



An Emboldened Kiss

Ava Barnes tugged her black velvet shawl tightly around her naked shoulders, bared by her festive Christmas Eve dress that pushed up her bosom into enticing cleavage and tightened her waist into almost nothingness.

The night had turned chilly, but Ava's heart had not. It was strongly beating with the hope of what this night would bring.

An emboldened kiss.

Perhaps, even more emboldened: the longed-for proposal

For her to become Mrs. William Sullivan had been the plan throughout her childhood. She had good reason to anticipate the proposal would come over the Christmas season. They had been officially courting for six months. William's younger sister Leah had acted even more excitable than usual during their annual holiday shopping trip to Savannah. Leah had drawn her attention to the selections of lace at the fabric store, where she had even pulled a swath over her head to mimic a bride.

Was it any wonder that Ava's heart gaily skipped when she thought about William bringing their courtship to its final and expected finale tonight, with a Christmas Eve proposal?

Tucked between her mother and father in their buckboard, Ava glanced at the moon shining above them in the dark winter sky. Its bright light illuminated the path they took for their short trip between the Barnes and Sullivan farmhouses.

Ava knew every rut in the path, and she knew her older brother Fitzgerald did also. He was loosely holding the reins of his horse while he rode at their carriage's side. Sometimes it was hard to believe he was only a year younger than William, who seemed so much older and grown-up than her convivial and spirited brother.

Her lips curved at the thought of how Leah planned to engage Fitz's attention tonight. Leah was determined to make him see her as a young lady to court instead of William's tag-along little sister. Ava slight smile broadened, remembering how Leah had confided about using a sprig of mistletoe to encourage Fitz to kiss her.

The Sullivans and the Barnes.

The Barnes and the Sullivans.

The families would soon be intertwined more tightly than honeysuckle vines. They had been neighbors since their grandparents had carved out their small farms in the isolated countryside near Savannah. They shared a cemetery plot where their property adjoined and where those same grandparents had been laid to rest. The Sullivan and Barnes offspring were predestined for each other: Ava and William. Leah and Fitz.

Everyone knew their marriages would be only a matter of time. The knowing looks their parents exchanged whenever the families gathered said as much. Their stair-step births set up such expectation: first William then Fitz, next Ava and lastly, Leah.

Ava breathed in deeply at the thought of their family connections, not minding how her tight corset cut against her. The pain was worth seeing William's eyes coveting her body.

She caught the inviting smell of the roast pig in the air. The menfolk had tended to it over the past day, while the women had busied themselves preparing the side dishes. Steadying her grip on the basket through which her freshly baked pumpkin brandy pies warmed her lap, she wondered if she would be brazened enough to offer William a lick of the custard from her fingers. The imagining of his warm lips doing so sent a shiver through her.

"Here." Her mother leaned over to more closely tuck the woolen lap blanket around Ava's ankle-high laced bootees. "You're shaking from the cold."

"Thank you." Ava could not tell her mama that it was desire for William that provoked her goosebumps. Some nights her body's longing for William made her toss and turn while her mind painted the consummation of their wedding night.

She knew they both held within themselves a torrent of passion for the other. Yet, it seemed the longer their courtship was lasting, the shyer the actions between them had become, as if they both recognized their proximity endangered her virginity. Their lips had not even actually

met in a kiss, though not because she had not turned her face up into his for encouragement.

However, they were never alone for him to take advantage of her willingness. Such were the annoying rules of courtship. She had seriously considered soliciting Leah to help her have some unsupervised time with William, but sometimes her soon-to-be sister could create quite the mess of things.

Ava sighed, thinking about Leah's rambunctious actions. She hoped the young girl would not be too overt in her coquettish ways toward Fitz tonight. Their parents would not approve.

Fitz's jovial whistling cut short her thoughts. She recognized the minstrel tune, "Dixie." It had become a popular song in support of secession from the Union.

"Enough, Fitz." Her mama shushed him, and in the timbre of her mother's voice, Ava recognized fearful concern. She knew why.

The news of South Carolina's secession just two days earlier had spread through the South like a contagious disease. That state's vote would surely mean other Southern states would secede also, guaranteeing war with the Northern states would follow.

