treatment as Celia's smaller one, with a lacey canopy and matching curtains that would be tied to the four posts each morning by Deliah, Mama's maid who had long since run away to seek her fortune in the Northern states.

Now there was no longer anything for the curtains to hang from – all for of the posts of that solid mahogany bed had been hacked down to the nub to use as firewood. Not a bit of the huge wooden bed frame remained. The matching dressers and nightstands – all of the furniture – was just plain gone,

burned whole, some of it practically in front of her in the front yard. There were holes in the finely stitched Persian rug that covered most of the room, and so many stains that the delicate rose bouquets that formed its pattern were indistinguishable beneath the unholy mess.

The bed itself – that huge feather mattress – was a field of stains that Celia really didn't want to consider the origins of. She hugged herself, trying to look away from the carnage of what had once been her life, but there wasn't a decent place for her eyes to land. She folded herself into a corner and turned away, shivering not only from the coolness caused by the evaporating bathwater, but from a deep, weary sadness in the pit of her stomach.

Aaron was amazed at the bed. At the size of it, first, but then that it was, apparently, still usable, with a little elbow grease. He reached down and flipped the heavy mattress over, and it was perfectly pristine. "Good as new," he pronounced, unable to resist flopping down on it. He hadn't been in a bed that fit his length in years – since he'd joined the Army and realized that not all men were as big as he was, or as those he'd grown up around – and he'd been sleeping on the ground for longer than he'd like to remember. The mattress would definitely need to be replaced as soon as possible, but for now, it would most definitely do.

He looked around all of a sudden, worried where she was and swearing under his breath at having allowed himself to become too rapturous over the idea of sleeping on something other than a bed of rotting moss. But he needn't have concerned himself too much. She was there, huddled in the corner of the room, looking like she expected him to take a stick to her at any moment and shaking like a leaf.

What an idiot he was – forgetting that he'd just plucked her from the bath. She must be frozen. He got up and scoured the room for something – anything – that could do as a makeshift towel or blanket, but there wasn't a thing to be had. He quickly checked the other rooms and came back with what was left of a set of sheets that had seen much better days, but were relatively clean. Aaron tried to tug her to her feet but she nevertheless rose slowly, as if she were much older than her years.

She stood stock still as he dried her except for the very obvious chills that shook her small frame. When he was done, he wrapped her in the shirt he had disdained wearing and herded her over to the bed, settling her down there on her back and wishing that he had a blanket or something to put over her.

"Stay," he ordered, giving her a warning glare before he departed with the lamp again.

She wasn't going anywhere even as the dark surrounded her. She wasn't even crying any more when she should be – faced with the remnants of her life all around her. But they weren't coming, and Celia couldn't say she missed them any. It seemed that in the few short hours since she'd lost her precious freedom to him that she'd cried more often than she had since this whole debacle of a war had begun.

He hadn't been around for when she'd just begun to lose her family and her life, but he was certainly bringing about the end of it pretty well all on his own.

When he returned it was with the curtains from what had been Gerald's room. Celia nearly snorted to herself. It wasn't as if he was going to be needing them any time soon. They were his favorite color, an azure blue velvet, heavy and warm. The Yank put the lamp down by the bed and proceeded to shuck out of his clothes. Celia didn't even bother to turn her head away; she just continued to stare up at the paint peeling off the ceiling.

When he joined her on the bed, he pulled the curtains over both of them and they made surprisingly good makeshift covers.

As one platter sized hand settled on her bare waist, a thought struck Celia and the question popped out of her mouth before she had a chance to stop it. "What's your name?" If he was going to do what she thought he was going to do to her, she wanted to know whose name to curse. She made a vow in her head that she'd consign him to hell in her prayers every evening.

He frowned down at her, the lamplight from behind him making him look larger and even more menacing – if that was possible. He considered her for a moment, trying to think if there was any reason why he shouldn't tell her his real name, and in the end he decided that since the war had ended and most

all of the volunteer forces were going home anyway, it wasn't likely that he was going to be hunted down as a deserter. It wasn't as if he was fit to fight anymore, anyway.

"Aaron. Aaron Denehy." It felt strange when he said it. But then this was a strange situation. This was hardly how he met most of the women he knew, and even when he'd been with a few whores he'd introduced himself to them. Most of them had complimented him on his gentlemanly manners, which had earned him no end of teasing from his older brothers.

Aaron leaned on his elbow and began to trace circles on her stomach. Once she'd stopped shaking and shivering, he folded back the curtains so that he could see almost all of her. She made a preemptive grab for the material, but he tsked at her and clucked his tongue soothingly, and she didn't make any more fuss about it. She was almost too quiet, considering what a fighter she'd been at the beginning, and he was on his guard that she might just turn into a whirling dervish again at any moment.

But mostly he was just entranced by her. He was no virgin, but touching a woman who was paid to endure his attentions and who was obviously ticking off the minutes of their encounter in her head, or the furtive groping he'd done in the barn with his next door neighbor Priscilla Carver, hardly compared to having a full grown woman at his disposal like this, no matter how reluctant she was about it.

His father and brothers had been fond of giving him the benefit of their experience and advice about women in general and sex in particular. It was his father's advice he'd taken when he'd treated the whores that hung about the logging camp with a level of respect they were rarely shown, and thus he'd often been treated to gratis encounters they'd never given to any other man.

But Red had also said that, as a man, it was his solemn duty and obligation to make sure that the woman he was with enjoyed the experience as much as he did. At first the camp followers hadn't been interested in letting him experiment on them – they were on the clock and didn't want him fussing about down there. But when they realized that he was in earnest about wanting to learn to pleasure a woman, they taught him everything they could, and as a result, he'd been able to make stuffy, starchy old Priscilla sing like a bird at just the moment he commanded her to, even with one eye on the lookout for their possible discovery.

And he'd had women since joining up, especially when they were all just raw recruits; they all availed themselves of a little horizontal refreshment now and then, until the marching and the fighting and the bloodshed began.

But Celia was an entirely different kettle of fish from both of those types of women. He hadn't known her since Noah was a pup, and she didn't seem to be a loose sort of woman, despite the fact that several had probably already known her in the biblical sense. That wasn't her fault or her doing, he was sure. She seemed to be just what she was – a Southern lady, born and reared gently until her family was beset by this war that plagued them all, North and South. She carried herself like the queen she must've been, and he found himself wishing he could have seen her then, in all her haughty glory. He bet she had been a handful to raise – it was no wonder her father had a paddle hanging up by the kitchen door. Aaron bet her backside had felt the sting of that implement more than once . . . or maybe she hadn't felt it, but she certainly was going to now that he'd come into her life.

Despite her pampered lifestyle, she was a strong woman to have made it as well as she had. She certainly wanted to be poor and wretched even less than most folks did because she obviously wasn't born to it.

But she was his now, and he would see to her – see that she had fine things again, but only when he wanted her to have them, and only if she behaved herself and settled to his hand.

"You are some beautiful, Celia," he breathed, winding his hand into her hair to hold her still, then leaning down to brush his breath and just the barest of his lips onto the pristine skin of her waist.

"Beautiful."

## CHAPTER SIX

She didn't know what to say, so she thought it best not to say anything, but his breath on her skin was doing strange things to her, making her nipples rise eagerly as if they were seeking the torture of that hot, wet mouth, so near and promising so much. The moist warmth of his breath tickled down to that very secret area that he'd already had the nerve to plunder with his fingers. There was something there – something she didn't even know she owned but something he seemed to know all about – that reduced her to a mindless jelly that wanted nothing more than for him to never, ever stop touching her there, in her secret parts, and she didn't want him to do that to her ever again . . . but her treacherous body wanted him to do it even now.

Celia knew she had to be strong in the face of such molestations. She had to fight him off to the death. She had to stop him from having his way with her, from defiling her, or she knew she'd be lost forever in the haze of the bit of pleasure he'd shown her.

Her head was immovable – he had her hair wrapped tightly around his hand. One of her arms was pretty well useless because he was lying on it, and the only thing she could do with it was beat at his back but that was about as effective as a mosquito against a cannon. In a very deft, devastating move, he managed to get her other wrist and hold it down against the mattress while still using that arm to lie on her hair, effectively trapping her upper body right where he wanted it in one easy motion yet leaving his right arm free to explore every inch of her at his leisure.

As much as she struggled, there was nothing left for her to move other than her legs. She was pinned like the big butterflies she'd seen in a museum in town, held open and helpless for his disturbing abuse.

Aaron let his hand wander all over her body, sensitive palm down, gliding slowly over every inch, sensitizing her skin and setting it to chill bumps, making those nipples beg for his attentions and saving them for last.

He cupped each healthy breast – he'd heard that that was the last place any woman lost weight, and he now felt he could attest to that fact. She was very skinny, but her breasts were a wonderfully plump handful that would have overflowed from smaller hands. But his fit her just perfectly there, as if they'd been made just to massage and squeeze those very sensitive titties.

After moving away just slightly, he tapped each one, sharply, on each side, delighting in the way they wobbled away from his punishing fingers, almost the way her enticing bottom did when he'd had to correct her.

Celia let loose with an outraged cry at the first light smack and redoubled her efforts to free herself, which he easily subdued and applied a second round of slightly harder swats – still nothing that would elicit pain – to her cringing breast, watching the rounded flesh rebound away from him, then come back for more. It was horridly demeaning – she had even less control over her breast than almost any other place on her body, and he seemed to delight in torturing that delicate, helpless part of her.

He wasn't hitting her hard enough to do any damage, he knew, but he loved to watch both her face and then her breasts as he spanked them playfully.

Finally, it was time to attend to those impertinent nipples of hers – they were begging for much the same attentions as her breasts had received, and it would come to that eventually, he was sure, but for now he squeezed one between his index finger and his thumb, rolling it with excruciating care while watching every nuance, every reaction play out on a face that was bathed gently in lamplight and shadows.

She was angry, for sure. She didn't like him to touch her like that – didn't want to want it, although he was slowly driving her there with his confident caresses, he could tell by the way she was moving her body less frantically and more languorously.

He plucked each nipple as if he was playing a human harp, gently at first, then stopping now and then to pinch and twist each of them until she began to arch to try to alleviate the ache, then he'd move on to the other one for a while.

Everything he did – ever touch of his fingers, or any other part of him – to her body made her crazy. She didn't know why, but almost all of the throbbing ache he was so deliberately creating had settled between her legs, in that very same area he'd explored during her bath. All Celia could think about was what he was doing to her – and even the shame of those feelings, of those awful, animalistic desires, seemed only to add to the almost painful pangs that thrummed through that hidden place.

If her hands had been free, she might have reached down there herself, if only to rub a little and help the ache go away. But he held her fast and helpless, and she could only hope – with an acknowledgement deep inside herself somewhere of the horror of just what she was wishing for – that eventually his hand would move down there for her, to help alleviate even just a little of the swollen, pulsating pleasure that had settled there.

But first, he bent down and latched his mouth onto the tender bud that he had been pinching ever so hard, hard enough to make her wail with it, and stiffen and arch and almost cry with the pain, so much so that he felt he needed to soothe it. He drew it deeply past his lips, taking as much of her breast into his mouth as he could as he suckled hard, flicking the stiff tip of his tongue over and over the equally hard and now sore nipple, razing it with his teeth and threatening more when she tried unsuccessfully to dislodge him.

Then he did exactly the same thing to her other nipple – long, slow moments of exquisite pain of his merciless fingers twisting and twirling it, tugging it out from her body and slowly pinching hard until it finally slipped through his fingers with a watery yelp from her, only to be torturously soothed by that wicked mouth of his.

Finally, he decided to move on to another, even more delicate and receptive area after having massaged and squeezed and spanked and slurped up every inch of her breasts, his big hand wandered down over her concave belly to claim her vaginal mound, dwarfing it completely, wisps of her dark auburn hair creeping up between his fingers like weeds.

With no forethought whatsoever, and despite how badly she wanted him to touch her there, her innocent reaction was to clamp her legs closed in some autonomic response she could lay no intellectual claim to.

But Aaron wasn't about to let her close him out in any way, shape, or form. He pressed his fingers between those magic folds, while whispering in a low, soft voice, "Open your legs, Celia, as wide as you can."

She knew what he'd left unsaid – that if she didn't comply, he wouldn't hesitate to use the paddle to get her to do as he ordered. That set her legs to pumping in frustration, because she most certainly didn't want to get her first taste of that awful thing on top of a bottom that probably still bore the marks of his previous gentle ministrations. But she also didn't want to just give up and hand over access to her most embarrassing of places to him like some woman of loose virtue.

He cupped her womanhood as best he could, watching her inner struggle and knowing that his mother would have taken strips from his hide for doing this to a gentlewoman, even if she was Southern.



But his mother wasn't here, and his patience, worn thin as it was by the pulsating, iron hard rod between his own legs, was rapidly nearing an end.

Just as he was about to lean over the edge of the bed and rummage around for the paddle, which he hadn't figured on coming in handy quite this quickly, her legs drifted open with excruciating slowness to settle well apart as she heaved a tearful moan of defeat.

"Sh-shh-shhhh," he comforted as his fingers found exactly what they wanted, bathed in her copious, slippery dew. "Mmmmmmmmmmm. That's wonderful, Celia. You'll be thankful for this, when the time comes. And now I know you want it – as much as you ever protest, as much as you push my hands away or try to escape what I'm going to do to you, I'll always know that, even now, when you don't know me, when I'm a virtual stranger who's having his way with your body, that your body craves me. Your body wants me, and that's all I need."

"Noooooooooooo!" she cried, trying belatedly to close her legs, but he was already at the heat of her, dipping his fingers into another place she didn't recognize on herself and bringing some sort of moisture that she knew shouldn't be there up to that place that only he knew about, that was a thousand times more sensitive than he'd proven her nipples to be.

Celia was quite sure she wasn't going to live through this evening – that he was going to kill her somehow, and it was going to involve dying from the pleasure he created effortlessly within her, and entirely against her will. She seemed to have absolutely no control over herself when she was in his arms. She didn't seem to have control over much of anything when he was around, but her body's betrayal was the worst of it.

His butterflying fingers, teasing and touching her over and over, rubbing here, barely making their presence known there, made the ache she'd already experienced seem like nothing in comparison. It was almost painfully pleasurable and she found herself panting and rolling her head back and forth, and praying – praying – that he wouldn't stop. She was just barely able to keep herself from pleading with him, begging him to please, please, please keeping doing whatever it was that he was doing.

Aaron smiled softly. "I won't stop, Celia. I promise. I want you to wild in my arms. I won't stop, I promise."

Celia was horrified to realize that she'd begged him out loud, but she didn't have time to dwell on it, because seconds later, he bent his head to her nipple, and began to suck, almost in rhythm with her pounding heart.

Ecstasy exploded within her at that moment, making her crazy, making her writhe and struggle and fight against him, making her growl with it in long moments of complete mindlessness and complete, perfect pleasure.

Celia thought it would never end, and with the help of those knowledgeable fingers of his it took a very long time until her body stopped those blissful spasms. And when they did finally subside, all she wanted to do was curl up and go to sleep.

But Aaron had other ideas, and her eyes flew open wide as he maneuvered one leg over her with the clear intention of settling himself between her legs. When she looked down between them, she could see that that here and gone again appendage of his was most definitely here again, hanging pendulously and threateningly from between the thick, lightly hairy columns of his legs. She wasn't exactly sure what it was that he intended on doing with that thing, but she knew, somehow, that she didn't want him to do it.

So she called upon the advice given to her by her long ago Mama and brought her knee up forcefully, hoping to catch him directly in that particularly vulgar area.

Luckily for Aaron, he had his left, injured leg partially over the leg she was trying to use as a weapon against him, and it largely deflected her attempt at unmanning him. But just defending himself like that with his wounded leg hurt considerably, and she had managed to catch a bit of his jewels, enough to make him rear back to keep himself from harms way in the guise of a lovely Southern woman, to whom he'd just given the gift of the ultimate in womanly pleasure.

He had half a mind to reach for the paddle, but his genitals were thinking along much different lines. He'd wanted to introduce her gently, patiently, into the art of joining a man with a woman, but he had lost what patience he had with her when she tried to inflict grievous bodily harm on him.

So instead he rolled to the edge of the bed and stood up, then leaned down before she had a chance to realize she was free of him and flipped her onto her stomach with a healthy whack to her bottom as he pulled her up onto her knees.

A part of his mind acknowledged the miracle that the bed was at just the right height for his purposes as he grabbed both her wrists into one at the middle of her back, thus forcing her head well down onto the bed. His cock loved her in this position – rounded white bottom that still harbored the occasional red weal from some previous discipline he had had to visit upon her because of her wayward behavior, thrust well up into the air, as if she was trying to entice him to take her like this, in this nameless, faceless fashion.

He decided that he didn't want to have to keep a hold of her wrists the entire time, or worry about her rearing her head up, so he reached down to grab what little remained of her drawers. After twisting it into a makeshift rope, he put the middle of it against the back of her neck, then drew the two ends tightly beneath her, which effectively required that she keep her head down. His spike up inside her woman's place would see to it that she couldn't lower her bottom any time soon, he smiled to himself. Making sure he kept the cotton rope taut, he slipped an end under each of her knees, knowing her weight – and his – would keep her in her rightful place. Then he took a second length and tied her wrists together just tightly enough that she wouldn't easily be able to free herself.

Aaron knew what an awful and awkward position this was – he'd been tied with his hands behind his back before once when he'd been captured by the enemy for a few short hours before he could escape. And he'd been standing, clothed. Even then, it had made him feel vulnerable and submissive, open to anything anyone wanted to do because he couldn't defend himself.

Now here she was, buck naked, head down, bottom up, hands bound at her mid back, her body still probably throbbing some from the pleasure he'd brought her to – just about as exposed and defenseless as a woman could possibly be.

"Don't you move, now, Celia, or there'll be hell to pay and you know it," he whispered hoarsely, allowing himself the luxury of touching her backside with no obstructions whatsoever. One of Aaron's meaty hands ran down her flank to cup a fleshy buttock possessively, then the other followed suit. He used his thumbs to pull those cheeks apart, hearing her sob as he did so, then following the call of his instincts he placed his stiff, aching shaft up into that moist valley he could clearly see. Eventually, he thought, teasing himself, he'd come back to her little pink rosebud, but not tonight.

Tonight he was going to take himself a Rebel bride.

He found her opening unerringly and grabbed a hold of each hip, using them to brace against as he pressed himself against it, expecting to slip up inside her in one swift, hard thrust. But he was thwarted by her body, and he could hear her cry of pain when he battered against her that first time.

She was a virgin.

At one time in his life, he might have stopped and backed away from this situation. Perhaps even done the right thing and married her before he took his pleasure with her – given her his name and his protection.

But not now. Later, maybe, but not now.

He wasn't going to stop. He couldn't. He wanted her and he intended to have her, any way his heart – or rather, his genitals, desired.

So Aaron reached down and tugged on the ends of the impromptu rope, making sure they were nice and tight and kept her head well trapped against the mattress, because he knew she wasn't going to cotton to what he was going to do next.

He got himself into position again, the head of his member nestled against her tight opening, and for a split second he threw his head back and reveled in the moment, in the feelings, even the torturous agony of being almost there, inches from claiming her.

Then he looked down at that bent back, and clamped his hands down on the curves of those feminine hips, using them to pull her back onto him as he thrust himself forward into her body, exploding past the thin barrier meant to warn him of her innocence, all the way into her until he could advance no further, until she took every inch of him, stretching slowly and reluctantly around him, accommodating a man within herself for the first time.

Celia had turned her face to the left so that she could breathe. He'd pulled that rope at the back of her neck so tight she could barely do even that, and she experienced the complete humiliation of knowing that she was the one keeping such a tight rein on herself. She'd tried to get her hands out of the bonds he'd tied, but she just couldn't do it, and her shoulders quickly grew tired from trying. Her face flamed from the picture she must have presented. She knew that her slit was still wet and probably dripping from whatever it was that he had done to bring about the storm he'd conjured in her body. She knew it wasn't her woman's time, but something was very definitely oozing out of her.

