

Blossoms at
Twilight
Sisters of the Heart 3

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Chapter One

Thursday, May 29, 1884

There were worse things in life than being in a crowded church. Baxter Washburn knew that as surely as he did that today would test his resilience. He settled into his usual spot, the aisle seat in the last row. Though he'd never had to avail himself of the easy escape being so close to the door provided, if there was one lesson he'd learned during those years that he was unable to forget no matter how desperately he tried, it was the importance of being prepared.

Judging from the number of people who continued to file into the church, today might be the first day he would have to make a quick exit. On most Sundays, no one sat close to him, but this morning every pew was filled. After all, it wasn't every day that the residents of Carr Valley had the opportunity to attend a double wedding or to see their minister marry the woman some had tried to drive from town. Today they could do both.

Baxter took a deep breath as the familiar music signaled the beginning of the processional. This was a wedding, a normal event. There was no reason to remember what had happened near another church that September morning more than twenty years ago, but some things could not be forgotten. Nor could they be forgiven.

Breathe in. Breathe out. You can't undo the past. All you can do is ensure that it's not repeated. The sound of the door opening brought Baxter back to the present, and his heartrate slowed as he wondered who the latecomer could be. The church was full, so whoever it was would have no seat unless it was a woman, in

which case he would offer her his. That could be the reprieve he sought, a valid reason to leave this overly warm, overly crowded room. Surely his cousins would understand that he preferred not to stand during the ceremony.

Then he heard the unmistakable sound of wheels rolling across the floor. While it was unusual for women to bring baby carriages into church, it was not unheard of. Baxter would have his excuse, for a mother deserved to sit.

He started to rise, then blinked at the sight of a man probably twenty years his senior pushing a wheeled chair into the sanctuary. More surprises were in store, because instead of the elderly invalid Baxter had expected, the person riding in the chair was a woman he guessed to be in her mid-twenties.

Her gown of such a dark green that it was almost black complemented her auburn hair and pale complexion at the same time that it highlighted her green eyes. A few freckles on the bridge of her nose and her cheekbones added character to her classic oval face.

She was lovely. There was no question about that, but though she smiled at the sight of the two brides walking toward the altar on the arms of a man Baxter had not met but knew to be one of the brides' father, her smile was unable to disguise her pain. It was more than whatever had imprisoned her in the chair. It was something deep inside her, something that had wounded her spirit, and though Baxter was skilled at compounding medicines that helped patients heal, he knew that whatever had hurt this woman was beyond his ability to cure.

Who was she? He didn't claim to know everyone in Carr Valley, but Baxter was certain he would have heard of a young woman confined to a wheelchair. His speculation about the woman's identity ended a second later when Victoria Holton turned, her expression revealing her shock. Shock turned to pleasure, and a broad smile lit her face as she let go of her father's arm, dropped her bouquet, and began to run down the aisle away from her waiting groom.

“Olivia! You’re here!” Victoria bent down to wrap her arms around the newcomer and press a kiss to her cheek.

Within seconds, Baxter’s cousin Sophia had joined Victoria and was standing on the other side of the wheelchair, her delight evident. “I can’t believe it. We’re finally together.”

The last piece of the puzzle fell into place. The newcomer must be Olivia Fairchild, the third of the three women who’d forged a bond as close as siblings during the year they’d spent together in Europe.

The music had stopped, and while Baxter suspected they were breaking some rule of etiquette, almost everyone in the congregation had turned to watch the scene unfolding next to his pew. Carr Valley would be talking about this for months, possibly even years, to come.

Though only a few minutes earlier he’d sought an excuse to leave, Baxter no longer had any desire to do so. As the ceremony proceeded, he was vaguely aware of the minister speaking to the two couples and of them exchanging vows, but most of his attention was on the woman in the chair. She wasn’t the most beautiful woman he’d ever seen, but Olivia Fairchild had done something no one else had in all his thirty-seven years: she had touched his heart.



If this were one of her stories, what had happened in the church would be where it ended. Two women had found the loves of their lives. A third was already married, leaving only one to find her Prince Charming in the next book. It would be the classic happily-ever-after final scene.

