

Jennifer Mueller

An Arrangement Among Gentlemen

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by

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Dedication:

To my husband Craig who decided I spent so much time anyway that I might as well try to get published. Thanks for the push even if I don't let you read them.

An Arrangement Among Gentlemen

A novella by

Jennifer Mueller

Dear George,

I am ill; the end for me has finally come. The doctor says no more than a few months. I am worried for my daughter now that her brother is gone, especially in this time of war. We joked of it all those years ago when Olivia was born, and now I want to broach the subject without jest. I should like to discuss the subject of marriage between the two of them. Olivia is a fine looking girl, and Cort, I have been told, is a handsome man. I have not brought up the subject with Olivia. I will not unless we can come to an agreement in regards to the arrangement. I know arranged marriages are becoming a thing of the past, but I feel this is the only way to see that my daughter is well cared for. Cort is no longer a boy; he has proved that well, but Olivia is still just a girl. I can't see her surviving without someone to watch over her. I have not given her a good life. A stable may have been fine for James, but it is not the place for a girl, especially without a mother. I should have seen that before now. A good home with women around as an example and a man to give her a place is what she needs most. Please, if you feel the arrangement is agreeable, discuss it with Cort and then, based on the answer, I will tell Olivia. It would make a dying man rest easy to see all he has left in the world taken care of.

Henry Thatcher

Dear Henry,

Cort indeed needs a proper female influence in his life; travels all over the world may sow many oats, but sets no roots. I fear that he may never find a wife before I die and can see grandchildren from the match. Knowing Cort, I'm sure if she has even a semblance of looks and a pulse, she will be good enough for him. Until the vows have made them man and wife, there is a room in the house for her to use.

George Garrett

Late in the winter of 1916, a train rolled to a stop in the snowbound rail station in the middle of Alberta, Canada. The station was small, but of picturesque brick with a slate roof. Two men in heavy wool shirts and pants and thick fur coats stood waiting for the train. They looked nervous. No, on second thought, one looked nervous. The other looked furious.

"Please, Miss Olivia, let me help you down the steps?" The porter asked after several people had disembarked. The two men perked up at the name and watched as she took the porter's arm. The younger man watched not her face, but the foot that emerged from under the skirt that was lifted for descent. Once down the stairs, the porter handed her a stout silver-capped walking stick. Both men could only stare. Olivia had thick black hair and dark eyes that made her pale skin stand out. Under a full-length seal coat, she was dressed in the latest fashion.

The men walked over to the train. "Olivia Thatcher?"

She raised her eyes. They weren't black as they first thought, but a deep blue-gray that reminded them of a horrendous storm over the mountains. It didn't bode well for the present situation.

"Yes."

The older of the two men walked forward and offered his hand. "I'm George Garrett and this is my son Cort. I'm glad you could make it in this weather."

"Funerals make no plans concerning the weather."

"I'm sure you won't find my son so much trouble we need to worry about funerals."

Her eyes flickered annoyance, and the storm in them grew. "I'm rather surprised, seeing as you arranged this fiasco, that you wouldn't consider my being here as proof that my father died last month. I won't have his death thought of so lightly. Martin, could you show Mr. Garrett where my things are?"

George could only stare in disbelief at the way she had spoken to him.

"Of course, Miss Olivia. Come with me, Mr. Garrett. I'll have you out of here right away," The porter answered.

She was alone with Cort as they rounded the building. Olivia began to walk away to get some exercise after being on the train for so long. She had made it only a few feet before she began to fall. A strong arm caught her easily. She looked over and saw Cort clearly for the first time through her anger. He had longer, sun-streaked light brown hair, and a hint of stubble on a rugged and quite handsome face. He was tan and staring at her with bright green eyes. Olivia suddenly felt very uncomfortable with the position she found herself in and tried to pull away from him.

"Careful. This snow is slick if you're not used to it," Cort warned.

"It's not the snow. I suppose my father forgot to write that this stick isn't just for show. Not being able to walk much the last few days has made it worse than normal."

Cort ignored her attempts at leaving his side and slipped her arm in his to keep her from falling again. "We'd best walk a bit then. The ranch is another 3 hours by car in this weather." There was a strained silence as they made their way down the station platform.

Olivia opened her mouth several times to say something, but she finally had to force it out. "I'm going to get this out of the way now. If I don't meet your expectations, tell me now, and I'll head home, consider this a tour of your beautiful country, and inconvenience you no further. I have no intentions making either of us miserable with this blasted arrangement."

Cort started to smile, and Olivia's heart caught in her throat as she waited for an answer. That smile was disconcerting. He was either smiling because he approved or because he was glad she gave him an out. He stopped walking and turned to her. His hand gently traced her cheek, the calluses of his hands rough against her skin. Then he kissed her cheek gently in welcome.

"If you're worried about my expectations, never fear. You've already greatly exceeded them."

"And, if I remember the letter I read, all that means is I have a pulse and some semblance of looks," she snapped, annoyed. She was not one to be won over so easily, despite his looks. Or maybe it was that her heart betrayed her and pounded furiously in her chest. She only hoped he couldn't tell her voice had become huskier since his kiss, peck on the cheek that it was.

There was only that smile again. "My father did me a great injustice then, as he never met any of my women. Their semblance was anything but vague, and their pulses quite rapid." His hand found her wrist and searched out her own pulse. "Like yours is just now." He started walking again, half-grinning at her annoyance. Then the grin faded. "I'm sorry I shouldn't joke when you're still grieving your father."

"Thank you." She murmured.

“Your father’s letter was rather wrong as well. Fine looking doesn’t begin to describe you properly. Magnificent is what comes to mind.”

“I’m a cripple.” Olivia announced as a matter of fact.

“Crippled is my mother who spends her time in a chair all day because it hurts too much to move. Do you mind my asking how you came to need the stick?”

She kept her face straight ahead. Her jaw tightened; she was not sure she could say it out loud, even after all those years. Then, to her amazement, her voice broke the silence. “I fell off a horse when I was 11. That’s not quite descriptive enough. It rolled on top of me with my leg pinned between it and a tree. My leg was shattered badly. They thought, after it happened, that they would have to remove it completely. I was back on a horse as soon as I was able. It was the only way I could get around. They told me I would never walk again. It took me two years to work up to just walking across the room. I’ll probably always have this limp, slight though it looks after 9 years. The main problem is my knee gives out quite easily. It’s easier to walk with the stick than to fall on my face 20 times a day.” The silence returned as the wind blew fiercely. Her clothes were not suited to the weather. Olivia pulled the coat around her tighter.

“I just can’t figure out why a woman would have to have a marriage arranged. I can understand it even less now that I’ve seen you. You’re not plain by any means, your eyes match, and your fingers aren’t webbed.”

“For that matter, why do you? If your experience is as well rounded as you claim, you should need it less than I.” Olivia saw that one hit home, and Cort flinched.

