

High Ground is a fictional account of the legal, political, and moral conflict that would eventually turn American against American. Garrett Fitzwilliam sacrificed the woman he loved to preserve the Union, but how does he defend the United States of America when America's survival depends upon an army sabotaged by its own incompetence? Or was America lost when the president, who swore an oath to preserve, protect, and defend the Constitution, imprisoned his political foes?

High Ground

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A close-up, high-contrast image of a woman's face, focusing on her eyes which are closed. The lighting is soft, highlighting her features against a dark background.

HIGH GROUND

A Novel



Elisabeth Nelson

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Chapter One

“Be careful what you wish for,” Captain Garrett Fitzwilliam admonished himself.

His presence was required at another one of those parties he wished for when he was covered in dust and broiling under a hot West Texas sun. It was another ill-advised wish that put him in Texas to begin with. He acknowledged his father was correct about the folly of that wish, but that was all he would concede, much to the disappointment of his father. But his father was familiar with disappointment, expecting nothing more than more disappointment from his younger son. So his father’s expectations were simply realized again.

Expectations. Garrett had plenty of his own. He wanted more. More of what, he couldn’t say, but then defining the intangible was never simply a matter of semantics. Five years in Washington, however, taught him most expectations were ridiculously high, if not simply ridiculous. Too many books...too many fairytales led him to once believe there was something romantic in being a soldier.

There was nothing romantic about his life, as this evening would bear out. He wasn’t going to find inspiration tonight or his happily ever after. No, sir. Tonight would be no different from any other night spent in polite society. He would pay the same respects to the same gentlemen; pay the same compliments to the same ladies; engage in the same safe conversation generally; and after a respectable amount of time had passed, he would take his leave of Washington society. All in all, he anticipated a very ordinary, if not dull, evening.

Five years of dull evenings. Five years of nothing special. Five years waiting for something he couldn’t even put a name to. Still, Garrett didn’t think anything would be different if he had lived the life his father wanted. His older brother, Ben, confirmed as much.

“The only happiness a man can guarantee himself is that which he finds in his profession,” Ben said, speaking on the subject after their

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father voiced his disgust with Garrett's decision to go West. Garrett appreciated Ben's moral support, but at the time, he didn't agree with the absolute. Almost a decade later, Garrett understood his brother better. Expectations and happiness weren't the same thing, but were equally evasive and easily disappointed.

Arriving at his destination, Garrett put the past where it belonged, dismounted, and handed the reins of his horse to the ready black hands of a groom. He still wasn't accustomed to the slaves, or rather the idea of owning another human being. He believed it morally wrong, but he didn't really think on it much. He didn't own "servants" (as they were politely referred to) so he absolved himself of any wrong doing.

Besides, he hadn't witnessed any of the brutal behavior depicted in Mrs. Stowe's novel. In fact, most of the servants he encountered, like this man before him, were considered family by their masters. Of course, he had no occasion to see plantation life in the country of the Deep South. Apparently neither did Mrs. Stowe, but that didn't stop her from writing about it, and consequently, inspiring the outrage of the southern people. Regardless, the relationship between master and servant was all very strange, illogical in fact, but it was a puzzle for someone else to solve. Slavery was legal, and it wasn't Captain Fitzwilliam's job to answer moral questions.

"How are you, George?" he said.

The man grinned. "Well, Cap'n Fitz, thank you for asking." The laughter and music from inside floated outside with the breeze. "Sounds like you're going to have a good party tonight, sir," George said, removing the corn he kept in a pocket. It was a treat he saved for the horses he liked. He liked a horse if he liked the person riding that horse. George liked Captain Fitzwilliam's horse.

"I don't expect to stay long," Garrett replied, which brought forth a soft chuckle from George.

"Maybe tonight you'll meet a pretty woman."

"Pretty isn't the problem," Garrett said with a sigh as he started for the door.

George laughed again. "No, sir, I guess it ain't. I'll keep your horse close by, Cap'n."

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Garrett smiled his appreciation, looking at his watch. "Forty-five minutes."

George shook his head. "No, sir, I'd be stealing if I took that bet. It's going to take you that long just to pay your respects to folks you do like. Mighty big party tonight, Cap'n."

"Why?"

George shrugged. "Can't say 'cept I seen some new faces. Maybe they're important folks."

Garrett responded with a sardonic curl of his lip. "Hell, George, this is Washington. Everyone's important—at least that's what everyone is quick to tell me."

He entered the house, noting the lack of formality in the arrangements and, as George warned, the size of the party. Music was provided for dancing. There was always dancing, he thought, at the same time resolving not to dance that evening. If he danced with one, he would have to dance with ten.

Garrett paid his respects to the host and hostess and some of those "important" people before migrating to the small circle of men in uniform gathered by the punch bowl. Among them was his best friend, Major Thomas Morland. Tom acknowledged Garrett with a slight jerk of his chin.

"I was wondering if you were going to make an appearance," Tom said as Garrett helped himself to a glass of the punch that the ladies stayed away from.

"I debated it, but decided to suffer the headache tonight instead of tomorrow."

Superior officers had a funny way of assigning the most disagreeable tasks to those of lesser rank who did not make an appearance when requested. Absence didn't reflect well on the army, and General Winfield Scott (or "Old Fuss and Feathers" as he was known, and not always affectionately) was a stickler about appearances in every manner of speaking.

"Requested?" Garrett mused silently. Ordered was more accurate. Though the "request" was general in its terms, Scott made the trip from New York to Washington, and wanted his officers present that

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evening for a particular reason, a reason he would reveal in his own good time.

From the corner of his eye, Garrett saw Tom glance about the room. In that one look, Tom made it clear he wasn't impressed with his company. The major looked at Garrett again, rolling his eyes. Garrett laughed softly.

Tom was one of General Scott's personal aides and communications liaison between Scott and the politicians. Intelligent, clever, efficient, and intuitive, Major Morland's value to the old man couldn't be overstated. It helped, too, that Tom was a gentleman first, which aided in the art of persuasion. That he was southern to the core didn't hurt even among the Yankee politicians.

Tom's inbred gallantry and dry sense of humor provided a brief reprieve from the bitter contests between the politics of states' rights and tariffs. A meeting with Major Morland was sure to entertain, and after so much laughter, it was hard to deny any request he might make on behalf of General Scott.

Yet, Major Morland, the gentleman, was also a self-proclaimed snob. This declaration amused politicians, but didn't endear Tom to most of his fellow officers. But then he had little use for most of them.

"Some of the ladies are quite pretty," Tom said, observing a pair of young women stroll by.

Garrett grinned. "Quite a compliment coming from you. Are you drunk?"

"Not yet," Tom said. "Whom will you favor tonight, Fitz? By my calculations, it should be Miss Harriet Lucas' turn."

Tom took particular pleasure in teasing Garrett about, what he termed, "daughter duty." Whenever some fat cat's daughter needed an escort, Garrett was usually called into service because of his dark good looks. Time had not diminished his appeal. Garrett was one of those men who grew better looking with the passage of time, was probably too good looking for his own good, and paid the price for it. Five years after arriving in Washington, the tall, strapping, blue-eyed Captain Fitzwilliam was still on "daughter duty."

The inside joke was Captain Fitzwilliam held the longest record for daughter duty. Most of the officers of equal or higher rank were

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married within a year of assignment to Washington. And they usually married a woman of some social prominence, some connection that would help her husband's military career. Garrett confided to Tom he would never marry a woman to further his career. Tom laughed, pointing out that unless Garrett forgo all the ladies in Washington to marry a trollop instead, any woman he married would further his career whether he liked it or not.

"She'll have all the ambition you lack and drag you up the ladder of promotion if she has to," Tom said.

"I'm happy where I'm at," Garrett replied.

"And she won't be happy until you're a general...attorney or otherwise," Tom said.