Endings. Olivia Fairchild looked around the room Sophia had given her. This wasn’t an ending. It was the beginning of the next chapter of Olivia’s life.

The room was conveniently located near the lobby of the Grand Carr Hotel, and her wheelchair went through the doorway when turned sideways. Although smaller than her bedroom at home, it

was spotlessly clean and tastefully decorated. Olivia wouldn't have expected anything else from Sophia, because her friend excelled at everything she attempted, including running this hotel.

That was a detail Olivia would include in the story, had she been writing one. She could tell readers that and then describe the brides, explaining the twists and turns their lives had taken to bring them to today. All of that would appeal to readers. What would not was what Olivia was calling the next chapter, the one she had no desire to write.

No one would want to read the story of a heroine whose life was shattered along with her bones. Olivia looked at her legs, now covered with a sheet. Stretched out on the bed where she'd been resting, they appeared normal, but they weren't. Normal legs supported a woman's weight. Normal legs moved easily, enabling a woman to walk and climb stairs. Normal legs did not twitch for no apparent reason. Olivia's had not been normal since New Year's Eve.

She reached for the glass of water on the bedside table and took a drink, wishing she could wash away her regrets as easily as she did her thirst. *Think about something else*, she told herself, *something happy. Pretend you're starting a new book*. But she wasn't. Story-telling had been another casualty of that night.

Olivia clenched her fists and pounded the bed, then stopped. That was a childish reaction, and she was not a child. She was a grown woman, well aware of the futility of tantrums. Instead of mourning what she'd lost, she needed to think about what she still had.

She had achieved her goal and had arrived in what her friends had told her was the most beautiful town in the Texas Hill Country in time for the weddings. The brief view of the town as she'd traveled from the train station to the church had shown her that Sophia and Victoria had not exaggerated. Carr Valley was an attractive town. The buildings Sophia's husband Gideon had designed with their skillful blend of European and Texan architectural styles made Main Street unique. The rest of the town,

although less distinctive, was well maintained and seemingly prosperous, creating a welcoming atmosphere.

If Olivia were writing a book, Carr Valley would be an excellent model for her characters' home. Baxter Washburn could be the hero. There was no question that the man who'd sat next to her in the church was handsome enough to fuel her readers' interest. When Sophia had written about her distant cousin and how she'd asked him to walk her down the aisle last January, she had neglected to say anything about his appearance. Tall, dark, and handsome was a cliché, but Baxter was no cliché. He was, quite simply, the most handsome man Olivia had ever met.

She guessed him to be just shy of six feet tall, with brown hair so dark it appeared almost black. The combination of eyes the color of rich hot chocolate, a square chin, and perfect features made him unforgettable.

But there was more to Baxter Washburn than physical beauty. Between the ceremony and the brief time she'd been at the reception, Olivia had spent less than an hour in his company, but that had been long enough to reveal an enigmatic side to the town's apothecary. Though he was the epitome of politeness and smiled at appropriate times, those smiles hadn't reached his eyes. Instead, his eyes held a hint of sorrow. It wasn't recent grief—Olivia knew how to recognize that, because she'd seen it each time she'd looked in a mirror over the last five months—but a long-standing sorrow, and that intrigued her more than his almost unbelievably handsome face.

What had hurt Baxter Washburn so deeply that he still had open wounds rather than scars?



He should have brought his sketchpad. Baxter almost laughed at the idea. No one took a book of sketches to church or to a wedding reception, not even a man whom some considered eccentric since he was over thirty-five years old and had never courted a lady, much

less married one. But other than to church services, Baxter carried his pad almost everywhere.

Drawing, he'd discovered, helped keep the horrors at a distance. He wasn't sure how it worked or why it was so effective, but translating his memories of those terrible hours at Sharpsburg into sketches helped him accept that the war's bloodiest day was over, that even though the memories had not faded, they were only memories. And so when pain threatened to overwhelm him, he drew.

Today it was not the Cornfield or Dunker Church or Bloody Lane that made his fingers itch to hold a pencil. Today the war had been relegated to the back of his mind. What he wanted to capture on paper was Olivia Fairchild's likeness.