

## CHAPTER 1



*MAIDEN VALLEY, NORTH DAKOTA. MARCH 1894*

As the thunder rolled, Liam Morgan cursed as he was fighting his way through the blizzard. Blinded by the snow, he didn't know which direction he was heading. However, there was no choice but to keep moving. If he didn't find shelter, he wasn't going to survive.

There was another loud rumble of thunder, and he heard a strike of lightning. What kind of a hellhole was he living in where nor'easter winds accompanied a blizzard and lightning storm? Liam cursed himself again. After the previous two months, he'd sworn he would not spend another in North Dakota. It was mid-March, for God's sake, not January! Three blizzards, one after the other, had stalled the trains from reaching Maiden Valley. When they'd finally made it, a medical emergency had delayed his departure.

Dr. Liam Morgan had been told it was a life and death crisis. He wouldn't have been much of a doctor if he'd ignored the plea for help. Still, Liam had an unused railroad ticket in his

pocket. He was lied to, and Liam was still angry. He should have stayed at the McCree ranch instead of trying to return to town. Liam had been asked, but he didn't like, trust, or have a high opinion of any member of the McCree family.

He'd been brought to the ranch to set a dislocated shoulder, not a nearly severed arm, and a man bleeding to death, as he'd been told. Liam had been relieved it was a lesser degree of injury. Still, he didn't appreciate being cussed out while trying to help a patient. The cantankerous Mr. McCree probably wouldn't follow his orders. Even so, the shoulder would heal, even if the idiot ignored his medical advice.

As a physician, Liam had done his duty, but he wouldn't be around to follow up on his patient. As soon as possible, he was going to be in California sunshine. He had no attachment to Maiden Valley, and he should have known better than to hang around too long. Snow came early in this part of the country and seemed to stick around forever.

Liam had spent a winter in the Teton Mountains of Wyoming. The intensity of the storms couldn't compare to Maiden Valley. He needed to find his way to town. Once there, he could idle his time away in his warm quarters until the current storm passed. When Liam saw a glimmer of light in the distance, he steered his horse toward it.

Tying his horse to a porch post, Liam knocked on the door. When there was no answer, he pounded his fists on it. There was no answer for a long time. Then, finally, the door opened.

A thin young woman wrapped in a quilt stood in the doorway, and he shoved past her. She barely reacted to his invasion.

Forcing the door closed against gale-strength winds, Liam addressed her. "I'm sorry to scare you, ma'am, but I'm going to have to seek shelter here."

"You're the doctor," the woman said in a timid voice.

"Yes, ma'am, I'm Dr. Liam Morgan. You're the school-

teacher, Miss Rose. I'm afraid I don't remember your first name."

She looked at him and seemed confused.

"Ma'am, maybe you should sit down," Liam suggested.

Instead, she opened the door and stood perfectly still as the snow swirled around her. She closed her eyes.

Liam stepped forward to close the door again, and he moved quickly to catch the schoolteacher before she hit the floor. He lifted her into his arms and shoved the door closed with his shoulder. The young woman was a lightweight. He carried the woman across the room and deposited her on the single cot. He dashed outside and returned carrying his bedroll and his saddle gear. He added his blanket to those already covering her. Then, looking around, he pulled a long wool cloak from a peg on the wall and laid it over her too.

Miss Rose was pale and hot. She began to cough and couldn't seem to stop. Her eyes opened briefly and closed again.

Liam yanked his gloves off and felt the woman's face. Even with his cold hands, he could feel the heat from her fever.

"Hell!" He tossed the cape aside, folded the quilt doubling its thickness, and tucked it tightly around her body. He covered her again with the cloak. Although she was hot to touch, she was shivering. He pulled on his gloves and retraced his steps outside.

Carrying his medical bag inside, he listened to her heartbeat and her lungs. His diagnosis was pneumonia. He dearly hoped the pneumonia wasn't combined with influenza, or the entire valley would be in danger of it spreading.

Liam was going to have to wait out the storm with a sick woman. From the previous winter, he knew that the blizzard could last a day, a week, or more. Leading his horse behind the cabin he found a small building used as a barn. There was a

cow inside, and he led his horse into the same space. Next, he found a substantial woodpile.

