

The Christmas Fairy Tale

By R. A. Conti

Copyright 2022

Chapter 1 - Real Books

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

Jenny 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 on Sunday. It was her last day off until Christmas.

The shop had many books, both new and used, and a bright, welcoming, cozy atmosphere. 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 never felt jealous, however, because 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.

Jenny's parents sold real books, the kind printed on paper. Jack died before digital books became 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 took.

Customers thought it was named Real Books because it was anti-electronic books. Jenny did not want them to think it was an elitist or anachronistic bookshop. She smiled at their misunderstanding and explained the origin of the name. They always felt impressed and liked that an independent bookstore was called Royal Books. It made them feel special. That was how her parents hoped people would feel whenever they came to their bookshop.

Jenny had been struggling to remain in business and felt apprehensive about the next five weeks. She worried that 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 at 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 patiently 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. Jenny 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 and he approached the counter.

"Um, yes. I'm not looking to *buy* anything, though. 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 them all. 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. He was a distinguished-looking man in expensive clothes with a kind face and businesslike voice. Jenny 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. She could not afford to buy an entire library.

“Yes, there are. Is that a problem?”

“No,” Jenny 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,” she replied as he reached the counter. She waited for more information. The stranger 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 added 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, Jenny 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,” Jenny replied. She could tell he did not want to talk about it anymore.

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

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

Charlie waved his arm and cut her off. “I *don’t* want to involve any dealers,” he declared. “My mother asked me not to.”

“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.” Books and her son Marcus were *all* Jenny loved. “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.” Jenny didn’t know what else to say. It was obvious that Charlie felt desperate and saw her as his only hope. She hesitated to say any more. Charlie noted her hesitation.

“I’ll pay you, of course,” he assured her. The payment wasn’t Jenny’s concern. The timing was.

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

“That won’t work for me, Jenny. 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 just that. Please?”

The pleading in his voice made her unable to resist.

“Sure, I could do that. When were you thinking?”

“Sometime this week would be great.”

“That could work,” Jenny replied. She liked pleasing customers, even if it meant she would have to go out of her way to do what they wanted. “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.”

Charlie smiled. He seemed relieved. Jenny felt the same way.

“That would be *great*, Jenny. Here’s my card. Could you call me when you know 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 annual holiday when everyone returned to their 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 forgot something. “By the way, Jenny... I was wondering... how does that fairy tale end?” he asked. Jenny had no idea what he meant.

“What fairy tale?” she replied, puzzled.

“The one that *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 Jenny expected, her son Marcus and ex-husband David arrived Wednesday afternoon. David picked up Marcus at college. She felt delighted to see them both. Marcus went away 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?” Jenny asked.

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

Jenny waited for details but Marcus didn’t offer any. She turned to her ex-husband.

“And, how are you doing?” she asked. David frowned and then a pained expression creased his face.

“Not good,” David mumbled. Jenny expected curt answers from her teenage son but David had always been chatty. 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. His worried expression remained. *This is bad*, Jenny thought. *Really bad*. She didn’t know much about David and Debbie’s relationship. Marcus came back from summer vacations in the city with his father and Debbie and always reported the couple seemed happy. Marcus also liked Debbie, which Jenny felt was a good thing.

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.” His request surprised Jenny but she understood his reason for asking.

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

“Thanks.” David felt relieved. His face finally relaxed.

Jenny went into Marcus’s bedroom to say goodnight before she went to bed. David had settled on the sofa.

“Mom, there’s more that you should know,” Marcus told her. He looked worried.

“What do you mean?”

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

Why didn’t David tell me himself? Jenny thought. *Is he hiding something, or didn’t he think I would listen?*

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

Marcus shrugged. “Yeah, a little, maybe. But, I’m more concerned about *him*. He’s down, Mom. 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.”

Jenny wondered if she should have responded so generously when David asked to spend Thanksgiving with her. Now that he was here, would she be able to get rid of him? She tried not to panic.

“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.” *So he ran back to me*, Jenny thought. *I’m not sure I like this. I have enough problems with the store. I don’t need my ex-husband’s troubles to deal with.*

“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.” Jenny’s reply surprised Marcus. His mother had always spoken highly of his father. They seemed to get along well. There was never any friction between them. Sometimes, Marcus wondered why they even broke up.

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

“Of course I do, Marcus, 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.”

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

Thanksgiving was going to be different this year. Usually, she and Marcus celebrated quietly. They both enjoyed the day off and their time together. Marcus had spent a few Thanksgiving holidays with David and always came back happy. Jenny wondered if this was going to be a happy Thanksgiving or a stressful one.

They were suddenly a family again. Marcus was in elementary school the last time they sat 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.

Jenny usually prepared too much Thanksgiving food so they could enjoy leftovers for several days and had enough to feed three people easily. David praised the meal she served. Marcus felt happy his parents were together at the same table. He had something to feel thankful for.

Jenny passed around a plate of turkey, several bowls of vegetables, and one of dark stuffing. After everyone filled their plates, Jenny asked them to wait while she said a brief prayer. She felt weird suggesting it but it seemed appropriate this year. She ended it with a quiet, “Let’s eat.” They started in on the wonderful meal.

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

David nodded, finished chewing, and then sat down his fork. “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 they divorced a decade ago and she was not in his life anymore. She kept quiet.

Their split had been amicable. He did not want to live in Springfield. There were no interesting or challenging jobs in his field and he felt unhappy. Jenny did not want to leave. Her life was here and she *was* happy. David did not see any other choice except to move to the city. That meant they would have to split 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?” Jenny 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?” Jenny asked.

“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,” David replied. “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.” Jenny had assumed David would make this request after Marcus told her the full story. She had decided on a course of action that might benefit them both.

“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, smirking. Jenny recalled his smirk. She used to like seeing it back when they were still in love. David’s eyes usually sparkled when he was happy and Jenny liked seeing him happy.

“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 affirmed. “It’s the least I can do.”

“Okay! Let’s enjoy the rest of our dinner.” Jenny felt relieved the immediate crisis was over. Perhaps this Thanksgiving had not turned out so bad after all.

Chapter 3 - The Collection

Jenny opened early the Friday after Thanksgiving. She brought David and Marcus to the store with her, showed them around, explained the cash register and online system, and left David in charge while she went in the back to call Charlie. He felt delighted she wanted to see his books and invited her to come over. She made an appointment to visit at two pm. Jenny wanted to do some research before she looked at the books.

She googled ‘Stockton family, Springfield’ and details of Charlie’s family’s history came up. His father, Ralph, had been a banker; his mother, Mildred, did local charity work. His grandparents started a local store but it went out of business during the Great Depression. She could not find out what his great-grandparents did. They were among the earliest people in Springfield. The town was founded just after the Civil War.

She looked at a photo of the Stockton house. It was an old and stately home, not quite a mansion, but ornate and imposing. She guessed it had been constructed when the town was new and the family had never moved. The ground around it also seemed lovely. Jenny looked forward to her visit.

