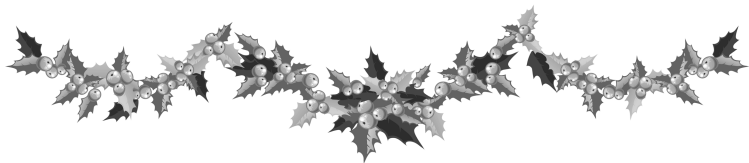


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A BAXTER FAMILY
Christmas



CHAPTER ONE

Heavy snow clouds hung low over Bloomington, Indiana, the Saturday before Thanksgiving. But the atmosphere was warm and bright in the Clear Creek High School gym, where Ashley Baxter Blake sat next to her husband, Landon. On the floor with the ball was her fifteen-year-old son, Cole, whose freshman team was minutes from beating its crosstown rival.

The high-pitched sound of a whistle pierced the gymnasium. “Traveling!” The ref called Cole for the violation and instantly Ashley was on her feet. “Are you se—” She eased herself back down to the bleacher and

bit the inside of her lip. Gradually she brought her hands together and clapped. "Here we go. You got this, Cole."

Four-year-old Janessa scrambled up onto Ashley's lap. "Cole's the best basketball boy in the world, right, Mommy?"

"Yes, baby." Ashley kissed her cheek. "And the refs are just human." She met Landon's eyes over Janessa's head and managed a smile. She mouthed her next words to him. *I'm trying.*

Landon chuckled. "You've come a long way."

It was true. Cole was just a little guy when he first started playing basketball here. Part of the park league program. On his first game, Ashley had caught herself getting too enthusiastic, yelling a bit too loud. And yes, maybe a bit too concerned with questionable calls by the referees. Her attitude wasn't that surprising. Lately she'd been frustrated with her father and snapping at everyone.

Ashley drew a slow breath. She still cared about the calls and the scoreboard. But she'd learned a lot. Winning and losing meant nothing compared to the thrill of enjoying the game.

Cole played basketball because he loved it. Today. For now. If he scored twenty points and his team won,

great. But the joy Ashley felt watching her son play had nothing to do with his points scored or an official's call or whether Cole played next season. Let alone whether he played college ball one day.

Even living here in the shadow of Bloomington's Indiana University.

Amy, ten, and Devin, eight, sat on the other side of Landon. Devin tugged Landon's sleeve. "That wasn't traveling, right, Dad?"

Landon smiled. "If the ref says it's traveling . . ."

"Oh! I know!" Amy's eyes lit up. "If the ref says it's traveling, it's traveling!" She came up behind Landon and looped her arms around his neck. "Right?"

"Right." Landon grinned at Ashley and then he winked at Devin. "You have to play ten points above the refs. Just in case."

Thanksgiving was less than a week away, but Ashley Baxter Blake's mind was on Christmas, and the dinner her dad was trying to pull together. Which was the reason she felt so irritated.

By halftime Cole's team was up six points. The kids were hoping for the first snow of the season, so Landon agreed to take them outside to check. Ashley stood to follow but her phone rang. Her dad's name appeared on

the screen. She motioned for Landon to go on without her. Then she took the call.

"Hey, Dad." She sat down again and tried to sound pleasant. "How are you?"

"Good. Beautiful day. It's already snowing here."

Ashley pictured it, the way fresh snow looked across Bloomington. The whole town would turn into a Norman Rockwell painting, the way it did every year at this time. "Amy and Devin will be thrilled."

"You kids always were when you were little!" Her dad laughed. "Of course, we always needed a big box by the front door for coats and mittens and boots. But that never stopped us!"

Ashley smiled at the memory. It seemed like yesterday when she and her siblings were the little ones, clamoring to get outside and play in the first snow. Now all of them were married with kids of their own.

Her dad paused for a moment, and Ashley could feel his tone change before he said a word. "Ashley, I think you know why I called . . ."

She closed her eyes. *I'm not ready for this, God. Help me. Please . . .*

"You and Landon." Her father sighed. "You haven't

given me an answer about Christmas Eve. About dinner with Kendra Bryant and her husband.”