"That is not the woman I'm going to marry," Garrett retorted.

"That's what we all say," Tom replied, smirking.

Garrett's naiveté about women was amusing, but it was Garrett's objective method of performing daughter duty that kept Tom entertained for hours. Captain Fitzwilliam simply rotated his attention equally among the ladies, who all gazed at him in breathless anticipation. He never did or said anything to suggest a particular interest in any one of them, but it was a mighty fine line he walked. It wasn't easy to pay personal attention to all the ladies and still avoid being labeled a Lothario.

Garrett would have preferred to avoid the balancing act altogether by suggesting to the ladies (particularly those who were always short one gentleman at their table) that they invite one less lady to dinner. It was, however, a suggestion no gentleman would make. Gentlemen were expected to graciously accommodate a lady at every opportunity, no matter how disagreeable the lady was or annoying the requested courtesy might be. And of course, an officer must be a gentleman.

Captain Fitzwilliam understood the high standard of professional, personal, and public conduct expected of officers, and in spite of daughter duty, he embraced it. He wanted nothing more than to be an officer and a gentleman, so he couldn't avoid daughter duty anymore than he could refuse to obey the direct order of a superior officer. Nevertheless, he could rebel against daughter duty when the circumstances allowed him a choice. He had a choice that evening.

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"I won't dance unless I have to," Garrett said. "And you?"

Tom shrugged. "I'm not in the mood to dance."

Garrett gave Tom a sidelong glance, knowing that morning he received a letter from his sweetheart back in Charleston. That sweetheart was one of those considerations taken into account when it came to assigning daughter duty and why Tom usually avoided "service." That sweetheart also caused Garrett's best friend considerable distress. He wondered what news her last letter brought, but he wouldn't pursue it now. Tom would confide in him when he was ready.

Tom swallowed the contents of his glass, put it aside, and adjusted his shirt cuffs. "I'm thinking about paying a call upon some other *ladies*," he said. "Will you join me, or will you keep to your unnatural priestly ways of late?"

It wasn't good news, Garrett concluded. He smiled slightly, which was answer enough for Tom, who snorted in response.

"Trust me, neither absence nor abstinence makes the heart grow fonder," Tom said. "And your absence, in particular, is insulting to certain females of our mutual acquaintance. Quite an accomplishment given their character and profession."

Garrett didn't reply, and he couldn't explain what changed. But something happened to him quite literally overnight. He awoke to the ache of emptiness the first morning of the year 1860. Beside him still sleeping was his tawdry bed mate. Had he settled for the affection of a pretty whore? Disgusted with himself...and wholly depressed, Garrett resolved right then and there to never feel that way again. He kept true to his New Year's resolution much to the disappointment of that pretty whore.

"I suppose celibacy suits you," Tom said, and then moved the conversation along. "I'm hearing something about a widow being in town. Do you know what that's about?"

Garrett shook himself out of his head. "No," he said. "I haven't heard anything about any widows."

He returned a polite smile to a very pretty young lady eyeing him from a short distance away. He recalled her childlike voice and equally

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childlike intelligence. He wouldn't settle for that either. If he had to settle, he would settle on greater intelligence and less beauty.

"Damn!" Tom said.

"What?" Garrett replied, following with his eyes the direction of Tom's steady gaze. Then he, too, was momentarily at a loss for both words and breath.

* * *

"General Scott you flatter me excessively, which I suppose is why I love you so well."

The general, with a smile, replied, "If I were a century younger, my dear, I would take that as a promise to marry me." He turned to the man beside her and said, "John, if it were in my power, I'd order you to keep Rachael here at home. She's a breath of fresh air we sorely need these days."

John Hayes looked at his beautiful daughter with pride and said, "Which is precisely why she travels with me. But if it's of any consolation, I can assure you we will not be leaving anytime soon."

He needed to offer no explanation as to why, and both men understood now was not the time to pursue that discussion. Rachael understood as much and more.

"Is there any means through which I might persuade you to dine with us tomorrow evening?" she said. "I brought home a whole library of books and treasures that I'm eager to show off."

There was a silent exchange between the gentlemen before the general said, "I shall be delighted to accommodate you, provided you promise to play for me."

"So I shall, but I warn you, I'm no better with Mozart than I was before."

He laughed. "And still superior to everyone else."

"There you go again," she said, "flattering me to the point of embarrassment. Tell me, sir, do you know of the French chef who traveled with us, and are you hoping that by catering to my vanity I might persuade that chef to cater to your appetite?"

The general laughed again as Rachael's father added something about the Frenchman seeking to establish a restaurant and bring a little Paris sophistication to Washington. The conversation turned to

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memories of the great meals her father and the general shared in the past. Other old friends began gathering around them to reminisce, which provided Rachael with an opportunity to reflect upon her recent homecoming.

It was said that Washington City was a southern town without the beauty or charm, but it wasn't the same city she left five years ago. The Renwick construction was under way, as was the Washington Monument—though people still speculated if the Treasury Building would ever be completed. Even the Capitol building was changing its appearance. Still, the president's home was as she remembered, and in between the monuments dedicated to democracy and the architectural wonders, there were the not so impressive storefronts and offices, just more of them. Pennsylvania Avenue had always bustled with activity, but there were so many more people, so many unfamiliar faces.

Between the increased development and expanding population, it would only be a matter of time before Washington became physically what it was in spirit—the capital of idealism and hope, the triumph of democracy. Rachael told herself this anyway. She would have to be insentient not to recognize the hostility that permeated the air and blind not to see the forced smiles and distinct geographical separation maintained among the citizenry.

"Politics," she thought. Everything was about politics.

National politics...Sectional politics were everywhere, infecting everyone, and wreaking havoc in the wake. "Social" politics were not all that different, only more trivial and mean spirited because peevish petticoats drove those politics.

Rachael understood that politics, be it in the Capitol or in the drawing rooms of society, was never a pretty business, but in the last few years, politics had reared its ugliest heads too proudly. Sectionalism triumphed over statesmanship, greed over goodwill, and now, power at the expense of peace?

It was a disturbing proposition, which prompted Rachael to close her eyes for a moment. She reminded herself now was not the time to dwell upon her fears. She was home, at least closer to home, and she ought to simply be thankful and enjoy her good fortune.

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Rachael pictured the great river where she and her brothers once played, recalling the house she hadn't spent enough time living in. Home...Belfaire, with its wide portico, great trees...and memories. The warm feeling faded. She should be at Belfaire now, but once again, the animosity between her father and her eldest brother sent the former back to Washington. Duty required Rachael to leave Belfaire with her father.

John Hayes was a professional diplomat. Though never appointed as an ambassador (a position he never sought) he was, nevertheless, given the honorary title by his friends. His experience, skill, connections, and perhaps most important, his personal charisma allowed him to exert considerable influence in matters of foreign relations and policy. But so much of diplomacy, foreign and domestic, was conducted within the social realm, he couldn't function without a hostess.

Rachael assumed that role when her mother died. She refused to continue in that role unless her father promised they would return to Belfaire come fall and stay through the holidays—regardless of the past, pride, or politics.

"If only I could persuade them to a policy of peace...No," she told herself. She wouldn't think about that now, not the fighting between her brothers or between her father and his sons...and no politics. And she wouldn't remind herself again that the last time her family gathered they buried her mother.

She turned her head slightly, caught a glimpse of the officers in attendance, and thought of her brothers again. It was then she realized she was under the observation of two of those officers. They were among the many faces she didn't recognize.

"Why is it," she pondered silently, "that all men look handsome in a uniform? Well, those two would be handsome regardless."

"What, or should I say who, has captured your eye?"

Rachael looked up at her father and smiled. "No one in particular," she replied. "I was just thinking that I don't know many people here. I used to know everyone."