She felt something big and hard intruding upon her there, where she was most vulnerable, and then she felt him give a push that hurt her somehow. She didn't know how, but it hurt badly, and she shrieked as best she could, but it was largely absorbed by the bedcovers he'd found. She wanted to try to get away from him, not wanting him to be able to hurt her again that way, but she couldn't move. She was in the abominable position of holding her own self captive for his violation of her body.

He tore into her with his next plunge, forcing her hips back against him to impale herself on him, on that awful huge rod of his as it split her wide open. She was sure that she was going to bleed to death from this assault on her person. She knew she must be bleeding great gushes and would surely be dead within the next few minutes, and she began to cry.

It wasn't enough for him to have rent her nearly from stem to stern in one stroke. No, he had to repeat the torture again and again, dragging himself slowly all the way out of her, so that she thought she might have some respite, only to snap all the way back inside her, rubbing against every inflamed inch of her delicate tissues.

He kept doing that, getting faster and faster, and she didn't seem to be dying, or even growing faint as she would expect.

No, it was much worse.

She was starting to enjoy it. It seemed that whatever this man did – short of spanking her – made her body clamor for more. Even this ignominious torture of being invaded and emptied rhythmically, forced to open her body to him every time helplessly, stirred those feelings that she had experienced with him before, those longings and that awful feeling of pleasure compounded on excruciating pleasure.

To make matters worse, he began to speak to her, panting at her, sounding as if he'd been running for hours, "That's it, Celia, I know it hurt at first, but it's starting to feel good, isn't it?" Aaron could tell by her heavy breathing and the way she'd begun to clamp down on him when he entered her, instead of trying to cringe away as best she could.

Her mind completely rebelled at the idea. "No! No, I'm not!"

Aaron reached up and grabbed those restrained wrists, tugging them back, using them as leverage to keep her tight up against him even as he withdrew, snapping his hips at hers almost violently.

"No – please – don't – I – no – I – " her complaints died away into a howl straight from the paradise he'd conjured in her unwilling body.

Aaron smiled with incredible satisfaction at having brought her to a second round of ecstasy, and finally he felt he could get a little of his own back. He rode her hard, making no accommodations for her innocence. He took his pleasure from her yielding body, spasming as it was around the member that had

forced her to it, and when he spurted his tribute well up inside her pulsating glove he couldn't help but growl long and low, it had been such an excruciatingly long but pleasant time coming.

He collapsed onto her back, then moved off quickly, afraid of crushing her. He loosed her arms and her neck immediately, since they were no longer needed to control her movements, and as much as he was about as relaxed as he'd ever been in his life at this moment, a part of his brain still kept a watchful eye out for Celia, just in case she decided to take it into her head to try to run at a time when he was probably the most vulnerable.

Of course, since she was – had been, he corrected himself – a virgin, she probably didn't know that about a man.

He could hear her crying softly, but she'd turned her face away from him to do it. Aaron felt a tug at his heart that he neither wanted nor needed, but there it was. Without really thinking about it, he reached out and pulled her to him, covers and all.

Celia was beside herself with grief, and she just wished he'd leave her alone. But this time he was almost gentle. He didn't force her to turn over, towards him. He didn't force her to do anything, for once. He just held her in his arms. And to her surprise, she fell asleep that way within minutes – grief, throbbing pain between her legs, shame, anger, and all.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

Aaron was surprised that he hadn't opened his eyes again until the next morning. He'd had a mind to enjoy her all night in various different ways, but apparently his body had other ideas. But it had been too long a time since he'd gotten a good night's sleep, and his body was weary from marching and running and healing, along with too little food.

He awoke with a start, reaching automatically for his gun before he realized where he was, then sitting up and looked for her instead, finding her gone and the bed beside him cold from the lack of her body heat. What he did see, and what she probably also saw in the stark morning light, was a good sized spot of her virgin's blood.

Aaron stood and threw the curtains off the bed, resolving to find something – anything – else for this evening that wouldn't remind them both of what he'd done. He dressed quickly and efficiently, his mouth set in a grim, determined line. When he came to the paddle amongst the pile of his things, he decided then and there that it wasn't going to be returned to what had apparently been its usual place by the kitchen door.

Instead, he found a nail sticking out of what had once been some kind of fancy wallpaper that was now much the worse for the wear, and hung it up by its rawhide tail just above the bed, where it would be closer at hand than all the way down in the kitchen.

He stalked out into the hall, checking each room as he went by, seeing things he hadn't noticed with just the help of the small lantern, shaking his head at the senseless destruction. But she was nowhere to be found in the house, he discovered after he'd explored every nook and cranny he could find of the big place.

He tried to check his anger as best he could when he stepped out onto the front porch, knowing he had only himself to blame. He should have tied her to the bed. He should have tied her to him. He should have realized that she'd take any opportunity to leave him, especially after what he'd done to her.

Aaron's body was more than ready for her right now, even though she was nowhere in sight. He'd never reacted that way to any woman, and now he had some awful, overwhelming longing for this slip of a woman who was Lord knows where at this point – he had no idea when she'd left him; she could have been well over the Mason Dixon line by now, for all he knew.

But then, all of a sudden, there she was, striding across the yard as if nothing was wrong. A huge sigh of relief left him that he refused to scrutinize too closely, and he had to check himself from running down the stairs to scoop her up in his arms and swing her around like a man in love.

And he certainly wasn't in love with her. Lust, most definitely. Love, no.

On sight of her, that ache that was becoming disgustingly familiar increased to the point where it was almost a pain, and he knew nothing more than that he wanted her, and there was no reason why he shouldn't have her.

"Celia Weston!" he yelled sharply, seeing her whole carriage change to one of wariness and fear. He crooked his finger at her imperiously.

Celia had been scurrying back from seeing her mother, who had been absolutely frantic at her daughter's absence. Celia had awakened several hours after her ignominious defloration, her face flaming

so bright red in the darkness she expected to be able to light her own way. But she knew the place well enough that once she found her dress and chemise, which were the only two pieces of her clothing that had survived his assault, she could find her way with no problem. It was the finding of the clothes that she thought was going to make her faint away, sure that he was going to awaken and subject her to some other form of degradation with every scrape and squeak of the floorboards.

But he didn't, and she was able to get back to Mama just as she was preparing to go out the door. "What are you doing, Mama? Didn't I tell you never to leave the house during the day?" Celia pushed her mother back into the decrepit room.

"Why Celia Angelique Weston, where have you been? I've been worried sick about you!" Despite the scolding, her mother held her tight, and Celia melted into that loving embrace, tears rising that she could barely tame, but she knew that if her mother saw them it would be too hard on her, and impossible to explain.

She knew she was going to have to bend the truth some. "I – I was almost caught, Mama. There was a man, and I – it took me a while to get away from him."

Sometimes her mother wasn't as fey as Celia might want her to be. She gave her daughter a hard look. "Are you all right?" Then a second, more insightful question, whispered furtively by her blushing Mother. "Did he hurt you, Ceeley?"

"No, Mama. I'm fine," she out and out lied. She wasn't fine by any stretch of the imagination. She was standing there, in front of her mother, as a woman of loose morals. No longer a virgin. No matter that that wasn't by her own choice; it was merely a fact of the matter. She was in disgrace. She was also standing there without a stitch of underwear on – which was practically worse than having been deflowered in her own home. None of the scraps of undergarments she'd had left had survived her time with him – she'd even checked in the back yard by the makeshift tub. There was nothing left. She had no protection from him of any sort, and it felt entirely unnatural to be walking about with nothing covering her bottom and legs, especially when she remembered what had happened last night between them, and how disgracefully she'd acted.

She'd seen a bloody flow when she'd used the woods for what was necessary this morning, but she knew it wasn't her time. Celia wished she could ask her mother the questions that kept piling up in her avid mind, but she knew that wasn't a proper thing to do at all.

She hadn't been able to gather anything for food before he'd beset her, and a quick scour of the kitchen garden before she'd arrived here had only turned up one softish potato that was barely fit for consumption, and she let Mama eat all of it, despite the offers the older woman made with a worried look on her face.

"You have to eat, Ceeley. You have to stay strong. Your Pa and brother's'll be back soon, I know – I know they will."

There had been a time when she would have shared her mother's fervor, but that time had ended abruptly last night. There was no rescue going to be forthcoming for either one of them. None. They had to make their way in the world as best they could, and it seemed that, for now, her destiny was as a fallen woman.

But this man claimed the whole place – surely he was going to fix it up and make it a working plantation again. If he was willing to do that, and take care of her in the process, then who was she to complain about it?

She had wanted to run away this morning so badly her feet had literally itched with it. She never wanted what had happened last night to happen to her again. She never wanted to feel his hands on her again, despite the devastating pleasure he could conjure within her just by laying one big, intrusive finger in a strategic spot. She'd been spanked and humiliated and forced to climaxes that she hadn't wanted or expected, trussed up for his amusement and her own shame and degradation.

But the truth of it was that she couldn't go. She was as tied to this place as she ever could be; she knew her mother would never leave it in this lifetime, and there was no way she could leave her mother.

She was caught between him the rock and her mother the hard place, and neither was ever going to budge, she knew it. The only thing Celia could do was hope that he was as good as his word – that he'd claim this place for his own and fix it up.

She stayed and soothed her mother as long as she could, knowing that if he awoke before she was able to get back to him, she was likely to get another of those humiliating spankings he seemed to thoroughly enjoy delivering, but still the time got away from her and she knew when she stepped out of the cabin that she had probably stayed much longer than she should have.

As she crossed around by the front steps, she saw him standing there imperiously and knew she was caught. Her bottom – and the rest of that entire area – immediately began to tingle at the heat – and anger – she could see in his gaze even from that distance. His crooked finger quickened her pace until she practically ran up the steps to him – hating herself for it all the way.

"Where were you?"

"Foraging for food," she lied, not wanting to consider what might happen if he found her out.

His eyebrow rose. "I see you didn't find any."

"No, Sir." How'd that slip out? she wondered. He certainly hadn't done anything that warranted that kind of respectful address from her.

He grabbed her hand and brought her back upstairs, saying, "We'll get foodstuffs when we go into town later."

Celia wanted to blanch back from him right then and there on the stairs, where she probably would have tumbled to her death. But he had too tight a hold on her hand and she couldn't go anywhere but where he dragged her, which was right back into the room where she'd surrendered her mind and body to him.

"Stay." He gave her a look that said she'd regret it if she didn't, so she stayed put, still shaking in what had been an expensive pair of shoes, at one time.

When he reappeared, it was with her grandmother's old looking glass, which he set up in the corner near the bed on its thin mahogany feet. Celia used to love the mirror, which had generally resided in her parents' room – it was almost big enough to see every inch of herself in, but it also tilted top and bottom to catch those important few missing inches. But she wondered – and worried – what he was going to do with it.

Aaron crossed the room, moving past her to prop the door up so that it was as closed as it was going to get until he could get take some tools to it, then he turned back to her and began to undo her dress, much as he had down by the tub last night, working silently until she was completely nude before him.

Suddenly he realized that he hadn't kissed her properly yet, and he bent and took her mouth with his, plundering that moist cavern with his tongue, undeterred by her muffled squeal and thwarted attempts to escape his embrace. Finally, though, he put her struggles to an end and wrapped her arms behind her, holding them there with one hand while the other hand made free with her body as he coerced it into arching against him by pulling down on those captive arms, causing those tantalizing breasts to thrust into the rough material of his shirt, dragging those pink, agonizingly crested nipples across it again and again, cruelly and heartlessly sensitizing them with every movement he made.

Without missing a beat, he turned her away from him, dragging his mouth from hers and making her bend at the waist until she had to brace her palms on the bed or fall over. It was then that he produced that awful paddle, and before she could defend herself against it, he gave her five hard swats with it, and she knew what all the other people she'd seen who were victims of that horrid thing were screaming about.

"You are not to leave the house without telling me where you're going. You are no longer free to roam about as you please, Celia. You've forgotten; I own you, and when you do something I consider to be wrong, you'll be paddled or spanked or punished in any way I see fit," Aaron lectured while paddling her mercilessly.

His discipline this time was sharp and hard, but quick. He didn't give her a chance to even really cry over it. Instead, he tugged her up and brought her over to the mirror, holding her tight in his arms, comforting her as much as she would let him, holding her close against him while his hands roamed up and down that sleek white back, reaching down to cup the cheeks he'd just blistered, with their flaming red reminders of how recently he'd wielded the paddle against them, fingering the slight red blisters raised by the holes.

She groaned as he cupped her bottom, trying to hold herself away from him, not wanting to accept comfort, not wanting to emit the moans he was eliciting just by stroking her so gently, as if he cared about her. But Celia knew he didn't. He wanted her. She could already feel that huge, ugly weapon of his rising behind the buttons of her pants, poking against her belly, pressing insistently into it as if he had every right to.

"Turn around," he whispered, giving her no choice in the matter – he simply flipped her over, still holding her against him. Aaron found himself nearly climaxing just at the sight of her in the mirror, pressed back against him by his big brown hand on her tummy. The fanciful thought flitted through his mind that it would be just that much better for him if she had been a willing participant, but that might happen down the line, and it might not. Regardless, he was going to make sure that the both of them had a good time.

Celia, her face wet with the tears he'd wrought from his vicious use of the paddle, got an eyeful when she was first trapped into place against him, and her whole body blushed a bright red. Since then, she'd done the proper and ladylike thing – even though she was no longer a lady – and closed her eyes against that raw, sensual vision of naked self with him standing strong and steady and covetous behind her. But somehow, that just made things worse. It amplified his every caress – and he was caressing her, not groping or grabbing, but almost massaging – until she knew that she was dripping down there again, and she told him that, flat out, assuming it would be an excuse that would deter him from repeating what he'd done to her last night.

"I'm having my monthly," she stated baldly, never having said such a thing to a man – and barely ever any other person – in her life.

Aaron's eyebrow rose. He hadn't seen any sign of that when he'd touched her last evening. He wondered if she was mistaking the small speck of blood that had signaled the end of her virginity with her monthly flow. "Well," Aaron breathed at her neck after he'd teased and tempted her there with gentle nibbles, "let's just see about that."

His hand went immediately to her crotch, enormous middle finger parting those pouting lips in a no nonsense manner and delving into her until he found what he sought, returning a glistening wet fingertip to present it in front of her nose.

There was no response from her whatsoever, and it took him a minute until he realized that her eyelids were screwed tightly shut. "Open your eyes, Celia, and keep them open."

She shook her head, knowing she did not want to see whatever the blood that was most surely decorating his finger.

"Celia!" he barked softly, near her ear, surprising her into responding.

And there it was, inches from her face, so near she could smell her own muskiness, despite the unexpected bath yesterday. His finger was wet, all right, wet with something that definitely wasn't blood.

Aaron could see her confusion. "Remember last night when I said I could tell that you were enjoying what I was doing to you?" He waited for her to nod, then decided she probably wasn't going to, being a lady and not wanting to be reminded of how she'd responded to the advances of a scalawag Yank



such as himself. "Well, this is a good thing. It's what happens to your body when I touch you – it makes itself ready to receive me – to receive this." He took one of her hands where it hung limply at her side, and brought it behind her, to feel how big he'd gotten even within the confines of his pants.

She jerked her hand back as if he'd scalded her, her face the perfect picture of ladylike outrage. Celia tried to make a break for it then, but he wasn't about to let her go – and where was she going to go stark naked in the light of day, anyway?

Oh, dear God, he was at her again, in front of that awful mirror. A good six inches of the glass itself was gone from the top, and it was cracked along the sides, but the middle of it was as perfect as the day it was made, and it showed every disgusting, hideously embarrassing, disgustingly pleasurable thing he did to her, and her headless, heedless reflection went along with every bit of it. Her nipples stiffened to enormous proportions, and every time he reached across her body, he scraped their sensitiveness with that rough shirt of his, making them red and achy even when he wasn't touching them.

And he barely left them alone.

Celia thought he'd had his way with her last night – at least that had been in the darkness. This was in the light of day, when anyone could see them, although there was no one around to do the seeing, thankfully. But that meant she was alone and at the mercy of her captor, whose huge hands cupped her breasts at will, squeezing them gently enough, not hurting her at all, but the humiliation of being so handled and having to watch it, seeing the brown of his rough fingers and thumbs as they pinched her twin pink nipples, tweaking them, tugging them in tandem enough to make her catch her breath, but no harder.

She almost wished he'd hurt her, so that she could hate him even more than she did. She didn't want her body to tighten and swell and throb when his hands claimed her like it did. There was no sense of hesitancy whatsoever in the man – he saw what he wanted – in this case, her – and he took it. He liked the looks of Trey Rivers, and it was his. Just because he said so.

"Mmmmmahhhhhh!" Celia was mortified that she couldn't seem to keep those disturbing moans from climbing out of her throat, and they got louder as he continued to tease her breasts.

But then he shifted his attention somewhat, keeping one hand on her breast, holding her in place but also cupping her flesh intimately, and snaked his hand down to her cleft where it had been minutes before, renewing itself in her moisture then rubbing over and over that sparkly spot he'd found unerringly before, the one that made her want to abandon all pretence of civility, lean her head back against him and arch her body into his touch until he brought to the same ecstatic explosion he'd urged her to last night.

Her body's desire to move, to cup his hand to her, to move in some way that encouraged what he was doing to her was almost irresistible, and Celia barely managed to control herself, to keep from writhing and moaning and reveling in the sensations he was so effortlessly creating. His mouth settled at that delicate spot where neck joined shoulder as he nibbled her with just the barest edges of his teeth, while his hands were full of much more interesting quarry – and she had to watch every bit of it in the glass as he played her like the high strung fiddle she was.

"That's it, that's it," he whispered hoarse encouragement as he felt her body overtaking that stubborn, puritanical mind of hers. "Just let go. Just let me make you feel good, sweetie."

Celia was nearly sobbing with pleasure when he sank to his knees before her, spreading her legs a little to accommodate himself before he caught each wrist as it hung by her sides and pulled them back just a little behind her, so that she had no choice but to arch the heart of her womanhood directly into his waiting mouth.

There was nothing she could do, there was nowhere she could go – she was held captive by those strong fingers and that hot, seeking mouth of his. His beard and mustache tickled a little against that rarified flesh, but as soon as he eagerly reached out and licked her up and down with the broad flat of his unrelenting tongue she thought she was going to faint dead away. It came from nowhere, with no warning, a fire in her that burned twice as deeply as the one last night, because now she knew this was

nothing to be afraid of, that it heralded an end that was more pleasure than God should allow one person to experience in a lifetime, and she knew he wasn't going to stop until she'd surrendered just that prize to him, again.

And she was right.

This time, she screamed with it, it was so hard and yet so wonderful, violent in intensity yet blooming through out her body with a sharp poignant edge that almost made her want to cry. And he held her through it all, held her to him, coaxing it all of out her at first, not letting her get away with half measures, but then comforting her at the last, when she crumpled on him in pure, blissful exhaustion.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

Aaron held her tight in his arms as she came down from the heights, noting against his will how good she felt in his arms, her small woman's body the exact compliment to his. He tried to shrug the feelings off. He didn't expect them or want them. She was no more to him than the house or the fields that he was going to go into town today and buy. She came with it, part of the lock, stock, and barrel, apparently, and as such he intended to enjoy her to the fullest extent, but he didn't want or need tender feelings towards her. They would just get in the way.

For once, Celia didn't fight against herself and when he cuddled her to him, lending a supportive and comforting shoulder as she practically straddled him where he lay, she relaxed, dropping her forehead to his chest as she fought for breath. She could feel the ridge of him beneath her dewy nether parts, but he didn't seem to be making any move towards invading her as he had before, and she had to admit she was surprised, but glad. She was still somewhat sore from having been despoiled, and she knew that if he insisted on that act again, that it was going to hurt her something fierce.

