

The Christmas Fairy Tale

By R. A. Conti

Chapter 1 - Real Books

It was the Monday before Thanksgiving. Jenny overslept and arrived at her bookshop late. The holiday shopping season was about to begin but she did not feel enthusiastic about it. No customers were waiting.

She pattered around the store unpacking boxes, shelving books, and straightening up displays. Saturday had been a long day. Several customers stopped in. Jenny closed late, had no time to clean up, and went home tired. She did not open Sunday. It was her last day off until Christmas.

She had many books, both new and used, and a bright, welcoming, cozy bookshop. There were a few inviting high-backed comfortable chairs scattered throughout the store. Her parents laid out the shop years ago when they opened it as *Real Books*. The name was a play on words. Real is the Spanish word for 'royal' so the actual name of the shop was *Royal Books*. It was their other child and they loved it. Jenny was never jealous, however; her parents always told her they loved her more.

Her mother Anne died a few years after the shop opened. Jenny's father Jack asked her to run it before he died but told her would understand if she had something better to do. She burst into tears and told him of course she would keep it; what could she possibly do that was better than running his bookshop? He died in peace.

Her parents sold real books, the kind printed on paper. Jack died before digital books were widely available. She did not think he would have objected to electronic books, however. He was an avid reader and loved language, stories, and information, regardless of what form they came in.

She did not want customers to think it was an elitist or anachronistic bookshop. People thought it was named *Real Books* because it was anti-electronic books. She laughed at their assumption and explained the origin of the name. They were always impressed and liked that an independent bookstore was called *Royal Books*. It made them feel special; that was how her parents hoped customers would feel whenever they came in.

Jenny had been struggling to remain in business and felt apprehensive about the next five weeks. She worried she might not make enough money to pay her bills and debts. This holiday shopping season could end as 'sound and fury, signifying nothing.' Jenny felt a miracle was necessary to bail her out. She did not, however, believe in miracles at Christmas or any other time of the year.

The door chime sounded around one pm as her first customer of the day walked in. He paused inside the door and looked around. Jenny waited quietly behind the counter. She did not like to approach people before they had time to take in the inviting and relaxing feel of the store. She wanted customers to feel at home. He did not move from the door, however, so she politely greeted him.

"Hello. Nice day. Thanks for dropping by. Looking for anything special?" He felt pleased she had addressed him. It made him feel less awkward.

"Um, yes. I'm not looking to buy anything. I have some books to sell and I wanted to see if you might be interested." Jenny immediately felt disappointed. She took in people's unwanted books but never had enough space for all of them. She never had enough money to pay people

what they expected, either.

“Yes, we buy books. Do you have them with you?” She expected he had a bag or box outside in his car.

“No. They’re at the house,” he replied as he walked toward the counter. He was a distinguished-looking man in expensive clothes. He had a kind face and a businesslike voice. She guessed he was around her age and had the impression, from the way he walked and spoke, that he liked to direct people and give orders.

“Are there a lot of them?” Jenny asked hesitantly. She could not afford to buy an entire library.

“Yes there are. Is that a problem?”

“No,” she lied. She wanted to encourage him to tell her more before she declined his offer.

“Oh, good. You see, I don’t know what to do with them. I need someone who knows about books.” Books were all Jenny knew about.

“Oh, great. I can probably help you.” He reached the counter. She waited for more information. He stared at her. She felt uncomfortable.

“Are you... Jenny Collins?” he asked.

“I *was*. It's Rodgers, now, just like it says on the door. Do I know you?”

“I’m Charlie Stockton.” Jenny had never heard of him. Was he someone famous? She looked at him and waited for more. “We went to Springfield High together,” he explained cheerfully as if he felt happy to meet an old classmate.

“Oh, did we? I’m sorry I don’t remember you, Charlie. Were we in the same class?”

“Yes. Class of ’99.”

“Wow. That was a long time ago. Where have you been? How are you doing?” *Judging from the way he’s dressed, she thought, Charlie’s doing pretty well.* Charlie ignored her questions.