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"Take heart, my dear," he said. "I expect that to change very quickly, to the extent that everyone will know you, or at least who you are."

"A rather cryptic prediction, I think," she said, bringing forth a chuckle from her father.

* * *

Oblivious to the conversation of his fellow officers, Garrett stared and then tried not to stare at the new face in Washington. He turned his back to her when he realized he was praying she was unattached.

"Foolish," he thought. "Still..."

His musings were interrupted by someone inquiring into whether he had met "the widow." Irritated by the same question asked of him a dozen times since Tom mentioned "the widow," Garrett glowered.

"I don't give a damn about the Widow Kendrick," he said. "And I have no desire to make the acquaintance."

A hush came over the officers, and Garrett looked to Tom for an explanation. Instead, his friend saluted and said, "General, sir, it's good to see you, sir."

Garrett spun around, stood at attention, ready to salute when he saw General Scott was not alone. The Grand Old Man of the Army was momentarily forgot as Garrett sank into the violet-blue, doe-eyes that met his. She returned her attention to the general.

"I fear we have interrupted your officers, sir," she said.

The sound of her voice was like a caress on Garrett's ear. British? No, there was a soft trace of that familiar, honey-like Virginia drawl when she spoke.

"I don't think they mind, my dear," the general replied, eyed Garrett, and added, "Most of them, anyway." He turned his attention to the other officers and continued. "Gentlemen, you've all heard me speak of Mr. John Hayes. Well, my old friend has just returned from Europe with his daughter," the general said, eyeing Garrett again. "The Widow Kendrick."

The general went on to state that Miss Rachael was like a daughter to him, which was a not so subtle direction to his men to pay her proper respect, as well as attention to her well-being. Garrett, however, was distracted by the certainty that his face was now beet red. He

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started to kick himself for failing to consider the possibility that the new face in Washington could also be the widow, but he stopped short. Death and dying were concepts she couldn't inspire in him.

Even now he was mesmerized with the details of her face...the curl of abundant lashes that gave a slight upward tilt to the outer corner of her eyes, the rosy hue of her lips, the gentle curve of her jaw...So femininely delicate, he decided she demanded without a word to be cared for (quite conscious of his masculinity and glad for it). His eyes drifted to the arch of her slender throat and the coil and curls of her rich chestnut tresses. All those dreams in Texas had just come true.

"Apology in order—absolute necessity," he told himself.

So while the general introduced the others to Rachael Hayes Kendrick, Garrett scrambled for words. He was silently rehearsing his apology again as the general turned to address him. But it was the lady who spoke first.

"General, I hope you don't resort to rank," she said.

"I beg your pardon?" Scott replied.

She looked at Garrett with demure eyes. "I wouldn't force my acquaintance upon anyone."

General Scott looked at her, then at Garrett, and shrugged. "Nor shall I," the general said. "You're dismissed, Captain Fitzwilliam." For a moment, Garrett stared at him stunned, uncertain, and on the brink of protesting when the general said, "You are dismissed, sir."

Garrett saluted just as sharply as the general's order was expressed. "Yes, sir," he said.

Nevertheless, he was compelled to look at her again, hoping he could silently communicate his regrets to her, so she might give his commanding officer a reason to reconsider his dismissal. He received instead an impish little smile that made him forget he had just been given an order.

"Captain Fitzwilliam, is there a problem?" the general said.

Garrett tore his eyes away from Rachael Hayes Kendrick, denied any problem, gave the general another quick salute, and then followed orders. He left the party, but the party did not leave him, not one member of it anyway. He couldn't escape that smile.

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“She was laughing at me!” he declared, and now his pride was feeling the sting.

Chapter Two

The next day Garrett fumed. Inventory. He was ordered to do office inventory. He wasn't a damn bookkeeper's clerk, but that fact had no bearing on the general's orders. Old Fuss and Feathers wanted a complete list of every piece of property in the army's possession, down to the last broken pencil. Captain Fitzwilliam was just the man for the job, and why? Because he alone insulted the daughter of the old friend of the United States Army's general-in-chief.

Garrett thought of Rachael Kendrick again and scowled. When the corners of her pretty mouth turned up, did she know this would be his punishment?

"Fitz? Are you down here?"

Tom appeared from behind a row of shelves. Garrett threw the inventory notebook at the major's head.

"I'll be down here the rest of my damn life!" he retorted.

Tom caught the notebook before it hit him, laughing. "You should have seen your face," he said. "I didn't know a human being could turn that color."

"Shut up!" Garrett dropped back against a table, sullen, and he crossed his arms. "You could have warned me he was coming," he said.

"I could have, I suppose, if my tongue wasn't on the floor. I've never seen a more beautiful woman in all my life...and charming, no, enchanting. She was—is enchanting. I think, my friend, you made a very stupid decision to avoid an acquaintance with the Widow Kendrick."

Garrett started to respond, then stopped. He wasn't sure what he should say, and didn't trust himself to say anything about the Widow Kendrick. Instead, he glared at Tom.

"Is that observation the only purpose behind your visit?"

"No, not really," Tom replied. "Well, maybe...I mean I'd like to ask you for an opinion about something."

"What?" Garrett said, wary that his friend's sly wit was about to come into play. Tom was frowning, and seemed somewhat hesitant to speak. "What?" Garrett said again.

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Tom's brow furrowed more deeply with uncertainty. "Do you think I should...He still withholds his consent. I keep assuring myself he will come around, but...Damn it, Garrett, what if he never agrees? Is she going to defy her father and marry me anyway? She never said so."

Garrett frowned now. "I've never heard you talk like this before."

"Well, I never met anyone like Rachael Kendrick before," Tom replied, flipping through the pages of the notebook.

Tom's explanation caused Garrett to snap to attention and retort, "What does she have to do with anything?" He at once questioned and regretted his tone.

Tom shrugged and said, "Perhaps she opened my eyes to the possibility that I've willfully blinded myself."

Startled again, Garrett spoke without thinking...again. "You're saying to hell with the woman you've been pining over all these years because you spent one evening in the company of a woman you just met?"

"I'm saying I'm not going to spend the rest of my life pining over a woman I can't have."

Garrett, incredulous, stared at Tom. "What exactly prompted you to start thinking along these lines?" he said—demanded. In an odd way, Garrett felt betrayed, as though his friend had kept a secret about himself, had been playing a charade, and was not the man Garrett had long believed him to be.

Tom looked at him again and answered, "You."

"Me?" Garrett nearly shouted. "What the hell did I say?"

"It wasn't what you said, but the look on your face when the old man dismissed you."

Garrett was confused until he saw the laughter dancing in Tom's eyes. "Damn you!" he said.

Tom was laughing aloud now. "Can't damn me for your stupidity," he said. "I swear to God I thought you were going to tell Scott to go to hell and demand an introduction besides."

Garrett's face was red again, and he knew it. "Go to hell, Major."

Tom tossed the notebook back at him and grinned. "Don't worry, Captain. It's not impossible."

"I don't know what you're talking about."

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“Careful, sir, your stupidity is threatening to make another appearance,” Tom said before taking his leave.

Another injury to his pride and the misery of doing inventory besides prompted Garrett to revolt, in a manner of speaking. He left the drudgery on the excuse of hunger. He would have to return, but he needed some fresh air and time to get control of his temper. He was only making a fool of himself and making things harder on himself by dwelling on the situation. Besides, he had been ordered to do far worse things than count pencils.

Outside the sun was bright, from the bakery came the scent of oven-warm bread, and his disposition improved. At least he was here counting pencils, and like the scent of that bread, it was something he still appreciated almost daily. Garrett appreciated a great many things that other people took for granted, like wide-open rivers, the shade of trees, and civilization.

