



## Good Will to Men

—by Anne (12.7.14)

Author's Notes: The story is selected scenes from the Season Nine episode "A Christmas Secret," as told from Seth Hazlitt's point of view.

*I heard the bells on Christmas day  
Their old familiar carols play  
And mild and sweet their songs repeat  
Of peace on earth good will to men.*

*And in despair I bowed my head  
There is no peace on earth I said  
For hate is strong and mocks the song  
Of peace on earth, good will to men.*

**Call me a curmudgeon** - you might as well, everybody else does - but Christmas was not my favorite holiday, and hadn't been for 'bout as long as I could remember. Oh, I liked the carols and the decorations well enough, I suppose, but it all seemed superficial, a veneer of tinsel on what was, after all, the darkest, coldest time of the year. So while it seemed like everyone around me was feeling the "holiday spirit," I felt ... nothing.

Still, I tried my best to not let my lack of cheer dampen anyone else's. When Alan and Mary Forsythe invited me to a holiday party celebrating their daughter Beth's engagement, I fully intended to decline ... but Jessica, who was home from New York for the holidays and also on the guest list, talked me into going instead.

"Aren't you even a *little bit* curious to meet Charlie McCumber?" she asked, her voice taking on a wheedling tone.

I had to admit that I was as interested as anybody to meet Beth's fiancé, a young Army veteran who, rumor had it, was planning on settling down in Cabot Cove for good. And so it was that I found myself spending an otherwise perfectly good Saturday afternoon in the company of people a heckuva lot merrier than I was.

I stuck close to Jessica for the duration, sipping champagne and observing the proceedings with a dispassionate eye.

"They certainly are an attractive couple," Jessica said.

"Of course they are," I snorted. "They've got their health and they're under thirty."

The party wound down and eventually we said our good-byes and left. As we stepped outside Jessica took a deep breath of the cold winter air. "Smell that, Seth!"

Charlie, who was also leaving, looked at her quizzically. "Smell what, Mrs. Fletcher?"

"The air - it's crisp and dry," she said, sounding altogether too happy about it. "And the wind is in the North."

There were times when Jessica's boundless optimism could be grating, and this was one of those times. "What Jessica's trying to say is we're in for a white Christmas," I grumbled. "Wishful thinking, Jessica. Besides, snow leads to traffic accidents and frozen extremities."

I knew my sour comment was a mistake the moment I made it as Jessica shot me one of her "looks." Sure enough, as soon we were out of earshot of the others she tugged at my sleeve.

"Something wrong, Seth?" she asked.

"I don't think so," I said, forcing a smile. "What gives you that idea?"

"Well," she said, "you've been going out of your way to deny even a smidgen of Christmas spirit."

I sighed. I could have put her off, changed the subject - but Jessica was as persistent as she was preceptive. Sometimes that could be annoying as well. But she'd get the story out of me sooner or later - it might as well be sooner, and have it over and done with.

"I guess it has come over that way," I admitted. "The fact is, these past few days I've been reminded of when I was ten years old."

"Oh? What happened when you were ten?"

I shrugged and avoided looking at her. "You'd think it was silly."

I tried to walk on, but if I thought Jessica would let me off with such a superficial explanation, I was wrong. She stopped me, turning me around so that I had no choice but to face her. "Try me."

Why not, I thought, so I took a deep breath and began. "Well, that was the Christmas I'd decided to sneak down and explore under the tree, the way kids will do," I told her. I smiled a little at the memory. "I was sure my Pop had saved up to buy me a train set. I can remember the tingle of anticipation, all those mysterious, colourful packages! Well, later that morning when I opened them up, it wasn't a train set, no, it was underwear and

socks.” I paused, surprised at how fresh the hurt still felt, even after all these years. “Jess, I don’t think you can understand how incredibly disappointing that is for a ten year old.”

“I think I do.”

I pulled myself together. “This year, with the world in the shape it’s in, Christmas is a hollow promise,” I said. “We shouldn’t be looking for toys anymore.” I turned up my collar against the wind, and headed for home.

I’d managed to at least partially restore my well-practiced facade of holiday cheer in time for the Christmas party at the community center the following evening and even enjoyed myself, if only for Jessica’s sake. This year I had again been asked to play the role of Santa Claus, which was the height of irony - I’m pretty sure it had as much to do with my ability to fit the dimensions of the costume as anything else. And once again I had said yes.

“I’d better get into my Santa Claus suit,” I said, rising from the table I shared with Jessica and young Charlie McCumber.

“What’s that about?” Charlie asked Jessica.

“Oh, that’s the raffle,” she told him. “Seth matches the number on your dinner ticket, and if you’re lucky, you might win a prize.”

