



Beneath
the
Mistletoe

M.A. Nichols

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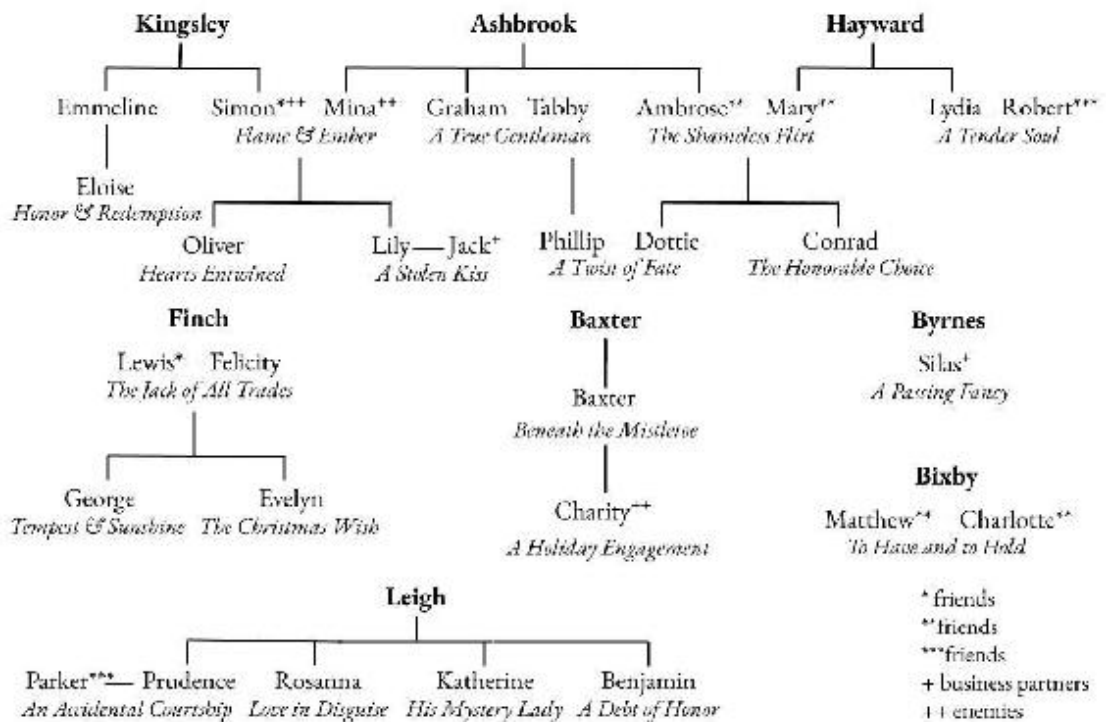
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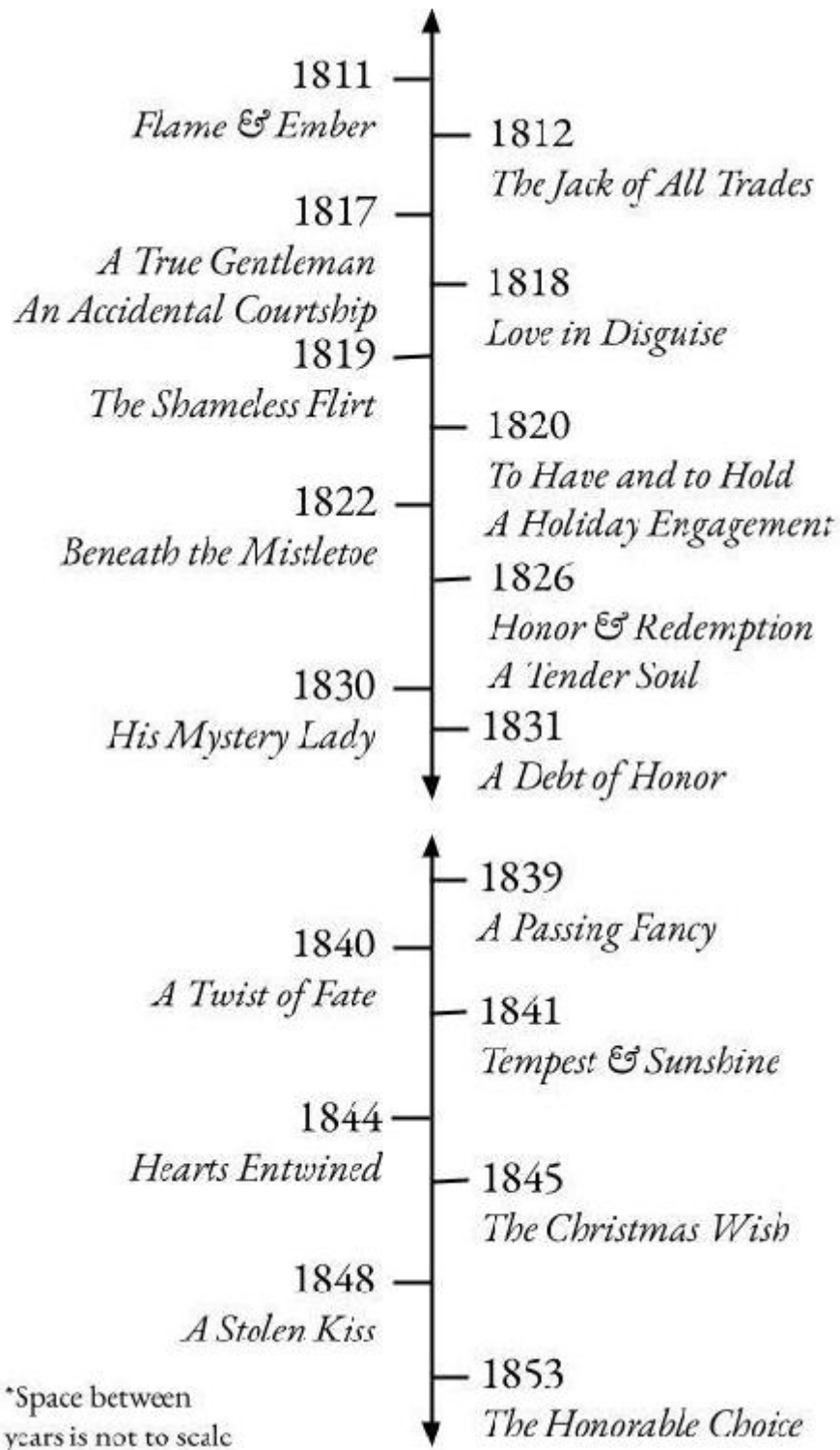
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Generations of Love Series Family Trees

All of M.A. Nichols' romances take place in the Generations of Love universe. Each book is a standalone story and can be read in any order with the titles being grouped together into family sagas. Below is a graphic showing the connection between all the books.



Generations of Love Series Timeline



Chapter 1

Bath, Somerset
December 1822

A gentleman didn't lie. It was the most basic of their tenets. Of course, there were many qualities and strictures attributed to that lofty title, and members of their rank embraced them to varying degrees. Plenty eschewed the implied expectations and treated women like playthings and servants like dredges, spending their days in idleness, drink, and debauchery.

Hardly befitting the epitome of a gentleman.

However, even those blackguards viewed honor as paramount. When the rest of their behavior couldn't claim to be so, they wrapped themselves in the cloak of sainthood simply because they did not tell lies. Dishonesty wasn't tolerated, and as far as Hamilton Baxter could tell, it was the only commonality shared amongst the gentlemen he'd known in his long life—and in those four and fifty years, he'd met quite a few.

A gentleman's word was his bond, and he never stooped to fibbing. And though Baxter considered himself a gentleman in every way, he couldn't deny that he was lying to his son. Or not telling the whole truth, which was a lie in essence, if not in fact.

"That is all well and good, my boy, but it is unseemly for me to attend the opera at this juncture," said Baxter, lifting his arm to display the mourning band encircling his bicep. "It is hardly befitting for me to spend my evenings amid society at this time. It has been only three months since we lost your mother, and though I think it good that you and your siblings have emerged from full mourning, I feel I cannot do so yet."

Tucking his hands behind him, Stanley paced before the fireplace, his gaze fixed on the floorboards at his feet. He paused at the far end, staring at the shelves as though perusing the books before spinning around to face his father once more.

“I know I am asking a lot of you, but surely it is for a good cause. Matthias and Camilla are otherwise occupied, and you know Charity is feeling poorly today.”

Stanley stood with slumped shoulders, his gaze pleading with his father, looking far more like the little boy he’d once been than a grown man of nine and twenty. “I know better than most how difficult it is to face the world after having suffered such a great loss, and I would never think to press the issue in other circumstances, but I am desperate.”

Giving his father his back, Stanley gazed into the crackling flames inside the fireplace. “I never understood just how much Mother aided me when I courted Gwen. It was easy to assume that she focused solely on the girls, but venturing back into courtship has been beastly, and it’s becoming clearer and clearer how much my dear mother did to further my suit.”

Baxter nodded, his voice low when he said, “She did much for all you children.”

That was true enough that he didn’t feel as though it was a blatant lie, but Baxter’s stomach soured as he wondered if Stanley would be singing Dolores’s praises quite so much if his choice of bride hadn’t aligned with his mother’s. Hell hath no fury like a mother’s plans being thwarted by a child’s free will. A lesson their eldest daughter had learned all too well.

Turning on his heel once more, Stanley paced the length of the library, his hand raking through his hair. “It’s beastly of me to ask you—I know it. My dear Gwen has been gone these three years, and it still feels heartless to turn my thoughts toward courtship. Mother has been gone for such a short time, and I hate to ask you to breach your mourning to traipse about town, but I do not have the fortitude to face the evening alone.”

Stanley paused at the fireplace and faced his father, his gaze pleading anew. “How am I to ever sort out if this Miss Alice Stillwell is a good match if her chaperone is forever at her elbow? Every time our paths cross at parties and balls, the blasted aunt is watching us, and I need someone to distract the old spinster—”

Baxter didn't allow his brows to climb at that statement, though Miss Alice's spinster aunt must be about his age, and neither of them deserved to be called "old."

"—It is difficult enough to return to the courting arena in the first place. It is impossible to do so in such a setting. I need someone to distract the lady if I am ever to discern whether or not Miss Alice will suit. Mother always did so much to help in that regard, and I'm finding it impossible to further my cause on my own."

Mourning was such a convenient excuse. No one expected a widower to venture into all the balls and parties Bath had to offer when his heart was breaking, which left Baxter's evenings blissfully quiet. No one would allow him such peace if they knew why he sequestered himself in the library night after night; his children, excepting Charity, were too like their mother to comprehend that anyone preferred solitude to society.

But now Stanley stood before him, pleading for him to sally forth. Had Baxter been entirely truthful in his objections, it would've been easy enough to bat away his son's pleadings. Perhaps.

"I have secured us a box, so we needn't wade into the crowds if we do not wish to," said Stanley in a rush. "I simply need you to engage with Miss Alice's aunt and keep the crone occupied."

For all that his son thought the words to be comforting, Baxter's muscles clenched at the thought. Boxed seats allowed for separation but not privacy, and sitting amongst the audience was far preferable. At least in a crowd, one was afforded a touch of anonymity.

But all those objections racing through his mind were for naught. Stanley required assistance, and there was no other answer to give.

"Enough, I will go," said Baxter, and in a flash, Stanley exclaimed his thanks and rushed from the library to ready himself.

Leaning his head against the back of his chair, Baxter drew in a deep breath and steeled himself for what was to come.

“In my day, a courting gentleman escorted his lady to and from the theater,” murmured Baxter as he crossed his arms and stretched his legs out, though his feet hit the ledge. Standing, he shifted the chair deeper into the box to allow him space.

“Her aunt wouldn’t allow it,” replied Stanley, his eyes turned toward the door. With so many people milling about, it was impossible to hear the ladies coming up the stairs, and Stanley’s gaze never drifted from it. “Something about the impracticability of it. They live within an easy walking distance and do not require an escort or some such nonsense.”

Baxter tried not to stare at the people milling below, but it was difficult when so many were gazing into the coveted seats to spy who occupied the boxes—though it was a touch amusing to see the disappointment when they caught sight of a man who had neither the wealth nor consequence to be of interest.

Of course, Stanley was positioned out of sight from the general onlookers. No doubt, they would be the focus of much attention once he was identified. Goswick & Co. was not the largest bank in Bath nor the most prestigious, but its holdings were vast enough to give its owner a healthy dose of social cachet. And now that Mr. Stanley Goswick was reentering the courting arena, every unmarried lady’s attention would be turned toward their box tonight.

“Do not fret, Father,” said Stanley, glancing in his direction. “I know this is a bit unnerving, but Mother wouldn’t

want you to shut yourself away forever. She would wish for you to enjoy all that Bath has to offer—especially with Christmastime nearly upon us. There will be parties and routs aplenty, and she wouldn't wish you to miss out on the festivities.”

Baxter fought against the curve of his lips that threatened to emerge at that balderdash. Dolores Baxter certainly had wrung her hands many times when her husband had wished to simply remain at home, but it hadn't been because she wished for his enjoyment. Even now, he felt the rap of her fan striking his arm, the phantom of her voice ringing in his ears; Dolores had never liked this green waistcoat—especially not paired with his blue cravat.

“A properly turned-out gentleman doesn't wear colors in the evening!” her ghost hissed.

Crossing his arms, Baxter ignored the thought, though he couldn't help but hear the litany of descriptions bouncing about his head as his gaze fell to the others, hearing with absolute clarity all the sharp words his wife would've said about the strangers. Dolores's judgments were as unyielding as they were effusive.

Baxter drew in a breath and let it out in a long sigh. An evening being gawked at whilst sitting with strangers was a torment. To say nothing of the fact that he didn't know a thing about the opera, other than it had garnered poor reviews in the newspapers.

“Thank you, Father,” said Stanley, his gaze still fixed on the entrance. “I know this isn't comfortable for you.”

Though his son's pose held the usual disinterest one expected of a gentleman of the world, Stanley's foot closest to Baxter was poised on the ball, bouncing up and down with the rapid determination of a farmer's wife churning butter. Drawing in a breath, Baxter focused on that little movement and forced himself to breathe deeply. His own discomfort was of little concern; this was an important step for his son, and Baxter wasn't about to ruin it by being a curmudgeon.

But oh, how he longed to be back in Stanley's library.

Thinking of the forthcoming torture was only extending the agony, driving his pulse to untenable levels, so Baxter forced it from his mind. The elder Miss Stillwell may be a tyrant of a chaperone and a disagreeable spinster, but Baxter would do his part to grant Stanley time to speak to the younger Miss Stillwell. One of them ought to enjoy the evening.

Stanley stiffened and jumped up from his chair, drawing Baxter's attention as he followed suit and turned to the stairwell to find a set of blonde curls appearing from below. Miss Alice Stillwell's light eyes met Stanley's, and the pair beamed at one another before he bowed over her hand and motioned her inside the box.

Only when she stepped inside was there room enough for her aunt to appear. Baxter's brows rose as the elder Miss Stillwell climbed the final stairs and Stanley performed the necessary introductions.

For all that his son had painted the lady as an old spinster, the elder Miss Stillwell was not at all what Baxter had anticipated. While her niece was the height of fashion, with artful curls and flowers sprouting from her head, Miss Stillwell's dark locks were shorn in an old Titus haircut; plenty of ladies had favored such styles years ago, but it had been some time since Baxter had seen a lady sporting that look, yet it suited her. Though she was taller and more rotund than was fashionable, the lady's dark eyes shone with a smile, which echoed in the faint dimples in her round cheeks as she curtsied.

"Mr. Baxter," she said. Her voice was lower than most, but there was a velvet quality to the tone that stirred Baxter.

Clearing his throat, he shifted in place, his gaze falling from her bright eyes and beaming smile as he bowed. "Miss Stillwell. My son has told me much about you."

"I can well imagine, sir." Though the words were simple, there was a laugh hidden in the meaning. Miss Stillwell's eyes drifted past Baxter to the potential sweethearts, who were occupied with a hushed conversation (though the area had little more space than a cupboard, and it was easy enough for

their chaperones to hear them discussing the sordid details of her journey to the opera house).

Baxter tore his gaze from Miss Stillwell and cleared his throat whilst fighting the urge to fidget with his waistcoat buttons. Motioning toward the seats he and Stanley had arranged all in a line, Baxter nodded for Miss Stillwell to sit.

Chapter 2

A spinster of advanced years knew naught of gentlemen and their schemes—or at least that was what so many believed—and though Harriet Stillwell certainly didn't boast a broad experience with the menfolk, she wasn't ignorant of their ways. And it was exceedingly difficult for Hettie not to laugh when she found precisely what she'd expected upon arriving in the theater box.

Not the father, of course, for his son had already included that tidbit of information that afternoon when they were finalizing their plans for the evening. No, it was seeing the chairs all lined up in a row along the edge of the box—despite the tight fit.

“Isn't it usual for there to be two in front and two behind?” asked Hettie, nodding at the seats with a sly smile.

Mr. Baxter straightened, his eyes flicking between her and the seats, and it was as though every muscle in his body stiffened at the implication. The man attempted to hide it, but there was no mistaking the tightness in his shoulders or his pinched lips. His brow furrowed in such a manner that Hettie immediately wished she hadn't said a thing. A simple question ought not to cause such distress.

Clearing his throat, he motioned to them. “My son thought such an arrangement would allow us all to see better. The position of the box is such that if we were to sit behind them, we wouldn't see a thing.”

And if the chaperone was not seated directly behind them, then the young gentleman would be free to hold Alice's hand or some other bit of naughtiness. Hettie was no fool.

Yet as Mr. Baxter stood there, attempting to direct her attention away from that possibility, Hettie felt a phantom discomfort on his behalf. The fellow was gallantly fighting for his son's interests, but it was clear that Mr. Baxter wished to be far from this gathering. Hettie glanced at the black band still firmly affixed to the gentleman's arm. His son had only

just put aside his mourning for his mother, but it would be some time before Mr. Baxter himself followed suit.

“You are quite right, sir,” replied Hettie. It was a little concession and would do no harm, and seeing Mr. Baxter draw in his first deep breath made it well worth it. “That is quite thoughtful of you and Mr. Goswick.”

And Hettie didn't miss the triumphant smile the young man gave his father; she managed to hide her own at that. Only just.

Mr. Baxter motioned to the chairs, and Hettie did as bidden, though she sat down beside her niece, leaving the gentlemen to sit on the outside chairs. For all that there was no chance of anything untoward happening in such a setting, Hettie couldn't allow the son to have his way in everything—on principle if nothing else. Having played the role of chaperone to Alice's two older sisters, she knew the game well, but it was amusing to see the young bucks attempt the same tricks.

Hettie glanced at Mr. Baxter as they took their seats, and it was easy enough to see the gentleman's nerves. Forcing her brow to remain placid, though it truly wished to furrow, she studied the fellow. It was difficult to tell how old Mr. Baxter was. Knowing his son's age and placement in the family, she would assume his father to be in his fifties. However, he looked to be a good decade older than her two and fifty years.

Not that he was haggard or craggy with age, for he was quite neatly turned out with all the proper trappings of a gentleman. But he had more than his fair share of wrinkles about the eyes and brow with more gray than brown weaving through his hair. And there was a heaviness to his gaze that spoke of age. Hettie couldn't say what it was precisely, for it wouldn't do for her to stare deeply into a stranger's eyes to discern the source.

Glancing at his armband, Hettie realized she was being silly. That was reason enough for the melancholy air clinging to him.

“My condolences,” she murmured, slanting a look at him.

Mr. Baxter's gaze snapped from the crowd below to her eyes, his posture stiffening.

Hettie hid a grimace. "Apologies. I do not mean to bring up a painful subject. I fear one never knows what to say in such a moment. To ignore it entirely feels cruel, but dredging it up seems equally painful, so one is forever caught between wishing to offer comfort but never knowing if doing so will do the opposite."

"I understand," he murmured, reaching a hand to scratch at his arm. "It is quite a conundrum, isn't it?"

"Yes." That was all Hettie could think to say, though she strained for something more.

Mr. Baxter shifted in his seat, and with all of them wedged together, he offered a quick apology for landing an elbow in her side and then fell silent once more.

Hettie glanced at the pair beside her. Alice was quite ignorant of anything but her young gentleman. The pair sat with their heads together, speaking of some novel they'd read, and Hettie smiled at their contentment, even as she held back a sigh when she returned her attention to her companion.

Mr. Baxter couldn't seem to sit still. He shifted his seat, though there was nowhere for him to go, and he cleared his throat as though wishing to say something, but no words emerged.

For all that many believed gentlemen to be masters of all they surveyed, without a morsel of self-doubt or discomfort, Hettie knew better. Shyness was not a quality belonging solely to ladies, and she was quite familiar with how strong a hold such a quality had on a person. Despite her best efforts to rid herself of that discomfort, it made itself known at various times—like when crushed next to an awkward stranger in an opera box.

Drawing in a deep breath, she shook that thought aside. Now was not the time for such sentiments.

"I feel as though I ought to apologize to you," she said in a low voice.

Mr. Baxter's brows rose, and he darted a glance at her. "Pardon?"

"Many chaperones are not so rigid in their duties, but I fear I cannot be blasé. Which is the reason your son dragged you here tonight, though I would hazard a guess that you would rather be ensconced in your parlor with a warm cup of tea and a biscuit or two."

The gentleman's gaze turned to her once more, and Hettie held her breath, hoping he would appreciate the humor in the situation.

"The library, actually," he said.

Hettie gave a playful wince. "And so, your son dragged you from your sanctuary to distract the irritating spinster chaperone of his potential sweetheart."

Mr. Baxter's lips turned upward into a faint smile. "Stanley thought himself quite sneaky and didn't believe you would realize his ploy."

"Ah," replied Hettie with a low chuckle. "Mr. Goswick underestimates just how creative my other nieces' beaux were."

"For all that he believes himself to be a great strategist, I fear my son is no soldier."

"No, but he seems like a good lad, so I am not opposed to giving him a small victory."

The courting pair beside her laughed, and Hettie pretended not to notice, her smile growing at the sound. But when she glanced back at Mr. Baxter, her grin stiffened as the fellow once more looked like a man facing the gallows, staring out at the teeming people below as they took their seats.

Clearing her throat, Hettie searched for some source of conversation. "I believe he is your second son, is he not?"

Mr. Baxter nodded and said nothing more.

"And he is a banker."

Shifting in his seat, Mr. Baxter nodded again. “He was fortunate enough to take after my wife’s father. With no sons of his own, he took Stanley under his wing and groomed him for the profession and named him his heir to his bank.”

“Ah, that answers another question,” said Hettie.

When Mr. Baxter gave her a questioning raise of his brows, she added, “I thought it odd that your son introduced you as Mr. Baxter when he is Mr. Goswick. But I’ve known a few men over the years who were similarly blessed, and in every situation, their benefactors required the heirs to change their surname to keep the family name alive—”

But her words died as the orchestra struck up the opening notes of the evening’s entertainment. Hettie gave Mr. Baxter a friendly smile, though his gaze was now fixed on the curtains. Letting out a deep sigh, she settled in for a long night.

Good heavens, the newspapers had been kind in their reviews; *La Bella Donna* was as inspired as its insipid name. It wasn’t as though operas were known for their captivating stories, but this one revolved around more idiocy than was usual.

Baxter gazed down at the stage as a pair of foolish beaux battled over the titular “beautiful lady,” whose only redeeming quality seemed to be her fair appearance. He longed to shout at the men, for it was clear from her first aria that the lady was naught but a flirt and a tease, yet the men were set to ruin their lives over the ridiculous chit.

That lunacy could be tolerated to a degree if the music were captivating, but the composer (Osborne? Osgood?

Oswin?) suffered from the same malady that plagued far too many young creatives. Editing was as important as the initial creativity that brought the masterpiece to life, but rather than selecting only that which improved the piece, these eager artists put everything into a single work. Baxter had seen such hubris, which eschewed subtlety as they determinedly did all they could to show the vast range of their skills.

The soprano launched into another soaring aria, which might've been appealing on its own, if not for the fact that it was her third in the past quarter of an hour, and the notes were more interested in displaying their master's creativity than serving the music. Her voice soared and dipped with abandon, getting lost in a tumult from the orchestra.

Baxter's gaze drifted to the companion at his side, and he let out a quiet sigh. Stanley and Miss Alice continued to hold whispered conversations, and Baxter longed to follow suit, but Miss Stillwell's attention was fixed on the stage. The lady exuded contentment, casting it about like a high summer sun on a clear day, and despite their having shared only a few minutes of conversation, it was clear she was one of those souls who could find enjoyment in any situation. Even this.

Leaning back, Baxter cursed boxed seats. They truly were the worst in the entire theater, for they did not place one in a prime position for hearing the music, and being closest to the side of the stage didn't allow for a good view, either. Usually, they provided more space than the general seats, as theirs were not fixed to the ground and could be moved apart from the others, but with Stanley having placed them all in a single row, they were forced into tight quarters, giving little difference between these and those below.

The only benefit that he could see was privacy, though that was suspect, as the entire point of a boxed seat was to allow people of importance to be seen. And this one was occupied by Hamilton Baxter. What a laugh. He spied more than a few ladies with their opera glasses pointed toward Stanley, though his son was blissfully ignorant of their attention.

Baxter squirmed in his seat and cursed the closeness as his elbow once more met Miss Stillwell's ribs. He murmured an apology and forced his limbs to still. Would this evening never end? And they hadn't yet reached intermission.

At least during that time, he'd be allowed a little more conversation. As much as he'd dreaded the evening (and it seemed with good reason, too), there was some enjoyment to be found. Miss Stillwell seemed a kind lady. Amusing, too.

And that was when Baxter realized he was staring at her again.

Turning his gaze away, he forced his attention back to the singers. Now it was the tenor's turn for an aria. Again. While it was true that such songs were often the focal points of an act, they lost their potency when they came one right after the other. It was as though they were watching a play with naught but monologues stringing the story together.

Interminable.

But then he recalled the small bag of lemon drops he'd secreted in his jacket. Surely there was a way he could indulge without drawing attention to it. Of course, Dolores's ghost appeared at his shoulder, rapping it with her fan, but Baxter shifted slightly, reaching into his pocket.

Which was when he elbowed poor Miss Stillwell again.

"My apologies," he murmured. Again.

Though her gaze didn't turn from the stage, her lips pinched together as though trying to hold back a smile. Then, turning laughing eyes to him, she whispered, "Are you struggling with this interminable mess as much as I am?"

Baxter drew in a breath and considered what to say, but apparently, the heavy sigh that emerged was answer enough, and Miss Stillwell pressed a hand to her mouth as though to stifle a chuckle.

"I fear I am not cultured enough to appreciate what the composer was attempting," he said, nodding toward the stage as the tenor and baritone began to prostrate themselves before the soprano. Again.

“I do not think anyone is cultured enough to do that,” she responded with an arched brow, and Baxter’s smile matched her own. “Do you enjoy the opera?”

“Like most, I enjoy music to a degree, though I fear many operas are too nonsensical for my tastes,” he replied, his hand still stuffed in his pocket. There was no chance that he could enjoy the sweets now. Unless Miss Stillwell would like one.

Just thinking that had Dolores’s ghost gasping in abject horror, but for goodness’ sake, he wanted one, and it was far more impolite not to offer one to his companion than it was to indulge in sweets during the opera. Outside the theater were food sellers, waiting to ply their trade during intermission, and no one thought twice about it. And it wasn’t as though the audience would be disrupted, if the amount of conversation humming about the theater were any indication.

“Would you care for a lemon drop?” he asked, tugging the small paper sack free of his pocket.

Chapter 3

Miss Stillwell's brows rose at that, and a grin cracked across her face as she laughed. Stanley and Miss Alice glanced in their direction, but the lady stifled it and snapped her fan open, batting it as though nothing were amiss. The young pair quickly returned to their conversation, and Miss Stillwell turned her fan to block the treats from their view.

Grabbing one of the bright yellow sweets, she popped it into her mouth and grinned around it, her nose wrinkling in delight.

"I see you come prepared, Mr. Baxter," she whispered.

"I have spent far too many evenings being paraded about stodgy events not to know one must always bring something to distract oneself from the ennui," he murmured in return. "Books are far too noticeable, and sweets are a tolerable substitution."

Baxter felt a few of the lemon drops rolling about in his pocket, so he placed the bag on the edge of the box to free his hand. Just as he reached for his jacket, the sweets slumped, the top of the paper bag leaning precariously over the edge. The bright yellow candies rolled free and spilled over the edge, and he snatched the bag up once more—but not before a good half-dozen cascaded onto the patrons below.

With wide eyes, he clutched the bag and stared at the place the candies had been, not daring to look over to see where they'd fallen. Stanley stared at him, an expression so very like his mother's fixed upon his face that Baxter heard the irritated thoughts whirling about his son's mind; thankfully Miss Alice hadn't noticed, and she distracted his son once more.

Baxter's cheeks heated, and when the lady at his side shook, he hazarded a glance in her direction and found her pressing a hand to her mouth, trying (and failing) to stifle her giggles. Heat swept through him, and he moved to stuff the

candies back into his pocket. But Miss Stillwell grabbed his arm to stop him.

“Pay it no mind, Mr. Baxter. Ladies’ hairstyles are so ridiculously elaborate nowadays that they are unlikely to notice a few lemon drops. No doubt next week, it will be all the rage, and ladies will be nestling candies amongst the mound of curls, flowers, and ribbons.”

Snatching one of the lemon drops from the bag, Miss Stillwell gave him a wicked grin. “My locks are too short for such a decoration, but...”

She twisted in her seat, moving slowly toward her niece’s coiffure to tuck a lemon drop amidst the profusion of curls. The girl never noticed, but Stanley snuck a glance around her to frown at his father. Miss Stillwell jerked back and pressed a hand to her mouth once more, though she couldn’t quiet the laughter shaking her. And Baxter couldn’t help but join in.

When Stanley and Miss Alice glanced at them with furrowed brows, the older pair shook and attempted a semblance of decorum, but it was difficult when tears were rising to Miss Stillwell’s eyes. Her hair curled faintly at her temples, making her look even more impish as she laughed at her own ridiculousness.

Keeping the treats on his lap, Baxter reached into his jacket and freed a handkerchief, offering it to Miss Stillwell.

“Oh, this is simply lovely,” she said when she could get breath enough to do so. The edges of the linen were embroidered with a pale green as though ivy were crawling along them, before turning into the corner with a flourish of leaves in which his initials resided.

“My daughter, Charity, gave it to me as a present for St. Nicholas Day,” he said, his thumbs brushing along the careful stitches before he offered it to her once more.

Miss Stillwell took it and examined the work. “This is gorgeous. I love the way she captured the curl of the leaves. I will have to try that.”

But she freed her own handkerchief, returning his. “That is kind of you, but I fear it is too lovely for me to use in such a fashion.” She dabbed at her eyes with her plain handkerchief, a few remnant chuckles working their way out as she shook her head. “I know all too well how much time and effort went into making that, and I shan’t risk ruining it.”

Baxter smoothed the fabric and tucked it gently into his pocket once more. “Do you embroider?”

“Is there a lady who doesn’t?” she asked with an arched brow. “But I know what you mean. Yes, I enjoy it. Greatly. Though I enjoy creative endeavors, I fear I am no artist, and needlepoint allows me an avenue for creativity.”

“No doubt you are vastly underestimating your skills,” replied Baxter.

Miss Stillwell chuckled and shook her head. “Definitely not, sir. I am not one to denigrate my talents in some bid for false humility, nor am I overly critical of my abilities. I am passable when it comes to drawing, but I have no true skill with the paintbrush. Needlework requires an entirely different set of skills, at which I excel.”

Flattening her handkerchief, she tucked it away and slanted a look at him. “And you, Mr. Baxter? Are you artistic?”

Such a simple question, but it dropped a weight on Baxter’s chest that threatened to suffocate him. Silly, really.

“Yes.” He paused. “Or I was.”

Miss Stillwell’s brows pinched together, though she smoothed the reaction away. “I would think that if you were in the past, you are still. Such a thing doesn’t exactly erase itself from one’s life, does it?”

Baxter shifted in his seat, promptly elbowing the lady once more. He hurried through another apology, but she brushed his verbal fumbling side.

“When I was younger, I spent many an hour painting and sketching,” he said, scouring his thoughts for an explanation. Of course, it was easy enough to hear Dolores’s condemnation

of the low-born pastime. It mattered not that many young gentlemen indulged in such pursuits. To her way of thinking, being an artist was common—even if one never attempted to sell one's work. It was a lady's hobby or a poor man's profession.

Baxter cleared his throat.

“After I married, I didn't have much time for such things.” And that was true enough that his conscience did not prick at him; the truth was too unkind to his wife's memory. A slight fib was a far better choice.

Miss Stillwell nodded. “A time and a season for everything, as they say. But perhaps now that you are settled in Bath you might try your hand at it again.”

Such little words, yet they struck Baxter to the core. It had been so long since he'd allowed himself to speak of that long-lost part of himself that the thought of venturing back into his art hadn't crossed his mind. As pleasing Dolores had been his only motivation for quitting, nothing was keeping him from picking it up once more.

Yet even as he thought about it, Baxter's heart clenched as though his ribs tightened around it, and his stomach gave an unhappy rumble. His marriage to Dolores had not been an easy thing, but that did not mean he celebrated her demise. To go against her wishes even now felt like a betrayal, painting him as a heartless cad.

Baxter's shoulders drooped, and he forced himself to speak evenly. “Yes, I suppose I could.”

Miss Stillwell's brows drew together, and she studied him, though he pretended to watch the singers below. “I hope you do. I would like to see your work.”

“You would?”

His gaze darted to her and was met with bright honesty. Miss Stillwell sat there, watching him with such an open expression that Baxter didn't know what to do with it. His cheeks didn't have the same problem, for they immediately reddened. Thank the heavens that they were inside, for though

many candles burned bright in the theater, there was not light enough to see that. Or so he hoped.

Though his face was quite hot.

“That is kind of you, Miss Stillwell,” he said, stumbling over his words.

“Not kind at all, Mr. Baxter. I am truly interested in seeing it, if you would allow me the honor.”

Baxter mumbled something, though he wasn't sure what the words were (other than that they were not coherent), and turned his attention back to the opera. But before he tucked away his lemon drops once more, he offered them again, and Miss Stillwell popped another sweet into her mouth with a smile.

The snowy streets were clogged with carriages; one could avoid the majority of the jostling when arriving at the opera (as the audience did so at different intervals), but once the curtain fell, the entirety poured out onto the streets, battling to get home. Clearly, Miss Stillwell was a woman of great foresight, for only those leaving on foot were able to weave through the mess with little trouble. Baxter stared out the window and glanced at the people, many of whom were outpacing the carriage.

A few snowflakes fluttered down from the heavens. Not enough to be concerning, but it filled the air with magic. Drifting between the darkness and the circle of golden lights radiating from the lamp, the sparks of white tumbled through the air undisturbed.

Had anyone suggested that Baxter would be pleased to be trapped in a carriage after having spent the evening at a wretched opera with a stranger, he would've thought them a lackwit, but there was no denying that he was, in fact, quite pleased.

Miss Stillwell was a treat. Baxter couldn't comprehend how such a gratuitous, engaging creature remained unwed; a man would quite happily gaze into those laughing eyes for the rest of his life. There was a quality to her that drew a man in, and Baxter couldn't recall another evening he'd enjoyed as well in some time. The lady was delightful.

A prickle at the back of his neck ran down his spine as Baxter considered that truth once more. When was the last time he'd felt like smiling so freely? Or laughing? Or felt anything at all? It was as though he'd been trapped outside, slowly acclimating to the cold until he didn't know what true warmth was, and then Miss Stillwell had swept into his world like a blazing bonfire.

"You two were quite cozy," said Stanley.

Baxter jolted from his thoughts, jerking his gaze from the window as a flush of heat swept his cheeks. "Pardon?"

His son stared out the window opposite. "You and Miss Stillwell seemed to enjoy yourselves. I hope it wasn't too onerous a chore to distract her."

Clearing his throat, Baxter shifted in his seat. "Of course not. She is a delightful lady. I enjoyed myself far more than I expected."

"Then would you mind doing so in the future?" asked Stanley, swinging his gaze from the frosted glass to gaze at his father. "I was thinking of calling on them the day after tomorrow. Miss Alice mentioned they would be home to visitors."

"Of course not." Baxter hid a smile and ignored the happy thump of his heart. "If you think it would be helpful."

Stanley gave a huff with vague meaning and turned his gaze back to the window as the carriage began to move in

earnest. Baxter's brows furrowed as he studied his son. The carriage was far too dark to discern the details of his expression, though the passing lights outside allowed him glimpses. Stanley stared out at the passing cityscape, his shoulders drooping.

"Is something amiss?" asked Baxter.

"Not at all," replied Stanley, though the denial would've been far more convincing if there was any true feeling in his tone.

Chapter 4

Baxter longed to return to his quiet corner of Essex and the verdant beauty of his quaint country village, but even his unsophisticated eye appreciated the inherent loveliness of Bath. Though it was plagued with the usual troubles found in a population of that size, the efforts of gentlemen like Mr. John Wood and Mr. Ralph Allen hadn't been misplaced, transforming the worn-down buildings into something new—even if much of it was merely layering over the old facade with the eponymous stone that painted the town in its hallmark honey gold.

No. 15 Hawthorne Lane, on the other hand, was not merely painted over to hide the aged interior. Though it did not boast the finest of addresses (much to Jonathan and Beatrice Goswick's lament), Dolores's parents had thrown their efforts into ensuring that the terraced house was as fine as any in the Royal Crescent.

Little had altered since his wife and her parents had roamed its halls. As Baxter had spent much time courting Dolores in these walls, there was a feel of familiarity to them, though he'd never felt entirely comfortable within them. Though a Baxter in blood now owned it, Stanley was a Goswick in name and fortune, and he was doing his best to ensure that the grand building was properly maintained. As was befitting a Goswick.

Which was why Baxter hid in the library, tucked away in his favorite seat.

An armchair was a personal piece of furniture. One might believe the bed more so, and though that venerable piece was a fixture in one's life, it was often shared. Children slept together, and though some were afforded a solitary cot during their school years, that was quickly surrendered when they married.

Of course, a gentleman's study afforded solitude, but with Juniper Court some one hundred and seventy miles from here and occupied by tenants, an armchair tucked in a quiet part of

the house was as close to a haven as Baxter could find. It was his and his alone.

However, he was feeling anything but comfortable at present.

Baxter rested his head against the worn leather, his fingers thumping against the padded arms. With the brown paper pulled back, he stared at the parcel on his lap and ran his fingers over the bundle of pencils and the sketchbook beneath it. Of decent size, it was suitable for dragging about yet large enough to do proper studies; plain green linen lined the cover, but when he flipped through the pages, the paper was of fine quality. It was simple but refined.

His fingers ran along the bindings as he attempted to sort through the feelings burning in his chest. They pulsed through him with such strength that one couldn't say they were comfortable. But as his eyes traced over the note tucked inside, his heart warmed, sending a wave of heat through him.

I expect to see a drawing soon. — H. Stillwell

Baxter's lips twitched as though to smile, his eyes roving over the elegant hand that had rendered the words. It was easy enough to hear her voice in that succinct sentence, and he could well imagine her raising a challenging brow if he were to deny the request. And no doubt, she would ask after it in the days to come.

Scouring his memory, he didn't think he'd mentioned his art other than during their first meeting at the opera, yet Miss Stillwell had remembered it three weeks and many conversations later—and she'd ascertained that he'd yet to recapture that hobby of his. A none-too-subtle prodding and a gift all in one.

A phantom pain in his heart panged, and Dolores appeared at his elbow once more, giving the implements a narrowed eye. A proper gentleman engaged in riding, cards, racing, and hunting; he spent endless hours in his social clubs, discussing politics and worldly issues. Doodling in sketchbooks was for men who dirtied their hands with work

and made efforts to appear more genteel than they were. Yet her husband preferred art over gentlemanly pursuits.

Tugging at the twine holding the pencils together, Baxter sifted through them, the blunt ends waiting for a sharpening knife.