Ava tightened her hold on the basket in her lap, a sense of dread coursing through her. War would intrude upon them and take away their men to the battlefield, even though their two families owned no slaves. They actually held more allegiance to the Union views than Southern ones. Regardless, their fathers conceded they would have to take up arms to defend Georgia, if called upon by their state. William and Fitz saw only glory in riding off to war.

Why couldn't women be in charge? Mothers would be able to find a compromise, for they could never send their own offspring off to be slaughtered in battle. Of that Ava was one-hundred-percent certain.

Her father clucked under his breath and gently flipped the horse's reins. "Oh, dashing through the snow," he began singing in his offkey pitch.

Even though she joined in, the singing of the Christmas carol, which they'd learned a few years earlier in Savannah where it had been penned by the husband of the mayor's daughter, did not lift her spirits much. It could not take her mind off the very real possibility of one day soon having to watching the ones she loved ride away to war. She squeezed her mama's hand, intuitively knowing she must be struggling with this same awful thought.

They continued the festive rounds of the song upon reaching the Sullivan's farmhouse. The lanterns on the front porch cast light onto the bare branches of the myrtle trees which flanked the front porch steps. Bottles lodged into the branches clanked in the night wind.

"I see Clarissa is fighting off the evil spirits again," her mama observed. "That conjurer Kali Despierre does seem to have a hold of her."

Ava knew her mama's low opinion of the freed slave conjurer who had settled in a ramshackle cabin on the banks of the Ogeechee a few months ago. And, about hoodoo beliefs, such as hanging bottles from trees outside homes to capture evil spirits before they could enter it.

"Well, they say hoodoo only works if you believe." Her father's comment was accompanied with a shrug. "Charles must have relented for her to decorate with them for the holidays. Otherwise, without his permission, those bottles would not be there."

Mama let out an "I suppose," her tone one of worry.

Ava agreed with her mama's dislike of the hoodoo conjurer, and she knew William and Leah did too. Ava knew that to keep the peace between her parents, Leah would go to Kali in secret at her mama's begging to ask for hoodoo medicinal herbs and such.

"As long as all Mama sends me for are plants, I can keep that a secret from Daddy without feeling too much guilt," Leah had told her in confidence.

Ava regretted promising not to divulge Leah's actions to anyone. However, once she and William were married, she would have to divulge to him his sister's actions. As his wife, she could never keep secrets, no matter whose or why. What Leah was doing in betraying her father's trust was not only wrong, but dangerous.

Fitz galloped ahead of their buckboard toward the Sullivan's front porch. He pulled off his hat and circled it high in the air, shouting, "Merry Christmas!"

The Sullivan family rushed out, echoing the greeting back with jovial spirit.

Ava's daddy maneuvered the buckboard to a stop at the porch's steps. William stepped toward them, and Ava beamed down at him. He held out his hand to her mother. "May I assist you, Mrs. Barnes?"

"Why, thank you, William." Her mother descended.

"Rebecca." Mrs. Sullivan entered into a brief hug with Ava's mother.

Ava moved to the edge of the seat and offered the basket to William. His manly hands covered her smaller

gloved ones during the exchange. Did he feel the same current of desire at their touch that she did? The look in his eyes seem to indicate yes.

"I'll take that, William." Mrs. Sullivan took the basket. Ava noticed the dark smudges under the woman's eyes and her thinness. She had long ago concluded that William and Leah had inherited their daddy's sturdiness, not their mama's fragility.

Mrs. Sullivan smiled warmly up at Ava, who remained still seated in the buckboard. "Thank you so much. We hope it's..."

Fitz interrupted with a shout. "Yes, ma'am! It's Ava's pumpkin brandy pie, all right. She wouldn't let me have even a smidgen of it, either."

"You wouldn't have stopped at a smidgen," Leah retorted. "We'd have only crumbs if she'd relented to your begging."

"Leah's right, you know," Ava added, laughing.

