

Bentonsport: A CHRISTMAS STORY

BY LISA SCHNEDLER



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*To my parents, George and Patricia Wagner, for the legacy of faith
they have shared with all of us!*

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Prologue

Bentonsport, Iowa
1869

“Well, ladies, we can all agree upon one thing—this simply has gone on too long. Too long!” Virginia Carrington slammed her palms on the table and stared at the other three women sitting around it. They nodded, almost in unison.

“And,” she continued, her curls bobbing on her forehead, “we’ve been entirely too patient. Much too patient.”

Annabelle Manning patted Virginia’s hand. “Oh, Virginia, dear, you tried so hard.”

“Twice.” Virginia lowered her voice in a harsh whisper, her green eyes glistening. “Yes, twice, I imposed upon dear friendships, first begging Mercy Paine and then Emmalou Barnes to turn their precious daughters over to me to present them to Mr. Barton in the most captivating and intriguing way.”

After pushing back from the table, she walked to the center of the room, her dress swishing against the broad floor planks.

Within this setting, the winter's fire cast a glow on her stout frame. She strutted as if she were performing on stage.

"'Mr. Barton,' I said." She curtsied. "I would like you to meet Miss Paine. You two have a great deal in common.' Yes—I emphasized this. And then I said, 'Miss Paine is highly educated and attending college in Mount Pleasant. She is musical too.'

"And what did he say?" Her tone changed from pleasant to stern.

She deepened her voice. "A pleasure to meet you, Miss Paine.' And then he walked away, chatting with Pastor Lockhardt. Not a glance back. Not a pause. Nothing. I was humiliated—hu-mil-i-ated!" She pulled a handkerchief from her skirt pocket, dabbed her forehead, and returned the lace-trimmed cloth to its place.

"Did I give up, ladies?"

The three women shook their heads, nearly in unison.

"No, I did not. I regathered my pride, and then I visited Emmalou, requesting permission to introduce her daughter to Mr. Barton. Lovely, kind, demure Eleanora was returning home from a year in New York. She's cultured. Yes, cultured! How could this not be the perfect match? So, I stopped by and asked Eleanora to accompany me on a walk."

Virginia strolled across the floor. "And we reached the academy just as school was ending for the day. So, I led Eleanora by the arm, and we made the ascent up the hill to the academy."

She marched in place as though climbing a steep hill and fanned herself, her elbow crooked, arm and arm with the invisible Eleanora.

"I paused, of course, to catch my breath. But, as soon as I had full control of my voice, I smiled at our headmaster and said, 'Mr. Barton, I imagine you've not yet met Miss Eleanora Barnes. Miss Barnes'—yes, I emphasized *Miss*—'has been in New York for a year to study art. She just returned home, here only briefly before she begins college.'

"I stepped away from Eleanora and placed my hand on his arm. 'Eleanora,' I said, 'I'd like you to meet Thomas Barton. Mr.

Barton is the headmaster of our academy. This is his second year, and we're so glad he joined us.”

Turning, bracing her hands on her generous hips, her lips clamped in a straight line, she nearly shouted, “Well, ladies, does Thomas Barton take my cue to converse with this young lady? Does he inquire about her time in New York? Does he ask what college she will be attending?”

She paused for a dramatic silence.

“No, no. He humiliates me once again. He smiles at Eleanora, tells her it is a pleasure to meet her, comments on the lovely day, and slips back into the academy.”

With this, Virginia walked to her chair and resumed her position at the head of the table.

“So, ladies, this is absolutely it. If we want Thomas to remain as the headmaster of our academy, he must find a wife. And, because Bentonsport has few eligible young women, we must make this our moment.”

Suella Thompson interjected, “What is special about this moment?”

“As you surely know, Elizabeth Miner is coming home—completely unattached.” Virginia folded her hands on the tabletop. “This time, we're not going to rely on simple introductions. No, never that again. This time, I am throwing Elizabeth Miner a welcome home party, and I'm inviting the whole town.”

“Oh, we'd be happy to help you,” Annabelle chirped.

“Well, yes, I will need help with the party. But I need your help before the party. That's why I asked you to come over today. Ladies, we will create excitement the likes of which Bentonsport has never experienced. If Queen Victoria herself were coming, it wouldn't outdo the excitement we will create throughout the town about the arrival—yes, I said *arrival*—of Miss Elizabeth Miner. I want Thomas to hear her name in every store, in every street conversation, until he hears the name in his dreams. I want him to not only desire but yearn to meet this divine woman.”

“Well, Elizabeth is pretty and nice, but ...”

“Anabelle, it doesn’t matter what she is. It only matters what he thinks she will be. This won’t be an introduction. It will be an anticipated event. And this time—”

A knock on the door interrupted. When Virginia rose and answered it, there stood Thomas Barton. She took two steps back, unable to choke out even a greeting.

“Ladies.” Thomas nodded to the women and held out a book to Virginia. “Mrs. Waters said it was fine for me to interrupt. I’m returning this. I read several sections to the children, and they enjoyed it very much.”

“Why, Thomas, do come in.”

“I can’t stay right now. I’m running errands. But it’s nice to see you ladies. Good day.”

He closed the door and left.

Virginia returned to her seat and lowered her voice to a whisper. The women leaned in. “This time, ladies, we will not fail.”