“I was told only this morning that I was engaged. I thought my father had more respect for me. I guess I know how he feels about me after this.”

“Then we’re both thrilled with this arrangement, aren’t we?” She snapped. His jaded father had written a reply without ever telling Cort of the decision, just as her jaded father had written the letter claiming she was in need of a knight in shining armor.

As they slowly made their way to the car, letting her get the full enjoyment of being off the train, they said little. Perhaps they both knew at that moment that, if they said much more, they would begin fighting over something that was neither of their fault.

“Took your own sweet time now, didn’t you? We’ve got to get back,” George snapped as they reached the car.

“Just shut up and leave us be, now that the damage is done,” Olivia hissed as she climbed in. Cort was grinning, trying not to let anyone see. Somehow, from that small gesture, she knew she wasn’t the woman anyone thought she would be: she was headstrong, opinionated, determined, even tough. It was best George learn early that she was able to take care of herself; if the look on his face at her tongue was any indication, he wasn’t happy about the real Olivia Thatcher.

They headed out of the station and town without another word. Despite the bumps in the country roads before they were barely a few miles out of town, Olivia’s head fell to Cort’s shoulder. She was sound asleep. It was the end of a long journey, and coming from England was no small feat in these times of war. Even though the United States had threatened Germany against sinking neutral ships after the *Lusitania*, it was still not uncommon for them to be blown out of the water.

Olivia ended up sleeping through dinner and, in fact, did not wake until the middle of the next day. She found something to eat in a house that seemed empty. Outside, she found no one either and wandered over to the corral. With no one to ask, she saddled up a horse and went for a

ride to survey what would become her home, if she could put aside her anger at this arrangement forced upon her. She knew there was nothing that forced her into making the trip to Canada. She could have easily spent her money on somewhere else to start over. But it had been the last thing she had promised her father before he had died. She would go for his sake, but would she stay? No money had changed hands, no announcement had been made, no vows said. She was free to leave, barring the promise she had made to her father. Her father had to have known his estate could cover the trip, but once here she would have very little to make her way anywhere else if this didn't work. So now she would see what would happen with a man she didn't know.

The Garrett property was perfect to raise cattle. It was a large flat plain surrounded by the grandeur of the mountains on every side. The house, however, belonged anywhere except on a ranch in the middle of nowhere. It was a large Victorian edifice, three stories tall, of brick with decorative terra cotta details. The inside was magnificent, filled with gleaming woodwork, stone fireplaces, and every other trapping that could be packed into such a space.

She had been riding for close to an hour and was on her way back when she saw a small cabin and decided to investigate. Perhaps, if it was empty, she might persuade them to let her stay there. The house was much more than a stable hand was comfortable with. The door swung open easily, and Cort spun around from where he stood at the fire. It wasn't what she expected. The cabin was filled with antique oriental furniture. Large wooden Korean marriage chests were used instead of dressers and cabinets, Chinese ch'auings instead of a sofa and chairs. A circular carved structure that reached almost to the ceiling surrounded the bed, separated from the rest of the room by a stunning cinnabar screen with scenes of water, mountains, pine trees, pavilions, and delicate bridges all surrounded by a border of dragons and clouds. By the bed stood a sandalwood incense burner made of green jade. The smoke filtered through the pierced carving, making the gilded miniature pavilion on its top seem as if it floated in space. Displayed on one wall was a suit of armor and helmet like none she had ever seen. It must have been purely decorative, as the yellow silk trimmed with red and covered in brass tacks didn't look as if it would offer much protection. Then there were the paintings of old style concubines, by their look, all along one wall, statues of jade, and porcelain dishes. There were even dragons in the corner.

"Oh, I'm sorry. I didn't realize this is where you lived." Olivia stammered.

"How did you get here?" Cort asked confused.

"No one was at the house, so I went for a ride. I just found it."

He looked her up and down. "Obviously Constance or mother didn't see you. They would have had a fit seeing you in men's pants."

"And you don't?"

He started grinning. "Me? With you in pants that show off your figure quite well, never" He saw Olivia blush quite prettily. "But I thought English ladies rode sidesaddle?" The blush vanished quickly.

"I worked for a living, Mr. Garrett. I don't know what your father told you. I may have lived at the Duke of Sutherland's estate, but I damn well worked in the stable. I'd rather work with the horses than the cows inside the house."

"I'm sorry. My father never really told me much about you or your father. He just shoved the letter in my hand weeks after he had written the reply. The clothes you wore yesterday didn't look like that of a stable hand or a maid."

"Engagement gifts from the Duchess. Said I had to come properly dressed to be married. I was schooled with their children, but I was always just the stableman's daughter to them. Then

Father tells them I'm engaged to the heir of some great ranch in Canada, and suddenly they care. I have to be presentable, because I'm marrying into money. Father never told them the truth either, I guess."

Above his head, over the mantle, hung a deadly sword along with a bow and arrows purely of exotic make. "He did tell them the truth, Olivia. None of that is a lie. This happens to be one of the biggest ranches in Alberta and I am the heir. I have to provide for the twins and Constance, but none of it will be theirs." Olivia walked around the cabin, looking at everything. "Do you want some tea?" he asked after a moment.

"Thank you," she murmured, and he brought over a cup of plain white china. It had no handle. "This place is very much you. I can see you here much more than in the house."

"Souvenirs from carefree days."

"I could see them in some rich warlord's palace, where he kept a harem of the most beautiful women in the land." Cort looked over his shoulder stunned, for what Olivia could only guess.

"So if this is my place, what kind of place do you belong in?" he asked, changing the subject.

"Me?" Olivia leaned back against the table, resting her leg, with a thoughtful look on her face. The tea steamed around her face as she took a sip. "I don't really know. I spent my whole life in a room above the stable watching all the rich people come and go. I never tried to belong. Other than in books, there was little chance to see what the rest of the world was like." She looked up, remembering something. "I had a dream about you last night. You sat there and watched me as I slept. I never learned why in the dream."

"It wasn't a dream."

She was genuinely shocked. "Why would you watch me?"

His grin made her feel as if she were standing there naked. "Because you're the most beautiful woman I've ever seen, who also happens to be more than a beautiful vase holding one perfect flower—as I heard women described once."

"I am not beautiful. I have a limp. That makes me good enough to woo in the stable when no one is there to see, but never good enough to be seen in public with."

Cort laughed at those words. "That's nonsense." His laugh died at the storm raging in her eyes. "Maybe it was because, in sleep, I didn't have to get lashed by that tongue of yours to find out what sort of woman I was stuck with. You were at least told of the arrangement before yesterday morning."

She ran her fingers over the shapes of an ivory statue on the table, a peaceful serene woman in flowing robes flying to the moon. Perhaps it calmed her, because the storm in her eyes had lessened when she turned back to him. "Why was my father so worried that he arranged a marriage for me? Is that the question you want answered?"