The door to the library opened, and he straightened, tucking the pencils and sketchbook back into the brown paper. Dabbing a hand at her temples, his eldest daughter wandered into his sanctuary; Charity pressed hands to her back and stretched, causing her swollen belly to stick out all the more. With a sigh, she dropped onto the sofa before him and rested her hands atop her growing child.

“Is the evening over?” asked Charity, her hazel eyes pleading with him to give her an affirmative.

Baxter slanted her a faint smile. “You could always begin your lying-in—”

“Do not begin with me, old man,” she said with a narrowed look. “Camilla has been demanding that very thing for weeks now, and I am fully sick of hearing about it. Even in jest.”

Holding up placating hands, Baxter settled back into his chair. “She means well.”

“That is the only reason I haven’t keelhauled her, as my husband so lovingly suggested. However, I haven’t a single jot of patience left for her ‘good intentions.’” Charity sighed as though the breath was pulled from her soul and not her aching joints. Casting a glance around the room, she pulled her brows together. “The servants have just put the final touches on the Christmas decorations in the parlor and drawing room.”

Baxter’s brows lowered as he considered her tone, which held far more melancholy than that statement deserved. When his daughter turned her attention back to him, she waved it away.

“Do not pay me any heed,” she murmured whilst brushing gentle touches against the swell of her belly. “It is silly. I know that traditions here are going to be different than

in Bristow, but I cannot help but detest how impersonal it all is. We may not have boasted many Christmas traditions, but gathering the family together to decorate the parlor with evergreen boughs was one of them. And Stanley cannot secure a large enough yule log in the city that can burn all twelve nights, and he is simply making do with a pile of wood, but it isn't the same if it is not one large piece we find ourselves. I cannot help but feel the loss."

Setting the package from Miss Stillwell aside, Baxter rose and joined his daughter on the sofa. Her chin wobbled a touch, her eyes brightening with tears, and he silently placed an arm around her shoulders. There was no questioning the true sentiment behind the display. Two Christmases ago had seen the start of her courtship with Thomas Callaghan, the last one had centered around her marriage, and now, she was forced to face their first one as man and wife with Thomas far away on his ship. And with her present condition, it was a wonder she wasn't weepier.

"If you wish to return home to Bristow, you need only say so. One way or another it can happen," said Baxter, though it took some effort to speak the words.

Charity chuckled and swiped at her cheeks. "Ignore me, Papa. I am being maudlin, and it is ridiculous to even consider such a thing in my state. I came here after Mama's passing knowing I would likely not return before the child is born. For better or worse, I am here for the time being—which is precisely where I ought to be."

Baxter's chest burned at that pronouncement, and pinching his lips tight, he nodded, as that was the only response he could give at the moment. Dolores's death may have been the initial impetus to her joining them in Bath, but that short stay had extended far longer than anyone had anticipated, and though he knew Charity would need to return to her home at some point, he couldn't help but cling to his daughter just a little longer.

Baxter glanced at her, but before he could say the thing he intended, his gaze caught sight of the greenery and berries woven into her coiffure.

“Is that mistletoe?” he asked.

Charity arched a brow and turned her head to show it off more. “Stanley claims it’s gauche to hang it in the house, but I think it’s a sweet tradition, and he cannot keep me from displaying it on my person.”

“Thomas would approve,” he said with a smile, and then, leaning close, Baxter kissed his daughter’s cheek as the plant required.

“Good man,” she said, patting his knee. “Now, how are you managing?”

And though Baxter wished to feign indifference, there was no avoiding the challenging lift of her brows as she stared him down. The heat fled his chest and settled in his cheeks as he dropped his arm from her shoulders. Rising to his feet, he strode to his armchair and straightened the pencils that had rolled across the sketchbook.

Charity saw too much for his good and possessed too much of her mother’s bold spirit to be frightened away from approaching the tender subjects.

“I had thought that I might start—”

“There you are!” called Stanley as he strode through the open door and stopped before his elder sister to drop a sprig of mistletoe on her lap. “Stop hiding these in the greenery. Mrs. Harrison and the staff know their business, and they do not need your interference. It is bad enough that Camilla will demand everything be altered the moment she arrives.”

Charity held up placating hands. “I apologize. I do not mean to cause trouble, but it’s such a little thing. They’re pretty, and it’s a sweet tradition.”

“For servants and laborers,” replied Stanley with a scoff. “I do not need my house becoming a laughing stock or to make my guests uncomfortable with such boorish traditions.”

“No, we must leave all the *boorish* kissing to the parlor games. In which case, it is entirely acceptable,” mumbled Charity.

“What was that?” asked Stanley with a frown, but holding his hands up before she could answer, he shook his head. “Do not tell me. I do not wish to know.”

Standing before the fireplace, Stanley stared into the flames, and Baxter studied his second-born son. The gentleman’s cravat was tied to perfection, his hair perfectly coiffed, and his shoes were polished to a shine, yet there was something disheveled about his appearance. Baxter frowned as he watched the young man shift in place and amended that description: Stanley was agitated.

“Is something amiss?” asked Baxter.

“No.” Stanley turned and strode away from the fireplace, and when he reached the far end of the room, he turned on his heel.

“Are you anxious about the dinner?” asked Charity. “You know Camilla is bound to be beastly since you asked me to play hostess tonight and not her.”

“No,” replied Stanley with a shake of his head as he continued back to the fireplace. “Yes. No. Nothing in particular. I just feel out of sorts.” Then, giving his sister a knowing look, he added, “And I fully anticipate things being a bit beastly at times. It always happens when Matthias and Camilla are about.”

Baxter frowned, though neither child noticed him. The hard words, true though they were, sat uneasily in his heart. The criticism was warranted, but it made him feel just as out of sorts as Stanley.

Pausing at the fireplace, Stanley turned and murmured, “We ought to go to the parlor, as the guests will arrive soon.”

Baxter rose to his feet and moved to assist his daughter, who had far more trouble budging from her seat. Straightening her evening gloves, Charity ran a hand down her skirts, though she slanted a look at her father, begging him to lead her somewhere other than into the party.

“You will like the Stillwells,” he whispered, tucking her hand into the crook of his arm.

“Though sharing Christmas Eve with strangers is not my ideal way to celebrate the holiday, I am anxious to meet them,” she said with a smile and patted his arm. “I am quite curious to meet the impressive Miss Stillwell. From what you’ve said of her, she seems like just the sort of lady one wishes to know. And there is Miss Alice as well.”

“What is this?” asked Stanley, drawing their attention back to Baxter’s armchair and the parcel sitting on the table beside it.

“A gift from a friend,” replied Baxter, though he didn’t know why he didn’t just say who that “friend” was. Yet he couldn’t admit the truth, either. The conversation and corresponding present felt too personal to share with just anyone. “I mentioned I used to draw and paint—”

“You aren’t thinking of starting it up again?” asked Stanley with a furrowed brow.

“Gentlemen dabble in such things—”

But that objection stopped when his son sent a faint sneer at the offending objects. “Not a self-respecting one.”

“That is nonsense,” said Charity, tilting her chin upwards. “Thomas’s closest friend is a gentleman in every sense of the word, and he is an avid artist.”

Stanley glanced at his sister, and though he said nothing specific, there was a dismissal clear in his gaze and the curl of his lip.

As Charity had been far beyond her majority and free to marry as she saw fit, there had been no legal course of action Dolores could’ve taken to forbid her daughter’s match to a mere naval lieutenant, but that hadn’t stopped her from making her feelings on the subject well known. Or from tainting her other children’s opinions on the subject.

Though most of society considered naval officers gentlemen, Dolores’s lofty opinions only gave that distinction to those whose career had garnered them wealth or glory—any rank lower than captain need not apply. All of which left

Thomas Callaghan far beneath her notice and the notice of the rest of her children.

Baxter rested his free hand atop hers, giving her a little squeeze, but Charity stared her brother down without flinching. Then, turning to look at her father, she gave him a gentle smile.

“You paint and sketch to your heart’s content, Papa. I think it’s marvelous.”

Stanley let out a sharp breath that carried the faint sound of an oath, and he turned back to the fireplace. Giving his daughter another pat on the hand and nodding for her to go on without him, Baxter turned back to his son.

“What is the matter?” he asked, once the library door was shut behind her.

Chapter 5

Leaning against the mantel shelf, Stanley stared into the fireplace. As this room wasn't likely to be used again today, the flames were dying down, but the last flickers danced across the coals.

"I think it was a mistake to invite the Stillwells tonight," he murmured with a frown at the embers.

Baxter froze in place, staring at his son. Unsure what to say, he remained silent, waiting for some direction.

"It is too forward to include them in such a celebration—gives them the wrong impression." Stanley tugged at his cuffs, straightening the already straight articles as he frowned at the fire.

"If this were Michaelmas, I could see your meaning, as we usually reserve that evening for our family, but Christmas Eve is merely the beginning of the Christmas season. Only minimally more significant than any normal evening. Nothing remarkable."

Turning from the fireplace, Stanley glanced out at the room but in a manner that didn't seem to take in any details.

"I do not know..." His voice faltered, and he paced the length of the room once more.

For all that his son didn't finish that thought, Baxter felt his meaning well enough.

"Miss Alice is a fine young lady..." added Stanley, though his words faded again.

"That she is," replied Baxter as his cravat tightened around his throat.

"But I cannot help but feel as though we are not a good match."

Lowering himself to his chair, Baxter tried to keep his expression neutral, but it was difficult to maintain the facade when the implications rang in his thoughts. If Stanley and

Miss Alice were not courting, then he and Miss Stillwell would have no outings to chaperone. Perhaps their paths might cross once more, but Baxter had few friends in town anymore, his social calendar was guided by Stanley's, and nothing encouraged two people to avoid each other more than a failed courtship.

“Love is not an instantaneous thing; otherwise courtships wouldn't be necessary,” said Baxter. “And three weeks is not a long time. It takes longer than that to know a person—”

“Not so,” said Stanley with a shake of his head. “I knew in an instant that my lovely Gwen was meant to be my wife. There was no effort or time needed, for our souls were like two halves, fitting together in perfect unison.”

Pausing, Stanley stared off at the far wall. “This feels as though I am settling for second best. Pursuing someone I could never love as much as my dear Gwen.”

Baxter's brows drew close together, his mind struggling to piece together an argument, though he didn't know how to combat that. And despite his best efforts, he couldn't forge together anything useful when his stomach was busy twisting itself in knots.

“But then, what am I doing, having any sort of celebration?” asked Stanley, throwing his arms wide as he turned on his heel and marched back to the fireplace. “This is our first holiday without Mother, and we are beginning with a grand party?”

The blood in his veins chilled, filling Baxter with that old familiar feeling, settling in like a lead weight around his neck. Dolores's absence hadn't once crossed his thoughts in the past few weeks. Of late, her presence had slipped from his mind, and as much as that realization made his insides roil, the feeling doubled in intensity when Baxter considered just how contented he'd been in that time.

The guilt returned in force, amplified as his son paced the room, working through demons that Baxter didn't share. But then, Stanley had loved his wife. He still did.

“You needn’t fret, son,” said Baxter, searching for some offering to give his boy. “Your mother wouldn’t want us to forgo the festivities. You know how much she adored parties. No doubt, she would be pleased.”

He managed to speak those words without stumbling, although few things ever seemed to please Dolores—and they rarely included others’ amusement. But Stanley paused and looked at his father. There was still hesitation in his gaze, and Baxter rose to his feet and motioned toward the door.

“We can celebrate in her memory,” he said.

Stanley’s shoulders fell, and he nodded, following his father’s prodding as the pair wandered out of the library. Baxter rested an arm around his son’s shoulders as they followed the corridor, though he didn’t know what more to say.

But both men straightened at the sound of raised voices. Stanley let out a heavy sigh and shook off his father’s arm, taking the stairs at a quick pace. Turning the corner, he pushed open the parlor door. Matthias and Camilla were facing off with Charity, their words coming in a quick stream that made it impossible to discern their meaning.

When Matthias spied his younger brother, he rounded on Stanley and jabbed a finger in his direction. “Is it true?”

Stanley merely stared at his brother with a raised brow, and Charity flung her arms wide with an exasperated huff and plunked onto the sofa. Stepping further into the parlor, Baxter shut the door behind him, though it would do little good to hide the conversation from any servant who wished to hear.

“What good does this do?” asked Charity.

“I didn’t ask your opinion on the matter,” said Matthias with a scowl, though if he intended to cow his sister, it was a poor job, for she merely folded her arms and watched him with narrowed eyes. Rounding on Stanley once more, he repeated himself. “Is it true?”

“As amusing as it is to see you all in a dither, I cannot answer you unless you give me more context,” replied Stanley

in a dismissive tone.

Drawing in a breath, Matthias clarified through gritted teeth. “Juniper Court. Are you in contact with the tenants? I heard a report that they discussed some of their proposed improvements with you.”

“It is our family home. Why shouldn’t they speak to me about them?” replied Stanley.

Matthias stepped forward, but his wife moved in front of him, facing off with her brother-in-law.

“Do not play games, Stanley!” shouted Camilla. “You know very well why your brother is upset. It isn’t your responsibility—”

“That is wonderful news!” replied Stanley with raised brows. “Has Matthias finally made it profitable?”

“How dare you!” growled the man in question. “I am the heir. Juniper Court is mine, and I have done my utmost to see it thrive. It is my inheritance—”

“A bankrupt inheritance,” added Stanley.

“But it is mine, and not yours! Do not get all high and mighty with me, Stanley,” continued Matthias. “Grandfather gave you his bank, and all you’ve managed to do is keep it on course. That is hardly worthy of note.”

“And do not forget that when the family’s income deteriorated, you begged me for a position with Goswick & Co., and I know precisely how skilled you are at managing investments and finances,” retorted Stanley.

Baxter’s gaze fell to the ground, his chest constricting as the two bickered back and forth about the estate. The elder son claimed his stake whilst the younger reiterated his skills with money and profits, all the while condemning the current state of the property; one being denied his grand inheritance whilst the other was made to spend his to assist in keeping the family solvent. Neither man said the words outright, but it was rife in the subtext of the conversation.

Like jackals, the two were fighting over the scraps of a carcass that had been felled by Hamilton Baxter. Tucking his hands behind him, he drifted back into the corner.

What sort of man allowed a thriving estate to fall to ruin? A man was the head of the household and controlled the family finances. If the estate failed, it was his doing and his responsibility. Yet for all the pomposity of that rhetoric, it assumed all women were delicate and demure flowers who willingly subjugated themselves to their husband's rule. And while that was true of many, there were and always would be women who refused such a role.

Yes, some men were the solitary heads of their households, ruling the family without input from their wives, while other men chose to partner with their spouses, dividing the roles and responsibilities of husband and wife between them. However, some wives were dictatorial and controlling, clutching the reins of their family with a firm grip; there wouldn't be so many jests about women being harpies if they were all sweetly sitting at their husband's feet, awaiting his dictates.

Dolores had held the purse strings, casting their money about on expensive gowns, lavish parties, and anything else required to maintain her position as queen of Bristow. Oh, he had attempted to curtail it in their early years, but shopkeepers had been bullied and badgered into ignoring the limits he placed. When he confronted her about that subterfuge, it had led to all-out war, and for all her prim and proper manners, Dolores could sling a vase with the strength of a milkmaid. Though she preferred using her greatest weapon—her sharp tongue.

A boat could not remain afloat if the two inside it were working at cross-purposes; no amount of him bailing out the water did any good while his wife drilled holes in the hull. One could only leave the boat or evict the troublemaker.

However, marriage bound the two together irreparably, and there was no undoing it. Divorce was only available to a small few, and Baxter had not the clout or legal justification to secure one. Had he separated from her, not only would the

scandal have harmed his children, but his finances would've suffered all the more; maintaining two households was far more expensive than one.

For better or worse, Baxter and Dolores were husband and wife, and all his attempts to set them to rights had only succeeded in turning Juniper Court into a battle zone, heaping misery upon everyone residing within its walls. And so, he'd kept his head down and avoided his wife whenever possible. Until the finances were strained enough that letting Juniper Court was the only option.

Would it have been better to turn every day into a battle with his wife, waging a never-ending war in which the main casualties would've been his children? Baxter believed he'd made the proper choice—better to let his estate suffer than his children—yet didn't that prove he wasn't fit to manage the place? A master's main priority was maintaining the family legacy, after all.

“You forget yourselves, brothers,” said Charity in a hard tone. “Or are you simply ignoring the fact that Papa is the head of this family, master of Juniper Court, and the one who ought to be managing this business?”

All eyes turned toward him, and Baxter managed not to flinch. Heat swept over his skin, settling in his cheeks, and he dropped his gaze to the floor.

For all that she was entirely correct, no one in this room believed him the best caretaker for the family estate. Baxter had worked hard to keep the misery hidden behind closed doors, and he'd done a thorough job of it.

Stanley and Matthias were kind enough not to scoff at Charity's question (though Camilla's lips curled in distaste), but neither did they countenance it. They launched back into their argument once more, and Baxter couldn't help but wonder if he would've been so very happy for Stanley to be named his grandfather's heir if he'd known what contention it would cause between the two. But that was nonsense, for it was a far better living than Baxter could've secured for Stanley.

Charity glanced in his direction, but Baxter pretended not to see it. What right did he have to wade into their argument? It was his bungling that had landed them all in this mess, and he couldn't blame either son for snapping and nipping at each other when they were made to bear the brunt of their father's mistakes.

"Enough!" Charity shouted, rising to her feet. Or trying to, rather. It was her second attempt that allowed her to stand, and she glowered at both men. "This is ridiculous!"

"What is ridiculous is a married lady wearing mistletoe," murmured Camilla, gazing at the greenery in her sister-in-law's hair. "Your husband is miles from home, trapped aboard a smelly ship whilst exploring some heathen shore, and you're making yourself merry? Flirting and inviting men to kiss you?"

Charity's eyes narrowed, and though Baxter fully expected her to respond in kind, his daughter surprised him with an even tone and calm response. "I know full well how far away my husband is, and I know he would rather I make myself merry than languish in misery, bemoaning his absence. And my 'condition' is healthy and hale. I have no intention of hiding away—"

The door to the parlor opened, and the conversation ceased when the butler stepped inside with a deep bow. "I do apologize, sir, but the first of your guests have arrived."

The air in the room shifted as Stanley and Matthias stepped apart, the scowls evaporating as pleasant smiles replaced them. Camilla drew up next to her husband, and they took each other's arms, looking the picture of matrimonial bliss as their host for the evening positioned himself at the fireplace, though he spared a narrowed look at his elder brother before adopting the commanding stance of the man of the hour.

Only Charity gave any sign of the previous argument, leveling a hard stare at her brothers before resuming her position on the sofa with a huff. As the Stillwells were announced, all signs of the disagreement were gone.

And Baxter remained tucked away in his corner.

*

Families fought. Children pestered their parents. Siblings disagreed. Even the closest families were plagued with the odd argument, the timing of which was not always convenient for those involved. And one could do only so much to cover that fact.

As Hettie followed her brother and niece into the parlor, it was evident from the stiffness in the various postures and the tightness to their expressions that something was amiss. Of course, their raised voices had been audible even from the entryway, giving stronger proof of discord, but the Baxter family feigned ignorance, so hers followed suit.

However, there was no overlooking the disjointed feel of the room, for despite the rigid air of the people inside, the parlor was attired in its Christmas finest. Evergreen boughs and holly festooned every free surface, with red and white ribbons nestled amongst the dark green of the foliage. A fire raged in the fireplace, and the air was sweet with the smell of spices, promising a delectable feast awaited them.

Mr. Goswick stood at the fireplace, looking quite dapper in his evening clothes, and the others (whom she supposed were his siblings) were in various states of repose in the room. But there was no sign of their patriarch.

“Welcome,” said Mrs. Camilla Baxter, sweeping forward to greet the others with all the grace and poise of a seasoned hostess whilst the true host of the party watched her with narrowed eyes before sweeping into introductions. Ah yes, families did bicker, didn’t they?

But Hettie ignored that and wondered where Mr. Baxter had gotten himself to. When they’d spoken last, he’d assured her he was attending the dinner party, but then, she supposed such times were trying for widows and widowers, especially

when the loss was so fresh. She didn't begrudge him the escape, though her heart sank at the thought of an evening of polite chatter with strangers who would likely be closer to their host's age than hers.

But when she turned to take a seat, her gaze swept the back corner and saw the man in question tucked into the darkened recess. The others began exchanging details concerning the goings-on in their lives, and she cast a glance at his son, though the gentleman didn't seem to notice that he'd overlooked an important introduction, as her brother hadn't met Mr. Baxter. But Mr. Goswick didn't seem to notice the fellow or the oversight.

Striding across the room, Hettie met Mr. Baxter with a smile. "Might I join you in your hiding place?"

Mr. Baxter didn't lift his gaze from the rug at his feet. "I am visible to anyone who bothers to look, so it is hardly a hiding place."

Hettie did not respond to that, for her description had been apt. Despite being visible to the whole of the party, Mr. Baxter blended into the shadows and furniture until no one but she noticed him.

The two stood there in silence as the others milled about, awaiting the arrival of the rest of the guests. Drawing in a deep breath, she considered what to do and say, but Hettie felt the invisible wall placed between them once more. It hadn't made a reappearance since their first outing to the opera, and feeling it there once more made her heart sink.

Though she couldn't claim to know the gentleman exceptionally well, the past three weeks had given her much insight into Mr. Baxter. He was such a sad soul. Hettie's brow furrowed as she considered that. Sad wasn't the proper descriptor, for when put at ease, he was as amusing and engaging as one would wish in a friend.

Weary.

Once that word popped into her head, Hettie latched onto it, for that was far more apt. Though many thought it merely a

physical condition, she knew better than most that it was a sentiment as real as joy, sadness, or anger. It often traveled hand in hand with sorrow, but in truth, it was the remnants left behind once hope had dried up.

Hettie didn't know a spinster who wasn't well-acquainted with weariness. It was impossible to avoid when one longed to find a partner with whom to share this journey through life, who desired her company as much as she desired his. A lady of Hettie's status couldn't help but stir some interest amongst the gentlemen, but none of them had truly desired the plump and dowdy Stillwell girl, and when the time had come to acknowledge that marriage and children were not in her future, weariness had seeped into her soul.

Fighting hard to move past that heaviness, Hettie had learned to focus on the lightness and warmth rife in her world—with or without a family of her own—but the lesson had been hard won. That experience had to be earned, but Hettie wondered how she might help Mr. Baxter to grasp the joy inherent in every life.

“And how are you faring?” she asked, glancing at him from the corner of her eye.

“Well enough. And you?”

She drew in a deep breath. Apparently, skirting the issue wasn't enough. Thankfully, he seemed to welcome her blunt manners, so she dove straight into what she wished to say.

“I am well, though I imagine it must be difficult to face your first Christmas season without your wife.”

Mr. Baxter stiffened, his gaze dropping once more to the ground. Shifting in place, he tucked his hands behind him. “I thank you for your concern, but please excuse me. I have something that requires my attention.”

With a stiff bow, he turned away, and though Mr. Baxter didn't rush away, he spared no time in putting distance between them. He strode right for the door, and though it would be easy enough to excuse his behavior and believe something dire truly required his attention that very moment,

Hettie recognized an escape when she saw it. She'd employed that same verbiage many times when wishing to flee a social situation.

Drawing in a deep breath, she clasped her hands before her and refused to be ruffled by that dismissal, though it was difficult not to feel as though she was back at the very beginning, needing to rebuild the friendship they'd developed over the past weeks. Her heart sank as she considered that.

His conversation had promised to be the one shining consolation to spending her evening with a small group of strangers. Hunting down conversation during a party was daunting and hardly an enjoyable way to pass an evening. Even if one secured it for a time, inevitably, the companions parted ways, leaving Hettie to search for another safe harbor in the social storm.

With Victor present and the intimate setting tonight, Hettie needn't remain at Alice's side. Clearly, Mr. Baxter wasn't going to entertain her, and though the butler announced two more couples, they were closer to Mr. Goswick's age, which was no surprise. However, it also provided Hettie with no clear alternative for companionship.

Until her gaze fell to Mrs. Callaghan, seated on the sofa. The others sectioned off into smaller conversations, but Mr. Baxter's eldest daughter remained where she was, seemingly unbothered by her solitary state. The lady was at that stage for which Hettie couldn't help but wince in sympathy, for Mrs. Callaghan looked entirely uncomfortable and unable to alter that until her child made its debut.

Slipping onto the seat beside her on the sofa, Hettie gave Mrs. Callaghan a broad smile. "And how are you this festive evening?"

Chapter 6

Mrs. Callaghan's lips twisted into a wry smile, her brows twisting up in challenge.

Hettie held her hands up in surrender. "Insidious question, I know, but I fear I am out of anything clever to say."

"That doesn't bode well for the evening. It has only just begun," replied Mrs. Callaghan. Then, with an arched brow, she added, "But then, I suppose a quiet, dull evening is precisely what my family ought to strive for after beginning it with such fireworks."

Hettie paused, but before she could think what to say, Mrs. Callaghan hurried to add, "Or are you going to pretend as well that you did not hear my brothers enacting their own Battle of Trafalgar?" Canting her head, she amended that. "Though I suppose since it was a land battle, Waterloo is a better comparison, though my naval husband would shudder to hear me choose it over Trafalgar."

"Ah, yes. Your father mentioned you were married to a navy man," said Hettie. "A lieutenant, isn't he?"

Mrs. Callaghan smiled, her hand reflexively resting against her child. "Yes. Unfortunately, they've taken him far from our shores at present, though I am glad to be able to spend the holidays with my family. There is little I can do for my father at this difficult time but keep him company."

"I know he appreciates it. He has said so a few times," said Hettie, though she omitted the guilt that had often accompanied his admission, for Mr. Baxter didn't wish his daughter to know. Staying in Bath was Mrs. Callaghan's sacrifice to make, and the anguish he felt over it was Mr. Baxter's secret to keep.

"I certainly hope so," said Mrs. Callaghan. "I—"

"Charity," said Mrs. Baxter, sweeping over with a furrowed brow and another lady in tow. "Are you certain you

ought to join us tonight? The numbers will be uneven, but that is of little consequence. You ought to be resting.”

“I am quite well, Camilla,” replied Mrs. Callaghan, not bothering to disguise the impatience in her tone.

Her sister-in-law held up placating hands before motioning to a lady at her side. “I do not mean to vex you. I was simply speaking with Mrs. Potter, and we were discussing our lying-ins. I did not stir from my bed for a month before the blessed event.”

Mrs. Potter’s brows rose at that. “For my first, I didn’t see another soul for a good two months before. Gatherings and crowds can be so taxing, after all. A mother ought to conserve her strength for the ordeal. I struggled for days before my first was born.”

“Days?” asked Mrs. Callaghan with raised brows.

“You cannot imagine. I thought I would be torn in two,” added Mrs. Potter with a grimace. “It is a miracle we made it through, and I know it was because I followed a strict lying-in period.”

“I know precisely what you mean,” added Mrs. Baxter with a sage nod. “My physician said he’d never seen a mother struggle for so long with my last child. It felt like a full sennight.”

Mrs. Callaghan drew in a deep breath, her gaze narrowing a touch as she looked at the ladies, and Hettie felt her own irritation simmering beneath the surface. Despite having witnessed it countless times, she would never understand why mothers enjoyed sharing horrific stories of childbirth, especially with those on the verge of the ordeal themselves.

No one ever spoke of averages. It was always the absolute worst of experiences, leaving her a wretched mess in body and soul, or it was the easiest, feeling like little more than a tickle. Childbirth was a badge of honor earned by only those who had the most unique of stories and experiences. Though Mrs. Callaghan’s expression held a hint of disbelief in

the wrinkle of her brow, there was enough concern in her gaze that Hettie longed to set the other ladies straight.

What were they thinking? Surely, if anyone would understand the fears facing a first-time mother, it would be those who had already walked that path. Sharing such extremes did not help in the slightest. It left the expectant mothers terrified or unprepared. Irritation bubbled beneath her polite expression, yet Hettie couldn't let it loose.

The Baxters did not need someone stirring the pot. Grasping onto something that might steer the conversation in better directions, Hettie smiled.

“Isn't it amazing how varied the experiences of a new mother are? Every lady and every baby is different, and there are plenty who eschew any sort of lying-in before, only resting after the ordeal. In my experience, if Mrs. Callaghan feels up to a dinner party, there is no reason she ought not to partake.”

Mrs. Baxter blinked at Hettie, a slight thread of steel in her voice when she replied, “And what would your experience be in such matters, *Miss Stillwell*?”

A laugh nearly slipped past Hettie's defenses. Mr. Baxter's daughter-in-law had to be around five and thirty years her junior, meaning that Miss Hettie Stillwell had been a confirmed spinster before Mrs. Camilla Baxter had taken her first breath, and yet she was attempting childish ploys to assert her dominance over Hettie.

For all that Mrs. Baxter comported herself as the lady of the house, this was not her home, and whatever she may believe, she was not Hettie's superior in any fashion. Though valuable in their own right, motherhood and marriage did not bestow value, and their absence did not detract from a lady's worth.

But it was rather amusing to see the girl's attempt to ruffle Hettie's graying feathers.

“Not only did I assist both of my sisters-in-law in bringing my brothers' children into this world, but I have been at the bedside of my nieces. To say nothing of the assistance I

have given my friends in such times,” replied Hettie. “I may have no personal experience with bringing a child into this world, but one needn’t have birthed a babe to be knowledgeable—else why do so many women rely on physicians during the process?”

Mrs. Baxter’s nose tipped upward, her breath drawing in sharply as she frowned. For all that many ladies still preferred midwives, physicians were far more elite in the eyes of society, and Hettie would wager a tenner that a lady of Mrs. Baxter’s pretension would never settle for less. Both ladies stood there, staring at Hettie.

Thankfully, their pride was spared when the butler returned once more and announced that dinner was served. Those words were like the firing pistol of a horse race; Mrs. Baxter turned to her husband and took his arm, moving as though to lead the guests into supper, and Mr. Goswick hurried to the sofa, holding out a hand to his substitute hostess and helping his sister to her feet. The two couples jockeyed for position, attempting to reach the parlor door first.

When Mr. Goswick arrived in the doorway, he gave his guests a bright smile. “Please, follow me.”

His brother and sister-in-law fell dutifully into place behind him, though the rest of the group did not follow such staid pairings, as Mrs. Tollman and Mrs. Thayer were deep in conversation whilst their husbands and Mr. York did the same. Hettie rose to her feet and followed the other stragglers as they entered the dining room and chose seats.

While opinions on the proper order of a dining room varied, Hettie couldn’t help but wonder if the relaxed approach was more the doing of Mrs. Callaghan, as the makeshift hostess of tonight’s gathering. Mr. Goswick certainly seemed more the type to stand on precedent, especially when it came to his elder brother.

Host and hostess were seated on opposite ends of the table, and the Baxters had taken what some deemed the place of honor beside them, though most everyone else was far more occupied with their conversations to give it much thought.

With narrowed looks exchanged between brothers and the general irritation emanating from Mrs. Baxter and aimed toward Mrs. Callaghan (though the latter gave it no mind), it promised to be quite an awkward evening.

Delightful.

As there were no two empty seats together, there was nothing she could do to ensure a place at Mr. Baxter's side, though she wasn't certain he would welcome it at any rate. No crying over spilt milk, as they said, so Hettie ignored it all and selected an empty chair, and when Mr. Baxter joined them, he slipped into a seat farther down.

The table was filled with dishes, the surface overflowing with a delectable selection: roasted turkey breast with lemon and liver, oven-roasted cod with seafood gravy, venison pie, boiled herb dumplings, fricassee of rabbits, stewed pigeon, and asparagus rolls, to name a few. In the center stood a myriad of yule candles, providing a veritable conflagration amongst the food, the shiny holly leaves catching the light like a mirror.

The gathering was intimate enough that they could enjoy discussions as a whole, but large enough that smaller conversations were common as well, and most had decided upon the latter. Thankfully, there was enough on the table to keep Hettie's attention, for she wasn't seated anywhere near her family or silent friend. Though Mr. York and Mrs. Thayer on either side were amiable people, they were more occupied with other conversations than with the stranger seated between them, which suited Hettie.

A host usually waited for entertainment until after the dinner, but Mr. Goswick and his elder brother were quite content to provide ample diversions, though it was far more of the discomfiting variety. At every chance, the latter attempted to force attention on himself, ignoring the fact that he was not in the host's chair, and Mr. Goswick rose to the bait, wresting control away. Though mostly subtle, it was not lost on Hettie (nor, likely, the rest of the guests) that something was amiss between the pair.

As it didn't seem in Mr. Baxter's nature to do so, Hettie doubted their father had given preferential treatment to one or the other; unfortunately, it was a fact of life that an heir was given more by nature of his birth. His occupation was established from the moment he drew his first breath, and there was never any question as to his prominence in the family or his station in life. The eldest son was to be the head of the family once the former patriarch passed; it was expected, and Hettie couldn't think of anyone who questioned such a thing.

But when a younger son was elevated, inheriting a fortune that was greater than that of his elder brother (as was the case with Mr. Goswick), it was bound to cause tension, as much of the power in the family came from holding the purse strings. Nothing stoked such fires like resentment, and there was an ample amount on both sides.

Understandable, yet it would be preferable if they did not insist on waging their wars in public.

With Mr. Baxter seated on the same side of the table but several places down, Hettie couldn't see the gentleman's expression, though she couldn't help but wonder about his feelings on the subject. No doubt, it was difficult to see the two at odds, but with the gentleman's heart so fragile at present, she wasn't going to ask him. Not now, at any rate, but certainly when he was feeling himself once more.

Casting that question to the back of her thoughts, Hettie focused on her food, enjoying the blend of sweet and savory. Mr. Goswick's cook was talented, to be sure, for the feast was as delicious as the conversation was uncomfortable. Spearling a bite of galantine turkey, Hettie swept it through a stray drip of gravy.

"It is a fine match, don't you think?" asked Mrs. Thayer.

The question was so unexpected that Hettie took a moment before she understood the lady's meaning. Mrs. Thayer glanced toward Mr. Goswick and Alice, who were seated together at the far end. Her niece laughed at something

he said, and Hettie considered that. Mr. Goswick seemed like an amiable sort though a touch snobby.

“Perhaps,” said Hettie.

“I am simply happy to see him finally emerging from his mourning,” murmured Mrs. Thayer before taking a bite of cod. “Gwen was a dear, but it is not good for him to lock himself away.”

“True.” Hettie glanced at the lady beside her. “I understand you and Mr. Thayer are old friends of Mr. Goswick.”

The lady nodded. “We were neighbors when we were first married, though he has since moved to far better lodgings.”

That statement was just a touch indiscreet, but Mrs. Thayer spoke it with more than a hint of good-natured self-derision, and Hettie couldn't help but smile. Soon their conversation drifted to the lady's children, as mothers were wont to turn most topics toward their offspring, and though Hettie wouldn't say the conversation was lively or engaging, it was diverting enough as the two made their way through the meal.

“And you?” asked Mrs. Thayer before taking a sip of her wine. “What are your plans when Miss Alice marries? As your chaperoning duties are finished, will you remain in Bath?” Pausing, she winced and hurried to add, “I do not mean to say that everything is settled between her and Mr. Goswick, but she is far too sweet and lovely a girl to remain unwed long—”

Hettie held up a staying hand. “Peace, I understand quite clearly. And that is a complicated question, for though I have asked myself that many times, I do not have an answer.”

But just as Mrs. Thayer moved to speak again, someone on the far end of the table stole away her attention, dragging her from the conversation. Which was a blessing, for Hettie wasn't certain she wished to continue it. There was little more for her to say.

What was Miss Harriet Stillwell to do once the last of her nieces was married?

Like Mrs. Callaghan, she'd chosen to reside with her brother to provide comfort and solace after Victor's second wife had followed in the footsteps of his first, leaving him widowed with five small children to rear. Those weeks had turned into months, and without knowing when the change had taken place, Hettie had stepped into the role of mistress of No. 12 Thornhurst Street and makeshift mama to her five nieces and nephews.

Yet remaining at his side had never been for Victor's sake but his children's. Now that they no longer required a motherly presence in residence, what would Hettie Stillwell do with herself? One might believe that having endless possibilities made for happier decisions, but it was daunting. Settling in a home of her own was a clear choice, but where? Ought she to travel? Time was no longer a limited commodity, for it was entirely hers, yet what did one do with it?

For years, her life had pattered along in a predictable fashion. Certainly, there were surprises and upsets, but as a whole, the path had been decided the moment her sister-in-law had taken her last breath. Now, Hettie stood on a precipice, free to be her own agent, and for all that she had dreamt of doing as she pleased, she couldn't seem to settle on any true course.

Travel would be nice, though her insides wriggled at the thought of tackling foreign countries on her own. Not that she required company, but her French was only good enough for a governess-taught schoolgirl who had never visited those shores before, and to wander foreign shores alone seemed foolhardy.

Taking another bite of her rabbit, Hettie tried to enjoy the food, but the flavors faded as she considered her future. In all honesty, the only thing she knew was what she did not want. She didn't want to reside in her brother's household, and she didn't want to remain in Bath.

The future wasn't terrible, regardless of what was to come, but the uncertainty of it sat uneasily in her heart. Hettie wanted a plan. A course of action.

Sighing, she found herself stuck once more in that quagmire. Without answers but with plenty of questions and doubts. A house in the country? Or ought she to travel the country? Europe might be too much of a leap at first, but could she attempt Scotland and Wales? Ireland was renowned for its beautiful scenery, and she could indulge in a bit of domestic adventures first.

Those thoughts followed her throughout the dinner, and when the courses were all cleared and the food consumed, they followed her as the guests left the dining room. In light of the festivities, the gentlemen eschewed the usual separation from the ladies and joined them directly in the drawing room, and Hettie only hoped that something would distract her from this puzzle.

Chapter 7

The same holiday cheer greeted the party as they entered the drawing room, with greenery and ribbons aplenty, along with another array of yule candles; though Hettie enjoyed any tradition that included the giving of gifts, those always sat uneasy with her, for like so many kindly meant customs, it had turned into a way to jockey for position and status. The more affluent the family, the more merchants they frequented, and thus, the more yule candles they received at Christmas as a sign of gratitude for their generous patronage.

While it was nice to have some fashion in which to express gratitude, it seemed a strange thing to have the lower classes provide gifts for their wealthy clients. Hettie far preferred the Feast of St. Stephens, when the masters were obligated to show some sign of appreciation for their staff; even the best of masters ought to give fine gifts at least once a year to the people who scrubbed his underthings, changed his linens, and kept him well fed.

A large log sat in great state inside the fireplace, adorned with holly and ivy, and Mr. Goswick stood at its side. Footmen arrived with glasses, passing them to the guests, and when they were situated, their host stood front and center, his drink held ready to toast.

“My great thanks for joining us this wonderful evening,” he said, his fingers along the stem. “A great time of celebration. And remembrance. For though we are blessed to enjoy each other’s company, we cannot help but remember those who are not with us.”

The merriment and laughter present at the dinner fled as the guests shifted in their seats, all holding their drinks and ready to continue the festivities. Yet Mr. Goswick stood in place, his gaze fixed on his glass.

“There is no undoing the past, and we must continue to live despite their absence, yet we would be remiss if we did not acknowledge the great effect they had in our lives.” He paused, and everyone moved as though to raise the toast, but

Mr. Goswick stuttered on. “I do not think any of us are untouched by loss. We all have suffered greatly when those we love are torn from us.”

Though his statement was fundamentally true, the others all cast furrowed looks at each other, though their host did not seem to notice.

“But we still live. We must do our duty and not hold to that which cannot be undone,” he murmured.

One of the gentlemen cleared his throat, and that seemed to jolt Mr. Goswick from his ponderance. Lifting a glass, he gave them a tight smile.

“Happy Christmas,” he said, and the words echoed throughout the gathering as glasses clinked together. Tossing back his drink, he downed it in one, and Hettie glanced over at his father, who was watching his son with the same trepidation and concern etched on his face.