Charlie opened the door before she knocked and invited her in. The house was elegant. There was dark paneling, ornate woodwork, stained glass, and a marble floor. It felt subdued and tasteful.

He took her to the family library and Jenny immediately felt overwhelmed. The room was not huge but it contained floor-to-ceiling shelves packed with books. There was one large window, an ornate high-backed chair, a small side table, a floor lamp, and a dark oriental carpet. Jenny had never seen a larger private book collection. She guessed Charlie and his family had spent many hours reading and enjoying their books.

“Wow! How old is your collection?” she asked, awed.

“It goes back to my great-grandmother. She was an avid reader.” Jenny looked more closely at the books. Some bindings were ancient. Jenny recalled the house was around one hundred and fifty years old and wondered if the collection was also that old. *This could be interesting!* she thought.

Jenny still believed Charlie should consult someone who dealt in old books. She had a *used* bookstore. There was a big difference between the books she handled and the old books in Charlie’s library. However, she had agreed to advise Charlie and decided to take time to find out what was there before she consulted any antiquarian book dealers.

“So, where should I start?” she asked.

“Start at the beginning... over... *there.*” He pointed to a shelf near the floor in the far corner of the room.

“Okay. Why that one?”

“My great-grandmother had a unique way of arranging her books,” Charlie explained. “She shelved them in the order she acquired them. Those are the oldest books. If you don’t want to start there, you could start with the newest ones that my mother bought. They’re upstairs in her bedroom.”

“There’s *more?*” Jenny asked, aghast.

“Only there. Nowhere else in the house,” Charlie answered, smiling. Jenny felt relieved. She looked around the library. It was packed but she felt at home among books.

“So, when can you remove them?” Charlie asked, abruptly.

“Remove them?”

“Yeah, that’s the idea. I need them out of here. Some workers are coming in to fix up the place before I put it on the market.”

“Charlie, I don’t have anywhere to put them.”

“But you have a store.”

“Yeah, and it’s already packed.”

“Don’t you have a basement?”

“Actually, I do.”

“Great. Should I hire people to box everything and move them there?”

“No, no, slow down. I don’t handle antique books. I don’t have the expertise. I should call someone who can help you.”

“No. I don’t want someone else, Jenny. You *are* helping me.”

“But I can’t get you what these are worth.”

“I don’t care about the money. My mother made me promise to find good homes for them. She told me not to sell the collection to some dealer who would haul it away without appreciating it. I can tell you appreciate it.”

He was right. The collection fascinated Jenny. She couldn’t wait to dive in.

“Why don’t I take a closer look?” Jenny suggested. She didn’t want to walk away from such a fascinating collection just yet. “It’ll only take a few hours and then we can talk.”

“Okay. Take all the time you need.”

“I don’t have much time. I have to get back to my store. My ex-husband and son are running it while I’m here.”

“I’m sure they’re doing just fine,” Charlie reassured her. Jenny could tell from his commanding tone of voice that he was used to getting his way without giving direct orders. “I’ll let you get started.” He turned abruptly, went out the door, and left her alone.

Jenny stared at the books. She went to the oldest shelf, slid out the first book, and looked at it. It was Jules Verne’s *Journey to the Center of the Earth*, with Fifty-Two Illustrations by Riou. She recalled reading the novel in paperback years ago. Jenny had never seen anything like this edition. It was not a book meant just to read but to get lost in. It looked and felt like it came from a different world. She opened it and read the date, 1874. She guessed it was a first edition and worth hundreds if not thousands of dollars. Jenny put it back carefully and then removed the next book.

It was *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*, by Victor Hugo. Jenny read the copyright page: ‘Published by Carey, Lea, and Blachard, Philadelphia (1834).’ It was older than the first book, and she wondered why it was not first on the shelf. Then she realized Charlie’s grandmother must have bought it after the Verne novel. *The woman had good taste*, Jenny thought, *and she went out of her way to buy first editions*. She wondered if everyone in Charlie’s family was as interesting as his great-grandmother and looked forward to learning more about them as she looked at their library. Then she reminded herself she was not there to learn about Charlie’s family but to decide what to do about their excellent books.

Jenny spent two hours examining the shelves. The collection was mostly fiction with some biography, history and science included. She found Charles Darwin, William James, Sigmund Freud, and Oswald Spengler. Strangely, there was almost nothing after the 1930s. She guessed the family could not afford to buy books or did not have time to read them after their store failed during the Great Depression. Perhaps they were too busy trying to survive. However, it was obvious the books had always been well cared for. They were neatly arranged and dust-free. Jenny guessed Charlie’s mother Mildred took care of the books as she read and perhaps reread them. She thought she would have liked Mildred and felt sorry they had never met.

Then Jenny noticed a book wedged into open space above others on a shelf. It was an unusually large, slender hardbound volume sitting atop the most ‘recent’ books from the 1930s and seemed out of place. She felt curious, pulled it out, and read the title. *Memories, 1999*. Jenny recognized it right away. It was the high school yearbook from the graduating class she and Charlie were part of. Jenny had not seen her copy in at least a decade and was

not sure where she stashed it in her apartment.

The yearbook had the timeless look of a commemorative volume. It felt elegant. She opened it and turned the pages. The paper was strong, the print dark and sharp. The students who created this yearbook knew they were making a treasured time capsule and created it as lovingly as they could.

Jenny slowly turned the pages. She found special sections for sports teams, clubs, the band, and other senior year events such as parties and the prom. One page displayed several photos and captions but was not from a club or sport. It was a page of reflections. The title was ‘What Will You Miss Most about Springfield High?’ She did not recall the page from her copy of *Memories*. Maybe she had never noticed it or had skipped over it. Her mother died soon after graduation and she had not wished to recall anything from high school.

Jenny looked at the photos on the page and saw Charlie there. She recognized him immediately. *Oh, yeah, I remember that guy*, she thought. *He was the nerdy fellow in the computer lab. I think he was in a couple of my classes, too.*

She immediately felt sorry she had not remembered Charlie when he came into the bookstore. *Well, it was twenty years ago*, she thought. *I’m lucky I can remember people from last year!* Jenny smiled at her thought, and then her eyes fell on the caption beneath Charlie’s photo. “The thing I’ll miss most is seeing JC every day.” *JC? Who’s JC?* she wondered. She thought about other students and two came to mind, John Clark and Jason Cataldi. She recalled there also had been a teacher named Jacqueline Cummings that was popular with the students.

Jenny turned the page, flipped past the portrait photos, and moved to the back of the book where the autograph section was. Charlie had a page and a half of greetings, silly comments, and signatures. Jenny recognized some names.

Then she noticed papers tucked into the back of the book. She thought it was something Charlie or one of his friends had written. Curious, Jenny removed the sheets, unfolded them, and read the heading: *The Fairy Tale, by Jennifer Collins*. Jenny almost dropped the pages. She recalled Charlie mentioning a fairy tale as he was leaving the store. *Is this what he meant? I didn’t write this. Maybe Charlie or someone else wrote it and used my name. Why would anyone do that?* she asked herself. Jenny suddenly felt uncomfortable. She folded the paper, put it back in the yearbook, and replaced it on the shelf. Charlie came in a moment later.