"It is the first that came to mind. There surely had to have been offers for marriage by those better qualified than me for the role of husband. A limp isn't that big of a handicap when it doesn't seem to impede you from doing anything you want." He started grinning again. "And mostly that stick you carry looks as if it could crack a skull or two, another point against you being unable to survive on your own."

"If I was rich and titled, they would have overlooked my leg or any other fault I might have. But the daughter of the stableman with only enough money left to her to make this trip? No man would degrade himself with me, no matter how beautiful they think I am. Even the other servants at the estate ignored me. I couldn't walk. How would I be able to keep a position in the

house without my father to help me keep my job? They had no money to support me without my footing my fair share. They never asked what I could or couldn't do. Why do you think he neglected to mention my leg in the letter? I had offers to be mistresses, quite a number of them. They all came for a roll in the hay where one's leg makes no difference. Men my father ran off with a pitchfork when they came wandering too close. But never once was I offered anything honorable. That's all I'm good enough for. I promised I would come see what may happen, even though I knew there wouldn't be enough money left to get me out of here without taking someone up on one of those offers my father made this arrangement to save me from. He lay dying, my brother dead, and a Lord came offering to put me up in London and pay my expenses if I became his mistress. A woman a sight better looking than his wife to bed and have on his arm at all those social functions other men brought their mistresses to. At least marriage, even if it was to someone I didn't know, was honorable in my father's eyes. He thought he saved me from becoming someone's kept whore. Who knows? Perhaps he did."

"Olivia..."

The door blew open in a gust of wind. Two men came in, taking their hats off before they even closed the door. They both revealed blond hair. "So this is where you hid her. Ma said her bed was empty, but she couldn't find her." One walked over to Cort and pushed him to the floor as he bent to get more tea. When Cort stood up, the other kicked him in the backside. Both had been playful, but when Cort smacked them in the back of the head, playtime was over. They were husky, heavier than Cort, with their baby fat still intact, and had blue eyes. Cort was several inches taller and built like a brick wall, not so much in size, but in strength. They knew he would whip them if they kept it up.

Subdued, they looked around the cabin. "God, I haven't seen this place since we were kids. Where'd you get all this stuff from?"

"You still are kids," Cort snapped. "Olivia Thatcher, the Garrett twins, Daniel and Nathan."

"How do you do?" they asked at the same time.

Daniel stared openly at her. Olivia paid him no mind, even though she had quite readily seen his gaze. She looked at the carved lacquer screen that blocked the bed off from the rest of cabin. "So Cort, can I have a chance at her if you don't take the wench? You said enough that you don't want her here, had to be the dregs of the barrel to be married off in this day and age." Daniel announced with an unmistakable leer.

Olivia looked over at Cort. The look in his eyes was as unreadable as his brother's had been obvious.

"You have heard thou shall not covet thy neighbor? I'm sure he meant brothers as well. If I marry anyone in this family, it will be Cort. Otherwise I'm leaving, so you may as well throw out whatever ideas you've got in that tiny little head of yours so you have room for more profound thoughts." Olivia watched Cort try hard to keep from laughing.

"You'd marry that jackass? The prodigal son returned home?" Daniel asked, laughing, his mind not mature enough to perceive the insult she had given him.

"Better him than you. Boys make those kinds of remarks, and I'd much rather marry a man."

Daniel's laughter stopped as Nathan's started up. Cort let out his breath, his eyes never letting hers escape their pull. "Ma wanted you to know supper's at 6. You'll need time to dress." Nathan finally said seriously. "Come on Daniel, you've put your foot in your mouth enough for

one day.” Nathan dragged Daniel out by the neck. “Nice to meet you ma’am,” he called, and they were left alone.

Olivia could only start chuckling. “How old are they?”

“Eighteen this May.” Cort brought over the kettle and refilled her cup. She looked up, and the chuckle died in her throat. Her breath came short when she found him standing only inches away. “I’ve only resented that I had no choice in the matter, never anything to do with you personally, no matter what Daniel says.”

“I like your place. I feel at home here,” she was finally able to whisper. Neither of them had wanted the arrangement.

“More than the house? Mother will be disappointed to hear that after all the money she spent on it.”

“I’ve never had a house; I’ve never had anything of my own. Why do I need more room than I know what to do with?” she added quietly, before she walked out the door.

Olivia took to the life on the ranch and was constantly found on a horse, riding everywhere. The snow melted a little more each day, whittling away at the several feet of accumulation that had fallen before she had arrived. She and Cort flowed around each other, never meeting alone, not out of desire, but out of circumstance.

Constance, the blond, blue-eyed belle of the province, wanted another woman to talk to, more sophisticated than country girls. That Olivia was a former servant was never a concern. She was English.

Violet, confined to a wheel chair by debilitating arthritis that plagued her constantly, wanted to talk of her own growing up in England and the world of bygone days.

George just acted as if she didn’t exist, other than in vague terms and the hopes for grandchildren.

Daniel had become the bane of her existence, though Nathan tried to shield her from him and, whenever possible, got in the middle.

Constance asked what Daniel was reading one evening they were around the parlor after supper. She was always on the prowl for a new book. There was little entertainment when they lived so far from everything.

“*Taming of the Shrew*. One never knows what pointers one can pick up.” Constance wandered off, oblivious to any veiled comment. She had read it before. She even missed the storm in Olivia’s eyes when Daniel grinned at her from behind his book.

“Daniel, how about you come and help me get some fire wood?” Cort asked. “You know how Mother gets chills on nights like this.”

Daniel followed him, and the evening’s entertainment continued as a round of Rummy commenced. The firewood took longer than most figured, but when they finally returned, Daniel put it in the bin quickly and excused himself for the evening.

It wasn’t until the next day at lunch that Olivia had some inkling of what had transpired the night before. Daniel sported a bad black eye and a fat lip and who knew what other bruises covered by his clothes.

“Good grief, Daniel. What on earth happened to you?” Violet cried at his appearance.

Daniel glared at Cort with his blood shot eye as he answered. “That stallion of Cort’s threw me.”

“Well that’s your own fault then. Cort raised that horse from a colt; Lightning never has let anyone ride him. What made you think he would now?” George said, putting an end to the topic.

Olivia had been there a full month when the snow began to fall from gray skies as she was riding around the ranch. It had happened often, flurries that lasted less than ten minutes then vanished as quickly as they had arrived. At least that was what she thought until, suddenly, she couldn’t see where she was going as a late season blizzard hit. For over an hour, the white fell around her in every direction with no real trees to block the wind. Suddenly, out of the oblivion, she saw the faint twinkling of a light. She urged her horse forward, not even knowing what it was from. Finally, she found herself at the door of the cabin and practically fell inside when a gust of wind blew the door closed behind her.

