

# One Christmas Eve

---

**Jerry Borrowman**

*December 24, 1935*

Kyle Byland looked out the train window again into the dazzling whiteout caused by the worst blizzard since the turn of the century. As a low moan escaped from the back of his throat, he had to force himself to relax his tightly clenched hands.

“You’re likely to go snow-blind if you keep staring out the window.”

Kyle jumped at the sound of the woman’s voice. “Pardon me?” he said moodily, glancing at her for just a moment before dropping his eyes.

“I said that you’re likely to go temporarily blind if you keep staring into the storm.”

He looked up directly into the woman’s face for the first time since the porter had seated them. Although dressed plainly, she was actually quite attractive with her rich auburn hair and remarkable green eyes. Her face was well-defined by a distinctive chin and high cheekbones, which Kyle had always admired. A light blush provided color and warmth to her features. Still, she was being meddlesome at a time he didn’t want to be meddled with.

“Thank you . . . for your concern.” He dropped his gaze precipitously to the menu, which he’d ignored up until this point.

“I’m a nurse, you see, and I spend each winter in Park City where a great many skiers are brought in with that very condition. It’s quite frightening for them and very painful until it subsides.”

Kyle glanced up sharply. “I hardly think that an occasionally glance out a window is enough to put me at risk.” He was irritated with himself for even responding to her absurd warning.

“You’re probably right. I suppose I was actually curious as to why you’re so concerned about the storm and simply hoped to strike up a conversation. We seem to be making good progress in spite of the snow.”

Kyle was even more aggravated when he let out another involuntary sigh, because he knew it would require an explanation. But she was determined to talk, and with the porter near at hand, he’d have to engage in light conversation over lunch anyway. “I’m just concerned that the storm will cause enough delays up and down the line that I’ll miss my connection to Salt Lake City when we arrive in Ogden. I have a rather important event tonight that I simply can’t miss.”

“Ah . . . I see.”

How could she see? This was the one thing he’d wanted to do since he first attended a concert at the Tabernacle years ago. Now, after going to extraordinary lengths to prepare, he was finally to give the first major concert of his life before a distinguished audience that would include many of the General Authorities and prominent citizens of Salt Lake City. *Except for the storm, which is likely to keep them all safely at home with extra coal in the stoves.* Even the voice in his head sounded bitter. He expected the woman to inquire further about the event, but this time it was she who remained silent. Having opened the topic, he thought it her duty to continue so he could at least talk about the honor that was to be his. Finally, unable to bear the silence, he continued. “I’m supposed to perform at a concert on Temple Square tonight—a special concert with members of the Choir.”

“Really! What a delightful way to spend Christmas Eve.”

“Well, it’s actually scheduled for very early in the evening so everyone can go home and be with their families. That’s why it’s crucial that I catch the 2:15 from Ogden. The 3:30 is absolutely the last train I can catch and still hope to make it for the concert at 6:30. I was supposed to get in yesterday, but the train out of Chicago was delayed.”

“I can see why it’s so urgent.”

“What can I get you folks?” Kyle startled as a waiter appeared from behind his elbow.

“I’ll have the—“ He caught himself as the waiter raised an eyebrow. *She should order first, you idiot!* “Excuse me,” he said weakly. “After you . . .”

She smiled. “I’ll have the roast beef and red potatoes,” she said pleasantly. “And some milk, if you have it.”

“Certainly, ma’am. And you, sir?”

Having grown up in a typically lower-middle class family, Kyle was still a bit awed each time someone waited on him. While his father had been fortunate enough to keep a job, even in the darkest days of the Depression that had started six years earlier, they’d never been able to afford the luxury of eating out. So, Kyle often felt a bit foolish when ordering food—particularly in the luxury of a well-appointed Union Pacific dining car, which was celebrated for its cuisine. “Uh, I’ll have the same, if you don’t mind, except that I’d like water instead of milk.”

“Thank you.” The waiter turned to the lady and smiled. “It will be just a few minutes.” Then he took time to fill each of their glasses with water and straighten the basket of bread that he’d set in the middle of the table. While all of this was going on, Kyle found himself staring at the single, fresh rose in a crystal vase set next to the curtain

by the window. It was a deep crimson red, which stood out in beautiful contrast to the whiteness outside the window.

He started to say, “I wonder how they get fresh flowers in the middle of the winter?” at the same time she started to say, “So, you’re a singer?” They both stumbled a second time while trying to allow the other to go first. Finally, she insisted.

“I was just wondering how the railroad can place a fresh flower in the middle of a table in the middle of winter. Everything about trains and their passenger service is amazing to me.” He looked up, a bit shyly this time.

“As it turns out, I know something about that since my father works as a supervisor in the stores department of the railroad. The railroad buys from hot-house nurseries at strategic points along the line. This flower probably comes from St. Louis.”

“Oh,” he said. “I didn’t even know there were such things as hot-house nurseries, and here I am enjoying their output.”

She laughed. “You really are a curious person. I doubt many on this car ever thought about the flowers. Perhaps it’s your artistic temperament?”

“I suppose so. My mother is always chiding me for being unaware of people, yet keenly aware of colors and flowers and music. It’s sometimes embarrassing when a friend passes by and I ignore him because I’m gazing off at a mountain or a unique building.”

“Yes, I can see how they’d be upset. But, perhaps you need such thoughts to give proper expression to your feelings.”

Kyle felt something akin to wonder at this. “Well, no matter how hard I try, I can’t seem to behave any differently, so I often find myself apologizing to others when they force me out of some foolish reverie.”

The waiter returned with two plates of steaming hot potatoes and a modest portion of sliced roast beef covered in a rich brown gravy. After waiting for his dinner companion to take her first bite, Kyle lifted his fork and quickly found himself savoring the taste in his mouth. He had to consciously slow himself down, or he’d eat the whole plate in just a few mouthfuls. Of course, it was his mother’s voice he heard in his mind telling him, *Slow down and enjoy your food*. He smiled at the thought.

“So, you’re a singer in the Choir, then?”

“What?” He raised his napkin to his face. “Oh, no, I play the piano and organ. I get to play a medley of Christmas hymns on the great Tabernacle Organ in the concert. I’ll be an interlude between some of the vocal numbers. It’s something I’ve always wanted to do, and now I finally get the chance.” Then, looking out the window, “But the blizzard may take it all away from me. Even if, by some miracle, we make it, who would want to come out on a night like this?” He recognized the bitter edge to his voice but was powerless to conceal it.

“We’re just an hour from Ogden, and it’s barely approaching noon, so it seems very likely that we’ll make it. And storms like this often blow over. Surely you shouldn’t give up so soon.”

Kyle was about to reply when there was a grinding noise in the carriage underneath their feet and the train lurched a bit crazily to the right.