But this street, this Pennsylvania Avenue, was his favorite place to be—even after the thrill of the city wore off. A son of Philadelphia, he didn’t deny that the street name might have something to do with it, but he didn’t believe that to be the reason. No, the reason was, when he walked or rode up and down the avenue, he wasn’t a stranger in a strange land.

Garrett felt a fit in Washington City that he missed in Texas and escaped him in Philadelphia. Washington was somewhere in between the old and the new. It was growing and defining itself with centers of culture, education, and news. The latter was of particular relevance to Garrett. In Texas, months could pass before he got his hands on an eastern newspaper, and by then, it was history. It was the isolation and ignorance in the untamed West that Garrett hated most.

It was only slightly less important that, at the end of the day, Pennsylvania Avenue took him home to Capitol Hill. His home was just the couple of rooms he occupied in a boarding house. But Garrett appreciated the comforts, cleanliness, and the hardwood floors his landlord provided. These were luxuries Garrett couldn’t take for granted, not after sleeping in the dust and mud while on patrol only to return to the dilapidated so-called officers’ quarters at the fort. If Garrett never saw the inside of a fort again, it would still be too soon.

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Escaping the primitive conditions didn't prevent Garrett from criticizing the airs and nonsense of Washington society, but he preferred to suffer that society rather than return to his prior situation. He could put up with the blustering and arrogance of the men and tolerate the silliness and snootiness of the women. With respect to the latter, it was a small price to pay for the pleasure they gave in other ways. They were always clean and soft...feminine, something he found lacking in most of the women he encountered on the frontier.

The frontier women were as gruff and coarse as their men. Perhaps they had to be tough and hard like the country they inhabited. Garrett admired their fortitude, recognized the genteel eastern ladies couldn't survive a week in the wilds he left out west. Still, he suspected it was the delicacy of these same ladies that made them far more appealing. Of course, if the lady was intelligent and pretty as well...

Pretty, he thought, as a particular face came to mind, didn't begin to do her justice. Rachael Kendrick may be the reason he was in the general's dog house now, but better he be someplace where he could insult her than...His eye was caught unexpectedly, and his internal discussion came to an abrupt halt.

"Damn it all!" he cursed under his breath, looking away from the Widow Kendrick.

Something inside told him to retreat, but it was immediately suffocated by the shouting of his pride. He remembered again that smile; the endless dusty supplies waiting to be tallied; the public embarrassment in the company of fellow officers the night before; and Tom's teasing that morning. Retreat in the face of this dainty evil? This tiny feminine foe, however beautiful, would not intimidate him into foolishness again.

Garrett moved into an offensive position, watching her pay for a bright bouquet of flowers. She thanked the vendor, and turned to leave. He took more than a little satisfaction watching her eyes lift upward from his chest.

"I beg your pardon," she said, paused, then added, "Captain."

It was clear she recognized him, but she attempted to step around him rather than acknowledge him. He moved just enough to halt her escape. "To hell with the 'rules,'" he told himself.

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"I believe, m'am, we almost met last night," he said.

She looked up at him from under the heavy fan of her long dark lashes. "I believe fate spared you of the inconvenience, sir."

"Fate? Is that what you call it?"

She tilted her head and said, "Or fortune, perhaps."

"Whose fortune might that be?"

She smiled that same impish smile. "Yours, of course," she said. "If chance had not put me in a position to hear your sentiments, I would have unwittingly forced my acquaintance upon you. But as it was, fortune favored you, and your wish was granted instead."

He rolled his eyes in response to her feminine logic. "Forgive me, madam, if I don't believe my wishes matter a damn to you."

"I regret the appearance of insincerity, but I am true. I don't make it a practice to force my acquaintance upon anyone," she replied, shifting the weight of her bag to her other arm. "And in that same spirit, I beg you excuse me, Captain."

She opened her parasol, and tried again to move around him, but he stopped her when he said, "Fitzwilliam."

She nodded her head. "Yes, I know."

"And you are the Widow Kendrick," he said, which brought some amusement to her eyes.

"Indeed, yes," she said.

"It doesn't fit."

"What's that, sir?"

"The 'widow.' It doesn't fit." His eyes drifted over her, admitting to himself she looked mighty pretty with the peppermint-like ribbons of her flirty little hat fluttering in the breeze. "You don't dress the part either," he said, making a conscious effort to preclude any hint of admiration in his observation.

"I did when it was necessary to do so."

"When was that?"

"Quite some time ago."

His eyes narrowed with suspicion. "It can't be all that long ago," he said. "You don't look old enough to have been married that long ago."

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"Forgive me, Captain, if I appear confused. I'm not certain if that's a compliment or a roundabout way of asking for my age, which you must know a lady never divulges."

"Neither," he said. "I'm just saying it doesn't fit."

"And you are the sort of man who likes everything to fit the way you think it should," she replied. "Well, sir, you are indeed wise to avoid my acquaintance."

"But I haven't avoided it, have I?"

"Not entirely. But if you let me by, I promise you this conversation will be our little secret, and no one else need ever know you are not blissfully unacquainted with me."

"Much as I might prefer it that way, I doubt it possible," Garrett replied. "You're too well acquainted with my commanding officer to avoid an acquaintance altogether."

She paused to study him for a moment or two before she said, "But together, I'm sure we can keep it minimal." With a slight bow of her head, she added, "Good afternoon, Captain Fitzwilliam."

Garrett didn't attempt to delay her departure. Instead, he watched her walk away, feeling uneasy, as if he had missed something obvious, and now he asked himself, "What the hell just happened?"

* * *

That evening after a delicious supper and light conversation, the small party retired to a drawing room. The door was closed, the gentlemen settled into deep wingback chairs with brandy in hand, and the order of business began.

"What are they saying about us, John?" General Scott said, setting the brandy aside in favor of coffee.

"It depends on whom you talk to," John replied.

"Don't be a damn diplomat with me. I've been hearing talk that England supports secession. Is it true?"

"I wasn't being diplomatic, Win. There's been discussion along those lines, both for and against."

"Even with the slaves?"

"Oh, they condemn slavery sure enough," John said. "But there's plenty of rationalizing going on that favors turning a blind eye. They're

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not willing to stand on morality at the expense of their economy. They need cheap cotton for their mills and southern ports for their goods.”

“So you think the British will offer aid...if it comes to that?”

John smiled and replied, “I think you’re jumping way ahead of yourself. I don’t think anyone on the other side of the Atlantic understands the seriousness of the situation. They certainly don’t think it will come to war. The issues we’re arguing over aren’t new—not how they see it anyway. We’ve been compromising for years, and they’re assuming we’re going to compromise again.”

The general drew in a deep breath. “But what do you think? What’s your gut telling you? Will Europe throw her weight with the South?”

John swirled the amber liquor in his glass and said, “I think they may conclude it’s in their best interest to do so.”

The general glanced over at Rachael. “What do you think?” he said. “If it comes to war, what will they do? Do you agree with your father?”

She smiled at her father as she replied, “No, Winnie, I do not agree.”

“In spite of all she has seen of the world, Rachael remains an idealist,” her father said with a wink to her.

“I admit that may be true,” she said. “But I can’t believe England will cut her nose to spite her face.” She looked at the general now. “I have two brothers, sir, and as you know, they’ve been at odds with each other their entire lives. If I were to side with one, I would alienate the other. However, it’s in my best interest to be loved by both of them, which leaves but one option open to me—neutrality. And I think that’s exactly how England and the rest of Europe will see it...if it ever came to war.”

“Their moral beliefs about slavery won’t compel them to support the North either?” the general replied.

“No,” Rachael said. “They hope slavery will run itself into extinction, but as my father pointed out, they have a substantial interest in the fruits of the institution. You don’t see their morality keeping them from buying southern cotton, investing in southern plantations, and trading at southern ports. We’re all hypocrites, sir, including the British. That same hypocrisy will keep them from taking sides.”