“She’s on the raffle committee, but it’s just more foolishness!” I groused. “Last year, I won a pair of sequined bedroom slippers. Weren’t even my color.” I gave an affronted sniff that made Jessica smile, and withdrew to the locker room to change.

I had just finished when I heard the shot, and moments later the alarm was raised: Wanda Andrews had been found lying on the floor of the women’s locker room, a bullet wound to her head.

I shucked off my Santa coat and knelt down beside her to assess her vital signs. I expected to find that she had been killed instantly, yet when I touched my fingers to her neck, there was a pulse. I rolled up my sleeves and pressed the towel Jessica handed to me to the side of her head to staunch the bleeding.

Very soon we were at the eye of a hurricane of activity as Mort and his deputies tried to get the situation under control. After what felt like an eternity the paramedics finally showed up, and very gently we rolled Wanda on to a back board and stabilized her head with a neck brace.

“She’s still alive, so take it easy, very easy,” I told them as I placed a portable oxygen mask over Wanda’s face. As they lifted her on to the stretcher I turned to Jessica and Mort and said, “Don’t ask me why or how, but her heart’s still beating.”

Jessica had tears in her eyes. “What are her chances, Seth?”

“Next to none, I’m afraid. I’ll go with her.”

When we arrived at the hospital, the battle for Wanda's life began in earnest. Shock-rate fluids through her IV. Intubation and oxygen. Mannitol and dexamethasone for intracranial swelling. A transfusion for blood loss. And monitoring, endless monitoring.

Once she was relatively stable I sent her off for x-rays and a CT scan while I put in a call to Frederick Nielsen at Maine Med, the best neurosurgeon I knew. If Wanda were to have any chance at all, we were going to need his help.

I hung up the phone and lowered my face into my hands for a long moment. Pain and suffering know no season, and death doesn't care if it's Christmas.

Fred must have broken every speed limit between Portland and Cabot Cove to get here as quickly as he did. We'd anticipated his arrival, and already had Wanda prepped for surgery. By midnight Fred and I were gowned up and scrubbed in, and the surgery began.

Brain surgery, I'm convinced, is one of those times when fortune favors the bold, and if there were ever a case for boldness, it was now. Fred worked quickly and confidently, removing a section of Wanda's skull to access the damaged part of her brain. Although the wound looked devastating to my eyes, Fred seemed almost pleased.

"The wound is fairly superficial, Seth," he announced after some probing. "If we can clean out the debris and relieve the hematoma, then it will all come down to whether we can control the swelling post-op."

The bullet had fragmented - that did cause us some trouble - but Fred remained calm, collecting the bits of metal and depositing them one by one into a stainless steel kidney pan.

All in all, we were in surgery for nearly three hours.

"There," said Fred once he had placed a "bolt" - a pressure monitor - to his satisfaction. "We're through here."

"What do you think her chances are?" I asked as we left the OR.

"Hard to say," Fred said as he stripped off his surgical gloves. "The next seventy-two hours are the most critical. There's going to be swelling - we can't prevent it, so we'll just have to manage that as best we can. But as long as the swelling doesn't cause more damage than the original trauma did, and she doesn't start hemorrhaging again, she might just make it." He shrugged. "We'll know in a few days."

The next morning I showed up on Jessica's doorstep after a very long night, exhausted and somewhat worse for wear, having not even bothered to change out of my scrubs. She must have anticipated my arrival because she immediately sat me down at her kitchen table and pressed a cup of strong, hot coffee into my hands.

"Wanda Andrews is still alive," I told her as she offered me a plate of freshly-baked muffins. "She struck me as a rather ornery young woman, all gristle and not much heart. Maybe it was gristle that saved her life."

“What do you mean by that?” Jessica asked as she refilled my cup.

“Well, the bullet struck the occipital lobe a glancing blow, then was deflected in some fluky fashion, centimeters from where it could have done real harm,” I said. “Dr. Neilsen healed the resulting hematoma.”

“I take it she showed more heart than you thought,” said Jessica.

The doorbell rang and Jessica went to answer it. Curious to see who would come calling at such an early hour, I followed her.

Beth Forsythe was shivering on Jessica’s front step. “Beth! Hello.”

“Mrs. Fletcher, I’m so sorry it’s early, but I just had to talk to you.” She sounded distraught. “The Sheriff has arrested Charlie for Wanda Andrews’ murder!”

“It’s not murder yet, young lady,” I said. “Not while the victim’s still alive and kicking.”

Beth nearly wilted with relief. “Thank God!”

“Beth, come in,” Jessica said, and guided her down to a chair.

The story tumbled out of her - how forensics had determined that Charlie’s gun had fired the shot, and how Wanda’s blackmail tape had been found in his room at the Hill House. She looked like she wanted to say more, but hesitated - at which point Jessica gave me a look that told me in no uncertain terms to make myself scarce.