“Christ, are you all right?” Cort gasped at her sudden appearance.

“The horse won’t stay the night where he is,” she sputtered, and Cort grabbed his coat to take care of it. He returned to find her standing close to the fire in her soaked clothes. “Stupid Brits, don’t know to get out of wet clothes when they’re freezing. What are you doing here? Father said you were with Mother.” He began pulling off her clothes, regardless of her protests at the treatment.

“Then he never checked. I haven’t been with Violet since this morning. I went for a ride with not a flake in the sky, and 10 minutes later I couldn’t see a thing. I’m lucky you were here to have the lights on, and I could find my way to shelter.”

Cort only shook his head. “Are you sure you’re all right?”

“My toes are bloody cold,” She mumbled through chattering teeth. Cort pushed her down onto a ch’uang before wrapping her in several blankets. He sat on the floor by her feet and began to warm them with his hands. The winds outside howled relentlessly, but the cabin walls were thick, and the wind sounded muted within. Cort started the gramophone, and soon jazz filled the air, blocking out the mournful noise. It suddenly seemed warmer without the sound of the gale to give her goose bumps.

“Finally I have you to myself for a while. My family seems to take a bit of your time.”

“Daniel works quite actively for it, I believe.”

“He hasn’t been as bad of late, has he?”

“You mean since you took him out to the woodpile? No, now he just ignores me, but I swear he sends me on errands he was supposed to do when he sees you coming. I thought, perhaps, you were having him do it so you wouldn’t have to be near me.”

Cort’s face darkened. “Daniel can be an asshole.”

Olivia smiled faintly. “Funny, he says the same thing about you.”

“You don’t see Nathan trying to keep me away from you, do you?”

“No.” She whispered as his hands went further up her leg. Her eyes met his, but he didn’t stop. At that moment, she couldn’t say if the cold caused the shiver through her body or Cort. His eyes held hers as his hand drifted up her thigh. Olivia couldn’t help but gasp as his fingers teased her folds. When had she gotten so wet? She couldn’t say. “What are you doing?” Olivia whispered.

“Warming you up.” She sat as still as a statue. “I’ll not take it as consent you agree to this arrangement. Lean back.”

“What are you doing?”

“You mean none of those men got close enough to show you?”

Olivia shook her head, then froze as Cort slipped a finger inside her. Her gasp filled the cabin, even over the gramophone.

“I haven’t tried to avoid you since you arrived. I thought that was why you spent so much time with my mother and sister. So you wouldn’t have to be near me.”

“Your mother and your sister talk too much. They trap me as a spider does a fly. Then they talk about people I don’t know, places I’ve never been. I’ve thought of improving your horse stock if everyone would keep from sending me on errands. I don’t really care about picking up your sister’s dresses for her because she can’t get up until noon.” Answering distracted her as he settled on his knees, and the other hand slid up her thigh to find her nub. When Olivia stopped talking, her eyes met his once more as his other hand found her. There was no gasp this time. She struggled not to let out a moan. She didn’t want this arrangement without there being something behind it.

“It’s not helping the coldness.”

Sliding another finger in came as a reply. “When it’s over, the heat will be everywhere. Talk to me.”

“Talk to you while you do this to me.”

“Do you want me to stop?” Cort asked with a grin, already knowing the answer.

She chose to ignore the question. It kept him from stopping, and she didn’t have to admit she felt like a wanton slut. But God, she couldn’t imagine him stopping. “The way this family’s acting, it’s as if they think I’m here to consider marrying everyone but you. I would like to find out if there’s a reason for me to stay.”

His grin faded. “You have doubts? I already know I like everything I’ve seen.”

“More than taking me to bed. I’d like to know there is love between us. I didn’t want the arrangement. I don’t have to make a mistake that will ruin the rest of my life. What if I don’t agree? Any man later will not have me.”

“I hate to tell you this, but all that horse riding you did probably took care of that years ago. Besides, even if it hasn’t, no one will know of this. I’m not taking your maidenhood, if that’s what you’re worried about.”

At a whimper from Olivia, Cort picked up his rhythm, forestalling any more talk, and Olivia fell back against the pillows as he had asked her to earlier. Pleasure ripped through her body. The coldness in her limbs was forgotten. Her channel sucked at his fingers, driving his thumb not faster, but staying on one place. A moan fell through her lips. Fell was the only word to describe it. She had no conscious thought of making it happen. Colors formed on the backs of her eyelids as she felt every fiber of her being explode, anchored to earth only by a pair of hands that didn’t stop moving even as she bucked on the unusual sofa. Olivia’s eyes slid open to find him watching her as he slowly removed his hands. Even after what she had just felt, she caught the little thrill at his hands running back down her thighs.

It took a moment for coherent thought to form, but there was one thing she wanted to ask. “What did you do when you were gone? What are they always referring to, but no one explains?”

Cort rested his head against her knee, and she could feel him taking a deep breath. After a long moment, he raised his head. Even if she wanted, she couldn’t pull her eyes away from his gaze. “I’ve never claimed to be a good man, Olivia. I’ve also never denied it. You’ve heard them talking. I’m assuming you can guess what I was like. All my brothers wanted to hear about when I returned was the excitement and adventure, and, in the dark when we were out to get the cattle, they wanted to hear of the women as well. That’s what they know of. They heard what they wanted to hear and never cared about the truth. The truth is I’m 29 years old, and, for 9 years of

that, I was a sailor, a soldier, an adventurer all over the Orient. I would hire onto any expedition or job that sounded exciting. I left here the day I finished school; I wanted to see all those places I had learned about. I wanted to see the world. All I found was the dark side of it. I've killed to save my life and for profit. I've sailed the seas. I took expeditions to the interior as soldier and hunter. I returned here, sick of the world. I had seen too much. I've had women from all over the world. I won't lie to you about that either. I was not a good man, a gentleman. What I just did, no gentleman would ever consider."

"And now?" Her words surprised him, and he froze.

"What do you mean?"

"Would you make a good husband? As you are now, not what you were?"

Even his breathing stopped. "It would make no difference to you what I had done?"

"It would make a very big difference if you did that to me. I want to know I have a place in my life. Whether I find that here or elsewhere is up to you. I will not be treated as a whore. If I stay, it will be as a wife, and I would be the only one in your bed after that. I wouldn't wait here idly if you ran off for your adventures again. You would expect no such behavior from a wife. I expect no such behavior from a husband."

"I'll have to find you something to wear before you freeze again."

"Cort?" He looked up slowly. "Answer me."

There was no recoil as he touched the jagged scars that ripped across the flesh of her leg. He pulled the blanket away to look and ran his fingers over the scars lightly.

For the first time she felt that, perhaps, she was beautiful as he claimed. "Cort?" she whispered. It felt as if the words wouldn't come out.