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The general contemplated father and daughter for a moment or two before smiling. "Well, Rachael, I'm going to hope you're right," he said, shifting his considerable weight into a more comfortable position. "Now if I may, I would like to address a rather curious matter."

"What might that be?" she said.

"I had a report that you were seen today talking to one of my officers. Is that true?"

"I don't think I can answer that question without breaking a promise," she replied.

"Well, you don't have to answer because I know it's true. What did you think of Fitz?"

Rachael gave him a little smile. "Again, sir, I fear I shall be breaking a promise if I respond to any inquiry along those lines."

John chuckled and said, "You can't outmaneuver her, Win. I suggest you move on."

Rachael exchanged smiles with her father, and then addressed the general. "The far more interesting question is, what do you think of Captain Fitzwilliam?"

The general helped himself to another pastry. "Cocky," he said, "and one of the best young officers under my command."

"Because he's cocky?" Rachael said.

The general nodded. "And he has the brains to back it up. He's a lawyer, you know."

"How would I know that?" Rachael replied, before sipping on her tea. Her father laughed again, and the general eyed her.

"All right, I'll play along," the general said. "He is a lawyer, damn good one. Sometimes too good, but the army needs a conscience. We don't always listen to it, but we need it just the same."

"Are you saying Captain Fitzwilliam is your conscience?" she said.

"At times."

"In what respect?"

The general thought for a moment, smiled to himself, and said, "A few months back we had an incident where a lady took exception to a lieutenant's conduct, a breach of decorum if you will. Her father took exception, raised a fuss, and the lieutenant was charged with conduct

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unbecoming an officer and a gentleman. Garrett prosecuted the court martial under protest.”

Rachael’s forehead furrowed slightly. “What was the nature of the captain’s objection?”

The general eyed her with an arched brow and replied, “The offended lady’s father is a colonel, and the lieutenant’s crime was essentially preferring another lady to her. Chivalry demanded he perform a service that the two young ladies required, but it was a service he could only perform for one of them. Fitz argued that it was wrong to discipline the man because the precedent would put every soldier in a no win situation. Had the lieutenant in this case preferred the colonel’s daughter, then the other lady would have been insulted.”

“It sounds to me like the captain was absolutely correct,” Rachael said.

“The other lady involved was not an officer’s daughter,” the general said.

A second or two passed before Rachael understood the implication, and then her eyes widened in astonishment. “That’s despicable!” she declared.

“I don’t necessarily disagree, but my priority isn’t the individuals involved. It’s the army. Had the young man stayed, there would have been a continuing headache to deal with. Besides, the lieutenant no longer had a future because the colonel would have made sure of it.”

“Why must one follow the other?” Rachael retorted. “Surely, sir, you could...”

“Why should I cause more trouble for myself running interference for an unremarkable soldier? But before you think me heartless, let me boast of my good deed. I secured for him a position with the railroad, which he’s better suited for. He has much more hope for advancement there than he could’ve ever realized in the army regardless of the colonel.”

Rachael wasn’t satisfied with the explanation or the lieutenant’s “consolation prize,” and said as much. This made the general chuckle.

“Well, Rachael, you should have thought about that before.”

“Before what?” she said.

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“Before I reprimanded Fitz for insulting you, and put him to counting inventory for the quartermaster.”

Aghast, Rachael stared at him. “You didn’t...You know perfectly well I wasn’t insulted, and he did nothing wrong!”

The general winked at John, and then said, “I do know that, but like I said, Fitz is cocky, and I don’t always like having my conscience being bothered. So I gave into the devil, and had a little fun with the captain. Maybe I also reminded him that even he stumbles on occasion.”

Chapter Three

Captain Fitzwilliam left Rachael with the impression that he bore her more than a little animosity. After dining with the general, she acknowledged the captain's hostility was wholly justified. She was embarrassed by, if not ashamed of, her thoughtlessness. Her thoughtlessness always resulted in someone else paying the greater price. For that, she owed Captain Fitzwilliam an apology. But in the week that since passed, she had no occasion to see him. She had reason to hope, however, that this evening would afford an opportunity to express her regrets.

Rachael arrived at the party, and almost immediately, she saw her hope was realized. Captain Fitzwilliam was present and at the center of attention of the several young ladies gathered around him. The laughter and smiles he brought forth indicated the conversation was quite amusing. Debating now whether or not to interrupt, Rachael questioned her motives for doing so.

Was it not her own conscience she wanted to appease with an apology? And if so, should she not suffer the guilt a little longer rather than risk spoiling his evening with a reminder of his punishment? Still, an apology was long overdue, and to wait any longer would only deepen his resentment...

"He would be doing us all a service if he would make up his mind."

Rachael looked over at the older woman addressing her. "Pardon me, Mrs. Hubert?"

"That Captain Fitzwilliam," Mrs. Hubert said, snapping open her fan. "Every year a new group of silly girls fancy themselves in love with him, and won't give another gentleman a second thought. When it finally sinks in that the captain isn't coming to the door with flowers in his hand and marriage on his mind, there's a month of misery listening to the crying." Mrs. Hubert looked at Rachael and smirked. "Why they all think they can do what has not been done before is a testament to the vanity of youth...and conceit of that man. With them all hanging on his every word, what reason does he have to settle on any one of them?" Rachael tried not to smile, but Mrs. Hubert had sharp eyes.

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"You can laugh, Rachael. You have a right to. Your mother raised you better. I can't imagine you ever acting so silly."

"You think too well of my mother to think ill of me. But in all honesty, I have plenty of the ridiculous in me."

"Not like that," Mrs. Hubert said, slipping her arm through Rachael's. They walked away from what Mrs. Hubert called "the spectacle." "Your foolishness," she continued, "was your brothers' doing. The fits you put your parents in...your poor father especially."

"I'm trying to atone for the sins of my youth," Rachael said, sitting opposite Mrs. Hubert.

"Your father is satisfied with relief."

"Relief, m'am?"

"He's relieved you are your mother's daughter. You're not ruled by your vanity. Nor will you be swept off your feet by a handsome face."

"But mama was swept off her feet by a handsome face. She said so many times."

"John Hayes was, and is, more than a handsome face."

Rachael conceded that fact. "And mama didn't marry daddy because he was the handsomest man of her acquaintance. He was—is the best man she ever knew." Mrs. Hubert started to reply, but rolled her eyes instead. "What is it?" Rachael said.

Mrs. Hubert didn't get a chance to answer. Her granddaughter, Bess, approached, beaming on the arm of the very handsome Captain Fitzwilliam.

"Good evening, Mrs. Hubert," the captain said. He glanced over at Rachael, and Bess spoke up.

"Miss Rachael, allow me to introduce Captain Fitzwilliam," Bess said.

"How do you do, sir," Rachael said.

"How do you do, m'am," he replied.

"Miss Rachael just arrived from England with her daddy, Mr. John Hayes," Bess said, looking at the captain. "Have you met Mr. Hayes, yet?"

"Yes, I had that privilege a couple days ago," the captain replied.

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"Mrs. Hayes was one of granny's favorites, and we all still miss her terribly, but having Rachael home helps," Bess said, and then she inquired after Rachael's family.

"We're all very well," Rachael replied. "Thank you for asking."

Mrs. Hubert interceded. "Well, you've both done your duty," she said. "Don't let us keep you. Go away, Bess, and impress the captain with your intellectual prowess and witty repartee."

"My what?" Bess said, looking up at the captain. He turned his face away, and the young lady laughed. "Granny confuses me, too." Then Bess took advantage of the opportunity to take her leave and her captain away.

"Good girl," Mrs. Hubert said to Rachael, who waited for an explanation. "You surprised, no, flabbergasted the captain by not melting away in his very presence."

Rachael burst into laughter, and Mrs. Hubert joined her.

