



Chapter Three

Thomas paced the room, stopping at each cluster of students, surveying their work for their upcoming staged version of Charles Dickens's *A Christmas Carol*.

Some students painted scenery and assembled costumes while others rehearsed their parts. Against the walls stood finished backdrops of various scenes: Scrooge's office, his bedroom of ghostly visits, and Tiny Tim's cozy home.

Art class was dedicated to building sets, English class to writing the script, history class to learning about England and its customs, and math class to plotting the actors' locations on the stage. By matching the lessons to components of the play, he kept the students focused on their studies and created an escape valve for their holiday excitement.

He pulled the long loop of a paint-splattered apron over his head. "All right, boys, let's lay out Scrooge's street. Girls, could you get the paints? All the shades of black, gray, and brown you can find. And both cans of brushes—the broad flat ones and the thinner ones."

After the boys laid canvas on the floor and spread newspapers to catch spills, he motioned the girls to join him. "Now, several of you sit over here on the left. Use the smaller brushes to outline

each object in the scene. Then shade them in with the broader brushes.”

“How do we know what color to use?” David Saltzer, a boy with round glasses, cocked his head like a robin.

“Good question.” Thomas pointed to the words penciled in each section. “The scene designers have labeled each section with a color.”

David squinted at the lettering, his lips moving as he mouthed each one he read.

“Over here on the right”—Thomas moved to the top-right corner—“I need those of you who like to paint skies.”

Three of the older girls walked over and stood.

“This canvas will be used for the predawn scenes and late at night, so we want a dark but moonlit sky. The moon will reflect off the clouds, so this area will be silver.” He gestured toward the middle. “The other sections will be shades of dark gray, dark blue, and black.”

The room buzzed while Scrooge’s neighborhood came to life. As sections of the sky were painted and repainted until the moon cast an eerie glow on patches of rippling clouds, the streetlamps glowed against the foggy background.

He’d just crouched on the floor to help Joe, his youngest student, paint the cobbled street when Abigail, seated across from him, stood and waved. Thomas looked over his shoulder. A group of mothers clustered at the door, watching the children—and him. He’d heard the parents, particularly the mothers, were curious about the play, but he hadn’t expected them to show up at the academy. Abigail’s wave alerted the other children, who stood and ran to their parents.

“All right, everyone,” Thomas called above their chattering voices. “After you clean up, you’re free to go. Paintbrushes in the buckets to soak. We’ll let the scene dry overnight, so walk around it for now.”

The students clattered away the painting supplies, some of them discussing the predicted snow.

As he ensured the last of the brushes went into the buckets, soft voices drifted his way.

“He’s so good with them,” one mother said, her voice just above a whisper. “He would make such a good father.”

“Well,” answered her companion, “there may be a better chance of that with Elizabeth’s return.”

As the women laughed, his face flushed. Elizabeth again. Regaining his composure, he greeted the women as if he hadn’t heard their remarks. He wiped his long fingers against his apron. “It’s always good to hear laughter in the academy. And especially pleasing to hear the laughter of you fine ladies.” He bowed, hopefully leaving the women embarrassed but pleased.

The boys and girls raced to get their coats and lunch boxes. With the last child’s departure, he closed the door, and the room fell silent. He cleaned the chalkboards, the swoosh of his cloth accompanying the wall clock’s steady tick. After extinguishing the lamps, he climbed the wooden stairs to his apartment.

As he sat and removed his highly polished black leather shoes, his thoughts returned again and again to Elizabeth Miner. Out of all the eligible bachelors in town, his name seemed to be on the shortlist, at least in some matchmakers’ eyes. A smile pulled at his lips. Some still deemed him “eligible,” even ten years after he had become so.

ON SATURDAY, THOMAS LAID OUT HIS FINEST WEAR FOR the Carrington event the following evening. As he rummaged through a dresser drawer for the gold cufflinks his grandfather had given him, he considered what topics he might raise in his conversation with Miss Miner. He could ask about her schooling. He could discuss the play his students were planning and invite her to attend. He could tell her he was the most intelligent man in the county. He grinned. Being a liar and braggart was probably not the best first approach.

Once satisfied with his planned attire, he left the school building and headed to Greef General Store. Breathing in the ever-present smell of spices, leather, and coffee, he chose a box of chocolates for the Carringtons, a bag of candy canes for the children to place on the tree at the church, and assorted hard candies as a treat for them at the hanging of the greens.