That was exactly what Aaron was thinking, and as much as it was going to kill him, he had already decided that he was going to give her a little respite to heal. Not too long of one, or he'd end up with the blue balls something fierce, he could tell, around her. But although he'd abandoned a huge chunk of the manners his Mother had taught him, he wasn't quite that much of a brute. Besides, his leg wasn't going to let him do too much more than what he'd done last night without a major rebellion. Having her sit on him like this was about equally as painful as it was pleasurable, and although he knew in the future that the scales were going to tip heavily in the favor of excruciating pleasure, he wasn't sure exactly how long he could hold this position, despite its obvious advantages.

And, although he knew of many other ways that she could satisfy him, he knew that part of desire was just the wanting and not having. Self denial had become a way of life in the past few years, and he had a lot of things to get done today. He'd spend a day hard as a rock, his erection – and the ladylike sway of her hips – reminding him every step of the way of what he'd passed up.

But come this evening, he could even the score in one of his most favorite manners, and he was, he admitted to himself with not a small amount of surprise, looking forward to teaching his starchy Miss Celia Weston one of the best ways to please a man.

That thought brought him up short as he was helping her up, and he frowned fiercely. For some strange reason, he couldn't countenance the fact that, having been the first man to claim her, and shortly teach her all manner of pleasurable pursuits in the bedroom, she might find and do the same things with someone else sometime down the road, when he'd had his fill of her and let her go. The idea of her with someone else left a very bad taste in his mouth, and he didn't want to explore the idea any further.

He didn't have any plans to loose her on the world any time soon, so he put the unpleasant thought out of his mind and got up to find that Celia was staring down at something on the floor, her eyes full of tears.

"What is it?" he asked, moving past her to follow her line of sight to the curtains they'd used as bedclothes last night, and the dark spot of what could only be blood that had caught her eye. He didn't want her dwelling on things, either, so he issued an order that snapped her out of her tearful reverie and into an outraged frenzy. "Get dressed. We're going into town."

"I can't go into town with you," she pronounced as if that was going to be the end of the matter, as she brought her dress and chemise over her head clumsily, slipping easily into those worn shoes. Celia began to run after him, almost bumping into him when he stopped at the door, realizing that he had watched her dress with a critical eye.

"We'll get you a new dress or two while we're there, and some new shoes."

She hadn't had a new dress in longer than she wanted to remember, and she most certainly didn't want one from him. She – the clothes horse, who had a new wardrobe from Paris every season and wore only the most fashionable of dresses to the most exclusive of society balls – had worn the same serviceable brown dress every day since forever, it seemed; a dress she wouldn't have even noticed years ago, but one that wouldn't call attention to her and wore well, and wouldn't show the dirt she was forced to dig through for sustenance.

And she'd continue to wear it happily and proudly rather than take charity from him. She refused to think of it as any sort of payment for what she'd endured. She hadn't leapt from grace, she'd been pushed, and she was not going to become the kind of woman who did things like that for pay.

He reached back and grabbed her hand, pulling her out of the room and down the stairs, then out the back door towards the forest where they met Patsy and her husband coming out of the woods.

"What have you done to my little girl?" Patsy yelled, ignoring Aaron entirely and reaching out to enfold Celia against her more than ample bosom.

Ben tried to restrain her, but he ended up only smiling up at Aaron uneasily. "She don't mean nothing by it, Sir."

"Don't you be saying what I mean and what I don't mean, old man. This man here is a Yankee carpetbagger. You got eyes like I do – didn't you see what he was doin' to her last night?" Unlike her husband, Patsy fairly glared at Aaron as she held and rocked the woman she still thought of as her baby.

Aaron decided not to acknowledge the old woman's concerns, and went directly to the heart of the matter, addressing Ben directly. "Do you two want honest work for honest wages?"

"You know we do, Sir," the white haired old man answered eagerly. "But there's nothin' around here, 'specially for Negroes."

"Well, there's plenty to do around here. I'll pay both in crops and in wages. You round up anyone you know – and trust –" he added with a warning look, "– I don't want no troublemakers. I want workers. You can both start any time you like, make me a list of what you need as you see it, and I'll get it."

The three of them stood there staring at him, completely dumbstruck. It had been so long since they'd known anyone who had any money at all, to say nothing of being willingly parting with it. Now that the South was lost, any Confederate blue backs many people had put aside for the odd rainy day weren't worth the paper they were printed on.

It hadn't stopped raining for quite some time for most of them, including what was left of Celia's family, not that they had anything tucked away besides their hopes and dreams of a better day. And Aaron Denehy certainly wasn't the harbinger any of them thought of in regards to that day, by any means.

He reached down and literally tore Celia out of her mammy's arms, dragging her along behind him. His stride was too long for her to keep up with easily, even with his limp. He brought her into the woods, and she wondered if he was going to kill her there, if the trip into town was just a diversion from his true intention. He was wearing his gun belt – he certainly had the means to do it even without the weapon, and he had more than enough nerve.

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He managed to get himself up into the saddle, but it wasn't pretty. He'd be happy when that damned leg was healed, although it was doing much better than it ever would have if he'd stayed in that blasted place they called a hospital. It would be better labeled a butcher shop.

Aaron leaned down and brought Celia up behind him one handed, using the other to control the prancing horse, who wasn't any too happy with the added weight. Aaron was decidedly happy with it the arrangement, himself; he thoroughly enjoyed the feeling of her breasts bobbing against his back, her warmth pressed tightly to him.

He hadn't considered that she might not know how to ride, and asked belatedly as he tried to look back at her as best he could, "Are you all right?"

She nodded at first, then realized he could neither hear nor see that. "Yes, I'm fine."

The trip into Hennessey, the nearest town, was long and depressing for Celia. Fields that should have been full of slaves harvesting their bounty were burned and ruined beyond recognition – much like those around Trey Rivers. Several of the plantations where she'd been whirled around the ballroom floor, or run up and down the stairs with the owners' daughters had been burned to the ground. Others stood like broken shells, uninhabited except for the occasional squatter and the myriad ghosts of its past occupants and happier times.

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knew her, but she was in luck. Now she just had to hope that old Mr. Crandall wasn't there behind the counter, as he always was . . .

"How can I help you?"

She knew that voice, and tried to duck behind the display of dry goods.

Aaron rattled off a huge list of things, then turned around to look for her. "Celia, did you see anything you wanted?" he asked, knowing she was in there somewhere – she damned well better be.

"No, thank you."

The welcoming look on Mr. Crandall's face that had fairly bloomed with such a big order was quite squelched when he realized that the man ordering it was a no good Yankee, but money was money, and the man paid in gold and he couldn't really turn it down. Aaron arranged for a delivery as soon as possible, and the proprietor nodded, saying it would be this afternoon before he could have anyone get out there with all the things he'd requested.

"Miss Celia, is that you?" he asked, shocked, when Celia had no choice but to join Aaron as he walked out the door.

Mr. Crandall had known her since she was a babe in her mother's arms, and she couldn't rightly just ignore his call to her. Celia turned, her face bright as a beet. "Yes, Mr. Crandall. I hope you and the Missus are doing well after the troubles," she said softly, tentatively.

"Miss Celia, you're with him?" he asked, incredulously. "Why, he's a - " he couldn't quite bring himself to say it with Aaron standing right there, glowering at him, but as Aaron proceeded to shepherd her out of the store he muttered quite loud enough for both of them to hear, "What would your father think?"

And it only went downhill from there. Word spread fast in a small town, and with both Hawkins at the Livery and Crandall from the store jawing away to anyone who'd listen about who and what they'd just seen, it was all over town in a matter of minutes.

They walked the short distance down the street to the lumberyard, and ladies who, before the war, had begged for an invitation to one of the annual balls at Trey Oaks, now lifted their skirts – granted, their homespun skirts - and gave her the cut, deliberately moving to the other side of the street as she came towards them on Aaron's arm.

The third time that happened Celia had had just about enough. "I think I'd prefer to wait in the carriage, please," she kept her chin down. She was close to tears yet again, and wanted to shed them by herself.

Aaron was not oblivious to what was going on, but he was the type who would meet something like that head on, and rub the offenders' noses in it, rather than shrink away like Celia was doing. "C'mon, honey, you have nothing to be ashamed of. They're just jealous because you don't have a man who's going to buy you a brand new wardrobe, top to bottom, and fix up your house as good as new."

"They don't need a man like you – they have husbands," Celia returned quietly, still staring at the ground.

"Likely dead husbands," he said, thinking it was odd to say when trying to cheer someone up.

"Better a dead husband than to sleep with the enemy."

Aaron's jaw was about to shatter; he was grinding it fit to break every one of his teeth, eying her with a hard glare. "Well, I can see that this isn't the time to take you to the dressmakers."

Her eyes shot to his and she gave him a pleading look. He could see that she'd already begun to cry, and for some reason, he could stand her tears even less than he could most women's. So he relented and took her back to the carriage, but he bade her stay there for a moment and went to the dressmaker's himself, causing quite a commotion in doing so.

Women of all ages and social strata fluttered around him like flies to honey, oohing and ahing that he was there, and that none of their husbands would ever come to this place with them for any reason. But as soon as he opened his mouth, everyone but the dressmaker herself left in a hurry, as if he carried

some sort of disease they might catch, and he knew he had just single handedly compounded Celia's problems just by his mere presence.

The seamstress, Mrs. Beauregard, was of the kindly old lady sort, and, as a businesswoman and times being what they were, she could hardly be fussy about her clientele. Aaron tried to describe the size and fit of what he wanted, and knew he was failing miserably at it. A thought came into his head, and he decided to try it. "Do you know Celia Weston?"

She nodded. "Oh, yes, Celia and her Mother were two of my best customers – I used to order dresses for them all the way from Paris."

"Her mother?"

"Yes. Nora is a wonderful woman."

"Is?"

Mrs. Beauregard shrugged. "As far as I knew, Celia and her mother were both still clinging to Trey Rivers, not that there was much there to support them, mind you, it being tromped over and through and occupied a time or two by one side or the other. But I guess they were hoping against hope that one of the brothers or Gib Weston himself would come home and rescue them, bless their hearts. I haven't seen either of them in a while. Can't be sure of anything these days, but the last thing I knew she was a little tetchy in the head, but fine."

Aaron tucked that gem of information into the back of his mind and steered the conversation towards something more practical, asking if she might have something on hand that she thought would fit Celia that he could take with him.

If Mrs. Beauregard thought that that was an odd request coming from him, she kept her mouth shut about it. "I do believe I have, young man. As a matter of fact, I think I still have the last dress she ordered before the walls started tumbling down that was never picked up."

She produced three dresses – one a beautiful ball gown of cream silk with gold embroidery and ecru lace at the sleeves and around the – too low, he noted – bustline. The other two were nowhere near as fancy but still of excellent quality and worlds away from her dreary brown – one was a soft, baby blue cotton with a eyelet ribbons, and the other was a somewhat plainer but still very pretty pale green gingham.

He thanked Mrs. Beauregard profusely, then leaned a little closer to ask, "Would you possibly have any shoes, Ma'am, and hose, perhaps?"

When he left he was weighted down by his purchases, and his pocket was much lighter for the effort. He tucked everything into the carriage as carefully as he could while Celia remained entirely silent throughout, looking completely cowed.

The muscle started working in Aaron's jaw again, but he kept silent, too, not really knowing what to say. He drove to the temporary assessor's office which was actually just a table in the Town Hall, to do whatever was necessary to purchase Trey Rivers. He didn't have enough gold on him to pay for it outright, but he signed a bank draft that they would present against his accounts in Maine, and it was as good as done. The assessor himself was from Boston, and they spoke a little about New England, then the gentleman said that once the draft cleared, he'd bring the deed to the place out to Trey Rivers himself.

The trip back to the house was accomplished in near silence. But if she didn't want to talk, then he wasn't going to require it of her. It was rare enough to find a woman who could hold her tongue, he thought with a smile.

When they arrived back at Trey Rivers, they could already see the improvements Ben had commenced, along with a small band of workers. Aaron helped her down and sent her upstairs with the command that she get out of that God awful dress and into something pretty, then he unhitched the horses and, since the barn was still going to be unusable for a while, he hobbled them and set them loose in the back yard to graze, then went get Ben to round up the men he'd brought so that he could speak to them.

Celia could hear him as he spoke to the small crowd. "My name is Aaron Denehy. I own this property now, and I intend to do my best to restore it. I need you men to help me in that. It's going to be a lot of work, but I'll pay fair wages, as well as give each of you a small parcel of land to work for shares . . ."

His voice faded as she wandered into the house towards the bedroom he seemed to have claimed for them.

"Miss Celia! Miss Celia!" It was Patsy, scurrying out from the kitchen. Celia hadn't even noticed her there as she'd passed. Patsy took the dresses she'd been carrying away from immediately, and grabbed her by the arms, giving her a thorough once over. "Child, you're so skinny some dog's gonna take you for a bone any minute. Come in here and let's get you something to eat."

It was in Celia's mind to say no, but she knew that Patsy would take offense at that – and she also knew that Patsy wouldn't have any of it, regardless. It seemed that everyone felt it was their right to drag her to and fro, and Celia was just too tired to fight it right now.

She ended up standing in the kitchen since there weren't any chairs, eating an apple that Ben had brought to Patsy. "I wish I had something you could sit on, Miss Celia. You look about to collapse on a body at any moment."

"I'm fine," Celia reassured wearily, trying to smile. "And there'll be chairs – well, stools at least – coming this afternoon." A certain amount of the mammoth list Aaron had given Mr. Crandall – only some of which had she overheard – was going to need to be ordered. He'd requested the basics of furniture, but hadn't gone into any kind of detail, half hoping Celia would want take the reins and do that.

But she'd been feeling much too full of the censure of her neighbors to be of any help.

"There will?"

"Yes. He ordered all kinds of supplies – kitchen stuff, too."

Patsy had continued to clean and set things right in the disaster of a kitchen while she'd also kept an eagle eye on the young woman who was as dear to her as the children she'd kissed and set off on a dangerous journey to the North, where they'd be safe. Patsy and Ben had had it hard during the War, but Miss Celia and Mrs. Nora had it worse than anyone. Patsy and Ben hadn't had anything material to lose – although they'd lost at least one son that they knew of.

But the Weston women had lost everything – husband, sons, brothers, their house, their clothes, their entire way of life. And through it all, through everything, Miss Celia had been strong and kept them going, sometimes just on sheer determination.

Now, after a morning of backbreaking labor, the place looked like someone had come along and shown some interest in fixing it up, rescuing it from its shamefully rundown condition, and that someone had shown more than a little interest in Miss Celia. Patsy knew that what was going on between those two wasn't right without the benefit of marriage vows being said, but at least the man was looking after her like he should.

She didn't hold with a man laying a hand on his wife in anger, but Patsy also knew that whatever it was that she'd done, Miss Ceeley had probably earned the whopping she got last night at the Yankee's hands. And she didn't look any the worse for the wear this morning, truth be told. A little more tired, but that was to be expected. There was no black eye, no broken arm, no bruises of any sort that Patsy could see.

And this new man – this new Master or whatever he wanted to be called – the words didn't make no never mind to her; it was all pretty much the same position she'd always been in, tied to the kitchen one way or the other – was doing all the right things, buying stuff and working the men into the ground like they needed to be to give them some feeling of worth about themselves after everything that had happened, promising wages and land and crops . . .

So far, he'd kept to his word about things. Patsy just hoped that he continued to do so.



## CHAPTER NINE

Aaron held her tight in his arms as she came down from the heights, noting against his will how good she felt in his arms, her small woman's body the exact compliment to his. He tried to shrug the feelings off. He didn't expect them or want them. She was no more to him than the house or the fields that he was going to go into town today and buy. She came with it, part of the lock, stock, and barrel, apparently, and as such he intended to enjoy her to the fullest extent, but he didn't want or need tender feelings towards her. They would just get in the way.

For once, Celia didn't fight against herself and when he cuddled her to him, lending a supportive and comforting shoulder as she practically straddled him where he lay, she relaxed, dropping her forehead to his chest as she fought for breath. She could feel the ridge of him beneath her dewy nether parts, but he didn't seem to be making any move towards invading her as he had before, and she had to admit she was surprised, but glad. She was still somewhat sore from having been despoiled, and she knew that if he insisted on that act again, that it was going to hurt her something fierce.

That was exactly what Aaron was thinking, and as much as it was going to kill him, he had already decided that he was going to give her a little respite to heal. Not too long of one, or he'd end up with the blue balls something fierce, he could tell, around her. But although he'd abandoned a huge chunk of the manners his Mother had taught him, he wasn't quite that much of a brute. Besides, his leg wasn't going to let him do too much more than what he'd done last night without a major rebellion. Having her sit on him like this was about equally as painful as it was pleasurable, and although he knew in the future that the scales were going to tip heavily in the favor of excruciating pleasure, he wasn't sure exactly how long he could hold this position, despite its obvious advantages.

And, although he knew of many other ways that she could satisfy him, he knew that part of desire was just the wanting and not having. Self denial had become a way of life in the past few years, and he had a lot of things to get done today. He'd spend a day hard as a rock, his erection – and the ladylike sway of her hips – reminding him every step of the way of what he'd passed up.

But come this evening, he could even the score in one of his most favorite manners, and he was, he admitted to himself with not a small amount of surprise, looking forward to teaching his starchy Miss Celia Weston one of the best ways to please a man.

That thought brought him up short as he was helping her up, and he frowned fiercely. For some strange reason, he couldn't countenance the fact that, having been the first man to claim her, and shortly teach her all manner of pleasurable pursuits in the bedroom, she might find and do the same things with someone else sometime down the road, when he'd had his fill of her and let her go. The idea of her with someone else left a very bad taste in his mouth, and he didn't want to explore the idea any further.

He didn't have any plans to loose her on the world any time soon, so he put the unpleasant thought out of his mind and got up to find that Celia was staring down at something on the floor, her eyes full of tears.

"What is it?" he asked, moving past her to follow her line of sight to the curtains they'd used as bedclothes last night, and the dark spot of what could only be blood that had caught her eye. He didn't want her dwelling on things, either, so he issued an order that snapped her out of her tearful reverie and into an outraged frenzy. "Get dressed. We're going into town."

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Mr. Crandall had known her since she was a babe in her mother's arms, and she couldn't rightly just ignore his call to her. Celia turned, her face bright as a beet. "Yes, Mr. Crandall. I hope you and the Missus are doing well after the troubles," she said softly, tentatively.

"Miss Celia, you're with him?" he asked, incredulously. "Why, he's a - " he couldn't quite bring himself to say it with Aaron standing right there, glowering at him, but as Aaron proceeded to shepherd her out of the store he muttered quite loud enough for both of them to hear, "What would your father think?"

And it only went downhill from there. Word spread fast in a small town, and with both Hawkins at the Livery and Crandall from the store jawing away to anyone who'd listen about who and what they'd just seen, it was all over town in a matter of minutes.

They walked the short distance down the street to the lumberyard, and ladies who, before the war, had begged for an invitation to one of the annual balls at Trey Oaks, now lifted their skirts – granted, their homespun skirts - and gave her the cut, deliberately moving to the other side of the street as she came towards them on Aaron's arm.

The third time that happened Celia had had just about enough. "I think I'd prefer to wait in the carriage, please," she kept her chin down. She was close to tears yet again, and wanted to shed them by herself.

Aaron was not oblivious to what was going on, but he was the type who would meet something like that head on, and rub the offenders' noses in it, rather than shrink away like Celia was doing. "C'mon, honey, you have nothing to be ashamed of. They're just jealous because you don't have a man who's going to buy you a brand new wardrobe, top to bottom, and fix up your house as good as new."

"They don't need a man like you – they have husbands," Celia returned quietly, still staring at the ground.

"Likely dead husbands," he said, thinking it was odd to say when trying to cheer someone up.

"Better a dead husband than to sleep with the enemy."

Aaron's jaw was about to shatter; he was grinding it fit to break every one of his teeth, eying her with a hard glare. "Well, I can see that this isn't the time to take you to the dressmakers."

Her eyes shot to his and she gave him a pleading look. He could see that she'd already begun to cry, and for some reason, he could stand her tears even less than he could most women's. So he relented and took her back to the carriage, but he bade her stay there for a moment and went to the dressmaker's himself, causing quite a commotion in doing so.