“So, what do you think?” he asked brightly.

Jenny hesitated to answer. She felt out of her depth as a bookseller. “There’s a lot of great stuff here,” she replied. Charlie sensed her hesitation.

“And...?”

“The whole collection is probably worth a lot.”

“I don’t *care* what it’s worth, Jenny. Not in dollars, anyway. Are there people who would treasure these books the way my mother and my ancestors did?”

“Yes, I think so.”

“Can you find them?”

Jenny wanted to help Charlie. These were all magnificent books that deserved good homes with new owners. “It will take some work and a *lot* of time but I think I can,” she confirmed.

“Okay, so what happens next?”

“I need to do a lot of research.”

“When can you start?”

“After Christmas.”

“But I need them out before then,” Charlie reminded her.

“I don’t know where to move them.”

“I had a thought. What about a storage unit? I have to store some furniture anyway.”

“That might work. Could you rent a climate-controlled unit? It would be better for the books. My basement is less than ideal. I don’t keep books there, just other stuff.”

“No problem. I can have them moved in a couple of days.” Charlie paused and waited for her to say something else. He was afraid she would refuse him, again. She remained silent. “So you’ll take the job? You’ll take care of them for me? You can take as long as you want,” he added.

“Yeah, I can take care of them. I’d like to. They’re beautiful. My dad would have fallen in love with your library.”

“I’m sorry he couldn’t be here to see it.”

“Me, too. But, I think I’m done for today.”

“Yes!” Charlie replied. “I’ll arrange everything, and have my lawyer draw up a contract.”

“A contract?”

“I’m hiring you and paying you a commission.”

“Look, Charlie, I don’t need a contract. But I do need a commission. How much were you thinking?”

“How’s thirty percent? Is that enough?” Jenny noted a change in the tone of Charlie’s voice. He wasn’t telling, he was asking. *He really needs me to do this*, she thought.

“Are you sure, Charlie? That could be a lot of money.”

“I know. You’re gonna do a lot of work. I want you to be well-paid.”

“Okay.” She reached out her hand. He did not know what she was doing at first. Then he took her hand and they shook on the deal. “Thanks, Charlie. I won’t let you or your mother down.”

“I know you won’t. I’m so happy I found you again.”

Jenny thought that she ought to feel happy, too. This job might provide a windfall that would enable her to save Real Books. Then she realized she had more work to do before she congratulated herself. *This might turn out to be more difficult than I thought. Well, I’m committed now. Might as well see where it goes next.*

Chapter 4 - The Yearbook

They ate the last Thanksgiving leftovers for Sunday brunch. David left to drive Marcus back to college. Jenny opened the store at twelve-thirty and planned to stay open until nine. She had only a few customers in the afternoon and no one came in after dark.

Jenny spent much of the day researching Charlie's books online. From what she had seen, they were all in excellent condition and might fetch high prices. The problem would be finding people who wanted them. There were thousands of books listed online that nobody ever bought. She knew a few antiquarian book dealers. They often had clients who were looking for specific volumes. She thought Charlie's books would interest them because of the high quality.

Jenny drew up a list of dealers she could contact and then researched what books they specialized in. It dawned on her that she would need to catalog Charlie's books before she tried to sell them. The size of the collection made the task seem daunting and she considered giving up before she started.

Instead, she decided she ought to develop a plan that she could present to Charlie—what she would do, how she would do it, and how long it would take. She could only give him estimates but wanted to make clear to him what an enormous job she was undertaking. Jenny hoped he might reconsider selling the entire collection to a dealer and getting rid of it all at once. She knew he would reject the idea but felt she had to be honest with him.

David returned around eight pm. He checked in with her at the bookstore and offered to go back to her place and make dinner. She felt too tired to eat anything but a sandwich and told him she would pick up something on the way home.

They sat together and ate. Their busy Sunday had worn them out. Jenny felt anxious before the start of what she hoped would be a busy Christmas shopping season. There was no way to predict how the bookstore would do with holiday sales. They would be working long hours and perhaps not making much money. She told David about her plans for Charlie's books. The work she had already done impressed him.

He was not, however, interested in books. It was Sunday night. He had no real job to go to on Monday morning. David felt tired, lonely, and sorry for himself. As he drove back from Marcus's college alone, he had been looking beyond the holidays. His future was uncertain. Christmas would come and go and he probably would still be out of work. Jenny would no longer need him at the store. No one would need him and he would have no place to go.

What happens to me then? David had asked himself. He didn't like that he had no answer.

"You look down," Jenny commented.

"Yeah. Sorry. I feel lost. What's gonna happen to me, Jenny?"

"I sure as hell don't know," Jenny replied. She had serious problems of her own and did not need to think about his difficulties.

"Did you ever think we would end up like this?" David asked.

Puzzled by his question, Jenny looked at him. "Like what?"

"I've lost everything. We're back together. Who would've thought *that* could happen?"

"David, that *isn't* happening. We are *not* back together. Not now. Not ever."

"You're sure?"

"Look, David, I don't mind helping you temporarily but that's *all* I'm doing. I have my own problems."

"Oh? Like what?"

"The store is on its last legs. This could be the end." Her confession shocked David.

“I didn’t know that, Jenny. I did notice there were fewer customers than I remembered.”

“You’re right. It’s been bad. This deal to sell Charlie Stockton’s books could be a windfall. But, it might not go anywhere and it might be a lot more work than I thought.”

“Look, I’ll help any way I can.”

“I know you will. Thanks for helping run the store but I can’t be away for too long. Customers need me. You don’t know Real Books as well as I do. Running it is more than just sitting in a chair behind the counter.”

“I know that, Jenny. But at least I can do *that* while you work on Charlie’s books.”

“Yeah, maybe it’ll all work out. I’m tired now, though. I’m going to bed. We open at ten from now on, so be ready to leave tomorrow morning.”

“I will.”

Jenny went to her bedroom and got ready for bed. She slid under the covers but could not fall asleep. She thought about Charlie’s books, remembered his yearbook, and wondered where her copy was. Then she recalled seeing it at the back of the bedroom closet, years ago.

She got up, opened the closet door, and noticed several boxes on the floor. She moved them aside and saw a pile of books behind them. Jenny did not recall ever burying books in her closet. *Why aren’t they at the store or up on shelves in the apartment?* she wondered.

Jenny pulled out the pile and looked at tattered hardback copies of *Flowers in the Attic*, *Interview with the Vampire*, and *Hollywood Wives*. She immediately recalled when she and her friends read and shared the books. Under them were a couple of Nancy Drew mysteries she had forgotten ever reading. They seemed in perfect condition and she remembered the effect they had on her when she read them before she was even a teenager. She found *Memories* at the bottom of the pile and carried it back to bed.

Jenny propped up the pillows, sat in bed, and placed the yearbook on her lap. The cover creaked when she lifted it. She loved the sound old books made when you opened them. It was as if they were taking a breath, happy to be getting fresh air. She smiled as she slowly turned the pages and recollections came to her.