"That man is dead, killed a long time ago. I have not been him since before I came back, nor has anyone shared my bed." He pulled off his shirt and handed it to her. "Here. Put this on. I forgot; the only pajamas are packed away. It would take all night to find them." Then he got up to put coffee on the fire. When he turned, sprayed across his back were five bullet holes in a wide arch, angry red from being relatively new. He was busy setting the table with simple, yet very beautiful white stoneware bowls. He was ignoring her as much as he was able. He froze when he felt her frigid fingers gently touching each scar.

"They look sufficient enough to have killed the man you used to be."

His skin burned despite the coolness of her fingers. "Sufficient enough to have almost killed all of me. I was lucky only the bad habits had left when I recovered."

"How did you get them?"

"Olivia," he whispered, willing her to stop. She gave him no such luxury.

"Should I not get to know the man I marry? Or when the time comes, are we to wear our clothes in the dark?"

Cort grinned slightly. "Does that mean you've made up your mind?"

"No."

"But?" He prompted, sensing she wanted to say something else.

"Are you worried I will say yes?"

"Worried? Never. I pray you will."

Olivia raised the corner of her mouth in a semi grin. It had no chance to progress further as Cort kissed her. He found her very willing. Still her hand came up and pushed him away. She never thought she'd seen such a heartbroken look His eyes shattered beneath her very gaze. He had indeed changed from the man he described if she could do that to him.

"How did you get them?"

“It’s the past, one I’m not proud of. No one has seen them before, and I’ve not spoken of it to anyone.” He leaned over and kissed her once more, and, once again, she pushed him away.

“I know what you’re doing, and I refuse to have you try to distract me that way.” She leaned the small distance separating them. She kissed his neck softly until she heard him groan. When she pulled away, the shattered look in his eyes was replaced with fire. “I’ll make an arrangement with you, one our fathers have nothing to do with. I’m not going anywhere. The little time we’ve been able to spend together has told me I would be crazy to leave you when no one has ever adored me as much or ever likely will.” Cort started grinning. “I’m not going anywhere, Cort. I want to be wooed. I want to be courted. Don’t take it for granted there’s an arrangement. I think we both know a fire is burning between us. I want it to grow high with love, not peter out like lust. I’ve seen enough to know the difference. It’s what my father ran off with a pitchfork. I’ve never belonged anywhere. I want to know I belong here with you, that there are no regrets between us and this arrangement.”

“Those are high expectations to live up to.” Cort ran his fingers lightly down her neck and she closed her eyes, shutting out the storm and everything else. When he did kiss her again, the fire that built from inside finished the job of warming her toes. It was a reaction he could see. Perhaps they weren’t such lofty expectations after all, if her look was any indication. “I’m very glad your father worried about you, no matter what your motives were for coming or my misgivings. They left long ago.” He kissed her forehead gently, then turned back to the fire and their supper.

They ate and talked, and when they did finally retire to the same bed, as there was only one, she lay along side him without shyness. Olivia slipped her fingers into his, but said nothing.

Cort kissed the crook of her neck, but he couldn’t bring himself to pull away when he finished. “I refused to help slaughter a village. Before that, it had always been troops. I may have done many things, but I still prided myself I was no murderer. Those I fought had just as much chance of killing me as I did them, but that day...I refused to slaughter innocent people because the others had seen loot and women they wanted to steal. I tried to leave, and they gunned me down before they turned on the village. The troops we should have truly been fighting found them from the noise a few minutes later. Most of the village was saved at least. They’d heard what had gone on, and they nursed me back to health. It was weeks before I was able to leave, and, when I did, it was straight here.”

Olivia pulled his arm around her, and nothing more was said as they drifted off to sleep.

The intimacy they had found in those hours was lost quickly when the storm let up in the night, and the Garrett men came riding there first thing to tell Cort of Olivia’s disappearance. When they found her there, she was quickly escorted back to the house to be fussed over by Violet and Constance for the ordeal she had gone through.

As George tried to push her out the door, she leaned near Cort’s ear with a grin. “I might just have found I prefer a reformed rake to a gentleman,” she whispered. The past had truly been forgiven.

Knowing how Cort felt, Olivia didn’t let Daniel distract her with chores when Cort came around, which was on quite a regular basis. Olivia was out in pants every day. She helped as much as the men, never letting her leg get in the way. As the weather warmed over the next two months, Cort would steal Olivia from the job she was doing, and they would go for picnics by

the river. It was the only way to be alone and yet in view. Violet fumed if they were ever alone without chaperones. They decided not to bring up the fact they had spent the night together during the blizzard. Violet seemed to be deluding herself that Olivia had been gone most of the night and was so frozen until the men had arrived there was no chance of anything.

Cort pushed open the door to his cabin, arms full. He had missed supper, needing to run errands in town. Even before he turned around, he knew someone was there.

“Come on, boys, get out. I’m not in the mood for your games.”

“How about my games, then?” Olivia said from behind him.

Cort smiled as he emptied his arms of his packages. Even if they picnicked now and again, they were always in view. “What do you need that you came all the way out here?” he asked as he put the groceries on the shelf.

Olivia shook her head slowly. “I’m tired of fighting the fire I feel every time you’re near.”

“Did your father know you talked like that?”

“He was the one who taught me to always speak my heart.”

Cort turned slowly and leaned back against the table. “Not so long ago, you spoke of being wooed and courted. What about that?” He tried not to smile.

“All those men my father ran off with a pitchfork, I knew what they wanted. But you try so hard to act as if it’s the furthest thing from your mind. Why?”

“Because you’re a lady.”

“Is it you thinking me a lady that’s stopped you?”

His smile couldn’t be stopped. “Very little else.”

“Do you forget, until the day I left for here, I lived above a stable? If it’s the clothes that confuse you, I can always take them off.” Olivia started to undo the many buttons on her lace dress.

“Is this your way of saying you’ve made up your mind?”

She grinned like no proper lady he’d ever known. “No. I’m not sure if I’m ready to marry you yet.”

Cort opened his mouth to say more when Olivia pulled the dress off. She was still covered with the array of undergarments as the beautiful lace dress lay in a heap on the floor. He could only shake his head. “If your father was so conscientious with your virtue, he must have been blind a time or two.”

Olivia took the last few steps to him. “My father, look the other way? Never. You’re the first to get my clothes off, the first to touch me—and only to save me from frostbite. At least that’s what I’ll tell your mother if it ever comes up. After enough tries to proposition me, I, at least, learned how to say the words.” Her smirk fell away. “Show me I belong here with you.”

Cort kissed her. He found her very willing, but still her hand came up and pushed him away as she had before. “I want you, Olivia. Have since the day you walked off that train. Please don’t say you’ve changed your mind.”

“Just lock the door. It would make my story kind of hard to prove if the twins walk in on us.”