Liam hadn't crossed paths with the schoolteacher, except for a nodding acquaintance. He knew she boarded with the schoolchildren's families, a week with each family in rotation. They were supposed to provide her with food and shelter. She was far too thin to be in good health, and he seriously doubted she was being fed enough.

He searched a shed, found an ax, and began to split the cut lengths of logs into pieces small enough to fit inside the fireplace. He carried the wood under the overhanging roof of the cabin. The wood would stay reasonably dry there.

Going inside, he carried in his bedroll and his saddle gear. He added his blanket to those already on the young woman. She was asleep, but she was running a high fever. He looked around at the poor condition of the cabin. Very little heat was coming from the small fireplace, and it wasn't reaching the bed or doing much to heat the small space. He dragged the makeshift bed over in front of the fireplace.

The single window was packed with snow on the inside. Returning to the shed, Liam found a few tools, a hammer, nails, and what looked like a wagon cover. He carried them inside the cabin. He cut the wagon canvas into pieces and hammered the thick cloth over the cracks in the walls.

He kept having to keep tucking the quilts around the young woman as she was pushing them aside. Wiping her face with cool water helped. In what he determined was late afternoon, he went to the barn, milked the cow, and carried the milk inside.

Liam kept searching the shed and the stable for anything he could use. He could see where snow was drifting through gaps in the roof and nailed a large tarpaulin to the roof timbers. He stuffed pieces of clothing in cracks between logs.

He carried wood into the cabin and kept stacking it against

a wall until he was sure it was enough to keep them warm overnight. He had to keep the door closed against the frigid temperatures. Locating the food larder, there was very little in it. There was a loaf of brown bread, several cans of beans, and more dried beans in a crock. There was another crock with some kind of meat packed in brine and a sack of potatoes.

He fed the fireplace and rummaged around using his knife to open a can of beans, dumping them in an iron skillet to heat over the fire. While searching for a plate, he discovered a crock of coffee, and he made half a pot. He had a feeling he was going to be awake all night.

With the simple food, he carried a bowl to the woman and shook her shoulder.

“Humm?” she mumbled.

“Wake up!” Liam demanded.

Her eyes barely opened, cornflower blue and unfocused. She looked confused. “Who are you?” She clutched the neckline of her nightgown and slumped into unconsciousness.

Liam gave a sigh and set the food aside. He used his stethoscope to listen to her heart and lungs again. This frail, sick woman needed help, and Liam was all fate had provided. Unfortunately, he had very little in his medical bag that could be used for her symptoms. Liam had seen the schoolteacher a few times from a distance. Usually, as he was riding through town, and she was ringing the school bell.

He applied a cold cloth to Lynette’s fevered brow and remembered her name. Miss Lynette Rose was Maiden Valley’s schoolteacher.

He went to the crudely made table, squashed the beans into warm milk, stirred it thin, and poured a tin cup of the heated milk. He carried the food to the schoolteacher and propped her head and shoulders on his lap, raising the cup to her lips. Forcing the liquid into her mouth, she swallowed. He followed the milk with the makeshift bean soup and kept spooning it

into her until she began to cough. Finally, he set it aside to try again later.

Liam tossed a threadbare, old pillow on the floor, sat on it, and stretched out his long legs. He propped himself against the wall. The winds howled around the small cabin. He had no idea how long the storm would last, but they would be safe in the little cocoon he'd created. If he could keep Miss Rose alive until morning, he would consider it a job well done, if not a miracle.

It was a night of cold cloths applied to her fevered brow and keeping her swathed in blankets. He fed the fire and occasionally got her to swallow warm milk and the soupy bean mix he'd made. She thrashed around in her fever. He had to hold her down to keep the covers on her.

While the storm was creating a bizarre world of white around them, Liam could barely tell day from night. He'd continued to find cracks and fill them to keep the cold at bay, but he could still feel the frigid air seeping through the walls.

As a physician, he fought the battle of life and death with the young woman. She stopped breathing once, and he had shaken, yelled, and sworn until she'd come back from whatever void she'd slipped into for a few minutes. He didn't sleep, afraid that she would slip into death. There was no clock in the cabin, and he'd forgotten to wind his pocket watch.

With little else to do, he made mental plans to leave Maiden Valley. As soon as he delivered Lynette Rose from the hell she was battling, he was leaving town. It was past time for him to return home.