Jenny had not merely forgotten her high school years. She had deliberately blocked them. Her mother’s death wiped out her childhood. Perhaps she was ready to revisit that time now, twenty years later.

She flipped through the pages, noticed some of her friends in group photos, and smiled. Jenny’s photo only appeared in the portrait section. She turned to the page she was on, gazed at her picture, and saw the face of the lovely Black girl who was looking forward to graduation, college, and adulthood. Jenny wondered whether that girl had any omen about her mother’s death and the resulting agony. No, *that* Jennifer’s eyes were bright, clear, and focused on her future. Little did she suspect the catastrophe that was coming.

Jenny continued paging through the yearbook and found the autograph pages. There were many messages and signatures from students and teachers. Buried on the last page in the clutter of signatures she did not recognize was one she did not recall noticing before. It read, simply, ‘To JC- I’ll always love you. CS.’ *Holy shit!* Jenny thought. *Was that Charlie Stockton?* She did not even know him back then. Why did he write that? She felt embarrassed.

Jenny should have panicked but she did not. If it was Charlie who wrote it that had been twenty years ago. Kids wrote all kinds of goofy stuff in yearbooks just to be funny and memorable. Perhaps he had a crush on her back then. Charlie probably forgot about her after he left for college and never came back. It was silly. She would not mention it to him. *No need to embarrass him*, she thought. *Or me.*

Charlie went in to take one last look at the family library before the movers arrived to

pack it up and haul it away. The books had lived there for years, decades, some more than a century. They were old friends but would soon all get boxed up and moved out. Later, the collection would be broken up and sent to different places, new homes, where new owners would treasure them. Charlie hoped that all his family's books would be happy in their new homes.

His eyes roamed the room as he gazed at some titles. Charlie had read many of them but skipped over others. He did not care about the non-fiction. He thought it dull and dated. He liked some fiction and had several favorite authors. Verne, Wells, Faulkner, Steinbeck, Sinclair, a few others. Charlie regretted not reading more of the family's books and wondered which authors were his mother's favorites. He had never discussed any of the books with her. She might comment on something she noticed he was reading but that was all.

Charlie noticed an odd book that seemed out of place in the orderly room. It was lying on top of other books. He picked it from the shelf and recognized the feel before he looked at the title. It was his copy of *Memories*. Charlie carried it to his mother's reading chair and sat down. The chair was going into storage with the books. He did not yet want to separate everything. He was thinking of taking the chair back to his house in the city as a reminder of his family and the place where he grew up. It was also his mother's favorite chair.

Charlie opened the yearbook, turned the pages slowly, and smiled. He appeared in photos of the Chess Club, Computer Room, and Honors Award Ceremony. Mostly, there were people he knew about in the photos but he never hung out with them. Charlie had been a quiet person with only a couple of close friends. He liked his privacy.

He paged toward the back of the yearbook and noticed papers stuck inside the back cover. Charlie removed the folded sheets, opened them, and recalled what they were: Jenny's 'fairy tale'. He'd forgotten he still had it and wondered if he should tell her. She might feel embarrassed or think he was creepy for keeping it. Then she might not want to help him with the books. *Best to keep it where she won't see it, ever*, he thought. He decided to keep the yearbook and take it back to his house in the city.

Charlie also felt happy that he found it.

Chapter 5 - Inventory 1

Movers took Charlie's books to a storage unit three days after Jenny saw them at his house. He rented a large unit with two tables and lights so Jenny could work there if she wanted to. He dropped by the bookstore to give her the key but she was out. Some guy named David was behind the counter. He smiled at Charlie, thanked him for bringing the key, and told him how excited Jenny was to be working with the books. Charlie felt disappointed that Jenny was not around but tried not to show it. He went to his car and called her.

"I had the movers carefully box them, shelf by shelf," Charlie explained. "They numbered all the boxes. They're in the same order you saw them. I hope that will help."

"Yes! That's excellent, Charlie. I've been doing some research. I will contact some dealers hoping they have clients who might be looking for the books you're selling."

"Great. Please keep me posted. Let me know if I can do anything else."

Jenny felt overwhelmed. She had hoped to persuade Charlie to reconsider hiring her to 'find good homes' for the books. She still felt it was better to sell them directly to a dealer. Now it was too late for that. She had taken on an ordeal that could take months. The only upside was that a slow, methodical sale could bring in more money than a large, quick sale would. That meant that Jenny's time commitment would be greater but her commission would be significantly larger. Perhaps it would be large enough to offset the meager holiday sales she expected at the bookstore.

David handed her the storage unit key when she walked in. He commented that Charlie seemed well-dressed and guessed he had money. "He could probably just give those books away," David remarked.

"I think I might give *some* of them away," Jenny told him. "Depending on what I find, I might contact libraries or collections and donate them. Charlie doesn't care about what they're worth. He just wants them to go where they will be most appreciated."

"That's nice of him, I guess. So, what do you think they're worth?"

"I have no idea. I've just started looking at them. It's gonna be a big job and take months to get rid of them," Jenny explained.

"I hope he's paying you well."

"Oh, he is," Jenny replied. She suspected David wanted her to tell him how much her commission would be but she did not want to mention it. He was part of her life temporarily and did not need to know more than a few things about her business. She did not want David to insinuate himself into her finances. They were private.

Jenny and David would have to discuss *his* finances at some point, however. They shared the cost of tuition for Marcus. Jenny hoped to maximize her income from Charlie's books so that she could take care of tuition for another year. She did not know what David planned to do if he was jobless for a long time. Perhaps he had some money saved but preferred not to use it unless he had to.

The bookshop phone rang a few minutes after they opened for the day. David answered. "Hello. Real Books, how may I help you?"

"Good morning. May I speak to Jenny, please?"

"Sure." David covered the mouthpiece and called out to Jenny. She picked up her phone.

"Hello?"

"Hi, Jenny, it's Charlie. I haven't heard from you. I was wondering how it's going."

"Charlie, you only moved the books two days ago."

"Yeah, I know. How are you making out with them? Is everything okay at the storage unit? Do you need anything?"

“What I need is some time to look at them.”

“Oh. You mean you haven’t looked at them, yet?”

“I went there yesterday and took a quick look. I’m on my way over now. I just had to open first. I do have a business to run,” she added, exasperated. Charlie ignored her frustrated protest.

“Great. Do you need any help? Can I drop by?” Jenny paused before she replied. She had looked everything over and decided to catalog the volumes before she did anything else with them. The dealers she contacted asked her for lists of the books she was selling. They had customers looking for specific volumes. If Jenny had anything that was in demand, it would be easier to sell and she could get a better price.

“Well, if you want to,” she replied, unenthusiastically. “I’ll be there in a half-hour.”

“Great. I’ll see you then.”

Jenny finished checking her mail and opened a box of new books. She had not planned on Charlie helping her. It might make the work go faster but Jenny wasn’t certain she wanted him around. They hardly knew each other.