“I think I’ll grab some shut-eye before I head back to the hospital,” I said, hastily draining my coffee cup before excusing myself and reaching for my coat.

I went home, dragged myself upstairs to my bedroom and was asleep within moments. Tired as I was, I didn’t think I would dream, but as soon as my eyes slid shut I was back in the operating room, frantically working to save Wanda’s life. Fred wasn’t there to help - no one was, I was all alone - and there I was trying to perform brain surgery with nothing more to guide me than the distant memories of what I had learned in medical school. Except that what I seemed to remember was that I’d slept through that particular lecture ...

And then the dream took a darker turn as I looked down at my patient’s face. I was horrified when I realized that the blond hair matted with blood didn’t belong to Wanda Andrews, but to Jessica ...

I abruptly sat up in bed, my breath coming in short gasps, my heart still pounding. According to the clock on my bedside table I’d slept for three hours, and it was already time to be heading back to the hospital.

Reality helped chase away the lingering cobwebs from my nightmare. When I arrived I found Fred at Wanda’s bedside, checking her monitors and jotting down notes in her medical record. The young woman was still deeply sedated and breathing with the help of a respirator, her head swathed in bandages.

“How’s she doing?” I asked him.

“‘Bout as well as could be expected,” Fred replied. “Serious, but stable. The pressure in her brain has gone up, but not too high. It looks like the sedatives are working.” He stood up and handed me the clipboard and chart. “I need to get back to Maine Med, so I’m turning the case back over to you.” He smiled as he gave me a collegial slap on the shoulder. “I know I’m leaving her in good hands.”

I fervently hoped that he was right.

I hovered around Wanda’s bedside for another few hours before the attending doctor in charge of the ICU chased me away.

“Why don’t you take a break, Dr. Hazlitt?” Jonas Beckwith suggested. “We’ll call you if her condition changes.”

I put up a token resistance, pointing to the monitor that was registering the pressure levels in Wanda Andrew’s brain. “Her numbers are still going up.”

Beckwith nodded with understanding. “Dr. Neilsen said that they would. If they get too high, we’ll call you - I promise.”

He was right, of course. I reached for my coat and my car keys.

“The star goes on last, Jess.”

Jessica looked down from her stepladder at where I was seated in a comfortable chair, supervising the tree trimming proceedings with yet another cup of hot coffee. It was the afternoon of the twenty-third, and outside the sky was leaden, but the ground was still bare of snow.

“Says who?” she demanded.

“Well ... says everybody!” I punctuated my declaration with another sip of coffee - I don’t think I’d drunk this much coffee since my residency, but right now it was exactly what was needed.

Jessica rolled her eyes and placed the star on the top spire of her Christmas tree, first of all the ornaments.

“Fine,” I muttered, helping myself to a sugar cookie with red sprinkles. “You want to do it backwards, that’s your business.”

“I heard that.”

“Umph.” I couldn’t think of a snappy comeback, so I decided to change the subject. “I hope you’re planning on making your special English Christmas pudding again this year?”

Jessica laughed. “Of course, Seth!” she said as she came down from her step ladder, collected the empty cookie plate, and headed for the kitchen. “Why should this year be any different from last year?”

“Well, you’ve been a bit distracted over this whole business with Wanda Andrews, and now there’s the added element of the pension money she apparently has stolen.” Jessica had filled me in on this latest twist in the case, and I was still fuming with

indignation. “I am blasted, if that isn’t the meanest thing a person can do, depriving retired folk of their independence!”

“Another big reason to keep Wanda alive, Seth,” Jessica pointed out. “She is the only person who can help us to locate the money.”

I stifled a yawn. “Ay-yuh.”

“But the question in my mind is, what was it that provoked the attack on her life?” Jessica wondered aloud as she refilled my coffee cup. “Was it her own blackmail scheme? Or was it her knowledge of the embezzlement?”

“Um-hm,” I said as I took a seat at the kitchen table. “Well, that is two different kettles of fish.”

“And who was she blackmailing?” she continued as she poured herself a fresh cup and sat down opposite me. “The tape that I heard in the Sheriff’s office could have been directed at almost anyone.” She paused, then added, “At the same time there was something downright *personal* about it.”

“And if the intended victim was someone else, Wanda might have become impatient and contacted them directly.”

“And they retaliated by trying to kill Wanda,” said Jessica.

I hesitated. “Jess, I hate to bring this up,” I said, “but if Charlie’s gun was stolen, you have to consider who had access to Charlie’s room at the hotel.”

“I know,” said Jessica wryly. “Beth. Like anybody else from here she could have recognized Wanda’s voice on the tape, and tried to kill her to protect Charlie.” She shook her head. “Sorry – I just don’t believe that of Beth.”