She noticed how Fitz could not take his eyes from Leah. Her metamorphosis from William's little sister to eligible young lady was indeed stunning. Her girlfriend's plan to get Fitz's attention just might work tonight, for she was turned out in a beautiful dress and bouncing ringlets.

Ava could not help but encourage Fitz's full attention on Leah. "May I say, Leah, that you look especially grown-up and pretty this Christmas Eve. Don't you agree Fitz?"

"Uh, well, I mean..." Fitz stumbled over his words. Leah's gaze upon him did not waver.

"Fitz, your horse needs tending," William directed, as if saving his friend from trying to complete his thought.

"Oh, yes." Fitz clapped his hat back on his head and with one last glance over his shoulder at Leah, headed to the barn.

"May I?" William offered his hand to Ava.

"Thank you." She accepted his assistance to depart the buckboard. When his touch permeated her glove, she wished her hand could remain in his forever.

Their eyes locked. At that moment, her world was only William. This, she thought, was what true love feels like.

She breathed in to steady herself. The garlands of evergreens and holly berries draped around the porch railing gave off the piney scent of the holiday.

She branded the smell upon her memory. It would always bring her back to this moment, to this feeling of losing herself in her love for William.

In a gust of wind, the hoodoo bottles clanked loudly. Guiding her up the porch steps with his hand still in hers,

William murmured in her ear, "Mother has been suffering her nightmares. When she begged to create the bottle trees, saying they would prevent the evil from entering her dreams, Father gave in. Just for the holiday season."

"I understand." Ava whispered back. His explanation explained observation about his mama. "Your daddy loves her. We sometimes must choose actions that are difficult for us to support those we love."

William nodded, his eyes relaying his thanks for her understanding. She did understand, more than he realized. She would have to make the difficult choice to accept him riding off to war, if that be the coming turn of events.

Another gust of wind sent the bottles clanking even more noisily. Ava jumped at the sound, for it seemed an uneasy harbinger of the future dangerous times she feared.

If only these bottles could catch the nation's evil spirits that were dragging it toward war. If that were a possibility, she'd become a hoodoo believer herself.

"We'll return as soon as the horses are settled," Mr. Sullivan called out. He rapped his knuckles onto the buckboard seat where Ava's father remained, reins in hand. "Let's head to the barn, Mathias."

Over the rattle of the buckboard, Mrs. Sullivan answered, "Don't tarry. We will be serving the lovely dinner soon."

William smiled down at Ava. "I must go help Father."

She returned his smile. "And I, Mother."

He lifted her hand and kissed it. She wished her glove were off so she'd feel his lips against her skin. He let her hand go, yet lingered for a moment before boldly leaning in to brush his lips against hers.

She let out a small gasp of surprise at their long-awaited first kiss. Desire overwhelmed her, as if a waterfall of warm rain was rushing through her.

Before she could say a word, he turned on his heels and dashed toward the barn. She removed her glove and pressed her trembling fingers to her mouth, her heart pounding.

"Ava?"

She swirled to find Leah at the screen door. Had she seen what just happened?

"What are you doing, standing here all alone? We need your help." Leah held the door open. Her distracted tone indicated she had seen nothing.

Ava insides warmed. The brief kiss was all hers alone, not to share. Its secrecy made it even more special.

She followed Leah inside, stopping briefly at the hall tree by the door to hang her velvet wrap. She placed her gloves on its shelf. The mirror hanging on the opposite wall enticed her to check her present-ability.

The open-air ride had dislodged some wisps of her bun and burnished her cheeks rosy. Her eyes traveled to her fully-shaped lips, and she lost herself in remembering the softness of William's against them, the tickle of his mustache.

"Ava! Are you coming?"

"Coming," she answered. She lingered a moment longer in her romantic reverie before heading toward the kitchen, set off to the back of the house through a longer hallway.

Leah met her at the doorway with a stack of dinner plates. She handed Ava the plates. "Help me set the table. You take these while I get the rest of what we need." She nodded to the napkins and utensils.

Leah followed closely at Ava's side while they set each place. "I just know William will ask you tonight," she whispered.

Ava shushed her. "We can't know that."

Leah giggled. "I do. He's been acting distracted. Every time Mama or I mentioned our time together tonight, he'd turn red and become quiet."

