

SNOWBOUND FOR CHRISTMAS
ON THE CITY OF SAN FRANCISCO

By Cherokee Echols

“All aboard for *The City of San Francisco* streamliner from Reno, Nevada westbound for Sacramento, California. This is the last call for boarding the westbound train *The City of San Francisco*.” The porter called out as he walked down the train track, loading passengers on the refurbished luxury diesel train *The City of San Francisco*.

“Maggie honey this is so cool! This is the best Christmas present you could ever have given me, I love you so much, baby.”

“Well I thought it was the least I could do. You’ve been so wonderful and understanding about taking my Mom to my brother’s in Sacramento for Christmas I thought we could make the short trip on one of your beloved trains.”

“But baby this isn’t just a great train, this is a refurbished luxury streamliner. We’re talking three Alco PA locomotives at 2250 horsepower each that’s over 6700 horses! These beautiful babies haven’t been built since the 1950’s.”

Maggie loved to watch the excitement in her lover as she admired the streamliner.

“I’ll tell you what Rae, I’m going to get Momma on board and settled while you look at the train but please don’t stay out here too long and miss getting on.”

“Don’t worry Maggie there is no way I would miss a ride on this beauty. I’ll be along shortly.”

A railcar away a woman was trying to get three rambunctious children loaded and settled into their seats. “Settle down you three or Santa won’t bring you any presents.”

“But Momma how is Santa going to know where to bring our presents since we are going to be at Grandma’s house?” asked eight year old Sarah.

“Because I sent Santa a note telling him we would be at Grandma’s along with her address. Now just set quietly Sarah and be a good girl for Momma and I promise you Santa will bring you something wonderful for Christmas.”

“But Momma Grandma doesn’t have a fireplace, how is Santa going to get in?”

“Your Grandma promised to keep the backdoor unlocked just for him so he can bring your presents in and leave them under the tree. Now Jon you and your brother need to help take care of Sarah on the trip to Grandma’s house. She is never to be left alone, do you understand me boys?”

The twin boys Jon and Don answered in unison “Yes Momma.”

Across the aisle from the woman and her children sat two elderly men. “Harvey look over at those twin boys. Don’t they remind you of when our twin boys were young?”

“They do, don’t they Bernie? It wasn’t easy for two gay men to raise two boys in the 1950’s but I think we did a damn good job with our twins.”

“They both grew into fine men, both professionals with good wives, children and now grandchildren. Our first great-grandchild, one of many with God’s blessing. I am so excited I can hardly keep the tears back. Harvey you are a wonderful husband and father I just want to tell you that.”

Harvey discreetly patted his thanks on the thigh of his lover of more than fifty years.

“Rae we’re over here,” Maggie said at seeing her lover board the train.

Rae entered the train car very enthusiastic about her trip through the Donner Pass and on into Sacramento even if it did mean spending Christmas with Maggie’s brother’s family.

“Hey baby, Andrea are you two ready for the ride of your life?” Rae addressed her partner and mother-in-law.

Andrea loved her daughter’s lover as her own daughter. Rae was always full of energy and life and clearly in love with her daughter Maggie. Andrea envied that love. Her husband of twenty-three years had left her the year before. Although in all honesty she couldn’t say, she missed him. They had been more like roommates for the last ten years and she wasn’t sure she was ever really in love with him. She always felt like something was missing: where were the fireworks you always hear about? A big smile came across Andrea’s face when her daughter’s face lit up at the sight of Rae. How she wished for someone to make her feel like that.

At the first lurch of the train, Rae was bouncing in her seat as excited as the three small children were a few seats away. “We’re moving, we’re moving,” the three children and Rae all said in unison causing the others in the car to laugh at their combined excitement.

Rae’s excitement caught the attention of the children’s mother Louisa. She thought what an attractive young woman Rae was, but it was the older woman across from her that drew her real interest. The smile on the auburn haired woman as she watched the two younger women with her captivated Louisa, she felt the pain in her heart at the loss of her own long time love.

Louisa and her partner Lori had been together since junior high school. After graduating college, they decided they wanted children. Together they decided that Louisa would bear the children and Lori’s twin brother would donate the sperm. All agreed this would

be the best way for the children to have both their characteristics and personalities. Now the woman she had spent more than half her life with was gone because of a senseless act of drunk driving. This would be the first Christmas without Lori since she was killed last New Years Louisa was not sure she could handle it alone so she and the children were on their way to Sacramento and her mother's for the holiday.

As the train climbed into the Sierra Nevada Mountains heading for Donner's Pass the snow began to fall. Within minutes the snow was coming down so heavily the white obliterated everything. There had already been several feet of snow on the ground as the train entered the mountains but in less than an hour several more feet had accumulated.

The train's engineer Tom Spencer with more than thirty years of experience under his belt was starting to become concerned with the accumulation of snow on the tracks, and snow sheds. He looked over at his firemen Gordon showing enough concern in his eyes that it made Gordon's blood chill. "Gordon you better get on the radio and find out what we're heading into here. Those drifts already look ten to twelve feet high and the wind has to be blowing more than sixty miles an hour."

"Right Tom I'll get on the line now." Gordon moved over to the radio set to get the Central Pacific Railroad dispatcher on the line.

"Breaker, breaker this is Central Pacific Train 101 *The City of San Francisco* calling Sacramento Central Pacific Dispatch over." Gordon adjusted the knobs trying to rid the speaker of static and locate the dispatcher.

"Breaker, breaker I say again this is Central Pacific Train 101 *The City of San Francisco* calling Sacramento Central Pacific Dispatch, over."