Women of all ages and social strata fluttered around him like flies to honey, oohing and ahing that he was there, and that none of their husbands would ever come to this place with them for any reason. But as soon as he opened his mouth, everyone but the dressmaker herself left in a hurry, as if he carried

some sort of disease they might catch, and he knew he had just single handedly compounded Celia's problems just by his mere presence.

The seamstress, Mrs. Beauregard, was of the kindly old lady sort, and, as a businesswoman and times being what they were, she could hardly be fussy about her clientele. Aaron tried to describe the size and fit of what he wanted, and knew he was failing miserably at it. A thought came into his head, and he decided to try it. "Do you know Celia Weston?"

She nodded. "Oh, yes, Celia and her Mother were two of my best customers – I used to order dresses for them all the way from Paris."

"Her mother?"

"Yes. Nora is a wonderful woman."

"Is?"

Mrs. Beauregard shrugged. "As far as I knew, Celia and her mother were both still clinging to Trey Rivers, not that there was much there to support them, mind you, it being tromped over and through and occupied a time or two by one side or the other. But I guess they were hoping against hope that one of the brothers or Gib Weston himself would come home and rescue them, bless their hearts. I haven't seen either of them in a while. Can't be sure of anything these days, but the last thing I knew she was a little tetchy in the head, but fine."

Aaron tucked that gem of information into the back of his mind and steered the conversation towards something more practical, asking if she might have something on hand that she thought would fit Celia that he could take with him.

If Mrs. Beauregard thought that that was an odd request coming from him, she kept her mouth shut about it. "I do believe I have, young man. As a matter of fact, I think I still have the last dress she ordered before the walls started tumbling down that was never picked up."

She produced three dresses – one a beautiful ball gown of cream silk with gold embroidery and ecru lace at the sleeves and around the – too low, he noted – bustline. The other two were nowhere near as fancy but still of excellent quality and worlds away from her dreary brown – one was a soft, baby blue cotton with a eyelet ribbons, and the other was a somewhat plainer but still very pretty pale green gingham.

He thanked Mrs. Beauregard profusely, then leaned a little closer to ask, "Would you possibly have any shoes, Ma'am, and hose, perhaps?"

When he left he was weighted down by his purchases, and his pocket was much lighter for the effort. He tucked everything into the carriage as carefully as he could while Celia remained entirely silent throughout, looking completely cowed.

The muscle started working in Aaron's jaw again, but he kept silent, too, not really knowing what to say. He drove to the temporary assessor's office which was actually just a table in the Town Hall, to do whatever was necessary to purchase Trey Rivers. He didn't have enough gold on him to pay for it outright, but he signed a bank draft that they would present against his accounts in Maine, and it was as good as done. The assessor himself was from Boston, and they spoke a little about New England, then the gentleman said that once the draft cleared, he'd bring the deed to the place out to Trey Rivers himself.

The trip back to the house was accomplished in near silence. But if she didn't want to talk, then he wasn't going to require it of her. It was rare enough to find a woman who could hold her tongue, he thought with a smile.

When they arrived back at Trey Rivers, they could already see the improvements Ben had commenced, along with a small band of workers. Aaron helped her down and sent her upstairs with the command that she get out of that God awful dress and into something pretty, then he unhitched the horses and, since the barn was still going to be unusable for a while, he hobbled them and set them loose in the back yard to graze, then went get Ben to round up the men he'd brought so that he could speak to them.

Celia could hear him as he spoke to the small crowd. "My name is Aaron Denehy. I own this property now, and I intend to do my best to restore it. I need you men to help me in that. It's going to be a lot of work, but I'll pay fair wages, as well as give each of you a small parcel of land to work for shares . . ."

His voice faded as she wandered into the house towards the bedroom he seemed to have claimed for them.

"Miss Celia! Miss Celia!" It was Patsy, scurrying out from the kitchen. Celia hadn't even noticed her there as she'd passed. Patsy took the dresses she'd been carrying away from immediately, and grabbed her by the arms, giving her a thorough once over. "Child, you're so skinny some dog's gonna take you for a bone any minute. Come in here and let's get you something to eat."

It was in Celia's mind to say no, but she knew that Patsy would take offense at that – and she also knew that Patsy wouldn't have any of it, regardless. It seemed that everyone felt it was their right to drag her to and fro, and Celia was just too tired to fight it right now.

She ended up standing in the kitchen since there weren't any chairs, eating an apple that Ben had brought to Patsy. "I wish I had something you could sit on, Miss Celia. You look about to collapse on a body at any moment."

"I'm fine," Celia reassured wearily, trying to smile. "And there'll be chairs – well, stools at least – coming this afternoon." A certain amount of the mammoth list Aaron had given Mr. Crandall – only some of which had she overheard – was going to need to be ordered. He'd requested the basics of furniture, but hadn't gone into any kind of detail, half hoping Celia would want take the reins and do that.

But she'd been feeling much too full of the censure of her neighbors to be of any help.

"There will?"

"Yes. He ordered all kinds of supplies – kitchen stuff, too."

Patsy had continued to clean and set things right in the disaster of a kitchen while she'd also kept an eagle eye on the young woman who was as dear to her as the children she'd kissed and set off on a dangerous journey to the North, where they'd be safe. Patsy and Ben had had it hard during the War, but Miss Celia and Mrs. Nora had it worse than anyone. Patsy and Ben hadn't had anything material to lose – although they'd lost at least one son that they knew of.

But the Weston women had lost everything – husband, sons, brothers, their house, their clothes, their entire way of life. And through it all, through everything, Miss Celia had been strong and kept them going, sometimes just on sheer determination.

Now, after a morning of backbreaking labor, the place looked like someone had come along and shown some interest in fixing it up, rescuing it from its shamefully rundown condition, and that someone had shown more than a little interest in Miss Celia. Patsy knew that what was going on between those two wasn't right without the benefit of marriage vows being said, but at least the man was looking after her like he should.

She didn't hold with a man laying a hand on his wife in anger, but Patsy also knew that whatever it was that she'd done, Miss Ceeley had probably earned the whopping she got last night at the Yankee's hands. And she didn't look any the worse for the wear this morning, truth be told. A little more tired, but that was to be expected. There was no black eye, no broken arm, no bruises of any sort that Patsy could see.

And this new man – this new Master or whatever he wanted to be called – the words didn't make no never mind to her; it was all pretty much the same position she'd always been in, tied to the kitchen one way or the other – was doing all the right things, buying stuff and working the men into the ground like they needed to be to give them some feeling of worth about themselves after everything that had happened, promising wages and land and crops . . .

So far, he'd kept to his word about things. Patsy just hoped that he continued to do so.

## CHAPTER TEN

Celia dipped the rags she was using to wash years of accumulated mud off the portico and the front steps into the wooden bucket of lye and warm water, then bent over to attack the grubby wood again as if she was punching a certain Yankee's midsection. It had been over a month since that fateful night he'd forcibly insinuated himself into her life, and although she'd never admit that the place was much better off for his stewardship, she most certainly was not.

That first night they'd spent in the house he'd only just begun to repair and restore had set the tone for every night since then, and, she thought with a grimace, probably every night for the rest of her life, if she was unlucky enough not to die of mortification first. Aaron made sure she stayed awake almost all that night as he had his way with her several times during those long, sultry hours. He certainly hadn't let her get away with pretending that she was asleep – not since then, either, although she'd attempted it several times. There had been a method to his madness of making her rest all day that day.

He'd rolled her towards him, so that they were each on their sides, and put both of her palms on his chest, sighing audibly when her palms rested on his flesh. "Touch me, Celia. It feels good. I like it as much as you like it when I touch you."

She had started to open her mouth to correct him and lie outrageously by insisting that she most certainly did not enjoy his touch in any way, shape or form, but she could see that he was waiting for her to do exactly that, so she closed it again with a bit of a glare at him. She didn't want to like what he did to her, but she had to admit that she was intrigued by the idea that he might enjoy her touch, too.

It was an angle she hadn't considered – she was out of practice. Celia had been a master at the art of flirting and cajoling and flattering the men who had swarmed around her since she was twelve or so and coming into her womanhood, but those skills – such as they were – weren't in much demand when one was on one's knees in the muck, trying to scrape up something – anything – edible.

She bit her lip, thinking back wistfully. Those flirtations at various balls and church gatherings – always overly chaperone by her parents and brothers, of course – were so innocent and naïve. She wasn't that carefree girl anymore, and she never would be again. She was no better than a concubine, or Hester Prynne. She should have a big red "A" on any dress she ended up wearing, although with him around everyone would automatically know who and what she was.

But her curiosity had been piqued, and since she'd already been dragged into the gutter, she wanted to see what happened when she touched him, although for some reason she could barely bring herself to look at his face as she proceeded, as if not doing so meant that she wasn't touching a real man, but some sort of mannequin or lifeless body.

Aaron was anything but lifeless, however. He oozed energy and vitality – to say nothing of masculinity. Her fingertips glided over his skin with the tenderest of butterfly touches, setting him to gooseflesh everywhere they landed. She learned the breadth of his chest with her hands, letting her palms cup each curve – pectorals, biceps, radius, ulna. Those dreary biology lessons she overheard Gerald receiving – since they were the youngest they'd been in the same schoolroom with their tutor together, although she certainly hadn't learned the same subjects as he had – took on another meaning when they were displayed before her like this.

She could feel his heat even when she wasn't touching him, and that body heat carried his musky scent to her eager nostrils. The hair on his chest tickled her fingers if she touched too lightly, almost making her smile. His lower arms were very brown, attesting to the fact that he usually worked outside with rolled up sleeves. His hands were relaxed in hers, but veined and callused. He might have money to throw around, but this was a man who was used to physical labor – those muscular plateaus and bulging biceps weren't acquired by sitting behind a desk and giving orders, as her father had done. He was strong as an ox, as she well knew, and that came from doing, not watching.

Aaron knew he had died and gone to Heaven. He had hoped that she would do this – that she would be curious enough about him to explore his body, but, realistically he had figured that he'd have to push and prod her all the way. Her innocently seductive survey was going to drive him crazy long before this was over, but, then, he figured with a grin, at least he'd die happy.

She did seem to stay above the waist, although she avoided his face for some reason. Probably because he still sported that rough beard and mustache he intended on relieving himself of tomorrow morning, with hot water and the brand new shaving kit he'd just bought.

But right now, her hands were hovering at his waist, and she was dragging those fingertips, that he noticed with a grimace were callused when they never should have been, up and down the fleshy bricks of his stomach. Finally, he captured those teasing fingers and placed them over the swollen length of him, holding her hands there when she would have drawn them back. "No, Celia. Touch me." If it had been any other man, that might have been a plea. But since it was Aaron, she heard it as a soft but implacable order. His hips began to rock himself against her automatically, in and out of the natural nest her fingers formed around him, and a quick, hot breath sizzled in through his teeth, then out on a slow moan .

It was that moan that made Celia look up at him as she cradled the essence of him in her hands. His face was bathed in the soft lamplight, and those black fringed eyelids were at half mast. He was breathing very heavily, and looked as if he was in terrible pain. She tried again to remove her hands, but he wouldn't allow it. "I don't want to hurt you . . . " she breathed, watching his face as if mesmerized.

"You're – not," he ground out.

She wiggled her fingers experimentally, cupping him a bit and feeling terribly wicked for doing so, but her reward was an immediate increase in the strength and frequency of those thrusting movements he was making into her hands. Celia was surprised at how that part of him felt against her skin, sliding against her palms and through her fingertips. It was like a piece of insistent, fleshy marble with a satiny covering that belied the power of his trusts.

Suddenly, he reached down and ripped her hands away from him, the air puffing out of him as if he'd just run a mile. Celia was confused. Seconds ago, he wouldn't let her remove her hands, and now he was holding them as far away from him as he could.

Aaron saw her confusion and tried to smile, but he was afraid that it came out more like a scowl. He was seconds away from exploding into those feminine hands, and that wasn't quite what he wanted. He needed to get control of himself, and quickly.

He forced himself to close his eyes and take several deep breaths while he still had a good hold on her wrists. Then he let her go, and rolled onto his back. "Celia?"

"Did I do something wrong?" she asked, wondering if he was going to reach up and grab that blasted paddle.

Aaron chuckled hoarsely. "No. No. You did everything right – too right." He gathered her to his side, and, because she wanted some sort of an explanation about what was going on with him, she let him do it without any resistance. "You're getting some of your own back, Celia, and you're too damned good at it."

He was no help. She was still confused, and he could see that.



"Men and women aren't that different – what I made you feel last night, when your body exploded for me?" He could see by her intense blush that she knew exactly what he was referring to. "Well, that's what I'm feeling right now, from your touch."

She knew that it wasn't his intention, but Celia had felt empowered by his admission. It was the first time since she'd become his captive that she felt like she had any control over any one or any thing that was happening in her life. She could make him feel as raw and intense as she had, she might just be able to gain the upper hand in this awkward situation of theirs.

But nothing in her life had prepared her for what he did next, when his hand came up and cupped the back of her head, encouraging her to lean forward, towards what her hands had just explored. Aaron didn't force her to take him in her mouth, and he wasn't sure that he even trusted her to at this point, given the fact that she seemed quick to use her teeth when she felt defensive.

Honestly, just having her mouth that close to him was almost more than he could handle. He could feel her warm, strawberry sweet breath on him, and he knew that he was going to unman himself in seconds. Aaron grabbed her closest hand and wrapped her fingers lightly around him, keeping her hand covered with his, and three agonizing strokes later he helplessly spurted his essence into the air as his hips arched and bucked and scraped him against her tender palm.

He was mindless with a pleasure that was more intense, and more complete than any he'd ever experienced, and he knew with an almost frightening certainty, that the small, slight woman lying next to him was the cause of it, no doubt.

Celia had been amazed to watch him taking his own pleasure, seeing that he was just as helpless in its grip as she had been – as she was, several more times, that evening, and every single evening since. Knowing her face was a bright, tell tale red, she hung her head in shame, hoping no one was around to notice her. Then she dunked the rags again, ignoring the painful sores the lye was produced on her tender skin, as if it was some sort of penance she had to pay for the illicit ecstasy she experienced with him and the immoral activities she couldn't seem to stop replaying over and over in her mind.

Of course, she couldn't have been lucky enough that no one would notice her shame. "What are you thinking about, Miss Celia?" came his inquiring growl.

Even six weeks after he'd first acquired her, as he liked to put it, he still kept a very tight rein on her, and was almost never very far from where she was, especially when she was outside, as if he still thought she might take it into her head to run away.

"Nothing," she answered, keeping her eyes on her task. He wasn't even supposed to be here. He was supposed to have taken Ben and gone into town to get more supplies. But it was just her luck that he discovered her wearing the forbidden garment.

Aaron chuckled and took a seat on one of the steps she'd labored over a few minutes before. "Not with a face like that!"

He was getting to know her entirely too well.

He peered at her closely, and she knew what was coming. "And what are you doing back in that dress? I thought I'd told you a while ago to burn it?" She could tell he was frowning without even having to look at him.

It was true, he had told her to burn it. He'd ordered her to do it that night when she'd first watched his ecstasy, and again the next morning as he'd bent in front of the very same mirror he'd used to force her to pleasure with his mouth the first time, scraping away his beard with his new shaving kit.

Celia had had to admit, as she watched him drag that razor blade over his skin, that he was a damned fine looking man, and much younger than she'd assumed, once he no longer looked like he'd just come back from years in the woods. He had a thick pelt of deep, chestnut brown hair on his head, and he'd kept a neatly trimmed mustache of much the same color just above his full upper lip. His brows were dark and thick above obsidian black eyes that made her shudder from across the room when she'd met

them in the mirror, and his nose was longish and a bit too prominent, but his high cheekbones and strong jaw line offset it nicely.

Realizing that she'd been looking at him dreamily, Celia had gotten out of bed and run as quickly as she could to her chemise, throwing it over her head and feeling for the brown dress she would have sworn she hated the very sight of several mornings ago. But now it had almost become a symbol of her struggle against him, her struggle to retain her dignity and pride in the face of his overwhelming will.

But someone had gotten to the forbidden dress before her. "Weren't you supposed to have gotten rid of this yesterday, Celia?" he had asked, as if she was somewhat dim.

With her chemise still settling over her head, she couldn't see him and what he was doing, but she knew it couldn't be good. Before she got a chance to jerk it down and pop her head through the neck hole so that she could keep an eye on him, he'd sat down on the end of the bed and given her hand a tug, making her settle very naturally over his lap, with her bare bottom hanging conveniently out from under the hem of the garment she was fervently trying to don.

His hand whacked her butt rhythmically; each stinging, scalding connection making her jerk and wiggle and try futilely to escape the punishment he meted out so mercilessly. Her backside was a hot, throbbing shade of ruby red before he stopped, and then it was only long enough to lean back and snake his belt through his pants and double it over, bringing it crashing down onto her cringing rear five times, as hard as he could.

Celia was beside herself, wiggling wildly to try to avoid even just one of those burning strokes, but she was entirely ineffectual and helpless against his strength, especially blind as she was. All she could do was hope to survive it and hope he would stop soon, before she humiliated herself by wailing her discomfort even louder. She couldn't think of anything else when he punished her – as he'd done with alarming frequency in the short time since he'd captured her; the consequences he was reaping on her vulnerable rear filled her mind and crowded out everything else with their pain and shame and mortification. She was no longer a strong, determined young woman. She was owned and controlled and being thoroughly chastised by the man who boldly possessed her, who could do this to her at any time he desired, and there was precious little she could do about it.

He effortlessly delivered both extremes to roughly the same area of her body – the ultimate in humiliatingly intense pleasure to her front, and the worst, most degrading, of agonies to her backside.

It wasn't until he stopped, and all of her manic movements had worked her head out through the neckline of the chemise, that she could feel how hard he'd become. Whether it was the actual act of disciplining her, or the fact that she had been bouncing nearly naked over his lap, she didn't know, and she wasn't at all sure she wanted to know the answer. But that most prominent part of him, the one that had claimed the inside of her and made her mad with pleasure, was most definitely making its presence known as it prodded into her tummy.

"I own you, Celia." Apparently that was a concept that bore frequent repetition, Aaron thought wryly. "And you are to dress as I see fit. I want that brown abomination burned, and I want to see you downstairs in the kitchen wearing either one of your new day dresses."

She thought he was going to let her up at that point, but she was dead wrong.

He reached beneath her to undo the buttons of his pants and relieve the front flap of his new drawers, letting that part that most wanted her spring free. With one quick twist of her waist, he had her positioned exactly where he wanted her, and, as her surprised eyes met his, he used the leverage of her hips to slowly impale her on that thickly swollen shaft.

Aaron loved the sight of her face as he entered her. She was still crying a little – he'd given her quite an impromptu licking, and her eyelashes around those wide, startled eyes were darkly spiky and wet. Her cheeks were red from having hung over his legs, but they became even redder as she felt herself being slowly invaded and stretched widely open.

He had known it was probably too soon. He knew it. But he just couldn't help himself. He went as carefully as he could, not trying to hurt her, but knowing that he was dying as she swallowed him up, inch by excruciating inch. She was whimpering a little, and he stopped just shy of filling her completely to gage her discomfort.

She wasn't crying any longer, and her eyes had drifted closed. She looked almost blissful, he told himself, but he felt the need to ask anyway. "Am I hurting you?"

Celia bit her lip hesitantly, knowing her immediate answer should have been a staunch and highly outraged "yes, she was being torn to shreds and shouldn't he be gentleman enough to stop humiliating her in this fashion."

But it wasn't true. She was a little sore from last night, but not much, and, to her considerable dismay, the overwhelming feeling his invasion was inspiring in her was a shamefully sharp, aching pleasure that made her want to take more of him, not less.

Aaron had taken his answer from her continued silence. If he'd been hurting her, he knew that she wouldn't have hesitated a second to let him know exactly how much agony she was in. But the truth that he knew she didn't want to have to acknowledge was that she had enjoyed their encounters. Granted, he'd had to force her to do so, but she had, in the end, been gifted with an ecstasy that eluded most women all of their lives. Aaron hoped it would become a powerful enough addition to her that it might spur her to overcome some of her reluctance about their coupling.

