

## *Christmas with the Hawkes*

*Christmas Eve, 1820*

*Rowan Manor*

Russell Hawke secured the blindfold over his wife's eyes and waved a hand in front of her face. "Can you see?"

Claudine playfully huffed. "Only the backs of my eyelids. How am I supposed to find my way to the great room?" She reached her arms out in front of her and took a few shuffling steps toward the drawing room doorway.

"You are not, darling, at least not without assistance." Russell captured her around the waist and saved her from barking her shin on a table. "Egads. You are a disaster in the making. Let me guide you before you hurt yourself."

She turned in the circle of his embrace to face him and wrapped her arms around his neck. "Wouldn't it make more sense to blindfold me in the great room before the game begins?"

"Absolutely not," he said, drawing her closer. Then her surprise would be spoiled.

She melted in his arms, tipping her face toward him. "Why not, exactly?"

"Because I like you a little bit vulnerable." His voice had developed a husky quality. He cleared his throat and dismissed the idea of abandoning their game of Blindman's Bluff to carry her above stairs and into his bedchamber. "Every husband should be allowed to play the hero on occasion."

Claudine laughed, the warm sound filling his heart. "Do enjoy my helplessness, Mr. Hawke, for it is a temporary condition, I assure you."

"Of that, I have no doubt." He touched his lips to hers for a lingering kiss. Russell loved the familiar feel of his bride's soft curves pressed against him and the fresh scent of soap clinging to her auburn hair. She was everything pleasant he could want in a woman—kindness, patience, and compassion—yet she possessed the courage and hardiness of a warrior.

These first three months of marriage had required more fortitude on her part than should be requested of any new wife, but she hadn't uttered a word of

complaint. While outwardly appearing to accept his decision to marry Claudine, his mother had been lobbing snide comments in her direction when he was not around to hear. His darling wife had silently withstood his mother's insults with remarkable grace, but he would have preferred she had spoken to him about the poor treatment she had been receiving. Instead, he had learned of it from his sister.

After Mother had rudely declined Claudine's invitation to assist her in planning a Christmas celebration at Rowan Manor, his sister Maggie couldn't hold her tongue any longer. She'd told him what had been occurring behind his back. Taking his mother to task had been unpleasant yet necessary. He would be damned if Claudine was made to feel unwelcome in her own home.

Thankfully, a few days after the confrontation, his mother had announced her intentions to travel north to spend Christmas with her cousin. Her decision had come as a relief to everyone residing at the manor, including his three younger sisters who adored Claudine almost as much as he did. Furthermore, they were equally eager to make Claudine's first Christmas as a Hawke joyful and memorable.

A quiet knock sounded at the door. Maggie stood in the threshold. "Are you going to keep your wife to yourself all evening?"

He smiled as he released Claudine. "I was considering it. Is everyone in place?"

"Do you mean all two of our younger sisters?" Maggie asked with a measure of sarcasm and winked. "Somehow, I managed to organize them."

"Now, now," Claudine teased as Russell took her arm to lead her to the great room. "No squabbling, or I will blindfold one of you instead."

"Perhaps I would like it," Russell murmured, bringing a pretty, pink blush to Claudine's cheeks. He did love to tease her.

As they neared the great room, Russell's two youngest sisters could be heard whispering.

"We are coming," Maggie called out. Juliana and Constance squealed with excitement.

"Have you ever played this game, love?" he asked his wife.

“No, but it sounds simple enough. I must capture you or one of your sisters while stumbling around a massive room blindfolded without breaking the family heirlooms or my neck. What could possibly go wrong?”

“Would it help if we yelled out before you run into something breakable?”

She smiled. “Indeed. You are a prince of a husband.”

Maggie chuckled as she slipped into the great room ahead of them. “Take your places.”

Russell held a finger over his lips to call for silence when he and Claudine entered the room.

Constance giggled. Everyone else grinned and held their places.

Russell led Claudine to the middle of the room. “First I need to spin you around.” He carefully twirled her in a circle several times, held her by the upper arms until he was sure she had her balance, then he stepped away.

On cue, Constance danced toward his wife. “Over here.”

Claudine spun toward her and grabbed the air close to her shoulder, but his youngest sister evaded her.

Juliana snuck up behind Claudine. “Here I am.”

His wife missed her as well.

“Very close, darling,” he said. “Try again.”

She tottered in his direction, waving her arms in front of her. Russell scooted aside and nodded to the next player.

“Merry Christmas, Miss Claudine.”

She gasped. “Benny?”

She ripped the blindfold from her eyes and covered her mouth with her hand. Scattered all around the room were her theatre friends—Oliver Jonas, Rachel, Natalia, Lars, and Tilde. The Drayton Theatre’s youngest cast mates, Anastasia and Jane, had already become chummy with his sisters and stood with Maggie arm in arm. Even the crewmembers had made the journey.

Of course, nothing would have kept her most devoted protector away. Benny was as loyal as one could be.

The women surrounded her, taking turns hugging her. Everyone talked at once, as the fairer sex tended to do. He didn't know how they followed the conversation, but they did.

When Claudine turned toward him, tears glistened in her eyes. "Russell, how?"

"With Mother away, the dower house was the perfect gathering place. Our last guests arrived with the post coach this afternoon."

"Is that where you were all afternoon? The staff told me you were riding."

"I rode to the dower house," he said with a shrug. "Do you forgive me for abandoning you?"

She laughed and came to wrap her arms around his waist. "How could I not? This is a lovely surprise."

"Should we dance?" he called out to everyone.

Their friends shouted their approval, and Rachel retrieved her violin.

As the actress played a lively tune and the others danced, Russell hugged his wife, keeping her close. Claudine laid her head against his shoulder.

"I don't know how to thank you, Russell. Opening your doors to theatre folk? I never thought my friends would be welcome at Rowan Manor."

He nuzzled her silky hair. "You once told me the Drayton's cast and crew had become your family when you had none of your own."

"I remember," she murmured.

"Now that we are married, they are my family, too. What is yours is mine, and what is mine is yours. Did we not make that promise to one another?"

She looked up at him with her forehead furrowed. "Reluctantly on my part."

"Why were you reluctant?"

"I feared I had nothing to offer you in return."

He smiled. "You are the only gift I need, darling. I love our life together, and I love *you*."

The lines on her forehead faded, and a bright smile lit her face. "I must admit our life together has been rather satisfying thus far." Lifting to her toes, she placed a peck on his lips. "Merry Christmas, my dearest love."

“Merry Christmas, Claudine.” And since he had conveniently taken up position beneath the mistletoe in preparation, he kissed his beautiful wife once more.

*The End*