Mr. Goswick reached toward the fireplace mantelpiece, fetched one of the twists of paper from the spills holder, and lit it on an obliging candle. Leaning into the fireplace, he held the burning spill to the log, the greenery quickly catching flame as the others applauded. Straightening, he motioned toward the tables set up around the drawing room, and in a voice far brighter than before, he encouraged the others to split into games.

The guests shifted, dividing off into pairs and groups as required by their chosen entertainment, and Hettie couldn't help that her gaze drifted to the quiet corner in which Mr. Baxter had chosen to hide—only to find him watching her. His gaze jerked away, and Hettie couldn't help smiling to herself. For all that he feigned disinterest in her company, he acted like a child caught sneaking biscuits from the pantry when their eyes met.

Drawing in a deep breath, she wandered to the fireplace and watched the holly leaves curl in on themselves as the flames danced along the bark. Would it appear desperate if she simply invaded his corner? Hettie was quite used to entertaining herself when need be, but there was something far

too forlorn about his solitary position. The manner in which he kept glancing at her betrayed his desire, making it difficult for Hettie to settle on a course of action.

Mr. Baxter needed friends. That much was clear. And Hettie was quite content to fill that role; the gentleman was amiable and lacked the puffed-up pride so many men boasted. In a few short weeks, she'd grown accustomed to having his company during Alice's outings, and she wasn't ready to surrender it.

Yet would it be entirely heavy-handed to simply march over to him and demand a conversation?

"Miss Stillwell."

Hettie turned from the fireplace and found young Mrs. Baxter at her back. The lady's lips were pulled into a polite smile (the sort that was more concerned with decorum than true delight), and Hettie knew better than to trust it.

"Would you do us the honor?" asked Mrs. Baxter, motioning toward the table. "We would love for you to join us. We have only four, and Loo is always best with more players." The lady paused, holding up placating hands as she leaned closer. "And we are playing penny stakes, so you needn't be concerned."

Lips twitching, Hettie feigned a relieved sigh. "That is good to hear."

And it was. Gambling was a useless pastime that by its very nature beggared more than it enriched.

However, the lady's meaning was rife in her tone. Spinsters were often impoverished, after all. So, it was no great surprise that she believed Hettie was as well, or that Mrs. Baxter wielded that shame to put Hettie in her place. After their last verbal parry, it was to be expected. Tyrants (whether political or social) could not bear dismissal.

Yet for all that Mrs. Baxter thought herself queen of all she surveyed, Hettie had been battling such bullies since before Mrs. Baxter was born. She wasn't going to be undone

by an insipid barb from a lady whose opinion mattered not in the slightest.

Hettie was far more vexed by the interruption than the insult. She cast a glance toward Mr. Baxter (causing him to jerk his gaze away from her once more), but before she could decide what she was going to do, Mrs. Baxter had Hettie by the arm and was leading her toward the table.

Mr. Tollman began shuffling the cards, dealing three out with a flick of his wrist. In quick succession, they launched into the game, with Mrs. York abstaining from that round as the others battled to take at least one trick, though with four of them still in play and only three tricks to be had, it was a close thing that Hettie managed to secure one. Mr. Goswick looked unhappy to be the odd man out at the end of the round, though he was a good sport and added his penalty to the pot without argument.

They continued in that course with each losing a little and winning some for several rounds, though Hettie caught Mrs. Baxter studying her from over the top of her cards. Smiling to herself, she wondered how long it would be before the lady spoke whatever words were simmering beneath the surface.

“So you are the lady who is said to have bewitched my father-in-law,” said Mrs. Baxter, glancing at Hettie. Mr. Goswick sputtered, nearly spitting his sip of wassail, as Mr. Tollman and Mrs. York’s eyes widened for just a fraction of a second before they became far more interested in their hands.

Shifting the cards, Hettie sorted through her words. The accusation was ridiculous, of course. With the black band fixed on his arm and his withdrawn behavior tonight, it was clear Mr. Baxter was still mourning his wife and struggling beneath his grief. Despite that evidence and the fact that the only time they spent together was in the capacity of chaperones, Hettie knew people enjoyed spreading speculation far too much to leave the poor mourning man alone.

However, straightforward denials rarely had the effect one intended.

“You cannot be serious, Camilla,” said Mr. Goswick, raising his hand to the footman for a napkin. Once the remnant of his drink was clean from his lips, he tossed it atop the table with a huff. “Such a thing to say.”

“Mrs. Clifton and Miss Bliss asked me about it this afternoon,” replied Mrs. Baxter. “If people are being so bold as to ask outright, then many more are whispering about it.”

Turning her gaze back to Hettie, Mrs. Baxter studied her, though such a disapproving look was far better suited to when a person was standing (when the other could peruse the length of her). The lady didn’t go so far as to sneer, but it was clear in the arch of her brow that she thought the rumor ridiculous.

“Surely people have more to occupy their time than to gossip about a widower and a—” Mr. Goswick halted before he finished his statement, though they all heard the dreaded “spinster” echoing in the silence. His gaze drifted across her much as his sister-in-law’s had, and though it was far more genuine than her calculated cut, it was no less unkind in its incredulity.

In such a moment, a person had two choices—anguish or amusement—and while such a blatant judgment of her attractions was bound to pain her at times, Hettie was not some young miss to be upended by two pups’ dismissal.

“I assure you I have no designs on your father’s virtue,” she murmured with a wry smile. Mrs. York’s eyes widened at that bald statement, though Mr. Tollman supplied the laugh Hettie had hoped to earn. “We are friends. That is all.”

“I hear you are planning a trip,” said Mrs. York, turning toward Mr. Tollman.

Though Mrs. Baxter looked like she wished to continue their present conversation, she made no objection as the two guests shifted it quickly into less dangerous waters. Hettie glanced at Mr. Goswick, and he studied his cards as if they held the answer to the greatest mysteries of the universe, though there was a vacantness to his gaze that suggested his thoughts were far from the game.

The tricks flew fast, with round after round adding up as they discussed the perils and trials of travel, the relative merits of different carriages, and the horror to be found at so many coaching inns. The conversation was hardly noteworthy, for they all spouted the same trite details everyone shared about such things. Carriages were always uncomfortable. Inns were always questionable. Pains and headaches ensued during the journey. The only differing opinions were on whether or not the destination was worth the agony.

But the previous conversation wouldn't leave her be.

Quickly enough, Hettie was free to excuse herself, and she took the opportunity to distance herself from the others. Wandering to the fireplace, she feigned a chill and pretended to warm herself so no one would drag her away once more. For all that Mrs. Baxter likely thought her to be licking her wounds, it wasn't the obvious criticisms of her appearance and marital status that lingered with her. It was Mr. Baxter.

This evening made it obvious that something was amiss with his family. Clearly, both he and his children were set adrift without their matriarch in the home.

Was it any wonder that his daughter-in-law would be so defensive of her family? Hettie certainly hadn't intended to cause more trouble by making Mr. Baxter the source of gossip. In truth, neither she nor he were of much importance to warrant such scrutiny. Friendships were intended to uplift. Support. Heal. Yet hers was adding to his troubles.

It wasn't difficult to see the connection between his distance tonight and his daughter-in-law's agitation. If Mr. Baxter knew of the rumors, it was perfectly reasonable that he would do what he could to stymie them. And though Hettie preferred to have an honest explanation, she couldn't fault him for silently withdrawing, either.

Mr. Baxter was her friend. At least, Hettie believed him to be. Not all friendships were forged in fire or built over long periods of time, and from the very first, Hettie had liked him.

Drawing in a deep breath, she forced herself not to wilt, though her heart made it difficult when it insisted on dredging

up memories of their time together and how empty those future interactions would be. Mr. Goswick and Alice were still connected, after all. But then, perhaps his son wouldn't ask him along on those outings, and Hettie would return to her role as the silent chaperone, following at their heels.

Good gracious, it was getting difficult to hold onto her holiday cheer when considering such thoughts. Turning on her heel, Hettie spied a pianoforte in the far corner (not Mr. Baxter's hiding place, thankfully). She strode to the instrument and opened the fallboard to reveal the pristine white and black keys. As Hettie was not gifted enough to play by ear, she was pleased to see their hostess had amassed some Christmas music.

Sifting through the sheets, she settled on what looked to be a lovely arrangement of "O, Come All Ye Faithful," and she took her place at the instrument.

Chapter 8

When people moaned and wrung their hands at the heavens, asking why God allowed terrible things to happen to the virtuous, the answer was simple enough. If doing good was a guarantee of protection and happiness for one's entire life, it wouldn't be difficult to do so. Righteousness garnered rewards far greater than immediate gratification or worldly boons, and unfortunately, the twists and turns of the path did not always allow one to see the blessings or their connections to past actions.

And though there were no clear benefits from avoiding Miss Stillwell, Baxter clung to the hope that he might see it one day. Seated at the piano, her fingers ran along the keys, filling the room with even more of the festive spirit, and it was far too easy to imagine pulling up a chair beside hers and passing the rest of the night by her side.

Baxter shifted in place, the back of his neck prickling as Stanley's words played through his mind again and again.

Their first holiday without Dolores, and he was contemplating how to approach an unmarried lady? One who stirred feelings in his heart that were best left undisturbed. His children were clearly grieving the loss—in addition to the other difficulties lying between them. In short, they were at each other's throats, and the last thing he ought to do was stir up more trouble by showing an interest in the lady.

Yet of their own accord, his eyes traveled to Miss Stillwell. The candles atop the piano were placed to illuminate the music, and it gave him a clear view of her profile. Her gaze was fixed on the sheets, her elegant fingers moving about the keys with the lightness of grace that seemed synonymous with the lady. Her hair curled at the nape of her neck and temples, drawing the gaze to her creamy complexion, and though her smile was not present, Baxter had seen it enough times to imagine her dimples peeking out.

More than that, Miss Stillwell had a light all her own that belied the darkness of the hour and outshone the myriad of

candles the servants had lit—the brightness of her soul forever viewed the good in the world around her, yet without the naivety that so often accompanied such dewy-eyed people. Intelligence and humor were but some of her qualities, and when Baxter’s mind drifted to the present awaiting him in the library, he added kindness and thoughtfulness to the list.

Anyone would be honored to have such a lady as his friend. What was wrong with seeking her out?

Baxter’s brow furrowed, and reasons sprang to his thoughts as to why such a thing was a terrible idea. Firstly, his feelings were far more than the friendly variety. Though he’d ignored them for some time, there was no denying them as his heart pulsed with warmth at the very sight of her. He cared for Miss Stillwell.

But that did not mean he must approach her with the intention of courtship. Baxter was well-versed in keeping his own counsel and setting aside his feelings. How was this situation any different? His brows rose as he considered that.

Besides, he needed to thank her for the gift.

As his seat wasn’t in her line of sight, Baxter was able to draw up quietly behind her. Standing there, he watched her hands move through the happy notes, but his gaze fell to her neck, the line of which was uninterrupted by the ringlets and ribbons so many ladies employed in their coiffure. Her shorn hair lent a grace to the sweep, and he longed to brush a hand along the skin.

But Baxter banished those thoughts. There was no need to venture down that path.

Miss Stillwell shifted, her head turning just enough to see him there, and she gave a start, her fingers tripping only slightly before she turned her attention back to the music.

“Good evening, Mr. Baxter.” Her tone was polite and far warmer than he deserved after having ignored her for the majority of the evening.

“I fear I have been remiss,” he said, moving to stand at the piano’s side. Her gaze flicked to him and then back to the

music.

“Is that so?”

“I apologize for not thanking you sooner for the wonderful gift you sent over this afternoon,” he said.

Miss Stillwell nodded. “I hope you will use them. As long as they do not gather dust, I will consider it money well spent.”

“You ought not to have gone to the expense,” he said with a frown.

But she met that with a challenging raise of her brows. “It has been weeks since you first mentioned your love of art, yet every time I’ve broached the subject, you haven’t done a thing about rekindling that passion. So, I thought it prudent to take the initiative. Everyone ought to have pastimes.”

Miss Stillwell paused, her fingers stilling, and though the interruption drew a little attention, she made no move to continue. “I am glad you approached, for I would like to apologize for what I said earlier.”

“Is that so?” he asked, parroting her question.

That drew a faint smile, but she chased it with a sigh. “Your loss still pains you and is likely to for some time. I didn’t mean to dredge up difficult subjects or press the issue.”

Baxter’s heart twisted in his chest, but before he could think how to reassure her, she continued.

“Though I do wish to be clear—should you ever wish to discuss your grief, I am always willing to listen.” With a small smile, she added, “We are friends, after all.”

Another sharp pain pricked at him at that little word. “Friends” was not a terrible thing; it was far better than strangers.

But the lady in question returned to her music, continuing “The First Noel” where she left off. With that velvety low voice, Miss Stillwell hummed along with the melody, and soon, Baxter was doing so as well. The two voices quietly blended with the tune, and before he knew what he was about,

the words sprang forth. Though the lyrics written on the page were slightly different from those he knew, Baxter felt the joy of the song filling him as he sang of this special time of year and the very first of Christmases.

When it wound to a close, Miss Stillwell gave him another of her bright smiles, her dimples making themselves known. “Bravo, Mr. Baxter. I did not realize you were an artist and a musician.”

Baxter shifted in place, his gaze falling from her.

“Come now, I am only teasing,” she replied. “Though I will say you have a fine voice. Far better than most. And now that you’ve shown your hand, I demand that you keep me company and sing along.”

Tugging at his jacket, he stepped closer as she shifted through the sheets.

“Any requests?” she asked.

Baxter’s tongue was well and truly frozen in place. Miss Stillwell simply chose for him and began playing a variation of “While Shepherds Watched Their Flocks by Night,” and though she had made her demands known, she did not press him any further to sing.

A sudden smile brightened her expression, and it held a hint of impishness that Baxter couldn’t help but ask, “What is it?”

With an arched brow, Miss Stillwell turned laughing eyes at him, then directed them toward her niece before her gaze flicked back to her sheet music. Baxter’s brows pulled together as he looked at Miss Alice, whose own expression was filled with equal confusion as her fingers dug into the riot of curls sprouting from the top of her head.

As she pulled her hand free, Baxter spied a lemon drop pinched between her fingers, and the young lady stared at the thing. Her companions were all as fascinated by its appearance as she, and they began plying her with questions, to which she had no reply.

Baxter slanted a look at the lady's aunt, who sat primly before the piano, her angelic expression betraying not a hint of guilt as her fingers skipped along the keys.

"I told you lemon drops would be all the rage," she murmured, her dark eyes turning to meet his, and Baxter couldn't help but laugh.

Standing at the parlor window, Baxter pretended not to watch whilst the Stillwells climbed into their carriage. As the candles were all snuffed, he was shrouded in shadow when Miss Stillwell gave her brother a beaming grin, but then her gaze rose past Mr. Stillwell's shoulder and landed on Baxter. His cravat tightened around his neck, and he raised a hand in farewell; though he'd thought himself hidden, she raised one in response.

For all that the evening had begun on such a rough footing, it ended on a happy note. Or a bittersweet one, rather, for Baxter couldn't help the pang of sadness that drew forth a frown as he watched her carriage trundle away, giving a final answer to the question that had loomed before him.

Could he simply be friends with Miss Stillwell? It felt far too shallow a label. Incomplete. Most definitely unsatisfying. Was she a friend? A potential sweetheart? He didn't know what to call her, but something deep inside lightened at the thought of either of those labels being applied to Miss Stillwell.

Why not allow himself to consider the possibility? Dolores was gone. There was no changing that unshakeable fact. Thus, there was nothing inherently shameful in the idea that he might consider another lady.

For three and thirty years, he'd remained faithful to his wife. Perhaps some might not think that a great accomplishment (since fidelity to one's spouse was the least one could offer), but when so many gentlemen and ladies felt free to dabble in dalliances, remaining true to one's marriage vows was no small thing. Whether or not he'd married to suit his parents, whether or not Baxter and Dolores had loved each other, it did not alter the fact that he'd spoken those promises.

Nowhere in the marriage ceremony was happiness ever mentioned. One pledged one's loyalty and support, and though Baxter couldn't claim he'd fulfilled the promise to love her, the only true comfort to be found in all those long, cold years was the knowledge that his behavior had been exemplary. Regardless of whether or not his wife deserved it.

Was that love? Surely not in the romantic sense, but by some vague definition, it might've been.

Baxter stared at the empty street, and though the world was quiet at present, the flickers of candles in various windows up and down the lane testified that not all were abed. Turning away, he moved from the parlor; though the room was darkened, it was easy enough to navigate without a candle, for one flickered in the hall just beyond, giving him enough light to move around the chairs and tables.

Sounds from belowstairs echoed through the quiet, testifying that others were still awake. Those poor souls would likely be occupied for some time before the house was locked up tight for the night. With the last of the guests gone, their hosts had hurried to bed already, and Baxter took the stairs, winding his way to the family bedchambers.

Charity's door was open, and Baxter paused at her threshold. A single candle burned on her side table, and he spied his daughter collapsed atop her mattress, on her side, with pillows propped up around her and her gown wrinkled in a manner that would've given her mother an apoplexy. Bits of her dark locks had pulled free of her coiffure, and her throat buzzed with faint snores.

A smile touched the edge of his lips, and Baxter lowered a hand to the swell of her belly that held her precious child. Though the mother was fast asleep, the babe was not, turning in the womb and bumping a little fist against his hand. Baxter ought to have known that she would wear herself to the bone the moment Camilla challenged her fitness to remain with them for the evening; Charity was too stubborn to give in even when good sense said she ought.

And as much as he hated to disturb her, he nudged her awake.

Her eyes opened a fraction. "Papa?"

Baxter's heart expanded, filling the whole of his chest at that. Her voice was so groggy and tentative that it was easy to imagine her as the child she'd been.

"You need to undress," he whispered. "You won't be able to sleep properly otherwise, and you wouldn't wish to catch your death."

Charity nodded, though she made no move. Striding to the far wall, he tugged the bellpull and left his daughter to her nap; the maid would be up promptly to manage things better than he.

Slipping out into the hall, he turned his feet to his own bedchamber, but Baxter paused at Stanley's door. Though shut to the world, the gap at the floor was large enough for him to spy the flickers of light from the candles inside and the shadow that fell across the doorjamb in time with his son's pacing. Stanley's steps quickly crossed the room, making him impossible to ignore.

Lifting his hand, Baxter rapped on the wood.

Chapter 9

“I do not need your assistance tonight, Evans,” said Stanley.

“It’s not your valet,” said Baxter.

“I am going to bed, Father.”

But he nudged the door open, ignoring the grunt of protest from his son. Stanley was still dressed in his evening finery, though his hair looked a mess and his cravat was pulled to pieces, hanging limp from his collar. With a narrowed look, Stanley didn’t pause in his trek across his bedchamber.

“What do you need?” he asked.

Baxter dropped onto the armchair sequestered in the corner. “It’s your need that has me here at this hour. Is something amiss?”

Pausing, Stanley scoffed, his lips curling as he stared at his father. “This evening was abominable, and you ask if something is amiss?”

But before Baxter could answer that (though he didn’t know what to say), Stanley flicked a hand at him in dismissal and continued his path. “I do not know what I was thinking when I invited the Stillwells. Charity may have been the hostess in name, but it was clear that everyone viewed Miss Alice in that light. Even she seemed quite content to step into the role.”

“I saw nothing out of the ordinary.”

But Stanley didn’t seem to hear him. His feet pounded a path across the rug, and then he dropped onto the edge of his bed and bent over, scrubbing at his face. When he straightened again, the anger thrumming through him subsided, and he stared at his father with weary eyes.

“Mr. Tollman asked me if I was falling for Miss Alice. He asked me that, as though it was a simple thing. But what sort of man loves two ladies? A snake—that is who.” Stanley

sighed, dropping his gaze with a shake of his head. “This courtship has been a mistake.”

Despite Stanley having spoken the words himself, his brows rose at them as though surprised they had emerged from his lips. “It was difficult enough when I was going against my conscience to seek out Miss Alice, but I fear I have given rise to expectations I cannot meet. It is clear that she and everyone else anticipate a great love match, but I cannot give such a thing to her.”

Baxter’s chest constricted, and his heart broke in sympathy for his lost son. “There is nothing wrong with starting again with someone else, Stanley. You needn’t spend the rest of your life alone.”

“That is not the same as love, Father.”

Despite the bleakness of the statement, Stanley was correct, and Baxter knew all too well one could share a life with another without feeling an ounce of affection for her. And he didn’t wish such a thing for his son. Then again, he found it difficult to imagine that love couldn’t grow as long as the couple respected one another and enjoyed each other’s company.

“Do not give up hope, Stanley.” Though he truly meant those words in far grander terms than this specific relationship, Baxter’s stomach constricted at the implications rife in what his son was saying. No outings with Miss Alice meant no outings with Miss Stillwell.

Stanley gave his father a faint but rueful smile. “Would you be so generous if you knew how my actions have tainted your reputation?”

“Pardon?” asked Baxter, unable to keep the question from emerging.

“Rumors have started concerning you and Miss Stillwell,” he said, his gaze not lifting from the Oriental rug at his feet. “People believe you two to be courting as well as her niece and me.”

Baxter's brows rose at that, but before he could say a word, Stanley was off again.

"Do they know no shame? Your loss is still so fresh, yet they're claiming you have designs on the Stillwell spinster. What sort of man would even consider courting a lady during his mourning? It is one thing when a man has children that need tending—in which case it is expected that he will marry with all haste—but a man of your age has no such need. However, they saw you out and about with a lady and leapt to the worst conclusions."

Each word was like a stone set upon Baxter's shoulders, adding to the weight there until it was liable to crush him. What sort of man cast aside his mourning to pursue another lady? But then, what sort of man shed not a single tear for the wife who had been at his side for three and thirty years?

A snake.

Yet Baxter couldn't help but say, "You needn't worry about my reputation."

"That is good of you, Father, but the more I consider it, the more certain I am," he murmured with a shake of his head. "I have been too hasty, and I've harmed not only myself and Miss Alice, but you and Miss Stillwell. Well done, Stanley."

Arguments burbled beneath the surface, demanding that he say something—anything, really—to get Stanley to change this course, but Baxter couldn't help but see his son's distress and feel a swell of fatherly concern for him.

"Perhaps you moved too quickly, son, but I wouldn't surrender altogether." Baxter cleared his throat, forcing the words out that he didn't wish to say but needed speaking. "Miss Alice may not be the proper lady for you, but that does not mean you must settle for a loveless marriage. Truth be told, I'd rather you not marry at all than go about it in such a manner."

Stanley huffed a laugh, his gaze growing ever more bleak. "Oh, that I could. I cannot tell you how much I would love to be in your shoes, Father. You have children and

grandchildren. Company and companionship aplenty between us all. What need have you to remarry? How could you ever replace Mother?"

The words were like a knife to the heart, twisting deeper with each implication and allowing the wound to flow freely, unable to shut. Protecting his children from the truth of his marriage was a good thing. The right thing to do. There was nothing he could've done to alter the situation, so Baxter had done the one thing he could: protect his children.

Yet it stung to realize his children knew him so little.

Did they think he'd been happy with a lady who found such delight in tormenting her social inferiors? Who prized money and position over goodness and kindness? For all that she'd wished to name her eldest daughter Charity, the lady had not a spark of it in her chest, yet her children believed that theirs had been a love match.

But was it any wonder? Charity's relationship with her mother had been strained, but the boys and the rest of his daughters believed their mother to be the pinnacle of womanhood. Even Camilla had quickly become a supplicant at the altar of Dolores Baxter, doting on her mother-in-law with all the fervor of the rest. They adored their mother, so certainly, their father must have as well. No child wanted to believe his parents disliked one another.

Not to mention that other than Charity, his children had all left home long before the age when children's eyes began to open to the world beyond their own concerns. They saw what they wished to see, and those fantasies ruled supreme still.

Baxter's gaze lowered, his chest aching as those thoughts washed over him; his hands gripped the arms of the chair, squeezing tight.

"I haven't a choice in the matter," said Stanley with a sigh. "Grandfather made me his heir to ensure his family legacy continued. He may not be here to know, but how would I face him in the next life knowing I refused to do my duty and

produce a proper heir born with his surname, rather than simply adopting it as I did?"

Rising to his feet, Stanley crossed to his father and patted him on the shoulder. "Thank you, Father, for listening. But I know what needs to be done. I enjoy Miss Alice's company well enough, but I suspect she will not settle for a loveless marriage, so I have no choice but to break with her and find myself a proper bride. I know my duty, and I will not shirk it."

Stanley turned toward his dressing room, and with a conciliatory smile, he added, "At least you won't be dragged about town any longer, forced to converse with chaperones. I do not think I will need your assistance again."

Rising to his feet, Baxter nodded, though it felt as though the ground beneath his feet shifted, leaving him with nothing firm upon which to stand. No more afternoons or evenings with Miss Stillwell. None. His stomach churned as he wandered out of the bedchamber and the door shut behind him; he stood in the corridor like a statue.

Duty. Such an important and difficult word.

More so when one's duty wasn't clear. Whether or not Baxter agreed with his son's course of action, Stanley understood what was required of him and had chosen how to fulfill that responsibility—however flawed that may be. But what was Baxter to do in such a moment?

The house grew quieter by the minute, and with only the bare flicker of candlelight coming from his bedchamber's doorway, Baxter felt entirely alone. His eyes adjusted to the darkness, and he made his way toward the light, though the golden glow emanating from his side table did nothing to soothe his soul. Shutting the door behind him, Baxter sank onto the bed as that one question thumped about his mind.

What was his duty? His heart certainly wished to believe his only consideration ought to be his own happiness, and he knew what would grant him that. There was nothing untoward about a widower courting a spinster, regardless of their age. People married at any age.

But what of Dolores? Though he might say his duty to her ended the moment she was laid to rest, Stanley's question echoed in his thoughts, piercing his conscience like an ice pick. What sort of man courted a lady so soon after the passing of his wife? Could he sully his wife's memory by leaping into the courting game as though she meant nothing to him?

Baxter knew he'd done many things wrong in his life. No one reached his age without a slew of mistakes in their wake. Yet, he'd done his utmost to minimize his regrets. Though Dolores had allowed him little influence over his children or the running of their household, Baxter had done what he could. If nothing else, he'd striven to give his sons and daughters an example of integrity and loyalty, honoring his vows and treating his wife with respect.

Would he now undo all that effort?

The room chilled, and it felt as though Dolores's specter swept in through the door, filling his veins with ice. Though that presence had left him for a time, it was clear enough what his duty was to his family and wife. If nothing else, Baxter knew how to set aside his desires for the good of his family.

"You win again," he whispered. "As you wish, Dolores."

Baxter hadn't thought to speak those words again in this life, but they rolled easily off the tongue, for they were old companions of his. He lowered his head, his shoulders drooping as the candle beside him sputtered.

Chapter 10

As she ran her hands along the polished surface of her desk, Hettie's gaze traced the patterns in the wood, following the striations of brown that whirled together; it was such a lovely shade, with light and dark blended. A wall of drawers sprouted along the far end, the brass handles dangling from their fronts and begging to be pulled; although many of them were too small to hold anything, Hettie remembered just how intriguing all those hidden nooks were when she was a child and how many times she'd searched them.

Although the desk was her domain, Hettie couldn't help but consider it her mother's. Her childhood was filled with memories of the great Mrs. Stillwell seated primly, scribbling out vast volumes of correspondence from this very perch. Hettie's things now occupied the many drawers, but at present, her paper, inkwell, and quill sat abandoned to the side as she fiddled with the handles, flicking them in time to one of the carols she'd played two days ago.

Jerking herself from those distractions, Hettie puffed out her cheeks in a heavy sigh as she considered the letter before her. Whilst she and her sister had little to say to one another in person, Vera was a veritable wealth of correspondence, detailing so many aspects of her world. Hettie didn't understand how one could make the mundane goings-on of one's daily life seem so fascinating.

She stared at the blank sheet she had readied for her response, and though it had been easy enough to rattle off replies to her sister's inquiries, she struggled to know what more to say. Her life varied little from day to day, and none of it seemed interesting to anyone but herself.

With only Nelson and Alice still at home, Hettie couldn't fill the pages with the children's antics. Though she supposed that as they were grown and having families of their own, it wouldn't do to call them children any longer. But still, there were a few stories to share concerning Nelson's new bride and Alice's courtship.

Not long ago, Hettie had been the source of familial gossip, but now, Vera's letters were full of information concerning Winnie, Oswald, and Lavinia, enough so that one might believe that Vera had been their substitute mama and not their absent aunt.

Hettie stared at the papers and scowled at herself. Jealousy was a wretched business, and she desperately wished to scrub her heart of it. But where had her dear little ones fled? For all that their hearts had been full of their Aunt Hettie as children, it seemed that they were forever forgetting her when they grew.

With a family and children of her own, their aunt Vera hadn't had time for them when they were small; Aunt Hettie had remained by their side, caring for them as well as any mother could. Yet it was the former to whom they gravitated when they grew into adulthood. The three of them hardly wrote more than once a month, but it was clear from Vera's letters that she knew far more of their goings-on than they ever told Hettie.

Scowling at herself again for good measure, Hettie straightened. Was she going to sit about bemoaning the natural changes that came with life? Affections shifted, and even Hettie could acknowledge that her connection to the children was strongest when they were young; Vera had natural graces and an exuberance that appealed to the adults they became. That was all.

She took up her quill once more, dipping it in the ink and readying it for when something brilliant emerged.

Nothing. It was as though her mind emptied whenever she sat to detail her world. It wasn't difficult to fill her journal with her thoughts and impressions, but those private details were not the sort the two sisters shared.

The library door swung open, and Alice swept in with a hardy, "Good afternoon."

"Thank the heavens," whispered Hettie, pushing away from the desk to grasp onto the distraction her niece presented. "And how was your morning, sweetling?"

“Mr. Goswick and I have decided we do not suit.”

The words were spoken with such disinterest as Alice dropped into an armchair that Hettie wasn't certain she had heard the girl correctly.

“Pardon?”

Waving a vague hand in the direction of the door, Alice sighed. “He called and asked for a private word to explain that he wishes for a loveless marriage. Though he didn't say as much, it's clear he's still mourning his first wife and doesn't wish to open his heart to another. As I have no interest in such an arrangement, we parted ways.”

Hettie rose from her seat, moving across the room to sit on the sofa across from her. “Oh, my dear—”

“Do not fret, Aunt Hettie,” replied Alice with a dismissive tone. “Had he not spoken directly on the subject, I would've broken with him. He is amiable in many regards, and I enjoy his company, but I do not want him as a husband or a beau. Mr. Goswick is far too interested in appearance, status, and all the rest of that societal nonsense for my taste.”

The young lady paused, her expression scrunching as she considered that. “And I do not care for how he treats his father. Mr. Baxter is a dear, and I do not think his son gives him the respect he deserves. I would much rather spend an evening with his sire than the son.”

Slanting a look at her aunt, Alice added, “In truth, I only kept accepting his invitations to allow you and Mr. Baxter time together.”

Straightening, Hettie raised her brows. “You...pardon?”

With a bright laugh, Alice shook her head. “Do not feign ignorance, Aunt Hettie. You two are as thick as thieves. I don't want to pull you apart.”

“We are friends. Nothing more,” said Hettie whilst frowning at the implication in her niece's tone. “There is no reason we cannot continue the acquaintance regardless of whether or not you and Mr. Goswick are courting.”

Guilt wriggled along her spine as she considered her behavior on Christmas Eve. For all that she had intended on keeping her distance from Mr. Baxter, the gentleman made it so very difficult.

“Friends?” replied Alice with an arched brow and a hint of a smirk.

Hettie chuckled, her nose wrinkling. “And what else did you think we were? I enjoy the man’s company greatly, but I have no designs on him nor he on me.”

“Perhaps you do not, but you do not see how he gazes at you when you are not looking.”

“Pardon?” Hettie blinked at that, her cheeks flushing before she knew what she was about.

Alice stifled a smile (though poorly). “You truly did not know?”

“The man is grieving the loss of his wife,” said Hettie with a furrowed brow. “I do not know what you believe you are seeing, but I assure you, it is not what you suspect. Even years after the loss, Mr. Goswick isn’t ready to love another; why do you think his father—who is such a dear, as you say—would be open to courting a lady only a few short months after his wife passed?”

Rising to her feet, Hettie moved to the library door as she called over her shoulder, “Rather than sitting about, building up castles in the sky, come assist me with the St. Stephen’s Day presents. I have paper and twine aplenty, but it will take some time to ready them for the servants, and then there are the charity baskets to deliver—”

“Didn’t Louisa speak to you about it?” asked Alice with a frown.

Hettie paused in the doorway and turned to face her niece. “About what?”

Rising to her feet, Alice brushed a hand down her skirts. “She and I finished wrapping them all this morning and plan to go together to deliver the baskets this afternoon.”

Hettie's heart gave a sharp pang, though it was there and gone in a flash; all in all, she was quite pleased with her composure. When her eldest nephew had married some months ago, she'd known his wife would wish to step into the role of mistress of the house. After all, Nelson was managing more and more of the family interests as Victor trained him to take his rightful place as head of the family; it made perfect sense for Louisa to manage more and more of the household duties as well.

"Would you care for any assistance?" she asked as Alice moved toward the doorway.

Her niece paused, taking Hettie by the hands. "Do not trouble yourself. You've done so much for so long. Allow us to manage it from now on and ease that burden from your shoulders."

Hettie managed to hold onto her smile, and she nodded. "Of course. If that is what you wish."

"Enjoy a quiet day at home," said Alice with a grin. "That sounds far more enjoyable than traipsing about in the cold."

And with a final goodbye, Alice swept from the room, leaving Hettie all alone once more. Sinking to the seat, she tried to lay hold of her good humor.

It was the natural order. The older generation had to relinquish control at some point and allow the younger to step into their place. Hettie had known this day would arrive—but not so soon. And without warning. Not that she blamed Louisa for avoiding the conversation; as the newest member of the family, she'd been put in a difficult position.

No, there was no need to rail about the shift and the ensuing alterations it created. To do so would only make the situation worse and amplify everyone's anguish.

Glancing at her writing desk, Hettie frowned. She did not have the wherewithal to manage a letter at present. And for all that Alice wished her to enjoy a comfortable day at home, Hettie felt uneasy there. Despite having spent her youth in

these walls, this was her brother's home now, and though he'd given her a place to live, it wasn't truly hers anymore.

Hettie rose to her feet and turned toward the door. Sitting idle would do nothing for her spirits, and a stroll was just the thing she needed.

Traveling by barouche in wintertime was not ideal, but when it was the only carriage available, one made do. Charity cuddled closer to Baxter and let out a sigh as he shifted the blankets so they were more firmly fixed over their laps. Between the bricks heating their feet, the thick wool wrapping them, and his daughter curled into his side, Baxter couldn't think of a better way to spend the Christmas holidays.

"I do not know if I can ever thank you enough," she murmured, burrowing into the cocoon he'd created. "Another minute in that house, and I would run mad! Camilla insists on visiting every day, and though she claims it's to watch over me, I know it's to pretend that she is a grand dame, giving orders to the staff as though she is the lady in residence. She is forever complaining that Stanley has such a fine house when they are forced to let a small one in an inferior part of town."

The streets of Bath were lovely in any season, but there was a unique magic to the wintertime. Snow covered the roofs and eaves, and the tan stone synonymous with the city stood out in stark contrast. Of course, the streets were a gray and muddy mess, and the remnant patches of white along the bottom of the buildings would be sullied soon enough. But for now, it was beautiful to behold.

Pulling her hand free, Charity reached out to catch a few stray flakes floating about on the breeze. "Anytime I even

consider venturing out, she lectures me on the health of my babe, as though I am selfish and risking my child and myself if I put a toe outside.”

“She means well,” said Baxter, turning his gaze to the passing scenery.

“Why do people always say such things?” asked Charity with a frown. “She is not the embodiment of evil or bent on making my life a misery, but Camilla doesn’t mean well at all. She enjoys feeling superior to others, and matters have only grown worse now that Mama has passed. It’s as though she believes it her right to be the matriarch of our family.”

“Nevertheless, it is not helpful to hold onto anger,” replied Baxter. “We cannot control others, nor should we if we could. Yours is the only behavior you can dictate.”

“Is that why you never say a cross word about Mama?”

The question snapped through him like a jolt of electricity, and Baxter turned his attention to his daughter, who watched him with raised brows.

“In all my memories, I cannot think of any time when you’ve spoken a single criticism about her, though you have more reason than most to do so,” said Charity. “When I was a child, I believed like the rest of my siblings that you two were a grand pair, but in the last few years, I’ve started to see things differently. When it was just me and you two at home, it was far easier to see it wasn’t love that created the peace in our house.”

Baxter paused, considering what he could and should say. “For better or worse. Those are the marriage vows. There is no unsaying them once spoken. As I said, we cannot control others, and nothing I could do would ever alter her. It would have only caused more trouble.”

“Yet she is gone, and you still do not say a word against her—”

“And I never will,” he said with a frown. “The least a person can do is to abstain from speaking critically to or about

their spouse. It accomplishes no good, and doing so only allows pain and resentment to fester.”

Charity stiffened, her lips pinching together. “You are far more kind and forgiving than I can be.”

Baxter raised a challenging brow at that. “If I am not mistaken, you are married to the good friend of a family that used to be your mortal enemies, and now you count them amongst your closest allies.”

“Yes, but much of that antagonism was my own doing—”

“As was my marrying your mother. That was my choice.”

That silenced Charity, and the two lapsed into silence that was neither friendly nor cold. It was heavy, though his daughter did not move from his side.

Drawing in a deep breath, Baxter couldn’t help but wonder at all the many decisions that had led him to this moment. The marriage may have been more his parents’ doing than his, but though he had longed to blame them for his unhappy state, they hadn’t forced the issue. No coercion had been enacted to ensure his obedience. They’d simply encouraged the match and made their feelings clear on the matter.

Was it society’s fault for restricting courtship with such rigid rules? Sweethearts were granted so little time together and rarely in a setting that allowed a true exchange of thoughts and feelings, making it easy for the harpies of the world to hide their true selves.

Or did he hold the blame for being blind to the warning signs that had likely been there, if he’d looked harder and seen past the surface attraction he’d felt for Dolores at the time?

Despite having given it much thought and consideration, Baxter knew that it didn’t matter, for it didn’t alter the fact that he’d chosen to speak the vows that bound himself to her. His decision and his consequences to bear.

Yet how long was one expected to pay for mistakes? There was a fine line between inactivity and patience, and Baxter had spent so much of his life considering that balance,

yet he still couldn't say with any certainty that he knew upon which side of the line he stood.

“Miss Stillwell!” Charity lurched forward, the blanket dropping from her lap as she raised a hand. Baxter jerked, his gaze snapping to where his daughter looked, and when he spied the familiar figure trudging along the side of the road, he couldn't control the quickened pace of his heart—though he couldn't say if it was an anxious or anticipatory beat.

Chapter 11

Calling to the coachman, Charity leaned forward with a smile as the carriage pulled up beside the lady. “What a happy coincidence. Where are you off to, Miss Stillwell?”

The lady’s gaze darted to Baxter and back to his daughter. Though she grinned broadly at the energetic greeting, there was a tightness to her expression that had him studying the lady.

“I am enjoying a walk this fine afternoon with no particular destination in mind,” she said, holding out a hand to catch a single flake. The occasional flutter was just enough to give the city a Christmas ambiance, though not enough to cause any real trouble for the traffic.

“Would you care to join us?” asked Charity, motioning for her to climb up. “We have escaped and are off to a pantomime.”

“Escaped, have you?” asked Miss Stillwell with her first truly genuine laugh.

“If you’d had the morning I’ve had, you would say ‘escaped’ as well,” murmured Charity. “But it isn’t a proper St. Stephen’s Day without a Christmas pantomime. You must join us.”

“I wouldn’t wish to intrude,” she said whilst stepping away and waving them off.

Charity glanced at Baxter, though he refused to meet her gaze. Everything inside him screamed to pull Miss Stillwell into the carriage, but his previous resolution echoed in his thoughts. He ought not to look at her as anything more than a passing acquaintance. It was not proper for a man in his position to entertain thoughts about another lady. He was in mourning.

