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LINDA LAEL MILLER

THE CHRISTMAS BRIDES



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EPILOGUE

A McKETTRICK CHRISTMAS

For all those people, everywhere, who make a loving space for pets in their hearts and their homes.

CHAPTER ONE

December 22, 1896

LIZZIE MCKETTRICK LEANED SLIGHTLY forward in her seat, as if to do so would make the train go faster Home. She was going *home*, at long last, to the Triple M Ranch, to her large, rowdy family. After more than two years away, first attending Miss Ridgely's Institute of Deportment and Refinement for Young Women, then normal school, Lizzie was returning to the place and the people she loved—for good. She would arrive a day before she was expected, too, and surprise them all—her papa, her stepmother, Lorelei, her little brothers, John Henry, Gabriel, and Doss. She had presents for everyone most sent ahead from San Francisco weeks ago, but a few especially precious ones secreted away in one of her three huge travel trunks.

Only her grandfather, Angus McKettrick, the patriarch of the sprawling clan, knew she'd be there that very evening. He'd be waiting, Lizzie thought happily, at the small train station in Indian Rock, probably at the reins of one of the big flat-bed sleighs used to carry feed to snowbound cattle on the range. She'd warned him, in her most recent letter, that she'd be bringing all her belongings with her for this homecoming was permanent—not just a brief visit, like the last couple of Christmases.

Lizzie smiled a mischievous little smile. Even Angus, her closest confidant except for her parents, didn't know *all* the facts.

She glanced sideways at Whitley Carson, slumped against the sooty window in the seat next to hers, huddled under a blanket, sound asleep. His breath fogged the glass, and every so often, he stirred fitfully, grumbled something.

Alas, for all his sundry charms, Whitley was not an enthusiastic traveler. His complaints, over the three days since they'd boarded the first train in San Francisco, had been numerous.

The train was filthy.

There was no dining car.

The cigar smoke roiling overhead made him cough.

He was never going to be warm again.

And *what* in God's green earth had possessed the woman three rows behind them to undertake a journey of any significant distance with two rascally children and a fussy infant in tow?

Now the baby let out a pitiable squall.

Lizzie, used to babies because there were so many on the Triple M, was unruffled. Whitley's obvious annoyance troubled her. Although she planned to teach, married or not, she hoped for a houseful of children of her own someday—healthy, noisy, rambunctious ones, raised to be confident adults and freethinkers.

It was hard, in the moment, to square the Whitley she was seeing now with the kind of father she had hoped he would be.

The man across the aisle from her laid down his newspaper, stood and stretched. He'd boarded the train several hours earlier, in Phoenix, carrying what looked like a doctor's bag, its leather sides cracked and scratched. His waistcoat was clean but threadbare, and he wore neither a hat nor a sidearm—the absence of both unusual in the still-wild Arizona Territory.

Although Lizzie expected Whitley to propose marriage once they were home with her family, she'd been stealing glances at the stranger ever since he entered the railroad car. There was something about him, beyond his patrician good looks, that constantly drew her attention.

His hair was dark, and rather too long, his eyes brown and intense, bespeaking formidable intelligence. ~~Although he probably wasn't a great deal older than Lizzie, who would turn twenty on her next birthday,~~ there was a maturity in his manner and countenance that intrigued her. It was as though he'd lived many other lives, in other times and places, and extracted wisdom from them all.

She heard him speak quietly to the harried mother, turned and felt a peculiar little clench in the secret regions of her heart when she saw him holding the child, bundled in a shabby patchwork quilt coming apart at the seams.

Whitley slumbered on, oblivious.

There were few other passengers in the car. A wan and painfully thin soldier in a blue army uniform, recuperating from some dire illness or injury, by the looks of him. A portly salesman who held what must have been his sample case on his lap, one hand clasping the handle, the other a smoldering cigar. He seemed to have an inexhaustible supply of the things, and he'd been puffing on them right along. An older couple, gray-haired and companionable, though they seldom spoke, accompanied by an exotic white bird in a splendid brass cage. Glorious blue feathers adorned its head and when the cage wasn't covered in its red velvet drape, the bird chattered.

All of them, except for Whitley, of course, were strangers. And seeing Whitley in this new and disconcerting light made *him* seem like a stranger, too.