He shifted his weight while joining the line of customers at the cash register. The hum of chatter offered bits of shared holiday plans, a promised exchange of cookie recipes, and snippets of the latest local news. Elizabeth Miner topped the list of topics.

As he entered the academy, his purchases in hand, thoughts of Elizabeth Miner swirled in his head. He spent the remainder of the day gathering evergreen branches to decorate the church sanctuary windowsills and then hauled the branches to the church in an old wagon one of the children abandoned at the school. The church, a stately brick structure with a tall white steeple, stood dark and shuttered. He stacked the branches in a neat pile outside the door.

Home again, he dressed in his formal attire, tucked the bags of candy in his coat pockets, grabbed the box of chocolates, and headed for the church. The hanging of the greens brought back fond childhood memories when the event meant Christmas Day lay just around the corner. This church, too, became a place of festivity, filled with the smells of cedar, pine, cinnamon, oranges, and clove.

Carriages passed him as he walked up the hill. He quickened his pace as a buggy pulled alongside him.

“Greetings, Mr. Barton,” a student’s voice sang out.

“Shouldn’t you be in school?” another chimed in.

Thomas and their parents joined in the laughter as the buggy continued its climb.

Near the church, William Miner’s carriage and horse overtook him. He glimpsed a young woman inside. Tendrils of hair the color of sunflowers curled about her face beneath her blue bonnet. This elegant beauty had to be Elizabeth.

Picking up his pace, Thomas arrived as the carriage rolled before the church door.

William climbed out and went to the other side to open the carriage door, offering his hand to the young woman.

Thomas rushed to follow them up the stone steps. Gaining the entryway, he positioned himself in William's line of sight, hoping to be introduced.

But before Thomas could make eye contact, Pastor Lockhardt clasped his hand. "Good evening. You certainly look dapper tonight."

Normally, Thomas would have greeted the jaunty pastor's warm handshake in kind. But tonight, as the Miners passed through the door and away, he wished his friend were not so attentive. His shoulders slumping, he focused on Pastor Lockhardt.

A short man, solidly built, Pastor Lockhardt smoothed his abundance of white hair. "Your children are about to start singing, Thomas. Won't you join me up front?"

"Of course." The enthusiasm he tried to infuse into his voice seemed to lodge in his throat, the words coming out flat. This would further delay his introduction.

Pastor Lockhardt sat just left of the center aisle, and Thomas took the spot next to him, placing his box of chocolates under the pew.

The children formed a semicircle behind the communion table. Whitewashed walls and dark windows framed them.

Pastor Lockhardt rose, strode onto the platform, and faced the congregation. "Welcome to God's house." His voice boomed over the packed pews. "We'll begin this celebration of our Lord's birth with some carols."

The twenty or so children sang "The First Noel," "Silent Night," and "Joy to the World." The younger ones swayed back and forth to the melody while most of the older ones self-consciously stood stiff. Rambunctious children who had shouted to him from carriages now, in front of their elders, avoided eye

contact. Their confidence had better return for *A Christmas Carol*.

After concluding their performance, the whispering and giggling children scrambled to their pews. Pastor Lockhardt read the account of Jesus's birth from the gospel according to Luke. Closing the Bible, he said, "Let us pray. Heavenly Father, we thank You for Your Word. We thank You also for the children's gift of song and ask You to bless us now as we gather to decorate Your home for this holy season, amen."

He stepped from the platform and raised his arms, his black robe flowing. "I invite you all to assist in decorating the church, enjoy some refreshments, and join in the caroling."

Elizabeth also rose, engaged in conversation with Lucinda Carrington, the Carringtons' oldest daughter. They ambled to the back of the church, lifted some of the cedar branches Thomas had brought earlier, and began placing them in the deep windowsills. He moved toward them, but Joe Miner, Elizabeth's uncle, intercepted him.

"Thomas." The man slapped him on the back. "We need another strong fellow to help us move the pump organ aside to make room for the tree. How about lending a hand?"

"Certainly." And thus, yet another chance for an introduction to Elizabeth slipped past.