"Come in Central Pacific 101 this is Sacramento dispatch we read you, over."

"We copy you SCP dispatch. This is CP 101 and we are looking for a weather report. We are running in near white-out conditions and it is not looking good from where we sit, over."

"CP 101 this is SCP dispatch what is your location, over."

"SCP dispatch this is CP 101, we have passed through tunnel 35 nearing Yuba Gap and at my mark will be passing mile post one seven six, and mark, over."

"Oh shit Gordon hang on!" shouted Tom as he slammed on the big diesel's brakes.

In the passenger car, everyone was enjoying the lull of the train and mesmerizing effect that the heavy snowfall was causing. The stewards had just passed through to provide everyone with a drink and if desired, a small snack.

“Don, Jon you boys stay here and watch your sister Sarah while I go to the bathroom.” Louisa stood up and gave her twin sons a very stern look. “Boys do you hear me? Sarah now you be a good girl and stay in your seat. I will be right back.”

“Well keep an eye on them for you miss,” Harvey told Louisa with a smile.

Louisa smiled at the two older gentlemen as she started for the back of the rail car. Just as Louisa was passing the handsome, auburn haired woman the train lurched and came to a bone-jolting halt throwing Louisa right into the woman’s lap. To be more exact it threw her down so that her head was right in the auburn haired woman’s crotch and one hand firmly planted on her breast.

Louisa would have been both embarrassed and thrilled to find her face in this woman’s lap except she could hear her children crying from fear; and what sounded as if one was in pain. Louisa quickly got up to check on her children without saying anything to the woman in whose lap she had just landed.

“Momma, momma!” cried the young children.

“Shh calm down I’m here, sugar, Momma’s here.” Louisa tried to calm her children down

“Momma look at Don’s face,” Jon said with tears streaking down his face as he got up from the floor where the rapid stop of the train had thrown him and his brother.

Don continued to lie in the floor whimpering when Louisa saw the blood flowing from her son’s nose. “Oh no Don, son lay still and don’t move.”

Andrea could see that the woman with the three children had her hands full and seemed to be concerned over one of them on the floor. Being a nurse and mother, she decided to see if she could help her out. Louisa felt the touch on her shoulder and heard the silkiness of the words spoken when a wave of electricity moved through her before she even knew who it was behind her.

“Hi, I’m Andrea you seem to have your hands full. Can I help?” Andrea said as she laid her hand on Louisa’s shoulder who was kneeling down over her son Don lying on the floor.

Louisa turned to look over her shoulder at the woman standing behind her. Louisa’s pale blue gray eyes with flecks of yellow looked into warm golden brown eyes. Their eyes locked and both women felt an instant bonding. At the sight of Louisa’s eyes Andrea

became captivated and didn't know what this feeling was washing over her from the woman with the beautiful pale eyes.

Don moaned lying on the floor and brought both women out of their trance as they looked back at the boy. The blood flowing from Don's nose was slowing, but had made a mess all over his face, giving him a ghoulish look.

"I'm a nurse, please let me take a look at him." Andrea kneeled beside the boy and started checking out his neck and the dilation of his eyes. She was very gentle with him and spoke soothingly to let both him and his mother know what she was doing. Although her attention was on the boy Andrea could not help but notice the warmth, she felt from the women who kneeled beside her.

"Hi honey my name is Andrea can you tell me what your name is and how did you get this bloody nose?"

The little boy stuck his bottom lip out in a pout, "I'm Donny and I think my brother Jonnie threw me on the floor."

Maggie came up to her mother "Can I help Mom?"

"See if you can find me something to wipe this blood off his face with." Andrea instructed her daughter not to move for fear of losing contact with the woman kneeling alongside her.

Jon, standing up on the seat to get a better look at what they were doing to his brother, protested loudly when he heard Don accusing him of the injury. "I did not throw him on the floor, the train threw both of us, and I just landed on him!" Don's tears began anew, concerned for his look-alike who lay bleeding on the floor.

"Hey buddy we know you didn't do it why don't you come over here and keep me and Harvey company. You too, sugar, I think I have some cinnamon candy in my jacket." Bernie said to both Jon and Sarah as he reached to pick the little girl up that sat sniffing next to her brother.

Maggie returned with a bar towel and a glass of water, "Here Mom this is the best I could do. Rae has gone forward to find out what happened."

Rae made her way forward with one of the male passengers and found the engineer and fireman buried up to their waist in snow in the cab-forward engine of the train. "What happened are you two alright," shouted the man in his excitement.

"We've run the train into a snow slide. It broke the windows out and dang near buried Gordon and I. If you can help us get out of this snow I think we'll both be alright," Tom told the man.

Rae and the man shoveled the snow away with their hands and had the two men free in less than five minutes. All four stood there shaking from the cold but thankful they were not seriously hurt.

“Could one of you go tell my head Porter to get up here, for me?” Tom asked. The man with an affirmative nod of his head turned to go back into the passenger cars.

“Is there anything I can do to help?” Rae asked, excited to be in the engine of the great train.

“If you would, we would appreciate you helping us to get this snow out of here away from the controls so we can see if we can back out of this slide. Gordon you better get back on the radio and inform dispatch about what happened.” Tom handed Rae some heavy work gloves to help protect her hands from the cold of the snow.

Gordon set about trying to pick up dispatch on the radio but was not having any luck getting out.

The head Porter arrived at the engine along with the man who had gone to fetch him. Tom looked up to see them arrive. Handing a pair of heavy gloves to the man “Could you help us dig this snow out?” Then looking at his Porter Tom asked, “Clay how are the passengers?”