A fresh wave of homesickness washed over Lizzie. She longed to be among people she knew. Lorelei, her stepmother, would be baking incessantly these days, hiding packages and keeping secrets. Her father, Holt, would be locked away in his wood shop between ranch chores, building sleds and toboggan boards and dollhouses, some of which would be gifts to Lizzie's brothers and various cousins, though the majority were sure to find their way onto some of the poorer homesteads surrounding the Triple M.

There were always a lot of presents tucked into the branches of the family's tree and piled beneath it, and an abundance of savory food, too, but a McKettrick Christmas centered on giving to folks who didn't have so much. Lorelei, Lizzie herself, and all the aunts made rag dolls and cloth animals with stuffing inside, to be distributed at the community celebration at the church on Christmas Eve.

The stranger walked the aisle with the baby, bringing Lizzie's mind back to the here and now. He glanced down into her upturned face as he passed. He didn't actually smile—as little as she knew about him, she *had* figured out that he was both solemn and taciturn by nature—but something moved in his eyes.

Lizzie felt a flash of shame. *She* should have offered to spell the anxious mother three rows back. Already the child was settling down a little, cooing and drooling on the man's once-white shirt. If he minded that, he gave no indication of it.

Beyond the train windows, heavy flakes of snow swirled in the gathering twilight, and while Lizzie willed the train to pick up speed, it seemed to be slowing down instead.

She was just about to speak to the man, reach out for the baby, when a horrific roar, like a thousand separate thunderheads suddenly clashing together, erupted from every direction and from no direction at all. The car jerked violently, stopped with a shudder fit to fling the entire train off the tracks, tilted wildly to one side, then came right again with a sickening jolt.

The bird squawked in terror, wings making a frantic slapping sound.

Lizzie, nearly thrown from her seat, felt the clasp of a firm hand on her shoulder, looked up to see the stranger, still upright, the baby safe in the curve of his right arm. He'd managed somehow to stay on his feet, retain his hold on the child *and* keep Lizzie from slamming into the seat in front of her.

"Wh-what...?" she murmured, bewildered by shock.

“An avalanche, probably,” the man replied calmly, as though a massive snowslide was no more than he would have expected of a train ride through the rugged high country of the northern Arizona Territory.

Whitley, shaken awake, was as frightened as the bird. “Are we derailed?” he demanded.

The stranger ignored him. “Is anyone hurt?” he asked, of the company in general, patting the baby’s back and bouncing it a little against his shoulder.

“My arm,” the woman in back whimpered. “My arm—”

“Nobody panic,” the man in the aisle said, shoving the baby into Lizzie’s arms and turning to take the medical kit from the rack above his seat. He spoke quietly to the elderly couple; Lizzie saw them nod their heads. They were all right, then.

“Nobody panic!” the bird cawed. “Nobody panic!”

Despite the gravity of the situation, Lizzie had to smile at that.

Whitley rubbed his neck, eyeing the medical bag, after tossing a brief, disgruntled glare at the bird. “I think I’m hurt,” he said. “You’re a doctor, aren’t you? I need laudanum.”

“Laudanum!” the bird demanded.

“Hush, Woodrow,” the old lady said. Her husband put the velvet drapery in place, covering the cage, and Woodrow quieted instantly.

The doctor’s answer to Whitley was a clipped nod and, “Yes, I’m a physician. My name is Morgan Shane. I’ll look you over once I’ve seen to Mrs. Halifax’s arm.”

The baby began to shriek in Lizzie’s embrace, straining for its mother.

“Make him shut up,” Whitley said. “I’m in pain.”

“Shut up!” Woodrow mimicked, his call muted by the drapery. “I’m in pain!”

Lizzie paid Whitley no mind, got to her feet. “Dr. Shane?”

He was crouched in the aisle now, next to the baby’s mother, gently examining her right arm. “Yes?” he said, a little snappishly, not looking away from what he was doing. The older children, a boy and a girl, huddled together in the inside seat, clinging to each other.

“The baby—the way he’s crying—do you think he could be injured?”

“My baby is a girl,” the woman said, between groans.

“She’s just had a bad scare,” Dr. Shane told Lizzie, speaking more charitably this time. “Like the rest of us.”

“I think we’s buried,” the soldier exclaimed.

“Buried!” Woodrow agreed, with a rustle of feathers.