Anxiety left an instant wake across the already troubled waters of Ashley’s heart. She blinked a few times and stared at the small cross on the wall just above the side entrance to the gym. “I’m not trying to be difficult, Dad.”

“I know.” His tone was kind. “And I don’t want to force your decision. It’s just . . . I’d like a plan.”

Thanksgiving was still days away, but her father had been talking about Christmas Eve since the beginning of November. Ashley and her siblings disagreed about how to handle their dad’s request. But Ashley was easily the most concerned about the idea. “Landon and I talked. We don’t think a family meeting with Kendra on Christmas Eve is a good idea. Maybe not ever.”

Silence followed before her dad finally spoke. “I understand.”

“You can still use our house. Landon and the kids and I will have dinner with his parents.” Ashley tried to sound upbeat. But her effort didn’t seem to be working. “I don’t want to get in the way of your plans. But on Christmas Eve? I’m not sure how Amy would handle that.”

"I like the idea of Christmas Eve. Because everyone will be together." Her dad sounded like he was struggling with the idea, also. At least a little. "I keep asking myself what would Erin want us to do?"

The mention of her sister made Ashley catch her breath. For a long moment she didn't speak. She closed her eyes again. *Erin should be here, God. We shouldn't even be having this conversation.*

"Ashley?"

"I'm sorry." She exhaled slowly. "What would I say to her?" What would any of them say? She spotted Landon and the kids entering the gym again, headed toward her. "Can I call you tonight? I'm at Cole's game. Halftime's almost over."

Her dad hesitated, but only slightly. "Sure." He paused. "Tell Cole I'm sorry I wasn't there. I had a few things to do around the house this morning. Next time, okay?"

"Of course." Ashley smiled. Her dad usually attended every game. Today, though, she was almost glad he wasn't here. She couldn't spend the hour talking about Christmas Eve and meeting the stranger with Erin's heart. It was all too sad.

Cole's team won the game and they drove home to

play in the snow. Once the kids were outside, Ashley and Landon stood near the window. "I don't have peace about it. I don't think it's good for Amy to meet this Kendra woman."

"Honey." He turned to face her. "You're clearly uncomfortable with this." Landon hugged her and searched her eyes. "So we skip the Christmas Eve dinner this year. We'll still see each other the next day."

Ashley looked long at her husband. She loved him so much. "Thank you. For understanding."

"Always." He shifted gears, grinned and motioned to the snow out front. "Let's go show the kids how to build a real snowman."



Ashley didn't call her father back until later that night when the kids were in bed. "Like I said earlier, Dad. Landon and I don't think it's a good idea."

"Okay." He was quicker to respond this time. "I understand. Really." He paused. "If you change your mind, just let me know."

His statement frustrated her. "Meaning . . . you hope we'll still join you?"

"Sure. Yes, that's what I'd like."

"But Dad . . ." Ashley paced across her bedroom floor. "I just got done telling you we won't be there." Nothing about this was easy.

"Just pray about it, okay? Can you do that for me?"

Ashley was near tears by the time she hung up. Her dad had never raised his voice, but he seemed unwilling to accept her decision.

After the call she found Landon in the kitchen washing the counters. "I talked to my dad."

He looked over his shoulder, his handsome face suddenly concerned. "He still wants us to be there?"

"Yes." Did she look as weary as she felt? She waited while he dried his hands and the two of them took seats opposite each other at the kitchen table.

Landon searched her face. "Tell me, Ash."

She nodded and her eyes found a spot on the table. "He wasn't angry or anything. But he wants us there." She looked up at him. "He asked us to pray about it."

"I'm sorry."

"Yeah." Tears filled Ashley's eyes. "I mean . . . of course we can pray. But think about how hard it would be."

"We don't have to be here." Landon covered her hand with his. "You can stick to your decision."

Ashley stood, paced to the sink, and turned again to

face him. "Doesn't my dad get it? We're talking about Christmas!" She kept her voice low so she wouldn't wake the kids. But her tone was strained all the same. "Okay, so the woman has Erin's heart. She doesn't believe in God and she needs hope and direction. Her marriage is in trouble." Ashley walked from one side of the kitchen to the other. "I get all that. But why is that our job? Couldn't we pray for her? Call a church in her area and try to get her connected?"