And even if he were not, Miss Stillwell was far above his station in life. Juniper Court was surviving—but just. Hardly

equal to a lady of distinction and beauty; a man could dream, but only a fool reached for such lofty heights.

“Please do come,” said Charity. “Papa isn’t one to shout alongside the audience, and I need someone to make up the difference.”

Miss Stillwell’s expression softened, her lips twisting into a half-smile. “Ah, so you require my assistance.”

“Most definitely.” With a wicked grin, Charity added, “After putting Camilla in her place so thoroughly, I know you are a lady worth knowing.”

The lady’s brows rose at that. “You wish to surround yourself with people who put your family in their place?”

“You have met my family, and you would ask that?” replied Charity with a put-upon sigh.

“And who puts you in your place?” replied Miss Stillwell.

“My husband, but I fear he is halfway around the world at present.”

“Then perhaps I ought to come simply to ensure that you behave yourself,” said Miss Stillwell with a chuckle, and Baxter’s lips twitched into a smile. Despite the levity with which she spoke, she glanced at him as though asking his permission first. The best route would be to give her a fond farewell and let matters lie.

Yet he couldn’t help but wish that Miss Stillwell join them, for she was certain to make the outing more enjoyable. And why shouldn’t she? A final outing together as friends. There was nothing untoward about that.

It was a lie, and he knew it, yet he couldn’t keep himself from saying, “Please come.”

Baxter opened the barouche door and stepped down, offering his hand to her and helping her inside beside Charity. Straightening the blanket over the ladies, he took the seat opposite.

“Oh, yes she will!” shouted Hettie as the audience all jeered at the stage.

The wicked stepmother stamped her foot, glaring them down with a fury that might well set the theater aflame. “She will not go to the ball!”

“Oh, yes she will!” the audience hollered back before dissolving into laughter as the stepmother harrumphed and turned back to her hapless stepdaughter—whilst bumping into a bucket her daughters had placed in her path during their bungling. With a mighty shriek, she collapsed into a heap before said daughters, her very feet flying over her head.

The two girls (who could be called such only because the actors playing them had adorned dresses and appropriate wigs) stumbled over themselves to help the lady up, but the three collided, tumbling one over the other in a heap of limbs as the crowd bellowed with laughter.

Straightening, the stepmother righted her wig and stared down the hapless heroine as she pointed at the now empty bucket. “You cannot go to the ball unless you clean all those lentils out of the fireplace.”

But once the villains of the piece were gone, a flock of birds appeared on stage. Though Hettie knew of a variation of the tale that said the task was performed by white doves, these were most definitely chickens. And rather than sweetly going about their task as directed by Cinderella, the foul pecked at her and each other, quickly swarming the stage as they sought out their feed. Soon, another actor emerged in a large bird costume to herd them in the direction they needed to go.

Hettie struggled for air as she vibrated with laughter. The scene was hardly unique, and she didn't know whether or not it truly deserved such a hearty response, but the crowd's glee was palpable, amplifying the moment. Seated amongst the general audience, Hettie spied the theater boxes with their highbrow patrons inside. For all that the space and comfort were better there, these seats allowed them to be part of the audience in a much more palpable manner; as a pantomime was intended to be interactive, it was far better to be squished alongside the rest of the crowd.

To say nothing of the fact that their view of the actors' cavorting was far better.

Leaning closer to Mr. Baxter, Hettie spoke loud enough for her voice to carry: "This may be a sign that I am terribly uncultured, but I vastly prefer this to the opera we attended."

Mr. Baxter nodded and shifted to respond in kind, his lips drawing near to her ear. "It is good to see you laugh. You seemed distressed when we came upon you."

Though he was of a quiet temperament, it did not signify that he had nothing to say; Mr. Baxter's gaze spoke volumes for anyone who cared to notice, and as Hettie stared into those dark eyes, she saw that concern echoing through them along with many questions he did not voice. But then, he didn't need to, for she understood his meaning well enough.

"I had a trying day." Hettie paused, her lips pinching together as she reconsidered that. "It has been a trying few weeks, in all honesty."

Mr. Baxter's brows pulled low in silent invitation. Jeers from the crowd erupted around them, and her smile broadened as Mrs. Callaghan joined in as boisterously as the rest, cupping her mouth for the sound to carry. Turning her attention back to the gentleman at her side, Hettie settled closer to him; with so many around them in such a state, there was little chance anyone was listening to them.

"With Alice coming so close to marriage, it has made me think about my future," she said with a furrowed brow. "My eldest nephew is lately wed, so my brother no longer requires

me to keep the household running, and my duty to my nieces will be complete once Alice marries. And I find myself at a loss to know what I will do with myself.”

With a sympathetic wince, Mr. Baxter nodded. “I know precisely what you mean. You have a goal to complete, and once it is finished, what does one do? I have felt that at various times in my life. In fact, in the last year, my last child married, and I moved from the only home I have ever known. It is difficult to know what to do then, and no one can decide for you.”

Then, giving her a warm smile, he added, “But you are an intelligent and thoughtful lady. I am certain you will sort it out. In the meantime, if you require a listening ear, I am quite willing to provide one.”

Only a few simple words, yet they nestled into Hettie’s heart, filling her with more peace than she’d known for some time when considering this trouble. Knowing she was not alone in feeling lost helped to ease some of the strain, for though she had tried to speak to her brother about it, Victor did not seem to understand her meaning or brushed it aside as a minor issue that would be resolved in a trice.

A friend and confidant. So many of the world’s ills could be solved with a good one, and Mr. Baxter certainly had proven himself to be that, although he rarely offered direct advice—merely sympathy and understanding.

Without thinking, she reached forward, laying her hand atop his clasped ones. “Thank you, Mr. Baxter.”

Hettie tried to think of how to convey the fullness of her meaning, but anything else felt cheap. One needn’t guild a lily, so she simply allowed her tone and expression to add weight to those simple words.

“Does this mean we are still friends, despite your son breaking my niece’s heart?” she asked in a tart tone. The contentment in his expression fled, his brows pulling tight together, and Hettie hurried to add, “I am jesting, Mr. Baxter. Alice’s heart is fully intact and unbothered by what has passed.”

Drawing in a breath, Mr. Baxter relaxed into the seat once more, and Hettie couldn't help the gentle smile that pulled at her lips. This man was such a dear.

Noise blasted around them as the crowd rose to their feet, jeering at the detestable villains determined to foil the heroine's plans, and Hettie's brows rose as she glanced at the wall of people around them. When her gaze fell back to Mr. Baxter, she found him watching her with such tenderness that she struggled to breathe. For all that the world around them was devolving into a braying cacophony, it felt as though the two of them were tucked away in their own little bubble. Apart from the others.

Mr. Baxter's hand shifted, and Hettie stiffened, glancing down to see her own still firmly holding his far longer than the friendly gesture warranted. Yanking free, she cast a look around, though she didn't recognize any of the faces around them and his daughter appeared too occupied with the panto to pay them any heed.

With rumors already abounding, that touch was poorly done. Mr. Baxter was her friend, and she had repaid that kindness by adding fuel to the flames. If his family were already troubled by whispers concerning the pair of them whilst they'd been acting as chaperones, holding his hand in public was certain to cause a stir.

Clearing her throat, she tried to think of what to say, but what did one say in such a moment? Mr. Baxter had extended the metaphorical hand of friendship, and for the briefest of moments, she'd turned this widower into a courting swain.

But Hettie couldn't think, so she feigned a great interest in the stage. Thankfully, the crowd had settled enough to take their seats once more, and she was allowed a view of the prince trying to mount his valiant steed whilst the two actors inside the costume made it especially difficult for the hero to do so. With a feigned laugh, she clapped along with the others and tried to ignore the feel of Mr. Baxter's gaze on her.

Despite a penchant for gambling and wagers, gentlemen did not do so with their estates. That family legacy was to be protected and maintained precisely as it had been, and from a young age, Baxter had been taught to keep the course; modernization and investments were bywords, looked upon as necessary for estates too weak to survive on their own.

Perhaps if he'd learned to eschew his father's teachings at a young age, Baxter might've undone much of Dolores's damage to their finances by mechanizing their production and employing prudent speculation, but by the time he'd set his mind to doing so, they hadn't the funds to do it properly. Enough to save them from ruin, but not to thrive.

Baxter cursed himself for acting so slowly then, and again for continuing to be so slow-witted now. "Slow to Act" ought to be written on his gravestone.

Miss Stillwell had held his hand, and rather than merely stare at her, Baxter could've taken the initiative. He didn't know what that would've been, but if he'd done so, they might be more comfortably situated. But he'd allowed the moment to lapse, and it would be all the more awkward if he were to attempt it now.

Baxter glanced at her fingers knotted in her lap, and as much as he longed to reach for them, the tightness in her muscles wasn't a good sign. Nor was the manner in which she'd snatched back her hand.

Then Charity jostled him as she shifted in her seat, and reality dropped down on Baxter once more, crushing him beneath its weight.

Had he truly thought to attempt something in front of his daughter? To say nothing of the fact that he'd promised himself that he would be Miss Stillwell's friend and nothing more. Friends did not hold each other's hands. Or notice just how wonderful they smelled. Like oranges and a hint of cinnamon, making one think of a warm cup of wassail. Delectable.

Baxter jerked himself from those thoughts that were leading him down the wrong path once more. What had taken possession of his good sense?

Chapter 12

The holidays were a time of levity and parties, and Baxter was grateful for it. Not so much for being paraded about town, but when the sun set and the Goswick party made ready to leave for the night's entertainment, it was easy enough to feign an illness and gain an evening of solitude. Not that there was much to feign. Baxter's insides still hadn't settled since that afternoon's outing.

Would that be the last time he saw Miss Stillwell? Only a few weeks into their acquaintance, and Baxter couldn't imagine never seeing that wry smile again or feeling the sweetness of her spirit. To be forever cut off from her. Their paths might cross again, but friendship clearly was not a possibility—his heart demanded more.

Sitting in his armchair, Baxter rested his sketchbook on his lap, turning back the cover to see his first attempts. Having had it only three days, there wasn't much to examine, but his thoughts were laid out across the paper. Baxter didn't have the wherewithal to attempt a proper portrait yet, but the little studies of Miss Stillwell's hair, eyes, and fingers made it clear who was on his mind at all times.

Baxter readied his pencil, tracing along the lines of her hands as they had looked whilst playing the Christmas songs. No doubt, it wasn't a perfect rendition, as it was done from memory, but the moment had taken hold of his mind, giving him a clear picture from which to sketch.

What was he doing?

Perhaps he ought to leave Bath. Yet that thought was dismissed as quickly as it came. Had he anywhere else to go, Baxter would've settled there. He preferred the country, but with the majority of the income from letting Juniper Court going into the much-needed modernizations, he had little to live on.

Stanley was the only one of his children who could afford to keep their pathetic father. Matthias was forced into a

profession and struggled to maintain his family's expenses. Charity was only slightly better off than him. Roberta, Janet, or Edith would likely take pity on him, but they had their own families and troubles; besides, it wasn't their husbands' responsibility to aid their silly father-in-law.

If he could only get away from the temptation, Baxter could scrub his thoughts of Miss Stillwell—

Yet his heart scoffed at that lunacy as his eyes held fast to the evidence that there was nothing to be done concerning his feelings for the lady. The sketchbook proved just how thoroughly he was ensorcelled, and there was no denying the fact.

Baxter paused, his hand resting on the paper as he stared at the study he'd done of Miss Stillwell's gaze. It was rough and showed just how much practice he required before his drawings were fit to be seen (if ever), and it was impossible to capture all the many emotions in her eyes, for they shone with her large heart.

Dolores had forever chased after others' opinions, forever seeking that fleeting and fragile prize. How many of their troubles had sprouted from that quest? Finer carriages and newer gowns, large dinner parties and vast renovations, all to exceed society's expectations or be cast down to social purgatory. Baxter had surrendered to her whims, and then his life had revolved around dancing to that tune, forever bowing to their opinion or suffering Dolores's wrath.

And he was doing so again.

It wasn't as though it went against a commandment or heavenly law to remarry. Though Baxter couldn't claim as wide a knowledge on the subject as many others, he couldn't think of a single scripture or passage in the *Common Book of Prayer* that condemned such a thing. In fact, the church praised marriage. Encouraged it. Only the speed with which he pursued it was questionable.

So, if courting Miss Stillwell wasn't a sin, and if public opinion were not a factor, what would he do?

The answer to that was simple. Baxter would marry her. If Miss Stillwell would have him, which was a massive uncertainty, as she was far above him in so many respects. Yet he would be a fool not to try. Many husbands had caught themselves a bride they didn't deserve.

And that left only one question—would he allow Dolores to control him still?

Setting down her quill, Hettie reached for her teacup and tested the drink. Her patience had finally paid off, and she drank deep of the wassail without scorching her tongue. It was such a shame that the beverage was so integrally tied to Christmastide. The blend of sweet, tart, and spice was the perfect addition to any winter's eve; it warmed a person through from the inside.

The house was silent, and though at times that was unnerving, Hettie reveled in the peace at present. With her role as chaperone and hostess, she rarely had an evening free. Of course, securing this one had required Hettie tell the slightest of falsehoods, but one's mind required rest as well as the body did, so it wasn't far from the truth to imply that her health required her to remain at home. With her father, brother, and sister-in-law attending, Alice didn't require her aunt to chaperone at the small card party.

Savoring the flavors, Hettie set down the teacup with a sigh and turned her thoughts back to her journal. She glanced over the pages and couldn't help but notice how often Mr. Baxter's name appeared. But then, he was making steady advances throughout the journal, taking more control of the pages with each passing day.

Dear Mr. Baxter. Such a puzzle of a man.

The afternoon had begun on such good footing, and then he'd grown distant once more. But then, she could only blame herself for that. Hettie hadn't meant to be so forward as to hold his hand, but apparently, her good senses had taken leave of her. She hadn't meant anything by it.

Of course, that would be more believable if her thoughts weren't forever lingering on the feel of his hand in hers or the warmth in his gaze as they stared into each other's eyes.

Hettie shook her head and grabbed the lemon biscuit resting on her saucer with a chuckle. Apparently, she was devolving into a young ninny who scoured every nuance for some sign that the gentleman cared for her. Biting the biscuit, she brushed off the crumbs that tumbled to the table as thoroughly as she tumbled into those thoughts.

Turning her attention back to her journal, Hettie forced herself to take up her quill again to detail all the things that had nothing to do with Mr. Baxter.

So many people wrote down their private thoughts as a record for future generations, but Hettie had no such aspirations. Children were not a possibility, and though her nieces and nephews adored her, she couldn't imagine them finding her words all that interesting once she was gone. However, working her thoughts out in a concrete manner always helped; there was a world of difference between simply thinking the words and giving them life. And though she had friends who would be quite willing to listen to her troubles, solidifying them without outside influence was a useful exercise.

Turning her quill toward the largest question at hand, Hettie enumerated her worries once more. Unfortunately, it did little to help her sort through her future any more than the other times she'd done so. Patience was no doubt helpful at such a time, but to sit about without a plan in place was like striding out into public without her gloves and bonnet—physically possible but disconcerting.

What was she to do once Alice was married? This hiccup with Mr. Goswick had only delayed the inevitable, but that future would arrive sooner or later; Hettie didn't think it likely her niece would remain unmarried for long, for Alice was the sort of girl with the personality, appearance, and fortune that drew gentlemen to her.

A knock sounded at the bedchamber door, and Hettie absently called out to the intruder whilst scratching out the final words of her sentence.

A maid stepped inside with a bob and said, "Madam, you have a visitor."

Hettie frowned and glanced at the small pocket watch resting on the edge of her desk. "At this hour?"

Moving forward, Sally handed over a calling card from Mr. H. Baxter. "I told him the family is out, but he said he needed to speak with you. Urgently."

Rising to her feet, she brushed her skirts down and raised a hand to her hair, stopping just shy of touching it when she spied the ink staining her fingers. With a quick swipe of her handkerchief, she cleaned her hands while her thoughts whirled about, trying to decipher the reason for this visit. Thank heavens she was still dressed, though her afternoon gown was hardly fit to be seen in the evening.

With a final glance at the looking glass, Hettie swept out of the room, following after Sally. The pair walked quietly to the parlor, and once she stepped inside, the maid closed the door behind her, leaving Hettie alone with Mr. Baxter. Despite being in her fifties and well past the age when chaperones were required, she couldn't help but feel a little discomfited. Which was ridiculous; no one could conceive of a gentleman having designs on an aged spinster, making such strictures unnecessary.

Hettie gave herself a mental shake, barely containing the eye-roll she wished to direct at herself. Meanwhile, Mr. Baxter stood by the fireplace like a statue, staring at her as she spent far too much time lost in her thoughts.

“Good evening, Mr. Baxter,” she said, motioning toward the sofa as she took a seat opposite. But the gentleman didn’t move from his place. His hands were tucked behind him, and as she took in the whole of him, Hettie couldn’t help but fidget in her seat; he was dressed in the finest, looking the best she’d ever seen him, which made her plain muslin gown seem all the poorer.

Cocking her head ever so slightly, she studied him for a moment, and though she couldn’t put her finger on the source, there was something odd about his appearance. More than simply outshining her.

“Good evening, Miss Stillwell,” he replied, but Mr. Baxter did not move to sit or speak further.

“Is something amiss?” she asked, her brows pulling tight together.

“No,” he said with a shake of his head. Then he paused and amended. “Yes. No. Nothing is amiss per se.” Shifting in place, Mr. Baxter cleared his throat as his gaze darted about the room. “I—You—This afternoon—”

Had the gentleman managed more than two words together, perhaps Hettie might’ve understood him, but as he strung seemingly random words into a sentence, she found herself quite unable to discern his meaning.

“Peace, Mr. Baxter,” she said with a slight laugh. The gentleman’s gaze snapped to her and then away again as he continued to fidget. “Come, sit, and tell me what has you so overwrought this evening.”

Hettie patted the seat beside her, and though she had anticipated a touch more coaxing, Mr. Baxter did as bidden and slid onto the sofa cushion beside her. The movement forced his hands to the front, revealing a narrow paper box. Pushing it toward her, Mr. Baxter stared at Hettie until she opened it to find a selection of the most beautiful marzipan shaped in a variety of blossoms.

“I wanted to bring you flowers, but they are difficult to find this time of year,” he mumbled. “But there is a sweet shop

down by the theater that is still open, and you said you love marzipan.”

Blinking at the array of sweets that looked like a veritable garden, she tried to recall when she might’ve said that, but their conversations were far too varied.

“I do love marzipan—” Reaching into the box, she freed a single lemon drop nestled among the confectionaries. With a wide smile, she turned to say something to Mr. Baxter, though the minute she met his eyes, all words fled her. It was the gaze of a starving man upon spying a feast, his gaze boring into hers with such want and need that it felt as though he had swept her into his arms.

“I care for you, Miss Stillwell. Deeply.”

Chapter 13

The words were blunt but no less beautiful for their brevity. The edges of the box bent beneath her fingers, and Hettie forced herself to relax her hold, though she couldn't muster the same control over her breathing. It felt as though her heart were beating against her ribs, threatening to burst if she didn't let it fly free.

Matters weren't helped when Mr. Baxter continued, "I don't know how to go about this precisely, as you are far beyond the age of requiring consent, so I will simply say that I want to court you. What are your thoughts?"

Hettie's jaw slackened as she stared at him. Perhaps she ought to have foreseen that confession, given what had preceded it, but hearing him speak the words proved far too surprising for her to comprehend them. And hadn't she just finished convincing herself that this was far from his mind?

Her eyelids started blinking rapidly once more, and her gaze drifted from his face. In an odd turn of clarity, her jumbled thoughts realized the difference in his appearance today. Mr. Baxter had forgone the black band on his arm, leaving the line of his green jacket untouched.

"Your mourning?" she murmured. It was not foremost on her thoughts, yet she couldn't help but ask—though Hettie regretted it the moment the words left her lips.

Mr. Baxter shifted in his seat, his gaze dropping to the ground in that beaten posture he so often employed. Impulse pulled her hand forward, and she rested it on his forearm with a gentle squeeze.

"I didn't mean it as a condemnation," she said. "I am merely surprised—"

"I did not love my wife." Mr. Baxter winced at the words, his head lowering. He shifted as though to leave, but Hettie held him in place. With effort, he swallowed, though he did not meet her gaze as he continued, "I may have felt some

inkling of it when we were courting, but that was mostly infatuation and died quickly after our marriage.”

Swallowing, though it seemed to take him a few tries, Mr. Baxter added, “I have worn the mourning colors out of respect for her, but it is nothing but a lie. I do not lament the loss.”

Mr. Baxter jerked to his feet and strode back to the fireplace. “No doubt, you think it’s disgusting that a man would say such a thing, and believe you me, I hate myself for it. I tried to love her. I did. And I tried to feel sorrow at her passing, but she was not a...kind lady.”

Hettie’s brows rose at his words, but not the ones he evidently believed were shocking. It was the final two. They said so very much about the gentleman, for though it was now clear his marriage had not been a happy one, they were the only criticism she’d ever heard him utter. All the times the subject of Mrs. Baxter had arisen, he’d never spoken a single word against her. And from what his children had said, it was clear they did not know the extent of their parents’ discord.

Yet the worst criticism he could offer was that she wasn’t kind.

Tears pricked at her eyes as she considered just what sort of a man would behave in this manner. Though clearly, he thought his deportment lacking, Mr. Baxter had proven himself to be the most loyal of husbands and the tenderest of souls. In truth, Hettie didn’t know if she could be so charitable in his situation; her feelings toward the lady were quickly souring as the truth about Mrs. Baxter unfolded.

With a heavy hand on the mantelpiece, Mr. Baxter stared into the flames, though something in his posture made her think he wasn’t seeing anything. “Though everyone believes me to be nursing a broken heart, the truth is I do not think I have ever known true love until I met you. Perhaps it is bad form to say such a thing so soon, but from almost the first moment we met, I have longed for something more. I thought I could be content with friendship alone, but I know that is impossible. I cannot remain silent any longer.”

Hettie forced her hands to relax, for they were destroying the delicate box and the sweet offerings within. Apparently, her brows were simply stuck at the top of her forehead, for they refused to lower. If anything, they climbed higher than she'd thought possible.

“From almost the first moment we met’?” she whispered.

Blinking rapidly, Hettie tried to stem the growing tears, but hearing anyone claim such a thing—let alone Mr. Baxter—was more than her heart could manage. Miss Harriet Stillwell had managed to catch the eye of a beau or two in the past, but those gentlemen were more entranced by her dowry than her unorthodox appearance and sparkling wit. Never had she thought to entrance anyone from the very first moment of their meeting.

And once again, her thoughts were lagging far behind Mr. Baxter's, for he pushed away from the fireplace and turned toward her, though his gaze remained fixed on the carpet.

“I know I am a poor excuse for a beau, and a lady of your caliber could choose another far better than me, but please allow me the opportunity to win your heart.”

Hettie's thoughts refused to budge, sticking in place as yet another revelation was heaped upon her. A lady of her caliber? A far better beau? She didn't know what to address first, though the fact that he still did not look at her was quite troubling as well.

Mr. Baxter cared for her. Deeply, as he'd said. The gentleman wanted to court her. And from his words, he seemed to think her some grand prize far better than he could think to attain. Each revelation was startling in its own right, and Hettie's pulse quickened as she considered each one.

“I understand,” he said with a sharp bow. “I will trouble you no further.”

“Pardon?” she managed to ask, though Mr. Baxter did not seem to hear her, for he barreled toward the parlor door with great determination.

Despite the harried nature of her thoughts, Hettie recognized a retreat when she saw it, and she shot from her seat, scattering the marzipan across the sofa. Darting forward, she leapt in front of the door, blocking him before he could leave. With a hand on his chest, she stopped him in place.

“I did not mean to cause you distress,” he mumbled, his gaze still turned to his feet.

“You didn’t, Mr. Baxter. But you are too hasty,” she blurted.

His eyes jerked from the ground and met her gaze, and it was only then that Hettie realized how near he was. Her back was pressed against the door, and Mr. Baxter was close enough that had she breathed deeply, she would’ve nudged him back a step.

“I...” But Hettie’s attention wandered for a moment when she realized her hand still rested against his lapels. With a tiny shift, her fingers drifted to his shirt front.

“You surprised me, Mr. Baxter.” And heaven help her, Hettie’s voice lowered even further, giving her words an intimate tone. Clearing her throat, she shook her head and met his gaze once more, though it was even more difficult to gather her thoughts when he filled her vision. She tried to speak again, but it was her turn to dither as she attempted to cobble words into coherence.

“Do not leave. Please. I was startled. That is all. I learned long ago not to consider men in a romantic light, so I never expected to hear you say such lovely things.” That wasn’t terrible, though Hettie wished for a touch more eloquence. “And they were truly lovely.”

Her breath hitched, and she tried to gather her thoughts, but they continued in that choppy vein. “I did think you quite handsome—”

Hettie’s cheeks flamed, and she changed course. “I did see a possibility of something, but I never truly considered it, so your confession has greatly surprised me. It is by far the loveliest thing anyone has ever said to me, and I am

overwhelmed by the thought that you view me in such a light. You are so remarkable, Mr. Baxter, and I am honored to have earned your admiration...”

The words kept coming, yet Hettie knew she was making little sense. His petition warranted a simple answer, but try as she might, she couldn't seem to say the words, “Yes, please, Mr. Baxter,” “I would be honored to be your sweetheart,” or any variation thereof.

Closing her eyes, Hettie winced against her inanity. In such a moment, one was supposed to be gracious and graceful and all sorts of ladylike things. Not a babbling Bedlamite.

But the feel of Mr. Baxter's fingers around her hand had her peeking at him. With his finery on, his gloves were pristine white next to her slightly ink-stained fingers, but slowly, he took hold of her hand. His gaze fixed on hers, holding steadily as he lifted her hand to his lips, never wavering as he pressed a kiss to her knuckles, holding them with such tender care.

“All I ask is for the opportunity to win your heart,” he whispered. “Please, may I have that?”

As Hettie's heart was thumping quite erratically, she was certain it was at least halfway to being wholly his, but she managed a quiet, “Yes.”

His handsome lips stretched wide as though that single word was the greatest thing ever spoken, and that only made her heart melt all the more. Only one minute into their courtship, and she was ready to run away to Scotland with him.

“Will you join me for tea tomorrow?” she asked, her voice once more a husky whisper, though when his gaze warmed, Hettie couldn't help but smile and blush for a much pleasanter reason than before.

“As you wish, my dearest Miss Stillwell.”

The two stood there for a long moment, merely gazing at each other with grins that looked (in her opinion) far too silly for such an exhilarating moment, but Hettie's refused to lessen despite her best efforts. Glancing at the sofa, she wondered if

she ought to invite him to stay. Certainly, she wished to, and that was far more decorous than the other inappropriate possibilities her brain supplied, which focused entirely on wondering what kissing him would feel like.

However, she was an unmarried lady, and he was her beau, and it was inappropriate for any courting couple to be alone like this.

Mr. Baxter followed her gaze, and when their eyes locked again, he frowned. "I suppose I ought to take my leave."

Hettie's heart gave a happy little hop at the disappointment in his tone. Stepping back, he gave her a low bow, leaning over her hand once more to press another kiss to it before he straightened.

"Until tomorrow, my dearest Miss Stillwell."

And with that, she stepped away from the door, and he swept out. The air in the room evaporated with him, and Hettie stared at the parlor with unseeing eyes. Moving to the sofa, she dropped heavily onto it and gathered up her marzipan, placing each one carefully back into the box.

She and Mr. Baxter were courting. At two and fifty years of age, Harriet Stillwell had a beau. Mr. Hamilton Baxter! A low chuckle rumbled inside, growing until Hettie couldn't contain it. Leaning back into the sofa, she held the sweets close and plucked a rose from inside, popping it into her mouth with a giddy laugh.

Chapter 14

Bristow was little more than a village nestled in the Essex countryside, but Baxter adored the place. Not only because he'd spent the majority of his life there, but because its quiet ways suited him. A perfect blend of city and country with people and prestige enough for balls, assemblies, and parties, yet nestled in rolling hills and verdant fields.

However, Bristow could never match Bath's pretension—a fact his city-born wife had mourned many times. Returning to Bath permanently had been the only saving grace upon leaving Juniper Court for her. Unfortunately, Dolores hadn't been granted the opportunity to fully embrace all the higher society had to offer before she had fallen ill.

And Baxter could well imagine her raptures if she'd lived to see the Snowdens' New Year's Eve ball. In truth, he wasn't certain how his family had gained an invitation to the event. But then, half of Bath seemed to be crushed into the house.

Flitwick Hall wasn't the finest home Baxter had visited, for Bristow boasted several grand estates within its reach, and Avebury Park and Hardington Hall were certainly a match in size and grandeur. To say nothing of the Lovells' opulent manor, which had the benefit of a long lineage, a title, and wealth to match. But regardless of how many times he'd visited such properties, they never failed to instill a sense of awe. Which was precisely their purpose.

The Snowdens' home boasted a proper ballroom, and the ceiling was gilded in gold and frescos that would do credit to the finest cathedrals in Italy. Candles by the hundreds lit the room until it was easy to forget the pitch black just outside. And Mrs. Snowden had brought in a veritable forest indoors, though Baxter didn't know how they'd managed to gather that much greenery. Evergreen boughs draped the walls, the dark greens complementing the gold of the extravagant decorations.

Then there was the Christmas tree situated in the corner. The great pine rose like a giant, the candles adorning it glittering against the mirrored ornaments hanging from its

branches. When Baxter had first heard of bringing a tree indoors, his mind had conjured up something far more scraggly, but the Snowdens' decoration radiated such beauty that it was clear why Queen Charlotte had brought the tradition to their shores, and why others were beginning to mimic it.

Music rang through the air, emanating from the veritable orchestra their hosts had employed, punctuated by the steps of the dance as the revelers whooped and clapped, skipping through the energetic steps of the reel.

Yet despite all the beauty of the room, it was the entry doors that held Baxter's attention. Standing just to the right of them, he was at an odd angle, leaving him unable to see the newcomers until they were fully inside; however, the crush of bodies made it impossible for him to spy the visitors from any other vantage.

Holding firm to her father's arm, Charity gave another heavy sigh, her gaze drifting across the crowds with unveiled apathy. Baxter frowned to himself and wondered again whether or not he'd done right by insisting she join them. So close to her confinement, there were many reasons she should've remained at home, but Baxter suspected her spirits would fare better with a distraction.

Unbidden, Baxter's mind turned back to last New Year's Day when Lieutenant Callaghan had asked permission to marry Charity after their year-long courtship, which had begun during the previous Christmas season. With her child soon to arrive, no doubt it was doubly difficult for her to be reminded that her dear husband was far from her side.

Movement to his left drew his attention to the doorway. But it wasn't the Stillwells.

Glancing about the room, Baxter cast his thoughts to the available entertainments. Of course, there were the usual pursuits—food and cards—though Charity was in no mood for the latter and had had her fill of the former. Of course, there was the dancing, but that was inadvisable in her condition. Or impossible, more like.

The Snowdens had a few games in a side room, which had the guests divining the future for the coming year (or attempting to, at any rate), but that would hardly be worth the effort of fighting through the crowd. The young mother-to-be was reaching that uncomfortable point where every movement was painful and exhausting. Letting out another sigh, Charity arched her back and shifted from foot to foot, and Baxter couldn't bear it any longer.

Their hosts hadn't provided much in the way of seating, requiring all guests to go to the dining room if they wished for refreshment (both of the eaten and seated variety), but there were a few scattered chairs along the walls. The moment one became vacant, he plowed through the crowd, herding Charity toward it. He deposited her on it before another could steal it away, and she bit back a groan, but the look of pleasure in her gaze was not lost on him as he stood at her side.

"I apologize for dragging you out tonight," he said with a frown.

Squeezing his arm, she shook her head. "It is good for me. I fear I've been far too maudlin today, and it would only get worse if I were left to my own devices. Thomas would tell me to embrace the evening and enjoy myself, but I fear I do not have his natural levity."

Baxter smiled at her self-deprecating tone, and his gaze drifted toward the door. Unfortunately, from their new vantage, much of their view was blocked by a wall of people. But there was nothing to be done about it; he wasn't going to abandon Charity after dragging her here.

"You needn't stay by my side the whole evening, Papa," she said, cutting through his thoughts. When Baxter glanced at her, Charity gave him an arched brow. "When Miss Stillwell appears, I fully expect you to abandon me and dance with her."

Baxter's throat tightened, and he fiddled with the cuffs of his jacket, straightening them. "Pardon?"

But his daughter merely smirked. "Do not feign ignorance, old man. It is a miracle the others haven't

discovered the truth, but I am no fool. You are courting her, aren't you?"

"I—"

Charity held up a silencing finger. "Don't you dare, Papa. Despite hardly ever venturing outside before, the past four days have seen you gone more often than you've been home —"

"I am enjoying the Christmas festivities."

"And do not think I missed how cozy you two were during the pantomime," she countered with an arched brow. "Or how often you speak of her in passing conversation."

Mouth agape, Baxter shifted in place. There was no defense against that. Especially when his cheeks began to redden. "Please tell me the others do not suspect anything."

Charity's smile fell, her brows furrowing. "Are you ashamed of her?"

"Heavens, no!" Baxter lowered his voice and glanced about, though no one seemed to notice. Except perhaps the elderly lady on Charity's other side, though she appeared to be fast asleep. "Not in the slightest. But neither do I relish the thought of telling the rest of the family."

Nose wrinkling, Charity considered that. "If you continue as you have, they will discover the truth in time. They've already heard the rumors and dismissed them, but this might allow them to acclimate to the idea, rather than springing it on them all at once. Besides, it is none of their business who you court."

For all that her words were perfectly sensible, Baxter's heart sank a touch and a prickle of fear skittered down his spine at the thought. Charity's logic was sound, and it was a proper course of action—one Baxter had considered when he'd chosen to remain mum. Yet as much as he tried to cling to that hope, deep within him, he knew the truth: the rest of the family would not celebrate his courtship whether it was sprung upon them or slowly introduced.

Heat filled his face, and Baxter's gaze dropped from his daughter. What sort of a man was afraid of his children?

Rising from her seat with a dainty grunt, Charity embraced him. "Do not let them sway you, Papa. Do not feel guilty for finding happiness. I like your Miss Stillwell, and she is a good match for you."

Baxter drew in a deep breath, reveling in the feel of her arms around him. Such affection was so rare in his life that he couldn't help but bask in it, despite the public nature of the display.

But when someone nudged at them, and he turned his gaze to find a matron attempting to edge Charity away from the seat, Baxter released her, and she quickly dropped back into place with a narrowed look at the usurper. The lady turned her nose up and walked away with a sharp huff.

Tugging on his sleeve, Charity drew his attention back to her, and with a broad smile, she added, "I just spied the Stillwells."

His gaze darted to the doorway, and through the shifting mass, he caught sight of a familiar coiffure. Though shorn locks were not entirely uncommon, the style was far too passé for it to be anyone but Miss Stillwell. Glance darting between his sweetheart and his daughter, Baxter stood there, frozen in place.

"Go get her, you fool," said Charity with a laugh, pushing at him, and Baxter required no further prodding.

*

A woman of her age ought to have more self-possession than this! But then, most women of her age had already experienced the giddy joy of a courtship. For all that Hettie had developed much self-control and decorum over the years, it fled the moment she caught sight of Mr. Baxter in the crowd. With so many packed into the Snowdens' ballroom, it was

difficult to see much beyond the writhing wall around her, but it took only a quick flash of his smile for Hettie's pulse to quicken until it mimicked a hummingbird's wings.

That mop of gray and brown disappeared and reappeared as he wove through the guests, his gaze never straying from her as he battled toward the entrance. And Hettie just stood there, her breath seizing in her lungs as she grinned like the absolute fool she felt herself to be.

Victor moved from her side with a chuckle and a shake of his head, and the rest of the family followed suit, leaving her there as Mr. Baxter came to stand before her, dipping into a bow.

“Miss Stillwell.”

With the crowd, the musicians, and the dancers all adding to the cacophony, Hettie wasn't certain if she'd actually heard the words or if her memory simply supplied his warm voice, but the greeting sank into her heart. Hettie's cup truly ran over, and for all that she hadn't believed herself to be capable of experiencing more elation, that cup expanded with each moment they spent together, allowing more joy to flow into her.

But whilst she longed to greet him in a far more enthusiastic manner, Hettie was all too aware of the eyes around them.

“Mr. Baxter,” she said with a curtsy.

“Would you honor me with a dance?” he asked, offering up his arm.

Some part of her knew she ought to regulate herself. Though it had been quite a few years since her first foray into society, she recalled ladies warning her to be careful in showing affection too readily, for it could give the wrong impression to the gentleman. Yet Hettie couldn't think of any impression she'd rather give Mr. Baxter than that she welcomed his attentions. Reveled in them, in fact.

And so, she beamed as they slowly wove through the crowd side-by-side, struggling against the tide though

unwilling to relinquish their comfortable position.

Chapter 15

Turning his head, Mr. Baxter gave her a wicked grin and leaned close to whisper, “Do you know how much I love hearing you speak?”

Hettie couldn't help but blush, her lips straining to keep her smile from growing to ridiculous levels.

“Your voice is so warm and rich, like a fresh bread pudding smothered in decadent custard.” Mr. Baxter paused, his expression faltering as he considered that. “That sounded far better in my thoughts.”

Not bothering to hide her laugh, Hettie patted his arm. “I assure you all your compliments are perfectly lovely.”

Good gracious, she adored this man. Though Hettie had fostered warm feelings for him long before that beautiful night in which he'd declared himself, they paled in comparison to the fire stoking inside her with each hour spent in his company.

Their conversation struck up as though there'd been no pause between this and their previous one. Though Hettie couldn't swear they began precisely where they'd ended that afternoon, it certainly felt as though each discussion melded into the next, flowing from one to another like the great system of rivers and canals that stretched across the country.

And when the next dance began, they took their places amongst the quadrille, and Hettie gave a silent prayer of thanks that the tune was slower, for her body was beginning to rebel against the quick steps that were so popular.

Hettie and Mr. Baxter stood together on their side of the quadrille, taking their bows and curtsies in turn as the introduction was played through. Though she bemoaned the fact that this dance didn't allow her to face her partner, there was the benefit that they could converse far more easily side by side as they awaited their turn through the steps.

Slanting a look at Mr. Baxter, Hettie gave him a faint smile as she moved forward. Shifting through the steps, she kept her gaze on him as much as possible without bungling her part. Flirting was not a natural skill for everyone, and she knew all too well how awkward it could be, yet she couldn't help but attempt it with Mr. Baxter. She wasn't entirely certain how others managed it so easily or what their tricks were, but she filled her thoughts with all the sweet and wonderful moments they'd shared and hoped they shone in her eyes.

When they came back to their places and it was time once again for the others in their square to move through the steps, Mr. Baxter leaned close.

"How has your search been faring?" he asked.

"My search?" Hettie straightened, her brows rising.

"Or your plans, rather. To chart out your future."

Hettie laughed. She couldn't help it, though her hand flew to her mouth. They moved together with the dance, and when she could, she leaned close to him and whispered, "If that is what you are thinking about when I am attempting to flirt, I must not be doing it properly."

"Believe me," he murmured in return as the couples all promenaded hand-in-hand in a circle. "You are doing it quite thoroughly. I fear I must distract you, or I won't be responsible for my actions." He punctuated that with a rascally wriggle of his brows.

Hettie laughed anew even as her cheeks flamed red. For all that Mr. Baxter was jesting, there was truth in his gaze that warmed her through. How had she been so lucky to stumble upon the only man in creation who not only recognized her juvenile attempts for what they were but was stirred by them?

"But out with it," he said, squeezing her hand before he released her. "Have you made any progress?"

She arched a brow at him as she moved forward toward the gentleman opposite and returned to her place. "I have been a bit preoccupied lately."