Ava's hand trembled when placing a plate down. She took a deep breath to steady her nerves. "Maybe you were reading your own ideas into his behavior. You can't know what he is thinking."

"I know I saw Mama going through her mother's jewelry box. What do you suppose she was searching for?" Leah's raised eyebrows.

Ava's hand trembled again while placing the next plate. She stared for a moment at her left ring finger, imagining William placing on it his Grandmother Sullivan's wedding ring, a garnet set in the filigree gold. Although their grandparents on both sides had died prior to any grandchild's birth, Leah had shown Ava the ring multiple times, sneaking it from the jewelry box when her mother wasn't aware.

"How are you girls coming along?" The sudden appearance of Mrs. Sullivan startled Ava, and she almost dropped the last plate in her hands.

"We are done, Mama," Leah answered, taking the plate from Ava's hands and placing it between the utensil and

napkin for the last place setting. She gave Ava a nudge and a wink. "Aren't we, Ava?"

"Yes, we are." Ava gave a slight shake of her head at Leah, warning that their conversation needed to remain quiet. Ava didn't want her anticipation of William's proposal to become known to his mother. Such forward behavior would be improper.

"Make way, ladies, for the platter," her mother called out, entering the room with the roasted goose. Its spicy cinnamon and sage scent filled the air, making Ava's mouth water at the thought of its succulence.

"Girls, please corral the menfolk here," Mrs. Sullivan waved them out, "while Rebecca and I place the other dishes upon the table."

With arms draped around the other's waist, the two mothers returned to the kitchen to check on last minute preparations for desserts.

Leah tugged on Ava's arm. "Come, you must see our Christmas tree in the parlor."

Ava pulled free. "First, let me get a good view of your dress." She whirled a finger in the air. "Twirl about for me."

Giggling, Leah obeyed. Ava couldn't believe how beautiful the young girl looked. The dress's white bodice, decorated with

narrow vertical strips of black velvet trim, showed off Leah's bared shoulders. Its black velvet sash accented her tiny waist from which the green silk skirt billowed. She let out a low whistle. "Fitz won't be able to notice anything but you tonight."

Leah flounced her head, sending her ringlets bouncing. "That is exactly my plan. I am no longer a child, you know."

Ava's response of a deep, throaty laugh flustered Leah. She stamped her foot in indignation. "I am not a child, Ava."

"You're right. Just a young girl wishing to grow up too soon." She patted Leah's shoulder. "Let's go see that tree, and then call the men to dinner."

Ava didn't know where to look first when entering the parlor. The warm glow from the rollicking fire in the fireplace bathed the parlor in inviting light. The evergreen garland, punctuated with berries and bows and sprigs of mistletoe bearing its white fruit, draped the mantel. The tree was dressed in strands of threaded popcorn. Red velvet bows were tied to the branches, and unlighted candles had been wired to the boughs. A silver tin star shone from the tree's top.

"What a strange tradition, to have a tree indoors like this. I'm glad we learned of it in Savannah. It's

beautiful!" Ava accepted from Leah a bow and tied it onto the tree.

"We'll light the candles after we eat, while we sit in here to visit." Leah straightened one. "Then it will be more than beautiful. It will be exquisite." She cocked an eyebrow at Ava. "This night will be a special one. Mark my words."

Before Ava could try to cajole more detail about what Leah meant, the stamping of boots in the front hallway diverted her attention.

The men appeared at the parlor door, and they rumbled in their low voices their message of holiday cheer. "Merry Christmas!"

"We were just heading out to get you," Ava announced.

William crossed to her and hooked his arm. "May I escort you to the table, Miss Barnes?"

She managed a slight nod of her head and looped her arm in his. At that moment, her world could not be more complete.

Fitz passed them, and Ava turned her head to watch him follow William's lead.

"Shall we?" he asked, his arm offered to Leah.

She accepted his offer, her ringlets bouncing with excitement.

Ava could tell her brother no longer saw William's sister as a "tag-along." He was smitten.