* * *

Whether or not Mrs. Hubert intended that Garrett hear her was irrelevant. He did hear the compliment to Rachael, and his face burned.

"Why would the old lady say that?" he asked himself, studying Rachael Kendrick across the room.

She was now knee-deep in men, men who didn't find themselves suddenly tongue-tied. All he wanted was a proper introduction and the opportunity to speak to her again. How did he manage to wind up looking like a fool again?

"Captain, might I have a word with you?"

Garrett looked up, saw Rachael's father, and grateful for the summons, he politely excused himself from the insensible Miss Bess. He followed the older man into the library where General Scott waited.

"General, sir," Garrett said with the appropriate salute.

The general indicated that he should sit. Garrett took the chair nearest the open window, and waited for the reason for his presence to be made known. While the older gentlemen talked quietly between themselves, his mind wandered back to Rachael and the sound of her laughter—at him. Was it only the "compliment" that made her laugh, or did she think, too, his intellect was as barren as Miss Bess? But what

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was he supposed to do? Politely translate for Miss Bess, and explain her grandmother just called her an idiot?

"Well, Fitz, I wonder if you will weigh in on a debate between me and John," the general said, pulling Garrett out of his head.

"If I can, sir," Garrett replied, looking between them.

"We're at odds over the Republican platform," Mr. Hayes said. "Are they abolitionists or industrialists?"

"They're opportunists, sir," was Garrett's answer. Both men looked at him somewhat surprised, and both urged him to explain himself.

"They don't seek reconciliation or compromise because it doesn't help them," Garrett said. "Instead, the Republicans have exploited sectionalism to their advantage." He paused for a moment to find the right words before continuing. "I mean they exploit the increasing fear of a 'slave-power' conspiracy taking over the federal government. They draw in labor with the 'no-expansion of slavery' platform, and satisfy the moralists with promises to impose their values upon the nation. But I believe the party itself has a single item agenda and that is to make progress the national priority."

The general nodded and said, "Yes, but what party doesn't exploit opportunities to further their cause?"

"I'm sure they all do, sir," Garrett replied. "The Republicans are different because they aren't seeking support in the South. They have no hope of it really." He glanced between the gentlemen, and continued to speak. "When I said progress, I meant northern industry and commerce. That aside, the southern states—the Democrats have very different ideas about the role of government. The party believes in strong state governments and weak federal power. The Republicans champion the opposite because their ambition can't be realized unless power becomes concentrated in the federal government. In other words, I believe the Republicans are a new generation of Federalists who believe industry and commerce, not cotton, should be king."

Mr. Hayes handed Garrett a glass of bourbon. "But are they abolitionists?" he said.

Garrett thanked him for the drink and replied, "I would say they're anti-slavery. I think the Republicans believe the true evil of slavery is

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that it keeps black labor in America.” He looked at the gentlemen, and from their expressions, he surmised they were unsure of the distinction he was making. “The abolitionists want to free blacks from slavery,” he said. “The Republicans want America free of blacks. That’s why Lincoln talks about African colonization instead of American citizenship.” Garrett didn’t think it necessary to mention most of the country wanted to be rid of the Indians and Mexicans besides.

“If they become citizens, they’re free to compete for jobs...anywhere,” Mr. Hayes said.

Garrett nodded. “And that wouldn’t be good for the Republicans, or rather, the votes they’re courting. Cheap labor is always good for the kings of industry.”

He looked between the gentlemen again, debating whether he should say more, or if he could without offending them. His expression must have revealed as much because General Scott urged him to continue.

“Say what you think, Fitz,” he said. “We want an opinion, not a toady.”

Mr. Hayes nodded in agreement. “Yes, Captain, speak freely. I assure you there is little left in this world that can surprise or offend me, not to the point of stupidity anyway.”

“Well, sir,” Garrett said, measuring his words carefully. “I believe the Republicans are the party of the wealthy industrialists, but they’re also the party of the people...the common man. Free soil, free labor. It’s the trumpet that calls for an end to the idea of an American aristocracy.” Garrett shrugged. “Defeating the homestead bill helped develop the present perception of the Democrats as the party of the wealthy southern planters. The Republicans used that to their advantage, like Kansas. The blood didn’t start flowing there until the fanatics took over. The Republicans saw the opportunity and seized it—put ideology at the forefront of the controversy. Free soil, free labor, and ship the Negroes back to Africa. It’s the message you send to white men wanting the opportunity to have a better life than their fathers...men who don’t want to see their opportunities lost to former slaves.”

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After a moment or two of silence, Mr. Hayes eyed General Scott with a rather sardonic smile upon his face. "Vote yourself a farm, and vote yourself a tariff," he said.

The general, shaking his head, replied, "Who would have thought it possible. Farmers and industry in bed together."

"Yes, sir," Garrett said. "But I suppose what impresses me most is how successful the Republicans are in keeping the focus on slavery and freed Negroes and the threat both pose to white labor. However, I don't think an America free of slavery or Negroes is going to improve the circumstances of the working poor. Their poverty isn't the result of slavery or freed Negroes. And I don't hear those wealthy industrialists up north talking about increasing wages so that their free but presently poor white factory workers can improve their lot."

* * *

Undetected on the other side of the window, Rachael listened to Captain Fitzwilliam's observations, and she resolved again to make her apologies that evening. However, when the captain returned to the party and saw her, he quickly turned away. She tried not to feel hurt by the snub. After all, one reaps what one sows. Still, she had not meant to sow anything that might reap such contempt. Then again, there were many consequences she never intended, and all the apologies in the world still couldn't undo the past.

Chapter Four

A couple days after being snubbed by Captain Fitzwilliam, Rachael was wishing the only thing troubling her was Captain Fitzwilliam's animosity. Another heated discussion over states' rights prompted her to distance herself from her father and his companions.

"Was it not just politics?" she asked herself again.

With a weary sigh, she looked to the Potomac River and the flat boats that lazily glided by. She thought of tall ships and ocean swells and the life she should have had—the life she would have had if not for ill will and hot tempers...and politics.

"Miss Rachael, are you unwell?"

Rachael turned to find Major Morland observing her with some caution. "I'm Mrs. Kendrick," she thought, but wouldn't make the correction. No one here knew Jack to remember him or her status as his wife. Here she would always be the Ambassador's daughter.

"Do I look unwell?" she said.

"No...physically, no. But I can't say you look altogether at ease," he replied as he approached.

Rachael studied his handsome, aristocratic face for a few moments. She wondered if this very southern officer ever argued politics with a particular Yankee captain.

"Tell me, sir, why aren't you surrounded by lovely young women like your friends over there?" she said, referring to a group of officers and ladies engaged in what appeared to be a very merry conversation. At least flirtation was still alive and well between the North and South.

Major Morland laughed a little and said, "You've not heard then."

"Heard what?"

"I'm far too superior for any lady—present company excepted, of course."

She laughed and replied, "How very gallant and wholly unbelievable."

"In what respect?"

"That I am the exception, and that you think yourself so superior. I have quite a different theory about you, Major."

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His grey eyes widened with interest. "Pray continue, Miss Rachael," he said.

Rachael tilted her head, let her eyes drift over him again, and then said, "I think you have your heart set on someone in particular, and will not settle for anyone but her."

Major Morland's tone expressed some boredom when he replied, "And what prompts you to believe anything so ridiculous?"

"Because once upon a time, I saw the same look in another man's eyes," she said. "It was a lifetime ago, but it's not something a woman forgets. I don't expect you to confirm or deny anything. But if you wish me to believe otherwise, you will have to put forth more effort than this weak attempt at pretension."

He appeared prepared to retort accordingly. But he stopped himself when he spied the happy bride and groom. He shrugged instead.