Landon shifted in his chair.

"I mean, there we'll all be. Standing around making small talk with this . . . this stranger. And the whole time she's only alive because Erin died. How are we supposed to have a beautiful Christmas Eve with all of that going on?"

"I hear you." Landon didn't look away, didn't argue with her. "Your dad means well. I believe that."

Ashley tossed her hands in the air and paced back to the sink. "That's the hardest part. Of course he means well. He always means well. He loves everybody."

A smile tugged at Landon's lips. "No matter how far gone they are."

The fight left Ashley and she felt her shoulders drop a bit. "Even me. Back in the day."

Landon gave a light shrug. "Just saying."

"Deep down you're not really on his side, though, right?" Tears blurred her eyes again. "Landon, really? On Christmas Eve?"

"I'm on your side, baby." He stood and came to her. "But I guess it's possible . . . Christmas Eve could change the woman."

A sigh slid from Ashley's heart through her lips. "That's what my dad says." She came to him and wrapped her arms around his waist. "I just can't imagine it. Like what if I can't stop crying?" She pressed her head against his chest. "And what about Amy? How is she supposed to deal with that? Her mother's heart beating in the chest of a stranger? Right there in the middle of our Christmas celebration?"

"I get that." He eased back and looked into her eyes. "Maybe we should—" He seemed to notice something as he looked toward the doorway. "Amy. Honey, why are you out of bed?"

"You're talking loud." She wore a red flannel nightgown and rubbed her eyes, the light from the kitchen clearly too bright for her.

"Oh, honey." Ashley felt a rush of remorse. "I'm so sorry." She shared a quick glance with Landon. "Come

on. I'll walk you back to your room. Me and Uncle Landon will be quieter. I promise."

Fifteen minutes later she returned to the kitchen. Landon was cleaning again, this time drying the stovetop. He set the towel down and turned to Ashley. "Think she heard us?"

"I asked her." Ashley put her face in her hands for a few seconds and then looked at Landon again. "She said no."

"She must've heard some of it."

"I think so." Ashley took his hands. "I thought about talking to her, asking her about it, but even that could be devastating."

"True."

Ashley saw the compassion in Landon's eyes. He loved all their children so much. And he treated Amy like one of his own. Ashley kept her voice low. "She's had to live with so much loss."

"Just like you." Landon pulled her gently into his arms. "Like all of us."

She searched his eyes. "But you don't think anything good could come from meeting with the woman, do you? For Amy?" She paused. "We're the ones raising her. We should know what's best for her, don't you think?"

"I'm not sure." His words came slowly, his eyes shining with love for her. "Could there be some comfort in it? Knowing that her mother's heart saved the life of someone else?"

The idea hadn't really occurred to Ashley. She let her forehead lean against his. "I can't see that happening. It would be so sad."

"Well . . ." Landon eased back so he could see her again. "We don't have to decide now. Christmas is still a month away."

Ashley nodded. She looked deep into his eyes, all the way to his beautiful heart. "Thank you. For listening to me."

"It's a lot." He brushed his thumb along her cheek. "Wanna pray?"

Her vision blurred with tears. She felt weary, afraid. "Yes. Please." She closed her eyes, but her fear and frustration only increased. The last few years had brought a gradual healing after the loss of Erin. Meeting Kendra would take her back to that terrible day in the emergency room, the day they found out about the accident.

Landon prayed out loud, asking God to give them wisdom and clarity about the possible meeting. He also asked that Ashley might have peace, whatever they de-

cided, and that her father might think hard about the situation. When he was done praying, Landon ran his hands over her dark, shoulder-length hair. "Has anyone ever told you?" He grinned.

The heaviness in her soul lifted. She knew what was coming.

Landon raised his brow, his eyes sparkling. "You have the most beautiful hair."

She giggled. "Thank you, sir."

