



FIRST FAMILIES
OF
FLAT RIVER

HER
GENTLE
PROTECTOR

CHRISTINE STERLING



HER GENTLE PROTECTOR
First Families of Flat River Book 9

Christine Sterling

HER GENTLE PROTECTOR
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— Christine Sterling

WELCOME TO FLAT RIVER

Come spend some time in Flat River, Nebraska, a small town filled with the strong men and women who settled the wild west of the Nebraska Plains, from 1860 to 1880. Flat River is home to unique characters, strong heroines, swoony heroes, and stories that will stand the test of time. All of these wholesome stories can be read by readers of all ages. They are filled with family values, romance, humor, and a sprinkle of faith.

GET FREE BOOKS

Do you love wholesome romance, funny stories, and want a new recipe each week? Join Christine's newsletter and get a free copy of [The Flat River Matchmaker](#), the prequel to the series of the same name.

Thank you to the following Chatters who helped me come up with ideas for this book and the bonus content (coming soon!), Nancy Schreib, Amy Davis, Sue Krznaric, Fern Pena, Barb Fellows, Dolores Howard, Stacey Umlah Emanuele, Amy Petrowich, Natasha Pittman and Rose Hale. I couldn't incorporate all the fantastic ideas, but I'll use them in future stories! I appreciate and love you. xo

HER GENTLE PROTECTOR

Miriam “Midge” Beale never imagined she’d be stealing chickens in the middle of the night just to feed her family. But when her father abandons them, leaving Midge in charge of her eight younger siblings, she will do whatever it takes to put food on the table. Until she’s caught by the grumpiest man in all of Flat River.

Baxter Hartman has every reason to be grumpy! He’s spent his days working on his ranch and his nights sleeping near the chicken coop trying to catch the thief who’s been stealing from his family. What he doesn’t expect is for the culprit to be the spirited young woman from the ranch down the road that everyone is whispering about.

As he gets to know Midge more, he goes from grumpy to gregarious; but when her past collides with the present, will he go back to the same old grumpy man he used to be? Will Baxter abandon Midge and her siblings, or will he step up and become *her gentle protector*?



CHAPTER ONE



July 1873, Flat River Nebraska

“I’m hungry, Midge!”

“I know, Berry.” Midge Beale tapped a wooden spoon along the bottom of the pot and released one final scoop into her little sister’s bowl. Elderberry, or “Berry” for short, was only seven years old but with an appetite larger than anyone in the family could fathom. The child never seemed to be full.

“What are you going to eat?” Petunia asked, eyeing Midge’s empty bowl.

“It’s alright, Pet,” Midge assured her fifteen-year-old sister. “I’m not hungry.” Her belly growled in protest at the lie. “I’ll pick some berries by the creek a little later.”

“Can we go pick berries?” Jenny asked.

Midge felt a pang in her heart as she looked over the eight faces of her siblings. She was the eldest at nineteen, followed by Peter, who recently celebrated his sixteenth birthday. Next was Petunia and then Ira—born three years later. Josiah had just turned nine and then came Elderberry. Jenny and Abilene were seven, five and three, respectively. Olive, being the youngest of them all, was only two years old.

“That sounds like a fine idea.” Midge took the pot to the sink to soak. She pumped cold water into the pot and swirled it around, trying to loosen the bits of oatmeal from the iron sides. “After breakfast, we’ll get the dishes done and then go to the creek.”

“I talked to Mr. Chapman yesterday,” Peter piped up between bits of porridge.

“Oh?” Midge lifted an eyebrow and poured herself a cup of coffee, trying not to grimace as she took a sip. There was barely any flavor left in the grounds. She must have brewed them at least a dozen times.

“He said I’m too young to hire as a cowboy, but I know it is because of Pa,” Peter complained, his spoon clanging against the enamel bowl. “I wish Pa had died.”

“Peter Beale,” Midge admonished. “Don’t even say such a thing.”

“It would be easier. Then we’d get help instead of them knowing that Pa got drunk and ran off, leaving you here with all of us.” He pushed away from the table, knocking his chair backwards as he rose. “It isn’t fair, Midge. You were could have been married by now. Not taking care of a bunch of kids.”

Ira, his face set in grim lines, looked straight at his brother sitting across from him. “Preacher says the power of death is in your tongue,” he said firmly.

“That’s not how that goes,” Petunia piped up. “It’s the power of life and death...”

Midge discarded her coffee into the soaking pot and dropped the cup in the cold water to be washed. “How about we clean the table and then go outside, and you can do your chores?”

Petunia scoffed. “What chores? We don’t have anything but a swayback horse.”

“Hart Chapman said his dog had puppies. Can we get a puppy, Midge?” Josiah asked.

The children started chatting excitedly about the thought of having a dog. Pa took the old hound dog when he disappeared. Midge was thankful it was one less mouth to feed.

Midge stared at the chair that Pa had recently occupied, feeling a wave of conflicting emotions. On one hand, she was

relieved that he was gone and no longer causing her pain. She felt guilty for wishing him away, as if it were her fault he was gone. Taking a deep breath, Midge turned away from the table, trying to shake off these overwhelming feelings, and pretended to concentrate on cleaning the pot.

“No. We can’t get a puppy,” she finally said. “Bring me your bowls and go outside.”

“I can’t find my boots,” Jenny whined.

“Where did you have them last?” Petunia said, picking up Olive. “Whoo-hee. You need your nappy changed. Midge! Olive needs her nappy changed. She stinks, and her dress is all wet.”

“I don’t know where your boots are, Jenny,” Midge said, dropping her rag in the dirty water. “Did you leave them outside?”

“I’ll go look.” The child took off, slamming the door behind her.

Petunia held Olive in outstretched arms. The child was giggling as she reached for whatever dead animal Pet had on top of her head. Petunia looked mortified as Olive bunched up her legs and released wind. “Midge, take her now.”

Taking the toddler from Petunia, Midge watched as seven of her siblings raced out the door. Sighing, she tapped Olive on the nose. “We should get you changed, and then perhaps you can help me do the dishes.”

Olive giggled, placing her hands on either side of Midge’s face, and squeezing as she put an open mouth kiss on Midge’s nose. Olive still hadn’t spoken a word, and sometimes Midge wished she knew what the little girl was thinking.

After quickly changing Olive into a clean diaper and flour sack dress, they went outside in search of everyone else. They stepped onto the porch and Midge spied Jenny’s boots, forgotten in the dirt. Midge stooped to pick them up and

brushed away the dust before placing them on the rickety porch that overlooked the empty fields beyond. As she glanced around the yard, everyone had gone. The berry pails were missing from their hooks on the side of the house, which told her that the children had probably headed to the creek.

Lifting Olive in her arms, she began walking across the grassy terrain toward where the Chapman's and Hartman's properties converged by the stream. That was where the berry bushes grew abundantly along the banks of the creek.

The Chapmans' appeared to be decent neighbors. Mrs. Chapman came by and introduced herself shortly after Pa and the family had moved into the small cabin on the ridge. Pa was drunk enough to threaten Mrs. Chapman with his rifle, and she never came by again. It embarrassed Midge to even think about it. The Hartmans, however...

They just scared her.

As she approached the creek, she could hear the joyful noise of her siblings splashing in the water. They seemed so carefree, and Midge wished she could join them, but she had work to do. She gingerly placed Olive down on the patch of grass and handed her a small stick, hoping it would be enough to keep her occupied.

Midge searched the bushes for the ripest berries, her mind wandering as she worked. Picking one, she placed it in her mouth, the juicy sweetness of the berry exploding on her tongue. Her ravenous hunger had her forgetting about everything but the delicious taste of the fruit. As she picked, she felt a sense of peace wash over her. It was moments like this that made her feel grateful for their little slice of paradise. Even though things had been hard since their pa left, the beauty of the land never ceased to amaze her.

It was so different from the dirty cow towns in Texas where they were living before.

Suddenly, she heard a twig snap behind her and instinctively turned to see who or what it was. She saw nothing but the shadows of the trees. Placing her hand on the knife she kept at her waist, she cautiously moved toward the sound. As she got closer, she saw movement out of the corner of her eye and heard footsteps crunching on the leaves. Fear crept into her heart, and she quickened her pace.

“Who’s there?” Midge called out.

As the sound faded away, a profound silence filled the air. Her heart raced as she raised her knife, ready to defend herself. She strained to listen, but she heard nothing but the distant babbling of the creek and her siblings’ laughter. She doubted herself. Maybe she was just being paranoid. Still, she couldn’t shake the feeling that someone or something was watching her. She scanned her surroundings once more before turning back to the berry bushes.

When she had her fill, she returned to where Olive was banging her stick on the ground. Lifting her sister, she carried Olive to the edge of the creek. “Let’s head home.”

“We didn’t get any berries,” Ira protested.

“Then hurry and pick the berries. If you get enough, I’ll make a pie for dinner.”

Berry wrinkled her nose as she picked up an empty bucket. “Can we have pie for dinner?”

Midge wiped the sweat from her brow and took a deep breath. “I have enough flour and lard to make a pie crust. And we can have whatever we want for dinner,” she informed her sister. She didn’t have the heart to tell her siblings that supplies were getting low and that was about all they had left in the pantry.

The children moved quickly to fill their buckets with berries as Midge watched, a mother’s gaze fixated on each of them. When they were done, they started the walk home, their

feet leaving small clouds of dust behind them. A noise carried on the wind as they approached their house.

Jenny tilted her head, listening to the sound. “What’s that?”

Petunia answered, taking the little girl’s hand, “That’s a rooster.”

Midge yearned for its meat, having longed for something more than floury pies since they last ate anything substantial weeks ago.

“If I had a rifle,” Petunia continued wistfully, “I’d shoot me one of those chickens.”

Peter, ever practical despite his youthfulness, laid his hand gently on Petunia’s shoulder. “Nuh-huh,” he said sternly. “They’d hear that gun and then you’d be in trouble for being a chicken thief. If you were gonna do it, you gotta do it where no one can hear or see you.”

Midge listened to her siblings chatter on the walk back up the hill, an idea forming in her mind.



Midge waited until the children were asleep, their bellies full of berry pie. She didn’t want them to know what she was doing. That way, if someone caught her, it would be on her shoulders alone.

Changing from her worn day dress into a pair of Pa’s pants and shirt, she put on his darkest jacket. She could already feel the perspiration rolling down her back. The humidity was unbearable and as much as she prayed for rain; she prayed even harder right now that it held off until she returned from her errand.

She slid her feet into her boots and winced. The cracked leather rubbed against her skin, and she could feel the air skimming over her toes where the toecap was separating from the sole.

There is no way I can run in these, she thought.

Pa had left a pair of boots that Peter used, but they were too big for Midge, and they were falling apart as well.

It would be better to go barefoot. Grabbing Pa's old hat, she crept out the door and into the darkness.

The moon illuminated the path as she tread carefully through the tall grass of the ridge. Pebbles and dirt shifted beneath her feet as she looked up to the clear night sky, marveling at the bright, round full moon. Her destination was close. She chose the Pickett ranch house, where Peter had told her she could find the chicken coop on the far side of the barn. She knew why Peter was familiar with this place; he had befriended Jesse, the youngest son, during one of his visits there to go rock-skimming at the nearby creek.

Midge's heart pounded in tune with each hurried step as she crept onto the Pickett's ranch, the darkness of night providing her only cover. The weight of her family's hunger bore down upon her, igniting a fire of determination within her that burned away any lingering fear. She had no choice but to do this for them.

The vast expanse of open plains stretched out around the ranch, bathed in the ghostly silver glow of moonlight. Shadows danced across the land, teasing Midge's heightened senses. She could hear cattle lowing in the distance, but they sounded far enough away. She wasn't worried about it.

While creeping up to the side of the barn, she noticed the chicken house and was surprised to find it simply sitting open in the yard. She at least would have expected it to be surrounded by wire or something.

As she moved deeper into the ranch, Midge noticed the towering silhouette of the main house, its windows dark and lifeless. She knew that somewhere inside, the occupants slept, unaware of the desperate soul who trespassed on their land. It sent shivers down her spine, but she couldn't afford to think about that now.

A quiet rustling caught Midge's ear, drawing her gaze towards the nearby chicken coop. Hope flickered within her chest, propelling her forward.

The darkness was both her ally and her enemy, hiding her from prying eyes yet making it difficult to see the path before her. She reminded herself that this was for her family, for the mouths that depended on her to fill them.

"Stay focused, Midge," she whispered to herself as she reached the chicken coop, her breath leaving a faint fog in the night air. "This is for Abilene and Olive... and for Peter and Pet..." Continuing to recite her siblings' names, she made her way to the side of the coop.

Midge stepped cautiously towards the coop, her gaze darting back and forth. The structure had a long rectangular shape with sturdy wire mesh covering its front. She peered through the wire of the chicken coop, admiring the solid construction and neat arrangement. A small box was set off to the side, with a standard door that was secured by a hasp and padlock.

Clenching her teeth, she reached into her pocket and pulled out the bent wire hanger she had been using to practice lockpicking. Her fingers had bled from honing the skill over the past weeks until she could almost do it without thinking. Taking a deep breath, she forced herself to stay calm and applied the makeshift tool to the lock on the door of the coop.

"Please, let this work," she murmured, her breath hitching as she slipped the wire into the lock. Her hands shook slightly,

but she knew she had done this countless times before. All those hours spent practicing were about to pay off.

“Come on, you stubborn thing,” she muttered through gritted teeth, her fingers working deftly to manipulate the lock. Midge could feel the familiar resistance, then the satisfying click of the tumblers falling into place. She exhaled a shaky breath as the lock disengaged, a wave of relief washing over her.

With a satisfying click, it opened.

“Thank you,” she whispered, more to herself than anyone else. She opened the door to the chicken coop, careful not to make a sound. With trembling hands, she reached inside the coop, her fingers brushing against the soft feathers of the hens. The warmth radiating from their bodies was a stark contrast to the humid night air, and it made her hesitate for just a moment. She could hear their gentle breathing, their small hearts beating rapidly within their chests.

“Sorry, girls,” she whispered, her voice barely audible. “But my family needs you.”

Her fingers explored the coop, searching for the perfect hen legs. She couldn't afford to make any mistakes, not when her siblings' survival depended on it. Her heart ached at the thought of taking one of these creatures away from its home, but what choice did she have? Midge shook her head, pushing aside her guilt. This was about her family, and nothing else mattered.

“Alright,” she murmured, her focus entirely on the task at hand. Her fingers danced over the hens, feeling the weight of each bird until she found the one that seemed perfect—a plump hen, its body full and rounded beneath her touch. “You'll do.”

Her hand wrapped around the chicken's body with a delicate firmness as she cupped her other hand over its wings. She snuggled the chicken close to her chest, its heart rate

increasing with every passing second. She gently turned it upside down to not startle the other chickens which were cooing around the henhouse. With her other hand, she opened the burlap sack she had brought along, ensuring it was ready to receive its new occupant.

The hen squirmed slightly, but Midge's grip remained firm. Once the chicken was safely tucked inside, she tightened the drawstring of the sack, securing it as best she could. A pang of guilt shot through her, but she pushed it down, reminding herself of the hungry faces waiting for her back home.

"Forgive me," she breathed, her heart heavy with the weight of her actions. As she turned to leave the coop, a single tear slid down her cheek. She knew that this was just the beginning, and the road ahead would be fraught with hardships. But for now, at least, she had done what she had set out to do.

"Thank you," she whispered once more, before slipping back into the darkness, clutching the burlap sack tightly against her chest, her thoughts consumed by the family she was fighting so hard to protect.

As Midge approached the small, dilapidated house, she breathed a sigh of relief that she hadn't been followed. She'd clean the chicken and put it in a pan on the stove. The children could eat once they woke up in the morning.

They would eat. They would be warm.

And that was enough.



CHAPTER TWO



August 1873

Baxter Hartman squinted under the blazing sun, sweat dripping from his brow as he surveyed the family ranch on the outskirts of Flat River. He ambled across the dusty acres, his back ramrod-straight and hands swollen from a lifetime of hard labor. Piercing blue eyes narrowed when he noticed the chickens scurrying about, their clucks and flutters disrupting the otherwise peaceful afternoon.

“Annamae!” he bellowed; hands cupped around his mouth. The screen door creaked open, and his sister appeared, her long, blonde hair falling in waves around her shoulders. She shaded her eyes with a slender hand, trying to discern what had riled her brother.

“What cha hollering for, Baxter? Can’t you see I’m busy?” Annamae’s voice held a hint of irritation, but she knew better than to ignore her brother when he was in one of his moods.

“Your chickens are out again,” Baxter growled, his boots crunching on the dry earth as he strode towards the coop. “And I reckon we’re missing another hen.”

“Can’t be,” Annamae protested, following him, her bare feet kicking up dust as she hurried to catch up to his long strides. “I lock ‘em up every evening, just like you told me to.”

“Then how come they’re always roaming, come morning?”

“Like I said, can’t be,” Annamae repeated stubbornly. “I latch that door tight, so tight even a coyote couldn’t sneak in.”

“Yet here they are,” Baxter replied, gesturing to the scattered birds pecking at the parched ground. Waving his

arms, he herded the chickens back towards the coop. “Open the fence, Annamae.”

“It’s not my fault. Maybe somebody else is letting them out.”

“Who’d do that?” Baxter asked, skepticism etched on his weathered face. “Ain’t nobody else around but us.”

She ran ahead to open the gate and then stopped, looking at her brother. “The gate is still latched. So, how did they escape?”

“Don’t ask me silly questions, Annie. Just open the darn door.” He pushed the chickens into the fenced area and motioned Annamae to close the gate behind him.

“Baxter!” Annamae pointed to the side near the tree. “Look.”

She swung open the rusty gate and ran into the chickens’ coop, her bare feet pounding against the ground. Baxter squawked angrily at her from the corner. But he was too late—the chickens were already spilling out through the opening, flapping their wings in delight as they scrambled away to freedom.

“Annamae! Look what you... what in the blue blazes?” he huffed, as he watched a fat hen push her way through the fence and join her companions on the other side. “When did that hole appear in the fence?”

Annamae gently shrugged her shoulders. “I don’t think it was there yesterday.”

“Were the chickens loose when you fed them yesterday?”

“Not that I noticed.”

“I wonder who cut the fence then.”

“Maybe the chickens have tinsnips,” she offered, her tone teasing.

“What makes you say a fool thing like that?”

“Because there is a pair of snips on the other side of the fence.”

Baxter ran his hand down his face. “I’ll get those.”

“Or maybe somebody’s stealing from us.”

“Stealing? From us?” he scoffed. “Now you’re talking nonsense.” As he eyed the chickens, his heart quickened with an uncomfortable suspicion.

“Fine then,” Annamae sighed, turning on her heel. “I’ll double-check the latch tonight. Make sure it’s extra secure.”

“See that you do,” Baxter muttered, his mind racing with unspoken thoughts. He couldn’t shake the feeling that something was amiss, that perhaps someone was indeed stealing from them. But who? And why?

“Annamae,” he called after his sister as she turned to leave. “How often have the chickens been out when you go to feed them?”

“I don’t remember.”

“Think, Annamae.”

His sister started rubbing her head. “I can’t think when you are grumpy. Stop yelling at me.”

“I’m not yelling at you,” he said, raising his voice. He bent down to pick up the tinsnips and flipped them over in his hand. The snips looked new, and he didn’t think it belonged to any of their hands.

“What’s going on?” Baxter looked up to see his brother Rex walking toward them.

“He’s yelling at me again,” Annamae said, rubbing her head.

“You need to stop that, Bax,” Rex warned him.

Annamae had suffered from scarlatina and nearly died. She didn’t like loud noises, confrontations, or difficult situations.

The brothers tried to be aware of her needs, but they were...
brothers.

There were five brothers and two sisters in the Hartman family.

Chatten was the oldest and born shortly after Ma and Pa arrived in Flat River. He married the Chapman girl next door. She seemed a friendly sort, but Baxter wasn't too fond of the Chapmans. He did like his new sister-in-law, however.

Baxter was born two years later. Then came Evangeline, Rexford, Frank, and finally, Annamae. Whitney joined the family when he was older after his own ma died. Since they shared the same pa, he was also a Hartman and was folded in as a brother with the family.

All the Hartman siblings lived on or near the family farm, apart from Whitney, Vangie, and Frank. Whitney went wherever Whitney went. Vangie left as soon as she was old enough, and Frank died from a rattler bite. Pa was gone too, and now Ma was spending a lot of time with that cook next door.

Baxter could add this new grievance to the accounts of wrongs his family suffered from the Chapmans.

He exhaled loudly. "I'm sorry, Annie. I'm just..." he stopped and rolled back on his heels. "Something's not right," he muttered to himself, scanning the ground for any signs of disturbance. And there it was—a series of small footprints leading away from the coop, barely visible amidst the dust. His heart thundered against his ribcage, and anger ignited deep within him. Someone *was* stealing from his family, and he wouldn't stand for it. "Come here."

"I don't want to," she whined.

"Were you on this side?" he asked.

"I'm all over the farm."

“There are footprints here.” Baxter pointed to the ground. “Don’t walk on them, Rex.”

“Sorry, Bax,” his brother said, taking a step backwards. “Those look smaller than Annie’s enormous feet.”

“I don’t have enormous feet,” she said, stomping towards them.

Rex laughed. “Maybe not, but it got you moving.”

“Stop there and put your foot next to that print on the ground.”

Annamae nervously obeyed Baxter’s request. She slowly lifted the hem of her skirt, revealing bare feet. Stretching her toes as far as they would go, she placed her foot in the dirt next to a clearly defined footprint, her toes extending past it.

“It’s almost like a child left that print,” she said, lifting her foot.

“We don’t have any children on the farm here,” Rex said.

Baxter emitted a grunt. “I want you to keep a close eye on them chickens. Hear me, Annie? And if you see anything suspicious, you let me know right away.”

“Alright,” she agreed, her voice softening. “But I still say it’s not my fault.”

“You think someone’s been stealing Ma’s chickens?” Rex removed his hat and scratched his head.

“Who would do that?” Annamae asked, her voice trembling.

“I don’t know,” he replied, his gaze never leaving the tracks. “But I’m gonna find out.”

“Be careful, Baxter,” she whispered, her hand resting on his shoulder for a moment before retreating into the house.

“What are you planning on doing?” Rex asked.

“I’m going to fix the fence, and then you’re going to help me round up the chickens again.” Looking at his brother, Baxter wrinkled his brow. “What did you need?”

“Oh. I came to tell you that Whit is staying in town.”

Baxter scratched his chin. “He is, is he?” Slipping the tinsnips into his pocket, he headed towards the barn to find supplies to fix the fence. “It would be nice if he was here to help around the farm.”