Cort picked her up with a smile as he headed to the door. With his free arm, he threw the bar into its brackets. “Just so we have our stories straight for Mother, where are you right now?” Cort carried her one armed across to the large bed surrounded by intricate woodcarving and muslin as his other arm already worked on removing the corset.

“Margery came to collect me to spend the night at her house. Her parents are out of town, and she didn’t want to stay alone. I’ll ride over there, and she’ll drive me back. Better make a good showing. My saying yes depends on it.” When she started laughing, Cort tossed her on the bed.

“Just for that, I’ll make sure you have lots to do tomorrow after I keep you up all night.”

“Planned on that. I’m not coming back from Margery’s until the day after tomorrow.”

Olivia undid the last hooks of her corset as Cort sat on the edge of the bed to take off his boots. Olivia helped him pull off his coat. Very hard nipples grazed against his back when she leaned close, her mouth by his ear. “I don’t tire easily. I hope you don’t plan on getting out of this half-assed.”

Cort turned the table on her, and she was pinned to the bed. Olivia just reached up and started unbuttoning his shirt. “If you don’t plan on saying yes, the next man to come along won’t appreciate my taking his right, not to mention the possibility of a child. Kind of ruins all images of being a proper lady. I’m trying to treat you as a gentleman would.” She lifted her head up and kissed the spot on his neck she had discovered once before, watching all rational thought leave his face.

“Maybe I haven’t made up my mind because I haven’t had a proper asking. This would rather say I’m inclined to yes, if I were asked,” she purred as she slid the shirt off him. Her hands reached for the buttons on his pants.

“Well, if you had just said that in the first place, we could have cut all this talk out. I suppose you have to hurry with all this trying to get my clothes off.”

Olivia looked all innocence, even as she undressed Cort. “Margery isn’t expecting me until morning. We have all night.”

The gentleman was gone from his grin as her hand found his cock. “Then Margery will understand if you don’t show up until the morning Mother expects you back. I need to take my time after dreaming of you for so long.”

“I’ve barely been here two months.”

“Trust me, a lifetime.” Cort groaned every time her fingers brushed against his hard length as she undid the tie holding her drawers on. Cort wasn’t making it easy on her as he pressed against her opening through the cloth. Only when she bit her lip did he suddenly roll to the side, his hand stilling hers trying to work at the knot.

“You know what I want, don’t you?”

“I lived above the stable. I’ve watched the stallions covering the mares. And, damn you man, there’s been a throbbing between my legs for two days. It took me that long to think up a plan to get you alone without anyone catching on.”

Cort took his teeth to the knot. She had fouled it up royally. “You could have just come to me and said yes. This could be our wedding night, no sneaking required. Mother has things ready for it to take place with a day’s notice.” Every time his breath hit her bare stomach, she shivered, making him do it more.

“I thought a reformed womanizer would enjoy ravishing a woman without the benefit of marriage.”

“Nice of you to think of me.” Cort pulled the knot out, but didn’t move his head from showering her belly with kisses. “And that’s all you were thinking of?”

“Not exactly.”

“Not exactly what?” He asked, but then he kissed a nipple, flicking it with his tongue. Taking the whole thing in his mouth, he sucked gently. Olivia rolled, offering it up to him

without thought, and he pulled it in deeper, grazing it with his teeth. “Not exactly what?” He asked again, after she moaned.

“Your mother has been pulling me aside, telling me what to expect, as she knows my mother died years ago. I don’t think she enjoyed the night, but she spoke as if it got better, and I want to be past that when you take me as your wife.”

Cort started laughing.

“What?” Olivia asked defensively.

“I can’t imagine my father being all that experienced when they wed. A farm with few women around, I just can’t see him getting much of a chance. I’ll have you past that part before dark falls.”

Olivia looked out the window to find the sun already neared the horizon. “That soon?”

“Aye, and then the real fun will start.”

Olivia turned her head to look at him, and he caught her mouth in his. There was no pushing him away this time, and his tongue delved further. Hungrily, he nibbled on her lips, before Olivia tentatively slipped her tongue against his. He played with her, but he let her explore and lead him where she wanted.

“Please, Cort,” she murmured against his lips, as her hand found his cock. “I’ve been throbbing for two days. I need you.”

“You women, watching horses. It will be the end of moral society,” he teased as his hand slid into her curls. There was no gasp, only a satisfied sigh, as his finger took control of her slick channel, almost tickling.

“This may take a little while.”

“Do I look like I care how long it takes? I just want you.” She pulled his head over, and there was no doubt she had learned fast. Her kiss was ravenous as she probed his mouth and thrust her hips, taking even more of him in.

Cort pulled his head away to drag in a breath. He pulled Olivia onto his lap and nestled her between his legs as he leaned back against the carved walls of the bed. Two fingers slid in this time, and she squirmed a bit. “Move all you want. I want to feel you.” He thrust his hips enough that she could clearly feel his erection on her back.

“Then let me feel.” She slid to the side without moving her lower half and turned in his arms. His free hand settled on a breast, and she sighed as he took her mouth in his. He had a leg crooked and resting against the side of the bed to keep her up. It put his cock right at her hip level. Her touch was tentative at first, just like her kiss, but when he moaned, just as she had, she wanted to give him as much pleasure as he was her. Her touch became stronger.

Olivia closed her hand around him, and Cort saw her looking down where a mere two fingers were in her. As if knowing what she was thinking, he slipped a third in. “Stroke me until you’re ready. Up and down,” he whispered in her ear as he kissed the lobe.

Olivia felt him grow in her hand, but the tingling in her belly that had tormented her for two days did too. Her hand started to pump fast as if it would rid herself of the torture she was in.

“Slower, or I’ll be done before you’re ready, and you’ll have to wait even longer. Or do I see to you like last time before we join?”

Her eyes were as dark as the sky outside. “It’s almost dark.”

“If you can’t wait, then climb on, but don’t complain.”

Cort could only laugh as she spun out of his arms and rested with him at her entrance in an instant. She leaned close to kiss him. As he lowered her gently onto him, exactly what the signal was she couldn’t guess, but each time the burn became too great he would ease her off. Each

time, he let her stay on a little longer, going a little further in. Then she sat fully, taking him in, but he didn't move.

His finger traced the scar on her leg as she straddled him. "I don't know that this position is going to do your leg any good." He said without looking away from her eyes. As if she weighed nothing, he lifted the both of them up without coming out of her. Cort leaned her against the wall.

"I know your mother would never mention this in her talks." Olivia murmured in his ear.

"Is the discomfort gone?" She nodded. "Wrap your legs around me," he growled in her ear, and she knew the time for talking was over. He grabbed hold of her hips to keep her from falling and slowly started to stroke. It burned at first, but with each thrust, it lessened. Olivia kissed him as he filled the hunger she'd had for the last two days.

He pulled back and let go long enough to guide her hand to her clit before he took her ass in hand again. "We're making sure you come with me. Do what I did. If it feels good, you're doing it right."