He moved in closer and kissed her. The sort of kiss that still took her breath away. "Now . . . how about we get some sleep?" He kissed her again. "God will make the answers clear."

"Mmm." Ashley kissed him this time. "You're a good kisser."

"You, too." Landon took her by the hand and led her toward the stairs and their bedroom on the second floor.

Ashley would be thankful every day for Landon Blake. The man he'd always been. It was hard to believe she had almost walked away from him all those years ago. Back when she was angry at God and not sure of her place in her family.

As she climbed the stairs, Ashley remembered it all again.

She was the third daughter of John and Elizabeth Baxter. One of six kids, all grown up now. All married with kids. Her parents had seen her through those difficult years. When she'd come home from Paris alone and pregnant and rebellious.

But it was Landon Blake who had given his life for her and Cole. He loved Ashley's son like the boy was his own. Ashley's mother grew sick with cancer, but she lived long enough to see Ashley and Landon marry. They'd had three kids since then. One who only lived a few days before joining her grandmother in heaven.

Then came the car accident. Ashley's dear youngest sister, Erin, and her husband, Sam Hogan, and three of their daughters all killed that terrible day. Only their daughter Amy had lived. Raising her now was something else Landon took on as easily as he breathed.

That was the kind of man Landon was.

They reached their bedroom door. It was a miracle any of her family had made it through the heartache of that time. Erin's organs had gone to several recipients. And her heart had gone to Kendra Bryant. An atheist.

The woman her father had invited to join them for Christmas Eve dinner.

“Hey.” Landon turned and put his arms around her neck. “You’re thinking about it again.”

She smiled. “How come you know me so well?”

“Because.” He kissed her. “When you’re sad . . . my heart hurts.” He smiled. “It’s always been that way.”

“I love you.” Ashley rested her head on his chest. She didn’t know what she had done to deserve a man like Landon Blake. But she knew this much. No family could be expected to meet a woman whose heart once belonged to one of their own. Especially on Christmas Eve.

Not even the Baxter family.



Amy Hogan couldn’t sleep. She lay in bed in her dark room and stared at the moon just outside her window. *You’re here, God. I know it. Right beside me.* She waited a minute in case God wanted to say something. But Amy didn’t hear any actual words.

Okay, God . . . so I heard everything they said. Now what am I supposed to do about it?

She rolled onto her side and tucked her hand under her pillow. Aunt Ashley didn’t want to meet the woman. She thought it would be too sad.

But it was all Amy could think about.

What kind of a person was this stranger? What did she look like? Aunt Ashley said the woman was only alive because Amy's mommy died. *You must have really special plans for her, right, God? Because she got to live and my mommy didn't.*

Tears came. Amy couldn't stop them.

She didn't talk about her mom that much anymore. She loved Aunt Ashley and Uncle Landon. She felt like part of the family here. But every night before she fell asleep she did the same thing. She looked out the window, up toward heaven, and asked God to do something for her.

Tonight, though, she wasn't ready to do that yet.

Her thoughts were so loud she didn't want to sleep. What would it be like? Would the woman look like her mommy? Would she sound like her? Since she had her mommy's heart?

Amy wiped her tears with the sleeve of her nightgown.

Then a picture came to her mind of what it might be like.

It would be Christmas Eve and the woman would walk into the house. She would look like her mommy

and sound like her. And Amy would run up and hug her and put her head against the woman and then . . . for the first time in such a long time, Amy would hear her mother's heartbeat. The way she used to hear it when her mommy would hug her and read to her and sing with her.

That would be really nice. Amy thought about that for a long time and her tears stopped. She rolled onto her back again and closed her eyes.

It's time, God. Like every night. Can you please tell my mommy and daddy and sisters that I love them. And I miss them. Amy waited. One more thing, God. Please can you ask my mommy if I should meet this woman who has her heart? Okay. That's all. Thank you, God.

With that, Amy yawned and a few minutes later she fell asleep.

But this time her dreams weren't about school or her cousins or her aunt and uncle. They were about a woman she had never met. A woman who looked and sounded like her mommy. And whose hug made Amy feel—if just for a little while—that her mommy was right here with her again.