“I think he might be sweet on a girl.”

Baxter let out a barking laugh. “A girl? We’re out here working every day and he’s in town trying to court a girl?”

“Must be nice to have a girl.” Rex kept pace, walking to the barn. “Pa never let us do any courting or anything.”

“They ain’t nothing but trouble.”

“How do you know, Bax? It ain’t like you’ve had one before.”

Baxter scoffed at his brother’s teasing and rolled his eyes. “I don’t need a girl to know they’re trouble.”

“Sure, sure,” Rex said, grinning. “Whatever you say.”

“I’ve seen enough of them in town to know they’re not worth the trouble. They’ll just distract you from important things.”

Rex shook his head. “I don’t know, Bax. I think it’d be nice to have someone to come home to.”

Baxter didn’t respond, lost in thought as he rummaged through the tools in the barn. He needed to concentrate on fixing the fence and finding out who was stealing their chickens, not on some meaningless romance. As they worked, Baxter couldn’t shake the feeling that their farm wasn’t the only one being targeted. He had overheard some of the townsfolk mentioning missing chickens and livestock. Baxter decided he would find out who was behind it all and put a stop

to it for good. No one was going to steal from the Hartman family and get away with it.



Heaven had better help the thief that continued to steal from Ma.

Baxter had been patrolling the farm, but even in the shadows of dusk, he hadn't been able to catch the person responsible for the missing hens.

And now it was raining.

The storm worsened, soaking through Baxter's clothes, and chilling him to the bone. He shifted his weight from one foot to the other, trying to ease the ache spreading through his legs. The frustration gnawed at him as he wiped a wet strand of hair from his forehead. Time seemed to stretch on endlessly, each minute feeling like an hour.

Pulling down the brim of his felt hat, he shifted the rifle under his coat and tried to get more comfortable. It was hot and sticky, but he knew he needed to be out tonight if he was going to catch the thief. He peered between the raindrops at the chicken coop on the far end of the barnyard. The barn doors were open, the light illuminating the yard and casting shadows towards the sleeping chickens on their roost.

"Come on. Come on out, you dirty thief," he growled under his breath, as if his words would encourage the chicken thief to reveal themselves. The rain grew heavier, drenching him to the bone, but his resolve never wavered.

He gritted his teeth as he kept watch over the chicken coop. The rain pelted against his hat, streaming down his face in cold rivulets, but Baxter hardly noticed. Time seemed to stretch on endlessly, each minute feeling like an hour. With

every passing moment, his patience dwindled, and his anger grew.

The oil lamp Baxter put on an iron hook swayed lightly against the rain pummeling it. It had been so dry that he was thankful for the rain, but it was making his job more difficult. He was exhausted and longed for nothing more than to curl up in his bed. The cold water rolled off the thick fabric of his hat and down his back, causing him to flinch. *Would the rain ever end?*

For nearly a week, this thief had deprived him of the comfort of decent sleep. The only respite from the damp ground was to nestle between corn stalks, keeping his eyes peeled for the thief that had been plaguing their land. Despite his best efforts, he had failed to catch them in the act. Meanwhile, an unexpected guest had taken up residence in their home, barring him from entering and leaving him out in the elements. The lack of a roof over his head left him feeling vulnerable. As a result, he was now both cranky and tired, with hunger gnawing at his belly like a ravenous beast.

His eyes felt gritty, as if he had rubbed them with sandpaper. Every blink was a brutal reminder of how long it had been since he last slept. Although he tried to keep himself alert, he drifted off at inexplicable moments, lost in a muddled chaos of fatigue.

He felt his head drift to the side, and he tumbled into the cornstalks surrounding him. Gasping for breath, he sat up and patted his coat to make sure the rifle was still there. Taking a deep breath, he looked around the barnyard.

Baxter squinted into the darkness as he heard a soft rustling coming from the direction of the chicken coop. His heart raced, and he thought for sure it must be a fox or coyote, but then he saw a tiny figure, bathed in shadow, draw closer. He stood straight up, scanning the darkness to find where the shadow disappeared to.

There! Close to the tree.

He squinted, trying to make out a figure against the night sky. Was it a fox, or a coyote? No, this figure was too big.

The creature disappeared into the darkness once more, and Baxter moved closer. Suddenly, the chicken coop door creaked open, and a figure emerged, clutching a hen tightly against their chest. Baxter sprang from his hiding spot, closing in on the thief with swift determination.

“Stop right there!” he barked, his voice booming through the storm.

The thief halted, eyes wide with shock, and took off running in the rain, disappearing in between the cornstalks, with Baxter right behind.



CHAPTER THREE



Midge was determined not to take anything from the Hartmans again, especially after nearly being caught the previous time. She even rode the swayback mare to town to buy food for her siblings.

The shopkeeper refused to extend her credit and limited her purchases to the pennies she scraped together. Attempting to push away the jeers ringing in her ears, she hastily exited the store with her meager purchases, tears blurring her vision. The pound of beans and pound of flour wouldn't last very long, but at least it was something. How did Pa always find money for his drink, but she couldn't find money to buy enough food for her siblings?

When she couldn't take the whining any longer, she would disappear into her bedroom and beg a God she knew had forgotten about them.

Heavenly Father, help me. Please send an angel to help me, she silently pleaded.

“What are you doing, Midge?” Ira came over and placed his hand on her shoulder.

“I'm praying, sweetheart.” She rolled back from her kneeling position and wiped the tears from her face. “Is there something wrong?”

“Other than us being hungry? Olive needs to be changed and Pet is complaining about the rain.” He waved a hand in front of his nose. “It makes her raccoon stink.”

“Tell her to take that horrible hat off and put it outside. I don't want it in the house.”

“You tell her. She won't listen to me.”

Midge let out a deep sigh before entering the great room and finding Olive sitting cross-legged on the floor, her hands pushing colorful blocks around in circles. The rest of the children gathered around the fireplace, huddled together for warmth. Midge felt her heart clench at the sight. They deserved better than this. They deserved warm beds and full bellies, not this life of poverty and struggle.

“That hat smells too bad for the house, Pet,” Midge said firmly, trying to keep the frustration from her voice.

Pet looked up at her, her eyes narrowed in defiance. “I like my hat. I ain’t taking it off.”

Midge resisted the urge to scream in frustration. She was doing everything she could to keep them alive, and yet it never seemed to be enough.

“I’ll put it outside,” Ira offered, yanking the hat from Pet’s head, and running towards the door.

“You give that back!” Petunia screamed, racing after her brother.

“Thank you,” Midge called, her voice softening as she kneeled beside Olive. “What are you playing with, sweetie?”

Olive looked up at her with a grin, lifting a block to show Midge before stacking the blocks together to form a little tower. Midge smiled despite herself. Watching her siblings play was the only thing that brought her genuine joy these days.

As the rain continued to beat against the roof, Midge felt a sense of despair wash over her. How were they going to survive the winter if they couldn’t even make it through summer?

She tried to limit her thieving to the neighboring farms but never visited the same farm two times in a row. She hadn’t been able to go out because of the rain, but it appeared she wasn’t going to have a choice now.

Petunia came back inside, a scowl on her face. “Silly boy, threw my hat in the water trough.”

“Where is it now?” Midge asked.

“About time,” Peter said.

“I put it on the nail in the lean-to so it can dry out.”

“I hope some animal takes off with it.”

“Stop it!” Midge shouted. “Stop it, all of you.” Ira stumbled back in, his locks and clothing thoroughly soaked from the downpour. “Ira, go get changed. Petunia, you change Olive. Peter, you read from the Bible and watch your sisters. Make sure no one gets too close to the fire, and I’ll be back soon.”

“Where are you going, Midge?” Peter asked.

“I’m just running out.”

“In the rain?” he asked skeptically.

“I’ll be back. I promise.”

“Want me to heat the water?” Petunia asked.

Midge tilted her head. “What for?”

“For the chicken.” Petunia threw her head back and laughed. “Come on, Olive, let’s get you changed.”

Midge didn’t bother with a response. She went straight into her bedroom and changed into her father’s old clothes. Grabbing his hat, she tucked her hair underneath it before leaving under the cover of darkness.

The walk to the Hartman ranch took longer, but she didn’t want to go to the Pickett’s again. Peter said that Beau Pickett was getting suspicious, and Midge had heard that he was even grumpier than Baxter Hartman. The Hartman Ranch would be a good choice, as they hadn’t picked the corn yet and it would provide her cover if she needed to escape quickly.

The corn towered high above her as she crept through the field. Midge couldn't help but think about how this was the most foolish thing she had ever done. The Hartmans had a reputation for being cruel and they wouldn't hesitate to hurt her if they caught her. Pa said he had a skirmish with Mr. Hartman once or twice when Mr. Hartman would come to play cards.

Her fingers hesitantly reached out into the tall cornstalks, brushing against wet ears of corn. Taking a deep breath, she carefully peeled back the thick husk to reveal the plump kernels underneath. She tugged the ear from its stalk and traced her fingertips along the drying husk. Biting into the sweet nuggets, she felt her stomach cramp with hunger and gratitude at the first meal it had in days.

She had never stolen corn before, and she wasn't sure how to do it quietly. As she reached for the next stalk, the rain seemed to pick up, and the sound of it pattering against the plants masked her movements. She quickly ripped the corn off the stalk, husking it before shoving it into her pack.

Just as she finished filling her bag, a high-pitched scream pierced through the stillness. Her stomach dropped and with shaking hands, she pressed herself against the stalks, her heart pounding wildly in her chest. She held her breath, barely daring to move until she heard just the wind racing through the stalks like a ghostly shriek.

Midge's eyes widened and her breath hitched as she caught a flash of red darting through the stalks of corn. A red fox paused beside a tall stalk, its ears twitching as it glanced in her direction. Yellow eyes met hers as it parted its maw to emit a raspy bark that echoed in the wind. Her heart raced as her hand pressed against her chest and she tried to compose herself.

"Oh, thank you," she said to the rustling stalks. "It was only a fox."

Take us the foxes, The little foxes, That spoil the vines: For our vines have tender grapes. The words her mother read from the Bible rang in her ears. Ma told her that the little foxes were those sins that people overlooked or tried to justify but would come back to haunt them or have huge consequences in the person's life.

Taking several gulps of air, she wondered if the fox was trying to warn her. She knew stealing was wrong. It also didn't set a good example for her siblings. *This will be the last time, Lord. I promise.*

Hitching her sack over her shoulder, she made her way to the edge of the property. She was grateful to make her way through the cornfield unnoticed. Hunkering down, she could see the tree next to the chicken coop and the barn in the distance. The barn door was open, and Midge could see several lanterns hanging from the rafters.

She waited to see if anyone would come out of the building or walk by. With nerves already frayed from the fox, she wanted to be sure there was no one else around. Dropping her bag by the edge of the cornfield, she crept closer to the chicken coop, her eyes darting around for any sign of danger. She chastised herself once more, but pushed away her guilt, focusing on the task at hand. Her family needed her, and she would not let them down.

As she approached the chicken coop, a mix of fear and determination coursed through her veins. Arriving at the tree, she looked for a weak spot in the fencing. It took several tries with the rusty snips since she lost her new ones, and she was inside the chicken yard. Since she was already familiar with the way the hen house was situated, it only took her a moment to scoop up a sleeping hen.

Midge gritted her teeth and shoved her shoulder through the opening in the chicken wire fence, ignoring the angry clucking of the hen.

“Stop right there!” a voice boomed through the storm.

Midge paused for only a second, then took off running towards the cornstalks, her bare feet slipping in the muddy yard. The hen squawked louder in protest. As she reached the tall corn, she glanced back and was startled by the thunderous footsteps of the largest man she had ever seen, chasing her through the pouring rain.

She navigated the tall stalks of corn as quickly as she could, holding the squirming hen to her chest with one arm while feeling for the missing burlap sack that was usually tucked in her pocket. When her fingers failed to brush against its familiar fabric, she let out a groan.

In her haste, she had forgotten her bag of corn. Shuddering, she knew she was in trouble.

The bag had Pa’s name on it.



Baxter grabbed the burlap sack the thief had abandoned near the barn. Opening it, he found it filled with half-dried corn. Not only was the thief stealing chickens but also food that was going to feed livestock through the winter. Gripping the burlap tightly, Baxter held it up to the light emitting from the barn.

Bea.

Bea?

Turning the bag once more, he could make out the rest of the faded letters.

Bea-l-e.

Beale.

He should have known.

Harold Beale had a notorious reputation for drinking and stealing. Pa, who traveled often on business trips before he died, was already familiar with Harold's shady behavior. So when news spread that the Beale family was moving to Flat River, Pa made sure everyone in town knew exactly what to expect from them. Harold had no wife by his side; most likely she had left him, given up on his habit of hard-drinking and carousing.

Tossing the heavy sack of corn over his shoulder, Baxter started down the winding path that connected the Hartman and Chapman properties. Moving quickly, he could feel each footstep pounding up through the soles of his boots. As he stepped carefully across the creek where it was shallowest, he thought of Harold Beale, and his anger spurred Baxter forward. He would make it back to their shack before Harold did.

As Baxter crested the hilltop, he had just enough time to hide behind a tree when he spotted a silhouette appearing further down the path, the chicken still tucked neatly under one arm. Holding his breath, he waited until the figure was just a few feet away before lunging out from his cover and grabbing the shadow by the shoulders roughly. A shriek broke through the air as a gust of wind snatched the hat off their head and sent it sailing through the air.

Baxter released her and stumbled backwards as the figure stepped into the light from the front porch, revealing a woman with long brown locks and hazel eyes flickering between defiance and vulnerability.

He knew he should remember her name, but his mind had gone blank as he stared at the woman before him. She had to be Harold's oldest daughter. Baxter racked his brain trying to recall her name, desperately searching for the right combination of letters.

Meg... Mary... Margaret... *Why couldn't he remember?*

“Midge. My name is Midge,” she told him, rolling her shoulders back.

“Why are you telling me that?”

“Well, it appears you’re going through all the names that begin with M. I just thought I’d make it easier on you.”

“Put the hen down, Midge,” he commanded, gritting his teeth.

“I need this hen and you can’t take it.”

“You stole it.” His large hands reached out towards her.

Midge’s eyes darted around the rain-soaked landscape, searching for a way to escape his grasp. Her heart pounded in her chest as she made a split-second decision, dropping the hen and bolting towards the dense underbrush that lined the edge of the property.

“Get back here, Midge!” Baxter muttered under his breath, giving chase. His boots slipped on the slick grass, but he pushed forward, determined not to let her slip away.

“Leave me be!” Midge yelled over her shoulder, her voice ragged with desperation. She weaved through the trees, her agility and resourcefulness on full display as she tried to put distance between them.

“Can’t do that,” Baxter grunted, his focus solely on catching her. He could feel his earlier grumpiness fading, replaced by something more primal as he chased her. It reminded him of the games he played as a child with his brothers. But she wasn’t Chat, Rex, Frank, or Whit. If this was a game, he was determined to win.



Midge’s heart raced as she dodged low-hanging branches and leaped over fallen logs, the rain-soaked ground nearly giving

way under her bare feet. She could hear Baxter's heavy breaths getting closer, spurring her to push herself even harder. But her determination faltered as she felt her foot snag on a root, sending her tumbling head over heels until she crashed into a large tree.

With a groan, Midge pushed herself up, trying to shake off the shock that had settled over her. But it was too late. Baxter was upon her, his powerful hand encircling her arm as he hauled her to her feet.

"Gotcha," he breathed, his face mere inches from hers.

Midge's breath caught in her throat as she gazed into his deep brown eyes, seeing something there she had never seen before. It was as if he'd replaced his earlier grumpiness with a fire, a raw desire that left her feeling both exhilarated and afraid.

"Why did you do it, Midge?" he asked, his voice low and gravelly.

"I had to," she replied, still breathless from the chase. "I need to feed my family. We've not eaten in several days."

"By stealing from mine?" he snapped, his grip tightening.

"I swear I didn't have a choice. I went to town, but no one would help me."

She watched as his face softened. Just a bit.

"Where's your Pa?"

Tugging on his grip, she tried to pull at his fingers. "You're hurting my arm."

He loosened his grip. *Just a bit.*

"Where's Harold?"

"I - I don't know."

Baxter dropped his hand, releasing her immediately. "What do you mean, you don't know?"

“I don’t know. He left several months ago, and I’ve not seen him.”

“He just left you?”

Midge swallowed hard and dropped her gaze, afraid to look into Baxter’s intense eyes. His cheek twitched and his chest heaved as he drew in a deep breath. With a quick nod, Midge conceded, unable to form words in the face of his rage.

“How many are at your house?”

“There’s me and my eight siblings.”

“Nine of you?” Baxter grabbed her arm again and started walking towards the small cabin. “Take me to your place.”



The rain beat down mercilessly, pelting the dilapidated roof of Midge’s home. Baxter stood there for a moment, taking in the sight before him. The house was little more than a shack, its faded wood splintering and peeling under the relentless storm. Through the cracked window, he could make out the faces of Midge’s siblings, their eyes wide with fear and curiosity, dirt smudged across their cheeks.

“Come on in,” Midge said hesitantly, her voice barely audible over the rain. She opened the door, revealing a dimly lit room that seemed to be held together by sheer willpower.

He stepped into the room and his water-filled boots made a distinct squelching noise against the wooden planks of the floor. He noticed Midge was going barefoot.

“You were out there without boots?”

She shrugged, taking off the wet jacket and hanging it on a peg. “I could move faster without shoes.”

“You’ll end up with a cold. You want that?” Baxter asked gruffly, his blue eyes scanning the room as he stepped inside. He couldn’t help but feel a pang of sympathy for the children huddled together on the floor, their ragged clothes clinging to their shivering bodies. “Is this what all the stealing was for?”

“Please, don’t judge us too harshly,” Midge pleaded, wringing her hands anxiously. “I ain’t proud of what I did, but I had no choice. Since Pa left us, I’ve been trying to keep my family from falling apart ever since.”

“What kind of man abandons his own children like that?” Baxter scoffed.

“Pa wasn’t always like that. But when Ma died, something in him broke. He started drinking and gambling, and one day, he just never came back.”

“Still ain’t an excuse for stealing,” Baxter muttered, crossing his arms over his chest. But despite his harsh words, his heart went out to Midge and her siblings. They were just kids doing their best to survive in a cruel and unforgiving world.

“Like I said, Mr. Hartman, we’re doing the best we can,” she replied, her words firm. Baxter noted the frantic pulsing of her neck as he focused on her. “We don’t need your pity.”

“Is that so?” he asked, his piercing blue eyes locking onto hers. “You needed my chickens, though.”

“Look, I know I did wrong,” Midge said, her voice wavering as she tried to hold back tears. “I’ll pay you back. But if it means keeping my family fed and together, I’d do it again.”

Baxter stared at her for a moment, his gruff exterior crumbling under the weight of her vulnerability. He knew he couldn’t turn her in to Marshal Briggs, not after seeing the direness of their situation. But something had to be done, and he was determined to figure out what that was.

“Alright,” he said finally, sighing heavily. “Let’s see if we can find a better way to keep your family fed without resorting to thievery.”

“Like what?” Peter snapped, his hazel eyes narrowing with suspicion. “We ain’t got no money, and our crops ain’t worth spit.”

“Peter, hush,” Midge admonished, though her own expression echoed her brother’s doubts.

“Listen,” Baxter began, addressing them all. “I don’t want to see you suffer. But I won’t stand for thieving, either. We can figure something out, I reckon.”

Midge swallowed hard, her eyes flicking toward the window as if expecting to see Marshal Orrin Briggs already bearing down on them. “Please,” she whispered, her hands clasped tightly together. “Don’t tell the marshal. He’d take my family apart, and we ain’t got no one else.”

“Let’s just focus on getting y’all fed for now,” Baxter said gruffly, unwilling to make any promises he couldn’t keep. “I need to go catch that hen.”

“Really?” one girl said. “Need some help?”

“Nah. It’s raining. She is probably roosting on the porch by now.”

“Thank you,” Midge whispered, relief flooding her face. She turned to her siblings, her eyes softening as she took in their frightened expressions. “Don’t worry,” she told them gently. “We’re gonna be alright.”

As Baxter watched Midge comfort her siblings, he felt a strange warmth spread through his chest. It wasn’t just sympathy or pity; it was something deeper, something that told him he needed to help this family.

Sighing, he tried to dispel the feelings building inside. If Annamae even thought that he was getting soft, she’d be laughing from here to next week.

Finding the chicken right where he thought it would be, he made quick work of butchering the bird. The same girl who offered to help him stood at the door, watching. She wasn't like any girl Baxter had ever seen. She wore buckskins and was covered in dirt. Hair, shorter than he had seen on any woman, stuck out from her head.

"Which one are you?" he asked, as he took his knife out to skin the bird.

"I'm Petunia. They call me Pet."

"Okay, Pet."

"I like to hunt, but Midge won't let me."

"You got a rifle?"

The young girl shook her head. "No."

"Bow and arrow?"

"No."

"Slingshot?"

Petunia shook her head.

"Then how do you hunt?"

"I could do it if'n I had one of those things."

"Let's get this inside to your sister." He handed the bird to Petunia, who took it by the legs and disappeared inside. Midge met him at the door, offering him a frayed towel. "Here, you can use this to dry off."

Baxter took the towel and dried his face. "Thank you."

"Would you like to have supper with us?"

"No. I don't want to take food away from you. I'll show you how you can prepare the chicken and you'll have another meal tomorrow."

"Midge just boils it until all the flavor is out of it," the youngest boy said.

“Behave now, Josiah,” Midge warned, who stared wide-eyed at Baxter. “And say thank you when he’s done fixing our supper.”

“I don’t trust him,” the oldest boy muttered under his breath, his arms crossed over his chest. He stood by the door, as if prepared to bolt at the first sign of trouble.

“Me either,” said another one.

“Peter, not now, and you behave too, Ira,” Midge scolded, though her gaze lingered on Baxter for a moment longer than necessary.

Baxter couldn’t help but feel a twinge of guilt as he watched the makeshift family huddle together like frightened rabbits. It was clear they’d been through a lot already, and while he still resented being stolen from, something in Midge’s desperate determination stirred a reluctant sense of compassion within him.

“Here,” he said gruffly, taking the cleaned bird that Petunia set on the table. “I’ll show you how to cook it properly, so it’ll feed y’all better.”

“Thank you,” Midge murmured, her voice barely audible.

As she moved closer, Baxter caught the faint scent of lavender clinging to her damp hair. His thoughts flickered back to his own sister, Annamae, and the lengths he would go to protect her. What would he do if he found himself in Midge’s shoes?