Sure enough, solid snow, laced with tree branches, dislodged stones and other debris, pressed against all the windows on one side of the car. On the other, Lizzie knew from previous journeys aboard the same train, a steep grade plummeted deep into the red rocks of the valley below.

“Just a bad sprain,” Dr. Shane told Mrs. Halifax matter-of-factly. “I’ll make you a sling, and if the pain gets to be too bad, I can give you a little medicine, but I’d rather not. You’re nursing the baby, aren’t you?”

Mrs. Halifax nodded, biting her lower lip. Lizzie realized with a start that the woman was probably close to her own age, perhaps even a year or two younger. She was thin to the point of emaciation, and her clothes were worn, faded from much washing, and although the children wore coats, frayed at the cuffs and hems and long since outgrown, she had none.

Lizzie thought with chagrin of the contents of her trunks. Woolen dresses. Shawls. The warm black coat with the royal blue velvet collar Lorelei had sent in honor of her graduation from normal school, so she’d be both comfortable and stylish on the trip home. She’d elected to save the costly garment for Sunday best.

She went back up the aisle, still carrying the baby, to where Whitley sat. “We need that blanket,

she said.

Whitley scowled and hunched deeper into the soft folds. “I’m *injured*,” he said. “I could be in shock.”

Exasperated, Lizzie tapped one foot. “You are *not* injured,” she replied. “But Mrs. Halifax is. Whitley, *give me that blanket.*”

Whitley only tightened his two-handed grasp, so that his knuckles went white, and shook his head stubbornly, and in that moment of stark and painful clarity, Lizzie knew she’d never marry Whitley Carson. Not even if he begged on bended knee, which was not very likely, but a satisfying fantasy, nonetheless.

“Here’s mine, ma’am,” the soldier called out from the back, offering a faded quilt ferreted from his oversize haversack.

The peddler, his cigar apparently snubbed out during the crash, but still in his mouth, opened his sample case. “I’ve got some dish towels, here,” he told Dr. Shane. “Finest Egyptian cotton, hand-woven. One of them ought to do for a sling.”

The doctor nodded, thanked the peddler, took the quilt from the soldier.

“If I could just get to my trunks,” Lizzie fretted, settling the slightly quieter baby girl on a practiced hip. Between her younger brothers and her numerous cousins, she’d had a lot of practice looking after small children.

Dr. Shane, in the process of fashioning the fine Egyptian dish towel into a sling for Mrs. Halifax’s arm, favored her with a disgusted glance. “This is no time to be worrying about your wardrobe,” he said.

Stung, Lizzie flushed. She opened her mouth to explain why she wanted access to her baggage—for truly altruistic reasons—but pride stopped her.

“I’m in pain here!” Whitley complained, from the front of the car.

“I’m in pain here,” Woodrow muttered, but he was settling down.

“Perhaps you should see to your husband,” Dr. Shane said tersely, leveling a look at Lizzie as he straightened in the aisle.

More heat suffused Lizzie’s cheeks. It was cold now, and getting colder; she could see her breath. “Whitley Carson,” she said, “is most certainly *not* my husband.”

A semblance of a smile danced in Dr. Shane’s dark eyes, but never quite touched his mouth. “Well, then,” he drawled, “you have more sense than I would have given you credit for, Miss...?”

“McKetrick,” Lizzie said, begrudging him even her name, but unable to stop herself from giving it, just the same. “Lizzie McKetrick.”

About to turn to the soldier, who might or might not have been hurt, Dr. Shane paused, raised his eyebrows. He recognized the McKetrick name, she realized. He was bound for Indian Rock, the last stop on the route, or he would not have been on that particular train, and he might even have some business with her family.

A horrible thought struck her. Was someone sick? Her papa? Lorelei? Her grandfather? During her time away from home, letters had flown back and forth—Lizzie corresponded with most of her extended family, as well as Lorelei and her father—but maybe they’d been keeping something from her, waiting to break the bad news in person....

Dr. Shane frowned, reading her face, which must have drained of all color. He even took a step toward her, perhaps fearing she might drop the infant girl, now resting her small head on Lizzie’s shoulder. The child’s body trembled with small, residual hiccoughs from the weeping. “Are you all right, Miss McKetrick?”

Lizzie consciously stiffened her backbone, a trick her grandfather had taught her. *Keep your back straight and your shoulders, too, Lizzie-girl, especially when you’re scared.*

“I’m fine,” she said, stalwart.