Mr. Baxter's lips twitched with a laugh as he moved forward as well, moving to the lady opposite before returning to his previous position.

"Jests aside, I do hope you are still considering it," he said, the laughter in his voice fading as they stood side by side. "Though I've had little time the last few days, I have been spending more of it sketching, and it's invigorating. I've considered hiring a tutor to help me learn more."

A jolt swept through her, and Hettie didn't regulate her grin as she beamed at him. "That is wonderful. You really must."

"Thank you for giving me the sketchbook and pencils. I do not know if I would've ever attempted it otherwise."

Her throat tightened as her heart thundered in her chest. The dance pulled them apart, and she refused to allow the sentiment to overtake her, though it was a near thing as her vision blurred. Such a little admission, yet it filled her with such power and warmth, thrumming through her as she'd never felt before.

For all that she might've inspired him, Mr. Baxter was returning the inspiration in kind. Hettie couldn't help but feel his excitement leech into her, filling her with possibilities that she hadn't truly considered. Not seriously, at any rate. Despite having pushed him to dive into his hobby, Hettie hadn't turned that logic on herself.

When they were deposited back in place, she glanced at him and said in a low voice, "When I was younger, I wanted to learn the flute. Mama insisted on the piano. I've often thought about trying my hand at the flute, but it seems a bit strange to take lessons at my age."

Mr. Baxter didn't dismiss this out of hand, instead considering it for a moment. "I understand, and I admit I feel the same way. However, I know I cannot learn it all on my own. I do not know the first thing about other art mediums, and I would like to learn."

“Then might we agree to do it together?” she asked, holding out a hand to him. Hettie paused and reconsidered that. “Not *together*, per se, as we will have separate lessons, but as in we will both be doing so.”

Mr. Baxter took her hand in his and they shook on it, though his touch lingered, his gaze holding hers in a manner that made her remember the kiss he’d bestowed upon it only a few nights ago. Hettie’s cheeks flushed deeper red, though she couldn’t drop her gaze.

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The gentleman in the pair to his left cleared his throat, and Baxter forced himself to drop Miss Stillwell’s hand and found the other couples in the quadrille watching them with varying expressions, ranging from amusement to disapproval. The lady across the way pointedly looked at his mourning band with a frown, and though Baxter stiffened at the obvious disapproval, Miss Stillwell’s hand drifted toward his, brushing against his in a light reassurance.

And Baxter could breathe again.

It wasn’t as though there were set rules surrounding the practice of mourning. Of course, there were always people who believed there to be strict guidelines concerning the level of color and the types of public outings one might attend whilst in deep mourning. However, the act of demonstrating one’s sorrow was personal to every family, and it was up to one’s conscience to decide just how long one would wear black and sequester oneself away from public view.

His children had left their deep mourning earlier than some might expect, but then, Dolores had set that standard when she’d done the same after her own parents’ passing; she couldn’t countenance any practice that forced her to wear only black and avoid gatherings for months and months at a time. It was fitting that they would follow suit, even though they mourned their mama in their hearts.

Baxter's family had held to a more rigid standard, and though it hadn't felt right to wear the black band when he had approached Hettie to ask her to be his sweetheart, it felt equally wrong to leave it off completely now. Whether or not it was a hollow sign of mourning, his children appreciated the gesture, and it was a little thing he could do to honor their memory of Dolores.

Of course, it was also bound to draw some attention when he was openly flirting, but that mattered little compared to the comfort it granted his family for him to wear it.

Turning his attention back to the dance, he moved through the final steps with Miss Stillwell, ending with the usual flourishes the dance demanded. The next was called, and they shifted to take their positions. With his thoughts so full of Miss Stillwell and the band on his arm, Baxter didn't realize precisely what was happening until the musicians struck an energetic tune, and they were thrown into the midst of a reel.

Miss Stillwell's eyes widened as she embraced the dance, skipping along through the rapid steps without missing a beat. Soon, Baxter was made to follow, and though the first few minutes were unexceptional, as the dance wore on, a fine mist of sweat began to bead at his temples.

For all that he had enjoyed dancing in his youth, Baxter had lived too sedentary a life of late. They'd sold the horses in Bristow some time ago, and though Stanley boasted several fine steeds, the city was not conducive to a hardy ride. And as he'd preferred to remain in the card rooms for most of his married life, Baxter had thought his dancing days long over. All of which left him unprepared for the vigorous steps.

When they were granted a short reprieve, Miss Stillwell sent him a panicked look, puffing her cheeks out as she let out a heavy sigh and dabbed at her forehead.

The dance drew them down the line, and Baxter spied a door not far from them. Sending her a silent question, he nodded toward it, and Miss Stillwell widened her eyes with a sharp nod. As they shifted once more, he took her by the hand, and they quietly slipped from their place. The dancers shifted

to fill it in quickly enough, and the pair wove through the onlookers to slip out of the stifling heat of the ballroom.

“I am dying, Mr. Baxter,” murmured Miss Stillwell, fanning herself as the pair stepped into the hallway. Though the area was not closed off to the public, there were few guests in the hallway, and the air was blessedly cool compared to the ballroom. He guided her toward a sitting room, and they collapsed onto a sofa.

“When did I get so old?” she asked with a laugh, slumping into the seat. “I am only two and fifty, and far from my dotage, yet I feel liable to fall apart at the seams.”

“Do not say that, for I am two years older than you,” he mumbled in reply. “I would fetch us some punch, but I fear my legs have given out.”

Miss Stillwell leaned into him, her shoulder resting against him, and she grinned at him. It was said epiphanies could strike at any moment, and though Baxter had been flirting with the idea for some time now, the truth struck his heart, clanging out like the church bells at Christmas.

He loved this woman. Not simply enjoyed her or even adored her. Baxter loved Miss Stillwell.

Reaching into his pocket, he plucked out a sprig of mistletoe. Her gaze fixed on him as he lifted it. Pausing, Baxter considered her hair, which wasn't styled in a manner that allowed him to tuck it in. Shifting to her ear, he tried slipping it there, but the bushy thing wouldn't sit properly, falling out the moment he attempted it.

His fingers fumbled with the sprig, his brows pulling together as he struggled to bring his romantic gesture to fruition. Miss Stillwell stared at him, not moving as he simply lifted it above her. Heart thudding, Baxter leaned closer, his lips longing to feel hers. Time seemed to speed and stretch at the same time, bringing him to the tipping point somehow quicker than anticipated yet still too slowly.

Despite his age, Baxter was not well versed in such heated moments, and his pulse quickened in both anticipation

and dread. Was it too soon? Would she welcome it? Would he do it properly? The fantasy of kissing her burned into his mind, pushing him toward that goal, all whilst his heart attempted to beat free of his chest.

Miss Stillwell's eyes widened, her muscles stiffening, and her shock stole away the last of Baxter's nerve. Shifting his aim, he pressed his lips to her cheek, which was the far more appropriate location for a kiss. Though his pulse quickened at the feel of her soft skin, his chest deflated.

Chapter 16

How could a moment be one of the most romantic in her life yet still so disappointing? Hettie held back a sigh that was tinged with a touch of both sentiments and turned her thoughts away from the latter. It was far too soon for them to be kissing. With only a few days of courtship, it was hardly fitting for them to be embracing in darkened rooms while the ball raged on not far from them.

It was hardly fitting for any courting couple to be doing such a thing; as the perpetual chaperone, she knew that better than most.

Hettie's lips trembled with a smile. How vastly different was her life at present from what she'd anticipated?

There was no firm age for when a lady became a "spinster." Certainly, many anticipated early marriages, but many ladies did not speak those hallowed vows until they were closer to five and twenty or older. Unmarried ladies were not so uncommon that one could be labeled so whilst in the blossom of one's youth, and such things were rarely bandied about until the lady reached at least thirty. Even the king boasted two sisters who were still unmarried and far older than she, and Hettie doubted anyone dared to call them spinsters.

However, there was a feeling—an instinct, really—that struck each lady. There was no rhyme or reason to it, but it was a moment in which one knew one had reached that stage. Spinsterhood. And having earned that title, one knew it was unlikely to ever change.

Though her family and friends batted the word away any time it was spoken, Hettie had known she was a spinster long before they did. What little attention she'd garnered from gentlemen had lessened with each passing year, until one day, she realized it had been some months since she'd shared even a conversation with a bachelor, let alone anything romantic in nature. Gentlemen didn't even wish to stand up with her for a dance; what hope did she have that one would wish to spend a lifetime with her?

Accepting that had been difficult at first, but once she'd embraced it, Hettie's life and happiness had improved greatly. No more waiting and hoping for something that would never come.

Yet now, here she sat, tucked snugly beside her beau as he stole kisses (chaste though they may be). Not only was this a perfect moment, but it was one of many they'd shared in the last few days. A gentleman not only longed for her company but couldn't seem to get his fill of it.

For all that joy coursing through her, Hettie couldn't help but wonder what Mr. Baxter would do if she simply took advantage of the opportunity presented and kissed the man properly. She felt like laughing at that image, though her heart pressed against her ribs, inching her closer. But when her gaze drifted to his arm, still holding the mistletoe aloft, she spied the mourning band once more on his arm and knew it was best not to rush things.

It felt as though they'd known each other for some time, but Hettie had only made his acquaintance a month ago, and for the sake of his children, they had to be cautious. Best to take their time.

Bother.

Mr. Baxter leaned in once more, pressing another kiss to her cheek, his lips lingering as he seemed to surround her. Hettie closed her eyes, savoring the feel of him, and his free arm slipped around her, drawing her close.

And despite all the logic of her previous thoughts, Hettie didn't fight the movement. No, she pressed herself into him, her head turning toward him. Her eyes opened to find him a hair's breadth from her, his gaze caressing her face with the sort of tenderness she'd never thought to see. The mistletoe drifted away, yet he inched closer.

Footsteps in the corridor sliced through the moment, dousing her as thoroughly as a bucket of ice water.

Her eyes widened, and Mr. Baxter followed suit; the pair disentangled themselves and popped to their feet just as

another couple strode into the sitting room. Hettie's gaze darted about the space, wondering if there'd been anyone else in here when they arrived, for her thoughts had been far too occupied to say with any certainty that they'd been alone.

Mr. Baxter stuffed the mistletoe back into its hiding place and tugged on his cuffs. Straightening her skirts, Hettie tried not to blush, but she couldn't help the snicker, and she pressed her fingers to her lips, though there was no stifling it in its entirety. They had done nothing untoward, yet the pair were acting like young sweethearts caught in a compromising situation.

"I ought to have known better than to sneak away with you, Mr. Baxter," she whispered. "You are a terrible influence."

His eyes lit with merriment and, taking her hand in his, the gentleman pressed a kiss to her knuckles before tucking it in the crook of his arm as they strode out of the room and back toward the dancing.

Hettie's footsteps were as light as clouds, moving as though spring breezes blew them about, and for all that she thought herself a mature lady of sense, she couldn't keep from grinning. Her heart thumped a rapid beat, pulsing through her with such strength that she couldn't maintain an elegant facade. Her joy simply had to be shown.

They stepped through the ballroom door, and Hettie glanced at him, his gaze sliding toward her at the same instant. Good heavens. Such a man. Mr. Baxter was not at all the sort of beau she'd anticipated meeting. Hamilton Baxter was not suave or sophisticated. He was quiet and calm, more liable to measure his words than allow a tempest to drive him into foolhardy behavior. He was honorable to the core. Thoughtful. Cautious. The antithesis of the dashing swain of her youthful fantasies.

But then, young ladies rarely prized a sensible beau. They were viewed as stodgy and boring. Yet when binding oneself to another for a lifetime, dull was preferable to roguish, irresponsible, and lackadaisical. The first would be the sort of

partner with whom one could weather the hardships of life and find joy in even the simplest of moments. The second was bound to leave one heartbroken and alone.

Hettie's brows rose as an epiphany, strong and clear, struck her heart. She loved this man. She wanted to be his wife. Wanted to be bound body and soul to him. Though he was by no means without flaw, she couldn't imagine anyone more perfect for her. She loved Hamilton Baxter.

Jerking her gaze away from him, Hettie felt her muscles tighten. For all that she'd jested to herself about running off to Scotland with him, they'd only been courting a few short days. If one of her nieces wedded a man after knowing him only a month, Hettie would say they were foolish or blinded by romance's wiles.

Yet she knew her mind. She knew herself. She wasn't some young miss just stepping into the world with no understanding of what the future would bring; Hettie knew what she desired. The smile sprang back into life, and her vision blurred a touch as the rightness of that thought settled into her heart. Now may not be the time to admit to it, but she knew it for certain. She loved Hamilton Baxter.

Squeezing his arm, Hettie drew in a deep breath, the sigh carrying with it all the joy of the present and hopes for the future, and then she couldn't help but laugh at herself for those romantic sensibilities.

The pair wove their way through the crowds, and though it was unseemly to monopolize his time, Hettie managed only short separations before she drifted back to his side. And her giddiness grew as he showed the same inclination, reaching her mere minutes later if she did not seek him out. Hettie was not the fainting sort, but she was certain to do so if her pulse didn't slow itself.

Though Mr. Baxter had few friends at the gathering, Hettie made certain to introduce him to hers, and with each questioning look she received from her social circle, her smile grew. It could not be dimmed even when Mr. Baxter was enlisted to dance a set with another lady.

The poor man didn't flinch when approached to shoulder the duty, although Hettie doubted he wanted to stand up again—but Mrs. Queensbury so longed to dance, and far too many of the gentlemen their age had retired to the card room. Without giving the slightest sign of discomfort, Mr. Baxter led the lady onto the dance floor.

And Hettie's giddiness grew.

As a young lady, seeing her beau dance with another lady wouldn't have elicited such a response, but Mrs. Queensbury's joy at joining in with the quadrille was so obvious that Hettie's own grew. A sacrifice for someone who was little more than a stranger, yet Mr. Baxter hadn't hesitated to offer himself up to the lady.

Her dear Mr. Baxter.

Turning on her heel, she glanced about the room, searching for any familiar face. Again, Hettie was like a silly young miss, humming a romantic tune as she wove deeper into the crowd. Mrs. Spragg rose to her toes, waving a fan at Hettie, though her words were lost in the tumult of the party. As she moved in that direction, the guests all jostled about, and Hettie received more than a few ill-timed elbows to her side as she maneuvered through the pack.

Only to find Mrs. Camilla Baxter standing in her path.

"I couldn't believe it. No matter what others said, I couldn't believe the rumors." The lady's nose rose high, her eyes glaring down the length as a sneer soured her lips. "Only a sennight ago, you assured me you were naught but friends, yet now you are parading about, hanging on his arm."

Drawing in a breath, Hettie considered her responses. If she did not tread carefully, the lady's dislike could grow into true animosity, leaving Mr. Baxter in a difficult situation with his children.

"I was speaking the truth at that time—"

"You trollop!" hissed young Mrs. Baxter with such ferocity that Hettie's brows rose and her words failed her. Some sardonic part of her mind wished to point out that during

their last discussion, his children had made it abundantly clear that they thought it impossible for their father to look upon her with any degree of admiration; to shift from plain old spinster to temptress in a sennight was quite a feat, indeed.

No, that would not be helpful to say.

Bringing her dear Mr. Baxter to mind, Hettie considered what the patient man would say instead and found a bit of equilibrium. This was his family, and they were grieving their matriarch. It was understandable. And if she ever wished to win their good graces, she must tread carefully.

“I understand this must be a shock,” said Hettie. “It took me quite unawares, too, but surely we can discuss this in private with the family—”

“We are not your family!”

“I didn’t say that—”

“You see a sad old man and think to get your claws into him?” Mrs. Baxter drew closer, which was likely meant to intimidate. Hettie was simply glad that the movement drove the lady to lower her voice, leaving it impossible for others to overhear. Though there were still plenty watching from afar.

“That is not—”

“You are nothing compared to her. Nothing!” Mrs. Baxter stared her down, holding onto her composure by the barest of threads. “My mother-in-law was one of the greatest ladies I have ever known, and you can never replace her. You’ve only bewitched a hapless man, who is too lonely to recognize your scheming for what it is. You are nothing, *Miss Stillwell*.”

Whether or not the lady intended it, that speech said more about the speaker than it did the listener, and Hettie’s heart broke for Mrs. Baxter’s loss.

“I—” began Hettie, but when the eldest Baxter son appeared at his wife’s elbow with a furrowed brow, glancing between them, she braced herself for what was to come.

“What is the matter?” asked Mr. Matthias Baxter.

“This harlot has been parading about with Father—” But his wife’s words were cut short when yet another of the family arrived in much the same manner.

“Why are you making a scene?” asked Mr. Goswick, glancing between his siblings.

“Why must you say it like that, Stanley?” asked his brother with narrowed eyes.

“Half the ballroom is staring at us,” whispered Mr. Goswick, giving the others a warning look, though Hettie thought his assessment a bit generous. It was only a third of the ballroom; her cheeks pinked as she ignored all the attention pointed in their direction. “Had I known your wife would cause a ruckus—”

“Camilla was not causing a ruckus!” he hissed.

Hettie’s gaze darted between the trio, who began bickering one with another, and though they attempted to moderate their tones, anyone with eyes could see the conflict well enough, even if they only caught one word in three. Some part of her longed to sneak away, but Hettie refused to take the coward’s way out. Though she was not responsible for all the tension between the brothers, it was her inelegant stumbling into the family that was igniting it from polite skirmishes to open war.

“Boys!” Their father’s voice cut through the tussle, but neither man looked the slightest bit chagrined or cowed by the intrusion. “What is the meaning of this?”

Chapter 17

Before either of Mr. Baxter's sons could say a thing, Mrs. Baxter drew up before her father-in-law, her nose raised in disdain as she pointed a finger toward Hettie.

"Is it true? Are you courting *that woman*?"

Both her husband and Mr. Goswick jerked their gazes toward their father, their wide eyes darting between him and his sweetheart.

"You cannot be serious, Camilla," said Matthias, his lip curling in disdain as his gaze grazed over Hettie.

"I told you there were rumors, and they've been swanning about together all evening while he pretends to mourn our mother's loss."

Mr. Baxter drew in a deep breath, lowering his tone as he addressed his children. "Let us speak of this later. Now is not the time or place for this discussion."

His eldest son breathed out an oath, though he quickly covered his mouth. Mr. Goswick managed to edit his language better, though the meaning rife in his polite exclamation was no less hurtful. Mrs. Baxter merely stared at her father-in-law as though he'd rolled about in muck.

Stepping closer to Hettie, Mr. Baxter held out his arm, and she slid her own through, clinging to it like a lifeline in a storm-tossed ocean. He placed his hand atop hers with an air that no one could misconstrue as merely friendly, and he turned them away, leading them back into the crowd. Whether or not they wished to follow their father's advice, the trio had sense enough to allow the couple to escape.

Though they all knew that was not the end of the discussion.

"I apologize," she whispered, shaking her head.

"For what?" Mr. Baxter asked with a frown. "You did nothing wrong."

Hettie nodded, though her chest tightened with the tell-tale signs that something was not right. Turning her gaze to him, she tried to think what to say, but it felt as though an invisible barrier was placed between them, growing stronger as a question rose to her thoughts, taunting her.

What if their courtship irrevocably damaged his relationship with his children?

Throat tightening, Hettie tried to bat it away, but it lingered in the back of her thoughts as the orchestra struck up a familiar tune that had become synonymous with the shifting of the year. For all that the revelers had been making themselves quite merry at their hosts' expense, the crowd stilled, and when the first verse began, the guests all joined in with the familiar words of "Auld Lang Syne."

Hettie struggled with the words, her lips moving along with everyone, though no sound emerged, for the song only served to accentuate the trouble brewing for the courting pair. Though she'd always enjoyed the melancholy call to remembrance, it felt like salt rubbed into her wound. And the stiffness of her beau at her side testified that the meaning was not lost on Mr. Baxter.

Should we forget the people of the past?

The doors of the ballroom were thrown open, symbolically beckoning in the new year and releasing the old whilst giving the guests a subtle nudge toward the exit, and the crowd slowly dispersed as the strains of the music followed them out, the tune haunting Hettie's thoughts.

"We will sort this out," said Mr. Baxter, and Hettie drew in a deep breath, forcing herself to smile as she nodded at him.

Coward. There was no denying that Hamilton Baxter was a coward of the highest order. It was easy enough to pretend that his actions were motivated by a desire to give time for tempers to cool, but one did not march several miles in the frigid cold for such a thing. Especially whilst knowing it wouldn't do any good.

Had he ready money, Baxter might've hired a sedan chair or some other transportation, but striding from the Snowdens' home, he'd been forced to join his livid children in their carriage or make the trek home on foot. And the choice had seemed an easy one at the time. Now, his toes were numb and his face was windburned, but still, he remained on the pavement outside his son's home.

Black swallowed the world, with all the terraced houses on either side dark and silent. Yet for all the effort Baxter had expended to avoid the coming discussion for a few more hours, the candles still burned bright in the front parlor, the light peeking through the curtains. The shadows moving about the room testified that he'd avoided nothing; surely Matthias and Camilla were there as well as the master of the house.

Baxter stood frozen in place, staring at the windows, but as they likely had arrived home some time ago, it was clear he wouldn't outlast his children. For good or ill, this conversation was happening tonight, and there was no point in avoiding it any longer.

Striding across the pavement, he climbed the stairs and paused at the door, staring at the mourning wreath hanging at eye level. Juniper Court had been Dolores's true home, and yet this was where she had passed, and No. 15 Hawthorne Lane still bore her mark.

Stepping through the front door, he discarded his hat, gloves, and coat, handing them over to the poor footman forced to wait until his master had gone to bed. Without pausing, Baxter strode down the hall and into the parlor; all four of his children were seated on the sofas and armchairs, though poor Charity looked ready to expire at any moment.

For one long moment, the other three stared at him, stretching out the silence.

Stanley shot to his feet. “What are you thinking? How could you defile Mother’s memory? Have you no shame?”

Baxter drew in a deep breath and measured his words. “I care for Miss Stillwell.”

As much as he longed to say “love,” he couldn’t bring himself to voice that all-important description to them. There was one person who ought to hear it first, and he doubted she would be ready for some time. However, the certainty of the sentiment nestled into his heart, filling Baxter with a measure of peace.

“Don’t be ridiculous!” shouted Matthias, rising from his chair to join his brother. “You hardly know the woman—”

“How can you deign to consider her in such a light? Dolores Baxter was a paragon of womanhood,” added Camilla, though her husband hardly noticed the interruption, speaking over her to list all the reasons it could not be true (though most revolved around the issue of time). Stanley joined in, adding his voice to theirs, and the three spoke over one another.

Though it was hard to follow each of their arguments, interwoven as they were, their meaning was clear enough, and their disgust settled onto Baxter’s shoulders like a boulder.

“I cannot fathom why you would do such a thing,” said Stanley. “How could you betray Mother? Did you know Miss Stillwell before? Were you carrying on behind Mother’s back, simply waiting for her demise?”

“Of course not,” replied Baxter, though his words made no impression, quickly swept away in the torrent.

“I’ve always thought you a man of honor,” said Stanley with a shake of his head.

“He is!” cried Charity. “He was a good husband, but Mother is gone. There is nothing untoward about him finding happiness with another—”

“Don’t be naive,” said Camilla, folding her arms tight around herself. “He may have played the part of an honorable husband, but Mother has been gone only a few short months, and he’s already cavorting about ballrooms with an old, fat spinster.”

Baxter straightened, his mouth opening to defend that description of Miss Stillwell, but his son’s next words silenced him.

“But then, his judgment isn’t entirely sound,” added Matthias with a considering tone. With a furrowed brow, he glanced at the others. “Our once thriving family estate has been brought to the edge of ruin, and its master and heir are forced to find lodging elsewhere so we can let it to strangers—all because of his poor choices. Is it any wonder that a scheming lady might turn his head?”

“Miss Stillwell is no scheming lady, and she is neither fat nor old,” said Baxter, though none of them paid him any heed as they began discussing all the many mistakes he’d made as the head of the family. The accusations rested heavily on his shoulders, for they echoed his past thoughts too closely, picking at the wounds that had only just begun to heal.

“Stop speaking of him as though he’s a child,” said Charity, frowning at her siblings.

Matthias huffed. “When he proves himself capable of running this family—”

“Don’t you dare speak of him in that manner!” Charity scowled at her elder brother, and her gaze darted to Baxter, pleading with him to speak on his own behalf, but what could he say? Though he refused to believe that his judgment was flawed regarding Miss Stillwell, Baxter couldn’t defend himself from the other allegations leveled against him, especially not without casting aspersions on his wife.

“I am sorry for what has happened to our family.” Baxter’s words were too soft to be heard at first, and when the others quieted he repeated it once more. His children all stared at him as he stood there in the doorway, his hands tucked

behind him. "I did the best I could to keep us from ruin, and I am ashamed to know how close we came to it."

Calm settled for a moment, and the siblings glanced at one another.

"If you mean that, you must break with Miss Stillwell," said Matthias.

Baxter stared at him. To agree would be to end the conflict raging amongst his family, but his heart quivered at the thought. Even imagining that moment was enough to make him shudder. To have found such joy and then to let it go was more than any man should have to suffer. Yet his sons and his daughter-in-law stared at him as though fully expecting his unequivocal agreement.

"It is late," said Charity. Holding out a hand to her sister-in-law, she strained to rise from her seat. "We are all exhausted, and we'd best continue this conversation with clearer heads later."

Stanley and Matthias both stood with their arms crossed, their eyes narrowed at him for several long heartbeats. Then the former took Camilla's place at Charity's side, helping her toward the hall and up the stairs, whilst Camilla and Matthias fetched their things and took their leave.

Dropping to the sofa, Baxter bent over, his hands running through his hair as his lungs drew in sharp breaths. His children or Miss Stillwell. Surely it wouldn't come to that. It couldn't. Drawing in a deep breath, he closed his eyes and prayed for clarity, and the sinking of his stomach was the only answer he received.

Chapter 18

When one thought of picnics, one did not often imagine a chill winter day. However, there was something wonderful about being bundled up in flannel petticoats, thick jackets, and woolen mittens and scarves. Though Hettie's cheeks were quite rosy from the nip in the air, the rest of her was pleasantly warm as she stared out at the River Avon.

A handful of people skated along the surface, their laughter ringing out as they careened about, toppling over at varying intervals. Hettie let out a sigh, sending a great puff of vapor into the air, as Mr. Baxter dug through the basket. Frowning, he pulled out a pair of bottles that had been wrapped in flannel and packed in straw.

"It's a lemon and elderflower tisane that I like. I had hoped it would still be warm..." he mumbled as he handed her one. A quick touch to the glass, and it was easy to tell that it was lukewarm at best, but Hettie merely smiled.

"It is wonderful," she replied whilst he handed her a Bath bun. The pairing of drink and sweetbread was perfect, and the tisane was just warm enough to help stave off the cold.

As they sat side by side, Hettie's gaze drifted along the landscape, following the lines of the riverbank. Silence was an easy thing with Mr. Baxter. Conversation flowed forth in its natural course, but when the words stilled and quiet descended, it was not awkward or discomforting. Hettie felt like she could simply be at his side without speaking a word, enjoying his presence without needing to add to the moment.

Usually.

However, they weren't alone during this outing. Memories of the previous night hung over their shoulders, watching every minute. Mr. Baxter hadn't divulged any details concerning his conversation with his children after leaving the ball, but Hettie could well imagine it hadn't been a pleasant moment. And his despondency only served as confirmation.

A fractured family, to be certain. But not broken. Not yet. Would she be the final blow to destroy the Baxters?

Hettie's eyes prickled, and she drew in a sharp breath, forcing it into her lungs. Setting her bottle to the side, she tucked her hands in her lap and stared at the merriment passing by on the river. A touch drew her gaze down to find Mr. Baxter's hand atop hers, and she forced her fingers to relax as her gaze drifted over to meet his.

"Do you truly think all will be well?" The question sprang forth, and Hettie shuddered, though she couldn't wish it unspoken. Ignoring the truth of the situation wouldn't help. And clearly, it weighed heavily on his thoughts, for despite her giving no context for her outburst, Mr. Baxter didn't ask for clarification.

"I do not know."

Though some part of her wanted a happier answer than that, Hettie knew anything else would've been a platitude. Clinging to his hand, she turned her attention to the skaters. Somewhere nearby, a street performer braved the cold and their lone violin rang out with the bright melody of "I Saw Three Ships." Hettie couldn't help but hum along; she didn't know how they managed to play whilst their fingers must be chilled to the bone, but she welcomed the bit of Christmas cheer.

"The children are beside themselves," he said with a sigh. Hettie's gaze turned to him once more, her brows pinched together as Mr. Baxter's shoulders slumped into that all-too-familiar position, his eyes downcast. "This is no little thing to them, and I fear it will be some time before..."

Dropping his head, Mr. Baxter sighed. "I have done so much damage to my family already. I feel as though I made the best decision I could've in the situation, but had I been a stronger leader for my family, perhaps my boys would be more brothers than friendly foes and our family wouldn't be struggling. I count myself lucky that Charity was able to see the error of her mother's ways, but I fear the rest of my children have followed in Dolores's footsteps, caring more

about vanity and social standing than strength of character. Had I chosen differently, perhaps I might've helped them see."

His tone shifted, growing more distant while he spoke, as though the words were directed at the great beyond rather than her, and Hettie watched him, her brows drawing closer together. It was as though the entirety of his heart and soul were collapsing in on themselves, and the poor man was struggling to keep from disappearing beneath the weight of his disappointments.

"I've made so many mistakes in my life. So many poor decisions. Do I have any right to put my children through this? I have failed them in so many ways—"

"Have you made mistakes? Certainly, but no more than any other parent," said Hettie. "You had an impossible situation in your home, and you did the best you could to keep your children from being on the front lines of a never-ending war."

"Yet my weakness has caused them pain and continues to do so."

There was such bleakness and finality to that statement, as though he truly believed himself to be the author of all their family's woes. Though Hettie was newly acquainted with the Baxters, she knew the man at her side well enough to believe with utter conviction that his weaknesses may have caused some heartache, but that he had done more to heal and help than naught.

Hettie felt the meaning beneath his words, and they were so much more than mere self-deprecation. It was the tone of a man readying himself to end a courtship—she felt it in her bones. And for all her previous doubts about the rightness of their relationship, Hettie knew there was nothing more right and proper than loving this man.

Shifting to slip her arm through his, she drew closer, leaning against him and resting her head against his shoulder.

"What do you want, Mr. Baxter? What should we do?"

His breath shuddered as he filled his lungs. “My children are unhappy, Miss Stillwell. What right have I to do this to them? When I have caused them so much heartache already, surely it is my duty—”

Straightening, Hettie pressed a hand to his lips, silencing his words. She held his gaze, looking deep into the depths of his eyes, and whispered, “That was not my question. Again and again, you speak of your children’s desires and what they wish for you to do and you wish for them, but I want to know—what do you desire?”

She lifted her hand from his lips, and the moment he was free to do so, he spoke without hesitation or qualification, giving her his answer with firm resolve.

“You.”

That one word sank deep into Hettie’s heart, burning like a hot coal until she couldn’t feel the bite in the winter air. It was no grand oration or declaration of love, but the sentiment infused in that single answer filled her as fully as if he’d asked her to marry him.

And they were sitting so very close, their knees turned to one another as their faces were mere inches away. Somehow his arms had come around her, drawing them together until they were all but embracing, and Hettie’s pulse quickened.

“I desire you, Hettie,” he repeated in a quiet yet firm tone. His gaze drifted to her lips, and she leaned closer, pulled toward him like a magnet. Trembling, she had just enough forethought to wonder what she ought to do before their lips brushed, stealing her breath from her lungs.

Snow smacked Mr. Baxter’s head, knocking off his hat and splattering them both with watery shrapnel. From the river, boys laughed and jeered, showing just a hint of bravery before scattering. Mr. Baxter sat like a statue where they’d hit him, and he stared off at nothing. As much as she longed to hurl a snowball back at the little terrors, Hettie’s hands rose to her mouth to stifle a laugh as a glob of snow dripped from his nose.

Lowering his head, he let out a halting chuckle. “I am quite the dashing beau, aren’t I?”

Hettie nudged his chin up and brushed away a splatter of snow from his jaw. “You are *my* dashing beau.”

As much as she longed to recapture that moment, the world had shifted (as it was wont to do), leaving no way to return to what was now gone. Moving so they were shoulder to shoulder once more, Hettie leaned close, and he drew his arm around her shoulders, holding her there.

“We need only be patient, Hamilton.” As he had taken that liberty, Hettie couldn’t help but reciprocate. Yet when his name passed her lips, he jerked back and stared at her. Brows pulled tight together, she studied his expression, but she couldn’t countenance what he was thinking. Or rather, her thoughts on the matter were not of a happy sort.

But Hettie forced them away. A man who had just nearly kissed her (or had kissed her? Hettie wasn’t entirely certain if they could count that brief touch as such) and called her by her Christian name wasn’t going to be upset about her doing the same. So, she waited for him to speak.

“Baxter,” he said. Hettie’s head cocked to the side, but before she could ask a clarifying question, he continued. “Please call me Baxter. It’s the name I prefer.”

“Certainly,” she said, though her confusion didn’t dissipate. “But if that is so, why did your friends last night call you Hamilton?”

“My wife thought it more dignified than Baxter.”

Though no further explanation was given, she didn’t require one. What Mrs. Dolores Baxter wanted was granted or others were made to suffer, none more so than her long-suffering husband and innocent children. And Baxter had surrendered another part of himself to protect them.

Hettie shifted again, lowering her head to his shoulder as her breath caught. Tears pricked her eyes, and try as she might, she couldn’t keep them from gathering. Though none fell. Slipping her arm around his back, she held fast to her dear

beau. Surely a man not allowed the freedom to use his preferred name deserved some happiness, and Hettie's resolve firmed.

One way or another, she would do what she could to grant him that.

"We need only be patient, Baxter," she amended, turning back to her previous statement. "Surely it is just a shock for them. They are grieving their mother, and it must be difficult for them. A few weeks or months and their feelings will change."

His arm tightened around her shoulder, and in a tone far brighter than before, he said, "Of course they will. How can they not come to love you?"

Lifting her head, Hettie met his eyes and saw nothing but earnest truth there. Such certainty and faith in her ability to win them over, coupled with everything else that had passed in the last few minutes, made it even more difficult to keep from becoming a weepy mess. A lady of her age and experience ought to have a better hold on her emotions, but it was near impossible when such a wonderful man said such wonderful things.

"I assure you, I have flaws aplenty that are bound to irritate." Hettie had meant it to be a jest, but Baxter's brows pulled tight as he blinked at her.

"I have yet to discover one."

Yes, there were objections she could make—despite how it felt, they hadn't known each other more than a month—but Hettie couldn't voice them when he watched her with such unblinking certainty. And that was when the first of her tears escaped. Huffing at her sentimentality, she wiped it away.

Resting her head back on his shoulder, she mumbled, "You are a silly man."

"Am not."

A little patience. So many of the ills of the world could be erased with that virtue, and Hettie knew that whether it be weeks or months, she was quite willing to wait. She had

waited her whole life for such a man. A few months was nothing.

Arm in arm with her dear Baxter, Hettie beamed at the world around them as they wove through the streets of Bath. Though she maintained a bit of decorum while they were passing others who might overhear, she found herself saying his name without the honorific “Mr.” as often as she could manage, tacking it onto every sentence. Baxter slanted her little smiles, his eyes alight with a laugh as he responded in kind.

As heavy as the beginning of their outing had felt, Hettie felt all the lighter now. No true decisions had been made, for they hadn’t spoken of love or marriage, but she felt the ghost of it hovering at the edge of the conversation. One could not speak of the future with a beau without some implication (however slight) that both parties believed there was some future to be had.

With such animosity pointed at their coupling, surely Baxter would simply break with her if he did not have grander intentions than a mere courtship. And as long as marriage was within the realm of possibility, Hettie was willing to overcome any trouble his children caused. Surely they would manage it together.

Her brother’s home was just ahead, and Hettie squeezed Baxter’s arm and nodded toward the door. “Would you come in? You can keep me entertained until dinner, and Victor has said you are always welcome to join us—”

“There you are!”

The hard voice sliced through the air, and Baxter turned the two of them around to see his eldest son striding toward them. The young man's expression was as hard as carved granite, his eyes narrowing as they glanced over Hettie before settling on his father.

"We have an army of servants combing the city for you, and you're here, gadding about."

Hettie's lips pinched together to hold back the words that came quickly to her thoughts; winning his family over would be far more difficult if she went about calling them rude little monsters and lecturing them about showing respect for their father. But her jaw ached as she forced her mouth shut.

"What is the matter?" asked Baxter.

"Charity has been brought to bed."

Baxter stiffened, and Hettie instinctively drew her free hand up to grip his forearm. "I thought she still had a fortnight —"

"Yes, we all did," he replied with a stony tone. "She asked us to send for you. So we have."

Giving Hettie another long look, young Mr. Baxter added, "Your *friend* isn't welcome."

"Matthias." The word was half exasperation and half chastisement but had no effect on his son.

Hettie released his arm and turned to Baxter. "Do not fret, but please send word when the ordeal is concluded. Meanwhile, I will pray for her, the babe, and your family."

"My thanks," he said, taking her hand and bowing over it. Baxter's eyes rose to hers, and there was so much swirling in his gaze. Mrs. Callaghan was a strong lady; surely, she would be well. However, far too many fine women were struck down, and it was difficult for either of them to hide their fear.

"Father, we must go," chided his son.

Baxter straightened and nodded her a farewell before turning on his heel and following his son. Hettie watched as

they drifted away, and she gave the first silent prayer of many for Mrs. Callaghan and the safe delivery of her child.

Chapter 19

With the shades pulled tight against the night and a fresh pot of tea at her side, Hettie toed off her slippers and set her feet on the footstool. Despite her best efforts, they were still chilled after her picnic with Baxter, but now, as she angled herself toward the fireplace, the last of the ice melted from her bones.

Thank the heavens for small miracles: though many were out and about on that evening, the Stillwells had always considered New Year's Day one for the family, allowing Hettie a moment of peace at home. Whilst the Christmas festivities were delightful, a night or two of rest was always called for if one wished to make it through all twelve days without collapsing.

To say nothing of their favorite tradition. Though most of the family no longer attempted to pen their own ghost stories, they each went to great lengths to scour up a tale guaranteed to chill the blood, and there was no better way to spend the Christmas season than gathered around a blazing fire with a selection of treats and drinks as they shared grisly tales of the great beyond.

Shifting in her seat, Hettie tucked her needle between her lips to free her hands and straighten the blanket on her lap. Pulling the needle free, she turned her attention back to her embroidery hoop and took up the next stitch, laying the base layer of green. With a medium shade to add depth and the highlights to finish it, the work would take some time to complete, but the mistletoe would look all the better for it. Though a strange decoration for a baby bonnet, it seemed appropriate for Mrs. Callaghan's babe.

Thankfully, Hettie was quick with the needle, and the project would be finished soon enough.

Nelson was currently sharing his ghostly tale, reciting it with all the drama of a stage performer. His always tended toward overt horror, though Hettie preferred more subtly to her scares, for they lingered in the thoughts long after the tale ended.

Vincent was seated in his usual chair, his elbows resting against the arms and his fingers steepled as he watched with unblinking intensity as Nelson spoke. The ladies kept their hands busy with their needlepoint, though Louisa and Alice spent more time watching Nelson with wide eyes and gasping than their embroidery.

“...The anguished wails of the condemned echoed through the vaulted corridors, as the specter, satiated yet unsated, dissolved into the ethereal abyss, leaving a nightmare etched in the cursed castle’s stone.” Nelson’s voice trailed off into silence as his audience stared at him, gaping. His father broke the spell with vigorous applause, which was quickly followed by the others, though Louisa looked a little ashen as she returned her attention to the needlepoint.

“Bravo, Nelson,” said Vincent. “That got the blood pumping. Alice, you should go next.”

“Might we take a moment before we delve into the next?” asked Louisa. Then with a shudder, she added, “I do not know if I shall sleep tonight.”