“First, you’ll want to season it,” he instructed. “Do you have any herbs? They will help stretch the flavor.”

“No, we don’t,” Midge shook her head.

“Salt? Pepper?” When she didn’t respond, he looked at the hungry faces. “How about any vegetables if you’ve got ‘em,” Baxter continued, more gently than before. “Potatoes, carrots, onions... anything hearty will do.”

“We ain’t got those either,” Peter blurted. “We ain’t got nothing.”

“Peter!”

Baxter watched as the color rushed to Midge’s cheeks. “Don’t worry about it,” he offered. “I didn’t mean to offend you. Just boil this tonight and be sure to save the broth.”

“Thank you.” Midge placed her hand on his arm, her voice stronger now. “For everything.”

“Yer welcome,” Baxter grumbled, unable to meet her gaze. He busied himself with gathering his coat and hat, preparing to leave them be.

“Wait,” she called out softly, hesitating just a moment. “Will you... will you come back?”

Baxter paused, considering her question. There was something about Midge that intrigued him. She had a spark of resilience that refused to be snuffed out. And while he couldn’t quite put his finger on it, he knew there was more to her story than met the eye.

“Reckon I might,” he said at last, tipping his hat to her.

“Are you going to turn us in to the marshal?”

“Y’all don’t have to worry,” Baxter said gruffly, catching her gaze. “Ain’t gonna involve Marshal Briggs in this.”

“Truly?” Midge asked, hope flickering in her warm brown eyes.

“Think I’d still be here if I was gonna turn y’all in?” He snorted softly, turning his attention back to the rain pouring down.

“Thank you,” Midge breathed, relief flooding her chest. She hesitated a moment before asking, “Will you help us?”

“Help you?” Baxter furrowed his brow, considering her words. “Reckon I don’t have much choice now, do I? Get inside and make sure you eat.”

He turned up the collar on his coat and stepped out into the night, his thoughts lingering on Midge and her siblings as he made his way back to his own ranch.



CHAPTER FOUR



The next morning, Baxter trudged through the mire in his boots, leading a donkey hitched to a small cart toward the root cellar. The rain had stopped, but the sucking sound of sticky mud followed every step he took.

“What are you doing?” Annamae asked, taking a crunchy bite of her red apple as she stepped off the porch. Baxter noticed she was shoeless, and he wrinkled his nose at the earthy smell of the mud squelching beneath her bare feet as she shadowed him. He opened the door to the root cellar and started inspecting the stores inside. Annamae watched him intently, still munching on her apple.

“How long have these potatoes been in here?” he asked.

Annamae shrugged. “I don’t know. I think those are leftovers from the fall crop. Why do you ask?”

“No reason,” Baxter said quickly, turning away from her gaze and back to the potatoes. “Why don’t you wear shoes?”

“I don’t like the feel of them,” she answered. “They pinch my toes.” An amused smile played on her lips as she took another bite of her apple. “That’s an odd question,” she said finally, with a chuckle. “Why do you ask?”

He shrugged, feeling a little embarrassed. “No reason,” he mumbled.

“There must have been a reason.”

It was easier to change the subject. “I caught the chicken thief last night.”

“You did?” Annamae jumped up and down, the mud sticking to her feet with each bounce.

“Yeah. She wasn’t wearing shoes either.”

“She?”

“Yeah. It was Midge Beale.”

“Midge? The girl down the road? The one with the raccoon on her head?”

“No. That’s Petunia. Midge is the oldest. I followed her home.”

“You were at the Beale house?” Annamae broke her apple core in half, offering a piece to the donkey and tossing the other half in the air. Baxter watched as it spun towards a pig that was ambling around the yard. The pig quickly snatched up the piece of fruit, not concerned about manners or politeness.

The sight of the pig enjoying the apple bothered him more than he cared to admit. They could feed their scraps to the hogs, but down the road their neighbors went hungry each day. “Her pa left. She’s now taking care of her eight brothers and sisters.”

“Left?”

“She’s all alone, Annie. They don’t have any food.” The thought of the hungry stares from eight... *nine* faces made him feel sick to his stomach. “I don’t think Midge had eaten in a while. Whatever they had, she gave to her siblings.”

“That’s terrible.”

“I thought I’d take a few things over.”

“You can take the few eggs I collected this morning. Just leave six.”

“What can I take out of here?” His eyes swept the root cellar, taking in the various vegetables.

“Take some onions, potatoes, and carrots. Maybe some of those apples, too.” Annamae grabbed a basket hanging from the wall and handed it to Baxter. “And take some of that salt pork. We can spare a little.”

“How many hams do we have?”

“I don’t know. You’d have to go over to the smokehouse.” Annamae put her hand on his arm. “Do you want to take all that over at once?”

“Why not?”

“If they’ve not had food in a while, they might eat it all in one sitting and that will make them ill.”

“You’re right.”

“There is leftover ham and half a slab of salt pork at the house. Take that instead. Oh, and beans. Beans are always filling.”

“Thank you, Annie.” Baxter nodded, gathering the items she had mentioned into the wooden cart. He couldn’t help but feel guilty as they talked about limiting what he took over the first time. He didn’t even know if Midge would accept the offering, and if he gave away most of their supplies, what would that leave them to eat over the winter?

As if reading his thoughts, Annamae waved her hand. “We’ve not restocked yet because of all the rain. Everything is in the barn. We’ll be fine for winter.”

“Do you think they need anything else?”

“Let me think,” she said as they made their way back to the house. “Maybe you could bring them some milk and butter. And some bread.”

“That sounds like a good idea.”

“I’d go see Ma and Marmee. They’ll know what to do.”

“Marmee?” The idea of visiting the Chapman ranch embarrassed him, especially after the trouble between the two families.

“She’ll know what to do,” Annamae said.

Baxter lifted a woven wicker basket and tucked it into the back of an old wooden cart. He had to be careful not to disturb the contents. A bowl of eggs, fresh butter, jars of jam, honey, and pickled vegetables. There was a loaf of bread, salt, coffee, a few herbs, and a chunk of salt pork. After securing the baskets in place with some rope, he added the bag of corn cobs that Midge had dropped in her haste to get away from him.

He whistled for his horse, Knickers, who was already saddled and grazing on a patch of soggy grass near the barn. The horse trotted towards him and chuffed a greeting. He clutched the lead line, pulling himself up onto Knickers' sturdy back before securing the line attached to the donkey.

"Come along, Daisy," he said, tugging the gentle donkey toward the main path that would lead him to the Beale home. As he rode, he thought about Midge. Last night he didn't get a good look at her, and what he saw looked like a cat that had found its way into the creek.

But when he lifted her off the ground, he felt her warm and soft body against his. In that moment, he would have done anything to keep her safe. He shook his head, trying to clear his thoughts. *It was not the time to be distracted.*

As he rode toward her home, he couldn't help but think of the longing in her eyes. The desperation of a girl trying to keep her family fed. He couldn't imagine what that was like, having no parents and all those siblings to care for. It wasn't his place to worry about her, after all. He needed to focus on his own family and their needs.

He arrived at the edge of the property along the ridge and grimaced. *It was worse than he thought.*

The Beale's house was a dilapidated structure made of rough timber and odd materials scrounged from items travelers found too heavy to carry on their journeys west. The roof was sagging in some places, and there were holes in others. Someone had patched it with mismatched materials, and the

chimney leaned precariously to one side. The paint, if there ever was any, had long since faded away, leaving the wood exposed to the elements.

The front porch sagged under the weight of rotting planks, which creaked and moaned with each step. Grimy windows emitted a low light, with cracked glass that made them look like they were perpetually fogged. From the outside, at least, it looked like a place that no one would want to call home. Baxter couldn't imagine how eight children, and a young adult like Midge, could all fit in such a small and rundown home.

As his gaze swept across the terrain, it filled him with a sense of apprehension. If he hadn't been there the night before, he would have ridden by and assumed the farm was abandoned. The fields were neglected, with weeds reaching up towards the sky, overtaking the once fertile ground.

Midge and her siblings were struggling to keep up with the work on the homestead.

He noticed the swayback horse, without a halter or lead, its tired frame grazing on a small patch of grass.

Snorting, he shook his head. No one was going to steal that horse. It was nearly worthless. There was a lean-to on one side of the house, and if he tilted his head, he could see that it was leaning almost to the ground. A tiny barn sat on the opposite side of the property. It seemed to be the sturdiest and most well-built structure on the land.

He could see a few children peeking out from behind the tattered curtains, watching him approach, their curious eyes on him as he pulled up beside the house. He dismounted and Daisy brayed her greeting to the children, who giggled and disappeared behind the curtain.

Baxter took a deep breath and knocked on the door, which creaked open on its hinges. Inside, he could see that the house was in even worse shape than he thought. The walls were bare and stained, and there was hardly any furniture. The only thing

that seemed to be in good condition was a small potbelly stove in the corner.

Midge appeared from the shadows, looking even more ragged than she had the night before. Her face was flushed, and Baxter could see the exhaustion written all over her face. Her hair hung limply around her shoulders, and she wore a dress that was torn in several places. A child, only two years old, balanced on her hip. But when she saw Baxter, there was a spark of recognition in her eyes.

“Mr. Hartman,” she mumbled.

“Hello, Midge,” he said, lifting his hat in greeting.

Midge looked at him warily. “What brings you here, Mr. Hartman?”

He frowned. “Just Baxter will do. I wanted to bring you some supplies.”

Her eyes widened as she looked past him at the cart. “You brought us supplies?”

“I brought some things for you and your siblings.” He motioned towards the cart.

Midge’s eyes flickered towards the cart, then back to him. “Why are you doing this?”

Baxter shrugged. “I want to help.”

Midge looked down at her feet. “Thank you,” she mumbled.

Taking a basket from the cart, he followed her into the house, trying to be as gentle as possible with the eggs and bread. He could see Midge’s eyes lighting up at the sight of the food, and he couldn’t help but feel a twinge of sadness and anger at the same time. No one should have to go hungry like this.

The kids watched him with caution as he carried the basket and placed it on the table. Removing the linen cloth covering

the basket, he lifted out a loaf of bread and placed it on the table. “My sister Annamae made this fresh this morning. There are nineteen eggs. Normally I’d have more, but...” he looked at Midge and then the children, as he placed a bowl filled with white and brown eggs next to the bread, “some of my hens have wandered off. Annie needed half a dozen, so we kept a few.”

He rooted in the box some more. Pulling out a glass jar that sparkled in the little sunlight getting through the windows, he twisted it so that everyone could see. “This is my Ma’s preserves. These are elderberry.”

“Like me!” Baxter looked at the little girl. “That’s my name. But you can call me Berry.”

“Elderberry is one of my favorite things.” He handed Berry the jar. “Hold tight to that. There should be a small jar of honey in here too.”

“Honey?” Petunia’s eyes grew wide.

“My brother and I found a hive in an old log. We stole the honeycomb from those bees, and it is the sweetest thing you’ve ever tasted.” He gave Midge a wink as he handed her the jar.

“Thank you. I’ve not had honey from the honeycomb before.” Midge held up the jar, looking at it. “Look at that, Olive,” she said when the toddler tried to grab for it.

“There’s also some salt pork and a piece of ham in the basket outside. A sack of beans and some flour.” Baxter pointed to the tallest boy. “Your name is Peter, right?”

Peter shrugged. “Yeah. What about it?”

“Peter! Mind your manners,” Midge scolded. “I apologize for my brother, Mr. Hartman.”

“It’s alright. I’m a stranger. I was just going to ask for your help in bringing in the vegetables. There are potatoes, onions, and a handful of carrots.”

“I’ll help you, Mr. Baxter,” Ira said, running out the door.

“Me too,” Petunia said. She moved towards the door and stopped to look at Baxter. Hesitating for just a moment, she threw her arms around him. The stench radiating off her nearly knocked him sideways. “I heard Midge praying for an angel, and here you are. Here you are.”

Releasing him, she ran out the door, followed by the rest of the children, except Peter. Peter went and sat down on the worn settee, crossing his arms over his chest.

He turned back to Midge, who was looking at him with those big brown eyes. Clearing his throat, he shifted his weight while he held onto the back of the chair. “Don’t eat everything at once. It will make your bellies sore.”

“Thank you, Baxter,” she said in a voice that was barely above a whisper. “You didn’t have to do this.”

“I know. But I wanted to,” Baxter said with a soft smile. He stepped closer to Midge and reached out to brush a strand of hair from her face. “I couldn’t bear to see you and your siblings suffering like this.”

Midge’s cheeks turned pink, and she looked away from him. Baxter couldn’t help but notice how young she looked, and how much she had to take on. She was barely more than a child herself, yet she was caretaker to all these kids.

“I don’t know how to thank you,” Midge said quietly.

Baxter stepped closer and gently took her hand in his. “Don’t worry about it, Midge. Just take care of yourself and your siblings. And if you ever need anything, don’t hesitate to ask.”

Midge looked up at him with gratitude in her eyes, and for one moment, it tempted him to lean down and kiss her. He had no right to even think about touching her. He was almost old enough to be her father, and he didn’t want to take advantage of her.

Instead, he squeezed her hand before letting it go.

“I should be going. It’s getting late and I have work to do at my farm.”

She gave a giggle. “You don’t have to fix up the chicken coop anymore.”

His lips quirked to the side in almost a smile. “Just for the foxes that might slip in where someone cut the fence.”

“Oh.” She looked at the table and put the jar of honey next to the bread. “I’ll come by and fix it.”

“I doubt you’ll be able to take care of it.”

“Why do you say that?”

Baxter waved his hand around. “You can barely take care of this place.”

Embarrassment flooded her cheeks. “Well, I’ll just say thank you again. You don’t have to come back.” She looked at him with a mixture of disappointment and understanding.

“What’s this?” Ira asked, carrying in the burlap sack.

“That,” Baxter said, taking the bag and opening it. He pulled out a cob. “Is field corn. It is drying out, but you can boil it, scrape it, and put it in a bowl. Add a bit of sugar and milk and it makes a fine breakfast.”

“Do we have sugar?” Jenny asked, lugging in a basket of potatoes and apples.

“There’s a small bag. And some coffee.” He tied the bag and dropped it to the floor.

“Can you hold Olive for a minute? I’ll help the children put everything away so you can take the baskets home.”

Before he could protest, Midge thrust Olive in his arms and flitted around the small area, putting the produce in bowls or buckets that she found. He stood stiffly at first, unsure of how to hold the child, but remembered seeing Ma bounce a

young'un a time or two on her lap. Gingerly, Baxter swayed Olive from side to side, feeling an unfamiliar warmth spread across his belly at her delighted laughter. She looked up at him with wide eyes full of amusement as she put her chubby fingers on his cheeks and patted him several times before suddenly throwing her head back and releasing a stream of liquid that cascaded down the front of his pants.

He pulled the small child away from him hastily, holding her with outstretched arms away from himself so that no more mess would be made. Olive continued to giggle uncontrollably despite having soaked Baxter's pants, and he couldn't help but smile too at the sight—until he realized what had happened.

“She peed on me!” he bellowed.

“Oh, my goodness,” Midge cried, rushing to gather her youngest sister. “Let me get you a rag so you can get cleaned up.” Handing Olive to Petunia, who dangled her with two hands as she carried her outside, Midge grabbed a rag and started blotting Baxter's belly.

“Stop,” he said, grabbing her hands. He took the rag from her, and as he ran it over the damp spot on his shirt, a dark smudge appeared and spread. He lifted the cloth to scrutinize it. The rag was coated with grime, and now his shirt had streaks of urine and God knows what else all over it. Midge hung back, embarrassed, as he let out a deep growl before wordlessly handing back the rag and throwing his arms up in defeat. “I'll just take care of it when I get home.”

“She's just a baby.”

“I said I'll take care of it when I get home.” As he picked up the empty basket and walked out of the house, he could feel his pants and shirt clinging uncomfortably to his damp skin. He couldn't help but feel a sense of guilt and shame wash over him.

He should have left the moment he delivered the supplies, but he couldn't help but want to stay and help Midge and her

family. Tossing the baskets in the back of the cart, he climbed on board Knickers without tying them down. It was going to be a long ride home in wet pants.

“Goodbye, Mr. Baxter!” a childish voice called, followed by a chorus of others.

Baxter turned around to see the children lined up on the rotting porch. It surprised him they hadn't fallen through. Midge stood behind them, her hands on the little girl's shoulders.

“Come along, Daisy,” he said, tugging on the donkey's lead. Ignoring the calls from the children, he started the trek home. It went much faster since the wooden cart was empty.

After putting the cart away and releasing Knickers and Daisy into the field, Baxter headed towards the house, but the young woman down the road invaded his thoughts. He wondered how old she really was. He tried to guess her age as he visualized her face with a washcloth, scrubbing it clean, her dark hair combed and tucked neatly behind her ears, her hazel eyes sparkling in the sun.

It didn't matter, though; he knew he couldn't act on his feelings. It would be wrong, and he didn't want to hurt her or the children. Plus, he had his own farm to take care of, and he couldn't afford to distract himself with anything or anyone else. He would help Midge and her family as much as he could, but he would do it from a distance, as he didn't want to become too attached.

Annamae was correct.

He'd take a ride to visit Ma and Marmee, as they were the perfect pair to provide guidance and maybe even additional help. As he peeled off his damp clothing, he knew the first thing to do was to change into dry clothes.



CHAPTER FIVE



Midge hadn't seen Baxter since Olive ruined his clothes a few days prior. She remembered how his grip tightened around the child, and the fear in his eyes as he looked at Olive for a moment before quickly holding her away from his body. If it wasn't so horrific, she might have found it rather amusing.

Stirring the pot of boiling water containing Olive's damp cloth diapers, Midge sighed heavily. Her younger siblings had said they were going to collect some firewood earlier in the day, and Petunia had wanted to try out her newly crafted slingshot to hunt a few squirrels. The ham and salt pork that Baxter had brought was already gone, so she had been rationing the beans just to keep them all fed.

Baxter was right. The children wanted every scrap of food consumed in one sitting. With great care, Midge had to distribute the food, ensuring there was just the right amount for each meal, while also saving some for the next day.

As she stood at the fire, her eyes glazed over as she stirred the pot thoughtlessly. *Why should she care about diapers when her handsome neighbor consumed her thoughts?* His tall frame, which seemed like he could carry anything on his shoulders, made her want to swoon. His arms were muscular and protective when he had pulled her from the forest floor to safety. He had dark brown hair that curled around his ears in a dashing way, framing a face with deep brown eyes like liquid acorns.

She wondered what it would be like to kiss him.

His lips looked soft. *When he wasn't scowling.* Midge wondered what made him so grumpy, and if she could make him smile. Shaking herself out of her thoughts and blushing at

the direction her mind was going, she concentrated on pushing the diapers back under the water. She couldn't let herself indulge in those kinds of fantasies when she had so much responsibility on her shoulders. A man like Baxter Hartman would never be interested in her, she was sure of it. She was just a simple girl with nothing to offer, but ... *nothing*.

"Midge! Midge!" Josiah came running up the hill, followed by Peter, Berry, and Jenny. "Someone's coming!"

"Someone's coming," Jenny repeated, her voice heavy with worry as she pointed towards the road. A buggy was kicking up clumps of mud, the horse racing towards the house.

Midge squinted in the bright midday sun, trying to make out the features of the two people in the buggy. Unfortunately, all she could see were their faceless silhouettes.

"Ira!" she called, dropping the paddle against the large kettle and racing to the porch.

"What is it?" he said, appearing in the doorway. Midge had put him in charge of watching Abilene and Olive while she did laundry.

"Go into Pa's bedroom and get the rifle from behind the dresser. We got company."

"We don't have any cartridges. Pa didn't buy any."

"Makes no mind, just run and get it. Make haste, boy." Turning to Josiah and the others, she shooed them inside. "I want you to be quiet as mice. You understand?"

"Who is it, Midge?" Berry asked.

"I don't know, darling. Go inside now."

Ira came back with the rifle and Midge sat it in the porch's corner, hoping she wouldn't need to pick it up. Pulling the door closed, she stepped off the rickety porch and waited for the buggy to reach the house.

Relief washed over her features when she recognized Ingrid Chapman and another woman in the buggy. The Chapmans owned one of the largest ranches in Flat River. Ingrid, his wife, demanded that she be addressed as Marmee, positioning herself as the matriarch of the town. Midge's interactions with the woman were limited, but she knew of Mrs. Chapman's reputation.

You didn't disobey her, and you didn't cross her.

Midge wondered if she was more afraid of her pa or the woman that was climbing out of the buggy with a frown on her face.

"This will never do, Verna. What say you?" Marmee asked, tugging off her riding gloves.

The woman named Verna scrambled out of the buggy from the other side and reached in to grab a basket. "It is not at all what I was expecting. Not at all how he described it to me."

"That," Marmee said, pointing with her glove toward the barn, "appears to be in better shape than this thing. I don't know why they don't move in there."

"Maybe there aren't enough rooms?" Verna walked behind the buggy, pulling her shawl over one shoulder as she tried to juggle the basket in her hand.

"As if this house has enough rooms to house all these babies."

Midge's cheeks burned with embarrassment, and she bit her lip to keep from stammering. She squared her shoulders and took a step forward, her hands clasped together in a tight ball to hide their trembling. "May I help you?"

"You must be Midge," Verna said.

"Y-yes. How did you know?"

"Baxter said you were as pretty as a picture, and my son doesn't lie."

Midge furrowed her brow in confusion at the mention of a “son.” She looked closely at Verna Hartman, trying to make out any resemblance to Baxter. Verna had deep wrinkles around her eyes, and she wore a simple cotton dress with an apron. She pulled her white hair into a loose chignon that had fallen out of its pins from the buggy ride over.

“I’m Verna Hartman, but you can call me Ma. Everyone does.” Verna gestured to the woman beside her. “This is my oldest friend, Ingrid Chapman, or Marmee.”

Midge looked between the two women, confusion written across her face. “Marmee,” Midge repeated. “I’m familiar with Mrs. Chapman. You have the ranch on this side of the creek.”

“And the only chicken coop that hasn’t been touched.” Marmee’s dark eyes watched as Midge reached into the corner of the porch. “You don’t need that, darling. We are here to help.”

“What kind of help?”

Ma Hartman stepped forward and offered the basket. “This is just some sandwiches. I thought you and the young’uns might be hungry. Baxter told us what happened with your pa.”

Midge only hesitated a moment before reaching out to take the basket. “Thank you. You’re Baxter’s ma?”

“I am. I’ve not seen him since the fever broke.” She peered around Midge’s shoulder to the children peering out the dirty windows. “You don’t have it here, do you?”