~~Dr. Shane gave a ghost of a grin. “Good, because we’re in for a rough patch, and I’m going to need help.”~~

As the shock subsided, the seriousness of the situation struck Lizzie like a second avalanche.

“I have to check on the engineer and the conductor,” Dr. Shane told her, stepping up close now, order to pass her in the narrow aisle.

Lizzie nodded. “We’ll be rescued,” she said, as much for her own benefit as Dr. Shane’s. Whitley wasn’t listening; he’d taken a flask from his pocket and begun to imbibe in anxious gulps. The peddler and the soldier were talking in quiet tones, while Mrs. Halifax and her children huddled together in the quilt. The elderly couple spoke to each other in comforting whispers, Woodrow’s cage spanning from one of their laps to the other like a bridge. “When we don’t arrive in Indian Rock on schedule, folks will come looking for us.”

Her father. Her uncles. Every able-bodied man and boy in Indian Rock, probably. All of them would saddle horses, hitch up sleighs, follow the tracks until they found the stalled train.

“Have you looked out the window, Lizzie?” Dr. Shane asked, sotto voce, as he eased past her and the shivering child. “We’re miles from anywhere. We have at least eighteen feet of snow on one side and a sheer cliff on the other. I’m betting heavily on first impressions, but you strike me as a sensible levelheaded girl, so I won’t spare you the facts. We’re in a lot of trouble—another snowslide could send us over the side. It would take an army to shovel us out, and one sick soldier does not an army make. We can’t stay, and we can’t leave. There’s a full scale blizzard going on out there.”

Lizzie swallowed, lifted her chin. Kept her backbone McKettrick straight. “I am not a girl,” she said. “I’m nearly twenty, and I’ve earned a teaching certificate.”

“*Twenty?*” the doctor teased dryly. “That old. And a schoolmarm in the bargain.”

But Lizzie was again thinking of her family—her papa, her grandfather, her uncles. “They’ll come,” she said, with absolute confidence. “No matter what.”

“I hope you’re right,” Dr. Shane said with a sigh, tugging at the sleeves of his worn coat in a preparatory sort of way. “Whoever ‘they’ are, they’d better be fast, and capable of tunneling through a mountain of snow to get to us. It will be pitch-dark before anybody even realizes this train is overdue and since delays aren’t uncommon, especially in this kind of weather, the search won’t begin until morning—if then.”

“Where’s that laudanum?” Whitley whined. His cheeks were bright against his pale face. If Lizzie hadn’t known better, she’d have thought he was consumptive.

Dr. Shane patted his medical bag. “Right here,” he answered. “And it won’t mix with that whiskey you’re swilling. I’d pace myself, if I were you.”

Whitley looked for all the world like a pretty child, pouting. What, Lizzie wondered abstractly, had she ever seen in him? Where was the dashing charm he’d exhibited in San Francisco, where he’d scrawled his name across her dance card at every party? Written her poetic love letters. Brought her flowers.

“Aren’t you even going to examine him?” Lizzie asked, after some inward elbowing to get by her new opinion of Whitley’s character. Oddly, given present circumstances, she reflected on her earlier and somewhat blithe conviction that he would settle in Indian Rock after they were married, so that she could teach and be near her family. He’d seemed casually agreeable to the idea of setting up house far from his own kin, but now that she thought about it, he’d never actually committed to that or anything else. “He might truly be hurt, you know.”

“He’s fine,” Dr. Shane replied curtly. Then, medical kit in hand, he moved up the aisle, toward the locomotive.

“What kind of doctor is he, anyhow?” Whitley grumbled.

“One who expects to be very busy, I think,” Lizzie said, not looking at him but at the door Dr. Shane had just shouldered his way through. She knew the car ahead was empty, and the locomotive was just beyond. She felt a little chill, because there had been no sign of the conductor since before the avalanche. Wouldn’t he have hurried back to the only occupied passenger car to see if there were any injuries, if he wasn’t hurt himself? And what about the engineer?

Suddenly she knew she had to follow Dr. Shane. Had to know, for her own sanity, just how dire the situation truly was. She moved to hand the baby girl to Whitley, but he shrank back as if she’d offered him a hissing rattlesnake in a peck basket.