She went out to the counter to talk to David. He was now familiar with the inventory and computer and felt comfortable working alone in the store. She assured him she would return by lunchtime and headed out the door.

As she drove to the storage unit, Jenny thought more about the project. She wanted to make some sales soon both to show Charlie she was making progress and to produce some commissions for the bookshop. She did not know if he was serious about helping. If he genuinely wanted to work, it would make the cataloging go faster. *I’ll let him unbox the books*, Jenny thought, *and read the information on the copyright pages while I type everything into a spreadsheet on my laptop*. She could take the list back to the store, copy it to emails, and then send the emails to the antiquarian booksellers she had already contacted.

Jenny decided that it would be a good idea to let him help, even if they didn’t know each other. Awkwardness was not an option. There was much work to be done.

Her anxiety rose when she found Charlie waiting for her. He smiled sheepishly. They went into the storage unit.

“So, where do we start?” he asked, eagerly. She pointed to the pile of boxes.

“Find box number one,” she ordered. “Put it on the table and open it. You’ll look at each volume and read it to me. I’ll type everything in and then we’ll move on. We should do several boxes in two hours.”

“That’s all?”

“C’mon, Charlie, you *know* I have a business. We talked about this. This is my busiest time of the year.”

“I know. Sorry.” He picked up the first box, put it on the worktable, opened it, and gently lifted out the first volume. It was *Journey to the Center of the Earth*. Charlie held it carefully in his hands as if it was something precious. He felt happy to hold the book and remembered reading it a long time ago. Jenny opened her laptop, booted it up, and waited.

“Charlie? We can start now. Just read me the publisher’s information.” Charlie held the book in his left hand and gently lifted the cover. He recalled his feelings of awe and expectation when he opened books as a child. He never knew what he would find. Anything could be inside, literally. Jenny wondered what was taking him so long and almost regretted she agreed to accept his help. It might take longer doing this with him than doing it alone.

“Charlie...?” she prodded, gently. He snapped out of his reverie. “The information?” He tenderly turned the first few pages.

“Um, here it is,” Charlie said. He read the publisher’s information. She dutifully typed it and quickly urged him to move on to the next book. Charlie did not close the book but stared at the page. Jenny had the sense that he wanted to sit down and start reading it. She

thought she would give him one last nudge before she kicked him out.

“Charlie!” she said, sharply.

“Sorry. I didn’t think I would feel this way.”

“What way?”

“I miss them.”

Charlie was becoming a pain in her ass. “Well, you can always move them back,” she wisecracked.

Her curt reply surprised Charlie and woke him out of his reverie. “No, no, that’s okay. I don’t want to keep them. I guess I just wanted to say goodbye.”

“You should have done that while they were still at the house,” Jenny replied. *And on your own time*, she thought.

Jenny had to nudge Charlie a lot but they successfully cataloged about fifty volumes before she had to leave. He felt disappointed they were quitting for the day. She felt sorry for him. It was obvious he felt conflicted about the books. They had been part of his life since his childhood and were part of his family for 150 years. She also wondered how Charlie felt about selling his family’s home and furniture. *It’s so much of his history to let go of*, she thought. Jenny resolved to be more sympathetic if he came back to help her again.

She thought about Charlie as she drove back to the bookshop. Would he show up again or had he had enough? Jenny could not decide which she preferred. She thought Charlie was beginning to realize what he was about to lose and felt sorry for him. When the books were gone, and his house emptied and sold, Charlie’s connection to Springfield would end. All he would have left would be that high school yearbook. If he even kept it.

Jenny wondered whether the yearbook played a role in his coming to help her. She recalled his comment on the ‘What Will You Miss Most about Springfield High’ page, and his message on the autograph page in her yearbook. Had he genuinely come to help with the books? Or, had he come to be with her? She did not know which alternative she preferred.

Chapter 6 - Inventory 2

Jenny did not feel surprised when she found Charlie waiting when she arrived on Wednesday morning. They had made a good dent in the library the first day. They developed a smooth procedure and sped up the process as they worked. She looked forward to cataloging more books today. The less time they took cataloging the books the more time she could devote to selling them. She would not need Charlie's help to do that. However, she was not eager to get rid of him, either.

Jenny looked forward to their two-hour shifts in the storage unit. Thursday morning she arrived and found coffee and croissants waiting on the table. "I brought us a treat," Charlie said, smiling proudly.

Jenny pointed to the croissants. "Did you *touch* them?" she asked, annoyed. Charlie shook his head. "Are your hands still clean?"

"Yeah, why?"

"You can't handle old books with greasy hands, Charlie," Jenny scolded. "It's a good thing I remembered to bring these rubber gloves." She shoved a box toward Charlie. "Put on a pair so we can get started."

"But what about the coffee and croissants?"

"*You* can eat them later. Let's move."

On Friday, Charlie brought a huge thermos of coffee and two large mugs but no croissants. The change didn't impress Jenny but she wasn't as harsh as she had been the day before.

"I'll have some coffee later," she said. "Let's get to work."

They worked for a solid hour and moved faster than they had before. The physical labor tired Charlie out. "You wanna take a break, now?" he asked. Jenny felt sorry for him.

"Sure. That would be a good idea. Things are moving along better than I expected. And you look exhausted."

Charlie sighed. He went over to the table, poured coffee, handed a mug to Jenny, and then sat down and sipped his coffee. He waited for Jenny to say something. She didn't feel a need to chat. Charlie decided to take a chance.

"You've never asked me where I went after graduation or what I did for all the years I was away."

His question surprised Jenny. She wondered why it was important to him. Was there something he wanted her to know?

"Um, I guess I haven't given it any thought. There's so much else going on right now that I didn't have time for a class reunion." She hoped her comment would not seem harsh.

Charlie smiled. "Well, it *is* a reunion, kind of," he said.

"So, what *have* you been doing for the past twenty years, Charlie?" Jenny asked, hoping he would keep his answer brief.

"Like many other people, I saw a niche in the computer industry and started a company that would fill it. My company took off. It was worth a lot when I sold it last year."

"Do you miss it?"

"Not at all. The industry changes day-to-day and I was happy to get as much as I did when I sold it. I'm independently wealthy now. Not rich enough to be a philanthropist like some others. But I never have to work again if I don't want to." Charlie felt proud of his company but did not want to brag about his achievements.

"So what have you been doing since you sold it?"

"Most recently, reconnecting with my mother. I was too busy even to visit her for years. Thank God, I could be with her at the end of her life. It meant a lot to me."

Jenny recalled her father's illness and death. "I bet it meant a lot to *her*, too," she

commented. She stayed with her father throughout the ordeal and it brought them closer than ever before. She assumed Charlie had a similar experience.

Charlie nodded. "I know this might seem absurd but she died happy. Her son had come back to her. That was all mom ever wanted. I was able to give her that and I'm grateful I could do it."

"You loved each other very much. I can tell."

"Yes, even from a distance. She was all I had. Now that she's gone, I just want to forget about Springfield. Once I've sold her house, I'll leave and never look back." Jenny sensed anguish in Charlie's statement. He was still grieving for his mother and likely felt ashamed of all the years he neglected her. He wanted to put that pain behind him. She suspected Charlie did not genuinely want to forget or erase his life in Springfield.