The young lady’s husband came to her side, settling into the seat beside her with a smile, and whispering something not intended for the others, he managed to bring a blush to his bride’s cheek.

Alice cleared her throat and cast a glance at her aunt. With a barely contained giggle, she asked, “Did you have a lovely outing with Mr. Baxter? It looks so cold outside, I think it must’ve been quite bracing.”

Apparently, that was enough to clear Louisa’s mind of ghouls and gore, for she grinned and added, “I am certain they were able to keep themselves warm.”

That drew the men’s attention, and they raised brows at the womenfolk. No doubt they hoped to fluster her, but Hettie was an old hand at familial jests and knew the best way to fight teasing was to fluster her opponents.

“Oh yes. Mr. Baxter knows how to keep a lady warm. I was quite comfortable. Flushed, even,” she replied with a

wicked smile, her tone full of insinuation.

Alice's cheeks pinkened, her wide eyes darting down to the seam she was mending. Victor arched a brow at her, and Hettie gave him a demure smile in return, though his son looked far less amused, his brows drawing tight together.

"Calm yourself, Nelson," said Hettie with a laugh. "Mr. Baxter is a perfect gentleman. Nothing untoward happened."

Though she couldn't help but wish Baxter had been just a little more ungentlemanly. Although their lips had touched, it was not much more than a quick brush of skin and hardly befitting a "first kiss." Thus, in the past twenty-four hours, they'd come close to an embrace and been thwarted twice.

Unacceptable.

But the word "patience" flashed into her thoughts again, reminding Hettie that they had time enough to sort things out. There was no need to rush it. Yet she couldn't help but imagine what it would feel like. She'd seen others kiss, but that touch of skin wasn't like a clasp of hands or anything else she might've experienced. A proper embrace must be far superior, yet she still didn't know how.

"Are you blushing, Aunt Hettie?" asked Louisa with a smile.

Despite having only just married into the family, clearly the young lady was quite comfortable leaping into the fray alongside the others, for the others quickly latched onto that. And for all that Hettie had just brushed aside the teasing, she couldn't quite do so after her thoughts had strayed into indelicate areas. Flustering others was far more difficult when one was flustered oneself.

Victor rose from his seat and joined his sister on the sofa, patting her knee. "I am glad to see you so happy."

"At least someone is," she murmured.

"Pardon?"

Hettie shook her head. As much as the goings-on with Baxter's children were unpleasant, there was no need to

dredge that up now and poison her family's feelings against them. That wouldn't be helpful.

"Ignore me," she said. "I am simply glad you all approve of Mr. Baxter."

"*Your* Mr. Baxter?" asked Alice with an impish grin.

Hettie scowled as she knew her niece wished, though beneath that facade, her heart leapt at the truth of the matter. He was, indeed, hers. Just as much as she was his. Dearest Baxter. And if at least one of their families was happy for them, it would be easier to face the coming trials.

Thankfully, the conversation drifted from her and her beau, though Hettie's thoughts remained on Baxter. Of course, they were always on the man, and that was unlikely to change in the near future. He was firmly imprinted on her heart—and rightly so. The more she knew him, the more she loved his quiet ways and selfless heart.

"She is sighing again," whispered Louisa, sotto voce.

And so the teasing began again, continuing with more fervor when they discovered what Hettie was sewing.

A maid appeared in the doorway, and with a bob, she came to stand before her master. "Please, sir, Mr. Baxter here to see Miss Stillwell."

That did nothing to quell the riotous comments, though her family had the good sense to quiet themselves before the man in question was able to hear them. Rising to her feet, Hettie greeted him with a grin, though it fled at the sight of his troubled expression.

"Your daughter?" she asked, barely daring to ask the question.

"Well, for now," said Baxter, and Hettie's lungs drew in breath once more.

"Do not scare me so," she said, pressing a hand to her middle as she strode over to greet him. "What is the matter?"

"I am hoping you might be of some assistance." Baxter's words were a little unsteady, his gaze darting at their audience.

“Ignore them,” she said, waving a hand toward her errant family. “Whatever you need. Simply say it.”

Baxter shifted. “My daughter is hoping you might visit. Assist her.”

“She is?” Hettie’s brows rose at that, for of all the things he might’ve asked, she had not anticipated that request.

With a heavy sigh, he rubbed at his forehead. “The midwife says all is well, but I fear my daughter-in-law is being a tad...”

“Overbearing and controlling?” asked Hettie in a wry tone, for she could well imagine young Mrs. Baxter doing just that.

“Charity is not comfortable with me or her brothers at her bedside, and I fear I wouldn’t be much help at any rate, but she desperately needs a strong ally, as she has no friends in town and her husband is halfway around the world. She said you had assisted others through the process, and she hopes you will do the same for her. We both do.”

“The poor dear,” said Hettie with brows pulled low. To face such an ordeal without the comfort of a mother or friend was unthinkable, and there was only one answer she could give to such a petition. “Of course. I will do what I can for her.”

Turning to the maid, she called for a portmanteau to be packed and sent to Mr. Goswick’s home, and then she made for the door with Baxter on her heels.

Standing on the threshold of his daughter's lying-in chamber, Baxter gave Hettie's hand a final squeeze; his gaze said more eloquently than words just how much this small act meant to him, and she wished she could explain just how much it meant that he had asked.

“Should you require anything, simply ask, Hettie.”

With a nod, she turned away, leaving him to wait with the others in the library, and steeled herself as she strode through the sitting room door. Sweltering heat enveloped her, making sweat bead at her temples as the raging fire pumped into the room. But at least it provided some light, allowing her to navigate the dark space, for they hadn't seen fit to light many candles.

When a lady was at her most vulnerable and facing uncertainty and pain, the least a prospective mother could ask for was a comfortable and familiar room in which to face the ordeal. Unfortunately, they were sequestered to a lying-in chamber instead. On the practical side, converting a sitting room or drawing room into one made perfect sense, as bedchambers were smaller and the ordeal was bound to ruin one's mattress.

In this case, the family had ordained the second floor sitting room for Mrs. Callaghan's use, with the adjacent library dedicated as the waiting room for the rest of her family. Situated to one side of the lying-in room sat the birthing cot with the usual selection of armchairs and sofas cleared away to give room for the mother-to-be and her assistants.

Mrs. Callaghan lay on the makeshift bed, spread across the narrow cot that was perfectly suited for the birth yet looked far too uncomfortable for all the work leading to that moment. Thankfully, plenty of pillows and blankets were provided, but Mrs. Callaghan had kicked much of the bedding to the floor as she lay on her side, panting.

And alone. Her attendants were too occupied with each other to tend to their patient. The midwife stood apart from the lady, wringing her hands as Mrs. Camilla Baxter directed the woman about her work. The midwife's gaze met Hettie's when

she entered, and the woman gave a visible sigh of relief, though Mrs. Baxter was too occupied to notice the newcomer.

Turning away from the midwife, Mrs. Baxter moved to Mrs. Callaghan's side and took a seat, patting her on the hand. "With my first, I was in labor for two days, but you are progressing far quicker than I did. Isn't that lucky for you?"

Hettie clamped her mouth shut, for the first words to spring to mind were not of the charitable variety, but she strode to the window and tugged back the curtains, opening the pane to let in some air. Though it was far too frigid to leave it open for long, the sharp breeze cleared much of the stagnant air.

Turning to the midwife, Hettie motioned toward the door. "Would you fetch a maid to see to the fire? And bring in some candles. We need to see." And in a lower voice she added, "Allow me to manage Mrs. Baxter."

The midwife didn't require a second prompting, immediately scurrying from the room to do as bidden.

"Shut that window!" said Mrs. Baxter, turning from her sister-in-law's bedside. "Do you want her to catch her death?" Upon seeing who the audacious intruder was, the lady gaped. "What are you doing here?"

Mrs. Callaghan attempted to speak, but a pain took hold of her, and she became focused on more important matters. Mrs. Baxter turned back to her sister-in-law, but her attention was still fixed on Hettie.

Ignoring the question posed, Hettie turned to the first of her concerns as she came to Mrs. Callaghan's bedside. "She is liable to suffocate if we do not get some fresh air immediately."

"What do you think you are doing?" asked Mrs. Baxter, rising to her feet. "I have things well in hand. You do not belong here, Miss Stillwell."

The hard words and tone sent a spike of anger through her heart, though she tamped it down; Mrs. Callaghan didn't need Hettie's pride making matters worse.

“I can see you have been hard at work,” replied Hettie, forcing herself not to huff at that statement. Though it was true enough in essence, the “work” did not concern the comfort of her sister-in-law as much as it was to stoke Mrs. Baxter’s ego.

Mrs. Callaghan opened her mouth, but Hettie spoke faster. “I wish to be of service. I know you are trying your best, Mrs. Baxter, but surely another set of hands is useful.”

“I do not wish for assistance if it will be the death of her,” said Mrs. Baxter, moving toward the window. “The room must be dark and hot, else mother and baby are at risk. It is terrible enough that Charity hasn’t bothered to find a proper physician, but that midwife is inept. She’s continually attempting to chill poor Charity to the bone when hot and dark worked wonders for my mother and was insisted upon by her and my physician. I have five healthy children to show for it, so clearly, their advice is best.”

Hettie drew in a deep breath, searching for the proper words to sway the lady without causing more megrims for Mrs. Callaghan. For all that people claimed medicine to be a science, it seemed odd that the opinions differed so greatly about the “proper” order of things. What was considered the peak of treatments one decade ago was now the greatest harm one could do, and never was that made more clear than seeing people bicker over childbirth.

It was little wonder that Mrs. Baxter believed as she did, for “hot and dark” was the prevailing belief of her mother’s generation, but more and more were rejecting that tradition. Mrs. Baxter’s physician had been either a quack or a coward, unwilling to stand strong against the domineering Mrs. Camilla Baxter and her likely equally quelling mother.

As it had done no harm in the many births Hettie had attended, she saw no evil in having the room a comfortable temperature, and logic demanded that Mrs. Callaghan’s assistants—be they physicians, midwives, or her father’s sweetheart—see properly.

The trouble was how to manage Mrs. Baxter without causing more trouble for everyone, including herself and

Baxter. Except for Mrs. Callaghan, Hettie's standing amongst his children was poor, to say the least, and she needed to tread carefully.

Mrs. Callaghan moved as though to speak again, but Hettie held up a staying hand.

"I am beyond pleased that hot and dark worked so well for you and your children," said Hettie, resisting the urge to slap Mrs. Baxter's hands away as she worked to close the window sash. "But there are bigger concerns afoot. When I arrived, I overheard the housekeeper and cook discussing the food to be sent up for Mrs. Callaghan. Likely some mulled wine and a bit of beef to keep up her strength."

Mrs. Baxter whirled around, gaping at her. "Ridiculous!"

"Perhaps you'd best advise them on a proper meal." Then, waving at the window, Hettie added, "I can manage while you are gone."

Crossing her arms, Mrs. Baxter scoffed. "I am no servant, Miss Stillwell. Go yourself—you are not wanted here."

Hettie paused, allowing that brief respite to help curb her tongue. She wouldn't let herself be goaded into an argument. It would not help anyone involved. No matter how much she longed to let her frustrations loose on Mrs. Baxter.

Quickly thinking through possibilities, she nodded and strode toward the door. Affecting her sweetest tone, she said, "I will ask them to send up a pot of strong tea and some cakes. That always lifts one's spirits."

"Are you completely senseless?" Mrs. Baxter's tone grew more strident, but Hettie merely stood there with an innocent frown on her face as Mrs. Callaghan glanced between the ladies, her brows pinched together.

"But it is not beef, and cake is very gentle on the digestion." Hettie turned toward the door as though determined to set about her task. "I will get a full tea tray sent up immediately—"

"Useless!" scoffed Mrs. Baxter, shooting up from her chair and stomping her way toward the door. "What is the

point of you if you are going to be so senseless?"

The wood reverberated as she slammed it shut on her way out, her footsteps pounding down the hall with far more force than a lady ought to demonstrate; no doubt Mrs. Baxter's mama would be quite shocked at the display.

Chapter 20

“I apologize,” said Mrs. Callaghan as she panted through a pain. “She can be so beastly—”

“Do not give it a second thought,” replied Hettie.

“But that was nicely done, Miss Stillwell,” she added with a wry smile. “I do not know if I could’ve managed another moment alone with her. Thank you for coming.”

Hettie’s own grin grew. “I am happy to be of assistance.”

The midwife and the maid hurried through the door, and with a few short instructions, the pair went about readying the room, airing out the stifling heat and lighting candles. Coming to the lady’s side, Hettie helped her sit upright, shifting the pillows at her back so she sat at a better angle.

Adjusting the seat at her bedside, Hettie sat and took Mrs. Callaghan’s hand in hers. Despite their fledgling acquaintance, it didn’t bother her in the slightest to take such a familiar position—especially when Mrs. Callaghan’s eyes met Hettie’s. Though the lady smiled, Mrs. Callaghan’s gaze was steeped in all the trepidation new mothers felt at such times.

Yet most women in her situation had far more people at her side in such a moment. Her husband, her mother, perhaps a friend or two. Mrs. Callaghan had only her father’s new sweetheart to call upon, and Hettie’s heart burned for the poor dear.

Mrs. Callaghan sucked in a sharp breath, her face crumpling as she strained against the pain; her grip tightened until it was nearly too painful to hold, but Hettie refused to let it show.

“You can do this.” Reaching up, she brushed back the damp locks from Mrs. Callaghan’s forehead.

Then, calling over her shoulder, Hettie sent the maid for water and a cloth whilst the midwife came to join the mother on her other side. With a heavy sigh, Mrs. Callaghan relaxed back into her pillows as the pain ebbed. Panting, she rolled her

gaze to Hettie with such pleading, though there was little more anyone could do.

“That’s good, Mrs. Callaghan,” said the midwife, wetting the cloth and dabbing the lady’s brow.

“How much longer?” she replied with a wince.

“I fear it may be some time yet. We’re still in the early stages.”

Mrs. Callaghan’s lips pinched tight together, and her chin gave the slightest of trembles, though the strong lady tried to fight the emotions bubbling beneath. Lifting her free hand, Mrs. Callaghan rubbed at her forehead, her breaths growing jagged.

“Have you thought of any names?” asked Hettie.

Lowering her hand, Mrs. Callaghan turned an exhausted gaze to her. “Pardon?”

“For the baby. What names are you considering?” she repeated. Then, with a ponderous furrow of her brow, Hettie added, “I was thinking that Calvin would be perfect for a boy. Little ‘Cal’ would be so adorable.”

The lady’s brows pinched together. “Cal Callaghan?”

The tone of her question was as dry as one could get, and Hettie nodded with an innocent smile.

“It rolls off the tongue, doesn’t it?”

Mrs. Callaghan stared for a long moment before devolving into a snorting giggle that was far stronger than Hettie’s jest warranted but was a fitting tribute to just how exhausted she already was, for such things were infinitely more amusing when one was spent.

“In truth,” she said when the last of her laughter finally faded away, “I like Abigail and perhaps Baxter, as it is my family name. Thomas prefers Bridget and Isaac, and we cannot agree. However, as he pointed out in his last letter, the deed will be done by the time he discovers what the child’s name is, so I am free to do as I please.”

While there was a hint of a smile when she spoke, Mrs. Callaghan's brows pulled low once more, her gaze growing troubled.

"He is so far away. It will be some weeks before he even knows what has happened," she whispered.

"Abigail is such a lovely name," said Hettie, drawing her attention back to their conversation. "Abbie is an adorable name for a little girl. But then, Bridget and Biddie are just as sweet. Though if I might be so bold, I have always thought Mildred and Hulda wonderful names."

Though she attempted to be subtle in the jest, Hettie couldn't help but speak those names with just a touch more solemnity than was required. There was something in the way they sat on the tongue that soured the names and conjured images of curmudgeonly crones who shouted at small children for being too loud.

Mrs. Callaghan stared at her, and Hettie tried to keep her expression as innocent as possible.

Another pain struck the lady, and her body tensed, her grip tightening as the midwife and Hettie softly encouraged her through the worst of the agony. It was a different sort of trial to watch another suffer so acutely, knowing there was little she could do but hold the girl's hand and hope that she found some comfort in it.

When the lady calmed once more and lay there, panting, Mrs. Callaghan turned a rueful smile to Hettie. "I knew a family in which they blended both the mother and father's names to form something unique. Charmas or Thomity could work for a boy or a girl."

The two dissolved into laughter, and the midwife shook her head at the pair, though with more than a hint of a smile.

"Are you comfortable? Do you need more pillows?" Hettie asked whilst adjusting the ones Mrs. Callaghan had.

"My legs..." The patient grimaced and shifted the offending limbs.

"It might help to walk around for a bit," said Hettie.

Taking Mrs. Callaghan's hand in hers, she motioned for the midwife. "Mrs...."

"Johnson," she replied.

"A pleasure to meet you, Mrs. Johnson. I am Miss Stillwell..." Hettie stumbled over the introduction, for she wasn't certain how to explain her relation to the soon-to-be mother.

"She is my father's sweetheart," added Mrs. Callaghan without pause as she stretched her back and began to shuffle toward the window, breathing deeply of the cool air. Hettie rather wished she were closer to it, for her face grew alarmingly flushed. Despite the utter truth in that statement and having thought of herself in such terms, it was odd to hear it spoken aloud. Especially from one of Baxter's kin.

"So, little Thomity Callaghan," said Hettie, shifting the conversation back. "That is quite distinguished."

Mrs. Callaghan laughed, her hands resting around her middle as she stared out the window. "Wouldn't that just cause a stir at the baptism..."

But her last word broke off, her grimace returning as Hettie moved to her side, giving her support as another pain took hold of her. Mrs. Johnson came to her other side, and she clung to their hands, a low groan escaping as she sagged against them.

They helped her to the edge of the bed, and Mrs. Callaghan leaned heavily against it.

"You are doing so beautifully, my dear," said Hettie, rubbing a hand along her back as the lady doubled over. "Just another few moments, Mrs. Callaghan."

The lady moaned, her head pressed against the bedding, and Hettie continued to babble little nothings, keeping her voice even and calm as she tried to distract her.

Mrs. Callaghan relaxed once more, panting. When she could speak, she turned her gaze to Hettie. "Charity."

"Pardon?" asked Hettie with raised brows.

“Call me Charity,” she repeated as she straightened once more. “You came to my rescue without hesitation. That alone earned you the right to use my given name.”

Hettie came to her side, taking her by the arm. “Are you certain?”

“Of course,” she replied, and when she glanced at Hettie, Charity’s eyes were filled with more remnants of tears. “Please do.”

“I would be honored,” replied Hettie, for there was no other answer to give to this poor lonely lady without a mother, sister, or friend to help her through such a moment. “I suppose it is pointless to hold to such formal strictures when we are going to cross far more intimate boundaries before this ordeal is through.”

Charity chuckled, though it was a weak thing. “I suppose it is hard to hold onto one’s dignity when one’s nightdress is rucked up, putting the whole of one’s ‘dignity’ on display.”

Again, the two ladies fell to laughing as Hettie helped her around the room. The pains continued to plague Charity, forcing them to stop at intervals, but with each pass of the room, the lady’s spirits strengthened. Though that could have as much to do with the room being a sensible temperature once more as it did the ridiculous conversation.

Hettie continued to pluck topics from the aether, and though she couldn’t claim that she and Charity saw eye to eye on everything, she adored the younger lady’s perspective and her unapologetic manner in expressing herself, speaking her opinion without hedging as so many did—as Hettie was wont to do herself on far too often an occasion.

“He didn’t!” Hettie gasped, her mouth gaping open as Charity dissolved into more chuckles.

“Oh, yes, he did. The fool.” Yet when she spoke that epithet, there was such amusement and sweetness in those two words that it wasn’t difficult to feel the love burning beneath them. “There we were, running about the party like two children—”

The door swung open, and before they could brace themselves, Mrs. Baxter let out a mighty, “Good heavens!” before rushing to Charity’s side.

“What are you thinking? You shouldn’t be walking about,” she said, nudging her way between Hettie and her sister-in-law. Then, giving the former a hard look, she asked, “Are you trying to kill her and the baby?”

Charity stiffened, her brows furrowing at the words no mother wished to hear inside that birthing sanctuary.

“She needed to move around a bit. There is nothing wrong with that,” said Hettie.

Mrs. Baxter looked about as though seeking support, but upon finding only Mrs. Johnson, she shook her head and started leading Charity back to the bed. “Once the ordeal has begun, a lady ought not to move. She ought to have removed to the lying-in bed weeks ago, in fact. Movement isn’t good for the baby. Do you want to do him harm, jostling him about like that?”

“I wish to stand, Camilla—” began Charity, but her objections were quickly waved away as Mrs. Baxter babbled more dire predictions if the young lady did not follow her instructions.

As Hettie could only cause more contention by holding onto Charity, she released her and allowed Mrs. Baxter to take the lady back to bed. It was clear enough why the expectant mother desired assistance through her ordeal, and the more time Hettie spent with the ladies, the more evident it was that a battle was to come.

Like a foot soldier on the line, staring off at the enemy from across the field of battle, Hettie sensed the impending doom of what that might bring. Her standing with the family wasn’t even tenuous; Mrs. Baxter and his sons had made their feelings clear on the matter, and no doubt his other daughters would write to voice their concerns as well once the news spread through the family. If one wished to ingratiate oneself, one did not do so by causing a fuss.

Drawing in a deep breath, Hettie considered her options. How could she assist and advocate on Charity's behalf without antagonizing Mrs. Baxter further? As far as she could see, there was only one option—another distraction.

"Mrs. Baxter," said Hettie with a bright smile. "How fortuitous that you have come."

Both mother and midwife looked at her with raised brows, but as Mrs. Baxter's attention had turned to Hettie, the lady couldn't see their surprise.

"There is a tisane that is exceptionally helpful during the ordeal, and I think it might be just the thing. My niece's physician recommended it during her lying-in," said Hettie whilst sending out a petition for forgiveness for the small falsehood.

Mrs. Baxter waved a vague hand toward the door. "Then go fetch it."

"But I cannot. That is the trouble," said Hettie with a frown, quickly piecing together what to say as the words tumbled forth. "It is only efficacious if made by a mother, and as you well know, I have no children."

"Then send the midwife," replied Mrs. Baxter before turning her attention back to Charity whilst rattling off various instructions for the poor mother-to-be in a manner that hadn't even a passing nod at calm or comfort.

"One of the great dangers during the ordeal is how the mother's humors are so dramatically imbalanced, and good health can only be maintained if we maintain balance," added Hettie, grasping at words before she truly knew what she was saying. "The ingredients are all perfectly chosen to do so, and its potency is increased when the ingredients are collected and brewed by a mother or sister—someone close to the mother-to-be who has gone through the ordeal herself and has a fine balance of humors."

Hettie paused long enough to consider the logic of that statement; she knew little about medicine and possessed only a passing understanding of what humors were other than the fact

that physicians insisted they required balancing. Yet, her assertion seemed sound enough.

“You are quite healthy and robust, and as you mentioned, you have delivered five healthy children without problem, which is quite the feat,” continued Hettie. “Surely, the best one to brew the tisane would be you.”

Mrs. Baxter paused in her fluffing of Charity’s pillows, a furrow in her brow. “You say your niece’s physician recommended it?”

Sending out a silent prayer for forgiveness, Hettie nodded. “He studied in Edinburgh, under some of the greatest physicians the university has ever produced, and she did as he prescribed and delivered a healthy baby boy without a single complication.”

No one in the room moved. The other ladies held their breath as Mrs. Baxter considered it, whilst Charity and Mrs. Johnson’s gazes bounced between the two, though Hettie’s full attention was fixed on Mrs. Baxter.

“I suppose it couldn’t hurt. As long as it isn’t a strong brew—”

“Not at all,” said Hettie, holding up her hands. “The tisane itself is brewed for quite some time, making it quite potent, but it is to be administered more like a draft—taken in spoonfuls.”

Mrs. Baxter glanced down at her patient. “I do not think I should leave her for long. She cannot do without me.”

“But if it will help me and my child, I can manage,” said Charity, reaching for her sister-in-law’s hand. “Please, Camilla.”

Placing her other hand on her hips, Mrs. Baxter turned a gimlet eye on the midwife and interloper. “Keep that window closed, and I will send a maid to stoke the fire. And ensure that Mrs. Callaghan doesn’t stir a toe out of bed.”

All three women held their breaths as they nodded and waited. Mrs. Baxter departed long enough to fetch paper and pencil from the others next door and returned with it at the

ready for Hettie's instructions. As she was the mother figure of the Stillwell family, household medicine had fallen to Hettie's shoulders, and she was familiar enough with the common ingredients used to rattle off an extensive list—none of which would cause Charity any harm, should Mrs. Baxter insist on pouring the drink down her throat.

To that, Hettie added quite a few instructions certain to draw out the time required to prepare it, lengthening it as much as she could without making Mrs. Baxter suspicious concerning the "medicine's" true intent.

Mrs. Baxter's brows furrowed. "This will take some time to gather and brew. Does it truly need to steep for an hour?"

Hettie nodded. "I am certain. I reviewed the instructions before coming here, and the physician was quite insistent on it. At least an hour. The longer it brews, the better. And make certain to stir it constantly. If it burns or boils over, you must begin again."

Giving a vague hum in response, Mrs. Baxter studied the hastily scratched out instructions as she strode from the room. Only once the door was shut firmly behind her and the sounds of her footsteps echoed down the stairs did anyone deign to breathe once more.

Mrs. Johnson covered her mouth, though her laughing eyes gave her away as Charity dissolved into giggles—though they were cut short when she groaned again, her body straining as another pain took hold. Hettie and the midwife hurried to her, taking hold of her hands and talking her through the agony until she relaxed once more into the bed.

"You are brilliant," said Charity with a halting chuckle. "I have tried being gentle and direct, but nothing will impede her doing as she wishes, yet you've managed to distract her long enough to give me some peace."

"It will only afford us a little time before she returns," said Hettie.

"But it is still time," murmured Mrs. Johnson, though the woman pinked when her quiet words drew the attention of the

other two.

Taking the seat beside the bed, Hettie grimaced. “I am a wicked person.”

“You are my savior,” replied Charity, squeezing her hand.

“She means well—”

“If she did, she would listen instead of demanding or frightening me into doing as she sees fit.” Charity’s brows knit together as she held fast to Hettie’s hand. “I know it was uncomfortable for you, and more unpleasantness will come before this is over, but I thank you for helping me.”

Wrapping the lady’s hand in both of hers, Hettie smiled. “Whatever you require. Though perhaps we’d best use this time to concoct other distractions. It will take her some time to gather and prepare the ingredients before she steeps it, but it has only bought us a few hours at most.”

Chapter 21

Grasping the tea tray, Hettie hefted it with a smile, giving the usual assurances to Charity before she slipped out the sitting room door. Once it was closed behind her, she slumped against the wood, her grin fading as she struggled to keep the tray upright. Just a moment was all she required. A tiny rest when she wasn't required to raise another's spirits.

Taking a deep breath, she tried to gather her strength, but it was difficult to straighten as her eyes fought the pull of gravity. Hands grasped the tray, relieving her of the burden and shocking Hettie enough to pull her from the stupor.

"I heard you stirring and wanted to see how things are faring," said Baxter, hefting the tray with a furrowed brow. "It has been so long..."

"The first child usually takes longer than most, and I fear that Charity still has quite some time left," said Hettie.

"Perhaps you ought to take a rest? I had a bedchamber prepared, if you wish to freshen up or lie down for a few minutes," he said, nodding down the hall.

"That is kind of you, but I couldn't think of leaving her. There is no reason to be alarmed yet, but in her state, she is fretful and exhausted. I can rest when it is over." But despite her best efforts, a yawn emerged, long and deep.

Setting the tray down, Baxter drew her into his arms, and Hettie's good sense didn't have the strength to be concerned about the propriety of such an action.

"Thank you for this," he whispered, holding her close, and Hettie welcomed the embrace.

"And thank you," she said, burrowing into his hold. "This is doing far more to restore me than lying down."

"There is little else I can do."

For a long moment, they stood there in silence, and Hettie let her eyes close for a moment. Despite the exhaustion

plaguing her, standing in his arms made her heart beat faster.

“Isn’t this cozy?”

Hettie jerked out of Baxter’s hold, and the pair turned to see Mr. Goswick standing in the library doorway, his arms folded as he stared at her.

“I thought you were here to help my sister,” he added with a narrowed look at her.

Drawing in a sharp breath, Hettie refused to fidget or flinch away from his look, though it was strange to see him in such a light. Having escorted him and Alice about town to various engagements, Hettie had spent quite a few hours in his company, and she’d never expected such coldness from him.

“I am here to help her,” she said, nodding at the tray.

“Clearly,” he replied in a dry tone, his gaze lingering on the small space between them.

“Remember your manners, son,” said Baxter, his brows lowering as he stared at his son.

Mr. Goswick scoffed. “A lecture on manners from a man embracing a woman outside the room in which his daughter is struggling for her life—all whilst he and his family are mourning his recently deceased wife?”

With another dismissive huff, he turned and disappeared into the library once more, leaving Baxter and Hettie to stare after him.

“I apologize,” he whispered, but Hettie shook her head.

“Do not fret—”

A groan, sharp and strong, drew their attention, and Hettie pushed open the door to find Charity grimacing and reaching for her leg as Mrs. Johnson began to massage the lady’s calf.

“Just a little cramp,” said the midwife. “It’s bound to happen from time to time. It might be good to get you up again.”

But Charity groaned and tears gathered in her eyes. Hurrying to her bedside, Hettie and Mrs. Johnson worked together to help her to her feet. The lady's breaths shuddered, and she limped along as the others carried the majority of her weight.

With the curtains pulled open, warm morning light now poured through the window, and though the brightness helped to lighten everyone's spirits, the long and weary night had left them with little energy to spare. Hettie prayed (not for the first time) that this would soon be over.

"That's better," said Mrs. Johnson as the muscles began to release, though Charity's tears didn't ebb.

"I want Thomas. I want to be home. I want to be done." She held fast to Hettie, her chin trembling, and shook her head. "I cannot do this any longer. Please..."

"You are so strong, Charity. So very, very strong. I know you can do this," whispered Hettie. "In just a little bit, you will have your dear little baby. Sweet Charmas or Thomity."

The silly names earned Hettie a faint and watery chuckle. With a heavy sigh, Charity stepped to the birthing cot and leaned over it, resting her elbows against the mattress, and Hettie stood beside her, rubbing small circles along her lower back.

"Please tell me it will be over soon," said Charity, turning to look at Mrs. Johnson, but the poor midwife had no happy answers for her. Nature took its time, and there was no rushing it along.

"What is going on here?" cried Mrs. Baxter as she swept into the chamber. Her eyes were wide as she gaped at the room. "Are you trying to harm our dear Charity?"

Striding to her sister-in-law's side, Mrs. Baxter elbowed past Hettie to take Charity by the arm and guide her into bed.

"Please, I do not wish to sit right now," said Charity. "My legs are cramping."

"Nonsense," said Mrs. Baxter. "Mrs. Flemming, a dear friend of mine, insisted on standing and walking about, and

she lost her child. To this day, she swears that a woman shouldn't stir from her bed before, during, or after the ordeal. Or do you wish to risk your babe?"

"Of course not!" Charity's eyes widened as new tears began to gather. With a pleading gaze, she looked to Hettie, but before she could say a word, Mrs. Johnson came to the rescue.

"Mrs. Baxter, we require new bed linens. Perhaps you can help us refresh them—"

"No!" Having deposited Charity back in bed, Mrs. Baxter turned around, her hands on her hips as she glared at the two of them. "I am not leaving again on some fool's errand. I was only supposed to close my eyes for a quarter of an hour, and you let me sleep through most of the night and half the morning. If you wish for something, do it yourself. I shan't stir from Charity's side."

Stalking toward the window, Mrs. Baxter tugged at the curtains, ensuring that the heavy drapery was closed tight against even the slightest shred of light, all while making a string of dire predictions about what would happen should they not listen to her sage advice. With each wretched story, Charity grew paler, her eyes pleading with Hettie to do something.

Yet what could she do in her position? The family detested her enough already. To confront Mrs. Baxter would be the death knell for her and Baxter. If they had any chance to win his children over, she mustn't cause a stir. She mustn't.

Coming back to Charity's bedside, Mrs. Baxter took Hettie's now vacant seat. "Now, if you two would call for a maid to stoke the fire, we can set this place to rights. Hopefully, Charity and her child will not be made to suffer for the damage you've done."

The lady in question turned wild eyes to Hettie, and Charity's chin trembled anew. At that moment, Hettie knew she had no choice—or rather, she knew what her choice needed to be, and no amount of fear on her own behalf could keep her from making it. What would come, would come, and

Hettie only hoped and prayed that it would not destroy her and Baxter's joy in the process.

"Thank you for your concern, Mrs. Baxter, but we have everything well in hand," said Hettie, moving toward the door and opening it. "Perhaps you should join the others in the library."

"I have no intention of leaving," came the cold reply. "Whatever you are to my father-in-law, I assure you, you have no right to order me about."

Hettie held up her hands in placation and sought words that were both firm and gentle. "You have done so much already, but all Charity requires now is peace and quiet."

"Charity?" Mrs. Baxter said, her voice and brows rising at that. "Are you so ill-mannered that you would take such a liberty?"

"As I took the first liberty in asking her to be here, I think it's fitting that she should do so," said Charity, but it was as though Mrs. Baxter didn't hear the words at all.

Patting her sister-in-law's hand, she shook her head. "Do not distress yourself, my dear. I will ensure you are not bothered any longer by this harpy." Mrs. Baxter rose to her feet and motioned for the door. "It is time for you to leave, Miss Stillwell. You are not wanted here."

"Yes, she is," said Charity, her voice rising to match the other's. Lifting herself in her bed, she glanced between the other ladies, and Mrs. Johnson moved to her side to assist.

"Hush, my dear. You do not know what you are saying. You are so exhausted, it is little wonder," said Mrs. Baxter.

Drawing in a deep breath, Hettie grabbed hold of her resolve and took the plunge. "Enough, Mrs. Baxter. You need to leave. I insist. You are distressing Charity, and I will not have it."

Mouth hanging open, Mrs. Baxter gaped at her. "*You will not have it?* Who are you to say anything? You do not belong here."

“What is going on?”

Four little words and Hettie felt the ground drop out from beneath her. It was bad enough to face down Mrs. Baxter, but when the lady’s husband appeared in the doorway with Mr. Goswick on his heels, dread settled into her stomach, weighing her down.

“Are you causing trouble?” asked young Mr. Baxter, his gaze boring into Hettie.

From her bed, Charity stared at the gathering group, her breaths coming faster as she surrendered to another pain. Gripping her middle, she curled in on herself, and Hettie hurried to her bed, sitting on the edge as she took Charity’s hand in hers.

“She is distressing Charity and demanding that I leave,” said Mrs. Baxter, jabbing a finger toward Hettie.

The trio began speaking over one another, oblivious to Charity’s pain. Hettie could hardly catch one word in three, though she wished she couldn’t understand that much, for none of it was complimentary to either the speaker or the object of their ire. Baxter peered into the room from behind them, but they formed a veritable wall, blocking him. Hettie saw his lips moving, but his words were swallowed up in the cacophony.

“Stop that this instant!” shouted Charity.

Mrs. Baxter quickly moved to her side, attempting to push Hettie away. The noise doubled as voices shouted over one another, demanding and conjecturing in a flurry of hard sounds. Hettie tried to hold onto her equanimity, but when Charity met her gaze once more, her eyes pleading for assistance, Hettie’s patience fractured into a dozen little pieces.

Whatever the cost to her, she had to help Charity.

“Enough!” Hettie’s voice boomed above the fracas like the blast of a cannon, stunning everyone enough that silence fell. With a glance at Mrs. Johnson, who moved to take her place once vacated, Hettie rose to face the rest of them.

“Leave! Now!” Hettie pointed toward the door, and the others watched her with varying degrees of shock and horror.

“How dare you,” said Mrs. Baxter. “Charity wishes me here—”

“She asked me and Mrs. Johnson to manage things. You can wait with the others in the library,” replied Hettie.

Mrs. Baxter looked to Charity, but if she expected support, she found none.

“Go, Camilla. I am tired and just wish for this all to be over. Leave me to it. Now.”

Gaping, Mrs. Baxter turned a hard gaze to Hettie. “You have poisoned my sister-in-law against me. Charity is not in her right mind, and you’ve used that to worm your way into her good opinion.”

Pride sparked in Hettie’s heart, burning hot and wild as it demanded that she level the truth on Mrs. Baxter’s irritating shoulders—it was she who had earned her ejection from the lying-in room—but it would do no good, and the only thing that mattered was Charity’s comfort.

“Leave. Now,” repeated Hettie, stepping forward to herd them out. The rest of them stared at her, and she shouted once more, “Out!”

With unyielding steps, she nudged Mrs. Baxter toward the door. The lady mounted more objections, but for all Mrs. Baxter’s bluster, Hettie was certain the truth was blazing in her hard gaze. At this juncture, Hettie was quite ready to fall into a scrap with the woman if she didn’t move, and Mrs. Baxter wasn’t determined enough to face down a heftier lady.

Hettie sent a silent prayer of thanks for Baxter as he forced the group back into the library. The sounds of their discontent echoed through the door, but once it was closed, the sound was muffled enough that Hettie could breathe again. Her fingers felt weak, as though all shouting and anger still reverberated through her, and she kept her hand on the door handle, allowing herself a moment to gather her nerves.

Chapter 22

A sob shattered Hettie's fledgling peace, and she turned to see Charity covering her face. Hurrying to her side, she helped Mrs. Johnson adjust the pillows and blankets into their proper spots, all while she tried to think of something soothing to say.

"All is well," she finally managed. "Do not let them upset you."

Charity's breaths came in ragged gasps, and she frowned at herself. "I am not usually so overwrought, but I cannot bear another moment of this. I hurt from head to toe, this stubborn baby will not come, and my family is being absolutely wretched!"

Seized with another pain, she moaned, and Hettie quickly returned to her seat, taking hold of Charity's hand. The grip tightened around her fingers until Hettie was certain one of her fingers might break, yet she kept her expression calm and impassible. Charity's eyes were squeezed shut as she fought through this bout, but Hettie still maintained the facade, counting the seconds until Charity relaxed once more.

Falling back into the pillows, she lifted her free hand to pinch her nose. The pains were lasting longer and coming quicker, so surely Charity was drawing nearer to the end, though it was still some ways off. Hettie only prayed that it would come faster for everyone's sake.

Charity's breaths were ragged, and Hettie patted her hand, drawing the lady's attention. Taking in a deep lungful of air, she urged the anxious mother to do the same. Though Charity scowled for a moment, she did as she was bidden, and with several long inhales, they were able to slow her breathing once more. But even when she was calmed, the lady's gaze was bleak as she watched Hettie.

"I apologize for my family, and thank you for not leaving me—though you have every reason to wish the lot of us to Hades. They are so terrible to you."

Hettie merely smiled. “I know that this has been a shock to your siblings, so I cannot fault them, and it is little wonder that I draw most of their ire, as it is easier to hate a stranger than one’s own family. As I adore two members of the Baxter clan, I can only hope the rest will acclimate in time.”

But rather than the strain easing from her expression, Charity’s brows pinched together, her eyes as bleak as ever. “They will not.”

“You say that with such certainty.” Hettie affected a light tone, though it did nothing to clear the worry from Charity’s gaze.

“I know them well, and they cannot stand the thought of Father being happy with a woman who is not our mother.”

Hettie’s brows rose. “And you are?”

“I know better than most how capricious and calculating Mama was. They only knew the lady who did whatever she must to ensure their futures, fostering matches of which she approved and placing them on paths she deemed worthy of her children. My mother was not wicked or evil. She was simply selfish in her endeavors, and as long as you did as she wished, she could be a lovely person.”

Shaking her head, Charity huffed. “I do not doubt my siblings saw the darker side of her personality at times, but for the most part, they were quite content to follow Mama’s proddings. I am the only child whose plans fell to pieces, and I became the physical embodiment of her failures, which shame I compounded by marrying ‘far below’ me. When Thomas and I announced our engagement, she railed like a banshee, raging as I had never thought possible of her.”