Time played tricks on a man's mind when he was alone. An hour may have passed or four hours, or twelve. It was hard to tell. He could only gauge time when his stomach told him it was time to eat, and he tossed potatoes into the ashes of the fireplace to roast.

When he went to the barn to check on the animals, he milked the cow again. He found a small bag of grain and

twisted bunches of what he thought was wild mustard weed and prairie grass. At least his horse and the cow wouldn't starve.

The snow was waist-deep on him, and he was a tall man, topping a height of six-foot, four inches. The storm continued to rage. At least the drifting snow would act as insulation around the small cabin and protect them from the freezing wind.

Lynette was slowly fighting her way from a thick, suffocating fog. All she knew was she was warm. There was a kind voice encouraging her to stay with him. She didn't know who belonged to the voice, but it sounded friendly. He wasn't yelling or trying to browbeat her with harsh words.

Hot! So hot! Lynette pushed at the covers, but they had a will of their own. They kept coming back, tighter and holding her down.

"Calm down, Sweet Rose, and stop fighting me," the voice said with a firmer tone. Hands held her still, and the kind person told her to stop fighting. She couldn't stop fighting; she had to keep fighting and running to have a life.

Lynette couldn't pull herself from the heat. Maybe she had died and gone to Hell.

Liam chuckled at the nonsense coming from Lynette Rose. It was the fifth day of the blizzard. It was also the fifth day she had been trapped in a high fever, not counting the days she had been sick before he had arrived. Pneumonia didn't set deep in the lungs without warning. She had a few moments of clarity here and there.

She'd also had bouts where she struggled, fought, and thrashed around in panicked fear. Whatever she was remembering and fighting against, she was tormented by it.

Liam tried to calm her, repeatedly assuring her that she was safe. He promised to take care of her, and he would. He was not going to allow her to succumb to her illness.

Liam was making Lynette drink warm milk when she opened her eyes and stared at him. He saw clarity in those blue eyes.

"Welcome back," he said gently, with a smile.

"Where have I been?" she whispered.

"In a purgatory between life and death, I think," Liam said. "You've been sick for a while."

"You are Doctor Morgan," she whispered.

"Yes, ma'am," Liam said. "I want you to drink this. You need to build your strength."

Lynette's eyes widened and she looked around. "Did they send you to find me?"

"Who?" Liam demanded.

"The Fergusons. It was their turn to board me. Mr. Ferguson said they were going to his brother's place to wait out the storm. He said I'd be all right here. He said I was sick, and he wasn't going to take me with them because whatever was wrong with me might spread to his kin."

"The bastard," Liam growled. "You were already ill, and they left you?"

"Yes, did they send you to help me?" Lynette asked. She was confused because she couldn't recognize the hoarse voice as her own.

"No, my being here was an accident. I was treating a patient and got lost in the storm," Liam said. He wiped her forehead with a cool cloth. "I saw the light from the lantern, through the cabin window, and this cabin became a beacon of safety in the storm. Nevertheless, as fate sometimes intervenes, you needed a doctor. You've been fighting a very high fever and pneumonia. You need to rest, so close your eyes."

The next time Lynette opened her eyes, the doctor was still there.

"You're still here. I thought you were a dream."



"I've been called many things, but not a dream," Liam said, smiling.

"How long have I been sick?"

"I'm not sure. It's hard to tell day from night in a storm like this. I think this is day seven, but I can't be sure. We'll leave as soon as it's possible."

"We can't stay here together!" Lynette whispered, sounding upset.

"We don't have a choice," Liam said. "Now drink this milk and eat. You need to build your strength."

Lynette looked at the food on the plate and gave a sigh. "I was saving the brown bread."

Liam looked at the pitiful offering of food. "Eat. The storm is still bearing down hard. I've never been in a blizzard this bad. Eat, Lynette. Doctor's orders."

She ate a few bites, no more, and drifted into a more comfortable slumber than before. She wasn't struggling to breathe. Liam had seen a lot of helplessness in his line of work. He'd seen people resign themselves to death. He wasn't going to allow Lynette Rose to fail. Giving up wasn't in his nature. If his patient didn't have the strength, he had enough for both of them.

He raised the spoon and began feeding her. She swallowed in her rest without choking. Her body was responding to nourishment, and he knew what was best for her. He'd seen she was too thin. He'd seen more of her than was proper, but he'd had little choice, and he was a physician.

