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HOLD ALL TRAFFIC

Lead Focused / Period Drama / 5-6 min
Cast 4 Female x3 Male x1

March 1912. Clara is the only telegraph operator in a mining town, and a message has come over the wire that the company has ordered her to keep quiet. Two women from the town want to know what it says, and her employer wants her to remember who pays her.

CHARACTERS

CLARA WHITLOCK (LEAD) - 20s, telegraph operator, the only one for forty miles, supports her mother on the wage.

MR. PRUITT - 50s, station agent and her employer, loyal to the company that pays him.

MRS. DOYLE - 50s, a widow with two sons working underground.

HANNAH - late teens, married four months, her husband on the night shift.

SETTING

The telegraph office of a railroad depot in a small mining town, an evening in March 1912.

The telegraph office of a railroad depot in a mining town, March 1912. A stove. A sounder clicking now and then at the desk. CLARA sits at the key with a pencil, a slip of yellow paper face down under her palm. MR. PRUITT stands at the counter with a ledger he is not reading.

PRUITT

Leave it face down, Miss Whitlock.

CLARA

I copied it. I have it.

PRUITT

Then leave it face down and leave it that way. The company man is on the nine-ten. He'll read it to the families himself, in the hall, properly. That's what the message says, and that's what will happen.

CLARA

The nine-ten is two hours.

PRUITT

I can tell time.

The door opens. Cold air. MRS. DOYLE, wrapped in a shawl, with HANNAH behind her.

MRS. DOYLE

The whistle blew at four. Three long. It hasn't blown since.

PRUITT

Mrs. Doyle, the office is closed to the public after six.

MRS. DOYLE

The door was open.

HANNAH

Clara. Has anything come?

CLARA

(not looking up)

Traffic comes through all day, Hannah.

HANNAH

From the mine.

The sounder clicks. CLARA's hand goes to the pencil out of habit, then stops.

MRS. DOYLE

You have a face like a shut door, girl. I've known you since you were in short skirts. Has anything come.

PRUITT

Miss Whitlock is under instruction.

MRS. DOYLE

I wasn't asking you.

CLARA

(quiet)

There was a message. At five past five. It's not mine to read.

HANNAH

Then whose is it?

CLARA

The company's.

MRS. DOYLE

My boys are the company. Every ton that comes out of that hill is the company. Read it.

PRUITT

If she reads it, she is discharged. That's not me, that's the rule, and the rule is on the wall behind her in a frame. The wire is private. Anyone who has ever put a hand to a key knows it.

CLARA

I know it.

PRUITT

Then you know what you owe.

CLARA

(standing)

I owe my mother's rent, Mr. Pruitt. I owe eleven dollars to the dry goods. I know exactly what I owe and to whom. I've known it every day since Father died and you gave me this chair because there was nobody else in forty miles who could send.

She looks at Hannah.

CLARA

The cage fell at the Ridgeline shaft at ten to four. Nine men were in it.

HANNAH sits down without deciding to.

MRS. DOYLE

Names.

CLARA

There were no names. The message gave the count, and said the company would send a man, and that this office was to hold all traffic until he came.

MRS. DOYLE

Hold all traffic.

CLARA

So nobody would run up the hill and get in the way of the rescue. That's the reason they gave.

MRS. DOYLE

That's the reason they gave to you.

The sounder starts again. Fast. CLARA sits, takes the pencil, and writes without looking at anyone. PRUITT crosses to her. She keeps writing. The room is nothing but the clicks and the pencil.

It stops. CLARA reads what she has written. Her face does not change. That is the worst of it.

PRUITT

(low)

Turn it over.

CLARA

No.

PRUITT

Clara.

CLARA

Nine names. Two of them are Doyle. One of them is Hannah's.

(beat)

I'm not going to read them out the way they came, like a list of freight. I'll say them one at a time, and I'll say them to the person they belong to. Then Mrs. Doyle is going to take Hannah home, and the company man can find them there.

PRUITT

And then?

CLARA

And then I'll sit at that key and send the company a message of my own. It will have my name on it. It won't be long.

She goes to MRS. DOYLE first. Takes both her hands.

CLARA

Thomas.

MRS. DOYLE's hands tighten in hers.

CLARA

Michael.

MRS. DOYLE does not cry. She nods once, as if signing for a package. CLARA turns to HANNAH.

CLARA

Hannah. Look at me. Not at the paper. At me.

She kneels in front of her. Lights down.

END OF SCRIPT