“No. None of us have a fever. Should we?”

Marmee tossed her gloves on the buggy bench. “Scarlatina has hit the town. The marshal is limiting who can go in or out.”

A sudden wave of worry surged through Midge for the man she had only just met. “Does Baxter have the fever?” Her thoughts raced as she tried to warn herself against jumping to conclusions. “He isn’t ill, is he?”

“No,” Ma Hartman said. “But I can’t return home now, because...” She looked at Marmee. “Well, you can tell her.”

“One of Weston’s hands came down with it. Annamae is the only one outside of town who had the fever and survived. She’s taking care of him. It just means Verna can’t go back home, as she has never had the fever.”

“So can we get it?” Midge put the basket down on the porch. “We have a baby inside. Pet has gone hunting. I need to get her home.” Her voice rose an octave as panic filled her chest and she tried to run for the yard, but Marmee’s firm grip held her in place. Tears welled up in her eyes as she faced the older woman, desperately searching for a way to find her sister.

“She’ll be fine. If she doesn’t get to town or visit any houses where people have been sick, then you’ll be alright.”

Midge yanked her arm away, the pain of Marmee’s grasp still there. Rubbing the tender spots, she glared at the older woman. “Is that why you stopped by? To scare us?”

“Midge?” The door creaked open, and Josiah popped his head out. “Are you alright?”

Still rubbing her arm, she gave her brother a half smile. “I’m alright, sweets. Mrs. Chapman just gave me some news that scared me. That’s all.”

“Which one are you?” Marmee asked.

“That’s Josiah.” Midge stepped back on the porch. “Mrs. Hartman and Mrs. Chapman brought us some sandwiches. Why don’t you take those inside and pass them out? Be sure to save one for Pet.”

“What about you?” the little boy asked, taking the basket.

“Put one aside for me, as well.” Ruffing his hair, she turned him back towards the door. “Bring me back the basket when it’s empty.”

“Baxter said you have eight siblings?” Ma inquired.

“Yes.”

“We aren’t here to cause any issues, child,” Marmee said. “We did not know your pa ran off and left you to fend for yourselves.”

Midge felt the pressure of a sob and fought with all her might to keep it inside. But before she knew it, thick hot tears were rolling down her flushed cheeks, leaving salty trails behind as they dripped onto her shirt.

“Shush now, dear,” Marmee soothed, her dark brown eyes brimming with compassion as she hugged Midge close. “We’re here to help in any way we can. And it looks like you’ve got some powerful hands that want to help already.” Her gaze flicked to another wagon coming up the road.

It was Baxter!

His dusty hat obscured his face, but Midge could make out his tall frame on the front of the wagon. Relief flooded her body, and she pushed past Marmee, bolting towards the arriving buckboard.

“Your ma just told me that the town has scarlatina,” she said, running up to the side of the wagon. “But you’re all right?”

Baxter’s calloused hands tugged at the leather reins, slowly bringing Daisy to a stop. He looked down at her, his gentle eyes locking with hers as a lazy grin spread across his face. “Were you worried about me?” he asked, a hint of mischief in his voice.

“Only in the sense that I didn’t want you to die before I paid you back for the chicken.”

Baxter let out a deep rumble that seemed to start in his belly before echoing through the small clearing. His eyes squeezed shut and head thrown back in laughter, as he

thumped his hand against his thigh. When he was done, he reached his hand down. "Get on up here," he demanded.

Midge only hesitated a moment before she placed her small hand in his large one. With a gentle tug, she felt herself floating through the air until she landed on his lap. Scrambling, she moved to the seat beside him and looked at the back of the wagon. Her eyes opened wide as she spied burlap sacks stacked high, overflowing with fresh produce. There were crates filled with canned goods and several large bags of flour, sugar, and salt, along with a few cans of preserved fruits and vegetables.

"You brought us food?" Midge asked, her voice filled with amazement. "And pillows?" she looked at the bedding on one side.

"The supplies are from Ma and Marmee. All of this is from Marmee's garden. It isn't much, but hopefully they can get the fever under control, and we can get back to town."

"We?"

"Well, see that pillow and bedroll?"

"Uh-huh."

"I'm going to stay in the barn," he said. "I can't go into my house since Sawyer is there; and you need the help."

Her spine stiffened as she processed his words, and she nodded slowly, not wanting to put any more strain on her emotions. He slapped Daisy lightly with the reins and continued towards the house.

"Baxter! Baxter!" Midge turned to see Petunia running towards the wagon. She held up two plump birds in her hand and waved with her slingshot.

"I hope those aren't chickens," Baxter rumbled.

"Merciful heavens. What is that child wearing?" Marmee said.

“My guess would be buckskins and a raccoon,” Baxter offered, stopping next to the porch.

Petunia ran up and leaned against Marmee’s buggy, slapping two plump quail on the plush leather seat. “Whoo-whee-bob. I didn’t think I was gonna get them. They shore are fast critters. But look,” she lifted the bird once more. “I got two of them! We are gonna feast tonight, ain’t we, Midge?”

Midge wanted to disappear under the buckboard bench. “Why don’t you take those over to the trough, Pet.” Glancing at Ma and Marmee, she rubbed her hands. “Or closer to the well and you can clean them.”

Petunia picked up the birds and brushed the dirt and feathers from the seat. “Will you show me that trick you used to skin that chicken, Baxter?”

“In a bit, Petunia.”

“Petunia?” Marmee walked over and cupped the young girl by the chin, turning her face left then right as she examined her. “I can’t believe this is a young lady.”

Petunia pulled back her face. “I ain’t no lady.”

“That I can believe.” Marmee couldn’t help but frown when her eyes met Petunia’s wild and fluffy raccoon hat, complete with two playful button eyes and a dry pinecone piece for a nose. “What is that?”

“I found it, and you can’t have it.” Petunia crossed her arms and stomped off towards the well.

Marmee turned and looked at Midge. “I have no desire to take that hat from her. It needs to be burned, and she needs a bath. Are all the children like that?”

“Like what? Dressed in buckskin?” Midge’s face flushed with anger, her fists tightening in frustration as Marmee stormed into the house, her arms crossed, and eyebrows furrowed. She asked questions of the children, but her stern demeanor intimidated them into silence.

Sensing their unease, Midge stepped in front of them and snapped, “Leave us alone!”

“Verna,” Marmee called, ignoring Midge. “Come in here.”

Ma Hartman walked inside the small house, stopping short as her eyes scanned the room. The two women exchanged worried glances as they surveyed the small room, taking in the ragtag band of siblings huddled together, their faces dirty and tired. The air was thick with tension, and Midge’s heart raced at the thought of what she and her family were up against.

“Oh, my word,” Ma Hartman finally said. “This is terrible. They can’t stay here. Look at this filth.”

“What do you suggest?” Marmee asked her.

“This house will never survive the winter.” Ma started walking around the small house, peering inside doors. “How many children do you have in each room?”

“W-we make do.”

Smiling at each of the children, Ma Hartman went around the table and patted them on the heads as they ate their sandwiches. “Does it get cold in here at night?”

“It’s terribly cold. I don’t know what we are gonna do for winter,” Josiah said.

“Children, hush.” Midge said. “I think you should leave,” she said to Marmee and Ma.

“I think you should leave too,” Marmee agreed. “This is no place for your family to be.”

Midge’s eyes stung and her lips quivered as she looked around the crowded room. “We have nowhere to go.” Her voice rising in frustration, fingers curling into tight fists at her sides. Her breathing became shallow as panic set in. She felt Baxter’s soft, warm hands grasp her shoulders and then envelop her in an embrace. His muscular arms were firm but gentle as they held her tightly against his chest.

“Everything will be all right, Midge.” His breath tickled her ear, sending shivers down her spine. She closed her eyes, feeling safe in his arms.

“Perhaps we could help,” Ma Hartman said softly. “Remember that young widow that used to live between our properties, Ingrid?”

“The one that moved back east?”

“Yes. That house has more room. Why don’t they stay there?”

“I think the bank owns that property,” Baxter said. “We can’t check until someone can get to town.”

Ma walked up and patted his cheek. “Well, then you’ll just have to check on it.”

“I can’t leave this place,” Midge said. “What if Pa comes back?”

“Well, we’ll just address that when it comes.” Ma moved to the table and made conversation with the smaller children.

Baxter stepped away from her, and Midge’s chest tightened painfully. She felt the warmth of his body replaced with a cold void and yearned to fill it. Panic welled in her throat, leaving her breathless at the thought of being abandoned in their small, drafty home with her siblings.

“In the meantime, we can work on making this place habitable,” Baxter said, moving towards the door. “Ma and Marmee can help with the little ones while the boys and I unload the wagon. Eat your sandwich, Midge.”

The children scampered after Baxter to help unload the wagon, leaving Midge alone with the two older women.

“Midge,” Ingrid began hesitantly, her voice low with concern. “I know Baxter will be here to help you, but it isn’t just about the supplies or fixing holes in the roof.”

“The children need stability and care,” Ma Hartman added, her voice gentle but firm. “We need to work together to ensure they’re looked after properly. Let us help.”

A flicker of hope ignited within Midge as she watched the exchange between Marmee and Ma. Their unwavering support meant more to her than she could express in words. For the first time in a long while, she felt as though her family wasn’t alone in their fight.

“Thank you,” Midge whispered, her voice thick with emotion. “I don’t know what to say.”

Marmee pulled a small notebook from her reticule. “How about we take an inventory of what you have, and we can go from there?”

“The most important thing is that the children have hot meals and clean clothes,” Ma said.

“And a bath. Did you see a bathtub?”

Midge sat at the table and ate her sandwich, listening to the two women talk as Marmee scribbled down notes. For the first time, she allowed herself to believe that she might just have a chance at keeping her family whole.



CHAPTER SIX



The sound of tiny footsteps reverberated through the dimly lit barn, and Baxter turned to see several of Midge's siblings emerge from the shadows. They crept closer, eyes aglow with wonder as they peered up at him from under a mop of tousled hair. Their small bodies huddled together, forming a protective circle as they watched his every move.

He dragged his worn boots across the dusty floor of the old barn, each step revealing a slightly cleaner patch beneath. There hadn't been any animals in the barn apart from the occasional rodent, judging by the random pellets scattered on the floor. He wondered if they brought the swayback horse in at night.

Despite its solid construction, with massive beams and sturdy walls, the barn had seen better days. The roof leaked in spots, and the air was thick with the smell of mildew and age. There were four stalls, and Baxter opened each door to look inside. Manure piled up on the corners and when he kicked the waste with the toe of his boot, it was rock hard. No one had cleaned the stalls in a while.

"What used to be in here?" he asked, moving further into the barn.

Ira moved closer and poked his head in the stall. "Pa had some goats and there was a horse."

Baxter scratched his chin and made his way to the back of the building, where a small loft tucked under the eaves. "A horse, you say. It wasn't that one I saw outside yesterday, was it?"

"Oh no," Josiah said. "Pa took the horse when he left. Copper was Mama's horse."

“Copper. Fitting name for a red horse.” Baxter examined a wooden ladder that was leaning on the far wall. “Where does Copper sleep at night?”

“He stays in the field,” Jenny piped up.

“In the field? Why’s that?”

Ira grinned. “In case he gets hungry, silly. That way, he has all the grass he wants to eat.”

“Silly!” Jenny chimed in, laughing hysterically.

Baxter grinned, but kept his face hidden as he dragged the ladder across the creaky wood floor. He steadied it against the wall and cautiously began his ascent, one rung at a time. The wood groaned under his weight. Once his eyes peaked above the ledge of the loft, he spotted a mouse scurrying along the dusty beams, its furry tail disappearing into the shadows. He gritted his teeth, realizing this meant there were likely many more mice living the barn.

He looked down at the children, who were now gathered around the bottom of the ladder. “Do you have a cat?” he called down.

The children shook their heads.

Josiah’s shoulders sagged, and he looked away, avoiding Baxter’s gaze. “No, we wanted a puppy, but Midge said no,” he muttered. His voice was almost too soft to hear, but there was no mistaking the disappointment on his face.

“Puppies don’t eat mice.” Climbing down from the ladder, he ruffled Josiah’s hair. “I’ll bring over a kitten or two from my barn. They will take care of the mice lickety-split.”

“Oh! I want a kitten!” Jenny said, jumping up and down.

Petunia walked into the barn, fastening a leather pouch to her belt. “What’s this about a kitten?”

“Kitten?” Midge said, following behind her.

“Mr. Hartman said he’s going to bring a kitten over here,” Berry exclaimed.

“We can’t have a kitten. Absolutely not.” Midge stamped her foot.

“You have mice. You might not be in the barn, but my horse will be in here. I’ll be sleeping in here. I don’t want mice crawling through my things.” Baxter gave a visible shudder. “Nasty creatures when they are in your clothes or feed. You want them gone before winter. I’ll be bringing a cat.” Looking at the house for a minute, he turned his cool gaze back to Midge. “I’m surprised you don’t have mice inside.”

“There ain’t nothing in there for them to eat.” Petunia waved her slingshot in the air. “I’m gonna go out hunting again.”

“You just got back, Pet,” Midge said. “Why are you leaving already?”

“Did you see those biddies in there? They wanna give me a bath,” Petunia scoffed. “Uh-huh. I’ll do my bathing in the creek when the water is warm.” She started counting on her finger. “Guess that means next summer.”

“Someday, you’ll change your attitude,” Baxter said. “Especially about bathing.”

“I doubt that. Who wants to sit in a tub?”

“You’ll meet a boy who turns you inside out and he won’t want to be near someone that smells like Daisy in the middle of a swamp.”

“I don’t like boys, mister.”

Giving Midge a wink, he looked back at Petunia standing there with her arms crossed and her chin held high. “Ah, you say that now, but you wait until you meet the right one.”

Petunia snorted. “Well, he better like the smell of swamp.” Sliding her slingshot in her pocket, she turned and sauntered

out of the barn.

Baxter turned back to Midge. “Now about that cat...”

“Will they stay out here?” she asked.

“Are you afraid of a cat?”

Midge nodded slowly. “Afraid of what they might eat. I have nothing to feed them.”

He pointed out the barn to the field. “There is a whole hunting ground out there for them. In fact, this might be a cat paradise.”

“Can I go with you? When you get the kittens?” Berry asked. “I wanna see them.”

Baxter leaned down and looked at her freckled-coated face. “Not this time, sweetheart. I can’t risk you getting sick, but I promise I’ll take you there soon and you can see all the animals.” Straightening up, he looked around. “Where’s the oldest boy?”

“Peter?” Midge looked at the children’s faces. “He disappeared over to the Picketts’.”

“He shouldn’t be anywhere with the fever going around. In fact, he should help around here. Where’s your wheelbarrow?”

“We don’t have one. Don’t be so hard on Peter,” Midge pleaded. “This has been very hard on him.”

“Looks like it has been hard on everyone.” Baxter’s eyes softened. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to come across so harshly. It’s just frustrating to see an able-body young man doing nothing.”

“I’ll talk to him.” Midge put her hand on his arm. “I promise.”

“You shouldn’t have to.” Looking once more at the barn, he sighed. “I can’t do anything else here, so I might as well head home. I’ll bring the kittens over tomorrow and some tools. We can get started then.”

“Thank you,” she said with a small smile.

With a nod, Baxter turned and walked out of the barn. As he made his way to his horse, he couldn't help but wonder why Midge let Peter get away with so much. When Baxter was his age, he was working from dawn till dusk on his father's farm, doing whatever he could to help his family survive. *Maybe there was something he was missing.*

As Daisy pulled the wagon down the road, he couldn't help but think about the feisty Petunia and her aversion to bathing. Chuckling to himself, he knew that at some point she'd take a liking to a young man, and she'd want to get rid of her buckskins and that horrible raccoon cap. He had to give her credit, though. She had what Ma would call gumption.

Few women would go out hunting to put food on the table. He was proud of her for getting two birds, if only for the look on Marmee's face when Petunia tossed them on the pristine leather bench.

As he neared the split in the road which divided the Hartman land from the Chapman land, he saw Petunia emerge from the corn, waving her hand. “Hey, Mr. Hartman!”

Baxter pulled back on the reins, bringing the wagon to a halt. “Petunia? What are you doing down here?”

“The quail is in the corn. It's easy pickings if you know how to find 'em.” She gave him a grin and scratched her belly beneath the buckskin jacket. “You headed home?”

“Yeah. I'm gonna go get the stuff to fix the barn and the roof.”

“Can I go with you? I promise I won't be much of a bother.”

Baxter rubbed his cheek, curling his lips slightly. “Not much, huh?”

She lifted her hand, crossing her chest, then her eyes. “Hope to die...”

Guffawing, Baxter shook his shoulders. “Don’t even say that.” He pointed his thumb over his shoulder. “Climb in the back, and don’t touch my pillows.”

“I don’t get to ride up front?”

“Not until you take a bath.”

Petunia put one foot on the wheel and hoisted herself over the side of the wagon. “You got any trapping supplies?”

“Yah.” He tapped Daisy, and the wagon lurched forward. “I have a few. What are you looking for, and why do you want them?”

“I heard you can sell rabbit pelts, and minks. Maybe even beavers.”

“True, but you have to have permission from the landowner to trap along their creek.”

“You think I can trap along your creek, Mr. Hartman?”

Baxter shifted on the bench to turn and look at Petunia. She lay in the back of the wagon with her legs draped over the backboard. “Why would you want to do that?”

Curling her legs to the side, she sat up and looked at him. “I thought if I could catch those rabbits, and such, I could sell them in town and then those old coots wouldn’t turn Midge away.”

“What do you mean, turn Midge away?”

“She went to town to see if that shopkeeper would sell her some stuff. She only had seventeen cents. Do you know how much you can buy for seventeen cents?”

“Not much, I imagine.”

“She got a bag of beans and some flour. Maybe a bit of cornmeal. That was it. The old coot wouldn’t even extend her credit because Pa apparently skipped out on his tab.”

“I wouldn’t call Mr. Arden an old coot, Petunia.”

“Just imagine. If I could sell furs, then we wouldn’t have to take charity. Neither a borrower nor a lender be.”

“Charity begins at home, Pet.” Turning back around, he thought of the courage it must have taken for Midge to go to town to buy supplies. He made a mental note to add that to the list of things he needed to speak to Whit about.

They rode in silence until the small house and barn came into view. Petunia let out a low whistle. “Is that your house?”

“Yeah. I grew up there with my brothers.”

“How many you got?”

“Four... I mean three brothers. Two sisters.”

“You said four.”

“Frank died. Rattler strike.”

Petunia became very silent for a moment. “I’m sorry.”

“You weren’t there. What do you have to be sorry about?”

“I can say sorry if I want to. Boy, you’re a grump.”

“We all have our shortcomings. I’m grumpy. You, well,” he glanced over his shoulder, “...stink.”

“Who’s that?” she asked, pointing to the house.

He looked and spied several people standing near the house. “Which one?”

“All of ‘em?”

“The woman is my sister, Annamae, and my brother is standing next to her. The rest are ranch hands. Just keep your distance from the house. It isn’t safe.”

“Why’s that?”

Baxter tossed his hat on the seat next to him and he let out a deep, rumbling growl. “Do you always ask so many questions?”

“Midge says I’m in-in-quis... I don’t remember now.”

“Inquisitive.”

“Yeah. That’s it.”

Leading Daisy closer to the house, he stopped far enough away that he wouldn’t risk taking anything back to Midge and the children.

“How’s the patient?” Baxter asked.

Annamae paced the porch. “He’s not awake yet.”

“Has Doc been by?”

She shook her head, her blonde hair sliding across her shoulder. “Not since yesterday.”

“The preacher has it,” Rex said.

“Reverend O’Brien?” The thought of the Reverend being ill hurt his heart. The Reverend had been a fixture in Flat River forever, and was the same age, if not older than Ma. Baxter could only imagine what the fever might do to him. When Rex nodded, Baxter lowered his head and said a quick prayer. “Any word from Whit?”

“I rode to town yesterday and delivered your message. I dropped it on the back porch of the mercantile. Whit yelled that he’ll investigate and get back to me.”

“I better get back inside.” Annamae grabbed the wooden handle of an old metal bucket filled with water and disappeared into the house. Baxter caught Petunia waving wildly out of the corner of his eye.

“What are you doing?” he asked.

“Just sayin’ goodbye.”

Rex hopped off the porch and walked over. “Who’s your friend, Baxter?”

“Don’t get too close. She’ll make your eyes water,” he grumbled.

“I’m Petunia.” She stuck her hand out. “But you can call me Pet.”

“Pet?” Rex hesitated before gingerly taking the dirty hand.

“She’s Midge’s younger sister. One of the Beale brood.”

Rex’s eyes opened, as if everything clicked into place. “Ah. Good meeting you, Pet. Nice raccoon.”

Baxter turned away from his brother to hide the smile that was creeping across his face. He coughed lightly to cover it up, and then said with a forced seriousness, “Petunia wants to learn how to hunt and trap.”

“Really?” Rex extracted his hand from Petunia, who was still shaking it up and down. Lifting his fingers to his nose, he grimaced. “Well, you’ll fit right in with the wildlife.” He wiped his hands down his pants. “You gonna teach her snares?”

“She can take out a quail with her slingshot. Snares would make the most sense.”

“I think there is some wire in the barn, but I’d start with the basics. Can you track?”

Petunia shook her head, her braid dancing behind her. “I don’t know anything yet. But I’m a fast learner.”

“Let’s get Daisy out in the pasture and the wagon loaded up again. We’ll take a walk along the creek bed and see what we can find.” Rex hopped on the wagon as Baxter led Daisy towards the barn. “Do you know where Momma cat and the kittens have gone, or are they still in the barn?”

Rex tilted his head as he thought about the answer. “I think they are in the third stall under the hayloft. Why?”

“I need to take a few. There are mice problems I want to resolve.”

“Oh. Should I ask any more questions?”

Baxter glanced over his shoulder. “Not now.” He pulled the wagon into the barn and unharnessed Daisy before rubbing her down with a handful of hay. He tried to ignore Petunia, who walked over to the feed area. She returned with two carrots. She took bites from one, between breaking off smaller pieces of the second before feeding them to Daisy.

Baxter eventually opened the gate to the paddock, watching as the donkey trotted away with delight. With Rex’s help, he started loading supplies into the wagon that they would need to fix the Beale homestead, along with some snares that Petunia could practice with at home.

“How bad is it?” Rex asked, referring to the house, as he added a pitchfork to the wagon.