As he straightened his jacket after they'd pushed the organ over beside the communion table, a tap brushed his shoulder. Virginia Carrington's catlike eyes gleamed up at him. "The children are nearly finished decorating their tree in the vestibule. Could you help them with the star?"

He rubbed his forehead. "Of course."

Thomas followed her to the foyer, walking past Elizabeth and Lucinda hanging ribbons on the pews. On the way, he retrieved the bags of candy from his coat. In the vestibule, he placed the tin star atop the children's tree, his frock coat bushing against garlands of cranberries, popcorn strings, orange slices studded

with cloves, and frolicking gingerbread men they'd made in Sunday school.

"You did a great job with your performance this evening." He crouched to eye level with the smaller children. "I have a surprise for you."

As he distributed candy sweets from two bags, the younger children shrieked in delight, and the older ones held out their hands with a polite thank you.

"Hang these on the tree in the front of the church." He opened the candy cane bag. With a candy cane in one hand and their own candy in the other, the children ran to do as he instructed. Thomas followed, stuffing the empty bags into his pockets, and a smile spread across his face. The church transformed into a magical place of light and color.

Mamie Huntington, the church accompanist, had taken her place at the piano. She was thumbing through a booklet of Christmas hymns as thirty or so adults, including Elizabeth, formed three half-circles around her. Thomas, Joe Miner, and a few others tidied up, sweeping up pieces of greenery and ribbon. Thomas kept glancing at Elizabeth. She was one of the loveliest women he'd seen in Bentonsport. Or in Pennsylvania, for that matter.

He needed an opening, an inroad to an introduction. But, as Mamie played the beginning notes, his shoulders stiffened. Timing continued to work against him.

When the last song concluded, parents gathered their children and belongings to hurry home and prepare for the Carringtons' event. He joined the minister near the church entrance as the others departed. Elizabeth Miner was with her brother and Samuel Wright, a friend of his. As they reached the front door, she smiled and thanked Pastor Lockhardt for "the nice service" but took no notice of Thomas. Surely, this evening wouldn't end without even an opportunity to say hello to this beautiful woman?

He and Pastor Lockhardt extinguished the candles and kerosene lamps, engaging in light conversation as they moved through the sanctuary. Then Thomas retrieved from under the pew the box of chocolates he'd brought for Mrs. Carrington. The two men put on their overcoats and headed outdoors. They chatted as they walked the two blocks, their breath lingering in the frigid air. The flare of oil lamps washed the exterior of the Carringtons' brick house. Carriages lined both sides of the street and continued around the corners.

At the front door, the two men wiped their shoes on the horsehair mat, and as soon as Pastor Lockhardt turned the crank on the ornate doorbell, the Carringtons' housemaid, Merrie Waters, opened the door. Dressed in a starched white apron and pleated cap, she curtsied.

Thomas gave her his warmest smile. "We're all dressed to the nines tonight, Merrie."

She laughed and shook her head. "Quite a night, yes, and quite an affair."

Carols, this time played on a piano accompanied by a harp, softened the air. The scents of spiced punch and evergreen branches joined the aroma of a rich variety of hors d'oeuvres.

"Smells like Christmas," Pastor Lockhardt said as he removed his gloves, scarf, and coat.

Thomas shed his outerwear as well and gave it and the box of chocolates to Merrie, who took them to an adjoining room.

Pastor Lockhardt walked toward the dining room, but Thomas entered the parlor, where Elizabeth sat on a chair in a far corner, punch cup and saucer in hand, engaged in discussion with Lucinda Carrington.

Elizabeth's skin appeared as delicate as china, her figure willowy. When she spoke, her sapphire eyes sparkled and flashed. Transfixed, Thomas didn't notice Virginia Carrington until her skirt brushed his leg.

"Mrs. Carrington." He cleared his throat. "I was—admiring that painting." He pointed to a landscape hung behind Elizabeth's chair. "Who is the artist?"

Virginia laughed. “My father painted it. Come, have a closer look.” She led him past a table heavy with crystal goblets over to where the women were chatting. “The landscape is the view he had from the front porch of his boyhood home.”

He nodded, his whole body stiff. If he lowered his hand even slightly, he would brush Elizabeth’s nape.

The young women continued their hushed discussion as he breathed in the rose water Elizabeth wore.

“Thomas,” Virginia said, “have you been introduced to Miss Miner?”