Chapter One

There was talk of a pending storm.

After sealing the envelope addressed to his parents, Thomas Barton drummed his fingers on the well-worn walnut desktop and stared out the windows at the gray sky. They would be saddened by its message. His family was hoping he'd travel the nearly one thousand miles from Iowa to Pennsylvania for the holidays—a trip of two and a half days by train.

But if the rumored storm were true, he couldn't risk being stranded in Pennsylvania, even for Christmas. In his second year of teaching at the Bentonsport Academy, he felt responsible for his twenty-six students. No one could take his place.

His gaze wandered over the few furnishings in his second-floor living quarters—the cannonball bed, chest of drawers, and bedside table with the lamp he carefully carried when he moved to Bentonsport. In the center of the room stood a round walnut table. It could accommodate two people only, which suited him well. He nearly always ate alone. Now he would be alone at Christmas.

As he descended the stairs, Thomas's steps echoed in the narrow stairwell. Then he slid on his coat and stepped out the door, locking it behind him. A slate-gray sky hung overhead. He

strode to the post office, hoping the walk would rid him of the creeping sadness. The dirt roads were hard from the long months of cold. Trees stood unmoving, armlike branches stretched up high.

As he turned the corner, Virginia Carrington, Bentonsport's most prominent busybody, left her house. She didn't look in his direction but stood on her walkway, rooting through her cranberry drawstring purse. She drew the bag shut and hustled toward the road. He'd have to watch what he said, as it would no doubt be repeated.

"Good day, Mr. Barton." She secured her pale green bonnet.

He smiled back. "Good day, Mrs. Carrington."

She approached and took his arm. "You won't mind if I walk with you into town, will you? I'm on my way to have tea with Luella."

"I'd be delighted," he lied and prepared to engage in a skirmish of small talk.

Two carriages passed, their horses decorated with red bows and brass bells. Young couples walked arm in arm with each other, enjoying the brisk day. Would he ever have someone special to take on a stroll about town? Someone besides Mrs. Carrington?

"I was going to visit you today, Mr. Barton. You're invited to the welcome home party Mr. Carrington and I are hosting this Saturday evening for Elizabeth Miner."

He couldn't match a face with the name.

A wave of her free hand saved him the trouble. "You probably haven't heard much about her. She's William's daughter. She's been away at school for three years. A lovely young woman."

He hesitated. Normally, he would make excuses—do anything other than be subjected to her matchmaking skills. But, with the dark winter days and the empty holiday season ahead, he knew he needed to be with people. He grinned, then cleared his throat. "Your event sounds like a nice way to enter the holiday season."

"Oh, it will be. Mark my word."

Virginia Carrington lacked all subtlety in her pairing

attempts. Twice before, she'd tried to set him up with women he had no interest in. But a party might just be what he needed.

When they reached Front Street, she released his arm. She pointed toward an elderly woman dressed in a navy skirt with a red sash, using a tapered black cane. "There's Annabelle Manning. I need to extend an invitation to her as well. Good to see you, Thomas." She patted his arm. "Don't forget Saturday evening!"

On Front Street, the five-story brick building across the way blocked his view of the river. To his left, cedar boughs and ribbon decorated the brick stores. A merry fiddle played *Good Christian Men Rejoice*. Ernst Gentry, a retired farmer, entertained shoppers at Christmastime by playing carols.

Another Christmas season and he remained alone. Disquietude crept through him. Why were times of joy always laced with melancholy? His yearning and loneliness seemed to frame even the happiest of events. Nevertheless, the season also brought hope—and now, his hope focused on Miss Miner.

Virginia Carrington called her lovely.

He shook off his thoughts.

Early expectations of romance rarely led anywhere other than disappointment and sadness.

He proceeded to the post office, and when he tugged the door open, the bells hanging beneath its framed window jingled.

"Hello, Thomas." Benjamin Ross, the postmaster, stared over wire-rimmed glasses far down his nose as he set aside a pile of letters. Tall and lanky in his early fifties, with his stiff turned-up collar and carefully knotted tie, he'd have appeared equally at home in a courtroom.

Thomas slid his letter across the marred wooden counter. "Good morning, Benjamin. What's new in town?"

"Most talk today concerns Elizabeth Miner coming home. No one thought she would return home without a husband, but according to her parents, she's unattached. Seems no one back East measured up to her standards." Benjamin shot him an

amused glance. “I imagine all the young gents in town’ll be finding reasons to stop by the Miners’ place.”

Thomas steadied his expressionless gaze. This Elizabeth Miner must be quite something to create such a stir.

“I’m sure her parents will be glad to have her back.” He tapped his envelope. “I wish I could send similar news to my family—about coming home, I mean. But with this forecasted storm, I can’t consider going to Pennsylvania for the holidays.”

“Oh? I’m sorry, Thomas—for you and your family.” Benjamin glanced down at the letter. “Well, Beulah and I would enjoy having you for a meal sometime during the holidays.”

“I’d appreciate it.”

“Let me know when you’re available. We’ll set the date.”

“I will.” When a stout man in a long woolen coat came to the counter, package in hand, Thomas thanked Benjamin and left the warm post office for the chilly air. Two invitations in one morning? The holidays looked better already. And the intriguing prospect of meeting Miss Elizabeth Miner—intriguing because it seemed he’d have to vie with other single men for the chance.