Lynette was drifting in her sleep. She was having strange dreams of howling wolves at her door and of being chased. Running toward a cliff, she had been ready to jump... to float away, but something kept holding her in place. Being warm felt good. The cabin had been so cold before.

Liam hadn't expected to play nurse, but he had little else to do. There were no books in the cabin, and the only newspaper

was three months old. He read it anyway, multiple times. With a lack of anything to do, he spent a lot of time reviewing his last few years.

He'd been traveling around the northwestern mountain states. With no itinerary, he'd found himself in Maiden Valley more by accident than design. He had responded to a man who had been hit by the train leaving the Maiden Valley station. He'd saved the man's life, and the town council had asked him to stay for a while and serve as the town doctor. He'd agreed to a temporary position.

This storm was the last straw. It was time he returned to what he considered a more civilized lifestyle. He'd been knocking heads with some of the town leaders. He'd already told the leaders of Maiden Valley he was leaving.

Lynette Rose began fighting the covers again, thrashing around, and he didn't want her to hurt herself. She'd fallen from the bed several times, and she had a few bruises as a result.

He lay on his side against her, on top of the blankets. His weight and an arm over her kept her from moving around so much.

Lynette opened her eyes slowly. She was hot, her throat hurt, and she was badly in need of personal relief. She tried to move but was pinned under something heavy. She opened her eyes and gave a raspy scream.

"None of that, Sweet Rose," the man who was lying next to her said in a soothing voice. He laid the back of his hand on her forehead and sat on the edge of the bed. He was fully dressed. "I didn't mean to scare you. I was trying to keep you covered with the quilts. You kept throwing them off, and I didn't want you getting cold again. Your fever has broken."

"What are you doing here?" Lynette gasped.

"Trying to keep you from hurting yourself," Liam said.

"By assaulting me?" she exclaimed.

“No, by keeping you alive,” he said. “You’ve been ill with a fever and delirious for days.”

Lynette struggled to rise, but she’d barely raised her head, and she felt dizzy.

“I need to get up,” she insisted.

“Don’t try it. You don’t have the strength to stand,” the man warned.

“I need... I need to go to the outhouse,” she whispered desperately.

“It’s under five feet of snow,” Liam responded. “I’ve stopped trying to shovel a path to it. The wind keeps drifting the snow around. I’ll get you a pan. It’s the best I can do. You’re too weak to stand.”

She nodded, her color rising in embarrassment, but it was hard to tell, as she’d been running a fever for so long.

While she was taking care of what was necessary, he returned to the woodpile, splitting more wood for the fire. He emptied the pan into the deep snow at the side of the cabin and shoved it under the narrow bed.

Lynette closed her eyes, shivered, and felt herself being tucked into a tight cocoon of quilts again.

“You lay still and behave, and I’ll get you something to eat,” Liam promised.

She was asleep when he returned, but a few hours later, she wakened again. She was all wide eyes, looking around the small cabin and the narrow bed he’d dragged over in front of the fire.

“How long have we been here?” she asked.

“I believe this is our ninth day, but I could be wrong,” Liam said. “The snow has stopped, but we’re not going to be able to leave for a couple more days. The storm dropped about five feet of snow, and the drifts are deeper. The snow here still surprises me. I come from California. We might get an occasional hailstorm, but not snow, except in the mountains.”

“It’s hard to believe such a place exists,” Lynette whispered.

“It does. You’ve been ill,” Liam said. “Lucky for us, there were enough provisions that we didn’t starve. The woodpile is getting low, but we’ll have enough to get us through this. If I ever lay eyes on who abandoned you here, they are going to be walking around with fewer teeth!”

The days went by slowly, and the weather changed. The heavy storm clouds moved on, and the sun appeared and began the natural process of melting the snow. Lynette slept less each day, and she began to feel better. She couldn’t talk much. Her throat was sore, and only a few words could be whispered before there was no sound at all.

Dr. Liam Morgan made soup broths and insisted she drink them for nourishment.

Lynette was feeling better, but she knew her reputation was ruined. She had been in the company of a man who was a stranger for weeks. Although Lynette had been ill, and Liam Morgan was a physician, the women of Maiden Valley would gossip and whisper. She had planned on leaving her position as the schoolteacher. Mrs. Elvira Wallbash, the wife of the Reverend and head of the school board, had already received her resignation. The woman had argued with her for over an hour, but Lynette wasn’t changing her mind.