“A few bumps and bruises but nothing to worry about. What the hell happened to us Tom?”

“We ran head long into a snow slide.”

“Are we going to be able to get out?”

“I don’t know yet Clay. We have to get some of this snow away from the controls and then our best bet will be to try to back out rather than push through. Why don’t you go back and have all your Porters prepare the passengers for the possibility of the train lurching and jerking, as we break free. Do whatever you can to keep them calm, Clay.”

Clay nodded wishing them luck and headed back into the passenger car.

“Tom I can’t get out on the radio.”

“Well let’s try getting free from this slide before we get too worried,” Tom said to his fireman.

Once they cleared enough of the snow away from the controls, the four people in the engine braced themselves to try to back the train up. The wheels spun and squealed on the tracks but the train other than shuddering from the effort did not move from its snow

bound spot on the tracks. Tom finally shut down the big engines to idle after several tries at freeing the big beast.

“We are going to have to get word out that we are stuck and with the radio not transmitting that means someone needs to hike back to Yuba Gap. It is only about a mile but in this weather it could take hours, and that is if you don’t lose the track and become lost.” Tom stated to the three people standing with him in the cab-forward engine.

“I’ll go Tom. No offense but you’re too old to make the hike,” offered Gordon.

“Thanks Gordon but I will need you here to help me keep the engines running and the boilers going to provide heat and lights for the passengers. Thanks buddy for the offer but you are sorely needed right here. I’ll have to see if one of the Porters will make the hike.”

As Rae was wondering how Maggie would react to her volunteering to go for help the man with them spoke up. “I’ll hike back for help. I am in great shape and traveling alone, so I have no one on board to worry about. I am sure you can use all your porters to keep everyone calm and happy. Just let me get my coat and I will head out.”

Tom slapped the man on the back “Good man, but we actually have some winter gear you can use. We have insulated overalls, parkas, boots and snowshoes that will make the hike easier on you. Come on lets get you outfitted and on your way.” Tom turned towards Rae, “Thank you ma’am for all your help but you might as well go on back to your car now; there isn’t anything else you can do at this point.”

Rae smiled at the engineer and took one last look around the huge engine before heading back to Maggie.

“Rae honey I was starting to worry you: were gone so long. What has happened?” Maggie took Rae’s hand in her own needing to feel connected with her lover.

“I’m sorry baby I didn’t mean to worry you. I was trying to help the engineer and fireman. We have run into a snow slide and buried half the engine. They tried to back the train out of the snow but had no luck: the train is frozen tight. One of the passengers is going to hike back to Yuba Gap for help because they were unable to get out on the radio. So now we just sit here and wait.” Rae finished telling her story by lovingly brushing a lock of Annie’s hair back behind her ear.

“How long do you think it will be?” Louisa asked overhearing Rae tell Maggie about their situation.

Rae shook her head, “I really don’t know. The engineer said Yuba Gap is only about a mile away but with the weather conditions it will take several hours to reach Yuba on foot and that’s if the hiker doesn’t lose sight of the track and get lost.”

Louisa was seated on the bench seat next to Andrea with her son Don on her lap and his legs draped across the lap of Andrea. She looked over at her other son thumb wrestling with Harvey and her daughter curled up sleeping on Bernie's lap as he gently rocked her back and forth. She was concerned for the welfare of her children if they remained stuck in this snow for very long.

"Do you suppose they have something that I can feed the children and maybe some blankets so that I can lay them down to sleep while we wait for help," Louisa asked no one in particular.

Andrea's heart lurched when she heard the concern and worry in Louisa's voice, not fully understanding her reaction to the woman she sat next to. "I'm sure there is something on board; after all the train was going on to San Diego after stopping in Sacramento. Girls do you think you could check on this, please?"

"Sure Mom we'll go find a porter," Annie looked over at her mother quizzically noticing that she was holding the hand of the woman who sat next to her. Andrea and Louisa were not even aware that they were holding hands.

As Maggie and Rae walked down the isle to find a Porter in one of the other cars Maggie whispered to Rae, "Did you notice my mom and Louisa were holding hands?"

"What?" Rae asked as she looked back over her shoulder at the two older women now locked in quiet conversation. "Wow! I always thought your Mom would be happier with a woman."

"Rae! You're talking about my Mom. She's not gay, she's my mom." Maggie said with obvious shock and horror on her face.

Rae seeing the non-acceptance on her lover's face to her suggestion quickly changed her position. "Well they are older women, honey. Old women are always holding each other's hands and such." Hoping this would smooth things over.

Maggie just rolled her eyes at Rae. "Mom isn't that old she is only forty-one and I'm sure Louisa's not even that old."

Rae, not knowing what to say, offered, "Well honey what does it matter, I mean, after all her daughter is gay." As soon as the words left her mouth, the look on her lover's face told Rae she should have gone with 'yes dear', instead.

"Don't worry Louisa, it will be okay. I am sure the girls will find the children something to eat and some blankets too. Then before you know it, help will be here and you and the

children will be safe at home back with your husband in no time.” Andrea squeezed Louisa’s hand reassuringly becoming aware for the first time that she held it in her own.

Louisa smiled weakly over at Andrea and squeezed her hand back. “There is no husband or father waiting back at home.”

“Oh, I’m sorry. I don’t have a husband either; he left me about a year ago for another woman.” Andrea said lowering her head. Even though she was not sad that he was not in her life any longer, she still felt embarrassment at admitting he left her.