Brows furrowed, she added, “She attended the wedding only because it was expected of her, but the moment the vows were spoken, she never looked at or spoke to me again. The deed was done, and the battle lost, so she erased me from her life.”

Though Charity spoke with little emotion, Hettie sensed the pain beneath it. With a tremulous smile, she added in a

falsely bright tone, “Thankfully, our engagement was of short duration, for our good friends gave us a marriage license as a present, so we didn’t need to wait as the banns were read, and I was spared weeks of such treatment. But even when she was at death’s door, she sent words of wisdom and loving farewells to each of her children except me.”

Hettie didn’t know what to say to such a confession. Sifting through the possibilities, she searched for something—anything—to say that might ease Charity’s heartache. But there was nothing to erase that hurt.

Then another pain took hold, distracting them both

“Breathe,” said Hettie, and though her patient gave her another scowl, Charity did as bidden, forcing her lungs to work even as instinct had her holding her breath. Together, they breathed through the pain, and once it passed, Charity collapsed once more, staring up at the ceiling.

“I don’t think my siblings ever saw our mother in that light—” she began again.

“We do not need to speak of this,” said Hettie, but Charity shook her head.

“You need to understand.”

“I—”

“You cannot let them get the best of you.” Gripping Hettie’s hand tightly once more, Charity turned her gaze to her. “The others never understood Mama’s cruel side. Even if we were to tell them the truth, they’d never believe it, for Mama always doted on them, and they loved her in return. And in their minds, our parents had a good and happy marriage simply because Papa never raised a commotion. They will always view this as a betrayal because it will shatter that illusion.”

Hettie drew in a breath as the weight of those words settled on her.

“Promise me...” Charity’s teeth ground together as another pain began again. “Promise me you will not allow him to surrender. Papa has grown so used to giving in to demands

that I fear he won't hold firm. But he deserves to be happy. You both do..."

But Charity's words were cut short when another moan escaped as she strained against the pain.

*

Proverbs warned against eavesdropping, cautioning those wayward ears of what they may hear, but as Baxter's position was not born of curiosity, he hadn't thought anything of taking up a post beside the door to Charity's lying-in chamber. Standing guard and dissuading the others from interrupting was the only thing he could do for the ladies inside.

However, good intentions didn't keep him from overhearing Charity's words.

As much as her concern warmed the cold corners of his heart, the motivation behind it left him far more chilled than before. Did she think so little of his conviction that he would throw Hettie over simply because his children were unhappy? Yet Baxter couldn't deny just how much their opinions had swayed him of late or how close he'd come to parting from her. His children were the very reason he hadn't pursued Hettie from the very first moment he'd met her.

With a sigh, he leaned his head against the wall and acknowledged that even his reason for being in the hall had less to do with Charity and more with the discomfort of being in the library with his sons and daughter-in-law lying in wait.

Hamilton Baxter was a coward, but he hadn't always been. True, he was never one for grand adventures or scrapes, and he'd never been called bold or dashing, but being reserved was not the same as being weak-willed.

Those thoughts followed him as he rose to his feet, pacing the hallway in front of the door. Baxter's thoughts swirled as he listened to the hum of voices from inside the room and the sounds of his daughter's cries. His hands clasped

behind his back, and he stared at his feet as they pulled him back and forth.

The minutes ticked away, feeding into the hours until the voices inside grew more agitated. Baxter paused at the door, his ears trained for the sounds inside, and he couldn't help but remember a day not so very long ago when he'd listened for Charity's first cries.

His daughter groaned, a bellowing moan ripped the air, and then that most beautiful of sounds followed as the babe cleared its lungs, announcing to the world its birth. Baxter beamed at the door, his heart swelling at the sound. How he longed to push it open and see for himself. Only knowing that Charity didn't wish him there kept him from doing just that.

It seemed another hour as he waited at the threshold before the door opened, and Mrs. Johnson gave a start upon finding him in the doorway. Stepping aside, she motioned him in, though Baxter hardly noticed the midwife as his gaze fell to Charity. She was wrapped up in her bed, her cheeks flushed and her hair cemented to her temples in dark curls, but she beamed at her father and gazed down at the bundle in her arms.

"Might I introduce you to your granddaughter, Miss Bridget Callaghan," she whispered as she brushed a gentle touch against the babe's cheek. "Isn't she perfect?"

The child looked much like all babes did at such a moment, all puffy and red, as worn through as her mama, yet still, she was perfect.

"She certainly is," he said, taking the empty seat by her bed.

From the other side, Hettie stood over Charity, wiping her hand on a cloth as she gazed down upon mother and daughter. She said not a word, but her bright expression said far better than words just how pleased she was. Baxter's own eyes grew misty, his grin fairly cracking in two as the joy of the moment swelled inside his chest.

With a gentle touch to Charity's shoulder, Hettie nodded toward the door. "I'll be outside if you need anything."

Catching her hand and holding it in place, Charity gazed up at her with tears thick in her voice. "Thank you for everything."

"It was my pleasure."

Turning toward the door, Hettie stepped around the edge of the bed, and when her hand brushed Baxter's arm, he snatched hold of it, drawing her gaze to his. There were so many things he longed to say, but none of them felt grand enough for the sentiments roiling in his chest. He felt ready to burst under the strength of it all. Baxter held her gaze and lifted her hand to his lips, pressing a kiss to her palm, which earned him a pretty little blush from his lady. And in his heart, he said the words he longed to speak.

A creak from the hallway had Hettie pulling free just as Camilla came into view with her husband and Stanley close on her heels.

"May we come in? Or am I too much of a bother?" she asked in a cold tone.

Charity didn't bother to hide her sigh. "I never said you were a bother, but please, do come in."

Sparing Hettie a narrowed look, Camilla moved to the opposite side of the bed and gave her sister-in-law a pat on the shoulder. "Think nothing of it. I know how easy it is to become confused and agitated during such moments. I lay not an ounce of blame on you."

Though not named, it was clear from Mrs. Baxter's tone and the dismissive glance she gave to Hettie just who held all the blame.

"Would you like to hold her?" asked Charity, and Camilla beamed.

"Of course. Please let me see your little darling."

Carefully transferring Bridget to her aunt, Charity relaxed into the pillows as Camilla took the empty seat opposite

Baxter.

“I cannot wait to bring the children,” she added. “The girls will be thrilled, though I fear Dahlia has it in her head that the baby will be a poppet to play with. She was so disappointed when Wesley turned out to be a boy, and she’s been desperate for a baby girl ever since.”

“Yes, well, perhaps we might wait a few days before you storm the castle,” replied Charity. “Give poor Biddie at least a few days to acclimate to her new surroundings before we inundate her with Baxters.”

Camilla gave her a wry smile. “Thankfully, I have broken Opal of the habit of poking babies in the eyes. Wesley didn’t care for it one bit, and I doubt Bridget will, either.”

“She is a beauty, Charity,” said Matthias, coming to stand behind his wife as Stanley joined them at the foot of the bed. “You and Thomas should be proud of her. She will be turning heads when she’s grown.”

“Surprisingly enough, I am proud of her regardless of whether or not she’s a beauty,” replied Charity in a dry tone, but her brother ignored the jab, and for the first time in some time, Baxter’s children gathered together in peace to welcome the newest member of their family.

Baxter’s attention drifted from the happy picture his children made, but when he glanced about the room, he found no sign of Hettie. And the perfection of the moment dimmed a touch.

Chapter 23

The world was silent. The lingering scent of wassail and gingerbread permeated the chamber, mixing with the paper and leather fragrance found in every library. In one hand, Baxter held his sketchbook; the edges of the pages were already curling, giving it far more of an aged look than it had earned. But for all the effort he'd put into sharpening the pencil to a fine-pointed perfection, it hovered over the page without touching.

Baxter's gaze drifted to the window as the daylight slipped away. In summer, the view could serve as inspiration, but the blanket of white robbed it of any artistic merit. Snowflakes fell from the heavens, pirouetting through the air in a delicate ballet before coming to rest upon the ground. The trees, once adorned with vibrant foliage, now stood as skeletal sentinels, their branches heavy with the weight of the glistening snow.

A painter could capture that beauty. Though the world was washed in whites, it was not as monochromatic as the untrained eye believed. Snow was a rainbow of variations; blues, purples, and browns, all blended to give the color depth and texture. His simple pencil could never do it justice.

Setting down the pencil and paper, Baxter removed his feet from the ottoman and straightened at the echo of a faint cry—the tinny, squeaky sound of one just learning to use her voice; Charity murmured to her child, the hum of her voice carrying through the walls but none of her words. The assurance that they were both happy and hale settled into his heart, stoking the fires of his gratitude. His child and grandchild were safe, and Baxter was grateful for each little sign that all was well.

Rising to his feet, he strode from the library and hovered at the lying-in chamber door, turning his ear to the wood to hear Charity humming a little tune. After her ordeal, she ought to be resting, which kept him from knocking.

“Is someone there?” she called.

Not bothering to wait for another prompt, Baxter inched open the door and peeked through.

“I thought I heard someone,” she said with a smile, motioning for him to enter.

“I do not want to disturb you while you are resting,” he said, even while he stepped in and moved to her bedside.

“For all that I was exhausted before, I feel quite revived now,” she said, her gaze fixed on the child nestled in her arms. “I may have fibbed and convinced Hettie and Mrs. Johnson to sleep by claiming I would do the same, but I do not think I could if I tried.”

Hands tucked behind him, Baxter stood beside her, gazing down at the pretty picture mother and child made. Charity smiled, her eyes never leaving the babe’s face, and it was as though a bonfire burned inside her; despite being dressed in her nightclothes and her hair tumbling free of its plait, Charity looked radiant, and Baxter wished he could capture it in a drawing.

“Would you like to hold her?” she asked.

Baxter shifted in place. “I wouldn’t wish to presume—”

“It isn’t a presumption, Papa. I offered,” she replied with a smile. “Camilla and the others monopolized her before, and I know you haven’t held Biddie yet.”

Not needing another prodding, he leaned down and gently took the proffered child into his arms before sliding into the seat at his daughter’s bedside. As Biddie was bundled in a blanket, she looked much bulkier than she was, and Baxter felt like a giant next to her. She felt no more than a bit of fluff in his arms, and all scrunched as she was, Biddie looked like a little bean.

With his free hand, he brushed his fingers through the dark fuzz enveloping her head, and a single eye cracked open at the touch, closing again the next moment.

“It is strange to ask to hold a baby,” he said with a smile. “They are so delicate and precious that it seems so presumptuous to do so. I would never ask to hold someone’s

pocketbook, and no one would think to give it over. Yet a child is passed about with little thought.”

Charity gave him a wry smile. “I suppose I hadn’t considered it in that light before, but you, *Grandpapa*, have every right to ask it at any time.”

Bouncing the little bundle in his arms, Baxter studied Biddie’s features. “She is a sweetie, Charity.”

Her mama beamed. “That she is. Hettie helped me to write to Thomas to tell him the news, but I fear I am not a wordsmith and cannot think how to describe her.” She straightened, her brows rising. “Would you draw him a portrait?”

“I haven’t the skill for that,” he said with a wince.

“I’ve seen you sketching away in that book, and though you try to hide it, I have caught sight of a few of them. You are talented—”

“You are being generous.”

Charity paused, her brows furrowing and her smile strained. “I do not believe I am, but if you are uncomfortable with the idea, I do not wish to press the issue. It was just a little flight of fancy. That is all.”

Yet for all that she feigned indifference, Baxter had seen the joy in her expression when she’d proposed the idea, and he couldn’t brush it away so easily. It wasn’t as though she could afford to pay for a professional to capture Biddie’s likeness, and surely Thomas would cherish any portrait—however flawed.

“If it will make you happy, I would be honored to do so,” said Baxter, and Charity’s expression lightened once more.

“Truly? I do not wish to pester you into it—”

“Think nothing of it, though you ought not to hope for a grand rendering. I am only just beginning again, and I have never attempted anything like this...” But Baxter’s meandering caveats came to a halt when Charity leaned forward to take his free hand in hers.

“I will love it no matter how monstrous you make my child look.”

Baxter smiled, as she meant him to. But in the silence that followed, he found his lightness of spirit fading and no amount of cuddling Biddie would restore it when questions prodded his thoughts, demanding he ask them.

“What is it, Papa?” asked Charity with a furrowed brow.

Waving it away, he rocked Biddie from side to side and brushed a finger against her tiny cheek, though that touch elicited no response from the sleeping babe. Yet once those thoughts planted themselves in his mind, Baxter couldn’t dismiss them entirely. With everything that had happened in the last few hours, he’d been granted a small reprieve, but sitting before the source of those questions made the issue impossible to ignore.

Charity’s words to Hettie hadn’t been any harsher than ones he’d directed inwards, but hearing them voiced aloud by another was difficult—enough so that Baxter couldn’t help but turn his thoughts to them again and again.

“Do you truly think I am weak?” Baxter’s question was clear, cutting through the quiet in the room, and Charity stared at him. Drawing in a deep breath, he continued, “I overheard you speaking to Hettie after she ejected Camilla from your room.”

With wide eyes, Charity sat in silence for a long moment. “I fear my memory of the conversation is muddled. After hours of struggling, my wits are a bit addled.”

“I am not offended, Charity. But please, speak the truth. Do you think I am weak?”

Charity drew in a breath and held it for a long moment, and Baxter waited, allowing her to gather her thoughts.

“Weak is not the proper word, Papa.” She paused, taking another moment before shifting in her cot so that she faced him more fully. “I recall when the decision to let Juniper Court was made, and it was not done lightly. Mama fought you every step of the way, yet you remained firm. Strong. Despite her

badgering, you did not relent. So, no. I do not think you are weak.”

Another long pause followed that, though it was clear from her tone and expression that Charity was not finished. It was easy to see from the difficulty with which she attempted to describe her feelings that they did not reflect well on him, else she wouldn't take such care to cobble her words together.

“Yet throughout my life, I watched you concede to Mama again and again,” she finally said. “Weak is not the word, but I cannot help but think you surrendered too readily at times.”

Baxter frowned. “I couldn't fight her on every decision.”

“Not every one, but surely you could've been more vocal. Kept her from having her way in all things.”

“And what ought I to have done, Charity?” he asked. “Turn our home into a battlefield? I know too well how wretched that is for children, and I couldn't allow you to be raised in such a home—”

“But had you not allowed her free rein, perhaps things might've gotten better. She might've softened. She might not have led my brothers and sisters down the path of vanity and snobbery.”

Baxter paused at that, considering the greatest concern he'd had throughout the years.

“I did my best, Charity,” he murmured.

Strange that as apt as he was to castigate himself, hearing another question those decisions somehow gave clarity and allowed the certainty that had driven those decisions long ago to resurface, filling him with as much peace as he could find in his unenviable position.

“One cannot coerce or manipulate another into a change of heart, Charity. People have to want to be better on their own, and no amount of kindness or firmness will alter that. Your mother was content with the person she was, and no amount of action on my part would've shifted her from her course. I could only control myself, so I did what I could to

live a good life, honoring my vows and treating my wife and children with respect and kindness.”

Charity gave a vague hum of acceptance as she settled back into her pillows and studied the ceiling with a furrowed brow.

After a long pause, she conceded, “I can see the merit in that, Papa. Mama was stubborn to the core, and I doubt anything would’ve curbed her behavior. To acknowledge that and behave accordingly is not weak. If anything, I think it shows great strength of character and far more patience and humility than I could ever manage—”

“I feel I ought to remind you that you were quite able to maintain a peaceable relationship with her.”

“Before I married Thomas, that is,” she replied, slanting a look in his direction. They shared a little smile, but Charity paused for a long moment, clearly working her way toward what she wished to say. “You chose the peaceable path, and that is admirable, Papa. I do not know what I would’ve done in your place. However, I am concerned for you.”

She paused and shook her head. “Things are worse than before, even though Mama is gone. The moment any conflict arises, you shrink in on yourself, cringing like a puppy waiting to be kicked. You allow your sons to speak to you as though you are an imbecile and incapable of rational thought, and there is something in your posture and expression that makes it feel as though you believe you deserve it.”

But he did.

Baxter managed to keep the words from leaving his lips, but that thought was so immediate and natural that it nearly escaped. It felt as though the window sat open, allowing a frosty breeze to weave its way through him and chill him to the bone. Shifting in his seat, he wondered if Charity could see the realization stamped in his expression, blaring the truth for her to see. Baxter lowered his face to his granddaughter, though his vision blurred, unable to focus on her sweet features.

“Papa,” whispered Charity, taking hold of his free hand once more. “I do not mean to distress you, but it pains me to see you cowed so often. You are such a good man with a kind heart. Whatever you may think or believe, you deserve better. You do.”

Pride was a strange thing. For all that he had defended himself moments ago from Charity’s assertions about the past and his behavior and held firm to his justifications, Baxter’s doubts resurfaced to bat aside her comfort, demanding that he ignore the logic he’d just shared in favor of the crushing guilt that he’d allowed his family’s holdings to be decimated by his wife’s spending.

Baxter’s choices had been limited, and he’d done his best to make the proper one. Yet still, his pride insisted that he could’ve done more—though he couldn’t think what it might’ve been. That was the nature of shame; it held fast to one’s heart and soul without giving any answers to loosen its grip.

“I do not think you weak, Papa,” said Charity, pulling his thoughts back to her. “But I am afraid a lifetime of keeping the peace has taught you bad habits.”

Baxter tried to think of something to say, but it was impossible to deny the truth of her words.

Squeezing his hand, she held his gaze, pleading with her eyes for him to listen. “If you overheard me speaking to Hettie, then I hope you heard the whole of it. For I meant what I said. I do not want you to give in to Stanley or the others. There is nothing wrong with your finding happiness, so do not let them or old habits—”

But her words were cut short when the door opened and Camilla swept into the room with a playful scowl.

“What are you doing up, Charity? You are supposed to be resting,” she said with a little wag of her finger. Then, turning her gaze to her father-in-law, she shook her head. “You should know better than to bother her. She needs to sleep.”

“She wanted company.” Baxter fought not to cringe at the timidity in his voice, but it was impossible not to hear it—or to deny the instinct that pushed him to fidget in his seat like a scolded schoolboy.

“I think Charity has proven she doesn’t know what is good for her,” replied Camilla with a laugh as she took Bridget from his arms. “For her health and that of the baby, they need to rest.”

Baxter tried to formulate an argument but struggled for the words. Glancing toward his daughter, he found her watching him with the slightest furrow of her brow, her eyes filling with disappointment. That, as much as Camilla’s badgering, had him rising to his feet and hurrying out of the chamber. But he refused to go far, reclaiming his seat in the library.

Though once again he held his sketchbook and pencil in hand, his attention was far from the work he’d been doing and was fixed on that conversation. How long would he allow the habits of the past to dictate his present? Would he allow them to darken his future?

Chapter 24

Intentions were slippery things, planting themselves in one's thoughts, seemingly firm and immovable, but when one tried to lay hold of them, they wriggled away. Hettie had meant to avail herself of the bedchamber only to freshen up. Charity might've been the one to do the majority of the work, but that hadn't left Hettie untouched by the hours of strain and sleep deprivation.

A few dabs of the warm washcloth had been enough to convince her to sit on the edge of the bed. Her arms were so very tired, and it eased some of the strain. She closed her eyes as she wiped at her face and neck, and she couldn't help but notice just how comfortable the bed was. She just needed a moment. That was all.

While so many others reveled in their slumber, Hettie often wished it wasn't a necessary part of life. It was difficult to take much pleasure in the act when falling to sleep took effort. If she managed her nighttime routine properly, it was possible to slip off into sleep within thirty minutes or perhaps an hour. To drift off immediately was such a foreign concept that Hettie hadn't thought it possible when she rested her head against the pillow.

Just a few minutes to relax, and she would be right as rain once more.

Hettie's eyes jerked open to find the world suddenly cloaked in darkness, as the afternoon sun had vanished from sight. If not for the lit fire, it would've been difficult for her to find her way around the room. Saints above, her foggy thoughts couldn't sort out what had happened, other than to acknowledge that time must've passed in that blink.

Stretching her back, she used the faint light from the fireplace to locate her slippers once more and find the door handle. The house felt empty, for only the faint sound of voices broke the silence, though she knew there must be others about. Following it back to the sitting room, she stopped outside Charity's lying-in chamber. The door was cracked just

enough for her to hear the people inside, and Hettie paused at the sound of her name.

“I do not care what you think of Miss Stillwell. She’s abominable,” murmured Mrs. Baxter, though her tone shifted as she cooed at baby Bridget.

“Enough, Camilla,” replied Charity with a sigh. “You’ve already spoken at length—”

“But can you believe her audacity? To ban me from this dear child’s birth? To leave you without aid or companionship throughout your ordeal?” The chair creaked as Mrs. Baxter rocked the child. “And you will never believe what she said to me!”

“I cannot imagine.”

“When I returned to the library after everything was concluded, I found her there with a tea tray, and she looked at me and said, ‘Would you care for milk and sugar?’” Mrs. Baxter spoke those words in a haughty mimicry, ending with a disgusted huff of annoyance as though that was the worst thing imaginable.

“The monster. How dare she offer you a bit of refreshment,” replied Charity in a monotone.

Mrs. Baxter scoffed. “She is playing hostess as though she has any right to do so. Making herself quite at home where she does not belong.”

“As I am the closest thing to a hostess this household has, and I was unavailable to see to your comfort, I think it was very kind of her to do what she can to assist the family.” Charity paused and added, “Frankly, I would love for someone to make me tea with a heaping dose of milk and sugar.”

“I wouldn’t care for any amount of tea if it was made by such a person,” replied Mrs. Baxter with a scoff. “I cannot believe Father has had his head turned by such a woman. I knew he lacked common sense, but surely even he should know better than to set his sights on Miss Stillwell.”

That was enough to have Hettie turning away. There was no good to be had in the conversation, and fetching Charity the

drink she desired would be of far more assistance.

But Biddie's cries stopped Hettie in her place; the sound was so wonderful and welcome that she couldn't help but marvel at the child's healthy lungs. And Biddie's strong cries were like those of a warrior, ensuring the healthy babe wouldn't waste away in the coming days. It was too soon to feel entirely at peace, but Hettie sent a silent prayer of gratitude heavenward; every time mother and babe made it through the ordeal was worthy of celebration.

“Really, Charity.”

Mrs. Baxter's tone had Hettie halting in place once more, for it held far too much chastisement to be ignored. Having heard Mrs. Baxter wax poetic about what Charity ought to do once the ordeal was complete, Hettie felt more than a small sense of dread at those two words. Especially when they were preceded by Biddie's sudden silence.

“It is one thing for you to hire a midwife rather than a proper physician, but to go without a wet nurse is unacceptable,” said Mrs. Baxter.

Hettie knew that tone all too well, for she'd heard it whenever mothers gathered to speak about children; the world always had those who set themselves above others, whether through family ties, finances, profession, virtuousness, appearances, or even motherhood.

Whether it was before, during, or after the birth, those venerable women never did anything of value to assist their sisters in arms, preferring to dole out “kindly” meant advice. They possessed the answers to every question and exacted judgments upon unwitting victims, convinced that all children were identical and that their philosophies concerning the rearing of children were the only valid method to rear perfect offspring—never mind that theirs were often little terrors whose greatest achievements in life were to become replicas of their pompous parents.

Hettie refused to step into another battle, but neither could she move away as Mrs. Baxter continued to speak.

“It is so crass to feed one’s child oneself. I shudder to think what your mother would say if she saw you now,” said Mrs. Baxter with a falsely bright laugh. “Besides, a mother’s milk is tainted from the ordeal, and it is far better for baby to have a wet nurse during the first few weeks. To say nothing of the fact that it slows your ability to heal. I would hate for either of you to be harmed—”

“It is a moot point, Camilla. I cannot afford a wet nurse.”

“Nonsense,” replied Mrs. Baxter in a dismissive tone. “You can borrow the money. Why else does credit exist?”

The more time she spent with Charity, the more Hettie saw Baxter in the lady, and never was that more evident when she responded with far more patience than Hettie could’ve mustered in such a moment.

“I thank you for the advice, but Thomas makes enough to support us in our modest lifestyle. I have no interest in living beyond our means—”

“You could simply offer the woman room and board in exchange for her nursing the baby—though I think it is far better to send the child to a family in the country until the babe is weaned. My children benefited greatly from it. In fact, I just received a letter from Wesley’s caretakers, and he is thriving. Once he is weaned, he’ll return to the family all the happier and healthier for his time in the country. Surely your child’s health is more important than a few pounds—”

Hettie was pushing open the door before she had time to rethink her action, but she could not remain silent a moment longer. The ladies both glanced at the intruder, though Charity’s expression was more one of relief than irritation (as opposed to her sister-in-law, who was most certainly feeling the latter).

“Mrs. Baxter, what a surprise,” said Hettie with a bright smile. “That is kind of you to visit Charity, but as you well know, she needs to conserve her strength—”

“She would conserve more strength if she chose the wiser course and hired a wet nurse,” said Mrs. Baxter, matching

Hettie's false levity.

Just at that moment, Charity struggled with a great yawn, which set Biddie squirming and squawking before quieting once more when her mother adjusted her hold and settled again so the child could enjoy her dinner.

"No doubt you are correct, Camilla. You always are, but I fear I am simply exhausted. I would like to close my eyes for a few minutes," said Charity. "Though I will call should I require your assistance."

With none-too-subtle nudges, Hettie herded the lady toward the door, but before she followed Mrs. Baxter out, she moved to Charity's bedside. The tea tray sitting there was still hot enough for her to make the lady a quick cup. Then, ensuring that the bassinet on the opposite side was set within reaching distance, she nodded toward the table beside it.

"I placed your sewing and your book there, and I will be in the library, should you require anything else."

Charity rested heavily against her pillows, her head beginning to loll; it seemed her feigned exhaustion was not so feigned after all. "You are heaven sent. Thank you again, Hettie."

"My great pleasure, Charity." Pausing at the door, she added, "And do not let her fluster you about the choices you make. Everyone is convinced there is only one perfect way to parent, but to date, no one has yet discovered it."

Another sleepy smile from Charity, and Hettie slipped into the corridor. The library door was open, and she paused to listen for any sounds before slowly peeking inside the room to find it empty, except for Baxter sitting beside the fireplace. The sketchbook she'd gifted him was resting on his lap, and his whole attention was fixed on his work as his pencil moved quickly across the page, marking the paper without hesitation.

His brows inched together ever so slightly as his eyes followed the lines, and Hettie found herself smiling as she crossed the room. The floorboards creaked, but he gave no sign that he'd heard her, and when she finally touched his

forearm propped up on the arm of the chair, Baxter gave a start. His eyes darted to hers, but it took a few blinks before they focused enough on her to truly see.

Lowering his feet from the ottoman, he moved to stand, but she tugged on his arm, forcing him back down as she sat on the footstool. There were seats aplenty in the room (as providing ample reading space was one of the primary purposes of a library), but none of the others was close enough to Baxter to suit her.

“What are you drawing?” she asked.

“Just a sketch.”

“May I see it?”

Baxter mumbled something incoherent as he shut the book, shoving it to the side. Though Hettie’s heart stung a touch, she knew it was a silly thing to feel, as it was natural for him to be hesitant when not long ago he was embarrassed by the mere thought of engaging in such a “lowly” pastime.

“I have made inquiries about flute lessons,” she said with a faint smile. “With all the excitement of the last day, I haven’t had time to tell you.”

“You have?”

She waved a vague hand. “Of course, I haven’t done much more than write to a few people who might connect me with a teacher, but you inspired me to take that step.”

Baxter sat there, blinking at her as his brows drew together. If it had been anyone else, she might’ve felt uneasy about the scrutiny, but it was her Baxter watching her with such intensity, and it drew forth a pleasant blush on her cheeks. Apparently, having her first beau was devolving her into a silly young miss. But oh, how pleasant it was.

The hand closest to her reached forward to take hold of hers, and Hettie smiled, her thumb brushing across his knuckles. Without a word, he offered her the sketchbook, and Hettie stared at it.

“You do not have to—”

“I know,” he replied, nudging it toward her again.

The quiet but firm manner in which he said it and proffered her the book set her heart sputtering, and though it seemed such a little thing, Hettie couldn't help but feel the significance of it. Keeping her gaze on his, she opened the book and the pages naturally fell open to the last drawing. There was the faintest flash of fear in his gaze, and Hettie squeezed Baxter's hand in reassurance before turning her attention to the page.

She couldn't breathe as she stared at the faint outline of her own features. The sketch was still in its infancy, but it was easy enough to identify the subject. Her head was tilted downward, though one could still see the faint hint of a smile on her lips. With only a few flicks of his pencil, he'd somehow managed to capture her.

“I cannot get your eyes right...” he murmured, drawing her attention back to the artist.

“It is beautiful,” she whispered, struggling with the words as her throat tightened against them. “You made me look so beautiful.”

Baxter's brows rose at that. “But you are.”

So simple. So matter-of-fact. He spoke without hesitation or qualification. If anything, there was a hint of a tone that implied she was ridiculous for even questioning that fact. Hettie's heart swelled, pressing against her ribs until she couldn't breathe.

She had learned long ago to accept the world for what it was. There was no good to be had in pretending to be something she was not. That didn't mean she thought herself unsightly or plain, but no one other than her family had ever claimed her to be more than passably pretty—and theirs was hardly an unbiased opinion.

Yet Hamilton Baxter thought it universally accepted that Harriet Stillwell was a gorgeous creature worthy of being an artist's muse. And with a quick flip through the book, it was clear to see she now occupied that role. Outward beauty was

not the measure of a person, but oh, how wonderful it was to know that Baxter thought her the loveliest of ladies.

Gazing into his eyes, Hettie couldn't help but acknowledge that one needn't accept reality as it was. Whether or not anyone else believed it, he thought her beautiful—just as she thought him handsome. For though he was veering quickly toward his dotage, with more gray than brown in his hair, Hettie couldn't help but think him a dashing suitor. Perhaps the young Miss Stillwell wouldn't have recognized the appeal of his features, but the present one felt a stirring she couldn't deny.

And so she yanked on his arm, pulling him close enough to press her lips to his.

Chapter 25

Despite so many near misses since they'd started courting, kissing Hettie shocked Baxter to the core. Of course, it was quite a pleasant sort of shock. The type that had him casting aside good sense and plunging into her embrace.

With her seated on the ottoman and him in the armchair, theirs was an awkward position, but Baxter quickly rectified that, tugging her into his lap. She squeaked, pulling away a fraction with wide eyes before devolving into snickers. Which Baxter silenced by capturing her in another kiss. Releasing her hand, he brought that arm around her to anchor her to him, his other traveling to her neck, resting against her cheek and jaw.

The timidity of the past disappeared in an instant, drawing him deep into the moment. Hettie filled his senses, her sweetness surrounding him, and Baxter craved more. She was like the calm in the eye of the storm. His peaceful harbor. His Hettie. Her fingers brushed the edge of his collar, and when their trembling registered in his foggy thoughts, Baxter forced himself to pull away. But there was no fear in her eyes as she met his gaze.

Perhaps he'd lived a cowardly life, but Baxter couldn't help but feel as though she'd been gifted to him. A recompense for trying his best. A perfect bit of happiness and peace after living so long without either.

"Hettie, my heart aches when you are gone," he whispered. He quickly added, "It aches whenever you are near, and I cannot touch you or hold you. It simply aches all the time at the thought of you. Even seeing you fills me with such joy that I feel ready to burst."

Whether it was too early to speak such things, Baxter didn't know, but he couldn't deny it any longer. Of course, he wished for something more eloquent, but the words tumbled forth as he tried to explain the inexplicable. But he was no orator, and there were only three words that could encapsulate his meaning.

“I love you,” he whispered.

Her dark eyes widened at that declaration, and Baxter couldn't regret it. For several silent heartbeats, they watched each other, and though he knew he ought to feel some flutter of fear at laying himself so bare, he couldn't. This wonderful lady deserved to know just how beloved she was.

His fingers brushed against her cheek, and Baxter whispered, “You needn't say—”

“And I love you,” she echoed.

He stiffened, his brows rising a fraction as he stared at her. For all that he didn't regret offering up this bit of his heart, Baxter hadn't truly expected anything in return, yet Hettie sat there, cuddled upon his lap, her eyes holding his as she returned those words to him with conviction and strength.

His lips stretched into a broad smile, and he repeated himself. “I love you, Hettie.”

Another little laugh escaped, and she responded once more, “And I love you, Baxter.”

Eyes drifting closed, they leaned in together, the touch of their lips filled with such tenderness as he held her. Baxter hadn't known that such bliss existed, yet here it was. His dearest Hettie.

“What is the meaning of this?” Matthias's voice sliced through the silence, shattering the haze that fogged Baxter's thoughts. He and Hettie leapt from the chair as his eldest son swept into the room, his expression full of thunder. Quick on his heels came Stanley, adding his indignation to his brother's as they stared at the pair.

“What is going on?” asked Stanley.

“Camilla is beside herself because Miss Stillwell keeps blustering about the house as though she is its mistress, and I just discovered her and our father in a compromising position,” said Matthias, and to make a wretched moment all the worse, his wife let out a gasp worthy of a melodrama as she followed in the boys' wake.

“She has been throwing herself at Father since the moment they met,” added Camilla with a scowl.

“That is not true,” said Baxter, though none of them paid him any mind.

“What is she even doing here?” asked Stanley.

“Charity asked for her—” But still, his children ignored his very existence as the three spoke over one another, and Baxter’s breath caught in his lungs. What had been a beautiful moment had crumbled to pieces, leaving him stripped of his usual reserve. His heart felt like a wound, raw and unprotected, and Baxter didn’t know what to say to calm the children down.

Hettie stiffened at his side, and she shifted as though to distance herself, but Baxter latched onto her hand, keeping her anchored in place—right where she needed to be. She turned to gaze at him, and though his attention was fixed on the chaos before him, he held fast to her.

Whatever was to come Hettie was where she belonged.

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Though she didn’t think of herself as a wilting flower, Hettie felt weak and shaky as the torrent of anger swirled about the room. The raised voices sliced through her nerves, leaving her feeling far more vulnerable than before. Only the firmness of Baxter’s hold allowed her to feel a modicum of peace in the storm.

“Quiet!” barked Mr. Goswick, and though Matthias and Camilla glared at him, they did as told. As he turned his attention to his father, Mr. Goswick’s gaze fell to their joined hands, and his jaw clenched. His hard eyes rose to meet his father, fully ignoring Hettie.

“We have been patient, Father,” he said. “Mourning is a difficult and lonely business, and it is understandable that you might seek comfort through this trying time, but we cannot

excuse this behavior any longer. It is time for you to cut ties with Miss Stillwell.”

Silence followed that as father and son stared at one another.

“No.”

A single word, yet the strength with which Baxter spoke it and the tightness of his grip on her hand testified to the certainty he felt in it. Hettie’s heart quickened its pace, though she wished it was due to the sweetness of the gesture and not the nastiness that had forced it.

Mrs. Baxter openly gaped, whilst her husband mutely blinked at his father. Only Mr. Goswick seemed unconcerned, continuing to watch his father with narrowed eyes.

“Consider this, Father. Juniper Court isn’t healthy enough to sustain you,” said Mr. Goswick. “You live here on my charity, and I shan’t give you another cent if you cling to this silly infatuation.”

It was Hettie’s turn to squeeze Baxter’s hand, though it was more for her comfort than his. The chill of the moment faded beneath a spark of anger that flared in her heart at the sight of his son extorting him. Her thoughts flooded with all the many things she might say to such a declaration, but she had sense enough to hold her tongue and remind herself that answering in haste would not make the situation any better.

His children were grieving. This whole situation was a shock to them, and it wouldn’t do to judge them for it. Patience. Forcing herself to breathe, she held fast to that and Baxter’s hand, refusing to give voice to the burning words that pushed her to defend the man she loved.

“It pains me that you believe you must take such measures,” said Baxter. “But I do not understand why you feel you need to do so. I was honorable and faithful to your mother, but she is gone, and I cannot bring her back. Is it wrong for me to love another?”

Yes, it was better to let calmer heads prevail, for Baxter’s words were far more diplomatic than Hettie’s would’ve been

had she given her tongue free rein. They didn't need to know that he hadn't loved their mother and that she was a poisonous shrew who had done her best to ruin Baxter's happiness. There was no good to be had in saying such things.

But then Mr. Goswick finally turned his gaze to Hettie. "Were you thinking of landing yourself a wealthy husband with a fine estate? I can tell you he has nothing to offer you. Juniper Court is let. Whatever income it generates is paying off debts, and the little left over is being used to pay for needed improvements. It cannot sustain you..."

The gentleman continued to spout off dire predictions concerning their financial future, but Hettie didn't pay it any mind, for a realization struck her with such force that she nearly laughed. For all that they had been speaking of money, it wasn't until that very moment that she realized they didn't know the truth.

Though society considered it gauche to speak of money, they were all too interested in whispering about incomes and dowries. Had this courtship taken place some thirty years ago, his family would've heard rumors concerning the Stillwell girl's healthy dowry, but few bothered speaking of spinsters. Most ladies in her situation had no income of note, and Hettie's living under her brother's roof for so long would've given ample reason for others to believe her similarly cursed. And the gossip surrounding their courtship had mostly focused on how quickly it followed on the heels of his wife's passing.

Baxter turned to meet her gaze, his own filled with such fear, and Hettie's heart sank. Did he truly think this might keep them apart? Even if she had to beg charity from her brother, it would be well worth it to keep Baxter. Thankfully, that wasn't necessary.

"It doesn't matter to me if he hasn't a single cent to his name," said Hettie, when she finally trusted herself to speak. "I have money enough for us both. I live with my brother to aid him, not because I must. My father provided handsomely for all his children, and I am certain my inheritance can restore Juniper Court."

That was met by silence as they all stared at her—including Baxter. Hettie allowed herself the slightest of smiles.

Young Mr. Baxter scoffed. “And you would entrust that money to the likes of my father? You would die a pauper.”

Hearing those words was terrible enough, but when Baxter merely stood there in silent acceptance, the last fraying bits of her nerves snapped clean away.

“How dare you speak of him with such mockery and derision! He is your father and has done his best for you, yet you constantly denigrate him, and I will not listen to another word of it!” Hettie quickly turned a glance toward Baxter and added, “I apologize. I have tried to keep my temper in check, but I cannot stand here in silence any longer!”

Turning her attention back to his children, she held up a warning finger. “He is a good man—one of the best I have ever known. He is far stronger, more intelligent, and more responsible than you give him credit for, and I trust him implicitly.”

But had she expected outrage or lashing out, Hettie was sorely mistaken. Of course, Mrs. Baxter looked as though she were sucking on a lemon wedge, but his sons relaxed, shaking away the tension of a moment ago as they gazed upon their father with equal parts pity and impatience.

“Father, you don’t need to court her to secure your finances,” said young Mr. Baxter.

This was quickly followed by Mr. Goswick adding, “I apologize for the threat, Father, but in truth, it doesn’t bother me one jot to manage the finances of the family. I am pleased to be of service. You needn’t go to such lengths to improve your situation.”

For all that their disdain might’ve cowed a younger version of Hettie, at present she could only feel a great sigh of relief at this turn of events. It mattered not if they believed the match to be motivated by greed, as long as she could be with Baxter. Let them believe what they would—if it granted them peace.

Leaning into his arm, Hettie held back a smile, but Baxter remained stiff at her side.

“If you had simply told us that from the beginning, we could’ve discussed this,” added his eldest son.

“You needn’t stoop to courting *her*,” added Mrs. Baxter, her gaze drifting across Hettie with the joyful look one gave an overflowing chamberpot.

“Enough.” Baxter spoke that single word quietly, though with such authority that the others in the room fell silent and stared at him including Hettie. She hadn’t thought him capable of losing his temper, but there was a flame burning in his gaze as he stared down his children. And though his voice didn’t rise one jot, he spoke with a firmness that wouldn’t be denied.