The first touch and her head fell forward against his shoulder. Stretched around him, it didn't take much for the shudder to start.

"What about you?" Olivia gasped for breath as he kept up with his task.

"Don't worry about me when you go. I'll make sure I finish." His rhythm grew faster as her hand went back to the spot he had shown her. With each flick of her finger, Olivia felt herself tighten. She wasn't sure she even needed it, but Cort obviously wanted to ensure it, so she ran her hand down to where his thumb rested against her nub. Her fingers found his balls, and Cort growled. Olivia snatched her hand away.

"Did that hurt?"

Cort just smirked and rammed her harder. Her stormy eyes grew heavy, even closing, and then she started to buck in his arms. Her tightening around him sent him over, and his grunts mixed with her cries. She milked him for all he had before her head fell against him. Gently, he laid her down on the bed. When he crawled next to her, she took his hand and pulled his arm around her before she fell asleep.

Olivia dreamed oddly. The pleasure was back, but she couldn't feel Cort between her legs or his weight. It was as if she were with a ghost. Even in sleep, she gasped at the sensation, and it forced her eyes open. It took a moment for the sleep to leave her. She knew the pleasure wasn't a dream. Her legs lay wide open, and Cort had his head between them. Nothing touched her but his tongue.

"Cort?" she moaned. She moaned even louder when he stopped to look up at her.

"I just had to taste you when I saw you laying here, spread eagle. A very pleasurable way to wake, isn't it?" His hands slid around her thighs and pulled her closer to his mouth, sending his tongue as deep as it would go. Olivia felt like she was floating. The only part of her body she could feel was where Cort was connected to her. Her hips rose begging him to go deeper. The knock on the door broke the silence, but Cort didn't move. Olivia's hand lay at her side trying to clench the fabric. Cort reached up and entwined her fingers in his. Bringing his tongue through the folds, he latched on to the sensitive bud and flicked his tongue. When he started sucking, she could feel the end coming quickly.

"No, not yet," he whispered. "You could do this all day." His chuckle rasped against the skin already sensitive, and she could feel the wetness grow between her legs once more. The

knock on the door became more insistent, and she grabbed the pillow to bury her face, stifling the moans she couldn't control as he eased his quick assault for a more leisurely one.

"What if they come in?"

"We locked the door, the curtains are drawn, and, if you can keep from crying out, they'll think I'm still in town." Nevertheless, when he put his tongue back in action, the pillow went quickly back to her teeth. Still, it was louder than she thought it would be. Then he invaded her again, and she had all the pleasure without the feeling of it ending.

"I expect you to pay me back."

"If I can make you feel like this, just show me what to do." But he was already back to work, and the last words faded off. Olivia lay there, looking as if she had melted, and the knocking stopped. How long exactly he licked and probed, she didn't know, but finally the want for release had grown, and she tugged on the hand she still held. When he looked up, the fury in her eyes was immense as she nodded. The storm he had seen the day she arrived was growing, ready to burst. Despite expecting it, he was still able to make her cry louder than all the rest when he found the center of her longing and took it in his mouth.

"Cort!" He pulled his hand from hers and pulled her even closer. Olivia panted forcibly, but she reached the edge quickly, and her scream filled the cabin and could probably be heard some ways away. Even as she rode the waves, Cort kept pushing it further. Every twitch was taken out of her. Olivia could hardly move as Cort crawled up next to her with a grin.

"Don't look at me like that," she whispered lazily.

"Would you prefer to have found out you felt nothing at my touch? I like knowing I can give you pleasure."

"And what about you?"

Cort chuckled in her ear. "Men are easy. I get hard just watching you ride a horse. Get you naked...hell, Liv, I want you enough to go from dusk to dawn."

"Good."

"Good?" He raised an eyebrow never expecting such words from her.

"I could take waking up like that everyday of my life. Better ask me soon. I don't want to have to explain to your mother how I'm with child and not even wed yet."

Cort rolled on top of her. "Waking you woke me up. I promise I'll be gentle."

Olivia could only grin as he slid in. There was no rush like the night before.

After a nap, Olivia was cleaning the dishes from their breakfast, while Cort was feeding his animals. Looking around the cabin, she knew she was making the right decision. It was a decision she made even before Cort took her to bed. That would have changed her mind, even if she thought it was the wrong choice.

The door thrust open with a bang, and she watched a disembodied copper bathtub precede Cort, wearing a huge grin. "How about a soak? You're looking a little worse for wear. Can't have Margery thinking I've abused you. Put some more water on the fire."

"Where on earth did that come from?"

"Bought it for you in town yesterday. Wasn't thinking you'd use it quite this soon."

"For me?"

"You said you liked it here more than the house. Figured when I wooed you enough to say yes, we would live out here. With Mother and Constance, there's no place at the house for another woman to make her home. I admit I'm a bachelor, so I was rectifying what necessities were missing."

Olivia bit her lip. “Thank you.”

Cort looked fierce. “You aren’t getting rid of my furniture though.”

The tenderness vanished as she laughed. “Makes me feel like I’m your harem. I’ll live with it. Just don’t expect me to take to the idea of you bringing in other women.”

Cort chuckled silently, but there was no denying the shaking from it. “Deal.”

“Isn’t there any good news to speak of?” Constance asked sorrowfully, the day Olivia officially returned from Margery’s.

The man she was smitten with had shipped out to Europe, practically on the first ship to leave, nearly two years before. If she ignored the papers and concentrated on the fact she was still getting his letters, she could believe he was still all right. Olivia sat in the parlor playing cards with the family. The papers spoke of nothing but the war. It was getting worse.

“I’m afraid there isn’t, Connie.”

“Cort, Nathan, let’s the three of us go to Europe and help Reed whip the Kaiser’s ass.”

Olivia looked up slowly across the table at Cort. The storm in her eyes was ready to break.

“Can’t you just imagine the 3 of us showing them what war is...”

Olivia slammed her stick hard on the floor, stopping everything with a great bang. Several people jumped, and they all turned surprised. “I can imagine the three of you dead quite well, but not showing anyone anything.” she hissed.

“And if everyone thought as you, who would fight the war?” Daniel snapped. He may have given up openly enticing her, but that never meant he started being nice to her.

“You answered your own question with that, Daniel Garrett.” Constance replied, visibly upset. For two years, she had faithfully steered the conversation away from war when she was within hearing distance.

Daniel wasn’t so easily pacified though. “What do you know of war, Olivia Thatcher? The stable must teach you so much about war, or even the world for that matter?” Daniel glared at her, expecting her to run in tears. She disappointed him when she stood and stopped in front of him and met his glare head-on. Her stick rose until the metal end rested against the hollow of Daniel’s chin. His body rose up without his feet actually leaving the floor, trying to avoid its touch.