“Well I am sorry your husband left you. But you don’t understand: I never have had a husband.” Louisa said looking hesitantly at Andrea.

Andrea’s face drew up in a look of confusion as she looked at the children then back at Louisa.

“My partner Lori and I decided to have children and I was artificially inseminated. No husband needed nor wanted.” Louisa smiled at Andrea.

“Oh!” Andrea turned Louisa’s hand loose and stood up. “I’m sorry if I... it’s just I assumed... I’m sorry.” Andrea then quickly went back to her original seat.

Louisa stayed in her seat for a few minutes wondering what had just happened and feeling a sense of lose with Andrea gone. She sat her son down on the seat and walked over to where Andrea sat. “I’m sorry if I shocked or upset you Andrea. I didn’t mean to, I was just explaining that I had no husband or anyone waiting for me at home”

Andrea looked up at Louisa, “No I’m the one who should apologize for jumping up that way. I don’t know why I did it. It certainly isn’t because you’re gay, my daughter is gay. Wait, you said you had no one waiting for you at home. What about your partner Lori?” Andrea patted the seat next to her for Louisa to sit down.

Louisa’s face registered the pain that she always felt when recalling the memory of how she had lost her long time partner. She took a deep breath and when she exhaled told Andrea how a drunk driver last New Years ran a light that took Lori’s life, her lover, and the children’s other parent and then he walked away without a scratch.

Maggie and Rae returned carrying four blankets and a sack full of sandwiches, three milks and several sodas. When Maggie noticed her mother and new friend had changed seats but were still holding hands, she nudged Rae and nodded toward the clasped hands. “We have some blankets and even snagged some food for us all. How are things here with you, Mom?”

Andrea looked up at her daughter into eyes that were the same golden brown as her own and wondered what that amused look on her face was for. “We’re fine, I’m glad you

girls found the blankets and some food. I was actually starting to get hungry. I'll help you feed the children Louisa and get them settled in."

The two women fed the children then found them each a bench seat to sleep on.

"You know I was heading to the restroom when this all started and I still haven't made it there." Louisa said to Andrea as she stood looking down at Sarah curled on the seat.

Harvey leaned into the aisle "You two go on and freshen up. Bernie and I will be here we'll keep an eye on the little ones."

The two women smiled at him and headed towards the restroom. Andrea smiled at the sight of her own daughter curled up under a blanket with her head resting on Rae's shoulder.

Andrea and Louisa squeezed into the tiny bathroom together. *Oh my God her breasts are so soft, what am I thinking?* With a nervous sound to her voice "Why don't I wait outside" Andrea said as her breasts were pressed firmly into Louisa's breast.

Oh, please no don't leave. Louisa gently brushed her lips across Andrea's afraid of actually kissing her but desiring her so greatly she had to see how soft her lips were.

Andrea sighed then leaned into Louisa and kissed her deeply. When Andrea pulled back from Louisa, she was breathing heavy and could swear she saw fireworks exploding overhead.

"I'm sorry; I don't know what caused me to do that. I have never kissed a woman on the mouth in my life." Andrea said as she leaned in to kiss her again.

Louisa kissed Andrea back and allowed her hands to roam up the front of Andrea until they lightly cupped her breast. The electric shock that shot through Andrea at having Louisa cup her breast made her gasp loudly. "Oh my gawd that feels... I am really sorry I need to go back to where my daughter and Rae are."

Andrea fumbled with the knob until the bathroom door opened and she headed back to her seat. *What have I done? I've kissed another woman. Oh my, what would Maggie think?* Andrea stopped in mid stride; what would Maggie think? Her daughter Maggie was gay and kissed women. However, would she think less of her mother kissing another woman? She had kissed another woman and for the first time in her life, she saw those fabled fireworks.

Andrea sat down across from her daughter Maggie and Maggie's partner Rae. The two young women looked so happy and natural together. Andrea's heart ached for that type of love and happiness. She looked up as Louisa walked past and then sit with her three children. Andrea knew she should go say something to Louisa, but what would she say? She would wait until morning, things are always clearer in the light of morning. She laid

her head back and closed her eyes to sleep dreaming of the softness of Louisa's lips and their kiss. She felt something that she had not felt in years... she felt an excitement growing inside.

Morning came early as everyone woke to the chill in the railcars. Louisa could see Andrea shivering in the cold and noticed Harvey and Bernie trying to capture some mutual warmth. "Children come here and bring your blankets. You two boys sit here with your sister and share a blanket." She then took one of the blankets and gave it to Harvey and Bernie who thanked her for the kindness.

Louisa sat down facing Andrea draping a blanket over herself. When Andrea looked at her Louisa pulled back the edge and with a look invited Andrea to join her. Andrea hesitated a moment shivered once then went to sit with Louisa under the warmth of her blanket. Louisa slowly and tentatively looped her arm in Andrea's to hold her hand, when Andrea did not reject her she laid her head on Andrea's shoulder.

"Momma I'm hungry," Sarah said. "Me too!" chimed in the twin boys.

Andrea looked at her daughter for help and Maggie nudged Rae "We did a pretty good job last night finding food: we'll see what we can come up with this morning."

As Maggie and Rae started for the other railcar in search of food Rae took Maggie by the arm "Honey it is way colder in here this morning than it was last night. How about you see if you can find some food and I go up to the engine and find out what is up with the heat?"

Maggie knew Rae was dying to get another look at the engine so she nodded her head 'yes' and gave her lover a quick peck on the lips.

Rae made her way forward to the engines to find Tom, Gordon and the head Porter Clay in heavy discussion. "Hey fellas what's up with the heat? Are we running out of diesel for the engine?"

