



Frontier Engagement (Frontier Bachelors)

By *Regina Scott*

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School Bells and Wedding Bells

James Wallin's family is depending on him to find a schoolteacher for their frontier town. Alexandrina Fosgrave seems to be exactly what he needs to help fulfill his father's dream of building a new community. If only James could convince her to accept the position.

Alexandrina has traveled west to seek a fresh start, not to find a groom. But after she's stranded in the wilderness with James, he offers her his hand in marriage to protect her reputation. Both are afraid to fall in love, but maybe an engagement of convenience could make them reconsider...

Frontier Bachelors: Bold, rugged—and bound to be grooms.

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Editorial Review

About the Author

Regina Scott started writing novels in the third grade. Thankfully for literature as we know it, she didn't actually sell her first novel until she had learned a bit more about writing. Since her first book was published in 1998, her stories have traveled the globe, with translations in many languages including Dutch, German, Italian, and Portuguese. She and her husband of over 25 years reside in southeast Washington State.

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Seattle, Washington Territory

June 1866

Alexandrina Eugenia Fosgrave clasped her hands tightly together, one up, one down, as she walked along the carpeted corridor of the boardinghouse for the formal parlor. Though her white organza gown floated about her slippers like a cloud, her heart was hammering against her ribs and her legs felt rubbery. None of that now! She was not going to let her nerves affect the outcome of this interview.

A gentleman wished to hire a schoolteacher, the girl who had come for her had said. He'd already spoken to two others and rejected them out of hand, even though he had few choices. Alexandrina was one of the last teachers among the Mercer expedition who had yet to be whisked away to the wilderness since their arrival in Seattle nearly two months ago.

She knew why the women who had traveled with her from the East Coast had been hired first. They had more experience and stellar references. She had only the written word of the sheriff near Framingham, Massachusetts, that she was of good character, a statement grudgingly given. She was fairly certain he had wished he could have locked her up as easily as he had the other members of the Fosgrave family.

But lacking a position, her financial situation grew more dire each day. She very much feared that she might be forced out into that wilderness, not as the teacher she'd hoped to become, but as a penniless waif.

Please, Lord, let this job be mine! You have been with me through it all. You're the only one I can rely on.

She paused outside the closed door of the parlor and drew in a deep breath. Mrs. Elliott's pristine boardinghouse always smelled of roses, the scent matching the pink papered walls and flowered carpeting. It was a suitable lodging for ladies, but she doubted a gentleman would appreciate it.

She tried to imagine the gentleman waiting for her beyond the door now. He'd be an older man, established in his profession, the head of his community. He'd ask about her skills, her experience, her eagerness to mold young minds, the values her family had instilled in her. She'd have to be both honest and circumspect in her answers, for her skills were untested, her experience nonexistent and her eagerness waning with each rejection.

And as for her family, the less said the better.

At least her past had prepared her to exude a certain presence. She felt it slipping over her now. Her head came up, her breath evened out and one hand slipped to her side as she reached for the iron doorknob with the other. She knew every honey-colored hair was in place, her hazel eyes bright and confident even though

she quaked inside. She allowed herself a pleasant smile as she walked into the parlor.

And then she very nearly missed her step.

Standing by the cold hearth was a fine figure of a man, tall, lean, with straight golden-brown hair neatly trimmed to the collar of his brown wool suit coat. His broad shoulders were damp with rain, as if he'd ridden far.

But he couldn't be the head of his community. He looked only a year or two older than her two and twenty years. And other than the warm color of his skin, he didn't appear as if he lived out in the wilderness and worked out of doors. Those men came to town in flannel shirts, rough trousers and thick-soled boots. With his tailored suit, elegantly patterned waistcoat and bow tie at his throat, he was easily the best-dressed man she'd seen here.

But the man she'd called father had cut a fine figure as well, and look what a scoundrel he'd turned out to be.

Hat in hands that looked strong enough to wield an ax, he nodded a greeting. "Miss Fosgrave, thank you for meeting with me."

She nodded, as well. He made no move to sit, and she wasn't sure whether he expected her to perch on one of the hard-backed wooden chairs that dotted the space. With its single shuttered window overlooking Puget Sound, Mrs. Elliott's parlor resembled a meeting room more than a retreat.

As if he meant to set her at her ease, he offered her a smile. It broadened his lean face, lit his eyes and caused her quaking to cease. Yet something told her he knew exactly how potent that smile could be.