"I suppose I'm a glutton for punishment. Otherwise, I would avoid weddings," he said, then jerked his chin up a bit. "Your turn. Explain the melancholy behind your smile."

"I suppose it would do me better to avoid weddings, too. Then again, I have reason to avoid gatherings of any sort."

"I can guess your reasons for the former, but I admit the latter escapes me."

She replied with a little smile. "Why, sir, I could continue to believe in happily ever afters and in the ultimate triumph of our better angels." Rachael turned her eyes toward the men with clenched fists, and the smile left her face. "Would we all be so naive?"

"Don't despair, Miss Rachael. There are still idealists in this world. Maybe in the end, those like you will prevail."

"I hope those who prevail are much better than I. It would be a sorry state of affairs otherwise."

Major Morland shook his head, and responded with a bemused sigh. "Again, you leave me mystified. I detect no basis for your conclusions."

"Perhaps because I make considerable effort to conceal my imperfections, but I assure you I have more faults and flaws than the average person. And I'm conceited enough to boast of it."

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He chuckled now. "I'm only more convinced that you're even more enchanting than I initially believed. Still, I must know what you perceive to be your greatest character flaw. What are you most proud of?"

Rachael pondered the question briefly before she replied, "That I recognize I could be better, and yet, I am what I am."

"What's that if not lovely?"

"Do they teach chivalry at West Point, sir?"

"I'm afraid I'm a natural born gentleman," he said, solemnly, while his eyes danced merrily.

"Well, Major, I am impressed, but then, I'm a natural born fool," Rachael replied with her impish smile, which brought forth a hearty laugh from the major.

* * *

Another long, thankless day of inventory passed, but Garrett had the satisfaction of avoiding another wedding. Of all the social events he attended, he liked weddings the least. Weddings always revived those annoying, baseless expectations that he would choose a wife from among those silly girls he had to be nice to.

Today, however, he wasn't thinking about any of that. He was thinking instead about the woman who put every man in Washington on high alert and his own foolishness.

"I had the chance to make a better impression," he scolded himself, "and I threw it away—twice!"

He tried not to think about Mrs. Hubert or Rachael's laughter. He tried to stop kicking himself for not approaching her again and behaving instead like a schoolboy when she caught him staring at her.

"Why should I approach her?" he asked himself almost angrily now.

Did he need to remind himself of the obvious? Beautiful, wealthy, conceited widows didn't bother with soldiers unless they were generals. But he scowled again recalling that a baby-faced second lieutenant managed to secure a private conversation with the Widow Kendrick. Garrett knew that boy lieutenant had less wit than a goat. So what could that boy with peach fuzz on his chin have to say that might even remotely interest Rachael Kendrick?

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Garrett didn't give himself time to ponder the question. Tom was approaching, so he opted to take immediate relief from his thoughts. His best friend would regale him with stories of the reception—all in his sarcastic manner. Garrett could laugh and thank Old Fuss and Feathers for sparing him the misery Tom endured. And he would forget about the Widow Kendrick, which is what he wanted most.

Tom took the porch chair next to Garrett's, withdrew a cigar, asked for a match, and then gazed ahead. Silent.

"Well?" Garrett said after several minutes.

"Well what?" Tom replied.

"Aren't you going to tell me what I missed, or rather what you wish you had missed?"

Tom glanced over at him. "No," he said, which caused Garrett's brow to crinkle.

"Why not?"

"Because I had a most enjoyable afternoon," Tom replied. Garrett waited for the rest, the biting criticism that Tom usually followed up with. Instead, Tom turned his eyes ahead and said, "I can't say I ever met anyone more intriguing."

"Whom do you refer to?" Garrett said, still expecting the sarcasm.

"Miss Rachael, of course."

Garrett's head snapped up. "Rachael Kendrick?" he said. "She was there? Why?" The questions spilled forth before he realized it. He caught himself, hid his red face, and tried to smirk. "I mean it was a rather unimportant affair, wasn't it?" Tom gave Garrett a questioning look, but didn't push him.

"I believe her father is acquainted with the father of the groom," Tom replied. "I believe her father is acquainted with damn near everyone, and I have yet to meet anyone who doesn't want the privilege of claiming an acquaintance with him and his daughter. You are the exception, of course."

Garrett responded with an annoyed look. "I'm not so easily impressed. Though I will concede, the Ambassador deserves the respect he garnishes."

"But not his daughter?"

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“The only thing I know about his daughter is that she is widowed, and doesn’t think twice about the consequences of her actions.”

“So you’re determined not to like her,” Tom said.

“No...like or dislike her. I won’t know her well enough to be anything but ambivalent towards her.”

Chapter Five

The following evening Garrett found himself at another reception for some cause or another. Old Fuss and Feathers “requested” the captain attend, though “daughter duty” didn’t motivate the request. This was about a standing order from the general. It was one of the first orders Garrett received from the general, and it was as simple as it was direct: *“Just keep your eyes and ears open, Fitz.”*

Garrett understood without further explanation. Tonight, however, there was no shifting in the winds of politics, no reason to suspect a change in positions or alliances among those in attendance. The reception, it seemed, would only present Garrett with another opportunity to observe Rachael Hayes Kendrick.

He wondered what sort of conversation the Ambassador’s daughter made with the old men of politics. He watched the Widow Kendrick gather the younger men around her with less effort than it took the moon to rise and the sun to set.

Garrett raised his glass and snickered. Widow, indeed. In all his life, he had never met a widow who looked like Rachael Kendrick, or any woman who behaved less like a widow than Rachael Kendrick. Was the poor bastard even cold before she shed her widow’s weeds? Not likely, he thought. He assumed she married a rich old fool with one foot in the grave, and suspected she intended to marry another rich old fool on his deathbed.

He started to look away in disgust when he saw Tom approach her. He watched for Rachael to politely rebuff the soldier in favor of the wealthy young man determined to have her full attention. Instead, Garrett was startled and a little dazzled by the disarming smile she bestowed upon his friend. Rachael readily accepted Tom’s arm, and they retreated to converse.

The other officers in attendance quickly joined them, and soon, their laughter could be heard from across the room. Tom looked up, spied Garrett, and motioned for him to join their party. He hesitated, but only for a second. He knew if he didn’t go over there, Tom would find some way to mercilessly tease him about it tomorrow.

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“Miss Rachael, I don’t believe you’ve been properly introduced to Captain Fitzwilliam,” Tom said.

“We have been introduced,” Garrett answered for her, ignoring Tom’s surprise.

He had not told Tom about meeting Rachael by chance in the market district or shared the details of the Hubert party. Tom would laugh if he knew what Mrs. Hubert said. Garrett was, uncharacteristically, too sensitive on the subject to laugh with him.

Rachael said, “How are you, Captain?”

“Well enough,” he replied.

“Did you know, Miss Rachael, that Fitz is not only an officer, but a lawyer besides?” Tom said.

“General Scott made mention of it, yes. I also understand his father is a lawyer quite prominent...in Philadelphia, is it?” she said, looking to Garrett for confirmation.

“Yes,” he replied. “Are you familiar with the city?”

“Not recently, no. But I have some fond childhood memories. We often stopped in Philadelphia traveling to and from Boston.”

“And you had reason to travel to Boston often?”

“My mother was born there, so naturally, we had occasion to visit family.”

Tom interceded. “Now how is it that a Virginia planter marries a Bostonian lady?”

“They were two Americans who met in Europe,” she said. “Mama was touring the Continent, and daddy had just entered into diplomatic service. It was love at first sight.”

“I imagine you spent considerable time in Europe,” Garrett said.

She nodded. “We all did.”

“Who is ‘we?’” Tom said.

“Me, my parents, and my brothers,” she replied.

“Where are you brothers now?” one of the other officers inquired.

“James is at Belfaire, and First Lieutenant Bradford Hayes is wherever the United States Army tells him to be.”