But back then, although he wouldn't quite let himself totally off rein, he knew that she wasn't nearly as tender as he might have thought she'd be, and he pressed her down the last inch or so, until she had fully consumed him, and he had to recite Shakespeare in his head to keep control of himself.

Just looking up at her from where he lay at the edge of the bed was enough to make him want to grab her and take her hard. She rode astride him in the bright light of the morning, yet the billowy cotton slip disguised his depravity. He couldn't even see her breasts until he reached up to flick open the buttons, as he did, pulling the fabric apart only enough to tug it around her breasts, so that it framed their generous roundedness wonderfully.

He began to move his hips slowly, and found himself with somewhat of a dilemma – whether to watch that chastely expressive face, or those tantalizing baubles as they rose and fell on their own to the rhythm that he called. He solved that monumental problem by laying a big, bear like paw over each breast, claiming it but not controlling it, but celebrating every time they rose to fill his palm, each pebble hard nipple pressed against his calluses every time, sensitizing them he was sure.

She was fighting against it, he could tell, trying to deny what he was bringing her, what this Northern defiler was doing that made her feel so good when she wanted to hate him through and through for everything he did to her, real or imagined. Her struggle only succeeded in making each whimper, each mewling cry from the back of her throat just that much more tantalizing to him, because he knew how hard won it was, to have been scraped away from this strong woman against her will.

To give her something to contrast with the hot wonderful, thrumming sensations that were flooding through her body, and to subtly remind her who was giving her leave to feel those things, he reached down and deliberately cupped each of her bottom cheeks, letting the residual heat from her spanking warm his hands.

Celia had shrieked and tried to rise up, away from his hands on her sore parts, but Aaron decided to relieve her of even more control, knowing that every bit of self-determination he could strip from her made it that much harder for her to deny him with her mind and her body. He removed his hands from her buttocks and placed them just above each of her elbows, using them to pull her down on each of his upstrokes, forcing her to accept even more of him.

The first time their bodies met like this, where she no longer had any ability to control how deeply he plunged, where her body weight was no longer just the only factor deciding his depth, she moaned outright, and Aaron felt like he had just won the war single handedly. He continued to force her to ride

him, determined to bring her to fulfillment. He felt that was very important – that although he sometimes brought her unbearable agony, that she also feel the exact opposite from him, and on a much more frequent basis than any sort of discomfort. He didn't want her to cringe away from him, afraid he was always going to hurt her.

So he pleased her, even though she thought she didn't want it. Her body did, and he was able to coax her along fairly quickly, pleased that she was learning to respond to him so readily. He listened carefully to every squeak and moan, learning to gauge where she was in her journey, and wanting to master that ability because there would be times when he wouldn't allow her to come to completion – as a manner of punishment, or just because it was his desire at that time that she stew in her own juices for a while, so to speak.

And her explosive, convulsive culmination was what triggered his own – she was clamping down on him so hard and so fast as her body rocked and twisted and spasmed endlessly. He had been concentrating so completely on her that his own body snuck up on him and took control. He completely lost himself inside her, taking her almost brutally at the end, never letting her ease herself away from any of his powerful thrusts, slamming himself up into her as hard as he wanted, groaning loud and low and grasping her hips in a way that he knew was going to leave vivid bruises.

Celia had crumpled on top of him, thoroughly exhausted and she'd barely gotten out of bed.

"Burn it," he'd whispered as he rolled her off him and onto the cold bed . . .

# CHAPTER ELEVEN

Celia, her hand still in the bucket of lye laced water, was embarrassed that she could recall their intimate encounters in such detail. She remembered every sigh, every moan, and every heartbeat of the paradise he unfailingly brought to her.

And here he was, launching into another of his alarmingly frequent lectures about her behavior. "And didn't I tell you that you weren't to be doing any hard work around here?" he asked, clomping up the stairs and taking the rags right out of her hand to drop them into the bucket. "What the hell has happened to your hands, Celia Weston?" his voice was getting louder and angrier by the minute. "I swear, woman, I can't leave you alone for two minutes - "

"I was just trying to help - " she answered belatedly, but he already had her by the wrist, tugging her into the house and up the stairs, which Celia had quickly learned in the past month and a half was never a good thing in the middle of the afternoon. It either meant that he was going to defile her in broad daylight, when no decent man or woman would have such discourse with one another, or, considering the circumstances, the more likely conclusion was that he was going to spank her on her bare bottom until she was blubbering like a baby.

Or, as he'd done on more than one occasion, both – like when she'd decided not to wear any of the nice clothes he'd bought for her. Celia didn't want to feel like any more of a whore than she was, and letting him dress her just seemed like she was falling even deeper into the pit that he dragged her down into every evening, working that sinister, sinful magic on her body and making her scream and writhe with delight practically just by looking at her.

All of those thoughts were enough to make Celia's stomach begin to churn with herds of wildly fluttering butterflies. When they got to the bedroom, Aaron closed the door behind them, then immediately brought her over to fill the pretty porcelain basin with water. He washed her hands carefully, tsking over the raw, red state of them.

"I thought I told you that you weren't to do anything strenuous?" That tone made her shiver. She'd heard it too many times to ignore it – she knew what it meant was coming next!

But she was still her stubborn self, to some extent. "I wasn't doing anything strenuous – especially when you compare it to what everyone else is doing! I want to help restore the house, and not just sit around reading while everyone else does all the work."

He couldn't really fault her for wanting to be a part of the restoration of her family home. He would have been the same way about Pine Knoll, but that was neither here nor there. She'd been told. "I don't want any of your backtalk, Celia. Look at your hands – they're bleeding, for crying out loud. I'm going to keep you from hurting yourself if I have to tie you to the bed."

He dabbed some of that God awful smelling stuff that he'd used on his leg on her hands. Celia had to admit that it had worked wonders with his leg – he was barely limping at all any more. But she wrinkled her nose and tried to pull her hands away from him while he was slathering that stuff on her.

Aaron gave her a warning look. "You'd best be standing still, Celia Weston. You're in enough trouble already without compounding it."

Before he'd arrived, although she'd been without the proverbial pot, she'd never been quite the watering pot that he inspired in her. It seemed she was always crying around him for some reason or the

other, and he would probably never believe that as she grew up she rarely cried, and never resorted to tears around a man. She'd never needed to. Now they came to her as soon as she heard him use the tone of voice that meant he would soon be flipping her over his lap, baring her backside, and reaching for either his belt or the paddle.

She'd had more than enough encounters with both of those implements in the past six or so weeks to know that she did not want him to resort to them. And she should have been smart enough to do as she was told – it wasn't as if she didn't know how he was going to deal with her when she disobeyed him.

But she wanted to hold onto that brown dress for more than just practical reasons - although it was the best thing for her to go about helping with the restoration and repair of the house, not that he was letting her be much help in that area at all, but she hadn't known how overprotective he was going to be about her at that point. The dress was also a link to four long years of struggle – a struggle she'd survived by sheer determination and grit and backbone. She'd done it largely on her own – it was an accomplishment she wasn't ready to give up yet, especially not to trade it in for the position she currently occupied as his mistress, and to her, although the other dresses were beautiful and there wasn't certainly nothing wrong with them – they were like a thousand other dresses she'd gotten from Beauregard's, pretty, flattering, and made of the finest of materials – she didn't want to advertise her place in the gutter to all and sundry. Celia had wished she was a brave enough soul to march down to the kitchen in that dirt brown dress and tell him to go to the devil with his orders and his possessive, invasive hands. But she wasn't. She'd done as she was told for fear of earning a worse punishment than she already had, but she did keep the dress rather than burning it, tucking into a hidey hole in her father's study – which Aaron had since come to occupy.

But this morning, despite his repeated and continual warnings over the past weeks that she wasn't to do anything that smacked of manual labor, she decided to clean the only area of the house that no one had touched yet - the portico. The barn was now functional and happily occupied by several cows and more than six horses at last count. The inside of the house, thanks to Patsy and several of the men's wives, was completely spic and span, if still considerably empty and bereft of furniture. And she had been consigned to loll around the entire time doing nothing, while everyone around her was about the important business of the restoration. It drove her crazy, and she was bored to tears.

She certainly had never turned her hand to anything like this before the war – she'd been too busy worrying about what dress to wear, who to call on and who was going to call on her, and helping her mother organize balls and soirees, as well as learning at her mother's knee how to run a large household like Trey Rivers in preparation for eventually running the estate of whatever man she married.

She was flat out all the time between one thing and another. Now, with the restrictions he placed on her, she had literally nothing to do all day. He'd come home one afternoon and found her helping to paint one of the bedrooms and had practically spanked her in front of everyone.

When he was finished tending to her hands – all too soon, as far as she was concerned – he brought her over to the bed, saying in a gravelly tone, "First, I'm going to get rid of this dress once and for all."

He proceeded to get her out of it, then produced a wicked looking knife, and disassembled the poor thing in front of her eyes, as if he was gutting a fish.

The tears were there right on cue as she watched him reduce her ragged dress to rags.

Aaron discarded the remnants by throwing them into the corner of the room, then turned to find her sobbing as if he'd just killed her best friend, and he hadn't even begun her punishment yet. Aaron didn't take kindly to his orders being ignored. He hadn't as an officer in the Union army, and he didn't as the owner of a Southern plantation, whose former princess was more than a handful and quite used to getting her own way, apparently.

But not any more. That's what he was here for – to curb her impulses. He didn't want her working for a living – that's what he was for. He wasn't her husband, but he was her lover, and he intended to keep her in the style he knew she'd been accustomed to pre-war. Better, if things worked out the way he expected them to.

Now, though, he had to deal with her disobedience, and he decided that her punishment wasn't going to take its usual course. He didn't want to become too predictable. She stood there in her chemise, which had also seen better days, he realized. He really needed to take her to see the dressmaker, but it seemed that every time he'd invited her in to town – and he had, up to this point, been merely extending invitations and not commanding her presence – she declined the offer, even though she was always complaining she had nothing to do around here.

But she did always seem to remind him that she was walking around without the proper undergarments that a lady should be wearing. Personally, he liked the fact that he could tip her back anywhere and not have a lot of layers of clothing to prevent him from getting where he constantly wanted to be – deep inside her. He also enjoyed thinking about how naked and vulnerable she was beneath her prim dresses, even though thoughts like that had taken to popping into his head at the most inopportune times. It seemed he spent the majority of the day painfully erect – thinking about her, thinking about thinking about her, remembering things he'd done to her and planning things he wanted to do to her.

The chemise – although in tact – joined the shredded dress in the corner.

Celia, fully aware of what was coming, was reduce to begging. She couldn't meet his eyes when she asked softly, "Please don't spank me, Aaron."

It was one of the few times she'd used his name. She didn't talk to him a lot unless he initiated it – they didn't have many casual conversations and he seemed to find out more about her from her former slaves than from her own mouth. Patsy was only too happy to answer any question he posed, and even offered advice on how to handle her. The older woman was as close a thing to a mother as Celia had, as far as Aaron could tell. He hadn't forgotten what Mrs. Beauregard had said about Celia's mother, Nora, but he hadn't seen hide nor hair of her, and he'd been both too busy to talk to Celia about it and loathe to introduce what was bound to be a painful subject.

He tilted her head up so that she met his eyes. "I'm not going to, but I don't think you're going to like what I'm going to do instead any better."

Ben had built them a bed frame that was probably a lot plainer than the one that had previously graced this room, but it had been built to one of Aaron's strict specifications: it had lots of places he could tie her to, if the whim struck him, and the footboard was just tall enough that he could tie her wrists there if she was standing in front of it, which was exactly what he did. Of course, he wouldn't think of chafing that soft skin with a length of rough rope, so on one of his many trips into town without her, he'd picked up about twelve silk cravats that he knew would just about fit the bill.

Once her hands were secure behind her, he positioned first one ankle and then the other well apart, securing them with the same gentle ties, rendering her both immobile and completely vulnerable, and forcing her to keep her shoulders back and arch her back just the slightest bit.

Aaron stood away from her and drank her in. He thought it was probably going to be one of his most favorite positions for her. Since Patsy had commenced to fattening them all up, Celia had become nicely rounded – nowhere near fat, and frankly not quite plump enough for him, but well fed enough that she didn't look like she was starving to death any longer. She did still looked as if she would need another several months of Patsy's cakes and pies before she'd completely shed the scrawny physique she'd had when he'd first come up on her.

But she'd filled out more than nicely. His mouth watered every time he looked at her – clothed or unclothed. She was beautiful, and he could barely believe that she was his. Perhaps it was a good thing that she wasn't coming in to town with him – he'd hate to have to deck any man who laid his covetous eyes on her, and they were all bound to unless they were half dead. Her ribs were no longer so sharply outlined

beneath her skin, and her breasts . . . he swallowed hard as he looked at them, jutting out and presenting themselves to him as she was forced to keep her back just slightly arched, her nipples blossoming like little rosebuds, eager for his attentions.

But she wasn't likely to be quite as eager for these attentions once she realized what they were going to be, he didn't think. The indoor necessary, which he thought was a wonderful idea, hadn't been worked on yet beyond being cleaned out. Thus it had become somewhat of a storage area, and Aaron had tucked a few things he'd thought might come in hand some day in one of the cupboards. He reached in there now, keeping his eyes on her, feeling around until he found what he sought.

Celia was already more than worried about the position he'd put her in. She'd tugged a little on the bonds he'd used, but although they were silky against her skin, they weren't budging an inch, and she didn't like at all how prominent he'd made her breasts. She remembered how he'd patted them – not hard, but firmly enough to make them wobble – the first night they'd lain together on that dirty bed, and worried that he had something much worse in mind for this time. She almost wished she hadn't begged him not to spank her – not that she had any illusions that her pitiful request had any sort of influence over him whatsoever. It certainly hadn't in the past – she'd practically screamed bloody murder and been reduced to begging for mercy when he was judiciously applying that loathsome paddle across her back cheeks, and none of it had effected him one whit.

And when he stood in front of her, tapping a slim wooden ruler into his left palm expectantly, she blanched white and began to pull at those ties in earnest.

But she couldn't move an inch.

When he advanced to stand a little less than arm's length from her - watching her avidly as he always did, cataloguing every reaction she had and calculating just how much to give her – and drew his right arm back not too far, but far enough, she wanted to cringe away from the slap she knew that ruler was going to deliver against her protruding, delicate flesh.

She couldn't avoid it. There was nowhere she could go. She couldn't protect herself from the searing pain as he swatted that ruler down onto the side of her breast, making her scream and cry and dance against those bonds.

But she couldn't get away from it, or the next one that was delivered with swift cruelty to its twin. Her wrists were going to be raw despite his careful selection of material, because she just couldn't stop herself from trying to escape this awful method of punishment. She would rather have endured a thousand spankings than this.

And he blithely did one thing that made the experience a million times worse for her – he used some of his clean bandages that he no longer needed for his leg and wrapped them around her head, effectively blindfolding her.

Now she wouldn't be able to see when the blows were coming, or where they were going to land.

He deliberately didn't establish any sort of rhythm. She never knew when the next sharp smack was going to land, and, very soon she was nearly hysterical with the anticipation, and he had only landed ten slaps, five to each of her poor abused breasts.

This was proving to be quite an effective method of punishment, Aaron thought to himself as he took one breast into his hand and plumped out the nipple by rolling and pulling it with his thumb and forefinger. Once it had peaked to his satisfaction, he held her breast in his hand and brought the flat of the ruler down on her nipple.

Celia expelled every bit of air in her lungs in an ear splitting scream, and she could hear Patsy thundering up the stairs to knock loudly at their door.

"Miss Celia, you all right?" she asked anxiously.

Celia went immediately stiff and tried to stifle her sobs. She didn't want Patsy coming in here under any circumstances.



Aaron answered her calmly, "She's fine. We're just having ourselves a little discussion. Go back to work, Patsy."

And Celia knew that, as much as Patsy wanted to barge into this room and rescue her, she wasn't going to, because she couldn't afford to lose such a good paying job as what Mr. Aaron was providing for Ben and herself.

At least Aaron had the decency to wait Patsy out, not making another move towards her until they could both hear Patsy's heavy frame slowly descending the staircase.

Aaron removed the bandages and ordered her to open her eyes. He looked grim faced, but Celia could see the bulge behind the buttons of his pants. "I think you know what's coming, don't you?"

She wailed again – she couldn't help it. She did know.

"I want you to watch i.," he instructed, as he wet his thumb and forefinger and went to work on her other breast, tweaking that nipple into sensitive prominence so that he could thwack it with the ruler seconds later.

At that last agonizing blow to her nipple, Celia nearly collapsed in her bonds, but Aaron kept her from hitting the floor, holding her almost tenderly until she was able to stand. She'd screamed again, but he'd muffled it with his hand as best he could.

And then he proceeded to prove his complete mastery of her body, because although they were still throbbing with pain and livid with the welts of the blows he'd dealt them, Aaron crouched before her and brought a nipple into his mouth, suckling gently and swirling his tongue around it carefully, almost soothing it but not quite.

Meanwhile, his fingers found that spot on her that leaked that embarrassing fluid he said meant that she enjoyed his attentions – even ones that made her scream. "Ahhhh, Ceeley, you're dripping!" he groaned, and she knew there would never be any end to her shame about how willing her body was to give itself over to him.

He dipped the middle and index fingers of his right hand into her cream, bringing it up to rub into her already peaked and swollen bud, as his mouth and left hand worrying her breasts, and he didn't stop until she shuddered and shook beneath his hands, begging and pleading with him all the while not to do this to her, although she knew he would have his way with her.

He always did.

## CHAPTER TWELVE

Aaron loosened her bonds and extracted her feet and hands from them, leaving the cravats in place for the time being. He bade her lie on the bed, and she did as she was told as she snuffled and sobbed and her legs trembled with the force of the orgasm she'd just experienced.

When he joined her, he was naked and fully aroused. Sometimes when Celia saw him erect like this, she wondered how she could take him into her body – like the rest of him, he was huge there, too. But after the first time, it really had never hurt – in fact it felt dangerously good to be so stretched and filled.

This time, though, he didn't insinuate himself between her legs as she expected – and almost wanted him to. Instead, he cupped her chin in his hand and met her eyes. "I want you to put your mouth on me." She knew where he meant without him having to be detailed. "And I want you to know that if you should take it into your head to bite me, what I just did to your titties will seem like Christmas kisses."

Celia couldn't say she was amazed at what he was asking of her – he'd certainly claimed her most delicate area with his mouth more often than not. He seemed to adore the way she came apart whenever he set his lips over her and suckled her to a screaming, crying completion.

But he'd never insisted that she reciprocate, and considering how quick she'd been to use her teeth on him when they'd first met, and how much she'd learned by handling him about just how sensitive that part of him was, she could see why.

Despite how dirty it seemed, the idea intrigued her. She'd found she liked touching him – making sure that she wasn't the only one who flew out of control when they came together. Pleasuring him helped her regain – and retain – a small measure of control over him, even though he generally guided her explorations in that area.

Celia scooted down on the bed, so that her head was just about at his hip level, and she could see how proudly he already rose, his tumescence bobbing as if in greeting, fairly vibrating as her fingers closed around it. She'd been taught to touch all of him – to reach out and fill both hands with him, right hand around his length, and left hand gently cupping that tightened sac of his, rolling the twins she found there with care, or reaching behind them to stroke that flat, hairless area that drove him to fuck her fist wildly.

Now she could take it all in her mouth – explore it all with her lips and tongue, and her mouth literally watered as she thought about doing so.

But the first thing she did was not grab him and force him down her throat. Instead, she lay her cheek on him, rubbing her face against that hardness, nibbling its teasingly up and down, letting her hand naturally follow where her mouth lead. He was jumping and jerking at her every touch, his body tense with anticipation of unbearable pleasure.

Celia crept between his legs, sitting on her folded ones and leaning forward, so that she could hold his eyes as she positioned him at her full, pursed lips, opening them just enough that her hot breath caressed the head of his manhood.