At first, Tom was surprised to see a woman in his engine then recognized her as the one that helped dig him and Gordon out and clear the snow away from the engine's controls. Feeling a sense of companionship with the young woman, he welcomed her into the engine.

"Diesel isn't our biggest problem right now, its water. We only had a limited supply on board and planned to refill at Sacramento. As it is, we only have enough for our boiler to last until maybe noon if we keep conserving it as we are. Without the boiler we have no generator and no generator means no heat and no electricity." Tom told Rae the grim facts of their situation.

“Well do you think the rescue party will be here by then?” Rae asked, suddenly very concerned about their situation.

“There is no way of telling. I mean we don’t even know if that young feller made it through to Yuba Gap.” Tom had a real worried look on his face feeling the weight of responsibility for sending that man out in the snowstorm.

“I guess we better not run out of water then,” Rae stated with a sound of finality.

The three older men just stared at her all amazed at what they thought to be the innocence of youth. “That would be the optimal plan Miss, only thing is where are we suppose to get the water from.” Gordon the train’s fireman asked.

“Hell there is at least twenty foot of snow all around the train. What is snow but frozen water?” Rae stated what she thought was the obvious.

“But how do you propose we melt that frozen snow so that it is of use to us?” Gordon was slightly annoyed with Rae’s optimism.

Now Rae was becoming annoyed with Gordon’s pessimism “We build a fire out of anything that will burn on this damn train and we melt the snow in any damn thing that will hold snow and not burn in the fire. Listen guys I love this train and know how much work went in to restoring it, but I think that keeping people from freezing to death is a little more important.”

“We could use all the wooden ladders for the berths and there are the dinning car chairs and the card tables.” Clay offered up.

“Great! We’ll need to collect all the magazines and newspapers, too. We can get several of the passengers to help us gather everything up and a couple of them to clear a place for the fire. It will be good to keep everyone busy helps to make the time pass faster. We need to also figure out what we are going to use to hold the snow so we can melt it,” Rae said enthusiastic for her project.

Maggie returned to what she was considering her newfound family with doughnuts, milk for the three kids and coffee for the adults. She smiled as she handed Harvey and Bernie each a cup of coffee, “I’m sorry I wasn’t able to get any sugar or cream.”

“Oh honey this is just wonderful anyway it’s HOT.” Bernie patted Maggie on the arm thankful for the young woman’s kindness.

Rae walked up with a look of excitement and determination on her face. “Hey babe I’m going to need your help.” She reached over and snagged a doughnut from the sack Maggie held.

“What’s up, Rae?” Maggie caressed the arm of her lover.

“The train is running out of water for the boiler and that is why the lack of heat. We need to gather wood, magazines anything that will burn so we can start a fire and melt some snow for the boiler. You want to help get it going?” Rae said popping the last bite of doughnut in her mouth.

Harvey stood up “Bernie and I can help too.”

Rae looked at the elderly gentleman leaning heavily on a cane. She walked up to him and placed her hand on his shoulder “That would be great, but if you could I need you two to do something else for me.”

Harvey first looked at Bernie then back at Rae “Sure whatever is needed of us.”

“I was thinking the fewer cars we had to heat the longer our resources would last. If you two gentlemen could get everyone to gather in this car and if we need the next one we could shut the heat off to the others and conserve what we have.”

“That is a splendid idea, young lady. Harvey and I will get right on it.” Bernie smiled feeling good to have a task.

“Do we know how long it will be before help arrives?” Louisa once again looked at her children with concern for their welfare showing on her face.

“The engineer doesn’t know how long we are going to be here. It all depends on whether that guy made it through to Yuba Gap, we could be here another night or even more.” Rae wasn’t sure how much to say in front of the kids.

With a mouth full of doughnut, Sarah looked worried at her mother “Momma does that mean Santa won’t be able to find us and bring our presents? Are we not going to have Christmas?”

The twins Don and Jon soon had looks of concern on their faces realizing that they might miss Christmas stopped eating waiting for their mother’s answer.

Andrea seeing the pain of disappointment on Louisa’s face and the worry in the children stood up “Of course we are having Christmas and I bet when Rae gets the fire going she will send up a smoke signal to notify Santa of our location, won’t you Rae?”

Three small faces turned to Rae with anticipation. Being surprised to have a part in this charade Rae looked at her mother-in-law dumbfounded until Maggie elbowed her in the ribs. “Smoke signal, Santa, sure, you bet: first thing we get the fire started.”

With the assurance Santa would be contacted by smoke signal, the three small faces ruptured into smiles and all was right in their world again. Louisa looked into Andrea’s

eyes with warmth and appreciation at seeing the smiles return to her children's faces. She reached over and gently squeezed her arm to convey her thanks.

Andrea discreetly winked at Louisa before turning back to the others. "Okay girls you better get to that fire. Harvey you and Bernie get everyone moving and then we are all going to decorate the car and prepare for Christmas."

The children let out squeals of joy and started bouncing in their seats with excitement.

"I think we should just make a small fire, it shouldn't take much heat to melt the snow. I think that way it will make our supply of wood last longer." Rae said looking at the men and women gathered about who helped clear an area and gather burnable material off the train.

"Do we have something to put the snow in so we can melt it?" Maggie looked around to see if there was something lying about, already.

"The head Porter Clay said he thought he knew of something and went after it, speaking of him there he comes," said Rae.

"Here you go Miss Rae, do you think this will work for melting the snow in?" Clay handed Rae a galvanized washtub.