"I came to Seattle on a mission, Miss Fosgrave," he explained. "We're about to open a new school in our area, and we have very high expectations for our teacher."

That was more like it. Every school that had requested a teacher had also sent a list of expectations. She'd rehearsed how to respond. "I was tutored in mathematics, science, geography, history and literature," she told him. "And I'm fluent in two other languages besides English."

"Excellent, excellent," he said, giving his hat a twirl as if he couldn't contain his delight at her answer. "What we really need is a teacher who is refined, polished and poised. I think you'll do nicely."

His gaze swept from her toes to her top, and she felt her blush growing along with his smile. She'd attempted to impress, but how could he know she was the right one for the job just by looking at her? She realized her recent experiences had made her too prone to suspicion, but she could not shake the feeling that there was more here than met the eye.

"You will want to see my credentials," she said.

"Certainly," he agreed. "But I have complete confidence in you."

Arguing with him was like refusing a gift, but she couldn't accept such an offer without questioning it. She'd seen too many people hurt by blind faith.

"Why would you have confidence in me?" she asked with a frown. "You have no proof of my skills, training

or experience."

He blinked. "I know you have sufficient training—you told me so yourself, and Mr. Mercer would not have listed you as a candidate if you did not meet my criteria. He recommended you in glowing terms."

He obviously had a much higher opinion of the head of their expedition than she did. She'd grasped Asa Mercer's lifeline of an offer to travel around the continent to Seattle and teach, but the trip had proved to her that the fellow was too shrewd in his dealings. He had accepted money from a number of men to bring them brides, but he hadn't told the women someone had helped pay their passage or why. There was mounting evidence that he'd sold some of the women's belongings without their permission so he could pay for unexpected costs for travel. This man's connection to Seattle's so-called emigration agent only raised her concerns.

"How much did you pay Mr. Mercer for that recommendation?" she demanded.

His brows shot up. "Nothing, ma'am. He was happy to oblige an upstanding fellow like myself."

An upstanding fellow he might be, but she smelled deceit. "If you are one of those men who paid Mr. Mercer to bring him a bride, you can leave right now," she informed him.

That look was all innocence. "A bride, ma'am? I assure you, I'm here for a schoolteacher."

Alexandrina shook her head. "I know your game. You intend to carry off some unsuspecting lady with promises. By the time she realizes the error of her ways, her reputation will be compromised and she'll be forced to marry you. You should be ashamed of yourself for offering false promises to those in need! I will go nowhere with you and neither will any of the ladies in this house."

She thought he might back away, offer apologies. Certainly men had scrambled to oblige when the woman she'd known as Mother had used such a tone. Instead, his reaction to her set down proved his determination. He approached her and took one of her hands in his, holding it reverently and gazing at her beseechingly. He had the eyes of the deepest blue. They pulled her closer more surely than his grip.

"Miss Fosgrave, please don't dismiss my offer," he urged. "Nothing I said was false. We need someone of your intelligence and sophistication to bring culture to our youth. Who else but a lady of your refinement could adequately guide them into the future?"

As fulsome compliments went, his weren't bad and neither was the earnestness of his manner. Under other circumstances, her resolve might have even wavered. But he couldn't know that she'd heard far better from veteran charlatans who had pulled the wool over the eyes of hundreds of townspeople. His considerable charm paled in comparison.

She drew back. "Unless you have someone to vouch for your purpose, sir, I must ask you to leave."

He frowned as if he wasn't used to being refused. A gamin-like grin, a well-worded tease and copious amounts of compliments had probably won the day for him more times than he could count. But he would find she was made of stronger stuff.

"Do you know Miss Madeleine O'Rourke?" he asked.

Now Alexandrina frowned. "Yes. We share a room."

His brow cleared. "Then she can vouch for me." He grabbed her hand again and attempted to tug her toward the door.

She dug in her feet, the soles of her slippers dragging against the carpet. "Release me this instant!"

He complied immediately. "Forgive me, ma'am." He nodded toward the door. "It's just that Miss O'Rourke was out on the porch when I arrived."

Did he think her so dim that she'd venture out of doors with him? "How very convenient. We must ask her back inside."

"If you wish." He clapped his hat on his head and strode out of the room for the front door. She followed cautiously. She let him open the door and step out onto the wide front porch, where wooden chairs sat sheltered from a misty rain. Sure enough, the redheaded Maddie was leaning against one of the porch supports, looking out toward a waiting wagon. Yet it wasn't her friend but the team of black horses on the street that drew Alexandrina's gaze.