"So, I just told you what *I've* been doing for the past twenty years. What about you, Jenny?"

"My story is not as interesting or exciting as yours, I can assure you."

"Maybe you think so, but I'd still like to know."

"Well, my mom died the summer after we graduated," Jenny began. Charlie almost spilled the coffee as he reacted to what she said.

"Oh, my God, Jenny! I didn't know that! I'm so sorry. What happened to her?"

"She died in a car accident. Needless to say, it messed me up pretty bad." Jenny fought back recollections of how her mother's sudden death had devastated her. The memories still hurt.

"What did you do?"

"I was all set to go to college but I put it off for a year. Ironically, when I did go, her insurance money paid my tuition. I didn't have to get financial aid or work. I came back often to be with my dad. After I graduated, I came back to stay. I didn't want to go anywhere else."

"I bet he was grateful," Charlie remarked.

"Well, yes, but he felt guilty, too."

"Guilty? Why?"

"He didn't want me to feel obliged to come back here and be with him. He wanted me to follow my heart. I had to assure him that's what I *was* doing. My heart led me back here to him and Real Books." Jenny paused and looked at her laptop screen. Charlie waited for her to continue.

"Um, what happened next?" he asked.

"Let's continue, shall we?" she replied and then gestured for him to pick up another book so they could catalog it. Charlie wanted to know more.

"Um, when did your son come along?" he asked.

"Oh, you don't want to hear about my marriage," Jenny replied.

"But I do," Charlie encouraged. "Really."

"I met David, my ex-husband, a year after I came back. He's a couple of years older than I am. He came into the store looking for certain unusual books. We started talking about those books and hit it off. One thing led to another..."

"David? Is he the same guy...?"

"Yes. He's taking care of the store while I'm here. We have a son, Marcus." Charlie suddenly felt he had heard more than he needed to hear. He picked up a book and read out the title. She typed it into her laptop. They moved on and soon finished for the day.

"Well, we've accomplished a lot this week," Jenny commented. "We'll start again on Monday." Her statement surprised Charlie.

"Monday? Why not tomorrow and Sunday?" he asked, puzzled.

"I have to be in my store all weekend. I expect more customers than I got during the week."

“Oh. Well, I’ll miss you.”

Jenny sighed. “I’m not going away, Charlie. I’ll be back on Monday.”

“I know, but I’ve enjoyed our work here. Isn’t there something I could help out with at the store?” The anguish in his voice was plain. Jenny tried to resist his plea.

“No, Charlie. Your books can’t distract me. I’ve got my own to sell.”

“Maybe I could drop by anyway.”

Jenny looked at Charlie sympathetically. “What’s wrong?” she asked.

Charlie didn’t reply immediately. He looked away from Jenny and tried to find words that wouldn’t alarm her. Then he decided to be frank. “I’m lonely, Jenny. You’re the only person I know in Springfield. I’m gonna have to sit at home alone all weekend.”

“You miss your mother, don’t you?” Jenny asked. Charlie nodded.

“It’s not just my mom,” he said. “My whole family is gone…” Jenny thought she understood what he meant.

“Your family is an important part of this town.”

“It *was*. It’s not anymore. Many people knew my mom. Nobody knows me.” Charlie seemed heartbroken. His anguish saddened Jenny. She closed her laptop, put it in her bag, stood up, and then walked toward Charlie as he was putting on his coat.

Then Jenny hugged him.

“It’ll be all right, Charlie. People do this all the time. It’s just saying goodbye. You’ll get through it.” Charlie began sobbing as Jenny continued hugging him.

“It’s hard, Jenny. I don’t know what I would do without you.”

“Charlie, I’m just a book lady.”

“No, Jenny, you’re my only friend.” He pulled back from her hug, clasped her hands in his, looked into her eyes, and kissed her. Jenny was so surprised that she could not react. “Thank you,” he said after the kiss.

“Charlie, I… I… don’t know what to say.”

“Don’t say anything. Just, please, don’t hate me.”

“I could *never* hate you,” Jenny replied. It was the kindest thing anyone had ever said to Charlie. The girl he had loved all through high school had just said it.

Charlie felt embarrassed by what he had done. “Thanks, Jenny. I guess I’ll see you on Monday.”

“You’d *better* be here. I’m gonna need you. We still have plenty of books to catalog.”

Charlie thought about their kiss all the way home. It rekindled his long-buried feelings for Jenny. He had never stood close enough to touch her before and only dreamed of kissing her in high school.

Charlie had noticed Jenny because she was not like the other girls. Most of them were vain, silly, and acted superior. They seemed in love with themselves and looked down on others, even their friends.

Jenny had been different. She was always nice. There was friendliness, kindness, and softness about her. Most of the other girls were hard and sharp. Their comments cut and stung.

Charlie never heard Jenny say an unkind word about anyone. Nor had Charlie ever heard an unkind word said about Jenny. She always thanked people and praised them. Also, Charlie thought that she was the prettiest girl in the school!

Jenny also thought about their kiss as she drove back to Real Books. That led her to think about the entire book project. It seemed obvious that Charlie hoped to do more than just sell books with her. He was lonely and his years of regret about neglecting his family were catching up to him. He was reconnecting with his past through her. Maybe he felt reconnecting with her could somehow redeem him.

However, Jenny did not feel Charlie needed redemption. He had done nothing wrong.

Charlie left his family but did not abandon them. Many people rejected their families when they grew up. His actions had not hurt anyone. He had not lost anything. However, Charlie seemed to feel that he had. He was a sensitive guy going through a tough time. Jenny felt sorry he was alone right now but felt there was nothing she could do about it except help sell his books.

Jenny needed to focus on trying to save her bookstore so she could prevent her life from coming apart. She envied Charlie. At least he had money. His life was emotionally stressful but not financially stressful. Her life was emotionally stable but soon financial stress might dominate it. What would she have to do, then?

Chapter 7 - Girlfriend

A car door slammed outside and woke Charlie early Saturday morning. He looked out of the bedroom window and saw someone coming up the driveway. He thought it might be a realtor or estate sale agent but no one had called for an appointment. He went downstairs as the doorbell rang, opened the door, and saw his girlfriend Emily standing there smiling.

She kissed him before he could say anything. “Hi, baby,” she said, cheerfully. “I’m here!” Emily was a tall blonde woman with long hair, an oval face, and a dazzling smile. She turned heads wherever she went but was unaware of her physical beauty.

“Emily. You didn’t tell me you were coming,” Charlie said, sleepily.

“Well, when you told me you were gonna be here at least until the end of the year I decided to surprise you. This is a nice house!”

“Yeah. Um, come in.”

“How about I make you a nice breakfast?” she asked. “You can grab my bags from the car.”