“Jenny, here’s the thing. I came back to be with my mother before she died. Now that she’s gone, I need to dispose of her possessions and sell her house. I’d like to get everything out by the end of the year.”

“Oh, I’m sorry she’s gone,” Jenny replied.

“She lived a good life and wasn’t in any pain. I’m grateful for that.”

“But, you *do* miss her.”

“Well, yes and no. We didn’t see each other a lot after I left Springfield but we kept in touch. We were close, but in a distant way.”

“That’s a strange way to put it but I understand.” She could tell he did not want to talk about it anymore.

“Here’s the thing. Many of the books have been in my family for generations.”

“Oh, if they’re *old* books, I can put you in touch with a few antiquarian dealers.”

“I *don’t* want to deal with dealers,” he cut her off. “My mother asked me not to,” he explained.

“The people I know would give you a fair price, I can assure you.”

“Oh, it's not about the money. My mom asked me to... how did she put it... find good homes for all her friends.”

“She must have loved the books very much,” Jenny commented.

“She did. So I don’t want a dealer, I want someone who loves books. Does that make sense?”

“I think I understand. But what do you want me to do?”

“Well, just look at them and tell me what you think. I don’t know what’s there. I don’t know what to do with them.”

“Well, I could help you with that.”

“I’ll pay you, of course.”

“I’m about to start my busy holiday season. I won’t have any free time until after Christmas.”

“That won’t work for me. But, maybe you could at least look at them, tell me what you think, and give me some advice, even if you can’t sell them for me. I’d be happy to pay you just to do that. Please?” The pleading in his voice made her unable to resist.

“Sure, I could do that. When?”

“Sometime this week would be great.”

“That could work. I’m expecting my son home for Thanksgiving. He could run the store for me- he’s done it before- while I come to look at your books.”

“That would be great. Here’s my card. Could you call me when you know that you’ll have some time?”

“Sure. I’ll talk to him and call you as soon as we have something worked out.”

Charlie smiled weakly and turned to leave. Jenny felt sorry for him. Thanksgiving was the holiday when everyone returned to homes and families. Charlie had just lost his mother and would soon say goodbye to his family’s home. He hesitated before he opened the door. She wondered if he had forgotten something.

“By the way... I was wondering... how does that fairy tale end?” he asked.

“What fairy tale?” she replied, puzzled.

“The one you wrote... back in high school.”

“I don’t recall writing anything. Are you sure it was me?”

“Absolutely certain, but I can understand if you don’t remember it. That was a long time ago.”

“I really don’t recall it. Sorry.” Charlie shrugged and left. Jenny tried to remember the story he referred to. Perhaps it was a long-forgotten class project. How could he remember it if she did not? She would have to ask him about it the next time they met.

Chapter 2 - Thanksgiving

As she expected, her son Marcus and ex-husband David arrived Wednesday afternoon. David usually drove Marcus to visit her. She felt delighted to see them both. Marcus went away to college in August and had no time to visit. She ordered a pizza so they could eat and catch up while she kept the shop open.

“So, how’s school?” she asked.

“It’s okay,” Marcus replied curtly. He was a freshman at a small college. Jenny and David paid his tuition.

“And, how are *you* doing?” she asked David.

“Not good,” David mumbled. Jenny expected curt answers from her teenage son but David had always been vocal. She studied his face. He seemed distressed.

“What’s wrong?” she asked. David did not answer.

“Debbie dumped him,” Marcus explained. Jenny understood why David seemed distressed.

“That’s awful. Do you want to talk about it?”

“Not really,” David replied. There was an awkward silence.

“So, David, what time are you heading back?” Jenny asked to change the subject.

“I was hoping I could spend Thanksgiving here.”

“Oh, I guess there’s no reason for you to go back and be alone. Yeah, sure, why not?”

“Thanks.” He felt relieved.

Jenny had a second bedroom for Marcus. She went in to check on him before she went to bed. David had settled on the sofa.