Miffed, Lizzie took the child back to Mrs. Halifax, placed her gently on the woman’s lap, tucked the quilt into place again. The peddler and the soldier were seated together now, playing a card game of some sort on the top of the sample case. The old gentleman left Woodrow in his wife’s care and stood. “Is there anything I can do?” he asked, of everyone in general.

Lizzie didn’t answer, but simply gave the old man a grateful smile and headed for the locomotive.

“Where are you going?” Whitley asked peevishly, as she passed.

She didn’t bother to reply.

A cold wind knifed through her as she stepped out of the passenger car, and she could barely see for the snow, coming down furiously now, arching over the top of the train in an ominous canopy. The next car lay on its side, the heavy iron coupling once linking it to its counterpart snapped cleanly in two.

Lizzie considered retreating, but in the end a desperate need to know the full scope of their predicament overrode common prudence. She climbed carefully to the ground, using the ice-coated ladder affixed to one end of the car, and stooped to peer inside the overturned car.

It was an eerie sight, with the seats jutting out sideways. She uttered a soft prayer of gratitude that no one had been riding in that part of the train and crawled inside. Clutching the edge of the open luggage rack to her left, she straightened and crossed the car by stepping from the side of one seat to the next.

Finally, she reached the other door and steeled herself to go through the whole ordeal of climbing to the ground and reentering all over again.

The locomotive was upright, however, and the snow was packed so tightly between the two cars that it made a solid path. Lizzie moved across, longing for her fancy new coat, and stepped inside the engine room.

Steam huffed forlornly from the disabled boiler.

The conductor lay on the floor, the engineer beside him.

Dr. Shane, crouching between them, looked up at Lizzie with such a confounded expression on his face that, had things not been at such a grave pass, she would have laughed.

“You *said* you might need my help,” she pointed out.

Dr. Shane snapped his medical bag closed, stood. He looked so glum that Lizzie knew without asking that the two men on the floor of the locomotive were either dead or mortally wounded.

Tears burned in her eyes as she imagined their families, preparing for Yuletide celebrations, unaware, as yet, that their eagerly awaited loved ones would never return.

“It was quick,” Dr. Shane said, standing in front of her now, placing a hand on her shoulder. “Did you know them?”

Lizzie shook her head, struggling to compose herself. Her grandfather’s deep voice echoed in her mind.

Keep your backbone straight—

“Were they—were they lying there, side by side like that?” It was a strange question, she knew

that, even as she asked. Perhaps she was still in shock, after all. "When you found them, I mean?"
"I moved them," the doctor answered, "once I knew they were both gone."

Lizzie nodded. Just the act of standing up straight and squaring her shoulders made her feel a little better.

A slight, grim smile lifted the corner of Dr. Shane's finely-shaped mouth. "These rescuers you're expecting," he said. "If they're anything like you, we might have some hope of surviving after all."

Lizzie's heart ached. What she wouldn't have given to be at home on the Triple M at that moment, with her family all around her. There would be a big, fragrant tree in the parlor at the main ranch house, shimmering with tinsel. Dear, familiar voices, talking, laughing, singing. "Of course we'll survive," she heard herself say. Then she looked at the dead men again, and a lump lodged in her throat, so she had to swallow and then ratchet her chin up another notch before she could go on. "Most of us, anyway. My papa, my uncles, even my grandfather—they'll all come, as soon as they get word that the train didn't arrive."

"All of them McKettricks, I suppose."

Lizzie nodded again, shivering now. The boiler wasn't putting out any heat at all. Most likely, the smoke stack was full of snow. "They'll get through. You wait and see. Nothing stops a McKettrick, especially when there's trouble."

"I believe you, Miss McKettrick," he said.

"You must call me Lizzie," she replied, without thinking. He had, though only once, and she needed the normality of her given name. Just the sound of it gave her strength.

"Lizzie, then," Dr. Shane answered. "If you'll call me Morgan."

"Morgan," she repeated, feeling bewildered again.

He went back to the bodies, gently removed the conductor's coat, then laid it over Lizzie's shoulders. She shuddered inside it, at once grateful and repulsed.

"Let's get back to the others," Morgan said quietly. "There's nothing more we can do here."

Their progress was slow and arduous, but when they returned to the other car, someone had lighted lanterns, and the place had a reassuring glow. Most of the passengers seemed to have regained their composure. Even Woodrow had ceased his fussing; he peered alertly through the bars of his cage, his snow-white feathers smooth.