Emily rummaged in the refrigerator and found enough food to assemble a decent breakfast. She set the table and hummed to herself. Charlie wondered what he was going to do about her. He did not want her there. *Maybe she’s just come for a visit*, he told himself. *Maybe she’ll go home Monday so she can go back to work.*

“So, I had enough leave saved up to take off the rest of the year,” Emily said as soon as Charlie started eating. “Isn’t that great? We can spend the holidays together. I’ve always wanted to spend Christmas in a quaint town. From what I saw of Springfield, it’s lovely. You were lucky to grow up here.”

Charlie nodded and did not reply. He felt his luck had just turned for the worse. He was lucky to find Jenny and work with her, get to know her, and kiss her. His high school fantasy had come true. Now, he felt that was all for naught. His adult life had reasserted itself.

Charlie and Emily had dated for a couple of years. He felt she wanted to get married but hesitated to ask her. She would make an okay wife but he wanted more. He wanted the same kind of love his parents, grandparents, and great-grandparents had. They were all wonderful marriages. The husbands and wives shared deep lifelong love. Charlie had never experienced that kind of love and still believed he could.

Now that he was independently wealthy he thought of trying to find such love. He could travel, maybe meet a woman in some exotic locale, get to know her, and discover she was his soul-mate. He felt certain Emily was not.

Emily was beautiful and had an agreeable personality but she was unremarkable. Charlie felt no spark when he thought about her or was with her. For him, their relationship was one of habit and convenience more than love and devotion. Emily was around when he wanted companionship. He was there when she needed a date for something.

Emily worked as a lawyer in a big firm. She struggled up the ladder toward partnership but had not yet made it. She brought in enough business for the firm to keep her on but her clients were not very profitable.

Emily tried to be like the other lawyers and seek out corporate clients with deep pockets and profitable litigation but she also had a weak spot for long-shot cases. She had a strong sense of justice that was a liability in a big law firm. Emily had handled Charlie’s business but did not bring in any other large clients.

After breakfast, she persuaded Charlie to drive her around Springfield to show her the town. Charlie hoped he would not run into Jenny. He did not know what he would tell Jenny about Emily.

He remained quiet as they drove. She had to tell him to stop so she could look at

buildings or other local features. When she asked him to tell her about the town, he answered in vague sentences.

“Boy, I would never know that you grew up here,” she complained. “You don’t seem to know *anything*.”

“Sorry. I’ve got a lot on my mind.”

Emily frowned. “Oh, my bad, sweetie. I know what you’ve been through. Well, I’m here to take your mind off *everything*.”

Charlie did not want his mind taken off anything. He had stayed to close his life here, wrap up everything, and then let go of his house, family, history, and Springfield. But possibilities had arisen with Jenny. Now, he wanted to find out how far things could go with her. Charlie had not begun fantasizing about a romance with Jenny but he came close to doing it. Then Emily showed up. Now, Charlie didn’t know what to do.

Saturday and Sunday were long, busy days at Real Books and Jenny felt pleased. There were times when six or seven customers were in the store at the same time. David was excellent at the desk and she roamed around the store helping customers and answering questions. She felt exhausted on Sunday evening and looked forward to a quiet Monday morning with Charlie and his antique books.

On Sunday evening, Jenny noticed that David seemed tired. She told him to go home early and rest up for the week ahead. He readily agreed. He stopped at the supermarket on the way home and bought some special take-out food so he could prepare a small dinner for Jenny when she returned home. David set the table, heated the food, and waited. She came home around eight-thirty and the meal surprised her. David sat her down and served her. He even bought a bottle of the wine she liked. Jenny thanked him and they made small talk about the store as they ate.

David’s plan, however, was not to have a casual conversation.

“You know why I left, right?” he asked. Jenny nodded. “It wasn’t because of you, remember? It was because of my work.” Jenny nodded, again.

“I know. You made it clear you had no other choice. I understood, but I didn’t like it. Up until then, I loved you.”

“Well, I’m back, and I have no work. So we could...,” David said. Jenny put down her fork and looked at him.

“David, I...”

“Don’t say anything.”

“Look, I’m sorry you’re in this situation. I know none of it’s your fault, just like leaving wasn’t your fault. But that happened a long time ago, and...”

“And now we could start over, Jenny.”

“No, we can’t,” Jenny countered. She got up from the table and left the kitchen. David sat there and wondered how the conversation had ended so abruptly. He wondered if he would get another chance to talk to her and began to panic. His future looked dim, if not non-existent. He had hoped there was a spark left between them but feared that was not true.

David poured Jenny’s leftover wine into his glass, drank it, and then poured the rest of the bottle into the glass and drank that, too. He got up, left the food out, and went into the living room, distraught. *Nobody wants me*, he thought. *Nobody cares about me. I’m worthless.*

He picked up the remote, turned on the TV, and looked for a sport he could watch to distract from his despair. He found a basketball game featuring a team he liked and forced himself to watch it. It was not easy. He tried to follow every play, every move, and every shot. David cheered when his favored team scored or booed when the opposing team did. He became enthusiastic but not noisy.

Jenny heard him from her bedroom and hoped his enjoyment was real. She wondered what was going to happen to him now that she had turned him down. Would he have any reason to stay? What if he decided to leave? She needed him for the store if for nothing else. Jenny got out of bed and walked to the living room. David did not look at her. She sat next to him on the sofa and looked at the TV.

“I’m sorry, David,” she said.

“Don’t be. I’m stupid. I hope you don’t hate me now.”

“I could never hate you,” she said for the second time in three days.

“I know. Do you want some dessert? I bought a pie.”

“I’ll get it. You enjoy the game.” She cut the pie and brought him a piece. They sat together and watched the game. He never took his eyes off the TV screen.

Jenny felt alone and knew he did, too. She knew they were not the answer to each other’s loneliness, despite what he had suggested. She finished her pie, sat the plate on the coffee table, wished him good night, and went back to bed.

David grew drowsy from the wine he drank and drifted off to sleep. He never found out who won the game. David didn’t care, anyway. What he cared about was his life. It had reached the lowest point he could ever recall. Would it ever turn around?

Chapter 8 - Truths

Charlie was not waiting when Jenny arrived at the storage unit on Monday morning. She unlocked the door, turned on the lights, booted up her laptop, and waited. He did not show up. She worried something happened to him on the way over and dialed his number. It rang a few times and then a woman answered.

“Hello?”

“Good morning. May I speak to Charles Stockton, please?”

“Who’s calling?” the woman asked.

“Jennifer Rodgers.”

“Just a minute. Charlie! Phone!”

There was a short pause before Charlie spoke. “Hello?”

“It’s Jenny. You’re not here. I wondered if something happened to you.”

“No, um, well, yes, but I can’t explain right now.”

“Are you coming today?”

“I don’t know.”

“Well, I need your help, Charlie. It will take a lot longer if I have to do all this alone.”

“I understand. Look, can I call you later? I’m kind of busy.” Jenny suspected what sort of busy he meant.

“Sure,” she replied and quickly ended the call.

As she worked, Jenny tried not to think about Charlie. She had missed him over the weekend and looked forward to seeing him, perhaps for the wrong reason. Now she discovered there were things Charlie had not told her about himself. She suspected he was not as alone in the world as he had led her to believe.