“Mom, there’s more that you should know.”

“What do you mean?”

“About dad. He didn’t *just* lose Debbie. He lost his job, too.”

“Oh, shit. I guess you’re concerned about your college tuition now.”

“Yeah, but I’m more concerned about him. He’s *really* down. I think this could be a big crisis.”

“You think I should do anything to help?”

“Well, yeah. You see, he also lost his apartment.”

“Oh. What’s he planning to do?”

“Well, he *was* planning to live with Debbie.”

“And that’s why she dumped him?” Jenny asked.

Marcus nodded. “It hit him hard,” he added.

“I can imagine.”

“Look, Mom, I don’t know how else to say this, but he needs a place to stay.”

“You mean *here*?”

“He’s got nowhere else to go. Couldn’t you help him out?”

“Maybe... but I’ll have to think about it.”

“What’s to think about? He’s your ex-husband. I know you still care about him.”

“Of course I do, but this is asking a lot.”

“He’s got nowhere else to go,” Marcus argued.

“None of his friends have any room?”

“His stuff’s all in somebody’s basement,” Marcus explained.

“Okay. Well, thanks for telling me.” Jenny left the room. She suddenly had more than her troubled bookstore to worry about.

They were suddenly a family again. Marcus was in first grade the last time they were together at Thanksgiving. Jenny felt they should frankly discuss David’s problems while they ate dinner. She planned not to mention her worries about the bookstore. Marcus already had enough insecurity to deal with.

“So, David, Marcus told me you have no job and no place to live.”

“Yes, Jenny. I have no reason to go back. There’s nothing there for me. All that’s left in my life is Marcus... and you.” Jenny wanted to point out immediately that they divorced a decade ago and she was not ‘in his life’ anymore.

Their split had been amicable. He did not want to live in Springfield. There were no jobs in his field, and he was unhappy. Jenny did not want to leave. Her life was here, and she was happy. He did not see any other choice except splitting up, so they did.

Jenny moved on; so had David. He met Debbie two years after he moved to the city.

Marcus flourished in Springfield. He went to the same high school Jenny did and loved it. He also loved spending the summers in the city with David.

“So what are your plans?” she asked, looking at David. She thought it best to be direct.

“I don’t have any.”

“No job prospects?”

“Not yet. I sent resumes everywhere, of course. Things are tight.”

“But there’s always been growth in the computer industry.”

“It’s changing fast. Software companies are going out of business, except for the giant ones, and they’re just getting bigger.”

“You can’t work for one of them?”

“I’d have to move, and they’re mostly prejudiced against guys my age. They want young hotshots.”

“But you’re not *that* old.”

“Ah, but I am. Not in human years but computer years. Everything’s moving so fast, now.”

“Is it? I don’t pay much attention.”

“Dad’s got a lot of ideas, but nothing’s worked out, yet,” Marcus commented. He and David had talked during the two-hour drive from his college to Springfield.

“So what can I do?” Jenny asked. She could see a discussion about jobs would get nowhere.

“Can I stay here awhile? Maybe through the holidays? That would help.”

“Actually, that might help me, too. This is my busiest season at the bookstore and I just had a customer ask me for help with his mother’s book collection. He’s willing to pay me and the commission could be large. I could work for him if you would run the bookstore for me. What do you think?”

“Are you gonna pay me?” David asked, smiling.

“Don’t push it,” she replied. Marcus grinned. He felt the worst of his father’s crisis was over temporarily. David had a place to stay and work to do. Marcus decided to change the subject.

“So, Mom, who’s this client?”

“Some guy I went to high school with. He remembers me but I don’t remember him. His mother just died and he’s clearing out her house. He just about begged me to help him. I didn’t think I could but now it might work.”

“Well, I’ll help in any way I can,” David said. “It’s the least I can do.”

“Okay! Let’s enjoy the rest of our dinner,” Jenny said. She felt relieved that the immediate crisis was over.