Seated at the table across from William, Ava surveyed the table now laden with food: roasted goose, cornbread stuffing, mincemeat pie, cranberry sauce, boiled onions, turnips, beets, winter-squash, mashed potatoes, and apple sauce.

Mrs. Sullivan eyes darted across the table before announcing her satisfaction with it all. "Another perfect Christmas Eve dinner." She took her seat pulled out by her husband, who gave the top of her head a kiss.

"Another perfect feast, Clarissa," he said, taking his place at the head of the table and grasping the carving knife in one hand and the fork in the other.

Ava's mama took her seat offered by her father, who then sat across from her. He nodded agreement. "How blessed we are to share another year with our friends, who are family."

With the men on one side facing the ladies on the other, the dinner was about to commence. "Let's say grace," Mr. Sullivan announced.

In unison, each recited from memory, "Bless us, O Lord! and these Thy gifts, which we are about to receive from Thy bounty, through Christ our Lord. Amen."

Ava couldn't help but peek during the blessing, only to find William staring at her. She shut her eyes tightly, her stomach gone aflutter. She doubted if she'd be able to eat a bite of the holiday feast.

At the blessing's end, she joined with the others to make the sign of the cross while chanting "In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, Amen."

She and William let their stare set upon the other, until Mr. Sullivan stood, asked, "Shall I carve?"

"Here, here!" the menfolk cheered.

"Pass your plates," Mrs. Sullivan instructed.

Before long, Ava found her plate piled with the delicious offerings. Each forkful reminded her of the hard work behind the meal preparation and how grateful she was to enjoy this holiday with those she loved.

She noticed Leah would not remove her gaze from Fitz, who, along with the other menfolk, was eating as if a starved soldier.

That comparison reminded Ava briefly of how this could be their last Christmas like this, if war did indeed break out. Her food now lay leaden in her stomach. She sent a prayer that God would somehow find a better way than bloodshed to solve the country's dispute.

After the main meal, Ava helped the women clear the table to present the desserts. Slicing her pumpkin brandy pie for serving, Ava remembered how she imagined feeding it to William, in her bare hand. A fiery blush encroached upon her cheek over that thought, as well as over the memory of his surprise kiss.

Perhaps this time next year, they would be husband and wife. Maybe their first offspring would be on the way. A boy, she daydreamed. Little William. Her thoughts strayed to their marriage bed, to their bodies embracing without shame or guilt but in love sanctioned by sacrament.

"Ava?"

Her mother placed her hand lightly on her shoulder, startling her.

"Yes, Mama?"

"Dear, I asked if your pie is ready to place on the table?"

"Oh, yes."

She placed the pie in front of William and took her seat opposite him once more, glad no one could read where her mind had just taken her. However, when their eyes met, she thought she detected a touch of lust in his.

Perhaps she misinterpreted his expression. He did love her pumpkin brandy pie. She pressed her napkin to her mouth to hide her smile.

After gorging on the pumpkin brandy pie, pecan pie, lemon gingerbread, and fruit cake, Ava was relieved when Mrs. Sullivan announced, "Menfolk to the parlor for cigars and brandy while we ladies do our duty."

What did the men discussed behind closed doors while the women continued with household labors? Ava could only assume war talk would be their focus tonight, rather than their usual discussion of planting and weather.

She hated how so many made war sound glorious. She'd seen what bullets did to animals that were hunted. There was nothing glorious about such a savage death.

"Finished!" Her mama removed her apron and hung it up on the hook by the kitchen door.

Mrs. Sullivan held out to her a tray holding cups and saucers. "Please take this into the parlor for our coffee."

"Yes, m'am."

"Leah, you take this platter."

Ava looked admiringly at the plate Leah accepted on which ginger spice cookies and molasses bars were piled high.

Mrs. Sullivan added, "We'll follow with the coffee to serve."

When Leah opened the door to the parlor, Ava gasped. The men had been busily lighting the candles on the tree, and their soft glow made the tin star at the top shine.

"Merry Christmas, ladies." Ava's daddy took her tray, and she walked over to the tree, marveling at its beauty.

Fitz rushed to Leah's side "I'll take that plate for you."