“You just don’t – or you’d rather not?” I countered, knowing that Jessica’s heart ruled her as much as her head. “Well, I’d better be getting back to the hospital. Thanks for the coffee.” I got up from the table, patted her on the shoulder, and left.

The rest of the day was a blur. Wanda’s intracranial pressure was up, then it was down, then it was up again. We were constantly playing catch-up with her meds, adjusting and re-adjusting the IV drips. Outside it got dark; I vaguely remember someone handing me a cup of tomato soup and half of a grilled cheese sandwich brought up from the cafeteria for dinner. Ordinarily I’m not a big fan of hospital food, but tired as I was, it tasted as good as anything Jess and I had ever cooked up in her kitchen.

I guess it was around ten o’clock when they kicked me out and sent me home to get some sleep.

The next day was Christmas Eve.

The hospital ward was abuzz with news when I arrived that morning. Apparently Jessica had a busy night, and although the details were sketchy, she’d somehow managed to tie up both Wanda’s attempted murder and the mystery of who’d made off with the

pension funds. As if that weren't enough, she'd also found Charlie McCumber's sister and daughter, Belinda, who he somehow hadn't gotten around to telling Beth about.

"Seems to me that was kinda an important detail to leave out," I muttered as I went in search of the strongest coffee I could find.

I gathered more details about Jessica's hi jinx over the course of the day, mostly from overheard snippets of conversation in the hallway outside of Wanda's recovery room. It turned out that Floyd Bigelow had been the pension embezzler - no big surprise there, I'd never liked the man - and Wanda knew about it and was blackmailing him over it. That didn't come as much of a surprise to me either. What *was* surprising was the revelation that it had been Amy Wainwright who had tried to kill Wanda. It was a pretty open secret in town that Amy'd been carrying a torch for Bigelow for as long as she had worked for him, but I never imagined that she had it in her to shoot someone over him.

It was getting on toward three in the afternoon when the pressure in Wanda Andrews' skull dropped to its lowest point since the surgery, and kept falling. Encouraged, I started dialing back the sedative a little at a time and waited to see what happened. An hour went by without any change, and then ...

"Doctor," the attending nurse said urgently, "look. I think she's starting to come around."

She nodded at Wanda's face, and sure enough, her eyelids were starting to flutter. The sedative was finally wearing off; Wanda was trying to wake up. But how much damage had she been left with?

I decided to start with something simple. Taking the young woman's hand in my own, I squeezed it.

"Show me two fingers," I said.

Nothing happened; the moments ticked by with agonizing slowness.

"Wanda, show me two fingers," I repeated.

Slowly, Wanda's hand moved, and very deliberately, she held up two fingers.

The room erupted in applause, and I let out a breath that I hadn't even realized I was holding.

The Forsythes threw a second party that evening to celebrate the acceptance of little Belinda as their future granddaughter. I arrived late, having stopped off at the hospital to look in on Wanda just one more time. Immediately I sought out Jessica, who I found having a conversation with young Charlie.

"Beth knows that you were afraid of losing her, and that's what counts for her," Jessica was telling him. "And if you had any doubts about her being an instant mother, how about a couple of instant grandparents?"

Charlie smiled. "Thank you, Mrs. Fletcher. It's a Christmas I'll never forget." He gave her a kiss on the cheek before moving off to join his daughter and future in-laws.

“Nice young man,” I said, coming up to her.

“Oh, Seth!” Jessica exclaimed. “I’d given you up for lost.”

“I was at the hospital checking on Wanda Andrews,” I told her. “She’s going to be all right.”

Jessica sighed. “Oh, thank God.”

I shuffled my feet uncomfortably. “Just a little something,” I said, and handed her a small gift wrapped in gold paper.

Jessica accepted it gratefully, and then presented me with one in turn. “Oh! I brought yours too.”

“Oh? Well, let’s see.” I unwrapped it while Jessica watched in anticipation of my reaction.

I lifted off the lid of the box; inside was a small toy train engine. I was deeply moved. “A train,” I said around the lump that had suddenly formed in my throat. “I deserve that. The little train that could. Hm.” I paused, thinking back to the moment when Wanda Andrews had held up those two fingers. “Tonight, when Wanda pulled through and I was part of it ... Jess, suddenly everything seemed brighter.”

Jessica smiled softly. “Then Frank was right when he said that ‘Christmas should remind us of what could be, not what is.’”

“Ay-yuh,” I agreed. “I hate to admit it, but I guess I was still looking under the tree.”

*Then rang the bells more loud and deep  
God is not dead, nor doth He sleep  
The wrong shall fail, the right prevail  
With peace on earth, good will to men.\**

The End

\*The song lyrics are from the carol “I Heard the Bells on Christmas Day.”