“I know that since the dawn of time people have fought for land, gold, beliefs, religion, honor, food, and even women. Men ordering others they don’t know to kill men they’ve never met. You read of this war weeks after battles have been fought with no idea of what’s happening, what’s caused it. Before I left, I watched friends, cousins, brothers march off to war only to come back dead or wounded. I read their names in the papers. They were people I knew, not abstract names that came from across the ocean. I saw pictures of the battlegrounds. I saw the pictures come to life. I heard stories of men wounded in them when I volunteered at the hospital. Two trenches facing each other with the only way to attack pouring over the top, no way to stop those trying to kill you until you were right on top of them—if you live that long. Those that didn’t make it were mowed down by machine guns, blown to pieces by mortars, caught up in the barbed wire, and gassed to death or permanent injury. The three of you leaving here to fight the Kaiser won’t make one damn difference where tens of thousands die at a time. They care nothing of you and your rush for adventure. They only want men to die.” She had started leaving the room, when Cort stepped in front of her. She refused to look him in the eye. He physically raised her head. “There’s something you’re not telling.”

Olivia pulled her head away from his fingers forcefully. “I don’t want to have to hear about one of you dying like my brother did!” she exploded angrily.

“Olivia, what happened?” Violet asked quietly.

“He was caught on the barbed wire in no man’s land, just hanging there like a rag doll. He had somehow escaped being shot more than once. It wasn’t even serious enough that he couldn’t have been treated. No one could get to him. They had to listen to him yelling for help and moaning in pain as he slowly bled to death, and infection set in. They don’t know which killed him first. He hung there for five days before the troops could break through the German lines. My brother was only 17; he ran away from home and lied about his age to go fight the great evil in the world. He’s dead for it before he ever turned 18. Father’s heart hadn’t been as strong the last years. When he got the letter telling him of James’ death, it was too much of a shock. This war has taken all of my family from me. That is what I know of war, Daniel, a hell of a lot more than you do.” The tears slid down her face, and she refused to look at Cort.

“Olivia, I’m sorry. We won’t go if it means that much to you,” Daniel said in apology—the first time he had been kind to her since she had arrived.

Olivia wound her way around Cort and headed up the stairs to her room. When she turned to close the door, she found Cort blocking it. She hadn’t even heard him following her. “I don’t want to hear how sorry you are. Go away.”

“I am sorry about that. It may not be what you want to hear, but I don’t know how to ever thank you for what you did tonight. Father has been trying to discourage Daniel from joining up and dragging Nathan with him ever since the war started. I would have thought you wouldn’t have minded Daniel leaving you in peace though.”

Her head spun around. “I couldn’t care less about Daniel. It’s you I care about, God damn it.”

Cort closed the door softly behind him. “I’m not going anywhere.”

“Aren’t you? Tell me the truth. Wouldn’t you have gone off as eager with Daniel? You’re the great adventurer, after all. It was your stories that have him so raring to go off in the first place and fight for something they know of in the vaguest of terms. Wouldn’t you leave to have yourself heaped with honors for killing men?”

“Why are you so sure I would?”

“Fourteen friends and family ran off within weeks of war being declared. They could think of nothing more than seeing blood run like rivers in some great biblical battle with all the evil being felled in one giant swoop. Only their blood ran like rivers. This war wasn’t even two years old when I left, and already six of them are dead and 4 of them wounded horribly enough they’ll never lead a normal life again. That’s why.” Her words had started calm, but as she continued it had turned to yelling. Cort grabbed her and pulled her to his chest. He held her close despite her protests, and, at long last, she collapsed against his chest crying. They were the silent tears she had not shed when they died.

Cort spoke quietly. “I’ve killed men before, you know that, and it’s not something I care to repeat. I still dream of them sometimes, and it haunts me everyday. Three months ago, when you stepped off the train, something other than those men filled my head. Today it fills my heart as well. I would never leave the peace you have given me—for any reason. Why were you yelling at me? I’m not my brother.”

“All you had to say was yes to him, and you would have cut my heart out as surely as my brother had. I never thought it would hurt so much to think of you not here.” Her crying became worse, and he led her over to the bed and cradled her in his arms as they sat there. It was many

minutes before silence returned to the room. Cort raised her head slowly. She knew he could see the fear in her eyes. Then he kissed her, and every spot he touched was on fire.

“Those stormy eyes of yours. I felt like they mirrored my heart the day you stepped from the train. I feared them. It was if you were reading my soul, and they shone as black and stormy as it once did. There is nothing to fear with me, not even me leaving for the war. Look into my heart now, and all you’ll see is you.” He pulled the pins from her hair until it hung down about her shoulders and waist.

“Cort,” A call came from downstairs as he traced her lips with his tongue.

“Stay,” Olivia whispered.

“That I’m taking as a yes. There’s something I want to get, and then I’ll stay.” He headed to the door and closed it gently behind him. She could hear them talking and a shriek from Constance when he told them she had said yes. Olivia was staring out the window when Cort returned. He placed a large box in front of her with a green bow. The lid slipped off to reveal a fabulous array of jade jewelry laid out on top of an off-white silk dress straight out of the design houses. It was the ideal color to show off the jewelry to perfection.

“I’d never have anywhere to wear it.”

“I was invited to go to a formal dinner and ball in Quebec by some old friends. I would be proud to have you at my side as my wife. You would want a honeymoon, wouldn’t you? We could make it part of that. I had planned to ask you properly, but since you already have a ring, I was waiting until the dress could come. It was in the packages the day you made your trip to Margery’s. I got a little distracted, somehow.” Olivia stared out the window once more. In the reflection, tears made tracks down her cheeks once more. He sat down behind, barely touching her. “What’s wrong?”

“I’m still just a stableman’s daughter with a bad leg.”

He wrapped his arms around her and pulled her back against him. “You belong with me now. You’ll never have to doubt that place.” His hand traced the scar on her leg once more. “Was it a rake or a ruffian you called me? You should be the one worried at being seen with me in polite society.”

Olivia looked up to find him grinning. “I think I called you a rake and a womanizer, but I said reformed too.”

“You’ll let me keep a few bad habits, won’t you? I have the strongest urge to take a woman the night before her wedding to some boring cattle ranch heir. After that, I promise to be faithful.” Cort started to undo the dozens of tiny buttons that held her dress on.

Olivia stood out of his reach, the fury in her eyes ready to unleash. “At a ravishing, on the night before her wedding to a boring heir, the woman is likely not to want to be caught. There are appearances to keep up.” She took his hand and led him out the door to the backstairs.

The war didn't end for over two more years. Twenty-four countries eventually mobilized 42 million men and women for the cause of the Allies and over 22 million for the Axis powers. Over 8.3 million men died between the two sides and millions more wounded. Over 5 million civilians were killed. No one missed three men not joining, not even Reed. He returned to marry Constance wounded, but whole.