“No,” he said as casually as he could. “I don’t believe I’ve had the honor.”

At the mention of her name, Elizabeth looked up. Her blue eyes met his.

“Elizabeth, this is Mr. Thomas Barton, headmaster of the Bentonsport Academy. Thomas, Miss Miner.”

“A pleasure to meet you, Mr. Barton.” Elizabeth placed her punch cup and saucer on the table next to her and extended a gloved hand, fingers pointed downward.

He grasped her fingertips. “How do you do?”

“Help me greet our other guests, Lucinda,” Virginia cooed, taking her daughter by the arm.

Lucinda rose, and the two women walked toward the front hall, Virginia pulling her daughter along.

“Won’t you sit down?” Elizabeth gestured toward the chair Lucinda had vacated.

“Thank you.” He tried to remember the opening lines of the conversation he’d been rehearsing. His heartbeat quickened — *What* were they?

“Mrs. Carrington tells me the town is pleased with your work at the academy.”

She had heard of him. He sat straight in his chair. With his palms moist, he tried not to wiggle like a child on the first day of school. “I’m glad t—to be here.” Had he actually stammered? How awkward.

“When I graduated from teaching school, I considered coming back and working at the academy. But of course, you already had the position, and Bonaparte is a short ride down the road. It has a fine academy as well, and fortunately, they had an opening for me.”

He steadied his breathing. “I’ve heard good things about the school.”

“As this is my first year of teaching, I would be grateful for any assistance you can provide.”

“It would be my—”

“From the moment I learned I’d been selected for the position, I began outlining my lesson plans, and I believe I have a strong start. However, I’ll need to refine them as I go along.”

Should he try to offer his assistance again?

She picked up her punch. “I plan to start the year with the theme of nature, beginning with the life cycle of animals and insects. I’ve incorporated the writing of short stories, the drawing of illustrations, and direct nature studies to extend the theme to each of the disciplines—literature, math, science—to create unity of thought.”

“I’m working on a similar effort. For our Christmas play—”

“Oh, I don’t mean to give the impression this is *my* original idea.” She waved a hand. “It’s a well-established method of instruction and quite effective from what I’ve heard. This teaching structure is popular back East, and I’m certain it will soon become the standard in this part of the country.”

He opened his mouth, but not fast enough.

“I apologize. I must be boring you with all this talk of instruction. But I’m so excited by the thought of having my own class. I have wonderful ideas of how I shall structure the room to stimulate the children’s imagination and, at the same time, facilitate learning. First, I plan to—”

Little wonder Elizabeth Miner hadn’t found a husband back East. She couldn’t stop talking. His heart sank. He realized—*felt*—how much he had staked in this encounter. The loneliness at

once began to creep in. Would he be a bachelor for the rest of his life?

Giving up trying to speak, he nodded often as this woman talked. If he turned his back on her and started a conversation with someone else, several minutes would likely elapse before she realized he was no longer paying attention. Too polite to end the monologue, he let his focus wander.

Many older women stared at them, smiling their satisfaction, no doubt calculating the number of months until he proposed, as they exchanged I-told-you-so looks. While Thomas again watched Elizabeth's lips move, her brother intervened. "Liz, I have someone who'd like to meet you."

Smoothing her cornflower-blue dress, she stood. "I have so enjoyed our conversation, Mr. Barton. I do hope we'll have the opportunity to speak more about our classwork in the future."

Exhaling, his shoulders loosening, Thomas stood and went to make a plate for himself in the dining room. He then joined the men gathered in Mr. Carrington's study, where the heavy cigar aroma centered him in male company.

In time, the pastor suggested everyone adjourn to the parlor to sing carols. Though he didn't feel drawn to more singing, Thomas would agree to any activity that didn't include Elizabeth Miner's chatter. He followed the others, taking care to position himself at the opposite end of the room from her. Nearly an hour into the entertainment, he excused himself, collected his belongings from Merrie Waters, and escaped.

The sky had cleared. Around the corner and up the hill, the academy cast a square silhouette against the starry sky. Home had never looked so good. Loneliness. Sadness. The awful but familiar conviction he'd never find the right woman stirred a raw space in his heart. But better he spent time in only his own company than with a woman who could see, discuss, and be absorbed in only one person—herself. He had himself, but he longed for more.