“Ah-ha! That explains it,” Tom said. “Your brother is why you’re so kind to inconsequential soldiers when you might instead be receiving the attention of more powerful and rich men.”

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Rachael laughed. "Perhaps," she said. "But it might just as easily be explained by the handsomeness of the men in uniform."

"So you prefer a man in uniform?" Tom replied.

"So much so I married one," she said.

"Your husband was in the army?" Garrett said.

"No, sir, the navy—Her Majesty's Royal Navy," Rachael replied, her voice noticeably softer.

The officers were now uncertain of what they should say, lest they say the wrong thing, and bring tears to her eyes. She must have suspected as much because she broke the silence herself with a wicked little smile.

"But you know," she said, "I still wonder if it was his uniform or his ship that won me over. I have, what must be for a woman, an unnatural love for ships and sailing."

Tom, grinning, replied, "I suppose it's better for us there is a total absence of the navy here tonight."

Rachael heaved a deep sigh. "I regret to confess to the truth of that inference," she said. "But now that it's out, I will declare my fickleness openly. The moment a ship's commander or admiral walks through that door, I shall dismiss you all without a second thought." There was laughter again, and even Garrett had to smile. "But," she continued, "in the meantime, I will study my dance card at the next ball. If you're not all sharing the burden of dancing with me, I shall complain loudly and see you all suffer for the slight."

"You can complain softly and accomplish as much," Garrett said, which made his fellow officers laugh.

"Captain Fitzwilliam," Rachael said, "it was never my intention..."

"Intentions aren't always relevant," he said. Then, with a slight bow, he excused himself.

* * *

Rachael watched him walk away, silently scolding herself. "I shouldn't have said that—not in front of him anyway."

"Rachael, there are some ladies eager to make your acquaintance."

It was her father speaking. Excusing herself from the officers, Rachael accompanied him to a group of women. She smiled as the introductions were made, but she knew the rest of her evening would

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be spent answering questions about fashion and the scandals of the European aristocracy. It was certain to be a dull conversation. Nevertheless, the Ambassador's daughter knew what was expected of her.

The discussion proceeded down the normal path: Yes, she had been presented at St. James, and the Queen was very gracious. The fashionable Empress Eugénie was remarkably beautiful, and like the French Empress, Rachael was also a regular patron of Mr. Worth, as her wardrobe could attest.

The questions reflected the usual curiosity, the same understandable envy of Rachael's connections and good fortune, until a young woman with an angelic face said, "Is it true your mother was a Yankee?"

Rachael looked at her in obvious surprise. "I beg your pardon?"

"Was your mother really a Yankee? I mean, well, you're a lady," the young woman said, as if astonished that the daughter of a Yankee could be a lady. For a moment, Rachael could only stare in disbelief until another female put her two cents in.

"They're all up there preaching and making speeches about voting rights—comparing ladies to slaves. And they're all convinced that southerners are barbarians because of that nasty Stowe woman. But the barbarian is that very same depraved creature who put her filthy mind and lies on paper. Still, Yankees, you know, what can you expect from a pig but a grunt?"

The others laughed, nodding their heads in agreement. The angel-faced one addressed Rachael again.

"Was your mother a Yankee—was she one of them?"

Rachael snapped her fan shut, raising her chin. Then she looked down her nose at this daughter of Maryland with a haughtiness Victoria would envy.

"My mother," she said, "was the toast of Boston...and all of Europe for that matter." With another look of icy disdain, Rachael excused herself, and glided gracefully away. She purposefully joined a circle of ladies who enjoyed higher social prominence than those she left behind.

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Rachael looked over her shoulder with sheer contempt at the angel-faced ninny and her friends before whispering to the lady who stood beside her. "I'm feeling unwell," she said. "Will you please inform my father that I've gone home?" The lady appeared concerned, touching Rachael's cheek for signs of fever. Rachael gave her a reassuring smile. "It's only a headache, Mrs. Clay."

Beneath her calm exterior, Rachael was fuming with indignation. Exiting the assembly room, she answered the groom before he could ask the question.

"Don't bother with the carriage," she said.

"If it's your intention to walk home, then I must insist you allow me to escort you."

She made a quick about face, and saw Captain Fitzwilliam leaning up against a wide column. Tossing aside his cigar, he stepped towards her.

"Thank you, Captain," she said. "But I wouldn't dream of imposing upon you, and I've not far to walk. Good night, sir."

He stepped in front of her as she turned to leave and replied, "Be that as it may, I must insist." She started to protest again, but he stopped her short. "Miss Rachael, I assure you argument on the subject is futile."

With a roll of her eyes, she said, "Suit yourself, Captain." She wasn't, however, going to attempt to make polite conversation. She knew he disliked her, and she was without humor, so it was best not to say anything.

"Boredom or illness?" he said.

"I beg your pardon?"

"Are you leaving because you're bored or because you're ill?"

"As you prefer, sir." She felt his eyes upon her, but she refused to look at him.

"It was something else. Another insult perhaps? Is it possible there is someone else who doesn't want to make your acquaintance?" he said. A little snidely, she thought.

Her eyes shot to his as she retorted, "I was not offended, sir. I was amused. But, frankly, I'm beginning to see an advantage to limiting my acquaintance with you and all the rest of your kind."

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“My kind?”

“Those thin-skinned types, who take personal offense in matters that don’t concern them, and narrow-minded fools, who pass themselves off as ladies and gentlemen. Those same fools wouldn’t recognize the insult if I called them ignoble because they don’t know what it means.”

He started to laugh, and she came to a halt. With her hands on her waist, she demanded an explanation.

“What is so amusing?”

“At the moment, you,” he said.

“And why is that?”

“When you say ignoble, do you mean contemptible, worthless, or low born?”

“All of the above!” she retorted, hearing a little too late the tone of her voice. She knew she was truly angry when the evidence of her years in Europe evaporated from her speech pattern.

“Really?” he said, still grinning.

He was highly amused now, she thought, and with good cause. She must appear ridiculous and sound as much. Drawing a deep breath, she turned her eyes away from him.

“Forgive me, Captain Fitzwilliam,” she said. “I’m out of humor this evening, and it would do us both better if you would return to the party, and leave me alone to suffer my surly disposition.”

“I will do just that...after I see you home.” Her countenance expressed her exasperation as she resumed walking, and he continued talking. “You’re not going to tell me what happened, are you,” he said, falling in line beside her.

“No, because I know how silly it will sound to you, and I doubt there’s enough time in the world to explain why it’s not silly.”

“Pick one word, and let me see if I can figure it out.”

She glanced over at him and replied, “Intolerance.”

“That conjures up a Pandora’s Box of possibilities.”

She turned her focus ahead. “Yes, it does.”

They walked the remaining distance without further exchange. At her front door, she briefly lifted her eyes to his before lowering her gaze and speaking again.

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“Sometimes my heart is so heavy with what I don’t understand that I can scarcely breathe under the weight of it, and I forget myself...as I did tonight. Sir, I beg your pardon for my outburst, ill-manners, and all the inconvenience I have caused you. I’m truly sorry.”

He waited until she looked at him again before he said, “I regret you have to bear that weight. It doesn’t suit you.” His smile teased a smile out of her.

“I don’t think I dare ask what you think would suit me better,” she said.

“It’s probably better for us both if you don’t,” he replied, then he tipped his hat, and wished her a good night.

“Good night, Captain Fitzwilliam, and thank you.”

High Ground is a fictional account of the legal, political, and moral conflict that would eventually turn American against American. Garrett Fitzwilliam sacrificed the woman he loved to preserve the Union, but how does he defend the United States of America when America's survival depends upon an army sabotaged by its own incompetence? Or was America lost when the president, who swore an oath to preserve, protect, and defend the Constitution, imprisoned his political foes?

High Ground

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