“Nothing an oil lamp and some matches wouldn’t cure,” Baxter grumbled, double-checking the contents. “Hand me that cloth.” Rex helped him stretch a thick canvas over everything, tying it securely with a rope. “We can find a basket or something for the kittens when we get back.” Turning to Petunia, he gave her a small grin. “You ready to learn some hunting and trapping?”

“I sure am! Show me everything you know,” she demanded, excitement in her voice.

He grabbed his rifle from underneath the buckboard seat and followed Rex and Petunia from the barn towards the woods along the creek. Rex pointed out various tracks and signs of animal life, explaining which traps to use for different prey. Petunia absorbed every word, her focus never wavering.

Baxter stood upwind, watching his brother, as he patiently pointed out the various tracks in the mud and how Petunia could tell which direction an animal was going based on broken branches. Rex took after Ma, with a never-ending supply of patience.

Unlike Baxter, who just wanted things done.

He listened to Petunia ask questions, as he walked further in the woods until he came to a clearing where a large home stood. The two-story log cabin made of wide, hand-hewn pine logs. Hand-crafted shingles covered the roof, and shutters framed the windows on either side of the door. A porch, which ran the entire width of the house, was solid and a hand pump rose from the dirt, so the woman of the house didn't have far to go for collecting water.

Wildflowers grew with abundance on one side of the house, and he could spy an overgrown garden on the other. Walking over, he could see there were still vegetables in the garden. He pulled an onion from the earth and brushed off the dirt before tucking it into his pocket.

When her husband died, Mrs. Callaghan and her four children headed back east, leaving the home and many of their belongings behind. Usually, when a house was empty, the bank would seize it and sell it at a heavily discounted price. That's probably how the Beales gained their property so cheaply. The land and home could bring in much more money; it all depended on how much debt the owners owed to the bank.

He prayed Whit's response would come soon.

Spying an apple tree on the corner of the property. Baxter walked over and plucked an apple from the tree, admiring its shine before taking a bite. The crisp crunch filled his ears as the sweet juice flooded his mouth. He wiped his mouth with his sleeve, glancing around the rest of the property. It was clear Mr. Callaghan had taken great care of the land before he died.

He wondered what the inside looked like. Chewing thoughtfully on the apple, he made his way to the porch and jiggled the latch. The door opened to a large room. Several posts divided the room into sections and held up the second floor. An enormous stone fireplace stood at one end, and Baxter immediately recognized that Weston Chapman must

have built it. Marmee had a similar fireplace in her house. A three-burner cast-iron stove stood against one wall, along with an empty wood box. The cupboards were bare and there wasn't a pot to be found, although the hooks for hanging them were still on the walls.

It surprised Baxter to see that the house still had furniture. In the center of the room was a long oak table with a jar atop it, filled with withered flowers. He could imagine Midge and the children sitting around the table.

As Baxter walked around the room, he noticed a picture frame resting against the wall. It was a picture of Mrs. Callaghan and her husband, taken before his death. The cracked glass divided the couple, just as they had been divided in life. Mrs. Callaghan was a petite woman with dark hair and deep brown eyes, and her husband was a tall man with a bushy beard. The picture captured a moment of love frozen in time.

What would it feel like to have a love that nothing but death could part? Baxter realized his parents didn't really love each other, but they made it work while Pa was alive. When he married, Baxter promised himself it would only be for love. Nothing less would do.

He explored the house a little more, wandering from room to room, taking in the cozy charm of the place. There was a bedroom with a large bed, a blue ticking mattress, and a handmade rag rug on the floor.

There were two other rooms that contained only mattresses lying on the floor.

He imagined living in a home like this with a warm fire, a beautiful wife, and a large family. As he made his way back downstairs, Midge invaded his thoughts. Eight siblings are not what he thought of when he considered having a large family. He needed to get the young woman off his mind and remember he was just doing his Christian duty by taking care of his neighbor.

As he made his way back to the porch, he saw Rex and Petunia walking toward him.

“What happened to you?” Petunia cried as they arrived at the farmhouse, her eyes widening in wonder. “Whose place is this?” She hurried to join Baxter on the porch.

“Is this the Callaghan home?” Rex asked.

“Yeah. She’s the one that went back to South Carolina with her children.”

“I’m surprised she lasted as long as she did.”

“I’m going inside to look,” Petunia said, pushing into the door.

“How was your hunting lesson?” Baxter asked his brother.

Rex rested his foot on the edge of the porch. “Good. She’s a quick study.”

“As long as you don’t stand too close.”

“That’s fixable. So, tell me, how’s it going over there?”

Baxter rubbed his hand down his face. “What do you want to know?”

“Is she pretty?”

“Midge? She’s... something else,” Baxter said, a faint smile tugging at the corners of his mouth. “And definitely not what I expected.”

Rex smirked. “I knew it. What are you going to do about it?”

“Nothing. I’m not going to do anything. She’s responsible for her brothers and sisters. Two are still babies.”

“Suit yourself, but don’t come crying to me when someone else sweeps her up. Women her age that don’t work at Miss Marcy’s are rare. Maybe I’ll...”

Baxter glared at him warningly. “Don’t finish that sentence.”

“All right. All right.” Rex clapped a hand on his brother’s shoulder. “Tell me why you were asking Whit about this house.”

Baxter looked up at the house with a critical eye. “It needs work, but it might be time for me to move out of Ma’s.”

Rex laughed. “You tell yourself that, brother.”

Petunia came bounding out of the house. “Oh golly, that is the prettiest house I’ve ever seen. I would die to live in a house like that. D. I. E.”

“People who live in houses like that bathe regularly, Pet.”

Petunia poked Baxter in the chest. “You need to stop picking on me. It doesn’t bother anyone else. Why does it bother you?”

Because I want better for you, he thought silently.

“Leave the kid alone, Bax,” Rex said. “Show me the inside, Pet.”

“Midge dreamed of living in a home like this. She talked about it all the time.” Petunia’s chatter faded as she followed Rex inside.

Baxter felt ashamed for the way he picked on Petunia. As he sat on the porch, looking at the small clearing, he wished he could make Midge’s dream come true.



CHAPTER SEVEN



Baxter grunted as he pushed the wagon further into the barn and out of the shafts of light that shone through the broken roof. Working quickly, he positioned it in a corner where it would be sheltered from the many holes in the roof that might let the rain in. Once he was satisfied, he laid out his bedroll in the back of the wagon and covered it with a coarse blanket.

“Whatcha doin’, Mister Baxter?” Berry asked, holding a kitten close to her chest. The children hadn’t left the kittens alone since he brought them back home.

Baxter turned around to face Berry, wiping a bead of sweat from his forehead. “Just getting things set up for the night, little one.” He smiled at her, noticing the kitten snuggled up against her chest. “What about you? Are you and your siblings ready for bed?”

“We have to eat supper first.” She paused, looking up at Baxter with big, curious eyes. “Don’t you have somewhere to sleep?”

Baxter chuckled, mussing her hair gently. “Don’t worry about me, sweetheart. I’ll make do.”

He watched as she gave the kitten a kiss and rocked it like a doll. The kitten let out a little mewl as Berry released it to the floor. The kitten scampered off in search of its littermates.

“Night, kitty,” Berry called.

“Are you sleepin’ in the barn?” Jenny asked, her curls framing her innocent face as she clutched a ragged doll to her chest.

“Yup.” Baxter nodded, his eyes meeting hers for a moment before they darted away, scanning the barn as if ensuring

everything was in order.

“Why?” Abilene asked, confusion creasing her small brow. Baxter learned *why* was the three-year-old’s favorite word.

Baxter sighed, rubbing the back of his neck. He glanced at the children, their eager faces waiting for an answer. “I reckon it’s best I stay out here, near the horses and all. Keep an eye on things.”

The children exchanged glances, as if trying to decide if this answer satisfied their curiosity. Baxter shifted his weight from one foot to the other, knowing that staying in the barn would also give Midge and her family the space they needed. She might be stubborn, but she was doing her best to protect these children, and he respected that.

“Alright,” Berry finally said, nodding solemnly as if accepting Baxter’s reasoning. “Don’t let the rats bite!” she added with a mischievous grin before leading the other children back towards the house.

“Rats?” Baxter muttered to himself, his expression souring at the thought. He saw mice. Not rats. Hopefully, the kittens were big enough to deal with an occasional field rat. He groaned at the thought.

After securing Knickers in the one stall he had cleaned, Baxter provided the horse with a bit of feed and filled a bucket with fresh water. It had been a long day, and he was ready to rest. He pulled out a cheese sandwich from his saddlebag and climbed into the back of the wagon.

The smell of leather and manure filled the air as Baxter settled down on his makeshift bed. He closed his eyes, trying to ignore the creaks and groans of the old barn. The last thing he needed was to imagine things in the dark.

“Mr. Hartman?”

Baxter’s ears perked up as he heard the approaching scuffle of feet and saw the light from a lantern cast across the

barn's interior. He propped himself up, squinting at the door to see a faint silhouette of a person holding an oil lantern in their hand.

“What are you doing out here, Midge?”

“Are you sleeping already?” She moved closer, the light from the lantern creating a glow around her head. *Almost like a halo.* “You’ll be joinin’ us for dinner, won’t you?”

“I have a sandwich. I’m not going to take your food.”

“We are just having beans and rice. You deserve a hot meal,” she said firmly. “It’s not much, but it’s what we got. Now come on in.”

Baxter hesitated for a moment, weighing his options. With a sigh, he nodded, wiping his hands clean on a nearby cloth. “That sounds better than a cheese sandwich.”

“A cheese sandwich sounds heavenly,” she said, heading back to the house.

He scrambled out of the wagon, sandwich clutched in his fist, before trotting after her into the kitchen. Stepping into the dimly lit kitchen, the aroma of beans and rice filled his nostrils, stirring a hunger he hadn’t realized he had. Midge moved about the room with ease, her light brown hair pulled back from her face, revealing her flushed cheeks.

“Need any help?” he asked, feeling out of place in the snug confines of the kitchen.

Midge glanced at him, considering his offer. She finally nodded towards a knife and cutting board. “Can you slice up that cornbread and put it on the plate?”

Baxter complied, his large hands making quick work of the task. As they worked side by side, the atmosphere in the kitchen seemed to shift into a crackling tension that Baxter couldn’t ignore. There was something about the way Midge moved, the curve of her hips, the way she brushed against him as she reached for the salt bowl. It was as if they were both

aware of the underlying attraction between them, but neither dared to acknowledge it.

He placed the platter of golden squares on the table and waited for Midge to say something.

“Alright,” Midge said, looking over the simple spread. “Let’s get everyone fed.” She called her siblings. Baxter noticed that Peter, Ira, and Josiah were missing from the group.

The children rushed in and grabbed chairs at the table. Petunia sat down and lifted Abilene onto her lap.

“I thought you’d be in the barn with the rats,” Petunia teased.

“They don’t come out until a little later. I should be sound asleep by then.”

“Y’all wash your hands?” Midge asked, her stern gaze sweeping over the children, who nodded in unison. She began dishing out the beans and rice, her movements efficient as she filled each plate.

“Ira! Josiah!” she yelled. “Come on now, git your plates.”

“Did Peter come back?” Baxter asked softly when Midge walked by him.

She shook her head and continued filling plates. “Alright, everyone,” she announced, her voice steady. “Eat up, then it’s off to bed.”

Handing Baxter, a plate of beans and rice, she offered him a piece of cornbread. “You can sit in Peter’s chair.”

“Where are you sitting?”

“I’ll eat shortly.”

“Then I’ll wait for you.” He placed his plate on top of the stove to keep warm.

The sound of spoons scraping against plates filled the room as the children dug into their meal. Baxter watched Midge, her every movement laced with determination, and felt a newfound respect for her blossoming within him. He knew in that moment how much she would sacrifice for her siblings.

Once the last of the children finished their meal and headed off to bed, Baxter noticed Midge returned to the table, but didn't prepare herself a plate.

"Aren't you going to eat?" he asked her, standing to retrieve the plate he placed on the stove.

"I'll eat soon."

Baxter paused and lifted the lid from the Dutch oven, peeking inside. He scraped the wooden spoon across the bottom of the black cast-iron pot. There were only a few grains of rice to be seen. The beans had been reduced to a paste-like substance and there was barely enough gravy to coat the spoon. He wondered if it would be enough to feed even one mouse in the barn.

Fury rose in his chest, hot and heavy, and he clenched his fists as he shouted, "How many times have you gone without a proper meal?" His voice reverberated off the walls of the small room.

The surprise in her eyes was unmistakable. She cautiously replied, "I'm not sure what you mean?" The sadness on his face was clear. He didn't want to repeat the question.

"It's apparent you've been going without so your siblings can eat. How long have you been skipping meals so they can eat?" He slid the plate she made for him in front of her.

She glanced down at the plate, then back up at him, her warm brown eyes holding his gaze. "I'm fine, Baxter. Ain't no need to fuss over me."

"Eat," he insisted, his voice firm but gentle. "Them young'uns need you strong and healthy." He pushed the plate

toward her, raising an eyebrow in challenge.

Reluctantly, Midge picked up her fork, poking at the beans and rice. As she ate, Baxter leaned against the wall, watching her with concern. The worry lines creasing her forehead seemed out of place on someone so young.

“I heard Marmee call you Miriam.” Baxter asked, watching her eat. “Why do folks call you Midge?”

Midge paused, her fork halfway to her mouth. “Miriam was my mama’s name, too. After she passed, I started goin’ by Midge so the young’uns wouldn’t get confused.”

Baxter nodded, understanding the weight that rested on her shoulders. “You’re doin’ right by them, Miriam. Your mama would be proud.”

A ghost of a smile flickered across her face before she glanced down, focusing on her plate. “Thank you, Baxter. That means a lot.”

With the last bite of food gone, Midge pushed her plate away and stood, fatigue clear in her posture. “I best be gettin’ some sleep. We have an early mornin’ tomorrow.”

“You’re not done yet.” He dropped the cheese sandwich on the table. “Eat that as well.”

“What are you going to have for supper?”

“I have some apples and biscuits in the barn.”

She unwrapped the napkin and looked at the sandwich as if were manna from heaven. “It looks wonderful. Thank you, Baxter.”

“Reckon I best head back to the barn.” As he opened the door, Midge’s voice stopped him.

“Will you be warm enough out there?” she asked, her concern clear.

Baxter offered a reassuring smile. “I’ll be just fine, Miriam. Don’t you worry about me. Good night.”

She pushed away from the table and raced over to him, reaching up on her toes to kiss his cheek. “Thank you for everything you’ve done for us.”

With a nod, he stepped out into the cool night, leaving the warmth of the house and the woman who was quickly capturing his thoughts with every passing moment.

The temperature had dropped, and the night was dark. Not even the glow from the moon provided any light. He closed the barn door behind him and could still feel the cool air seeping through the cracks. Knickers nodding his colossal head as Baxter walked over to pat the horse. “Good night, Knickers,” he murmured. The animal’s warm breaths huffed in response, a comforting presence in the dimly lit barn.

He hoisted himself onto the wagon with a soft grunt, settling into the bedroll he’d laid out earlier. The straw beneath the wagon wheels creaked as he adjusted his position, trying to find a comfortable spot.

“Mew!”

He felt a kitten jump into the wagon and climb on his legs, the small paws kneading him through the blanket. Soon three kittens were curled up next to him and the sound of their low purrs mixed with the gentle rustling of Knickers shifting in his stall.

As he closed his eyes, images of Midge flitted through his mind. Midge cooking dinner where there was enough to go around. The children sitting at a table that was large enough for everybody. And when dinner was done, they could go sit on the porch and watch the fireflies dance in the warm summer air.

“Miriam,” he murmured, testing her name on his lips. *It suited her, he thought, strong and steadfast, like the woman herself.*

“Sleep well, Miriam,” he whispered into the darkness, his voice barely audible. Sleep claimed him, wrapping him in

dreams of a fierce, brown-eyed woman and the promise of a new day ahead.



Baxter stumbled out of the barn, every bone in his body aching from sleeping in the back of the wagon. The morning sun had just peaked over the horizon, casting long shadows across the dried grass and dirt. He made his way to the fence line, leaning against the wooden posts as he wiped away strands of dew-drenched hair from his forehead. He'd been working on the homestead for what felt like forever, but it wasn't even two weeks. Although he'd made some progress, something seemed always to be left to do. His head was already throbbing in frustration as he surveyed the never-ending list of chores ahead of him.

What he would give for a cup of coffee and one of Annamae's biscuits.

He thought about what he'd be doing if he were at his own ranch. He would drink a steaming cup of coffee by the porch, watching the sunrise while enjoying the surrounding peace, before getting started on the day. But this land, this homestead, was far from peaceful. It was rough and unforgiving. Baxter had always been a hard worker, but trying to fix even a portion of the issues at the Beale house was challenging everything he knew. Looking around the homestead, he felt a strange mix of both sadness and frustration.

The creak of the back door stirred the air like a death rattle. Out from the shadows, Peter slipped out and down the steps into the yard. The young man didn't avoid Baxter, but he didn't help him either. As Peter approached, the rancher raised an eyebrow in surprise.

"What're you doin' out here so early?" he asked gruffly, scanning Peter for any sign of trouble. "Is everything all

right?”

Peter paused before responding, his jaw clenched, and his eyes narrowed. His answer was soft but held an unmistakable edge of defiance. “Thought I’d lend a hand.”

“Did Midge send you out?”

“I don’t need my sister to tell me what to do.”

Baxter narrowed his eyes. Finally, offering a slight nod, he motioned to Peter. “Fine, you can help me get Knickers to the pasture.”

“Shouldn’t we start with feeding him first?” Peter challenged, crossing his arms over his chest.

“Been doin’ this a long time, boy,” Baxter shot back, irritation clear in his voice. “I know what I’m doing. Now, you gonna help or not?”

Peter clenched his fists, and Baxter could see he was struggling to contain the anger bubbling inside him. “Fine,” Peter spat through gritted teeth. Taking a lead line from Baxter, he stomped towards the barn.

As they walked, Baxter couldn’t help but feel the tension radiating off Peter. He knew that the young man’s rebellious nature could be an asset in some ways, but it also made him unpredictable and sometimes downright difficult to deal with. As they reached the barn, Baxter saw that the hay bales he had brought over the day before had shifted. They were dangerously close to tumbling down and blocking the entrance.

Baxter’s eyes narrowed in frustration as he stepped forward to fix the problem. As he bent down to fix the bales, he heard Peter’s footsteps approaching.

“I can do that,” Peter said through gritted teeth, his hands balling into fists at his sides.

Without looking up, Baxter grunted in response. “Suit yourself.”

The sound of hay rustling and bales being moved broke the silence between the two men. Before long, they had stacked the hay bales back into place, and the entrance to the barn was clear once again. Baxter stood up, wiping the sweat from his forehead, and turned to face Peter. “Thanks for your help.”

Peter only scowled in response. “What’s next?”

“The horses are still eating. We need to clean out the stalls on this side.” Baxter handed Peter a shovel. “Get shoveling.”

Once they finished the first two stalls, Baxter held out a halter. “You’ll need to get this on Knickers.”

“Why? He has a halter already.”

“Because I want to see if you can do it, that’s why.” Baxter watched as Peter tried to figure out which side was the top of the harness. “Like this,” he offered.

Peter waved him away, stubbornly insisting on doing things his way. Baxter watched as the boy fumbled with the halter and gritted his teeth in frustration. He wanted to step in and help, but he knew Peter had to learn this on his own.

“Here,” Baxter said finally, “let me show you how it’s done.” Peter glared at him, but let Baxter take the halter from him. Baxter carefully explained each step, showing Peter how to put the halter on properly and securely.

Once Knickers was hooked up and ready to go, they headed out to the pasture. As they walked, their voices rose with each passing moment, echoing across the ranch.

Baxter knew there was tension between him and Peter, but he chose not to comment on it. Finally, they reached the pasture, where Peter released the lead line, letting Knickers join Daisy in the cool grass.

They walked back to the barn when Baxter spotted Midge approaching with a steaming cup of coffee in her hands. She looked relieved when he accepted it and gave a thankful smile. “You don’t know how much I’ve wanted one all morning.”

“Why didn’t you come in?” she said, her eyes still heavy with sleep.

“I didn’t want to disturb anyone. I have some hardtack and water in the barn.”

A snarl emitted from Peter’s throat, and Baxter shot him a warning look. “Why are you here?”

“I’m here to help your sister,” Baxter growled, his patience wearing thin.

“I don’t think that’s why you’re here. I see the way you look at her.”

“You need to watch yourself, Peter. Learn more, talk less. Step up and be the man of the house.”

“Maybe you ain’t such an excellent teacher,” Peter shot back, his face red with frustration.

“Are you always so grumpy?” Midge interrupted, asking him.

Finishing the coffee, Baxter handed the empty cup back to her. “Only when I’m wasting my time trying to fix up something that will never be fixed.”

“Then don’t bother fixing it up, Baxter Hartman. We were fine without you. We’ll be fine again.”

Midge’s eyes flashed with anger, and she marched back into the house, slamming the door so hard that Baxter felt it in his bones. He turned his scowl to Peter, a fierce expression etched on his face.

“You made her cry,” Peter accused, taking an aggressive step forward.

Baxter stood his ground, towering over the younger man. “I didn’t make her do anything. She’s upset because of you and your attitude.”

“My attitude? You’re the one who’s been treating us like we’re helpless. Like we can’t do anything without your precious help.”

Baxter shook his head in disbelief. “I never said you were helpless. I offered my help, and you refused to take it. You think you can do everything on your own, but you can’t.”

Peter stepped closer; his fists balled up at his sides. “I don’t need your help, old man.”

“That’s where you’re wrong,” Baxter said, his voice calm but firm. “You may not want my help, but you need it. You want to be the man of this house? Then act like one. Take charge and start fixing things up. But don’t come crying to me when you realize it’s not as easy as it looks.”

With that, he turned on his heel and walked away, leaving Peter seething with anger behind him. Baxter knew he had a lot of work to do, but he also knew that he couldn’t do it alone. He had to bridge the gap between himself and the Beale family. Whistling for Kickers, he led his horse to the barn and saddled him before taking off down the road. He needed to check on Annamae and see if there was any word from Whit.



CHAPTER EIGHT



Knickers kicked up a cloud of dust as Baxter rode into town. His eyes scanned the area for any sign that people were about. They hadn't received word that it was finally safe to ride into town, but Baxter couldn't wait any longer.

He had been anxiously waiting for a response from his brother, but two weeks had gone by without a word. The ranch had a system in place for communication, with regular runners going back and forth between town and the ranch. They would meet at designated spots and call out for either Marshal Briggs or Whit. One of them was always on horseback, keeping watch to prevent anyone from entering or leaving the town while the fever still raged.