She was a natural sensualist, Aaron had to admit. She'd certainly never done this with anyone else, and yet she was taking to it like a duck to water – almost too well. He felt sure his balls were going to explode before she ever cradled him in her mouth.

But he was wrong.

As Celia locked eyes with him, she met the head of him with her welcoming tongue and, with excruciating slowness, slid her moist, hot mouth down to the hilt of him with one motion. She could feel him tickling the back of her throat, and squelched a bit of a burp as she worked her mouth up and down him, her tongue licking every rock hard inch of him, only to the again take him inside her until she could accept no more.

And she stayed there, letting her tongue dance wildly around him, closing her lips – but very carefully not her teeth – around the root of him, and exerting as much suction as she could manage, she tugged him away from her, her lips grasping at him and suckling as if she never wanted to let him go.

Although he had been moaning and crying since she'd begun this wild adventure, that movement got her the loudest response yet, and she intended to repeat it. But this time, she reached beneath that unholy rod of his and cupped his balls as her mouth descended, and she knew she had gained the upper hand as he began to pump in and out of her mouth in earnest, not able to hold back any longer.

But then he reclaimed what little advantage she'd found, laying his big hands on the back of her head and guiding her movements, forcing her to take him just a little deeper each time, and stay a little deeper with each descent. He watched every movement she made, thoroughly enjoying the sight of her accepting him into her body in this manner.

Within five intense strokes, she could feel him spurt his seed within her mouth, and she had no choice but to accept it into her body – no more choice than she had when he was pumping between her legs. She was his to use as he pleased, and there would never be any advantage that would relieve her of that position.

Aaron thought that he had died and gone to Heaven. When he finally closed his eyes – he'd been reluctant to do so while she was bringing him to such ecstasy – he saw stars behind them, and nearly felt faint.

What this woman did to him was amazing. He'd never felt anything like what she could create within his body. He thought he'd felt and done it all in regards to bed sport, but she proved him wrong with each thing he introduced her to; it was as if it was new to him again, too, and he had to wonder sometimes who was the teacher and who was the pupil.

It was the first time that the idea of claiming this woman for his own on a permanent basis entered his head and he didn't immediately dismiss it. In fact, he was realizing he liked the idea and it solved several problems at once that had been buzzing around in the back of his mind.

If any male members of her family happened to have survived, there was every chance that they could win Trey Rivers back from him in court, which would favor inheritors over some stranger who happened upon the place and decided he liked it. He'd get his money back, to be sure, but he'd still be out on his butt, and probably lucky if he wasn't killed outright by whomever returned, considering what he'd been doing to their cherished female relative.

They were both lying there, exhausted, and lost in their own thoughts when Patsy's strident voice drifted up to them.

"Miss Celia! Miss Celia! Come down here right now!" While Aaron was wondering if Patsy wasn't considerably overstepping her bounds, ordering the mistress of the house around in that manner, Celia was already up and stepping into her pretty green dress. She didn't bother to tug on hose or anything but slipped into the new shoes she'd barely broken in and practically ran out of the room.

If it was a matter of that much urgency, Aaron decided it was a good idea if he tagged along, in case the place was burning down or something. Some of the Trey Rivers former slaves had an annoying tendency to go to her with problems, thoughts, and suggestions, rather than him, even though he was the one who was paying their salaries.

When he saw her standing in the middle of the front yard, crying in Patsy's arms, he knew he'd done the right thing in coming down. As he ran out to see what the problem was, he sniffed the air quickly and couldn't smell anything burning, so that was a good sign.

As he got closer, he heard Patsy saying, " – there was no sign of her, Miss Celia. None at all."

"No sign of whom?" Aaron asked, frowning fiercely.

Celia immediately stepped away from Patsy, and Patsy glared at her, saying plainly, "No sign of - "  
"Celia Angelique Weston, you come over here right now!"

Her mother had a no nonsense tone that was much like Aaron's, Celia decided, her heart – that had been in her mouth when she'd thought her mother was missing - sank in her chest as she obeyed automatically and ran into her Mama's open arms, closing her eyes against the questions she knew Aaron must have in his eyes and just being ever grateful that she was alive.

"Where have you been?" they asked each other in unison.

"I would have been down to see you this afternoon sometime, Mama – you should have stayed put like I told you to!"

Nora set her daughter a little away from her, chiding, "You watch your tone of voice with your Mama, Celia, or I'll go and get your father to give you a good talking to. I won't have any of your sass."

"That's something I've been saying to her for a while now, too," Aaron smiled as he joined the two women. His eyes glittered down at Celia as he said pointedly, "Well, aren't you going to introduce me?"

Celia thought her mother would notice her blush immediately, but the older woman was too interested in the man standing so close to her daughter. "Mama, this is Aaron Denehy, from Maine." She deliberately emphasized his state of origin, hoping that her mother – who had taken to seeing any man as a possible savior, regardless of what uniform he wore - would catch on that this man was not to be welcomed with open arms. "Aaron, this is my mother, Nora Weston."

Aaron bowed low over Mrs. Weston's hand, kissing the back of it as Nora curtsied awkwardly. "Now I see where Celia got her good looks," he complimented gently, offering her his arm and escorting Nora up the front steps that Celia had just gotten her breasts striped for washing.

"Are you helping my husband clean up the place a bit?" Celia heard her mother as him sweetly.

Aaron gave Celia a furtive glance over his shoulder as he walked ahead with Nora, while she and Patsy began to follow them. "What are you gonna do about this, Miss Celia? What's he gonna do with her?"

"How should I know?" Celia hissed angrily. That man had better not hurt her Mama, or paddle or no paddle, there was going to be hell to pay.

But nothing could have been further from the truth. Aaron treated Mrs. Weston as if she was made of fine crystal. He played along completely with her delusions about her husband and sons, keeping his voice soft and steady, and smiling at her reassuringly. They still didn't have much in the way of furniture, so he brought her into the study where he had accumulated a small settee and two small, finely upholstered chairs.

But Nora stopped as he tried to guide her into the room. "No, Mr. Denehy, I can't go in there without my husband. He never likes me to go into the study when he's not here," she demurred.

Instead of getting angry, Aaron just continued to smile down at the small, frail older woman. "Mrs. Weston, please do call me Aaron. And I'm quite sure that your husband would want you to come into the study, considering that we have such a shortage of chairs in the house right now."

Nora hesitated, looking to Celia who nodded that she thought it would be fine, and then she finally allowed Aaron to assist her in sitting at one of the small divan. Celia tried to sit next to her mother, but Nora batted her away, extending her hand and invitation to Aaron instead, who took his place next to Nora with a wry smile at Celia, who ended up alone in one of the smaller chairs across from the two, who were appearing thick as thieves even though they'd just met. Celia couldn't think that this was going to bode any too well for herself.

Without taking his eyes off the woman who had produced and put up with Celia until he'd happened on her, Aaron said quietly, "Patsy, why don't you go and get Mrs. Weston some tea and some of those wonderful cookies you just made."

Patsy, who had been looking – as Celia still was – as if the world was coming to an end – gladly turned towards the door to do as she was bade.

"Patsy, use the good tea service, since we have guests," Nora added with soft but firm authority.

Neither Patsy nor Celia had the heart to tell her that the tea service that had been a family heirloom was one of the first things they'd had to sell when times had gotten hard. It was hard to tell what Nora was going to remember about what had happened in the years since her family had dissolved around her. She'd shrunk, mentally and physically, so much that Celia had been amazed to see her appear on the lawn, and that she'd left the cabin at all.

But with a big strong man around to lean on, Nora became somewhat more like her old self. "Now, Mr. - " Aaron gave her a chastising look that Celia was intimately familiar with, and Nora immediately corrected herself. She even smiled, and tears rushed into Celia's eyes. She couldn't remember the last time she'd seen her mother smile. " - who are your parents, Aaron?"

Celia wanted to roll her eyes, but knew better. She was commencing to interview Aaron as if he was a prospective suitor, when he couldn't possibly be further from it.

"My father is Big Red – uh Terrence - Denehy, from County Cork in Ireland. My mother is Priscilla Denehy – formerly Priscilla McCort from Innisfree in Ireland, Ma'am."

"Ahhhh. Now, Aaron," Nora began again, putting her hand on Aaron's knee in a motherly gesture, "tell me what it is that you're doing for my husband?"

Celia's entire body went tense, but Aaron grinned down at her mother as if he dealt with slightly touched older women every day. "I'm restoring the house for the family."

Nora nodded eagerly. "It certainly had become dilapidated, hasn't it?" Celia could see her mother's eyes cloud over for a second, but then she rallied, and Celia knew it was because of Aaron. "But you've done wonders with it, haven't you? I do hope all of our Negroes are assisting you with your efforts. If they're not, you just talk to my husband, Gib, when he gets home and he'll set them right for you."

Aaron grinned. "I'll keep that in mind, but I think everyone is putting in their best efforts, because we all want to see the house looking grand again."

"Yes, yes, we do."

Patsy appeared at that point with tea in the plain, rough cups that Aaron had bought at the general store, which she distributed to everyone, along with a small plate of cookies that she put on the desk.

"Where's the tea service, Patsy?" Nora asked plaintively, and Patsy looked to Celia for direction, but not before Nora's face fell into an almost trancelike placidity, and she began to rock slowly back and forth as she stared at a spot only she could see, everyone and everything else falling away from her reality.

Celia couldn't help it. This was what she had been dealing with on her own for several years, and she knew that her mother – what was left of her mother – would be gone now for a while as she turned inward and spent time with the much more pleasant memories of her past.

It hurt Aaron to see Celia in so much pain, although he also felt a bit of a pang himself that she hadn't felt she could trust him enough to take care of her mother, who obviously needed much more care than she was being given wherever Celia had kept her hidden.

Aaron stood and took Nora's hand, which he had a feeling might queue her to rise also, and it did. He brought her carefully up the grand staircase, and into one of the sparsely decorated guest bedrooms that actually had a bed in it, helping her lie down and making her as comfortable as possible. Celia followed along after them, feeling worried and useless and so sad she could barely stand it.

He backed out of the room and practically into Celia, who had been peering in at just exactly what it was he was going to do to her mother. When he pulled the door partly closed, he grabbed Celia's wrist to keep her close to him, and addressed Patsy. "Do you know of someone who would be willing to work as Mrs. Weston's nurse? Preferably someone she knew from before, someone she'd be comfortable with?"

Although he didn't seem to be talking to her, Celia started to ponder that question, too. "What about Ruthie?" she suggested.

Patsy nodded her head slowly in agreement. "Yes, Miss Celia, she's right for the job, if she'll do it."

"Would you ask her for me?" Aaron asked, turning away from Patsy and putting his hand on the small of Celia's back, guiding her towards the stairs and saying in a much less polite tone, "I want you to show me where you kept her hidden."

His hold hurt her arm. "Why? There's no one there now."

"Because if she could stay there without my knowing, then there's no telling who might end up squirreling themselves away there," he bit off.

Celia didn't have any time to lament that he treated her mother better than he treated her, by a long shot. She showed him her parents' old cabin, and stood outside while he inspected it. Aaron came out still looking as angry as he had when he went in, but at least he didn't proceed to march her back to the house for a spanking, which was what she expected him to do.

Aaron had to admit to himself that the small room was amazingly well hidden by the foliage that had been allowed to all but take it over. If he hadn't known that it was there, he would never have seen it. But he couldn't be too happy that she'd kept her mother's existence a secret from him for so long, and, from his demeanor she knew that he was very angry.

He just . . . walked away from her, leaving her to stand there, staring after him, until she decided to follow him. "Uh, Aaron?"

"Yes," he answered as if she was bothering him.

Celia wrapped her arms around herself and tried to match his step. He wasn't making any accommodations for her of any sort. "What are you going to do?"

"About what?"

"About the cabin?"

"I'm going to have it destroyed."

Celia swallowed hard. "Please don't," she asked quietly.

Celia laid her hand on his forearm, and Aaron realized several things at once. It was probably the first thing she'd ever asked him for – beyond begging for him to stop a spanking or let her come. It was also one of the few times she'd touched him voluntarily. Even in the privacy of their bedroom, she still continued to be somewhat reticent, although she did seem to like to bring him pleasure, for which he was eternally grateful.

Aaron stopped suddenly, nearly causing Celia to plow into him from behind. "Why?"

Celia sighed, not really knowing how to explain this to him. "Because it was the first house my parents lived in once they'd bought this property, and before Papa made it the success it became. It was where I played house when I was a little girl. And it earned its right to exist when it kept us safe for so long – until –"

Until he'd come along, he filled in for himself. He had to admit her arguments were compelling, but he didn't want anyone to squat in it. He looked down into those spring blue eyes of hers, and knew he couldn't hurt her that way. Sighing in exasperation, he said, "All right. But I'm going to use it, then, as storage or something, so that no one else gets any ideas about it."

The broad smile on Celia's face was almost worth the aggravation she caused him on occasion. "That's fine." He turned away from her immediately, until he heard her say softly, "And Aaron?"

"Yes?" he turned back, not bothering to conceal the fact that she was testing what there was of his patience.

"Thank you for getting someone to nurse Mama. I could do it, though, if the cost is too dear."

She'd never asked him where his money had come from – she'd just assumed that his family was well to do – but still, he had spent and was spending a fortune on the renovations and there seemed to be no end to his deep pockets.

He was already walking away from her again, saying nothing more than, "Nope."

## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

When he strode into his study, Celia looked up from the dusting she was doing, and the sight of him took her breath away, even now after almost three months in his bed. He walked like a man who knew his place in the world, and with the confidence of a man who had shaped the world around him to his exact specifications – much like he'd shaped her.

She watched his eyes narrow when they settled heavily on her, and she knew that if her gaze drifted below his waist, as no lady's would, she'd find parts of him reaching out eagerly to her, wordlessly confirming his unending desire for her.

But if she'd been any weaker a woman, she would have been hiding in the corn crib rather than standing there pretending to calmly dusting the few pieces of furniture he'd acquired. The truth was that her knees were knocking together so loudly she was afraid he was going to hear them.

Settling a hat atop his head, he grabbed his coat off the back of the desk chair and shouldered his way into it, his eyes never leaving hers. "Ready?" he asked blithely, as if this was something she did regularly. It wasn't yet, but he was determined that it would be in the future.

And it had been at one point in her life, but not any longer.

Celia reached around to untie the small apron she'd sported to protect the pretty blue dress she was wearing while she was doing about the only cleaning he'd allow her to do. He'd deemed pretty much anything else – anything of any real importance – to be too strenuous for her.

"Yes, I guess." There was no way he could mistake her reluctance for anything other than what it was, but they had already had this out – or rather he had taken it out on the fair white skin of her prominently presented rump, darkening it to an angry red until she agreed to do as he asked: accompany him into town.

He knew she'd had a bad experience there the last time they'd gone, but he would be damned if he'd let her spend the rest of her life cowed by those narrow minded people. She needed to stand up for herself, to brazen her way through it to the other side, not hide out at the house cowering in the corner from the censure of people who no longer mattered in her life.

He would be there with her, to support her. And they were going to do something she liked to do – or had liked to do prior to the war – they were finally going to order her a complete wardrobe.

"Are you sure Nora won't come?"

Aaron was long since on a first name basis with Nora, who thought the sun rose and set on his broad shoulders now that her husband's were no longer available. And he doted on her as if she was his own mother, making sure she ate enough and always blocking out some free time from his schedule to spend reading to her. She was one of the few people he allowed to come into his study whenever she wanted to, telling her she could never bother him.

Even when she was at her delusional worst, he handled her with kid gloves, almost as if she was his mother rather than hers, showing her the utmost of respect and caring. It made Celia reconsider how much of a monster she thought he was.

Apparently she was the only person he treated like dirt.

Nora had somehow gotten it into her mind that Aaron was Celia's fiancée, and Aaron wouldn't allow anyone to disabuse her of that notion. In fact, much to Celia's dismay, he encouraged her by referring to events in the future that might happen "after they were married". He was disgustingly fond of



reminding Celia – especially when she was wont to argue with him about something or other – that she needed to obey her future husband, and, of course, if her mother was around she would commence to scolding Celia quite fiercely for going against him, which of course only made Aaron's evil grin deepen.

"No, I don't think it would be a good idea to take Mama into town," Celia answered absently as Aaron handed her up into the curricule then followed her up.

"Well, I want her to have new clothes, too, so you can choose for her."

Celia nodded absently, huddled in on herself, dreading every inch the horses covered.

"That's another thing, Celia Weston. I gave you and your mother that catalog a month ago to decide what you wanted for new furnishings for the house. Have you even opened it?"

She nodded. She hadn't been able to resist opening it – it was full of some of the most beautiful things she'd ever seen – couches, tables, beds, rugs, anything and everything one might want to furnish a house. But she didn't want to spend his money. It just wasn't right, and she didn't feel comfortable doing it – it was much too close to prostitution, as far as she was concerned, and the catalogue had languished under their big bed. "I've opened it."

"But you haven't really decided what you want?"

"Uh, no . . ."

Aaron had never met a female who was so reluctant to spend a man's money, but he figured he knew why she was delaying – aside from the fact that the house would then end up looking very different from the way it had while she was happily growing up in it, surrounded by her father, mother, and brothers. It – along with the rest of her life – was already irreparably different, and the best thing she could do was just pick up the pieces and go on.

Besides that time when she'd requested that he not demolish her parents' first home, she never asked him for anything for herself. If she asked him for anything at all, it was usually for her mother or something small for the house, and even then the request was delivered with such obvious reluctance that it didn't happen very often. And he already knew she didn't like the idea of him buying her things. He supposed that if he was in her place, with her sense of pride – which wasn't all that different from his own – he might feel much the same way.

Not that he was going to let her get away with it. He loved the two dresses she had now – they were certainly a huge step up from what she had been wearing – but he wanted her to have much more of a choice of what to put on each morning. He'd already picked out and installed one of Ben and Patsy's children – Esther, who was twenty one herself – as Celia's lady's maid, although with only two dresses and not even a vanity to sit down at, there was hardly a need for one yet.

That was another reason he wanted her to decide what she wanted for furniture. The best impetus to use to force her hand popped into his head. "If you don't hand me a list of what you want by the end of the week, I'm going to pick stuff out myself, Celia."

Her look of horror could have been interpreted as insulting, but he just laughed. "Well, if you want nice stuff that goes together, then I suggest you and your mother put your heads together. Otherwise . . ." He left it to her imagination and waggled his eyebrows at her, glad when she lost that worried, pinched look around her eyes and mouth for a moment and smiled at him.

"Do – do you mind if I ask you a question, Aaron?"

"No," he answered, curious about what she might ask.

"You're so good with my mother – have you had to deal with someone who was . . . who was like my mother before?"

Aaron began nodding before she finished. "Yes. My grandmother – we called her Mam – my father's mother – she came to live with us from Ireland once my Dad got his feet on the ground in Maine and the place started to thrive."

"What kind of place is it?"

He was surprised to realize that although he knew a lot about Celia and her background, she knew very little about his – not that she'd bothered to ask until now, thought. He was only too happy to tell her about himself. "It's a huge lumberyard – my Dad bought acres and acres when it was available for a song, and he's been going at it ever since, felling trees all by himself at first until the place caught on. Now we have upwards of fifty men working for us. He built our house single handedly, and, although it's not quite as nice as Trey Rivers, it's the biggest and nicest house in the County."

Celia could hear the pride in Aaron's voice when he spoke of his family. She gulped down the sadness of her own losses. "Do you have any brothers or sisters?"

"Two older brothers – Eric and Stone."

"My, are they as big as you are?" She couldn't imagine a family full of such tall, broad men. And if they were all like him, his poor mother must be a saint!

Aaron chuckled. "Oh, yeah. And Dad's the biggest of us all – and the loudest."

"He sounds like quite a character."

"He is. I miss him." He said it without thinking, and regretted it the moment the words were out of his mouth. "I'm sorry, Celia," Aaron shifted the reins to one hand and reached over to pat hers. "I didn't mean to -"

She shook her head. "I'm fine. Gerald is -" she swallowed hard, and drew a breath. "Gerald is the only one we know is dead – we got a telegram at the very beginning of the war. I still have my hopes about the others, and I think I'll keep them even though I know they're probably just pipe dreams. I keep expecting to see them in the foyer sometimes when I come down the stairs, and I miss them at dinner time when we all used to gather together and laugh and talk."