“Say what you will about me; I will not allow you to speak of Hettie like that.”

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Drawing in a breath, Baxter considered what to say. It was difficult to sort through his thoughts when they rang with the disparaging words his children had lobbed at Hettie with little thought or care. Or rather, with cold calculation and a desire to cause harm.

“No ‘say what you will,’” said Hettie with a frown. “Do you believe I can bear to hear them disparage you any more than you can listen to them speak ill of me?”

How he longed to show her how much those words meant to him, but this was neither the time nor place for such sentiments. Instead, he contented himself with saying as much as he could with his eyes as he held fast to her hand and her gaze. Whether or not he deserved Hettie was ridiculous to consider, for he knew he didn’t deserve her. Nor could he ever hope to be worthy of her.

And knowing that, he wasn’t going to let her go. Not ever.

“This is not about money or position or loneliness,” said Baxter. “I love her.”

Chapter 26

A few little words, but it was as though he'd fired a pistol into their ranks, for the three immediately erupted once more, speaking over one another, and though their words were difficult to separate one from the other, their meaning was clear enough from the anger etched in their faces.

"You cannot be serious! You hardly know the woman—" began Stanley.

"I've known her as long as you knew Gwen before you married," replied Baxter in a steady tone.

Though his words were swallowed up in the agitation of the moment, he refused to raise his voice. Matching their anger with his own would only make things worse, and as long as Hettie remained fixed to his side, clinging to his hand, it was easy enough to hold onto his patience. If anything, living with Dolores had taught him to keep calm.

Charity's chastisements rang in his thoughts, helping him to see history repeating itself. It was said that old habits die hard, and never was that clearer than at present. It was as though his wife had been resurrected from the grave, for her spirit lived on in his children; they raged, and Baxter's instincts told him to relent.

In the other room, little Biddie wailed, breaking through their thoughts. Stanley calmed first, straightening his jacket as he stared at the floor, though Matthias and Camilla's glares burned holes through Baxter.

Once he was ready, Stanley turned to face him once more, and standing tall, he held his father's gaze. "We are done with this foolishness. That woman must go."

A firm "no" rang in his thoughts, and though Baxter wished to speak it, he took a moment to consider the situation. Not Hettie—for she was the only thing of which he was certain—but his children and how to proceed.

If they were truly concerned about Hettie, that would be a simple solution. A little time, and they would acclimate to the idea and warm to her. They couldn't help but be won over by her. However, their objections didn't concern her, even if their anger was directed at her. The truth was that they didn't want him to marry anyone, and they certainly didn't wish for him to find happiness with another. Baxter needed to remain the heartbroken widower who had lost their dear mother.

Dolores Baxter had been a saint in their eyes, and even if Baxter could convince them otherwise, he didn't wish to do so. No good could come from vilifying a beloved parent.

How did one contend with such stubbornness? Baxter knew the answer, for years of marriage to Dolores had taught him that lesson thoroughly. Sometimes a pyrrhic victory was the only one to be had.

"I know how much of a shock this is to you all, and for that, I am sorry," he said as evenly and clearly as he could. "But for some inexplicable reason, this divine creature cares for me, and I will not give her up. I can only hope and pray that she will allow me the honor of being her husband."

The silence continued, though it was like the calm before the storm. Before a word was uttered, Baxter knew what was coming, and only the feel of Hettie's hand in his kept his heart from shattering irrevocably.

Stanley stepped forward, his gaze hard as he said, "If you marry her, I will never speak to you again. You will be dead to me and my family. She will never be a Baxter, and we will never acknowledge her."

Baxter's throat tightened, but though he tried to think of some way to alter their current course, there were only two ways forward—surrender or hold firm—and he'd spent too much of his life doing the former. Whether or not that had been the proper course in his marriage, Baxter couldn't follow it now.

"I am sorry for that. I truly am," he managed to say, though his words trembled. "You are my children, and I would

give anything to see you happy, but giving in to this demand will not do it—”

“You would choose *this woman* over your children?” asked Matthias, his brows pulled low.

“It is you who are making the ultimatums, not I. If your objections were reasonable, I would gladly do whatever I can to appease them.” Baxter’s gaze lingered on each of them, and though there was a hint of softening in Stanley’s expression, Matthias and Camilla stood united in their disgust. “Whom I marry is my choice—one that I will live with for the rest of my life—and you do not have the right to make it for me. And I choose Hettie.”

The room seemed to shrink as the air thickened with the weight of his children’s emotions. Frozen in place, they stared at him as though looking for some weakness in his armor before readying their attack. And then the first bullet cracked through the air as Matthias shouted, drawing the others into the fray as words exploded like cannonballs.

But Baxter’s eyes found Hettie’s, her hand still held tight in his own. Her brows pinched together, her gaze simultaneously mourning, pleading, and questioning. Peering into those eyes, Baxter didn’t feel the frenetic energy swirling around them; calm settled into his heart, filling him with such certainty.

The subject of matrimony ought to be broached in a happier setting, but Baxter had all but declared his intentions, and there was no point in pretending otherwise. With raised brows, he silently asked her if she was willing.

Her own rose in surprise, and she mouthed the words, “Are you certain?”

“Yes.” There was no other answer to give, for Baxter felt it to his bones. He couldn’t imagine a happier life than spending every day of it at her side.

The world burned around them, but it was as though they were locked inside a little pocket, safely tucked away from the

rest. With a bright smile, she nodded, and Baxter's heart expanded until his ribs felt ready to burst.

"Get out." Stanley's sharp command punctured the sweetness of the moment, drawing his attention to them to find all three glaring at the incredible lady at his side. "I want her out of my home. That woman is not welcome here."

Baxter straightened. "If she is not welcome, neither am I."

That was met by another bout of silence as his children stared at him with varying degrees of horror and disgust stamped on their faces, but though his heart ached at what he knew was to come, Baxter held fast to his Hettie, and for once, he was certain about what was the right thing to do.

"Then get out," said Stanley, pointing toward the door. "You are not welcome here until you come to your senses."

Hettie drew in a sharp breath, but Baxter didn't flinch. It was as though he could hear Dolores from the grave; every syllable of his son's command was steeped in her tone and mannerisms, and though a lead weight settled into his heart, it only served to strengthen Baxter's resolve.

"You are my children, and I will always love you." Baxter's tone was low and gentle, filled with the truth of that statement. "Whatever course you choose from here on out, that will never change. If you wish to cut me from your lives, that is your decision, but know that I will always welcome you into mine."

Drawing in a deep breath, he feared he was crushing Hettie's hand in his, though he couldn't bear to loosen his grip as he strode from the room with her at his side.

"Mother is turning in her grave," said Matthias as they passed, but Baxter didn't respond. There was no denying the truth of the statement. If Dolores was aware of this moment, Baxter didn't doubt that she would be livid. But then, she always was when she didn't get her way in things.

Though he didn't know what his destination was (beyond finding the front door), Baxter moved with purpose; his things

could be sent for or replaced; there was only one thing in this world he couldn't live without, and she was clinging to his hand. Their winter clothes were waiting for them, and when they stepped onto the street, the front door slammed behind them, ringing through the air like a death knell.

As they stood there on the pavement, Baxter's breaths sharpened, his lungs heaving as the world pressed in on him, squeezing him like a vice. A fog rolled through his thoughts, and it felt as though he stood there for an eternity as the carriages and carts rolled past.

His children had turned their backs on him. Though buried beneath that sorrow was the flickering hope that all might be set to rights with time, it didn't alter the truth that they had ejected him from their lives, even if temporarily.

Then Hettie stood before him, her dark eyes holding his. The sunshine broke through the clouds, filling his heart with light and warmth once more.

"Are you certain?" Her brows pinched together, her own anguish showing in her eyes as she repeated that question, and if he'd had any doubt concerning his choice (which he hadn't), it would've evaporated at that moment. Rife in those three little words was a world of emotion, and where his children railed and demanded, Hettie was more concerned about him than herself.

But before he could say a word, her expression crumpled.

"You cannot allow this to split your family, Baxter. I cannot bear the thought of being the source of so much pain."

"You could never be the source of pain, my love." With his free hand, he straightened her cloak and took the opportunity to brush a touch against her cheek. "This is not your doing or mine. My children wish to control my life and future, and I am done allowing others that power."

Despite the concern still etched in her expression, Hettie's lips curled into a smile, and she drew in a deep breath. "I cannot tell you how happy I am to hear that, for your sake. But surely we can wait. Give them time—"

“No.” Baxter gentled the word, but he would not allow her to go down that path. Lifting her hands to his lips, he kissed her knuckles. “You are too kind for your good. But believe me when I say it will not help matters. Perhaps they may soften, but I cannot plan my future based on that uncertainty. My mind is made up. My choice is made.”

“But—”

“No.” Baxter held her hands to his chest. “For years, I have been existing. Alive but not truly living. Then I met you, and it feels as though my life has truly begun. I have waited long enough, and I will not waste another minute.”

Hettie’s eyes widened, and a tiny “Oh” escaped her lips.

“You asked me if I am certain? I have never been so certain of anything else, Hettie, and I will not give you up. Never doubt that.”

Drawing in a deep breath, she melted into him as he drew his arms around her. The passing vehicles paid them little mind, and there were few out on the street to notice the display, but regardless, Baxter needed to feel her far more than he cared about propriety.

“You are too good for me, Hamilton Baxter,” she whispered.

Though he wished to argue with her, there was little point in doing so. Years of practice had taught him to recognize a losing fight, and Hettie was too stubborn to let her statement be contested. All Baxter could do was hold her close and thank the heavens that the lady was too blind to recognize how far beyond his reach she was. Hettie Stillwell was his better in every possible way, but Baxter wasn’t going to do anything to convince her of her folly.

Chapter 27

Though not as fine as many of the houses of worship found in other parts of Bath, the Church of St. Barnabas was by no means inferior. In fact, Hettie rather thought it superior for its simplicity. The cavernous nave stretched upward, filled with the polished wood pews. The dark wood contrasted with the white plaster walls, and the texture of the parquet floors added to the aesthetic.

Though imposing in size, the interior felt comforting. Familiar.

Having spent her entire life in the same house, Hettie had attended St. Barnabas since entering this world, and as she stood beside the altar, she couldn't help but realize that this may very well be the last time she visited the building.

“Are you certain?” asked Baxter.

Though Hettie had not uttered that question since that painful and beautiful moment on his son's doorstep, Baxter offered it to her at this moment—though for a different reason. Standing hand in hand at the altar, he held her gaze, waiting for her to answer, and Hettie couldn't help the tears that gathered in her eyes as she borrowed his answer.

“I have never been so certain of anything else. Never doubt it, Baxter.” Despite speaking in a whisper, her words rang through the empty nave.

However, his troubled expression did not clear. “But we can send for your family. You needn't be alone today. They would happily join us—”

“Hush,” she said, cutting this old argument short once more. “You said this was our marriage and our life to live, and I believe that with all my heart. This is *our* journey, and I cannot think of a more fitting way to begin it than just the two of us.”

His smile matched hers, and before she knew what he was about, he pulled her into his arms, pressing his lips to

hers. Throwing her arms around his neck, she accepted the token, though she had enough sense to keep it far more chaste than she'd prefer. Despite being newly introduced to kissing, in the last three days, Hettie had proven to be far too enamored with the pastime.

A throat was quietly but pointedly cleared, and when Baxter released her, Hettie couldn't help but blush at the vicar's arched brow.

"May I begin?" he asked in a dry tone that held more than a hint of a laugh. Which only made matters worse, for Hettie's cheeks flamed red as she took Baxter's arm and faced Mr. Hansford. The man may be at least a decade her junior, but he was still a man of the cloth, and she was even more grateful for the empty pews at her back.

"Dearly beloved, we are gathered together here in the sight of God, and in the face of this congregation, to join together this Man and this Woman in holy Matrimony..." And so, Mr. Hansford began the ceremony that would bind them, husband and wife, although the only congregation involved were the two witnesses the vicar had pressed into service.

Joy coursed through Hettie so strong and palpable that her muscles tensed, and she felt liable to begin dancing about on her toes. Truly a preposterous thing to do, but she couldn't help it. Having witnessed marriages before, she knew all the words, but now it was her turn to speak the vows.

And though this setting was not what she had imagined her ceremony might look like, Hettie couldn't picture a more fitting way for her to start her life with the man who had sacrificed so much to be with her. Though Charity was the lone Baxter to welcome the union, she was in no fit state to join them, and if Baxter wasn't to have any family at his side, then Hettie would be that family, and he would be hers, and they would start this new journey alone. They required nothing more than that.

Hettie held Baxter's gaze, and though she attempted to listen to the words of the ceremony, she couldn't help but think of the man before her and how quickly a life could alter. Four

weeks ago, she hadn't known him, and it felt as though everything in her life had been rearranged, building itself into something entirely new.

Her Baxter.

*

A gentleman of Baxter's age and experience ought to manage a bit of patience, but for all that he'd developed that virtue in diverse ways, he found himself shifting from foot to foot, silently urging the vicar to speak faster. A sennight-long courtship and a three-day engagement was hardly any time at all, yet Baxter couldn't bear to prolong the moment.

Hettie stood there, every bit the blushing bride. Her gown was a simple white muslin, but expert hands had rendered a veritable garden of greenery along the edges, circling the arm, neck, and hem. The pale color suited her to perfection, bringing forth the rosiness in her cheeks and complementing her dark hair.

But most of all, Baxter's heart filled to bursting at the sight of the mistletoe crown adorning her head. That simple gift from Charity was the only sign that his family celebrated the union, and though she was unable to join them, he felt her spirit there, standing as a silent witness and celebrating from afar just as Hettie's family were doing.

And then the final words began, and Baxter's pulse quickened, though the vicar seemed to relish each syllable, drawing it out with far too much deliberation.

"...and as ye have consented together in holy wedlock, and have witnessed the same before God and this company, and thereto have given and pledged your troth each to the other, and have declared the same by giving and receiving of a ring, and by joining of hands; I pronounce that they be Man and Wife together, in the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen."

The period was hardly placed on that final sentence before Baxter swept her into his arms, nearly giving in to the urge that demanded he seal this union in a similar fashion to how they'd begun the ceremony. However, the vicar was watching him with that same amused expression on his face, and Baxter forced himself to release her. Taking her hand in his, he raised it to his lips in an action that had become so very familiar of late. But when his lips touched her skin, they brushed the simple band of gold that now resided on her ring finger.

A quick signature and a few handshakes later, and Baxter swept his wife out of the church into the waiting carriage Victor had arranged for them.

Shutting the door behind them, Baxter settled onto the seat beside her, and before he could make a move, she threw her arms around him and pulled him into a kiss. With a quick hum of laughter, he fell into the embrace with all the eagerness of youth. But for all that fire and passion warmed their touches, Baxter couldn't help but feel a stir of something deeper. Gooseflesh rose along his arms, and his head seemed to spin as he considered the very great gift he'd been given in this dear lady.

"Mr. and Mrs. Baxter," she whispered, her words coming out in a halting chuckle. "I can hardly believe it."

Though that name had borne far too many unpleasant associations, Baxter grinned. Mrs. Hettie Baxter. His wife.

The carriage jerked forward, pulling them apart, and Hettie laughed before settling into the crook of his arm. The mistletoe crown poked his cheek, and she tugged it from her head and reached over to place it atop his.

"Are you crowning me your Twelfth Night king?" he asked.

"Only if I am your Twelfth Night queen. But in truth, I just want to make use of it before I am forced to pack it away now that Christmas is coming to a close tonight," she said before pressing a kiss to his cheek. "We wouldn't want to invite bad luck for the coming year."

“Bad luck cannot touch me,” he replied with a gentle smile. “Not with you at my side.”

Baxter blushed at the words, for they had seemed so grand and delightful in his thoughts, but speaking them aloud felt absurd. Thankfully, his bride adored absurdity, for she gave him a great, beaming smile before pulling him in for another kiss.

His beautiful bride.

*

For all that Hettie quite enjoyed losing time with Baxter, the crinkle of paper in her hand demanded she turn her attention to other matters. Nevertheless, she remained locked in his embrace for several long moments before she finally parted from him and turned her thoughts to the marriage certificate Mr. Hansford had given her.

With careful movements, she smoothed the wrinkled edges of the thin page. For something so important, one would expect a finer quality paper, but there was nothing to be done about it. Reaching for the bundle she'd left on the seat before the ceremony, she pulled out the portfolio; it was the sort that artists used to protect their loose drawings, and it served her purpose perfectly.

Laying the paper inside the heavy cover, she gave herself another moment to marvel at the small yet important document. Baxter reached forward, but she batted his hand away.

“Mr. Hansford gave it to me, and it is a wife's duty to keep it safe,” she said with an arched brow.

“Is that so?”

Hettie gave him a firm nod as she shut the cover and tied the ribbons that held the portfolio shut. Setting it back on the seat opposite, she leaned into the crook of his arm and turned her gaze to the passing landscape. It would be some hours

before they arrived at their inn for the night, and though Hettie didn't usually enjoy long carriage rides, she couldn't help but think this one would be quite delightful.

The city was readying itself for the grand festivities tonight—the crowning end of the Christmas celebrations. Yet for Baxter and Hettie, this was only the beginning of their happiness. A start to their private festivities. And what a beginning they'd made of it.

Chapter 28

Bristow, Essex

1 Year Later

“Must we be overrun with people? Surely we needn’t invite the whole neighborhood.” Though Baxter had thought his tone light, Hettie looked up from her papers with a furrowed brow. Before she could give voice to whatever concerns were rattling about her thoughts, he winked at her before hiding behind his newspaper once more.

As intended, Hettie huffed. “You are cruel, Baxter.”

But her chastisement missed the mark, for there was far too much brightness in her tone for the stern words to be believed.

“I think I have the guest list sorted out at last,” she said, followed by the plink of a quill being dropped in an inkwell.

Peeking from behind the edge of his newspaper, he watched his wife as she sifted through the papers. Despite having a sitting room to call her own, Hettie had commandeered a desk in the library. Turned toward the window, it gave her a fine view of the gardens behind the house, and she leaned on her elbow, staring out through the glass.

After an unseasonably cold summer, winter was now dragging its feet, refusing to settle in properly for Christmastime. Had it been cold enough, they would’ve been buried in snow for all the rain they’d received; instead, it left the world a brown and gray mess. Enough so that Baxter prayed Hettie’s Christmas plans wouldn’t be foiled by the terrible roads.

At his age, Baxter had thought firsts were a thing of the past. Not that he was pompous enough to think he’d experienced the full breadth of life, but when one was speeding ever more quickly to sixty, firsts were far more unlikely. Yet he felt a flutter of anticipation when he

considered that this Christmas Eve party would be the first event they'd hosted together in their home. Clearly, Hettie was equally eager, for she had thrown herself into the task with far more effort than was required for the small gathering.

Hettie dropped her gaze back to her lists and plans, and Baxter's chest expanded far beyond its capacity, filling him to bursting. For all that he'd previously been married for more than three decades, he'd never known just how pleasing it was to make his wife happy, and Hettie was so inherently content that it took little effort to delight her.

"Are you certain there is no one you wish to invite?" Hettie asked, turning her attention over her shoulder to him.

"No one at all," replied Baxter, straightening his newspaper.

Rising from her seat, Hettie drifted toward him, sinking into the new armchair that had been placed so close that it was touching Baxter's. Though she didn't say a word, he understood the concern in her gaze, and he tossed the newspaper aside and took her hand in his.

"They were never my friends. They were hers," he said, repeating the words he'd given her before. "It is no great loss."

And though Hettie's expression softened, Baxter recognized the shadow of pain that always accompanied such conversations. The joy of their situation far outweighed any regrets, but his heart ached whenever her light dimmed—even in the slightest way. Especially as she always seemed more perturbed for him than herself, though she was the one who shouldered the brunt of the disapproval foisted on them.

Lifting her hand to his, he placed a kiss on her knuckles, and her cheeks pinked just as they had the first time he'd done so.

"Thank you for marrying me," he said.

With a wry smile, she replied as she always did, "It has been a great sacrifice and such a burden."

Hettie seemingly did not dwell on that faint shadow, dispelling it as she always did by turning to more pressing

matters. “I thought of inviting the Mayers, the Drakes, and the Ingalls. And the Kingsleys and Ashbrooks, of course. Charity is quite right, and they seem like delightful people.”

Baxter nodded and offered little tidbits of opinions, though mostly, he watched as she described all the details of the dinner and entertainments she was planning. It was as though her whole being lit from within, the words flowing forth with such eagerness that it seeped into him, and for the first time in decades, he found himself eager to host a party.

A shout from outside cut Hettie short, and the pair rose from their seats to gaze out the windows opposite her desk, which overlooked the front drive. Charity’s voice carried through the winter air as she sprinted down the length of the gravel drive, her skirts hiked up far more than was seemly, though it was little wonder when the man standing at the entry dropped his canvas bag to the ground and opened his arms wide.

Without pausing, Charity threw herself into her husband’s arms, nearly knocking both of them to the ground, and Hettie drew in a sharp breath. Baxter glanced at her to see her eyes growing misty, her hand to her lips. Drawing his arm around her, he pulled her close, and they watched as Thomas and his wife reunited.

“Thank the heavens he has finally come,” whispered Hettie. “I was about ready to write to the First Lord of the Admiralty and demand his ship return to port.”

“There is nothing they can do about weather delays—”

“For six weeks? After being denied shore leave for so long and only putting into ports too far for them to travel to one another, it is unacceptable that he has been so delayed.”

Pressing a kiss to her temple, Baxter watched the sweet reunion as Charity greeted her husband with great enthusiasm. His eyes widened as the pair began kissing, the sweetness fading into something that wasn’t intended for public consumption. Clearing his throat, he nudged his wife and turned them away from the window.

Hettie chuckled. "It is only some kissing, my love."

"Yes, but there are some things a father doesn't need to see." Then, before she could tease him further, Baxter threw out a distraction. "And what of your family? Have they decided whether or not they are joining us for the holiday?"

Taking his arm, Hettie wandered toward the door. "It is too far for some of the children to travel, and they decided to descend upon Bath instead, so Victor wishes to remain there."

"Are you certain you do not wish to join them?" he asked as they stepped into the corridor.

"We have already decided—"

"I do not care if it is difficult to make the journey with the roads as they are. We will find a way."

Hettie smiled and leaned in to press a kiss to his cheek. "You are a dear, but I want our first Christmas together to be in our home. Perhaps next year."

Their home. Two words that never failed to fill Baxter with contentment, for never had they been truer.

As it had taken many months to negotiate with and relocate their tenants, the new Mr. and Mrs. Baxter had only taken up residence in Juniper Court recently. Yet even in the few short weeks since their arrival, Hettie had made her mark on the house. Baxter couldn't even describe how she'd done it. The furnishings and decorations were much the same, with only little adjustments here and there, yet it felt like an entirely new building to him.

From the top of the stairs, they heard the front door opening, ushering in Charity and her husband, and the silent house immediately filled with noise and merriment as Biddie joined her parents. Though Baxter was eager to join them, Hettie stopped him to straighten his cravat. Her hands moved quickly with the folds, smoothing out the fabric, and Baxter watched her as she examined her work. The slight quirk of her lips as she considered what needed doing; the gentle smoothing of his lapels once she was content.

Baxter was struck by the sight she made. So radiant and lovely. His dearest Hettie had swept into his life without warning and altered it into something he didn't recognize. Something so much better. His pulse rapped a quick beat against his chest, filling him with such strength and vitality that he felt like a man half his age.

"I almost forgot to remind you that we have our painting lessons tomorrow." Hettie's gaze rose to meet his, and like so many times before, she seemed unaware of the effect she had on him. "Mr. Reeve asked that we move it forward, as he is traveling to Colchester to visit his daughter."

Unable to control himself a moment longer, Baxter pulled her into his arms and kissed her. With gentle touches, he tried to convey the feelings pulsing in his veins; there were no actions or words that could ever express just how much he loved her, but he never stopped trying.

When he finally released her, he couldn't help a little smirk when she gazed at him dazedly.

"I am just very pleased about our lessons," he quipped.

"I can tell," she replied with a smile.

There was a time and season for everything, but it was a truth eternal that people often believed that time and season were always "later" and never "now," allowing the years to pass by without action. Certainly, there were responsibilities one must place first, but it was easy to allow those demands to edge out all else, never giving way.

And then one day, one was suddenly in her sixth decade of life, struggling to make her once limber fingers perform as

they ought.

Taking a deep breath, Hettie forced herself not to scowl as she slowly moved through the scales. She wouldn't have claimed a natural propensity toward music, but in her youth, she'd boasted a mediocre ability. But for all that age brought experience, it also wore away one's mental and physical dexterity, making it far more difficult to acquire new skills and talents.

No matter. Hettie forced her fingers to move about the flute's keys, and though they struggled to find their proper places, she was pleased to hear the clear sound coming forth. Having played the pianoforte, she'd never imagined just how difficult it was to wring notes from a woodwind. One simply had to press the piano key and the sound emerged, but with this instrument, there were so many variations of the mouth and breathing that one must master first.

But the notes came out clear as she moved through her fingering exercises with more ease than the week before, which made any practice a success.

A knock at the sitting room door had her lowering the flute and calling out to the interruption. A maid entered with a bob and offered a stack of post. Though Hettie wished she was diligent enough to ignore it, she seized upon the interruption and set the instrument aside. Rising from her stiff-backed seat, which was perfect for her practices but terrible for relaxation, Hettie shifted to the sofa as she sorted through the correspondence.

Pausing, she stared at the third letter, which bore the seal of her eldest son-in-law. The shock of it held her hostage for a long moment before she cast aside the others and opened it, her eyes darting to the signature.

Camilla had written. Or ought she to call the lady Mrs. Baxter? Truth be told, she'd not spoken to anyone from Baxter's family (beyond Charity), so she wasn't certain what to call them, despite the familial tie giving her the right to call them by their given names.

But that wasn't important, and Hettie's attention turned to the scant lines her daughter-in-law had written.

Dear Miss Stillwell,

We have received your correspondence, and as you seem incapable of understanding a clear snub, I am forced to tell you in no uncertain terms that we do not wish to hear from you now or in the future. Please desist.

Mrs. Matthias Baxter

Hettie sat there with the letter in her lap, her eyes fixed on the rug beneath her. For all that the response was not unexpected, she still felt its sting. Turning her gaze back to her flute, she attempted to stir herself to practice or to read the rest of her letters at the very least, but she couldn't help frowning at the floor.

Another rap on the door stirred her to action, and she gathered up the letters as she called out for the visitor to enter.

Thomas peeked through the door, his brows raised as he located Hettie. "Am I bothering you?"

"Not at all," she said with an attempted smile. "I was just practicing."

But he paused on the threshold, his hands tucked behind him, and in a tone that was far more gentle than one would imagine coming from a navy man, Thomas asked, "Is something the matter?"

That concern drew a true grin, and Hettie waved it away. "Just a spot of bad news. That is all."

"Might I be of assistance?" he asked with a frown that was so genuinely troubled that it helped to ease the last of her pain away.

"Not unless you can fundamentally alter how my husband's other children view me," she said with a half-smile.

Thomas drew in a sharp breath and shook his head. "As I previously occupied the role of 'least favorite' in the family before you arrived, I fear I am of little help."

Hettie raised a staying hand. “Pay me no mind. I had simply hoped for a better outcome. Stanley still refuses to speak to his father, but Baxter has managed to open the lines of communication with Matthias and his daughters. I had hoped that perhaps they’d softened enough for me to attempt it as well, but I knew it was unlikely, as they refuse to acknowledge me even in their letters to their father.”

Then, motioning toward the sofa, she invited him to sit. “But please do not tell Baxter. I fear he takes that rejection harder than I do, and there’s no reason to trouble him.”

Thomas paused, his gaze fixed on her. “As another who is relatively new to this family and attempting to navigate it, I will certainly honor your request, but I will say that keeping secrets from your staunchest ally does no good.”

“It is no secret,” said Hettie with a laugh. “Baxter knows full well how the children feel about me, but it hurts him to see it. To be entirely honest, I do not care beyond the pain it causes him. They are his children, and he adores them regardless, but I find it difficult to forgive them for how they’ve treated him. I try for his sake—and his alone.”

“That is good of you,” he said with a huff and a shake of his head before taking the proffered seat. “It speaks highly of you that you even bother to foster a relationship. My parents haven’t bothered to write to me in so long that I haven’t the foggiest notion if they and my siblings are alive or dead.”

Hettie paused at that, her brows furrowing, but before she could say a word, he shifted and waved it away.

“To borrow your phrase, pay me no mind,” he said with a bright laugh. However, there was a quality to the sound that settled uneasily in her ears, though Hettie couldn’t say she knew the gentleman well enough to judge if the laugh had been sincere or not. “Between the fracture in Charity’s family and the birth of my daughter, I find myself thinking more and more about my upbringing.”

“So, it is a day for being maudlin, is it?”

Thomas chuckled once more, an earnest grin finally crossing his features. “Any day I get to return to my true family is a good one—which brings me to my purpose in calling on you. I wanted to speak to you whilst Charity is putting Biddie down for her nap.”

For all that it had been he who had sought her out, the turmoil surrounding Camilla’s letter had forced that from her mind, and Hettie perked.

“I wanted to thank you for all you did for my family.” Thomas paused and took a deep breath, his gaze holding Hettie’s with such unadulterated gratitude that her heart warmed at the sight. “You were there for her when I couldn’t be, helping her through such a difficult time, and since then, you’ve become like a second mother to her. Or a first one, in many ways, for Charity had a complicated relationship with Dolores.”

“I think the Baxter family motto is ‘complications at every turn.’” Hettie laughed at her quip, and Thomas joined in.

“Isn’t that the truth.”

But Hettie didn’t wish to let the moment slip into levity quite yet, and she gathered all the joy the last months had given her and funneled them into her words as she said, “I am grateful for her, as well. I never was able to have children of my own, and I adore Charity as much as any mother could.”

“And Biddie is lucky to have a lady like you to call grandmother.”

Hettie’s eyes glistened at that, the delight of those words settling deep into her heart. Though not by blood or birth, she had a daughter and son-in-law now, with a granddaughter and more to come.

Thomas drew in a deep breath and added, “When I return to my ship, I shall rest easier knowing she has you nearby.”

Though the words were sweet, there was a heaviness in his tone and expression that spoke of a dissatisfaction so palpable that Hettie couldn’t ignore it. Not that she wished to. This was the precise conversation she’d hoped to have with

Thomas at some point during this visit, so it was a blessing to have it served up to her so easily. But it didn't make it any easier to broach such a tender subject.

Considering what she might say, she chose her words carefully. "Do you enjoy the navy?"

Chapter 29

“Is that a question?” he mumbled with a wince. “As it is how I sustain my family, I enjoy it immensely.”

Shifting in her seat so she was facing him more fully, Hettie considered the fellow before her. “Do you wish for another position?”

Thomas straightened and rose to his feet, brushing at his trousers. “Pay me no heed, Hettie. I have several weeks at home, and that is reason enough to celebrate.”

But she grabbed his sleeve, holding him in place. “I am being serious. Are you unhappy in your profession?”

Though he didn’t sit again, Thomas didn’t make his escape either. Reaching up, he scratched at the back of his head.

“I was content for many years, but I loathe the distance it puts between me and my family.” Tucking his hands behind him, he strode the length of the room and paused before the fireplace. “Charity and Biddie mean the world to me, and the thought of leaving them again causes me no end of pain. My daughter is nearly a year old, and this is the first time my shore leave has been long enough for me to meet her. What father would be content with that?”

With a shrug, he turned to face Hettie again. “But there is no point in bemoaning the fact. I have tried to find work elsewhere, but I cannot secure a position that pays as well.”

Despite having already taken action, Hettie wondered once more if she was being too bold. Thomas seemed an affable sort, but she didn’t know him well enough to take such liberties. But then, wasn’t that what a mama (even a makeshift one such as she) ought to do for her children? And there was nothing she wouldn’t do for Charity and Biddie.

“I hope you do not think I am meddling, but I may have taken some action on your behalf.” Hettie watched Thomas

closely, praying that she wasn't causing trouble with the one branch of the Baxter family who liked her.

Holding up her hands, she hurried to add, "You are free to accept or reject it. There is no obligation on your part. However, I couldn't bear to see your family separated once more after the holidays are over. I know you both make the best of it, but it's clear you do not wish for that sort of life. And Biddie needs her father..."

Thomas stared at her, and Hettie pulled her words to a halt, for they were leading her nowhere. Gathering her courage, she focused on the item at hand.

"I have stock in a merchant company out of London. I wrote to the owners to see if they had any positions available, and as it happens, they have one opening in the next few months that is uniquely suited to your skills. One of their shipping managers is stepping down, and they need someone with knowledge of crews and ships to manage that side of the business."

Drawing in a deep breath, Hettie forged ahead, though Thomas stood there, staring at her.

"It is based in London, so Charity will be forced to leave Bristow, which is a tragedy, but the position doesn't require travel, and I believe it pays better than your current position, and there is a greater chance of advancement as well—"

"Hettie, please," said Thomas, raising his hand to silence her. He stood there for a long moment, his mouth open as though to speak, though his brows were pulled together in thought.

For goodness' sake, the idea had seemed so wonderful when she'd formulated the thing, but then again, the fact that she hadn't said anything to Charity or Baxter spoke volumes about her concerns.

"Forgive me if I am sticking my nose in where it doesn't belong, Thomas. Now that I am saying all this aloud, I realize how presumptuous it was of me—"

But he held up another hand, and Hettie fell silent again, watching him as heat crept into her cheeks.

“I apologize if I am giving the impression that I am unhappy, but I fear I am at a loss for words,” he murmured. “I am overwhelmed by your generosity and thoughtfulness. I... I...”

Though she didn't know the gentleman well, Thomas Callaghan did not strike Hettie as one who struggled for words. If anything, Charity's tales of him indicated quite the opposite was true. Yet he stood there, stammering to express his thoughts.

Straightening, as though to shake his thoughts free, Thomas faced her and then dipped into a low bow. “Thank you so very much, Hettie. This means the world to me.”

And when he met her gaze, there was a brightness to his eyes that had Hettie's prickling in response. Drawing in a sharp breath, she waved his response away.

“Think nothing of it. I am simply thrilled that you are so happy,” she said with a smile. “I feared you might think it presumptuous. After all, Stanley has plenty of connections in such things, and as you did not take assistance from him, I had thought you too proud to accept it from me.”

Thomas was rather adept at hiding behind a pleasant mask, but Hettie saw the slight tightness in his jaw and the flash of something sorrowful in his gaze that made her consider the situation in a new light. Charity's marriage to Thomas had been a blight in the eyes of most of Charity's family, but at least he was a gentleman of the navy. Poor he may be, but it was better than being a well-paid merchant, which was one of the few options for a man with his skills.

“I suppose I am not the only one who has found entry into this family a bit difficult,” she said, raising her brows in question. A huff was the only answer she received, and Hettie brushed it aside, striding forward to take him in an embrace.

“Think nothing of it. I and the rest of the Stillwells are quite happy to do what we can,” she said, giving him an extra

squeeze. Releasing him once more, she nodded toward the door. “Now, we ought to go find your wife and tell her the happy news. I have been bursting to tell the secret.”

Thomas beamed, but before he stepped away, he offered his arm with a bow, and Hettie took it, as regal as a queen, whilst they went in search of Charity.

One year ago, Baxter couldn't have imagined such felicity in his life. Though he was quite familiar with the concept, the sentiment had been a stranger to him. Not that his life had been devoid of all joy, but it was vastly different from being happy. A moment of jubilation was delightful, to be certain, but to exist in a constant state of contentment and pleasure had seemed like a fairy story one told children. Yet standing in the parlor as his daughter and son-in-law drank to the health of his wife, Baxter knew it was real. He was truly happy.

Soon, they were joined by his daughter and son-in-law's friends, and though Baxter usually avoided gatherings, good people celebrating good news was the best sort of party. He opened his cellars and pantry to the revelers as Christmas was ushered in early. Holding his daughter in his arms, Thomas beamed like a proud papa as Charity began planning their future in London, and as much as it pained Baxter to think of her traveling so far away, he couldn't help but smile at her unrestrained delight.

Hettie stood to one side, and it was easy enough to know what thoughts were shuffling about her mind, for there was no artifice in her expression. She was the picture of contentment, and he rather wished he had his pencils on hand to capture it,

though he knew he could never do the warmth in her eyes justice.

Sneaking up behind her, Baxter slipped an arm around her chest and held her to his own as she leaned into him with a contented sigh. Then, secreting out a bit of mistletoe, he drew it up over her head with his free hand, and she gazed up at it with a feigned frown.

“It is too early for that, Mr. Baxter,” she said in a tart tone. “The greenery isn’t to come out until tonight.”

“Then will you deny me a kiss?”

With a huff, she turned her cheek, presenting it to him as though allowing him a great honor—one which Baxter did not turn aside. Leaning close, he pressed his lips to her skin, lingering to savor the touch, and with her snuggled close to him, he felt the quickening of her pulse. It matched his own.

Leaning her head back, she rested it against his. “I am so happy for them, but I cannot help but be a little selfish and mourn the thought of them moving so far from home.”

“London is not so very far from here,” replied Baxter, though he couldn’t help but agree with Hettie’s assessment. “It is some fifty miles, depending on where they settle in Town, and the roads are very good. It won’t be difficult for us to visit them as often as you like.”

“Every day?” she asked with a slight laugh.

“We could move there, too, if you wish.”

Hettie stiffened and turned her head to look at him. “Do you wish to?”

But Baxter couldn’t say if he did or not. Certainly, being close to his daughter and her family was quite the enticement, but Juniper Court was his home. So, he gave her the only answer he had to give.

“If it will make you happy.”

“Will it make you happy?” she pressed.

“As long as I have you, I am happy.”

Twisting around to face him, Hettie circled her arms around his neck. “You say the sweetest things, my love.”

His hands rose to cup her cheeks, and Baxter stared into her eyes, once more awed by this magnificent lady. That he was her “love” struck him anew every time she uttered the endearment. How could he ever be worthy of such a lady? But only fools questioned good fortune when it came their way, and despite his many flaws, Baxter was no fool. Hettie was his, and he was never letting her go.

*

Though Hettie never tired of hearing Baxter speak those lovely sweet nothings, staring into his eyes as he looked at her with such reverence was even better. There was no artifice in that gaze. No tempering of his feelings. Hettie felt as though he saw to the very heart of her and loved her all the more for it.

But as much as she adored gazing into his eyes, she wasn't going to pass up this opportunity. So, she leaned forward and pressed her lips to his. As she drew her arms tight around him, the world narrowed to this single moment, stripping away everything else in her life until it was just her and her dear Baxter.

Unfortunately, their audience was far too rowdy to let the moment go, and teasing jeers soon had the pair parting.

“Ungrateful brats,” grumbled Baxter, swiping a hand at his daughter and the rest. But it was Thomas's waggling brows that had Hettie losing the last of her composure, and she dissolved into a fit of laughter that was more befitting a lady half her age.

Turning to face them once more, Hettie took her previous stance whilst Baxter drew his arm around her, holding her close.

“You have done this for our family,” he whispered into her ear as they watched the others return to toasting their plans for the future.

Hettie’s heart nearly burst at the swell of happiness. Between the celebrations raging around them and her husband snuggled close, she didn’t know how to contain the incandescent bliss surging through her. Baxter’s words echoed through her, burrowing deep into her heart and filling her so completely that she couldn’t help the joyful tears that gathered.

Our family.

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About the Author

Born and raised in Anchorage, M.A. Nichols is a lifelong Alaskan with a love of the outdoors. As a child she despised reading but through the love and persistence of her mother was taught the error of her ways and has had a deep, abiding relationship with it ever since.

She graduated with a bachelor's degree in landscape management from Brigham Young University and a master's in landscape architecture from Utah State University, neither of which has anything to do with why she became a writer but is a fun little tidbit nonetheless. And no, she doesn't have any idea what type of plant you should put in that shady spot out by your deck. She's not that kind of landscape architect. Stop asking.

For more information about M.A. Nichols, her books, and future projects, check out her on:

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