Baxter had become increasingly concerned about the Callaghan property and the Beale ranch after learning about Midge's pa's debts. The weight of uncertainty settled heavily in his gut like a rotten meal.

"Whit!" Baxter called, spotting his brother leaning against the hitching post outside the livery. Whitney straightened up, squinting against the sun to see who was calling him.

"Hey, Bax," Whit replied, raising a hand in greeting. "Don't come any closer."

Baxter brought his horse to a halt at the end of the alley that ran between the buildings. He looked at his brother. Whit looked as though he hadn't slept in days. His hair was disheveled, and dark circles were visible under his eyes. For a moment, Baxter felt bad about his impatience.

"How's everything going?"

"Not good. Reverend O'Brien passed yesterday."

“That’s too bad.” Baxter took off his hat and said a silent prayer for the pastor.

“Just one of many. How’s Ma?”

“She’s still over at the Chapmans.”

“Probably the best place for her. Is that cowhand still at the house?”

“Yeah. He’s finally better. He’ll probably go back to the bunkhouse soon.”

“How do you think Annamae will hold up?”

“Annie? She should be fine.”

Whit laughed. “Sometimes you are so dense. She’s been sweet on Sawyer since he came back with Caleb.”

“Annie? I don’t believe that. She’s never appeared interested in anyone.”

“You should pay more attention, Bax. So, are you checking up on that information you wanted?”

“Yeah. I was wondering if you heard anything about the Callaghan place or the Beale ranch?” Baxter asked urgently, dismounting with a thud.

Whit sighed, looking around to make sure no one else could overhear their conversation. “I did some digging. Turns out Midge’s pa owes money to almost everyone in town in the last cow town they were at.”

“How much money?”

Whit named a figure and Baxter let out a low whistle. “That’s a hefty sum.”

“They’ve been trying to find him to collect on it. You don’t go playing cards, racking up credit, and then skip out of town.”

“Is that why he disappeared?” Baxter’s jaw clenched, anger flaring hot within him. He could only imagine how

Midge must be feeling, trying to keep her siblings together while dealing with this mess her father had left them in.

“Most likely. The cardsharps are willin’ to take Midge to settle the debt. The bank wants Beale to sell his land and then the profits to be split with the merchants there.” Whit continued, shaking his head.

“That’s not going to happen,” Baxter growled.

“Rex said you were sweet on the girl.”

Ignoring the comment, Baxter addressed the land. “Can they force the sale?”

“He’s already filed a lien with the bank.”

Baxter dragged the toe of his worn leather boot across the dry dirt, and the top layer crumbled to reveal a deeper, richer soil underneath. “Have they announced the sale?”

“Not yet, because of the fever. But I don’t think they are going to wait much longer. There’s a landowner from Chicago looking to buy up properties ‘round here. He might help settle the debt.”

“Chicago?” Baxter grumbled, running a hand through his sandy-brown hair. His mind raced with possibilities, each more worrisome than the last. “What do you know about the landowner?”

“Owns horses. That’s all I know. Looking for a place to retire. I think he has a young daughter, but she spends most of her time with her grandmother.”

“For someone who doesn’t know much, you know quite a bit.”

“What are you thinking?”

“I want to buy the Callaghan property, but I don’t want to see anyone take Midge or her family’s home. That is the only place the children have right now,” Baxter declared, his eyes narrowing with determination. He paced back and forth, the

dust beneath his boots puffing up like little clouds with each step. “If it comes down to it, I’ll buy the properties myself.”

“Slow down there, partner,” Whit replied, holding up a hand to stop his brother’s pacing. “I got some good news for you. The bank will sell you both the Callaghan property and the Beale ranch. You can come into town and sign all the paperwork once it’s safe to do so.”

“You’re telling me...” Baxter stopped in his tracks, staring at his brother in disbelief. “They’d sell both of them to me?”

“Yup,” Whit confirmed, a grin spreading across his face. “Seems they’d rather keep the land in the hands of someone local than have it snatched up by some big city fella.”

“That is a relief.” Baxter couldn’t help but think of Midge’s fierce spirit and those warm, brown eyes that held so much defiance and vulnerability. He’d do anything to keep her and her siblings safe, even if it meant putting himself out on a limb. “I need you to arrange for the bank to transfer the money from my account,” Baxter said, his voice low and serious. “I don’t want to risk anyone else getting these properties. It’s important that Midge doesn’t find out about this. Not a word.”

“Your secret’s safe with me,” Whitney assured him, nodding with understanding.

“Elliot can get everything written up and just send word when I can return. And make sure they know that Midge and her family can live there rent free until I decide what to do with the property,” Baxter added, his piercing blue eyes locked on Whitney’s, leaving no doubt as to his determination. “I don’t want anyone bothering them.”

“I’ll let you know as soon as it is done.”

With the arrangements in place, Baxter set his mind to preparing the Callaghan house for Midge and her family. He knew that if he worked diligently, he could have it in shape by the time of the harvest dance at the Chapmans. The thought of presenting the refurbished home to Midge after the dance

filled his heart with hope, giving him the drive to push forward.

As Baxter mounted his horse to return to his ranch, his mind churned with plans and possibilities. He knew that securing the properties would be just the first step; ensuring that Midge and her siblings had a stable home would take time and hard work. But he was more than willing to put in the effort, for Midge's sake and for the future he hoped they could build together.

"Thank you, Whit," Baxter called over his shoulder as he turned his horse around. "I won't forget this."

"Take care of that girl," Whit called after him.

With a wave, Baxter pushed Knickers into a gallop, directing him around the ranch to the Callaghan home. *Soon to be the Hartman home.*

As the house appeared in the distance, he felt a renewed sense of determination well up inside him. He knew that there would be obstacles in his path, but he was determined to confront them head-on. For Midge, her siblings, and the potential future they could have together, Baxter would do whatever it took to guarantee their happiness and safety.



CHAPTER NINE



“Come on!” Midge called as she slid her feet into her boots. As much as she hated shoes, she knew she needed to wear them today. “We need to leave shortly if we want to get to the harvest dance.”

“I can’t button my dress,” Jenny said, coming into the bedroom.

“Turn around, bunny.” Midge finished buttoning Jenny’s dress and sent her out of the room with a gentle pat on her backside.

When Marmee extended the invitation, Midge was hesitant about going. Her siblings hadn’t been around crowds before, and although she wasn’t concerned about their behavior at home, who knew how seven children might act surrounded by strangers, barn animals and a table filled with food.

Peter had disappeared, and she’d only caught glimpses of him when he came to the house to eat or sleep. When she tried to talk to him, he shut her down and then disappeared for another few days. She thought he might sleep at the Pickett’s, but she wasn’t sure and there was no time to go down and find out. Whatever he was going through, he’d have to work through it on his own.

“This thing itches,” Petunia complained, coming from the bedroom. She stepped out in a dated yet still fashionable dark blue dress with white cuffs and collar. Marmee insisted that everyone have dresses to wear, so she brought over several selections from her daughter’s closets for Midge and Petunia to choose from.

Midge didn’t even recognize her sister. Her light blue eyes shone through the dusty layers that once obscured them, and

her rosy cheeks were now clean and vibrant. Her mud-encrusted locks had been washed and dried into soft fluffy curls. They even scrubbed her fingers clean. Midge could see the marks of a brush where Marmee or Ma Hartman removed every speck of dirt. Though Midge didn't know how the two women had persuaded Petunia to take a bath, she was very grateful that they had.

"You look funny," Josiah said, coming into the room.

"That's it!" Petunia tugged at the collar. "I'm going to go put my buckskins back on."

Midge sighed. She knew it was a lost cause to convince Petunia not to change, so she didn't bother trying. "Stop fidgeting with the collar," she said, gesturing toward the door. "We must go. You can change later."

"I still don't like this," Petunia groaned.

"I think you look just like Mama," Jenny said, taking Petunia's hand. "She was beautiful and so are you."

Petunia kneeled in front of her sister and kissed her forehead. "Thank you, Jen. I'll keep the dress on." She looked over her shoulder at Midge. "Even though I hate it."

"You look beautiful." Midge started pushing everyone towards the door, grabbing her wrap on the way out. "Everyone out."

Ira carried Olive, and Petunia picked up Abilene. The sun glowed in the sky, and a light breeze rustled through the trees. It was still comfortable for October, but Midge knew she had to get the children to the ranch before the sun set and the temperatures dropped. Marmee assured Midge that they would have transportation back to the homestead.

She led her siblings down the dirt road that headed toward the Chapman and Hartman ranches. The last time she'd walked down this path, it had been under the cover of darkness

to steal chickens for her family's survival. Now, they were invited guests, and the thought left her uneasy.

"Be sure to be on your best behavior while we are there. We don't want to cause any trouble," Midge reminded her siblings as they walked along. Truthfully, she didn't want to give the town any ammunition to use against them. *Sins of the father...*

Berry ran up and tugged her hand. "Is it true, Midge? Will there be dancing and music?"

"Sure is," Midge replied, forcing a smile onto her face.

"Marmee said she was making apple pies, and they were cooking a whole hog!" Josiah licked his lips at the thought of a full belly. "Can you imagine a whole hog?"

"I can't wait to see it."

As they made their way down the road, the laughter and lively music of the harvest dance grew louder. Midge felt her heart race, a mixture of excitement and apprehension swirling within her chest. She couldn't help but think about Ingrid Chapman, the town matriarch, who had invited them. Ingrid was a kind, nurturing woman, but her presence always intimidated Midge. Ma Hartman, however, reminded Midge of her own Ma.

Every time Ma Hartman came over to visit, it reminded Midge that Baxter wasn't coming back. When she tried to ask Ma Hartman about it, the woman would simply respond with a smile and then change the subject. She wondered if Baxter would be at the dance.

"Look!" Ira shouted, using Olive's hand to point. Midge's stomach tightened. There was no turning back now.

As they approached the ranch, she couldn't help but be in awe of the sight before her. The fields were golden with cornstalks, and the pumpkins glistened in the setting sun. Children ran around and played games, and the smell of food

filled the air. The barn, which had been cleaned out and set up for dancing, was filled with couples twirling around with smiles on their faces. The sounds of fiddles and banjos filled the air, intertwining with the chatter of townsfolk and the stomping of boots on the wooden dance floor. Her siblings bounded ahead, eager to join the festivities, leaving Midge trailing behind.

Lanterns hung in the trees, looking like fireflies from the distance.

“Remember what I said,” she called after them, her voice strained. “Behave, or we’re leaving!”

As she stepped onto the Chapman property, Midge steeled herself for the night ahead. With a deep breath, she followed her siblings into the whirlwind of music and laughter, unsure of what the evening would bring but determined to make the most of it for her family’s sake.

As she took in the lively scene around her, she searched for the familiar sandy-brown hair among the sea of cowboy hats. She couldn’t shake the image of Baxter’s face from her mind. She hadn’t seen him in nearly three weeks, and her heart ached with longing.

“Oh! There’s Rex.” Petunia passed Olive to Midge and took off after the handsome man in the middle of the room. She noticed his eyes opened wide as Petunia hugged him and then twirled, showing him her dress.

Midge’s eyes narrowed as she watched her sister animatedly converse with the handsome stranger. He was tall and broad-shouldered, his deep voice filling the room. Midge couldn’t help but feel a pang of envy as she observed Petunia’s uninhibited gestures and carefree expression. She wished she could be that confident and carefree in social situations, instead of constantly worrying about what others thought of her. But then she shook off the thought and refocused on the

present moment. After all, it didn't matter who this man was to her sister. He was just another brief encounter at a party.

"I'm hungry," Jenny complained, tugging at Midge's skirt.

"Let's go find you something to eat, then."

"Miriam!" Marmee called her name, waving her over. "Let me hold the little one while you get something. I bet the children are hungry."

"Are you really cooking a whole pig?" Josiah asked.

Marmee laughed. "Well, we cooked it earlier. You can find all the choice bits on the table over there."

"Hi. I'm Hart." A boy around the same age as Josiah came up to them. "Wanna see my frog?" He reached into his pocket and pulled out a slimy creature holding it out to Berry.

"Hart Chapman," Marmee admonished. "How many times have I told you not to bring those things up here? Take it back to the creek and come get something to eat."

"I was just showing..." Marmee gave him a look and Ma Hartman hid her face in her hand, trying not to laugh. "Yes, ma'am." Looking at Josiah, he asked, "Do you want to go with me?"

"I wanna go too," Berry said.

"Me, too," Ira said.

"I can show you my puppies when we are done," Hart said, leaving the barn with a skip and a jump.

"I'm hungry." Jenny tugged on her skirt again. "Midge. You said I could have something to eat."

"Let me have Olive," Marmee insisted, holding her arms out. "You go get something to eat and come back and visit with us."

"There you are." A handsome older man with silver hair walked up and placed his hand on Ma Hartman's shoulders. "I

was hoping to get a dance with my best girl.”

Ma looked around. “Why? Is she here?”

“Verna, get off that chair before I put you over my shoulder and carry you to the dance floor.” His eyes twinkled as he spoke to her.

“Oh, Clayton,” Ma Hartman said, her cheeks red. “You know I don’t dance anymore.”

“Well, I’m not taking no for an answer. I saved this dance just for you.” He held out his hand, a charming smile on his face.

Midge couldn’t help but feel a pang of jealousy as she watched Ma Hartman and Clayton move to the dance floor. They looked so happy, so content. She couldn’t remember the last time she had felt that way. As she scanned the crowd, she saw Baxter standing on the edge of the dance floor, his eyes fixed on her. Her heart skipped a beat as their eyes met, and she felt a warm feeling spread through her chest. She felt a sudden urge to run into his arms and never let go.

“Midgeeeeeeeee!”

Jenny’s whining brought her out of her thoughts. “I’m sorry, love. Let’s go grab you something to eat.” After making sure Jenny was comfortable next to Marmee with a plate of food, she went back to the table to get plates for her other siblings. As she returned to the table, Petunia appeared again and took hold of her elbow.

“Come on, Midge. I want you to meet someone.”

Before Midge could protest, Petunia dragged her across the dance floor to where the man she called Rex was standing with a long-haired cowboy, and a younger man around Midge’s age. The man with the long blond hair smiled at Midge, his eyes lingering on her for a moment too long.

“This is Rex,” Petunia said. “He’s been teaching me to hunt.”

“Pleasure to meet you, Midge,” he said, extending his hand out for her to shake. “Baxter has told me about you.”

“Baxter?” she hesitantly took his hand.

Rex grinned. “He’s my older brother.”

“Oh. I’m sorry. He told me he had brothers. I just didn’t learn their names. Nice to meet you, Rex.” Turning to the cowboy with the long hair, she gave him a small smile. “Are you all brothers as well?”

The cowboy laughed. “No ma’am. Name is Ranger Hardin. This is my cousin, Tommy Moore. We work for the Chapmans.”

“Nice to meet you, Mr. Hardin.”

Ranger lifted her hand and pressed a kiss against her knuckles. “The pleasure is all mine. If you aren’t taken, I’d love to take you for a spin around the dance floor. The fiddle player plays a fine Virginia Reel.”

“She’s taken, Hardin.”

Midge twirled around to see Baxter had moved up behind her. “Baxter.” His name came out on a breath as she drank him in.

“Well, you can’t blame me for trying. Miss Beale.” The cowboy tipped his hat and moved toward the front of the barn.

“You said Rex was teaching you trapping?” Tommy asked. “I can’t believe a girl as pretty as you is a trapper.”

Midge was taken aback by the unfamiliar sound of her sister’s giggle. “I’ve been setting traps along the creek bed by the old Callaghan property,” Petunia responded. Their voices faded into the distance as Tommy led her towards the dinner buffet, but Midge couldn’t take her eyes off Baxter.

He was dressed in a well-fitted plaid shirt and black pants that hugged him in all the right places. Midge felt her chest tighten as she let her eyes linger on the defined muscles on his

arms and chest. She traced every line and crevice on his face. He had a fresh cut on his cheek that added a rugged edge to his already sharp features.

“Midge,” Baxter said, his voice low and husky, “you look beautiful tonight.”

Midge felt her cheeks warm at his compliment. “Thank you,” she said, feeling shy under his gaze.

Baxter reached out and took her hand. “I’ve missed you.”

“Where have you been?”

“I had some things I needed to take care of at home.” He looked around the crowded room. “Are all your siblings here?”

“Everyone but Peter. I’ve not seen him since you left the farm.”

“Hmmm. I’m sure he’ll be back. I guarantee it.”

“Pet said your brother was teaching her how to hunt? How did that happen?”

Baxter shrugged. “I found her hunting quail when I went to get the kittens. Rex and I taught her some basic things. Mostly Rex.”

“I know that means a lot to her. I think she’s sweet on him.”

“Rex?” Baxter scoffed. “I don’t think so. She’s like a kid sister. Someone he can look out for, and I think she’s glad to have the guidance.”

“She’s been bringing home some nice rabbits lately.”

“Rex has been teaching her snares.”

“What have you been doing?”

“I had some business in town to deal with. Recently purchased property. Two, in fact. I’m trying to fix one up and determine what to do with the other.”

Midge tried not to be hurt. That he abandoned them to go fix up some place else was unsettling. “Oh, that sounds like quite the project,” she said, with a little more venom than she intended.

Baxter nodded and took a sip of the drink in his hand. “It is.” There was an awkward pause before he spoke again. “Listen, Midge, there’s something I need to tell you.”

Midge felt her pulse quicken. “What is it?”

“It’s about us. And Peter.”

A flash of anger crossed Midge’s face. “Peter? Baxter, you need—”

Before she could finish, there was a sudden commotion from the opposite side of the barn.



Baxter’s eyes suddenly flickered towards the front of the barn, his brow furrowing as he spotted someone in the crowd. “I gotta take care of something, Midge,” he snapped, his voice tense. “I’ll be right back.”

“Is everything alright?”

“It will be. I need to deal with the man who made my Annie cry.”

She watched him leave and meet Rex at the door. Rex leaned over and said something in Baxter’s ear, and they disappeared into the darkness.

“Fine,” she muttered, her arms still crossed and feeling slightly abandoned. Unsure what to do, she made her way back to the table where her siblings were enjoying their dinner. Ma Hartman had placed small slices of cake in front of each child, along with glasses of milk.

“I made you a plate,” Ma Hartman said, pointing to the end of the bench. “I saw you talking to Baxter. Is everything alright?”

“I don’t know.” Midge slid onto the bench. “Something happened, and he took off with Rex. Mentioned a woman named Annie?”

“That would be Annamae. They are very protective of her. She’s my youngest daughter.”

“I wonder if they found Sawyer,” Marmee mused.

“Who is that?” Midge asked, taking a small bit of the pork from her plate.

“He was the cowboy with scarlet fever. The one that Annamae was taking care of for a bit,” Ma explained. “He came back here a few weeks ago.”

“I guess that was the same time that Baxter left my house.”

“You know what you need, Miriam?” Marmee asked, as she shoveled mashed potatoes into Olive’s mouth.

“I can’t imagine,” Midge murmured.

“What was that, dear?” Marmee said, cupping her ear. “I must be hard of hearing.”

“I said this dinner is delicious.” Midge took another bite of pork and chewed so she wouldn’t have to speak.

“You need a husband.” Midge nearly choked as Marmee continued. “Someone who can help you with all these children and provide some income for your household. Perhaps one of the hardworking men on either ranch. What are your thoughts, Verna?”

“That long-haired cowboy who was in here earlier might be a good choice. He is like butter on salt pork.”

“Verna Hartman,” Marmee laughed, pretending to be mortified.

“Well, he is rather handsome.”

“Ranger is not ready to get married, and he is not ready to take on the trappings of a family. Open up, Olive,” Marmee said, picking up another spoonful of potatoes. When the spoon was clean, she pointed it at Midge. “There are plenty of men in this town who are looking for a wife. Perhaps we can place some children with other families.”

“I won’t separate any of us. I’d rather become a spinster than risk one child going to a bad home.”

Marmee gave a little smile. “Families should stay together. Just remember that, Midge. Because sometimes change is a good thing. Oh, look, it’s Reverend Billings. He just arrived in town. I think you’d like him.”

Midge looked over her shoulder at the older man in the black frock. “I wouldn’t want to marry him. He could be my grandfather.”

Giving a light laugh, Marmee went back to feeding Olive. “He’s married. That’s his daughter, Ethel. I was just thinking if you came to church, you’d find that he’s easy to talk to.”

Embarrassment flooded her cheeks as she realized she’d misunderstood Marmee, thinking of the reverend as a potential suitor. “I don’t know if there is anyone I’d want to marry.”

“May we go?” Ira asked. “I want to go see the puppies.”

“I want to go to see the puppies,” the rest of the children chorused.

“Take Abilene with you. And just look, we aren’t taking any home.” Midge watched as the children scampered away.

“They are delightful children,” Ma Hartman said. “What would you be looking for in a husband?” Midge opened her eyes wide, looking at the older woman. “I mean, if you were looking.” Ma Hartman gave her a little wink.

“I bet he’d be handsome,” Marmee said.

“And kind. But not put up with anything,” Ma Hartman quipped.

“A gentle heart. Ever watchful, with a keen eye for people in need. Patience beyond compare.”

“Can fix up a chicken coop lickety-split.”

“Might be quick to anger, but he’s even quicker to forgive.”

Midge dropped her fork. They were describing Baxter. Unless there was another man that they knew with those qualities.

The object of her thoughts walked through the barn along with his brother and they were escorting a rather pale looking man between them. They disappeared through the crowd towards the back of the barn where the animals were kept.

“May I have your attention, please,” Reverend Billings said. “If we can all make our way outside, we are going to have a surprise.”

The crowd buzzed with anticipation as they headed towards the barnyard.

“Should I go find the children?” Midge asked.

“They’ll be fine with the puppies,” Marmee said, handing over Olive. “I know you’ll want to go home soon. Let’s go see what this is all about.”

As she made her way to the front of the barn, Midge spied the brothers, along with the blonde woman and the pale man, walking towards them. A few moments later, the woman stood underneath the canopy of a large tree. Lanterns hung from the branches, illuminating the ground where their family and friends gathered. The reverend pronounced them man and wife, and the groom leaned down to brush his lips against hers. The gesture was so tender that Midge felt a lump rise in her throat as she wiped away tears.

“That’s Annamae,” Baxter’s voice said from behind her, causing Midge to startle.

“Your sister?” Midge repeated, turning to face him. His eyes were filled with warmth, and there was no trace of the tension that had been there moments before.

“Yep,” he confirmed, a proud smile tugging at the corners of his mouth. “She finally found herself a good man. I reckon it’s about time, too.”