Aaron nodded. "Us, too," he grinned down at her. "But I bet it was a lot wilder dinner table than you're used to down here. My Mom did her best to drill manners into us, but when we were younger, we were a bunch of ruffians, always fighting and getting into scrapes."

Somehow, she didn't have a problem envisioning that, and her mind boggled at there being three other men in the world like him. In some ways, she had to admit, that might be a good thing. In others . . .

She started to feel a little bit better while he was distracting her, but in town, it went worse than she'd expected. Since the fighting was over, more people she knew – as well as a lot she didn't from the influx of Yankee opportunists - had drifted back to the places they'd known, and as she and Aaron walked down the sidewalks together, no one she knew – not man nor woman – would meet her eyes even before they rucked up their skirts and crossed the street to avoid any possibility of being seen within any proximity of her or being contaminated by her lowliness.

When she wanted to stop, Aaron patted her arm and kept his head up, pressing his other hand to her back, making her stiffen it and walk on, tears rolling down her cheeks. They finally ducked into Beauregard's and Celia heaved a sigh of relief that there was no one there that she knew. Mrs. Beauregard took her measurements again after Aaron told the dressmaker that he wanted Celia to have anything she wanted and everything she needed – at least six new dresses and one new ball gown to start. He remembered the looks of the one he'd picked up, and knew he was never going to let her wear that thing in public. Private, maybe, he thought, having to adjust himself on the tiny, dainty chair in the waiting room at the thought.

Aaron got her everything, soup to nuts, including the underwear she'd practically gotten used to not wearing by now. Drawers, hose, chemises, several new pairs of shoes, gloves, hats, everything – all of the things she used to have in embarrassing abundance.

As Mrs. Beauregard tallied up the bill – which in actuality was double what Celia had gotten, because her mother was getting the same things only in more subdued colors – she thought of something she'd forgotten. "Oh, and you'll need nightgowns, Miss Celia, right? How many would you like?"

The light from Celia's blush could have lit the place for a week. She could barely glance at Aaron, who said quietly, "One."

Mrs. Beauregard's eyebrows rose. "Only one?" she parroted, perplexed.

"One." Aaron repeated firmly, and he could see when the thought dawned on her as she turned away from him, flustered, and marked down the order of a single nightgown.

Celia wanted to bury her hands in her head and cry. This visit to town was getting worse by the moment.

Before they left, Aaron stopped her at the door. Mrs. Beauregard was in her back room, probably already salivating at what she was going to make off this order. Aaron caught Celia's cloudy eyes, knowing she didn't want to go out there again. "Celia, I know what's happened between us hasn't been very easy on you. And I'm sorry that you feel ashamed about it. But times are changin' – times have changed for the South, and they'll never be the same as they were before. Yankees are pouring in here right and left, and that's going to change the way the South looks forever. People are going to have to adjust and that's just the gist of it."

Celia swallowed hard. If only it was as simple as just him being from the conquering North. "You don't understand. It's not only that you're a Yankee, Aaron. It's that we're living in sin. I'm unclean. Before – before, if I had known some young woman who was living with a man without the benefit of marriage, I would have ostracized her, too. I'm your mistress, and I'm not fit for proper company."

She ran out of the shop with a sob, and all the way back to the carriage. Aaron let her go. He'd never really seen things from her side – he especially hadn't realized the depth of the shame she'd taken upon herself all because of what he did to her every time he could lay hands to her. Because he'd had to force her at first and practically hold her captive. Because she wasn't his wife.

Aaron followed her determinedly, jamming his hat down onto his head as soon as he got outside. She was sobbing quietly in the corner of the curricule as he slapped the reins onto the teams' backs to get them going. He wanted to get them home as soon as possible – he had some serious thinking to do. But as they were trotting just outside town, Celia suddenly sat straight up, staring at the horse and rider that were coming towards them and sobbing uncontrollably. At first he thought that the man might have been one of her brothers or her father, but then she sank down again, crumpling herself away from him.

He couldn't stop himself. He had to know. "Celia, what was that? Why were you crying at that man?"

She just shook her head, but Aaron wasn't going to let her get away with that. "Celia. Tell me."

She collected herself, but barely. She was just biding her time until they got home and she could throw herself onto the bed and cry it all out. But then she couldn't really do that, either, because her room was no longer her room. She was being forced to share her parents' room with him, and she really didn't have a safe place to go, even when she got home. "It's nothing. Really."

Aaron stopped the horses cold to glare at her. "We're not going one more inch until you tell me the truth."

Celia pleaded her skirt compulsively. "He – He was riding my – my horse." One of those bushy eyebrows rose in question. "Your horse?"

"Yes."

"How do you know it's your horse?"

Celia rolled her eyes. "How does anyone know their own horse? She's got a blaze on her forehead and her left back hoof is white, and I know it was her because I know my own horse when I see her!" She was almost yelling when she stopped, then sighed defeatedly. "It doesn't matter."

He clucked to the horses and they started up again. "What was her name?"

"Adina."

"And you rode a lot?"

He kept up the mindless chatter all the way home, although she only gave him reluctant one word answers. It was better than listening to her sob, which, when it wasn't about him spanking her or otherwise punishing her, wrenched his heart abominably. When they arrived, she exited out of the

carriage on the other side, not waiting for him to come around to help her, lifted her skirts, and ran full out.

Aaron passed the reins off to a confused Ben, who had probably come to talk to him about something pressing, but right now he had other things to attend to. He pressed his hat more securely down onto his head and took off after her at a lope, keeping an eye on where she went. But she knew the woods she'd darted into better than he ever would, and Aaron realized that he might have been a little overconfident about his ability to track her. He could have outdistanced her in a race in the open without really trying, but here there were thousands of places where she could hide here. He could have been standing right on top of her and never known it.

He couldn't spend the rest of his day looking for her; he just couldn't. There were still too many things to get done and not enough hours in which to complete them, and Ben no doubt had something important going on that he needed to know about.

But then he decided to try to think like her and ended up in front of her parents' old cottage, which was now crammed full of tools and supplies, so much so that there was barely any room in the old place, which had been his plan in the first place. If it didn't look like it was going to be accommodating as a place to stay a while, then the squatters – which had become more and more of a problem as soldiers streamed home from both sides – wouldn't squat.

The door had been opened to just about Celia size, and he found himself pressing it a good bit further so that he could slip his own bulk through it. "Celia?"

She didn't respond, but he could see her there, behind the rakes and shovels and picks and hoes, tucked into a corner of the already crowded place, sitting on the dirt floor in her pretty dress, knees drawn up to her chest, arms folded across the top of them while she bawled her heart out.

She didn't even protest when he lifted her in his arms and carried her out of her little hiding spot, and, for the first time he could remember, she actually wrapped her arms around him and buried her face in his neck, turning to him for comfort when she barely ever touched him voluntarily.

Once he got her in the house, he had to pray that they didn't meet up with her mother, because he didn't want to cause Nora any added stress, but the only person he saw was Patsy, who was wiping her hands off on a towel as he ascended the stairs with his sobbing bundle.

"Mr. Aaron, what's wrong with Miss Celia?" Patsy asked, sounding alarmed.

"She's fine, Patsy. She's just not feeling very well right now."

Ever the one to want to help, Patsy started to come upstairs, too.

"No, let me handle her. She'll be fine; she just needs some rest."

Patsy stayed put but continued to follow the two with her eyes, daring to mumble something under her breath to the effect that Miss Celia wasn't going to be getting much rest alone in a bedroom with him.

Aaron tried to place Celia carefully down on the bed, but she didn't seem to want to let him go, and he wasn't about to force her. He'd done quite enough of that already. Instead, he lay next to her, kicking off his boots after a bit of a fight, but nothing and no one was going to take him away from her, now that she was finally acting as if she wanted him to be close to her.

Although the reasons he'd had for wanting to find her quickly were definitely still valid, and he knew that the dirt she'd accumulated at the back of her dress was probably ruining the new comforter he'd bought for their big new bed, he was perfectly content to simply lie there and hold her in his arms until she felt better – he didn't care if the whole damned place burned down around them, as long as she continued to latch onto him with those still a bit too thin arms of hers.

Aaron settled her into the crook of his arm and held her gently, rubbing her back a bit while she cried it out in a soft, defeated manner that pulled his heart another inch out of his chest with each mewling whimper.

It was in that specific and distinct moment that Aaron realized that he loved Celia.

## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

He knew what love was and had frankly despaired of ever finding it. His parents always had been and always would be deeply in love with each other, not that they hadn't had some famous rows in their time. Celia was a lot like his mother in that, much stronger than she looked and not likely to back down when faced with adversity, and an angry Red Denelhy definitely qualified as such, but tiny Priscilla never backed down from her husband, despite the fact that he dwarfed her nearly three times over.

Celia had come through years of hard times, survived the loss of one brother and the probable loss of everyone else in her family, including her Mother to a large extent, and yet she'd survived.

She'd even survived her encounters with him.

Aaron drew a deep breath as he pressed an almost absent kiss on the top of Celia's head. He knew that Celia felt wronged by what he'd done to her, and Aaron knew that he wouldn't want his own mother to find out how he'd forced her to accept his advances. He wasn't suffering under any delusions that she harbored anything but an active loathing for him – and he couldn't say as he blamed her one bit.

But he had to admit to himself that although he'd taken her against her will, and continued to do so, he simply couldn't decide to just leave. He'd come to love Celia, yes, but also this magnificent home he'd bought, as well as her fragile mother. Aaron couldn't see that suddenly leaving any of them was going to do them any good – in fact, he was quite sure that without a steady rudder such as himself, they would all just fall back into the state of disrepair they'd been in when he got here.

Regardless of the fact that she would probably never admit it, Celia was better off for his presence in her life. He kept her fed and clothed and made sure that she took care of herself and watched her step as to her own personal safety – something that had gone out the window in favor of merely surviving during the years of hard times.

And he found that he had to take into account the fact that he gave her infinite pleasure within the confines of this bed of theirs, nearly swamping her with a haze of constant raw, complete sexual satisfaction every night that put a healthy glow in those hollow cheeks the next morning. There was no way he could walk away from that – he'd have to rip his own heart out and leave it and his genitals on the front steps before he left.

The incidents in town only served to prod him about what he'd practically concluded already, and now that he'd acknowledged within himself that he loved her, it was a relatively easy step to take: they had to get married. There was no other answer for it.

Celia was snoring lightly in his arms, having exhausted herself crying. He supposed he really should spank her for running away from him, but somehow he didn't think that would be quite right. And it wasn't as if she didn't give him plenty of other reasons to give her bottom a good shiny coat of sore redness. This time, he thought she'd been through enough, especially considering that she'd had to go through it entirely on his account.

Aaron was abuzz with thoughts and ideas about how he was going to accomplish what he wanted, and he carefully squeezed out from under her, tucked her up tightly, and exited the room in his stocking feet, carrying his boots in one hand, so as not to wake her.

The entire event took several months to coordinate, and it seemed the hurrier he went, the behinder he got. He made a trip in to see Mrs. Beauregard himself to ask her to get the best, most beautiful wedding gown she could from whoever her contacts were in Paris. He said he wanted it to be

the envy of all the brides in the entire United States, and money was no object. Then he set about contacting his parents, which was no mean feat considering their little kingdom was nearly a country unto itself, especially in the winter months. But it was coming on to Spring, and he sent several letters as well as a telegram, hoping that one of them would reach its destination.

The first thing he did, though, was talk to Nora Weston, catching her on as good a day as he'd seen her have of late.

"Nora?" he asked quietly. She was sitting on the back porch in a huge old wicker rocking chair he'd found for her, with a light shawl over her lap, just rocking and watching the slight, floral scented breeze glide through the trees at the edge of the forest.

"Yes, Aaron?" Her voice was so fey and high, it was like talking to a fairy.

He took the seat next to her that Celia often occupied, a staunch, sturdy wooden chair that Aaron had built for himself. He came right to the point, looking into Nora's eyes and trying to determine how much of what he was going to say she was going to comprehend, and not wanting to disturb the delusions she was living quite happily with. "Nora, even though we're already engaged, I want to do things right and proper. I want to ask you for your daughter's hand in marriage."

The older woman took her own sweet time in answering him, and Aaron thought his heart was going to burst out of his chest before she did. "You really should be asking my husband that question - " Nora stopped and blinked her eyes, experiencing a moment of clarity whose pain nearly crippled her. " - but you can't. You can't." Tears trickled from her eyes. "Do you love her? Really love her?" she asked, taking Aaron's hands where they were folded together on his leg.

He nodded, answering in all honesty. "Yes, I do."

"Then marry her, my boy. There's been all too much heartache and bloodshed and loss around here lately. It'll be good to have something happening that we can all be happy about." She lifted her arms to him in a welcoming hug. "Welcome to the family."

Aaron felt tears sting the back of his own eyes at her warm welcome. "Thank you." He rose and hugged Nora gently, then sat back down and cleared his throat, telling her about all the arrangements he'd already made. "There's only one problem. I don't think Celia's going to be any too happy about it."

Nora pulled her shawl around her thin shoulders, saying, "Pshaw! She'll do what's right, although she'll probably fuss at you about it. I always thought Gib was too soft on her - she had him wrapped around her little finger, she did. Why, he gave her her first horse when she was only three! Imagine that!" She shook her head. "He never really took her in hand the way she needed to be, and he wouldn't let me do it, either." Nora patted his hands. "But you do, and she needs that. She needs it."

"Thank you, Nora."

At least one person thought he was good for her. Too bad it wasn't the right person.

Throughout all of his preparations, and his discovery of his newfound love for her, he would have thought that he would have eased up somehow in both his diligent discipline of her or his constant craving for her soft, creamy flesh. But if anything, both of those tendencies only increased considerably once he realized how much he loved her.

There had never been an evening since he'd clamped his hand across her mouth that first night that he didn't bring her to the heights of ecstasy in one way or the other, and Aaron's tastes in sexual matters were broad and encompassed all manner of stimulation.

One evening, several weeks before he let his prospective bride know that she was his prospective bride - even though almost everyone around her knew but had been sworn to secrecy on penalty of death - he came into their bedroom, which was, finally, fully furnished. Celia had decided on a beautiful dark cherry set she'd seen with a large, ornate headboard - above the rails Aaron insisted upon. The combination of the two of their requirements wasn't easy to find. They actually had furniture in their bedroom now - twin nightstands, a highboy, double dresser with a mirror, and a vanity for the perfumes and geegaws he insisted on bringing her back from town, where he hadn't asked her to go again.

Yet.

When he came in that evening, she was fast asleep, which wasn't at all unusual. There was so much to do around the place lately that he rose well before she did, and retired long after her, although she was always on his mind throughout the day, so much so that he thought he was going to have to have a seam let in his pants to accommodate the hardness he'd grown accustomed to sporting quite consistently since meeting her, and entering their room at night, when it was filled with the somewhat spicy floral scent of her warmth made it a thousand times worse.

Aaron doffed his clothes immediately and slipped under his side of the covers, pulling her into his arms and feeling her settle contentedly there. He almost persuaded himself to leave her alone – it seemed that he was at her all the time, especially lately. Any time he saw her – even in the light of day – he'd steal at least a few minutes worth of fervent, fevered kisses, and once he even took her in the little cabin she'd hidden in, lifting her up onto a stack of big, heavy crates full of tools and tipping her back, forcing her legs open beneath her skirts as he ripped her new drawers away from her trying to get into her as fast as he could, before he shamed himself and exploded in his pants. He'd nearly gone crazy as soon as he'd entered her, slamming himself into her and holding her shoulders down so that she couldn't get away from him – not that she was trying to.

That was another in the list of things he was finding he loved about her – she responded to him nearly as quickly as he did to her, and in his experience that was something rare in a woman. Generally, he'd found they needed quite a bit of attention before they'd gift him with a glimpse into their own brand of paradise.

Although she was still obviously reluctant and never welcomed what he did to her when he approached her each evening, at first, her body was only too happy to welcome him, regardless of where or when. He knew it was something she struggled with, and sometimes she tried to deny her own pleasure, although he was always more than willing and able to drive her well past the point of being able to hold it back.

But tonight, since she was sleeping, she sank into his arms with a long, slow sigh, and as much as he would have liked to have just let her sleep, he knew his own body would never let him. He'd decided to test her on something different he'd been having a bit of a craving for.

"Wake up, sleepyhead," he whispered, not wanting to startle her, pressing his lips to the side of her head as she rolled over onto her back. Aaron rolled over himself and lit the bedside lamp, making Celia groan, and he knew it wasn't just because of the light in her eyes, either.

Aaron liked to see her when he took her. He liked to watch her breasts as she slowly opened herself up to him, sometimes helplessly because he'd tied her so that she wouldn't get it into her mind to try to interfere with him, or just because he liked seeing her bound, but most of all he loved to watch her face, especially when he first pressed himself inside her. His use of her hadn't seemed to stretch her much, and every time he joined his body with hers, her eyes grew wide and she whimpered sexily, drawing in a surprised breath, as if she didn't expect that she would be able to take him.

This time, he turned her onto her side away from him, reaching around with both hands to cover her breasts and squeeze them firmly, using his fingers to make those nipples – which were already erect – a little sore and achy with their pinching and tugging attentions.

"Aaron," she sighed, and he couldn't tell if it was an admonition or a plea, she was still somewhat sleepy, and he thought that that would only be an advantage in what he was going to do.

His long, thick erection had already found a nest for itself as far between her legs as it could manage to insinuate itself, which was nowhere near as far as it wanted to.

He pressed a kiss against that sweet spot just behind her ear before positioning her the way he wanted her – on her knees with her head down, legs spread as far apart as she could – and reached into his night stand for a special pot of slippery stuff he'd kept there for just this purpose.

Since he wasn't quite sure how she'd react to this, and he thought it might go easier for her if he buttered her up some in the most literal of senses. Aaron reached between those sweet legs, bringing his mouth down to kiss the top swells of her bottom as he unerringly found what he sought. She was already more than buttered up all on her own, and he felt an incredible amount of satisfaction at that fact – and at the fact that her body always seemed to welcome his attentions in the most intimate of fashions a woman possibly could.

He dipped his fingers liberally into that honey, but didn't explore the cavern from which it literally dripped down onto him, preferring instead to bring that bounty up to that exposed little button her awkward position forced into easy accessibility. It was already plump and eager for him – as her nipples had been, but even more so. He'd become very good at recognizing where she was in the climb and quickly used both of his hands – one at her very prominent little clitty and the other pumping hard and fast into the honey pot he'd so recently raided. She was very quickly almost there, and mewled as he removed his hands.

She was still relaxed, but also hot and eager, and he figured that was probably the best condition for his intentions. Aaron dipped his index finger into the small container he'd retrieved, and brought out a good sized helping of the stuff, then proceeded to open those sweet cheeks of hers with one hand, exposing her bottom flower he'd been fantasizing about opening since this morning.

Celia was an awkward combination of incredibly excited and very mellow from sleep, and she didn't really pay attention to what he was doing until she felt his well trimmed fingertip pressing against a place she'd never expected anyone to have any interest in – especially not him, for some reason. It just seemed to her to be the least exciting place on her body, to say nothing of the most indecent.

She immediately began to try to wiggle away from him, but a loud smack to her flank stopped her in mid crawl.

"You know better than that, Celia, trying to get away like that," he chided. "Do I need to have you go get the paddle?" Despite the fact that it was still hung on his side of the room – if a little to the left of where he'd put it originally to accommodate the headboard, he always made her go retrieve it for him when he disciplined her. Aaron felt that it gave her a chance to think about what she'd done, and made sure she understood exactly who it was that was in charge of her punishments – not that there had ever been any doubt as to that idea.

"No, please, I – I – don't, Aaron, please!"