Whitley had emptied his flask and either passed out or gone to sleep, snoring loudly, clinging possessively to his blanket even in a state of unconsciousness.

"I'd better take a look at him," Morgan said ruefully, stopping by Whitley's seat and opening his kit, pulling a stethoscope from inside. "My preliminary diagnosis is pampering by an overprotective mother or a bevy of fussy aunts or spinster sisters, complicated by a fondness for strong spirits. I've been wrong before, though." But not very often, he might have added, if his tone was anything to go by.

Lizzie could not decide whether she liked this man or not. He certainly wasn't one to remain on the sidelines in a crisis, which was a point in his favor, but there was a suggestion of impatient arrogance about him, too. Clearly, he did not suffer fools lightly.

She approached the Halifax family and found them still burrowed down in the faded quilt. The peddler had lighted another cigar, and the soldier was on his feet, trying to see out into the night. Darkness, snow and the reflected light of the lanterns on the window glass made it pretty much impossible, but Lizzie understood his need to be doing something.

"Some Christmas this is going to be," he said, turning when Lizzie came to thank him for giving up his quilt to Mrs. Halifax and her little ones. "Nothing to eat, and it'll get colder and colder in here you'll see."

"We'll need to keep our spirits up," Lizzie replied. "And expect the best." Lorelei said things

generally turned out the way folks *expected* them to, Lizzie recalled, so it was important to maintain an optimistic state of mind.

“Reckon we ought to do both them things,” the soldier said, his narrow, good-natured and plain face earnest as he regarded Lizzie. “But it wouldn’t hurt to prepare for some rough times, either.” He smiled, put out a hand. “John Brennan, private first class, United States Army,” he said.

“Lizzie McKettrick,” Lizzie replied, accepting the handshake. His palm and fingers felt dry and hot against her skin. Did he have a fever? “Do you live in Indian Rock, Mr. Brennan? I grew up on the Triple M, and I don’t think I’ve ever seen you before.”

“My wife’s folks opened a mercantile there, six months ago. I was in an army hospital, back in Maryland, laid up with typhoid fever and the damage it done, for most of a year, so my Alice took our little boy and moved in with her mama and daddy to wait for my discharge.” Sadness flickered in his eyes. “Reckon my boy’s all het up about it bein’ almost Christmas and all, and lookin’ for me to walk through the front door any minute now.”

Lizzie sat down in the aisle seat, and John Brennan lowered himself back into the one beside the window. Lore lei had written her about the new mercantile, pleased that they carried a selection of fine watercolors and good paper, among other luxuries, along with the usual coffee, dungarees, nails and tobacco products. “What’s your boy’s name?” she asked, “And how old is he?”

“He’s called Tad, for his grandpappy,” Mr. Brennan said proudly. “He turned four last Thursday. I was hoping to be home in time for the cake and candles, but my discharge papers didn’t come through in time.”

Lizzie smiled, thinking of her younger brothers. They’d be excited about Christmas, and probably watching the road for their big sister, even though they’d surely been told she’d arrive tomorrow. She consulted the watch pinned to her bodice; it was almost three o’clock. The train wasn’t due in Indian Rock until six-fifteen.

She imagined her grandfather waiting impatiently in the small depot, right on time, hectoring the ticket clerk for news, ranting that in his day, everybody traveled by stagecoach, and by God, the coaches had been a hell of a lot more reliable than the railroad.

Shyly, John Brennan patted her hand. “I guess you’ve got home-folks waitin’, too,” he said.

Lizzie nodded. “Will you be working at the mercantile?” she asked, just to keep the conversation going. It was a lot less lonely that way. And a lot easier than thinking about the very real possibility of another avalanche, sending the whole train toppling over the cliff.

“Much as I’m able,” Mr. Brennan replied. “Can’t do any of the heavy work, loading and unloading freight wagons and such, but I’ve got me a head for figures. I can balance the books and keep track of the inventory.”

“I’ll be teaching at Indian Rock School when it reopens after New Year’s,” she said.

Mr. Brennan beamed. He was one of those homely people who turn handsome when they smile. “In a couple of years, you’ll have my Tad in first grade,” he said. “Me and Alice, we place great store by book learnin’ and such. Never got much of it myself, as you can probably tell by listenin’ to me talk, but I learnt some arithmetic in the army. Tad, now, he’ll go to school and make something of himself.”