Leah laughed. "I can bet you will." She dodged his attempt and sat the platter on the table before the fireplace.

"Oh, look." Ava's mother stopped at the door, the serving pitcher of cream in one hand and sugar bowl in the other.

"My, my! How lovely!" Mrs. Sullivan stood at her side, the gleam of the candles dancing in her dark eyes.

"William, please play some carols for us?"

"Hark the Herald Angels Sing!" Leah requested.

At the same time Fitz called out, "Joy to the World!"

They glared at the other, in pretext of irritation, but Ava could tell they were enjoying a flirty moment. She reached for William's guitar propped against the settee.

"Thank you." He strummed it and raised his eyebrows at her.
"I know your request would be 'God Rest Ye Merry Gentlemen'?"

Her heart lurched at William's remembering her favorite carol. She nodded.

William began strumming, and Ava joined in with the others, singing the carols in the coziness of the parlor. When the last strains echoed through the room, they sat in quiet for a moment.

Ava found herself feeling a tad woozy from the warmth of the room, the tightness of her corset, and the fullness of her stomach. She pulled her fan from the pocket of the folds of her dress. She fanned herself, letting her gaze rest upon William, who returned it, his feelings toward her signaled boldly by his intently caring expression.

She hid her pleasure over his attention behind her fan opened wide, the position held to return the secret message of love.

Her attention was drawn from William by Leah's movement to retrieve her own fan. Leah openly stared at Fitz, touching her half-open fan to her lips. It was the motion which brazenly invited a beau's kiss.

Before anyone else could notice Leah's inappropriately flirtatious behavior, Ava stood and announced, "I must get a breath of fresh air. Leah, join me, please?"

Leah stood and pointed her fan first at Fitz and then William. "Let's all join her, shall we?"

Ava's mother leaned back on the settee. "You children enjoy the night air. I think we shall stay here and relax, shall we?" She nodded at the other parents, who all murmured contented agreement.

William placed his guitar down and checked the candles on the tree. "Let me first relight the candles that have extinguished."

Ava joined him by the tree. "Let me help."

From the corner of her eye, she saw Leah and Fitz in the doorway. Leah was dangling a sprig of mistletoe and to her shock, Fitz leaned in to give the girl a kiss on her cheek.

"Don't look now, but our siblings are misbehaving," Ava whispered to William.

He took in the scene and gave a chuckle. "My sister is determined to become Mrs. Fitzgerald Barnes. However, she should not be so obvious." He placed his hand over Ava's to steady a flaming candle. "After all, our wedding must be before theirs. Don't you agree?"

It was as if his words were lighting a flame inside her, not the candle. "Why, Mr. William Sullivan." She could hardly speak from her breathlessness.

She turned to face him, and he pulled her into an almost-embrace. "I believe it time to end our courtship, and your father agrees."

Ava felt the room spin.

William lowered to one knee and took her left hand into his. He lightly kissed it before looking up. "Miss Ava Lynn Barnes, will you marry me?"

Her answer came out in a hushed tone of wonderment. "Yes."

He rose to his feet and gathered her into his arms, this time in a full embrace.

The two mothers released cries of joy, their words tumbling over each other's.

"How romantic!"

"How lovely!"

Mr. Barnes strode to William, a serious look on his face. "My daughter is a precious young woman. You are to cherish and provide for her always."

William released Ava from his embrace and faced her father with outstretched hand. "Yes sir!"

Their enthusiastic handshake relayed happiness.

Mr. Sullivan approached Ava, arms out inviting a hug. "Welcome to the family, officially, Ava dear." She folded into his arms.

"Hooray!" Leah rushed to them and gave her brother's shoulder a playful slap. "It's about time, William!"

Fitz followed Leah, and he clapped William on the shoulder. "You've always been like a brother, and now, you will be my brother."

William nodded, and he turned to his bride-to-be. Ava placed her hands on his broad shoulders and looked up at him, her eyes inviting his kiss and he needed no further encouragement.

This time, their kiss was an emboldened and passionate one in full view of others. It symbolized their love and hope for their future together.

But, it would be a future the coming war would change forever.