He knew it was a fault within himself that he loved to hear her plead and beg him, but even having acknowledged that, it wasn't something he was going to work on repairing, either. Her cries and moans – be they of infinite pleasure or pain – worked their ways directly from his ears to his cock, setting fire to ever inch of him in between on their way. When she reacted to him – even in the most minute of ways – his passion increased a thousand fold. When he was with her – even though he emptied himself into her several times a night in various ways – he was constantly in danger of losing control of himself, most especially when he put her into situations that made her beseech him like this.

"Yes, Celia. I can make it feel very good to you. I can. But you must try to relax for me, because I'm going to do it anyway, and I don't want to hurt you."

Celia was beside herself. No one had ever touched her there. She barely touched herself there. This was even worse – if it could be imagined – than the fact that he'd taken her virginity, and continued to violate her, bringing her to screaming completion every single time. This was the most depraved thing he'd ever required of her, and she shuddered to think that he was going to force himself on her in this shameful manner.

But she knew he was, or he wouldn't have said so. Aaron didn't say things just to hear himself speak. He always followed through on them – whether it was with her in bed, or with the men who worked for him. He was as solid and steady as a rock, and he did what he said he was going to do. He was



going to put that finger up inside her bottom hole, and if she fought him, then he'd just do it after raising rounded red blisters on the flesh surrounding it.

Part of her wanted to fight him at all costs. Part of her still berated herself for not having fought him more – even to the death if she'd had to – before he let her dishonor her, as the townspeople obviously would have preferred she'd done, and most definitely before he'd been able to make her enjoy it, the bastard.

And now . . . now she'd come to crave him. Now he barely had to look at her and that cream he inspired in her as no one else ever had would drip down onto her drawers, somehow, even from across the room at dinner or when they spent a quiet night in the living room reading with her mother, he knew. He knew more about her body by far than she did, and he used every bit of that knowledge to his advantage against her – every time. She always succumbed to him, because her flesh was weak.

And then there was the way she saw him treating almost everyone else – with respect and caring – most particularly her mother. It was like he was another person with them, and she had a hard time reconciling the man who wielded the paddle or his belt so readily with the man who was so tender with Nora.

His words cut ruthlessly into her thoughts. "I expect you to be still – it's important, so I don't hurt you any more than I have to. If you can't be still, I'll tie you so that you'll have no choice."

She never had a choice. Celia bit her lip on a sob. She hated how helpless he made her feel, hated that feeling helpless with him didn't make her as angry as it should, instead it made those awful desires he conjured in her that much sharper, that much harder to clamp down on.

He did it just then, pressed his finger into her there, where her body immediately wanted to reject it, pressing it in slowly no matter how hard she clenched against it – no matter how she tried to prevent it, he could always find a way in – usually, a very pleasurable way. Her muscles would not allow her to keep them constantly tense, so she had to relax after a few moments of him pressing into and out of her, and once she no longer fought against it, she was completely mortified to realize that she was beginning to like even this, especially when he reached to the front of her again, with his free hand and began to manipulate that little nibble of hers, rubbing those calluses lightly over the top and sides of that raw bundle of nerves while he pushed the thick, stiff finger in and out, over and over.

Without even asking, without telling her, he presented a second finger with the first, introducing it gently but firmly at first, then slipping the two up inside her as she moaned and tried to remember not to cringe away from him, lest she get paddled, but it was so hard not to. Every time she leaned just a little away, he patted her bottom in a way that reminded her of how it was between them – how he took and she gave, how he administered and she received, how he pushed and she yielded.

He was inside her to his knuckles, opening her, stretching her in preparation for that part of him that would open and stretch her just that much more.

When she'd just started to enjoy what he was doing again, crying the whole time – not because he was hurting her, but more in protest of what he was doing to her – but moaning on each thrust despite how much she tried to suppress it, he drew his fingers out and washed them on a damp soapy cloth he'd brought with him to bed. Celia stayed in position, having learned the hard way that she didn't want to take anything on herself about moving. She mustn't move until he'd given her permission, or moved her himself. She'd had to go cut her own switch in the back yard so that he could teach her that lesson.

He stood, arranging her right where he wanted her to be, at the edge of the side of the bed – the perfect height, because although the new frame she'd ordered had made the bed a lot higher than the last one, which had been at just the right height, he had spent some of the morning after they'd set the new bed frame up sawing off several inches of the legs and leveling them until it sat right where he wanted it to be, for just moments like this.

Aaron used both hands to pry open those bashful cheeks, his member bobbing up and down eagerly, seeking her warmth. He'd slathered it with slippery stuff, too, in preparation. As he positioned

himself against her opening, Aaron used her hips to pull her back onto him, very, very slowly. She began to cry outright as he watched that virginal opening expand around the circumference of him. He advanced by tiny increments, pausing to give her time to acclimate herself to him, but not for too long.

Finally, once he had buried himself within her to the hilt, he withdrew all the way and began again as Celia wailed her unhappiness. It took him a few strokes like that until he felt she was comfortable enough that he actually began to plunge into her fully and firmly, with some shorter strokes where he held her hips and pumped into her in sharp, hard bursts, but also longer, slower, more powerful thrusts where he removed himself completely then forced himself back inside her all at once, right to the hilt.

And soon, much sooner than he'd expected, her wails of humiliation and pleas for him to stopped turned into guttural moans she did her best to stop, and she began chanting a frantic "No!" instead.

Aaron grimaced at just how hard she was on herself about the pleasure she received at his hands – and various other parts of him. Just to make it a little harder on her to deny herself – and him – that wonderful culmination, he leaned back just a bit, enough so that his right hand would reach that vulnerable spot of hers, and just lay his fingers over the top of her. His relentlessly bucking hips would do the rest, he knew, since he increased their rhythm at the same time, snapping himself into and out of her with absolutely no mercy at all.

"Aaron – no – please – d-don't do thhhhaaaat!!" Celia hated herself for begging, but she had to – despite the fact that she knew it would be to no avail.

In fact, she reached back to try to stop him – not that she got anywhere near him, and ended up encouraging him to use both of her arms as reins that forced her tight up against him as he battered up against her.

He was doing it to her again, bringing her to that ecstasy no matter how hard she fought it and him. It overwhelmed her – he overwhelmed her with sensation after sensation, and even though she knew those feelings he created were humiliating and dirty and that she shouldn't be experiencing anything except shame and mortification at the way he used her, she couldn't convince her body of that fact, and as he plied her with ecstasy at every turn, even this one.

She didn't want to enjoy it. She didn't want to want that hard won explosion, she didn't, she didn't . . .

But he brought it to her anyway, making her convulse and scream and claw at the mattress as he continued to pump into her on his way to his own end, which came only seconds later as he slammed into her almost roughly, growling and grunting and groaning as his entire body indulged in a long, hard first spasm that shook him to the core, then repeated with only slightly fading intensity until he nearly collapsed, and finally did, withdrawing from her carefully, then falling onto the bed on his side before realizing that she had remained in position, still panting.

Aaron got up and took a rag from the necessary, which had finally been put to rights, bringing it back to clean her gently and thoroughly, surprised when she didn't raise her usual complaints when conducted his usual ablutions – if at points south of where he was usually on her body.

He tossed the rag into a hamper that Patsy had set up and turned to Celia, who still hadn't moved an inch, gathering her into his arms and just holding her. Sometimes she got like this when he pleased her, almost catatonic, as if she'd just felt too much at once and couldn't deal with it. Her body was board stiff, but at least she wasn't crying. That was some small victory, he thought to himself. Aaron figured that he'd hold her for a while and she would relax into sleep.



## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

But she hadn't. She'd stayed awake all night – he knew because every time he woke up, she was sitting up, wide awake, and no matter how many times he reclaimed her and made her lie down, hoping she would fall asleep naturally.

That morning when he woke she was already out of bed, sitting at her vanity getting dressed even though Esther was nowhere to be found. He hopped out of bed immediately, taking the rare opportunity to play lady's maid to his lady, helping her stand and locking the hoop skirt around her waist, then gathering the dress she'd chosen – a pretty pink rose with green accents – and dropping it over her head, adjusting it here and there so that it fell right.

He accomplished all of this while completely nude, watching the color on Celia's quickly grow to match the pink of the dress almost perfectly.

"Stay where you are," he commanded with a fierce, almost comical scowl. He got himself dressed quickly, dragging the razor over his face so rapidly that it was a wonder he had any face left, or that he hadn't managed to slit his throat.

When he was done, he grabbed her hand and brought her downstairs, then out back. Aaron positioned her right where he wanted her, standing by the corral they'd built off the repaired barn. "I have a surprise for you."

Celia stood where she was told, confused and more than a little curious, although she didn't want to be. What could he possibly have for her back here?

When she saw what it was, she couldn't believe it. She just couldn't believe it.

Aaron led a horse out of the barn. Her horse. Adina.

Celia forgot everything she'd ever learned about decorum and ladylike behavior and ran into the mucky corral, not worrying about the fringe of her dress and what it was being dragged through, only caring that he'd somehow found her Adina.

She burned her face against that smooth black neck, and the horse whickered, as if in recognition. Celia's hands patted her sleek skin – she'd obviously been very well cared for. "How?" she asked on a sob. "How'd you find her?"

Aaron was still holding the horse, but his eyes were only for Celia. "I took note of the man and the horse when you were staring at them, and I had some luck finding out information about them in town. I found the gentleman and explained the situation, and despite the fact that I think he thought I was a crazy Yankee, he let me buy the horse from him."

Celia stroked her hand over the big mare's ears, laying her cheek on Adina's face. "She must've cost you a pretty penny."

"It's worth it to see the look on your face," Aaron said baldly. But she was right. The mare had cost him an enormous amount, plus the promise of a Morgan horse his father would send down from Maine.

Celia turned her nose to the horse's, rubbing her hands over the animal as if she was going to refuse to ever leave it.

He had planned to tell her of their upcoming marriage when he gave her the horse, figuring she would probably be about as mellow as he was ever going to get her, but then he decided against it. He knew that, regardless, she would just spend as much time as she could between now and then either being

miserable or trying to talk him out of it, and he didn't want to give her the chance to dwell on it. Aaron thought that keeping the element of surprise might be the best course of action, so he bit his tongue while she reveled in lost treasures found.

The date for the wedding drew nearer and nearer, and Celia began to suspect that something was going on, although no one would tell her anything. But there were a lot more people around of the past week, people working on the house, doing the last minute things that Aaron had always said that he'd get around to, painting the whole house and the trim, stripping and refinishing the hardwood floors in the dining room and the foyer, and for some reason, opening up and airing out the spare bedrooms, as if they were expecting guests to arrive. It seemed everyone but her had a polishing rag or a mop or a broom in their hands, but, as usual, he wasn't about to let her help doing anything that might smack of housework, and no one would answer her questions about what they were doing, least of all Aaron. Patsy just said they were doing the normal spring cleaning, but Celia never remembered spring cleaning being quite this frantic.

One evening she was in the parlor, reading a copy of Dumas' "The Three Musketeers" that Aaron had gifted her with only the day before, when she heard the unmistakable sounds of carriages approaching. Her first thought was to run and hide – conditioned as it was from too long hiding out from whoever might be trying to take over her house next. She successfully stifled the impulse, but she couldn't quite bring herself to run out to greet them as she would have before the War, when nothing bad happened to her and visitors were always a good thing.

Instead she hung back in the foyer, leaving the door open a crack so that she could see what was going on, but not venturing out until she was a little more sure who had arrived. The first person she saw get out of the first in a line of impressively rich looking carriages was a huge older man who was probably even bigger than Aaron, and Celia wasn't at all sure she could wrap her mind around that concept. The giant reached his hand into the bowels of the carriage and extracted a small, dainty woman whose clothing was well made, if somewhat dated. People began pouring into the front yard, two more huge men, younger men, and their smaller women, as everyone lent a hand in collecting their baggage in the front yard.

Aaron arrived and literally threw himself at the huge old man, hugging him without reservation, the same way he hugged the small woman and the other men.

Before she had a chance to process this information, he ran towards the house and found her there, staring out at them. "What's going on?" she asked, looking into his happy face.

"It's my family," he answered, giving her no chance to refuse as he tugged her out to meet them.

His family? She asked in her mind, but it was too late to consider the ramifications of their appearance. She was already being presented to them, his mother first. "Ma, this is Miss Celia Angelique Weston. Celia, this is my mother, Priscilla McCort Denehy."

Celia was dumbfounded, and when she looked back on the incident, she hoped that she'd said the proper things, but she couldn't quite be sure. Apparently she'd said something appropriate, because no one was looking askance at her. Priscilla had hugged her gently, saying something to the effect that she'd been looking forward to meeting her.

Aaron was pulling her in a different direction, presenting her to the giant. "Dad, this is Miss Celia Angelique Weston. Celia, this is my father, Big Red Denehy."

Red Denehy didn't hold with the proprieties. He reached out and clutched her to him, swinging her around, and remarking quite impolitely that she needed some meat on her bones, that she weighed no more than a feather. "Welcome to the family, lass!" he bellowed in a thick Irish brogue that apparently hadn't been dulled one bit by his time in Maine, nearly causing Celia to trip as she stepped back a bit to preserve her ears from his excessive volume.

Aaron saw Celia's shocked face, and gently moved her on to his brothers, who were able to speak in kinder, gentler tones.

As she shook hands politely with the other men, Celia couldn't help but draw comparisons. He and his brothers were all the spitting image of their father – it was hard to see any of his delicate mother in any of them.

After the rest of the introductions were made – she met his brothers' wives and Mama appeared and Aaron made all of those introductions, too – they adjourned to the living room for a very short time, where Patsy brought tea and the small shortbread cookies she was known for.

The Denehys were worn out from their long trip, though, and they all retired not long after, with no one having mentioned a thing about why they'd come all this way.

Celia, for one, couldn't wait to get Aaron alone and pump him for information about why all these people had suddenly appeared on her doorstep. But once they were alone in their room, he still refused to answer any questions, to the point that when they both crawled into bed, he laid his hand along her jaw and made her look at him before he turned out the light, and asked in a very serious, threatening tone, "Do you want to go to sleep with or without a sore butt?"

Celia frowned up at him, because he certainly knew the answer, and let the subject go, but very reluctantly.

It was the first night since he'd first taken her captive that he didn't show any interest in her sexually, and that had her as curious as everything else. She fell asleep quickly in his arms, despite the questions that were dancing around in her head.

The next morning, however, he was up before she was, and she awakened as Patsy was arranging a dress on the front hook of her wardrobe.

It was a wedding dress, there was no mistaking it. It was a white lace concoction that looked gorgeous even just hanging there. Patsy came over and gave Celia a big hug, but Aaron shooed her out of the room quick when he came out of the necessary half dressed in formal pants and a starched white shirt with an ornate cravat. He donned his morning coat before coming over to Celia and looking a bit nervous for the first time she could remember. He kissed her gently on the forehead, then said softly, "Good morning, Celia. This is our wedding day."

Celia was dumbstruck. Wedding? He'd never even asked her about it. And who said she could consent to marrying him anyway! Her first reaction was one of pure anger, and she didn't hold any of it back, lighting into him but good about how he'd treated her and how she was still his prisoner and how much she hated him for it all.

Aaron had sat down in the straight backed chair he'd stolen from the dining room set they'd bought, figuring it might well need one close in this room, too, his face growing more and more like a thundercloud as her tirade continued. When she finally ran out of steam, he asked with more than a little sarcasm, "Are you finished?"

Deflated and somewhat depressed at this turn of events, Celia crumpled back onto the bed, saying, "Yes."

"Well then let me respond to what you just said, and then, like it or not, we're going downstairs to get married." Aaron ticked off all the things he'd done for her in the past year or so, including feeding and clothing both her and her mother, restoring Trey Rivers almost back to the grandeur it had enjoyed pre-war, making the place a working plantation again and paying off all of their creditors.

Celia was feeling just a bit petty, when she knew she had the right to feel put upon instead. "I never asked you do any of those things," she said petulantly, fiddling with the sheet.

Aaron sighed. "No. You didn't. You would prefer that I had just let you and your mother starve to death. That would have been the honorable thing for the two of you. Well, I won't apologize for saving your lives, and I expect to see you downstairs in fifteen minutes. I'm going to send Patsy in to help you dress."

Patsy was right outside the door, probably having heard every word of the conversation. "The man's right, you know."

Celia sniffed and huddled down into the blankets.

"C'mon now, Miss Ceeley, you gotta get up and get dressed."

"I won't." Celia couldn't believe what he was doing – trying to coerce her into marrying him. How could he even begin to think that that was what she wanted – not that he'd ever really taken what she'd wanted into consideration.

She didn't care if he paddled her for days, she wasn't going to get out of this bed. She didn't want to marry him, she didn't . . . even if that would be the most rational thing to do, since he'd already deflowered her six ways from Sunday, taken over her house and her servants, and even her dear mother.

But she didn't want to think about what was right and rational. She was too angry that he'd be so high handed as to plan her own wedding for her. It should have been something that she'd had months – even years to plan and dream over, to think about and fantasize about and . . . well, anticipate! It should not be something that was sprung on a body.

It just wasn't right, and she refused to have any part of it.

Patsy did everything she could, short of dragging Celia out of the bed, but Celia stubbornly stayed put. Finally, although she didn't want to do it because she knew how Mr. Aaron was going to deal with her, Patsy gave up and went to find him. At least that man could get that stubborn chit to cooperate, although Patsy didn't always agree with his methods.

Celia's heart began to thump as she heard Aaron's feet clomping up the stairs then down the hall to their door. He burst in, and stepped over to the bed, lifting her up and over his lap in one motion. She was already naked, so he could commence the spanking immediately, which he did. "I am not going to have you acting like this on your wedding day. I didn't want you to have to walk down the aisle with a sore bottom, but apparently you need to be reminded who you belong to." Aaron smacked away at her bottom, and Celia, as always, couldn't keep herself from howling from the stinging ache he was creating. "You realize that the entire household – my family included – is up and waiting for you in the living room downstairs, and they can all hear how I'm having to discipline you like this."

Celia clamped her mouth shut, but it only lasted until he reached for the paddle, then she began to wail again as she begged him not to blister her bottom.

Aaron gave her ten very hard swats with that awful, entirely unforgiving implement, then he hauled her over to her vanity and told her to do her hair the way she wanted it, because they were getting married within the next five minutes or so, even if he had to drag her down there to stand up in front of her family and his completely naked.

Celia had never been very good with her hair, but she put it up in a simple bun with small curly tendrils falling out of it at her temples. Aaron helped her into her skirts, hose and dress, cursing the small buttons at the back the entire time he was hitching them together. Finally, she was as ready as he was going to let her get, and he grabbed her hand to bring her to the door, but he stopped short and turned to look at her, taking in the pale, blushing complexion and her slightly still watery eyes, with the spiky black lashes that set off their stark blue perfectly. She was perfection to him, and he bent down to kiss her, whispering against her lips, "I love you, Celia Weston Denehy."

But he didn't give her a chance to think about what he'd just said, because he escorted her to the top of the stairs, where his father stood blushing, having heard an earful, she was sure. Red Denehy offered his arm to the delightful young woman who was soon to become his newest daughter in law as Aaron scampered down the stairs to take his place in the ballroom, where they would be married by his brother, Eric, who was also a preacher.

Aaron had hired a small orchestra who began to play on Red's signal as he and Celia descended the stairs together. The ceremony was short and sweet, but the congratulations and the food – a wedding brunch - and drink seemed to never end.

Stone, who was Aaron's best man, made the first toast, then Red stepped in and formally welcomed Celia into the Denehy clan, and even Nora spoke up in her quiet, gentle way, thanking Aaron for all he'd done for herself and her daughter.

It was Aaron who raised his glass to be next, turning to stand before Celia as everyone's attention focused on them. He caught her up in his arms and held her too close for polite company, saying loudly enough that everyone could hear, "This is Celia Weston Denehy, the woman I love, and my Rebel bride, and my most treasured spoils of war."

Celia knew her blush was lit the room all on its own as their guests parted and he whirled her out onto the dance floor.

Rebel bride. Celia rolled the phrase around in her head, deciding with a look into her new husband's eyes that it suited her just fine.



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