What Maiden Valley had promised her as the teacher and what they had delivered were two different things. If she’d been ill for the last couple of weeks, it was because the town had failed to provide her with the decent lodging she had been promised.

Several more days passed before Liam thought it was safe for them to leave. He held Lynette in front of him on his horse. She was wrapped in the wool cloak and quilts taken from the cabin. It took them the better part of a day to fight their way through the melting snow to town. He took her straight to

Mrs. Ariella Simpson's boarding house and tucked her into a bed.

Liam went to his office first, but there were no messages on his slate board. His next stop was the saloon because if there was a town crier of news, it was Homer Myles, the owner. Not much had been going on in town since the storm started. If Liam had been needed, Homer hadn't heard about it. He returned to Mrs. Simpson's boarding house to see how his charge was fairing under the woman's care. He was surprised to find the boarding house parlor full of men and women waiting to see him. Mayor Plimpton was there, along with Reverend Wallbash and their wives.

"What's going on?" Liam asked.

"I think we would like to know the answer to that question," Mrs. Myrtle Plimpton demanded with a raised eyebrow.

"What are your intentions toward Miss Rose?" Reverend Perley Wallbash demanded.

"Intentions?" Liam exclaimed. "I have no intentions toward Miss Rose except to keep her alive! She's been ill with pneumonia. I couldn't leave her there alone, and I couldn't bring her to town because of the blizzard."

"You've spent several weeks alone with an unmarried young lady," Mrs. Wallbash huffed.

"You've ruined her reputation, and she is our teacher!" Mrs. Plimpton complained.

"Now, wait a minute," Liam exclaimed. "Nothing happened between us. She's been ill. She wasn't aware of what was going on!"

"Too sick to know what you were doing to her!" Mrs. Wallbash exclaimed snidely.

"I resent your implications! You've got a dirty mind, Mrs. Wallbash! I didn't *do* anything to her except keep her from freezing to death or dying from a fever! Those bastards you boarded her out to left her there to die!"

"It looks bad, Dr. Morgan," Mayor Plimpton said, glancing at his wife.

"You need to do right by Miss Rose," Reverend Wallbash said. "You need to do the Christian thing."

"I haven't done anything unchristian to her!" Liam said furiously. "Would the Christian thing to do, have been to leave her to die, like the Fergusons did?"

"Of course not," Reverend Wallbash spluttered.

"You have ruined her reputation, and every lonesome cowpoke within a hundred miles will be after her, and their intentions will not be honorable. The poor girl has no one to look after her. Even if she's not innocent anymore, she doesn't deserve to be treated as soiled goods," Mrs. Plimpton exclaimed.

"She is not soiled goods," Liam growled angrily. "What is wrong with you people?"

"You need to do right by her," Reverend Wallbash repeated.

"You need to marry her," Mrs. Plimpton said. "It's the only proper thing to do."

"Marry!" Liam exclaimed.

"The townspeople won't think much of you for taking advantage of Lynette," Mrs. Simpson said. "Everyone thought highly of her, but we can't have her teaching our children now. A teacher has to be above approach!"

"Miss Rose is no different now than she was when she was taken to board at the Fergusons' homestead!"

"Except she's unemployable," Mayor Plimpton said firmly.

Liam looked around at the faces of Maiden Valley leaders and realized they'd already reached their conclusions. Nothing he said was going to change their minds. He jammed his hat on his head. "You people are a suspicious and ungodly lot! To hell with the lot of you! I need a drink!"

When the town doctor stalked from the boarding house, Mrs. Plimpton whipped her head around and looked toward

the stairs. "If we want to keep Dr. Morgan as our town doctor, he needs a reason to stay here. We need to get him married to Lynette. He'll come around to accepting it, and she'll make him a good wife."

"I don't feel right about pressuring Dr. Morgan," Mayor Plimpton said. "We're railroading him."

"Do you want this town to be without a doctor again? Nothing settles a man more than a good woman to go home to at night. You need to get to the saloon," Mrs. Plimpton ordered her husband. "Maybe with a few glasses of whiskey in his gullet, he might feel differently."

Mrs. Simpson looked over to the table in her parlor filled with libations for her guests. "I think Miss Rose needs a hot toddy to help her sleep."