Midge bit her lip, jealously washing over her for a moment. She wondered what it would be like to exchange vows with Baxter under that tree.

“Congratulations,” Midge said softly, trying to conceal the churning jealousy that threatened to overwhelm her. Annamae appeared to be only a few years older than Midge and now she was starting on the next steps in her life. Midge spied her brothers and sisters chasing the puppies in the barn and winced, the sound of barking and laughter echoing in her ears. *Olive was only two.* This was going to be her life for the next sixteen years.

She couldn’t ask anyone to take on that type of responsibility. Maybe Marmee was right, and she should think about splitting up the family. A round of applause went through the crowd and someone pulled Ma Hartman towards the tree where the reverend stood. Midge recognized the handsome man Ma Hartman danced with earlier.

“Is your ma getting married?” she asked Baxter.

“Seems so. I know she’s been waiting for him for over thirty-four years.”

“But you’re only...”

“Thirty-two. They were sweethearts before she married my pa. I guess you never forget your first love.”

“That’s so romantic.”

Baxter looked at her. “I guess it is. I know I’ll never forget mine.”

When the ceremony was over, he led her back to the barn and turned her to face him under the lanterns. His eyes searched hers for a moment before he looked away. “Now, how ‘bout that dance?”

“Maybe just one,” Midge conceded, her heart pounding in her chest as she placed her hand in his.

The mournful notes of the fiddle reverberated through the hall, and Baxter swept Midge up in his arms. As they moved gracefully around the room, her earlier feelings of awkwardness and embarrassment melted away with each step. She felt protected in the warmth of his embrace, and for a moment she let herself believe that maybe—just maybe—she could find happiness again. With each step, Midge felt an increasing sense of belonging, like she had finally found her place in this world.

The night air grew cooler as Baxter pulled her closer, resting his chin on her head. Laughter and music filled the surrounding air. Her heart raced; her cheeks flushed with an unfamiliar warmth she hadn’t felt in a long while. Just as their dance ended, Berry raced up to them, fear in her eyes.

“Midge! Midge! You need to come quick!”

Midge reluctantly pulled away and looked at Berry, who had tears in her eyes. “What is it, Elderberry?” she asked.

“It’s Pet.” The girl was sobbing, and Midge could barely make out the words.

“What about Pet, dearest?”

“She’s... she’s...” Berry pointed to the dark.

Baxter kneeled next to Berry and took her little hands in his. “Take a deep breath, sweetheart, and blow it out like you are putting out a candle.” He showed her. When Berry complied, he did it again. “Once more.”

When Berry had calmed down enough, she looked at Baxter with a serious expression on her face. “Petunia’s dead.”

“Dead?” Midge squeaked.

Baxter lifted his hand. “Why do you say that?”

“She’s in the wagon and there was somebody with her.”

Midge saw Baxter’s body stiffened. “You saw someone with her?”

Berry nodded. “You need to hurry. He’s eating her brains!”



CHAPTER TEN



Baxter's pulse raced as he clenched his fists, feeling his anger build. If Tommy Moore was anything like his cousin, Ranger, who had a reputation for being a little too carefree with his affections, the young lad was going to wish he had never met Petunia Beale. Or Baxter Hartman.

Placing his hands on Midge's shoulders, he pulled her close. "Stay calm, Midge," Baxter said, his voice steady and reassuring. "I'll find her."

"Thank you," she whispered, her eyes flashing with panic.

"Berry, where did you see them?"

"In the wagon by the side of the barn. We were playing hide and seek."

"Stay here with your sister," he instructed and with a turn of his heel his boots kicked up dirt as he headed back outside. Baxter pulled the collar of his coat tight around his neck as he turned the corner. Puffs of white fog escaped from his mouth with each breath, a clear sign of the chilling temperature. He approached the line of wagons stretched out along the wooden fence.

The laughter and music from the harvest dance seemed to fade away as his focus narrowed, his eyes scanning the back of every wagon.

"Petunia!" he shouted again, only to have his voice swallowed by the revelry. Panic clawed at him, threatening to overtake his usual stoic demeanor. He rounded the corner near a second stable where Weston kept injured animals for his daughter to nurse back to health. There was a wagon filled

with hay where the light barely reached, and that's when he saw them.

Tommy Moore pressed himself against Petunia. Their mouths collided in a frantic kiss as Tommy wove his fingers through Petunia's short hair. Baxter felt a roar bubbling up inside him.

Every muscle in his body tensed as he balled up his fists, his knuckles turning white. How dare that young man even think of taking advantage of a chaste girl? The white-hot rage consumed Baxter.

What if this was Midge?

He'd be in jail waiting to be hanged.

But this was Petunia. Someone who was innocent in the ways of the world. What would his pa do if it was Annamae?

He'd probably be in jail waiting to be hanged.

But Baxter wasn't his pa, and Petunia wasn't his daughter. That didn't mean he wasn't responsible for her. He had feelings for Midge, and with those feelings came a responsibility to the rest of her siblings.

Grabbing Tommy by the back of his shirt collar, Baxter pulled him off the wagon with a hard jerk. Tommy let out a surprised yelp as he hit the cold ground with a loud thud.

Snarling, Tommy leaped to his feet and assumed a defensive stance. "We were here first..." Surprise flashed across his face before it was replaced with fear.

Baxter emerged from the darkness and into the light cast by the lantern hanging near the stable's entrance.

"You need to leave now," Baxter warned, his voice low and menacing. He turned to Petunia, who seemed dazed and confused, but otherwise unharmed. "We're heading home, young lady."

Tommy was about to protest, but one look at Baxter made him think otherwise.

“Mr. Hartman, let me explain.”

“I don’t want to hear anything from your mouth except goodbye. You don’t want me to go see your pa.”

Tommy shook his head. “Bye, Pet—”

“Not her. Me.” Baxter stepped forward. “Listen to me, son. Stay away from her. You don’t even think of coming near her before she turns eighteen. Understand me?”

“I hear you.” Tommy turned, and Baxter watched him race into the darkness like a jackrabbit with a coyote on his tail.

“You gonna tell Midge?” Petunia asked, climbing out of the wagon.

“I think she needs to know. If she can’t tell you about proper behavior, then Marmee or Ma can.”

“Nothing was happening. We were just talking about trapping and hunting.”

“Uh-huh.” Baxter turned and pointed a finger in her face. “Let me tell you this. He has nothing to offer you long term. He’s not going to marry you, Petunia, and he was hunting tonight. You were just the prey.”

Petunia brushed his finger aside. “He will marry me. I intend to marry Tommy Moore.”

“Well, you’ll have to wait until you’re old enough and you make your own decisions.” Baxter’s fingers dug into her elbow, steering her towards the front of the old red barn. She struggled to break free from his grasp, her feet slipping on the dusty ground.

“Let go!” she shouted, but he kept dragging her along, his grip tight and unyielding. “You ain’t my Pa.”

“You’re right, I’m not. However, I wish I could be, because then I would make sure that you and all your siblings

are taken care of. We're headed home. Gather up your brothers and sisters."

"You're no better than Tommy."

Baxter paused, swinging her around so he could look at her in the light. "What do you mean?"

"You gave my sister hope and then you took it away. At least Tommy didn't do that. You say he ain't gonna marry me, but you ain't no better. Look at you, giving Midge hope and then breaking her heart. You have no intention of marrying her." She yanked her arm away and wiped the hot tears rolling down her cheeks. "You ain't no better." She lifted her skirt and raced into the barn.

Midge came out a few minutes later with the children. "Petunia said we were leaving."

"It's getting late. I'll take you home. My wagon is over here." Picking up Abilene, he hoisted her up so her head was resting on his shoulder. He helped the children climb into his wagon, each of them chattering excitedly about the night's events, unaware of what had transpired between Petunia and Tommy. "Where's Petunia?"

"She was talking to Marmee." Midge rubbed her hands. "Bawling really. I'm almost afraid to ask what happened."

"Found her with Tommy Moore," Baxter grumbled, struggling to keep his emotions in check.

Midge's eyes widened. "That poor girl. I hope he does the right thing."

"They were kissing."

"Kissing?" With Baxter's help, Midge climbed into the front of the wagon before he joined her.

"Kissing."

"Oh, thank goodness. I thought it was something serious. But she's all right?"

“Seems to be,” he replied, his gaze drifting towards Petunia, who was walking toward the wagon. She climbed in the back and sat silently, staring at her hands. The night had taken an unexpected turn, and now all Baxter wanted was to see Midge and her family safely home.

They rode in silence for the short ride home. Baxter pulled up to the door and helped Midge carry the children in. Petunia went straight to her room, saying nothing. Baxter felt bad, but not bad enough that he wouldn't do it again.

Once the last child was settled in bed, Baxter headed to the wagon for the ride home. Midge followed him to the porch.

“Are you sure you don't want to stay for a cup of coffee?” Midge asked.

“Do you have coffee?” he asked.

Midge gave a little shrug. “I do. I have brewed them a thousand times and they taste like paint, but it would pass for coffee.”

He laughed and moved to the end of the porch. Baxter couldn't help but think how beautiful Midge looked in the porch's light. He thought about what Petunia had said and it was true; he couldn't shake off the feelings he had for Midge. Walking back towards her, he took her hand. She looked up, surprised at the sudden movement.

Baxter spoke, while rubbing the back of his neck awkwardly as he shifted his weight from one foot to the other. “I wanted to take you for a ride tomorrow by the creek. Would you go with me? There is a special place I'd like to show you.”

“I'd like that.”

“I think it would be best if Petunia didn't come by hunting for a bit. The Moore family are all trappers, and they are getting ready for winter trapping. I don't want her running into him.”

Midge chewed on her lower lip; concern etched across her face as she considered Baxter's words. "It was just a kiss," she mumbled, trying to dismiss the severity of the situation. "It doesn't mean nothing."

"It does mean something. Kissing leads to thinking," Baxter countered, his voice firm but gentle. "Thinking leads to other things. Petunia doesn't have a father figure in her life and all those boys are gonna want to get to thinking around her. She looked completely different today. She looked like a woman. They noticed."

Midge looked away, her gaze falling on the dark outline of the trees in the distance. A soft breeze rustled through the leaves, carrying with it the scent of fresh earth and the distant sound of crickets singing. The night had grown cold, and Baxter saw her shiver beneath her thin shawl.

"Do you ever get to thinking?" she asked hesitantly, her cheeks flushed with heat despite the chill in the air.

"I think about a lot of things."

"You ever think about kissing?"

Baxter's hands trembled and his heart raced as he struggled to form the words. "I... I do," he finally managed, his voice barely audible. "But that doesn't change the fact that I shouldn't."

She moved closer, placing her hand lightly on his chest. "I know you won't do anything you don't think is right."

He could feel his heart beating wildly underneath her palm. "But what if what I want isn't right?" he murmured, his fingers lightly grazing her cheek.

Midge leaned into his touch; her eyes filled with a thousand unspoken words. "Then I guess it's up to you to decide." Her voice was barely a whisper in the dark night.

He leaned down, his lips brushing hers. Baxter heard Midge gasp at the sudden contact as his warm breath fanned

across her skin. His hands drifted to her waist, tugging her closer until she felt every inch of their bodies pressed together. Lifting his head slightly, he cupped her face in one hand, the pads of his thumb gently caressing her cheeks.

“Miriam,” he whispered before leaning down to brush his lips against hers once more. The kiss was tender at first, but soon intensified as her fingers danced through his hair, pulling him down for a deeper kiss.

When he broke apart, they were both breathing hard. He dropped his hand and stepped back; a million emotions reflected in his eyes. “I... I shouldn’t have done that.”

“Then why did you?” Her eyes searched his for answers to unspoken questions.

“I just wanted to know what it was like,” he admitted, his eyes drifting to the ground.

She took his hand in hers once more and squeezed it gently. “It was perfect.”

Baxter looked up, a hesitant smile tugging at the corner of his mouth. “Yes, it was.”



Midge let out a frustrated sigh as she bent down to pick up the dirty socks Peter had carelessly left in the kitchen. Despite her annoyance, she couldn’t help but feel a flutter of excitement for her upcoming adventure with Baxter.

She quickly finished tidying up and went to get ready. As she brushed her hair, a small smile played on her lips as she remembered her mother’s lessons on how to create an elegant, coiled bun. She carefully pinned back the stray hairs that fell across her face, giving her a romantic and slightly disheveled look.

Changing into a yellow skirt that matched the changing leaves and a cream blouse, she pinched her cheeks to give her pale skin a bit of color.

“Petunia?” she called, walking back into the main room.

“Yeah?”

Petunia reclined on the small settee, her legs stretched out in front of her, clad in soft buckskin pants and moccasins. Her raccoon fur hat lay discarded on the floor, its fur ruffled and matted from days of wear.

“You are gonna watch Olive and Abilene for me, right? I don’t think I should be too long.”

“I planned on it, since I can’t go hunting no more.”

“Honey, you can go hunting. Just not by the creek where you were hunting before.”

“They’re cutting the corn. That means the quail will hide in the bushes.”

“If you want to go out to the woods, you can do that as soon as I get back.”

Petunia flopped over on the cushions, and draped her arm over the side, dragging her finger along the floor in circles. “No. I liked learning from Rex. Even when Baxter was grumpy, he could teach me a thing or two.” She looked up from her invisible drawings, as if seeing Midge for the first time. “You look nice. Where are you going?”

“Baxter wants to show me something.”

Petunia smiled. “I think you’ll like it.”

“Do you know what it is?” Midge’s curiosity was piqued.

“I can’t say anything,” she said, turning over again.

Midge noticed another sock near the stove. “Have you seen Peter?” she asked, picking up the sock.

“I saw him in the barn earlier, but then he disappeared again.”

“I wish I knew what was going on with him.”

“I dunno. Boys are funny.” Petunia pushed herself up to a sitting position. “Have you ever been kissed?”

Midge thought about the kiss she shared with Baxter the previous night. A shiver of excitement ran through her as she remembered the sensation of his lips on hers. She smiled at Petunia, feeling giddy and blissful. “Yeah, I have,” she replied, still lost in her thoughts.

Petunia laughed. “I knew it! Who was it?”

“Baxter,” Midge said, the blush deepening.

Petunia let out a low whistle. “I knew he was gonna kiss you. How was it?”

Midge couldn’t help but grin. “It made my toes curl in my boots.”

“It was like a thousand thunderstorms were racing overhead,” Petunia sighed.

“Maybe Baxter is right to keep you away from that boy.”

“I’m almost as old as Ma when she got married.”

“And look at what happened. She had all these babies, and her body just gave out. One day, Pet, you’ll find someone who makes your heart sing.”

“I already did. I just gotta wait.” She rubbed her eye. “Waiting’s the hardest part. It’s like setting your snare and then watching it all day for that rabbit to come through. Nothing happens, but the moment you leave, bam!” She clapped her hands together, causing Midge to jump. “You catch the rabbit.”

“I’m going to go put these on Peter’s bed. Abilene and Olive are still asleep.” Walking to the room that Peter shared with Ira and Josiah, she found her two youngest brothers sitting on the floor with a wooden box between them.

“What do you have there?” she asked, throwing Peter’s socks on his bed.

Ira tossed the papers back in the box. “We found it under Peter’s bed.”

“You shouldn’t be looking at your brother’s things. How would you like it if someone went through your private things?”

“What does that mean?” Josiah asked.

“Things that no one else should see.”

“We can’t read what it says anyway.” Ira slammed the lid and pushed the box aside.

“Give that to me. We’ll put it back under the bed and you’ll never look at Peter’s things again.”

“Who wants to look at a bunch of boring letters, anyway?”

Midge sat on the end of the bed and opened the box, intending to refold the papers and return the box to its rightful place under the bed. Her eyes opened wide when she saw envelope after envelope scribbled in her father’s handwriting.

Her fingers trembled as she unfolded the crumpled paper, her eyes quickly scanning the faded ink. The words before her seemed to burn into her very soul, each sentence igniting a firestorm of betrayal and heartache. Her father’s unmistakable scrawl revealed his secret manipulation of Peter, pushing him toward actions that could tear their family apart.

Midge took the letter and ran from the room. Petunia hadn’t moved from the settee. “Where did you say you saw Peter?”

“He was in the barn.”

Racing out of the house, she yelled for her brother. “Peter!” Her voice cracking with a mixture of anger and despair. She clutched the letter tightly in her hand as she stormed through the yard, the loose strands of her hair

whipping around her face like an untamed storm. “Peter, where are you?”

“Here,” Peter replied, stepping out from behind the rickety barn door. His hazel eyes widened at the sight of his older sister; her cheeks flushed with fury. He noticed the paper in her hand and his eyes narrowed. “Where did you get that?”

“Explain this,” she demanded, thrusting the letter in his face. Her warm brown eyes bore into his, searching for any hint of deceit or guilt. “Tell me why Pa has been contacting you behind my back. Tell me why he’s been using you to undermine Baxter and threaten our home!” Midge clenched her fists, her knuckles turning white as she stared Peter down. The silence hung heavy between them, like a storm cloud ready to unleash its fury. “Tell me the truth,” she demanded, her voice quivering with barely contained anger.

“Alright!” Peter shouted, unable to withstand the pressure any longer. His hazel eyes flashed with defiance, yet his voice trembled. “Yes, he’s asked me to help him secure the ranch as collateral for his debts.”

“By undermining Baxter?” Midge’s heart raced, each beat echoing through her chest like thunder. She couldn’t believe what she was hearing.

“Y-yes.” Peter shifted uncomfortably under her gaze, his hands fidgeting at his sides as he looked away. “He said it would help our family in the long run. That we wouldn’t have to rely on Baxter anymore.”

“Do you know what this means, Peter?” Midge slapped her palm against her thigh, the loud smack reverberating through the barn. She closed her eyes, struggling to keep her emotions in check. But the betrayal and hurt swirled inside her like a whirlwind, threatening to consume her. “Someone will buy the property and then we won’t have anywhere to live. You know we can’t trust Pa. He left us to fend for ourselves and never looked back.”

“I know, Midge. I know!” Peter’s voice cracked, tears welling up in his eyes. “But when he reached out, I thought... I thought maybe he’d changed.”

“Changed?!” Midge scoffed; her disbelief clear in every syllable. “He’s only trying to save his own skin! And you will risk everything we’ve worked so hard for just because he asked you to?”

Peter’s shoulders slumped; defeat written across his face. “I’m sorry, Midge. I didn’t give it much thought. I just wanted to protect our family, too.”

“By going behind my back and siding with the man who abandoned us?” Midge’s voice cracked, the hurt she tried so hard to hide finally breaking through. She couldn’t fathom how Peter could betray her like this, how he could even entertain the idea of working with their father after all they’d been through.

“Please, Midge.” Peter’s gaze pleaded for forgiveness as his tears spilled over. “It was a mistake. I didn’t want to hurt you or our siblings.”

Midge stared at her brother, the raw pain in his eyes mirrored in her own. But she couldn’t bring herself to forgive him, not yet. The betrayal cut too deep, and trust wasn’t easily mended. “We’ll deal with this later,” she said, her voice distant. “Right now, we have bigger problems to face.”

She turned on her heel to head back to the house.

“Someone bought the property,” Peter called after her.

Stopping in her tracks, she turned and looked at him. “What did you say?”

“I heard Bass Pickett talk about it. That the bank sold the property to someone. Bass didn’t know if that person was going to make us move or not.”

“Move?” Her face twitched. “When did you find out about this?”

“Right after Baxter left and didn’t return.”

“I don’t believe you.”

“Believe me, Midge. The person was only after the land. He didn’t care about any of us.”

“What do you mean?”

“Why don’t you ask him? The person who purchased the land is coming up the road.”

Midge looked over her shoulder to see Baxter enter the yard riding Knickers.

Baxter? Baxter Hartman had purchased her home and land.

Midge’s chest tightened as she stood in the dusty yard, her fists clenched at her sides. She stared blankly at the rundown ranch house, a sinking feeling of despair settling in her stomach. It wasn’t much, but it was her home.

“Midge. Peter,” he said, stopping next to them. He slid off the horse and dropped Knickers’ lead. “Are you ready?”

“Can you explain this?” She lifted the paper in her hand and waved it.

“I don’t know what that is,” Baxter replied coolly.

“You stole this house from underneath us,” Peter accused him.

Baxter looked around the clearing. “Is that what you think?”

Midge waved the letter again. “It’s all right here. My father wanted to secure his debts with the ranch and work to pay them off. You took that away from him by buying the house and land. You just wanted this property.”

Baxter scoffed. “Yes. I wanted this property because it is so valuable. Look at it, Midge. The house is falling. You can’t grow anything in the field but weeds and poison ivy. The only value are the precious people inside.”

“So, you’re going to kick us out? Right before winter?”

Baxter rubbed his chin. “Did I say that?”

“Well, it is your house. I can’t afford to pay rent.”

“You really think so little of me?”

“I want you to leave, Baxter.”

“I would really like you to come and see...”

Midge inhaled deeply. “You need to go. I don’t ever want to see you again.”

Baxter stood in front of Midge and Peter; his hands shoved deep into his pockets. He studied them both for a moment, then gave a solemn nod. “If that’s what you truly want.”

Midge felt her heart constrict as she met Baxter’s gaze. She couldn’t bear the thought of him leaving, but she knew it was for the best. “It’s what I really want.”

“I don’t think you really mean it, Midge,” Baxter said softly. “But I’ll honor your wishes. I’ll go.” He turned to leave, giving one last glance over his shoulder. “It will be up to you to find me if you change your mind.”

Midge watched him mount his horse and gallop down the dirt road, tears streaming down her face. Peter placed a hand on Midge’s shoulder, his own eyes welling up with emotion. “I’m glad he’s gone,” he whispered. “We don’t need him, Midge. Things will go back to the way they were.”

She crumpled up the paper and threw it at him. “You’re wrong, Peter. We need him. I need him. And things will never be the way they were.”



CHAPTER ELEVEN



As Midge lay in bed, she couldn't shake the feeling of guilt gnawing at her. She didn't want to get up and face the day, but the children were depending on her. The older children could take care of themselves for a few hours, maybe even a day, but Abilene and Olive counted on her.

She rolled over; her pillow was still damp from her tears. It had been three weeks since the harvest dance, which also meant it had been three weeks since Baxter shattered her heart. He owned their home. Gasping for air, she flopped on her back and decided if she was going to get up or just lay there, praying for the ground to open and claim her. If this was what being in love felt like, she wanted no part of it.