"Oh, what beauties!" Just as the man beside her was one of the most prepossessing gentlemen in Seattle, his team was one of the best she'd ever seen. Those strong haunches, those alert ears, all those fine lines. She hadn't seen their like since the sheriff had confiscated her team. Before she knew it, she was out on the porch.

"Do you race them?" she asked the man beside her.

He cocked his head as if he could not have heard her correctly, and too late she realized prim and proper schoolteachers should not know about racing horses. But he merely straightened and adjusted his bow tie. "Certainly not. I'm a serious horseman."

That she could not believe. Even now she could see the gleam in those deep blue eyes, daring her to laugh with him. Going back inside was no doubt her best option short of ordering him out of her sight.

But she'd challenged his word, and the least she could do was follow through. She turned to her irrepressible roommate. "Do you know this man, Miss O'Rourke?"

Alexandrina had met Maddie O'Rourke aboard ship. Her short stature belied the force of her personality. Alexandrina might have had cause to doubt many people, including herself, but experience had taught her that Maddie would always speak her mind.

The Irishwoman pushed away from the porch support now with a nod. "I've had the misfortune of meeting him," she said, brown eyes twinkling over her russet gown. "This rogue is James Wallin, brother to the man who wed our dear Catherine."

Oh, no. Alexandrina had attended Catherine Stan-way's wedding, but she'd sat at the back to allow closer friends to sit near the bride. She hadn't paid much attention to the men who'd ranged alongside the groom, but she'd heard from several of her traveling companions that they'd been an impressive group. If this man had been one of them, she had indeed misjudged him and cost herself a position in the process. She'd destroyed her future by focusing on her past. She wanted to sink into the rough boards of the porch.

Yet James Wallin seemed to bear her no grudge. He went so far as to bow to her as if they had been introduced at a formal ball. "Miss Fosgrave, a pleasure."

She nodded, unable to meet his gaze. "Mr. Wallin. Forgive me for doubting you. I truly did suspect you were here for a bride."

"And how could you not?" Maddie asked with a tsk. "Mr. Mercer must have collected bride prices from more than a dozen men, all of whom have had call to visit. But you needn't worry about James here. Catherine tells me he's a sworn bachelor."

She could only feel relief at that statement. Unlike some of the women who had journeyed west on the good ship *Continental*, she hadn't planned to marry. So many of the things she'd grown up believing had proved false, yet she still felt that marriage meant two people giving themselves to each other. They shared dreams, hopes, feelings. They benefited from the association. They became one. She wasn't sure she could ever trust another person to that extent again. At times, she didn't even trust her own judgments.

"I hope you'll hear me out now, ma'am," James Wallin said, standing taller as if about to address a congregation. "We really do need a teacher. And I believe we have a great deal to offer—a new schoolhouse that can seat as many as thirty students. A large room to yourself. A salary of forty-five dollars per quarter. All the wood you could want, chopped and stacked just outside your door, with a spring an easy walk away for water. Plus a tithe of the produce raised within a two-mile radius."

Bounty indeed. She knew women who'd left Seattle for promises half as great. Some of the women back East had been earning no more than thirty dollars a quarter and lucky to have board with a local farming family.

"How many students now?" she asked, heart starting to pound hard again with hope.

"Just a few," he admitted, "but more and more folks are settling out our way. The school will only grow."

Just like her dreams. This was exactly the sort of situation she'd promised herself when she'd left Framingham. She'd find some place she could make something good out of the tatters of her life, where she could make a difference.

"They're a lovely family," Maddie put in. "Sure-n you won't be sorry to help them. I'd be happy to take the position, only I've no experience, and I wouldn't want all the children to learn to speak like me."

James Wallin spread his hands. "And what would be wrong with the way you're a-speaking, me darling girl?"

She laughed at the way he'd mimicked her brogue. "You've just proven my point."

How easily they chatted. She wanted a life like that. Somewhere there must be people who would laugh with her, talk to her as if she was one of them, families she could help, young minds she could challenge to think.

You give beauty for ashes and joy for mourning, Lord. Help me to see this as an opportunity.

But try as she might, doubts circled her like ravens. What if the Wallins didn't like her? What if she didn't like them? What if they saw right through her to the scared little mouse inside?

What if he wasn't telling the truth?

Users Review

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