"That will be great. What was an old tub like this doing on a luxury train, I wonder?" Rae said taking the tub from Clay.

"Well I keep it for soaking my feet in at the end of a long day." Clay admitted to the young woman's inquiry.

"Well Clay your sore feet may have just saved us from freezing to death." Rae laughed as she situated the tub on the fire to fill with snow.

"I'm glad I can help Miss. If you don't need me any longer, I need to see what we are going to give everyone for lunch. We hadn't planned on serving lunch when we left Reno." Clay turned to go back on the train.

"If you don't need me out here anymore I think I am going back on the train too, Rae. Mom has everyone making stuff to decorate the train with for Christmas and even getting gifts together, too. I want to see if I can be of help." Maggie touched Rae's arm to have some contact with her lover, as was her habit before leaving.

"How is the melting of snow for water coming outside sweetheart?" Andrea asked her daughter Maggie as she came into the rail car.

“Rae has everything in hand and seems so happy you would never guess we are in a life-threatening situation. She acts like we are at a camp out or something.” Maggie laughed thinking of her take charge lover. “So what can I do to help in here Mom?”

“We are tearing the gold and the purple velvet curtains and bedspreads into strips about one inch wide. We plan to use it for garland to decorate our tree and the inside of the rail car. Bernie is helping the children cut stars out of some heavy construction paper we found. Harvey has a group in the next car practicing Christmas carols to sing for everyone tomorrow. A group is organizing food and we will each need to get our Christmas gifts out of the cargo car. Pick a group and lend a hand.” Andrea smiled at her daughter as she leaned a little closer to Louisa.

“What are you planning on using for a tree Mom?” Maggie asked looking around.

“I knew we were forgetting something. That can be your task to find us something to use as a Christmas tree.” Andrea smiled lovingly at her daughter.

A Christmas tree where am I going to get something to use as a Christmas tree stuck out here in the snow. Maggie thought to herself as she looked out the window to see if there where any small trees in sight. All she could see were some very large trees several yards up the side of the mountain that looked completely inaccessible for her to climb. Maggie turned to go back through the cars to see what she might find. It made her feel good and warm inside to see how everyone was working together to make a Christmas for the children on board the train.

“Hi Clay, how are things looking for lunch?” Maggie asked the Porter when she met him coming through the cars.

“It’s not going to be lunch at the Ritz but I think we have enough to keep everyone from starving. Where are you heading Miss?”

“I’ve been given the assignment of finding something suitable to use as a Christmas tree. I didn’t notice any small trees outside and besides the trees all look un-attainable up on the hill side. Do you have any ideas for me?” Maggie hoped the Porter could pull a tree out of his hat as he had the washtub.

“A Christmas tree? Now that is a hard one to solve. Wait I have a thought, come with me.” Clay was all smiles as he led Maggie back to the cargo car.

Rambling through and pushing boxes aside a big smile finally broke out across Clay’s face. “Here we go Miss.” Clay said as he held up a few feather dusters.

Maggie wrinkles her brow looking back and forth at the exuberant smile on Clay’s face and the dusters he was holding in his hands. “Don’t you think they make kind of a small tree, Clay?”

Clay realizing what Maggie is thinking chuckles “No ma’am Miss Maggie we take the dusters and we attach them to one of the metal coat trees like limbs.”

Maggie finally grasping Clay’s plan burst in to smile and hugged the Porter around his neck. “Fantastic idea Clay I think you have solved our Christmas tree problem!”

Louisa loved the warmth of Andrea sitting next to her she enjoyed the attractive woman’s company. She found herself being torn between her devotion to Lori’s memory and her interest in this new woman who was **straight**. *Jeez, get a grip Louisa. Andrea is straight and you have the children to worry about now. What is going on with your hormones anyways?* Louisa chuckled at her inner thoughts.

“What’s funny?” Asked Andrea.

Louisa’s face flushed knowing she had been busted “What?”

“I asked what was funny. You chuckled, so obviously something struck you as funny. Come on and share it I can use a good chuckle myself.”

“Oh it is nothing really I was just wondering what was going on with my hormones?”

“Your hormones? Aren’t you a little young to be going through the change? Are you having hot flashes?” Andrea looked at Louisa with concern.

Louisa couldn’t help but break out into a full belly laugh at Andrea’s interpretation of her comment. She stood to leave calling back over her shoulder “You could say I am having hot flashes but it has nothing to do with going through the change, honey.”

Andrea watched her walk down the isle wondering what else could it be when Maggie showed up with her Christmas tree.

“Hey Mom so what do you think of our Christmas tree?” Maggie smiled brightly at her mother.

“What? Oh I’m sorry honey what did you say?”

“I asked how you liked the Christmas tree. Clay helped me make it.”

“Oh honey that is marvelous! Reminds me of a small tree my grandmother from Germany had when I was a child. I love it, just absolutely love it.”

Maggie beamed at the praise bestowed her by her mother. “Where shall we sit it so that we can decorate it?”

“How about we put it in the landing area there? I think there will be enough room and it will not be in anyone’s way.”

“Great, I think that will work just fine.”

“Maggie honey can I ask you a question?” Andrea asked apprehensively while looking at Louisa at the other end of the car.

Maggie still looking at her tree replies “Sure mom anything, you know that.” She then turns towards her mother and follows her gaze toward Louisa. Maggie decided she probably better sit down for this question and collapsed on the nearest bench seat with a loud sigh.