She knew they were trespassing on private property, but she also couldn't bring herself to leave. Part of her wanted the marshal to come and kick them out, while another part hoped he never showed up. She was torn between obeying the law and following her heart. Her heart wanted to find Baxter and beg him to leave them be. *Or kiss her senseless once again and tell her everything would be all right.*

Midge started crying again. Large sobs racked her body. She placed her pillow over her head, hoping that it would muffle the sound from her siblings. The sound of a gentle knock and the door creaking open dashed her hopes of being left alone.

"Mo mamay." The pillow muffled the words.

"Midge?" The mattress dipped, and the pillow was ripped from her head.

"Give that back to me," Midge said, her arms flailing, trying to catch the pillow that Petunia tossed to the bottom of

the bed.

“Ma Hartman and Marmee are here.”

“Tell them to go away. I don’t want to see anyone.” It would be just like Baxter to send his own mother and her best friend to evict them from their home.

“I’m not telling Marmee. She scares me.” Petunia gave a little laugh. She reached over and gave her sister a light shake. “Get up, Midge. You’ve not been out of bed for a week.”

“I might not get out for another week.”

“That’s it.” Petunia got off the bed and yanked the covers down. “You can’t blame Baxter for this. He did nothing but make sure that we had a place to live. You wanna know why he purchased this property?”

“I don’t want to talk about Baxter.”

“You don’t have to talk. You just gotta listen.”

Midge begrudgingly sat up, her eyes still red and puffy from crying. “Fine,” she said, wiping away a tear. “Tell me why Baxter bought this place.”

Petunia’s eyes narrowed as she spoke, her fists clenching at her sides. “Those vermin from Cowntown showed up in town looking for Pa. They put something called a lien on this house to pay for Pa’s debts. Those men wouldn’t care about putting us out before winter, but Baxter did.”

Her voice grew louder with each word, laced with anger and resentment. “Baxter purchased this to make sure you didn’t have to worry about where you were going to live. He made sure we were taken care of and protected from those greedy men. He did this for you, Midge. Who do you think brings us supplies every week? He makes sure we have enough milk for Olive and Abi?” Petunia stamped her foot on the hard floor. “Peter had no business talking to Pa, but I’m glad he did because it meant that Baxter purchased our home. I

pray every day that I find someone who loves me half as much as he loves you.”

Midge’s cheeks burned with embarrassment as she remained silent. She had been completely oblivious to the situation and now she regretted not paying more attention. Her mind desperately wanted to ask Petunia how she knew all this, but her heart couldn’t handle the potential truth.

She heard Petunia’s footsteps, followed by the click of the bedroom door closing. The silence that filled the room was heavy with her sister’s words. Burrowing deeper under the covers, she wished she could hide from reality for just a little longer. But no matter how tightly she shut her eyes, she couldn’t escape the weight of Petunia’s accusations. With a sigh, she gave up pretending to sleep and reluctantly opened her eyes to face the day.



Baxter carefully poured steaming hot coffee into his favorite mug, savoring the rich aroma that filled the kitchen. Just as he was about to take a sip, a sharp knock on the door interrupted him. He was not expecting any visitors, so it took him aback when he saw six little faces peering through the window. Peter, Petunia, Ira, Josiah, Elderberry, and Jenny Beale stood huddled together on the porch, their small bodies shivering in the cool air.

“What are you doing here?” He stood in the doorway, holding it open with one hand while trying to block the heat that was escaping. The chilly air outside crept in as he waited for her response.

“We needed to talk to you,” Petunia said, pushing her way in. “Go stand by the fire, Jenny. You’ll warm up soon enough.” The sturdy wooden door creaked open, and they rushed inside, their cheeks flushed and noses red from the cold outside.

“Is this your house?” Peter asked, his eyes wide as he took it all in.

“It would have been yours as well, but you took care of that.” He watched the children move closer to the stone fireplace. “I just heated some soup my sister made. Would you like some?” When the children nodded, he headed to the kitchen to see if he needed to add more water to the pot. It would thin out the soup, but right now, he was just concerned with making sure the children were warm.

As he cut thick slices of bread, he felt a pair of small arms wrap around his legs. Looking down, Jenny hugged him, a big smile on her face.

“I miss you, Baxter,” she said, squeezing him tighter.

Baxter could feel Jenny’s chilled skin through her thin coat. “I miss you too, sweetheart.”

“I’d like some soup,” Berry said. She wrapped her arms around Baxter’s middle. “I missed you too.”

“Me too, Berry.” He kissed the top of her head. “I’m glad you’re here.” He took her little hands and rubbed them between his palms. “Your hands are freezing. Where are your gloves at?”

“It’s not too cold,” Petunia said. “We’ll warm up in a minute.”

“Did you walk here?”

“It’s not too far,” Peter said, walking around, looking at every corner of the room.

“Is everything all right with Midge?”

With a gentle hand, he guided the children to the rustic wooden table left behind by the Callaghans. The smooth, worn surface bore the marks of countless meals and memories shared. They settled onto one of the sturdy benches, their small feet dangling above the ground. As he looked around at

the faces of his family gathered around the table, his heart swelled with joy. This was what he had always dreamed of; a warm home filled with love and laughter. And now, as they sat together enjoying this simple yet precious moment, his vision had become a reality. Midge and the two little ones were the only missing pieces.

“Other than she won’t get out of bed?” Petunia snorted. “She’s okay. We came to talk to you about her.”

“Let’s get everyone fed and warmed up, and then we can talk. Can you help me serve the soup, Petunia?”

“I’ll help,” Peter offered.

Baxter lifted an eyebrow but nodded. “I don’t have enough bowls, so we’ll use mugs instead.” As he pulled the mugs from the pegs in the wall, Peter moved closer.

“I wanted to talk to you,” Peter said in a low voice.

Baxter paused for a minute, then resumed his task. “Talk. I’m listening.”

“Mr. Hartman, I...” he started, hesitating. “I mean, Baxter... I wanted to apologize for my actions. I know I’ve made things difficult for you and Midge. The way Pa talked in his letters, I thought he had changed.”

“I understand where you’re coming from. It’s difficult to come to terms with the fact that the person you love may not be who you believed them to be.”

“You really love Midge, don’t you?”

Baxter started ladling soup into the mugs. “I do. I also realize that she comes with all of you. And that means I love everyone else as well. It doesn’t mean that I must agree with your behavior, but I’ll still love you.” Handing Peter two mugs, Baxter tilted his head. “Take those to the table and be careful because they are warm.”

Peter fetched the mugs in silence and returned for his soup. “Baxter?” he finally said.

“Yes?”

“I’m glad you love Midge, and I love you, too.”

Placing his hand on Peter’s shoulder, Baxter smiled. “Let’s have a fresh start, then. Just remember, I’m here to help, not fight y’all.”

“Thank you, Baxter,” Peter replied, relief washing over his face. They shook hands, sealing their newfound understanding.

Baxter nodded, picking up his own mug and the plate of bread. Placing both on the table, he sat down and lifted Petunia’s and Berry’s hand to say a blessing over their simple meal.

“And Father, bless Midge and let her know how much she’s missed and needed. Amen.”

“Amen!” a loud voice boomed through the room. “Looks like I’m just in time.”

“Rex!” Petunia raced from her bench to hug him. “Are you going hunting? Can I go with you?”

“You’ll have to talk to Baxter. I think he was going to go hunting in the next week.”

“Can I go with you?” she asked. “I was hoping to get a turkey for Thanksgiving.”

“That’s Midge’s birthday,” Ira piped up between bites of soup.

“We’ll see what we can do. I might have an old rifle hanging around here somewhere.”

Petunia whooped and raced back to the table to finish her soup. “Let’s go right now.”

“We have a week,” Baxter said. “Soup’s on the stove, Rex.” He finished his soup and placed his spoon on a napkin before he asked what had been weighing on his mind. “What’s going on with Midge?”

“She’s sad,” Jenny said. Berry nodded her agreement.

“She refuses to get out of bed,” Petunia added.

Baxter’s eyebrows knitted together in worry. He was concerned Midge wasn’t looking after the children. “Who is taking care of Abilene and Olive?”

“Your Ma and Marmee came to visit, so that is why we walked over,” Peter said.

“I think Midge should come here for Thanksgiving,” Rex said.

“Rex,” Baxter warned.

“No. It would be good for her to see the house, and everyone can help make dinner.”

Baxter was skeptical. “Can any of you cook?” They all shook their heads. “Maybe Annamae can help.” Sighing, he looked at his brother. “I’m going to need to go to town. You up for a ride?”

“I can hitch the wagon as soon as I’m done eating.”

Petunia stood at the sink, water splashing against her hands as she scrubbed each dish clean. Berry stood beside her, drying and stacking the dishes in a neat pile. Once the food was put away and the dishes were done, Rex and Peter headed to the barn. They came out shortly after, with Daisy harnessed to a large wagon. Baxter trailed behind them, arms full of warm blankets from the house. The children giggled as they piled into the wagon, bundled up and cozy under the layers of blankets. Baxter carefully tucked them in before climbing onto the driver’s seat, determined to keep them warm on their bumpy ride into town.

“Be careful not to break anything,” Baxter warned as they neared the store. He parked the wagon in the alley, and everyone climbed out and raced for the mercantile door. A blast of hot air hit his face as he pushed open the door to let the children in. The stagecoach had just arrived from Grand Platte, so there was a crowd huddled around the potbelly stove in the corner. Rex saw the marshal near the stove and went to join the crowd. Baxter knew he only came along to drink coffee and catch up on the latest news from town.

“I’m gonna look at the hunting supplies,” Petunia said, disappearing to the far corner of the store.

“Baxter,” Dillon Arden greeted him. He had been the owner of the mercantile for longer than Baxter had even been alive. “Looks like you have your hands full today.”

“I came in for some supplies. The children need coats and boots for the winter. Oh, gloves too.”

Dillon peered over his glasses at the children and eventually nodded. “That is really Rose’s department.” He called for his wife, who appeared from behind a curtain with a bolt of fabric.

“Baxter, what a surprise. And look at all these children.”

“They need coats. Boots and gloves are over there,” Dillon pointed. “I’ll take care of this list.”

Baxter watched as the children eagerly tried on coats and boots, their faces lit up with excitement. He couldn’t help but notice that their previous winter clothes were worn and inadequate for the harsh climate.

“Why didn’t you have proper winter clothing before?” he asked.

Peter, sensing his confusion, explained, “We used to live in Texas. We never needed coats like these.”

Berry held up a pair of vibrant knitted mittens with colorful stripes. “Can I get these? They’re so pretty and

warm!”

“Of course. Pick out a pair you think Midge would like.” Once the children were outfitted, they joined Baxter to wait for the rest of their order to be ready. He picked up several other items and added them to the growing pile in front of him. Fragrant soap and a pair of beaded combs rounded out his gifts for Midge.

As they waited, Baxter felt a tap on his shoulder. Turning, he spied his sister and her husband standing behind them.

“What are you doing here?” Annamae asked.

“We came to get a few things for the house,” Baxter started.

“Where’s Midge?”

“She’s at home. And,” he looked around the group, “Petunia... is around here somewhere.”

“You need to tell Midge to put tonic on that child’s thumb,” Rose Arden chastised as she scribbled on a piece of paper. “She’ll end up with a hole between her teeth if she keeps sucking it.”

“She does it when she’s nervous,” Baxter said, taking Jenny’s hand. Annamae raised her eyebrows as she looked at Baxter.

“What are you getting Midge for her birthday, Baxter?” Annamae asked sweetly.

Baxter glared at his sister. “A dustpan and broom,” he mumbled under his breath. Turning to the children, he gave them a smile. “How about several of those hair ribbons? Each one of you may pick out a color. And a large bag of penny candy.”

“A large bag costs five cents,” Rose said.

“Then make it two. There are a lot of children.”

“Come with me, children, and do not touch a thing,” Rose admonished, leading the brood over to the ribbon display.

“Fatherhood looks good on you, man,” Sawyer said, joining them.

“Whoop! Lookie here!” A cry went up near the large picture window. “They’s gots new guns. I could go hunting up in the hills with something like this.” Petunia walked over and put the rifle on the counter. “How much do you think something like this is?”

“More money than you have, Petunia,” Baxter replied. “Put it back.”

“You don’t know how much money I have,” she argued, crossing her arms over her chest. “I’ve not sold my furs yet.”

“I know you don’t have two nickels to your name, and that rifle is at least ten dollars. Put it back.” Baxter pointed to the display at the front of the store.

“It’s shore pretty, though. Hey, Mr. Arden!” Petunia picked up the rifle and swung it over her shoulder before stomping off to see the shopkeeper at the register.

“Here you go, Baxter. Five ribbons and I’ll get you that sack of candy. Anything else?”

“Just what was on the list. Total me up and I’m going to get everyone out of here.”

“Fine. Let me get these wrapped up. I have some pretty lace doilies which will do the job. I’ll meet you at the counter.”

Sending the children to wait by the stove up front, Baxter finally turned to his sister. “What are you doing here, Annie?” he asked, concern etched on his face. “You shouldn’t be out in this cold. Neither should you, Mills.”

Annamae watched as Mrs. Arden counted out an assortment of candies from display jars and put them in a large

paper sack. “We needed to find a turkey since there aren’t any more chickens in the coop.” Taking the bag Mrs. Arden passed to Baxter, Annamae popped a gumdrop in her mouth and rolled the bag back up. “That’s the least you can give me to replace all the ones you took.”

“Don’t you have chicks?”

“It takes a few months for them to lay or be big enough to butcher.”

“I’ll see what I can do. Petunia wants to go hunting for a turkey.”

“Ask her,” Berry said, tugging on Sawyer’s coat.

“Ask me what?”

“I need help cooking dinner, Thanksgiving dinner for Midge. The children don’t know how to cook.”

“Will you be having Thanksgiving with us, Baxter?” Annamae asked.

“Haven’t decided yet; I’ll stop by and let you know. I better get my wagon loaded if I want to get everything home before it snows.” Giving his sister a kiss on the cheek, he picked up his bag of candy and headed toward the register.

“Come on, Rex. I’m headed home.”

In no time at all, he had loaded his purchases into the wagon. As he motioned for the children to climb into the back, two unfamiliar faces appeared from around the corner of the store. It was Sawyer’s siblings, who had come all the way from Texas to find him. They needed help to transport their heavy suitcases out to the ranch, so Sawyer happily offered to help. They all piled into the wagon and began their journey home together, with the added company of Sawyer’s brother and sister.

After dropping off the two strangers at the farm, Baxter was ready to head back home. “Are you coming, Rex?” he

asked.

“Nah. You go on ahead without me.” He was looking at Tillie, Sawyer’s sister. “I think I’ll stay here and make sure everyone gets settled.”

Baxter chuckled. It was easy to see that Rex was immediately smitten with the pretty lady from Texas. “See you later. Come on, Daisy. Let’s go home.”

“Where are we going now?” Ira asked.

“We’ll drop everything off at my house and then I’ll take you home.”

“What are you going to do, then?” Petunia asked.

“I’m going to convince Midge she needs to marry me.”



CHAPTER TWELVE



“Miriam Beale! I know you’re in there!”

Midge rose from her bed and walked over to the window. Baxter was standing outside next to his wagon. She quickly dropped the curtain and turned around, pressing her back against the wall.

“Miriam!” He called her name again. A chorus of giggles erupted from behind her bedroom door. “I saw the curtain move, Midge.”

Standing on her toes, she peeked out once more. Baxter leaned back against the wagon and tipped his hat as he stared at the window with his piercing eyes. It was as if he were commanding her to appear.

“Go away!” she yelled out the window.

“I can’t do that. I’ll give you ten minutes and then I’m coming in.”

“No, you don’t.”

He stood there for a moment. Pulling out a pocket watch, he snapped open the cover and peered at the dial. “Nine minutes.”

“Fine. I’ll be right out.” Midge looked around the room. She needed to find something to wear. *It would serve him right if she walked out in her nightgown.*

She grabbed a chipped pitcher from the washbasin and walked to the kitchen, her bare feet cold against the floor. Stepping over to the sink, she filled the pitcher with cool water and turned around. The children were all lined up, wearing brand new coats and boots. Their eyes were wide with excitement. Even Petunia was wearing one.

“Where did those come from?” Midge demanded.

“We went to Baxter’s house,” Jenny said. “It’s really pretty.”

“Baxter’s house? Where were the babies?” She looked around for Abilene and Olive.

“Ma and Marmee took them. Said you needed your rest on account you have the cholera,” Ira piped up.

Petunia groaned. “Melancholia. Not cholera.”

Midge realized just how much she had been ignoring her family. She felt guilty for not being more present, for not noticing the new clothes, or that Ma Hartman and Marmee had taken the babies. But she pushed the guilt aside and focused on the present. “Did Baxter buy you those coats?”

“Uh-huh.” Josiah shoved his hands in his pockets and pulled out some knitted mittens. “He got a pair for you, too.”

“Why would he do that?” she mused loudly.

Peter stepped forward. “Because he loves you, Midge.”

“Loves me?”

“He loves all of us,” Peter continued. “But he did all this for you.”

“You have five minutes, Miriam Beale!” Baxter’s voice boomed from the yard.

She pinched the bridge of her nose. Baxter’s velvety voice mixing with Peter’s words. “I must have cobwebs in my head. I can’t think.”

“He bought this house so you would never have to worry about Pa or where you’d live until you were ready,” Petunia said. “But he also purchased a really pretty home by the creek that has enough room for all of us.”

“He bought a house?”

“For all of us. We won’t have to share beds no more,” Berry said. “It’s so pretty.”

Peter nodded. “He said it was easier to fix that one up instead of pouring time into this one.” Grabbing Midge’s hand, he gave it a slight squeeze. “I was wrong, Midge. Baxter and I made our peace. Now you should do the same.”

“Two minutes!”

“Oh, my goodness!” Midge exclaimed. “I can’t let him see me like this. Go distract him and I’ll get changed.”

“What do you want us to do?” Jenny asked.

“Show him the kittens or something.” She bolted back to the bedroom, her feet pounding against the wooden floor. She quickly filled the washbasin with cold water and splashed it on her face, wiping away the last remnants of sleep. With a sense of urgency, she rummaged through her closet and pulled out her best dress. It was a blue day dress with patches, but it would have to do. She ran a brush through her hair, letting it cascade in loose waves down her back. Her pins were missing and there was no time for a fancy chignon. After slipping into her dependable black boots and grabbing her wrap, she rushed out the door. She quickly wiped her sweaty hands on her skirt before steeling herself for whatever awaited her outside.

“I heard you wanted to see me.” She kept her lips tightly pressed together, but her eyes gave away the struggle to maintain a serious expression.

Baxter’s eyes widened as he took in her appearance. “You look lovely,” he said, moving closer.

“What do you want, Baxter?”

“I wanted to come by and see how you were doing. The children said you weren’t feeling well.”

“I wasn’t. I think I’m better now.”

He rubbed his thumb along his chin. “Good. Good.”

“Thank you for the coats for the children. You didn’t have to do that.”

“I know. I don’t have to do anything.”

“Peter said you did it because you love me. Is that true?”

Baxter gave a chuckle. “That is what I love about you. There is no pussyfooting around. You get straight to the point.”

“I love you too, Baxter. I may not like the way you behaved, but that doesn’t mean I don’t love you.”

“I said the same thing to Peter this morning.”

He moved closer. “You seem very grumpy, Miss Beale.”

“Maybe it’s because I’ve been missing you.”

Baxter leaned in and kissed her softly on the lips. Midge’s breathing quickened as she felt his arms wrap around her waist, pulling her closer. She melted into him, letting herself be consumed by the warmth of his embrace. He broke the kiss and held her face in his hands, looking directly into her eyes.

“I missed you too, Midge. I learned kissing makes you less grumpy.”

“You’ve been doing some thinking, I see.”

“I have. Miriam Beale,” he began, his voice trembling ever so slightly. “A lot of thinking. I thought about how miserable I’ve been being apart from you. I thought about how you and your siblings have brought light into my life in ways I never imagined possible.”

“Petunia told me you purchased this house so that we could stay here.”

“I didn’t want you to have to worry about a place to live until I was ready.”

Midge felt her cheeks flush as her siblings watched in silence, anticipation hanging heavily in the air. “Ready?”

He cupped her head, pushing her hair back from her face. “Your strength, resilience, and love for your family have touched my heart,” Baxter continued. “And I want nothing more than to be a part of it, if you’ll have me.”

Her breath caught in her throat as Baxter pulled her closer. Her heart pounded relentlessly against her ribs, threatening to break free. “What are you saying?”

“I’m asking. Miriam,” he whispered, his voice barely audible over the rush of blood in her ears. “Will you marry me? Will you let me love and protect you and your siblings for the rest of our days?”

Tears welled up in Midge’s eyes, her vision blurring as she took in the sight before her. The man who found her stealing just to feed her family was now offering her something more. He had entered her life as a stranger and was now offering his heart and his loyalty to her and her family.

“Y-yes,” she stammered, tears spilling down her cheeks. “Yes, Baxter Hartman, I will marry you.”

As soon as the words left her mouth, Baxter’s eyes lit up in delight. He hugged her fiercely, picking her up off the ground as he swung her around. Midge’s siblings cheered and clapped, filling the room with their excitement. It was a moment of utter joy, and Midge could feel the love radiating from everyone around her.

As Baxter put her down, he brought his hand up to her face, brushing away the stray tears. “I promise to love and cherish you for the rest of my days, sweetheart. And I vow to take care of your family, no matter what. You won’t have to worry about a thing ever again, as long as I am here.”

Midge smiled, her heart melting with affection for the man standing before her. “I believe you, Baxter.”

He leaned in and kissed her again, this time with a passion that made her knees weak. Midge wrapped her arms around his neck, pulling him closer as they deepened the kiss. For a

moment, the rest of the world seemed to fade away, leaving just the two of them in their own little bubble of happiness. When they finally parted, Midge could feel her cheeks flush under Baxter's intense gaze. She could hardly believe that this man, who had once been her enemy, was now going to be her husband.

Baxter Hartman was her gentle protector.



I hope you enjoyed Baxter and Midge's story. Look for the books featuring the Beale siblings coming in 2025! In the meantime, check out the next book featuring Rexford and Tillie in [WRANGLING HER HEART](#).



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ABOUT CHRISTINE STERLING

USA Today bestselling author **CHRISTINE STERLING** writes small-town inspirational romances with a touch of humor. Her stories take place in the plains of Nebraska or Colorado, but she will write wherever there are brave heroes needing to find love. She loves to create tight-knit families with strong family values, and you'll often find that her characters cross over in many of her stories.

She lives on a farm in Pennsylvania with her husband, four dogs, and two spoiled cats, aka The Floofs. When she's not writing, she can be found hiding in the cornfield, drinking tea, staring at the weeds in her garden, eating snacks or napping.

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