Lizzie remembered how Mr. Brennan had given his quilt to Mrs. Halifax, even though he was obviously susceptible to the cold. He’d wasted during his confinement, so that his uniform hung on his frame, and plans to help out at the mercantile or no, he might be a semi-invalid for a long time.

“If Tad is anything like his father,” she said, “he’ll do just fine.”

Brennan flushed with modest pleasure. Sobered when he glanced toward the front of the train, where Whitley was awake again and complaining to Dr. Shane, who looked as though he’d like to throttle him. “Is that your brother?” he asked.

“Just someone I knew in San Francisco,” Lizzie said, suddenly sad. The Whitley she’d thought she’d known so well had been replaced by a petulant impostor. She grieved for the man she’d imagined him to be—the young engineer, with great plans to build dams and bridges, the cavalier suitor with the fetching smile.

Morgan left Whitley and came back down the aisle. “I’m going out and have a look around,” he said, addressing John Brennan instead of Lizzie. “If I don’t come back, don’t come searching for me.”

Lizzie stood up. “You can’t go out there alone,” she protested.

Morgan laid his hands on her shoulders and pressed her back into the hard, soot-blackened seat. “Mrs. Halifax might need you,” he said. “Or the children. Or the old folks—the husband has a bluish tinge around his lips, and I’m worried about his heart.” He paused, nodded toward Whitley. “God knows, that sniveling yahoo up there in the blanket won’t be any help.”

The peddler opened his sample case again, brought out a pint of whiskey, offered it to Morgan. “You may have need of this,” he said. “It’s mighty cold out there.”

Morgan took the bottle, put it in the inside pocket of his coat. “Thanks.”

“At least take one of the lanterns,” Lizzie said, anxious wings fluttering in her stomach, as though she’d swallowed a miniature version of Woodrow.

“I’ll do that,” Morgan answered.

“Here’s my hat,” Mr. Brennan said, holding out his army cap. “It ain’t much, but it’s better than going bareheaded.”

“I have a scarf,” Lizzie fretted. “It’s in my handbag—”

Morgan donned the cap. It looked incongruous indeed, with his worn-out suit, but it covered the tops of his ears. “I’ll be fine,” he insisted. He went back up the aisle, leaving his medical kit behind, and out through the door at the other end.

Lizzie watched for the glow of his lantern through the window, found it, lost track of it again. Her heart sank. Suppose he never came back? There were so many things that could happen out there in the frigid darkness, so full of the furious blizzard.

“I don’t think your interest in the good doctor is entirely proper,” a familiar voice said.

Lizzie looked up, mildly startled, and saw Whitley standing unsteadily in the aisle, glowering down at her. His cheeks were flushed, his eyes glazed.

“Be quiet,” she said.

“We have an understanding, you and I,” Whitley reminded her.

“I quite understand *you*, Whitley,” Lizzie retorted, “but I don’t think the reverse is true. Unless you mean to make yourself useful in some way, I’d rather you left me alone.”

Whitley was just forming his reply when the whole car shuddered again, listed slightly cliffward and caught. The peddler shouted a curse. Mr. Brennan launched into the Lord’s Prayer. Mrs. Halifax gave a soblike gasp, and her children shrieked in chorus. Woodrow squawked and sidestepped along his perch, and the elderly couple clung to each other.

“We’re all right,” Lizzie said, surprising herself by how serenely she spoke. Inside, she was terrified. “Nobody move.”

“Seems to me,” observed the peddler, having recovered a modicum of composure, “that we’d all better sit on the other side of the car.”

“Good idea,” Lizzie agreed.

Whitley took a seat very slowly, his face a ghastly white. Lizzie, the peddler, and John Brennan crossed the aisle carefully to settle in. So did the old folks and Woodrow.

Outside, the wind howled, and Lizzie thought she could feel the heartbeat of the looming mountain itself, ponderous and utterly impersonal.

Where was Morgan Shane?

Lost in the impenetrable snow? Buried under it?

~~Fallen into one of the treacherous crevasses for which the high country was well known?~~

Lizzie wanted to cry, but she knew it was an indulgence she couldn't afford. So she cleared her throat and began to sing, in a soft, tremulous voice, "God rest ye merry gentlemen, let nothing you dismay..."

Slowly, tentatively, the others joined in.

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