Andrea turned back to her daughter and decided to sit beside her. “Earlier Louisa and I were working together when she suddenly chuckled. I asked what was funny and she said ‘oh nothing I was just wondering what was going on with my hormones’. I asked if she was going through the change and having hot flashes. She got up to walk off laughing and said ‘You could say I am having hot flashes but it has nothing to do with going through the change.’ What do you think she meant by that?”

Maggie couldn’t restrain a slight laugh of her own at her mother’s innocence. “Mom you really have no idea?”

Andrea getting a look on her face that definitely said she was not happy with her daughter’s laughter. “If I had known would I be asking you?”

“Okay sorry mom. I think Louisa was saying she has the hots for you and that you have her hormones in high gear. I mean look at you two. Sitting close, holding hands, her resting her head on your shoulder, the intimate way you two lean in to talk together. Mom, I think you are interested in a woman and she is interested in you, too.” Maggie stated matter of fact.

“Don’t be ridiculous. I mean after all I am your mother. I was married for twenty three years don’t forget, to a man your father. Do you really think she has the hots for me? What would you think of me if I had the hots for her too?” Andrea took her daughters hands in her own worried about the reply.

Maggie laughed at the way her mother rambled on before she asked her real question. She wanted to know what she thought of her loving another woman. What else could she say, “Mom this is the happiest I have seen you in years. If you really are interested I say, go for it. Louisa seems like a very nice person, I like her.”

Andrea all smiles at her daughter’s easy acceptance. “She is very nice isn’t she? And she has the softest lips.”

“Mom! How do you know how soft her lips are? Have you already kissed her?”

Andrea blushed at her daughters inquiry and nodded her head 'yes' then the two laughed together and shared a hug. "Come on Maggie let's get this tree decorated."

That night after the train and tree were decorated and the children were sound asleep Andrea accompanied Louisa back to the baggage car to retrieve the children's Christmas presents. "Burr it is kind of cold back here isn't it?" said Louisa

"Rae shut all the vents off except one to this car to save heat but she didn't want anything to freeze so it is rather cool. Here let me warm you up a little then we will search for your box." Andrea boldly wrapped her arms around Louisa's shoulders and waist pulling her in close to her own body.

Louisa allowed Andrea to pull her in close but she rested her hands flat on the other woman's chest. "Andrea do you have any idea what you are doing to me? I don't know if I can be this close to you in your arms and not kiss you."

"Well I guess I must be doing something right, because that is exactly what I want. I want to kiss you; I want to taste your lips, I... I want to do much more with you."

"Then show me Andrea. Kiss me and show me what you want to do to me." Louisa wrapped an arm around Andrea's neck and tangled her other hand in the auburn hair pulling their lips together. Andrea nibbled on Louisa's lip, urging her to open her mouth which Louisa happily did welcoming Andrea's tongue to duel with her own.

Louisa moaned and almost devoured Andrea's mouth hungry for the sweet passion her lips conveyed. Andrea gave her everything, she held nothing back, opening her mouth wider to drink in the sweetness offered her. She needed to be closer, she needed to feel Louisa's skin on her own. She boldly started unbuttoning Louisa's shirt without ever breaking their kiss. She found the soft mounds with the hardening nipples her hands greedily taking them in fondling them passionately. Andrea's palms tingling with the sensation of the nipples pebbling in her grasp.

Louisa gasped loudly causing them to break the kiss and Andrea began trailing kisses down to take one of the nipples in her mouth. Never had she felt anything as nice as the sensation of Louisa's erect nipple on her tongue. With a husky voice Louisa said, "Andrea I don't think I can stand it much longer, please touch me." She then guided the older woman's hand down into her pants.

At the first touch of the hot slick wetness, Andrea thought she might come herself. She started stroking the slick lips circling the nub of nerves with her thumb. She again found the nipple with her mouth lavishing it with her tongue then pulling back and gently blowing on it. This extracted a growl from Louisa.

"Andrea please don't tease me. I need you so much please enter me."

Andrea gently slid two fingers in slick muscles contracted around them pulling them in further. "Yes! Yes darling... just like that. I want you deeper inside. Ah yes, yes Andrea take me." Louisa arched into the touch and growled with desire when Andrea again took a nipple into her mouth.

Andrea started a steady rhythm curling her fingers up searching for Louisa's special spot. The throaty husky voice of Louisa's encouragement sent chills running up and down Andrea's spine causing her own arousal to heighten.

When Louisa cried out and started convulsing in her climax Andrea found herself following suit. Tears flowed freely down both women's cheeks as they held each other tightly. Andrea whispering soothing words in Louisa's ear reassuring her she was okay.

Louisa not only heard the words she felt comfort in the softness of the other woman's voice and the warmth and love in her embrace. It took them several minutes to catch their breath and right their clothing before locating the presents and returning to the passenger car where they slept soundly in each other's arms.

Christmas morning arrived with the squeals of children standing in front of the makeshift Christmas tree. When they had gone to bed the night before the tree had no presents but now sat stuffed with gifts flowing out from beneath.

"Momma, momma look Santa found us! He brought us gifts!" Sarah jumped up and down with excitement then bolted into Rae's lap. The little girl wrapped her arms around Rae's neck hugging her tight. "Oh thank you so much Rae for sending Santa the smoke signals!"

Rae had never been around children looked at Maggie for help while tentatively patting the little girl on the back. Maggie laughed at the look of distress on her lovers face and scooped Sarah up in her own arms. Hugging the little girl close "Rae was more than happy to help, now you better get back to the tree or you might miss getting your gift." The little girl scurried back to the tree smiling back at the two young women over her shoulder.

"What's the matter honey?" Maggie wrapped her arm in Rae's and gave her a bemused smile at the look she found on Rae's face.

"Maggie have you ever thought about having children?" She looked seriously into the golden brown eyes staring back at her with amusement.

"As in give birth to a child?" Maggie was wondering where this suddenly came from. She and Rae had never spoke of children she wasn't even sure if Rae liked kids.

“We’ll yeah, I guess eventually. But you know there are so many kids out there with out families and no one to share Christmas with. Look at those kids at the tree; wouldn’t you like to see that every year?”

Maggie could tell something was nagging at Rae and that she was serious about the topic but wanted to know what brought it on. “Rae honey what started you to thinking of children?”

Rae’s eyes clouded up with tears as she looked at her partner. “I have never told you but I am adopted. I lived in foster care until I was almost six. For years, I thought no one wanted me and that Santa thought I was a bad girl, because I never got what I asked him to bring. I guess seeing those kids so happy at that pitiful tree just brought it all back to me.”

Maggie quickly wrapped her arms around Rae. “I want you baby for always. You are such a kind, generous and loving woman. If you want children we can look into it as soon as we get back home.”

Rae relaxed into Maggie’s arms feeling the warmth and security she provided looked over and smiled at her. “I think maybe we should wait a few years until we are sure we could provide for a child, I was just wondering if you would mind sharing our home in the future. Personally, I am not ready to share you. I want to be selfish a little longer and keep your attentions all to myself.”

Maggie laughed softly and pulled Rae closer feeling so much love for the woman she held in her arms. She knew they would have to find a place for some time alone soon; she missed the intimate touches and shared love of her partner. This is the best Christmas ever sitting stranded on this train holding the woman I will always love in my arms thought Maggie.

Andrea and Bernie passed out the Christmas gifts making sure everyone on the train including the crew received something. Harvey was leading his make shift choir singing carols in the background. The feeling of love and joy was everywhere.

Louisa sitting next to Andrea slipped a small box into her hand “I want you to have this from me. It’s not much but I wanted to give you something.”

Andrea took the box and then looking into Louisa’s eyes turning a shade deeper showing love for the woman with whom she sat. “I’m sorry I didn’t get something for you.”

Louisa leaned closer to Andrea so she could speak softly and not be over heard “Honey you gave me mine last night in the baggage car.”

Her face turning red Andrea had a shy smile on her face and proceeded to open the small box. Inside she found an old key on a ring with a bob made from what looked like woven hair. She looked back at Louisa with a slight confused look on her face.

“That is the key to my heart, if you want it.” Louisa replied to the unasked question.

Tears first built in Andrea’s eyes and then quickly cascaded down her cheeks. “Do I want it? I want it more than anything I have ever wanted in my life.” The two women embraced in a heartfelt hug.

For Christmas dinner several passenger dug out food items they were taking with them. A Virginia salted ham was produced with several fruitcakes and many cookies, there was some chocolate and candies and even a box of fresh fruit along with items the crew was able to scrounge every one was looking forward to a wonderful Christmas meal. They all stood holding hands as the Porter Clay gave thanks for their bounty and the blessings they all received that Christmas day. When the last Amen was voiced, everyone suddenly became quiet. What was that strange noise they could hear in the distance?

Tom and Gordon both quickly ran to the exit of the train and looked down the track. Soon everyone on the train heard whoops coming from the two men and others ventured outside to see what the excitement was.

Tom came back on board all smiles “Friends it looks like the Cavalry is arriving and we will all be going home for Christmas!”

The train erupted in shouts and whistles: everyone felt blessed to know rescue was imminent. Sure enough within ten minutes a rotary snowplow followed by a heavy Mallet steam engine pulled up to the stranded train. The rescuers were invited in to celebrate Christmas dinner before they would begin the return to Yuba Gap with the stranded passenger car in tow.

As the train pulled into Yuba Gap Tom came back into the passenger car, “Folks I know it has been a tough three days but I have never felt more of the Christmas spirit than I did with you all. Everyone working together and providing for each other even made my old heart feel warmth. I want to thank you each and everyone for all you did to keep spirits up and keep the true Christmas spirit. However, Gordon, Clay and I would like to give one passenger a special gift. Because of her optimism and spirit, she didn’t let these three old dogs fail their crew. Rae would you come up here ma’am?”

With a look of surprise on her face, Rae stood to walk over where Tom stood grinning back at her. “Rae on behalf of the crew of *The City of San Francisco* I would be honored if you would accept this engineer’s cap with our logo on it and the medallion off the steam whistle in appreciation from a grateful crew.”

The car erupted in cheers as a happy Rae donned the cap and gave Tom a big hug both smiling ear to ear. Everyone was happy for the young woman who did deserve praise for all she did to help them make it through their ordeal. All on board seemed hesitant to leave having bonded together over the last few days. Slowly they started to disembark each going their own way to celebrate Christmas with family and friends.

“Maggie honey you and Rae go on to your brothers. I am going to go meet Louisa’s mother first and then we will see you all tomorrow.” Andrea was beaming at her daughter while holding hands with Louisa on one side and Sarah on the other.

“Actually mom Rae and I thought that we might go to a little B&B we know and celebrate Christmas alone, you don’t mind do you?”

“How about we all meet up day after tomorrow at Brennigans for supper around seven?” Andrea looked to see if this was okay with Louisa who nodded her concurrence.

They all waved good bye and were on their way to have a very Merry Christmas.

The End

I would like to thank everyone who has taken the time to read my stories and especially all of you who write me. I wish each of you a very merry holiday season and a happy New Year. Best wishes and warmest regards, Cherokee

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