Jenny put in her two hours cataloging the books. It was not as difficult as she anticipated, although she had to caution herself to concentrate. *Charlie’s just a client*, she reminded herself whenever she felt distracted. *Nothing more. I need the money he’s paying me or I would walk away from this.* She locked the unit at noon and drove back to Real Books wondering what would happen next.

Charlie stood outside the store with a tall, stunning woman.

“This is Emily. I’m showing her around Springfield. I told her about how you were helping with my books and she wanted to drop by your store.” Jenny forced a smile, shook hands with Emily, and invited them in.

“Well, it’s not much,” she said after they entered the store, “but it’s been in my family for a long time. My parents started it when I was a baby.”

“It’s lovely,” Emily remarked, visibly impressed. “Quite lovely. Do you mind if I look around?”

“Of course not. That’s what it’s here for.” Emily wandered off and Charlie stood by the door. He tried to think of a way to get Jenny alone so he could explain what was happening.

“So, um, any news?” Charlie asked. Jenny shook her head. “Nothing’s sold, yet?”

“Nothing over the weekend. I haven’t checked my email yet this morning,” Jenny replied. “I was too busy working. *Alone.*” Charlie grimaced.

“Well, could we meet in your office?” Charlie asked. Jenny shook her head.

“It was a busy weekend and I have a lot of straightening up to do.”

“Look, Jenny, I’m sorry. I can explain,” Charlie whispered.

“I haven’t got time to listen, Charlie. I have to get to work.” She walked over to the counter. David was finishing up with a customer.

“Who’s Charlie’s friend?” David asked. “She’s a knockout.” *So much for David wanting to get back with me*, Jenny thought.

“I don’t know. You can ask him..., or *her*, if you want to know,” Jenny replied. David caught her derisive tone.

“That’s okay,” he said. “I was just asking.” Jenny went back to her office and unpacked her laptop. She found a surprising email and ran out to where Charlie stood waiting for Emily.

“Charlie! We’ve received an offer for the Jules Verne!”

“Oh, you mean the *Twenty Thousand Leagues*?” he asked.

“No. A collector wants *all* of them. He’s offering fifty thousand!”

“Oh, Jenny, that’s great! You’ve done it!”

“Well, we have a long way to go, but I was right. Your collection is very special.”

Charlie would have hugged her to celebrate if they had been alone. All he did was flash Jenny a quick smile.

“Fifty thousand? For some *books*?” Emily asked as she walked out from browsing among the shelves. “I had no idea old books could be worth so much. Charlie, this is great!”

“Are you ready to leave?” Charlie mumbled. Emily nodded and put on her coat. Then they walked out.

“So, is she his wife?” David asked.

“No idea,” Jenny replied. She tried to hide her surprise and disappointment but had no idea if she was successful. David didn’t ask again. Jenny went back to her office to work.

Jenny arrived on time the next morning and Charlie was not there again. She started working alone but paused when she heard voices in the hallway. Jenny recognized Charlie’s voice and that of a woman. She feared he might have brought Emily but hoped she was wrong.

Charlie walked in with Mrs. Johnson. She ran the storage facility. He casually introduced her to Jenny. She felt relieved and wondered whether it was because she did not want to see Emily again or she wanted to be alone with Charlie. Both possibilities unsettled her.

Jenny directed him to an open box and waited for him to take out a book and read the copyright page to her. Charlie wanted to comply but he also wanted to talk.

“Look, about Emily...”

“Who?”

“Emily was, *is*, my girlfriend-.”

“Oh, *her*,” Jenny interrupted him. “She seemed nice.”

“Um, thanks. Look, there’s something you should know.”

“We’re kinda busy Charlie. Can it wait? I want to get this over with so I can go back to my store.”

“Oh, yeah, of course. So where were we?”

“Have you forgotten what we did last week? Pick up the book and read the copyright page to me!” Jenny seemed annoyed at him. He tried to think of what he could say and again forgot what he was supposed to be doing. Jenny became even more annoyed. “Charlie!” she said. “Are you gonna help me or not?”

“I don’t love her,” he mumbled.

“Who?” she asked, although she knew who Charlie meant. Her sharpness surprised him. She seemed genuinely angry.

“Emily.”

“So?”

“So, I just wanted you to know.”

“Charlie, your relationships are not important to me,” Jenny lied. “We have work to do. The sooner we finish the better.”

“But, Jenny... we... *kissed*. I didn't want you to think I was doing anything wrong when I kissed you.”

Their kiss had been playing in the back of her mind since it happened. “I haven't thought about it,” Jenny lied again.

“Look, Jenny, I...”

“Charlie! We're falling behind. I've got to get this done. I have a bookstore to run, remember?” Charlie said no more. He plowed into the box and diligently read her the publication details from as many books as he could as fast as he could. She scarcely kept up with him. He finished the box, shoved it aside, opened another, and then reached in and pulled out a volume.

“Charlie, stop!” she yelled. He laid the book down but did not turn to look at her. “What's wrong?” she said.

“I don't know,” he replied.

“Are you mad at me?”

“No.”

“Did something happen?”

“Yes.” That was all he said. She waited for him to explain.

“Well, *what*?” She thought he would tell her about Emily. Who was she? Where did she come from? He did not mention Emily. He turned, looked at Jenny, and took the biggest risk of his life.

“Jenny, we kissed. It was the most wonderful thing that's happened to me in a long, long time.”

“I'm sure you kiss Emily all the time,” Jenny said. She tried not to seem blasé.

“Yes, but she's not *you*.”

“Oh.” Jenny feared he would say something like that and did not know how to reply. She thought her life had just become more complicated than it already was. *Or*, she thought, *maybe everything just got very simple*. Suddenly, old books became unimportant. Old love had replaced them. Charlie's old love, anyway. Not hers. Maybe new love, for her, but it was too soon to know. *What the hell is happening?* she asked herself. *Do I want this?* Jenny already knew the answer.

“Jenny, I'm sorry. I've screwed everything up. I've no right to talk to you like that. Why don't I just go? You can take all the time you need with the books. A year, if necessary. This storage unit is paid for. That's why I brought Mrs. Johnson up. We just signed a contract and I wanted her to meet you.” Charlie picked up his coat and started walking toward the door.

“No, wait,” Jenny said. “You didn't do anything wrong, Charlie. Please stay and work with me. We're doing so well. Maybe we can talk a little while we're working. Get to know each other. What do you say?” Charlie smiled for the first time since he last saw her at the unit after their kiss.

Charlie smiled. “Okay. I'd like that.”

“So would I. Grab that next book, will you?” They worked slowly and methodically for a half-hour and did not converse. Charlie finished two boxes and was about to unpack the third one. He paused.

“So, I guess you want to know about Emily,” he blurted out.

“So, I guess I should tell you about David,” she said at the same moment. They laughed. Jenny got up from the table and walked over to where Charlie stood surrounded by boxes of books. She put her arms around him, gave him a gentle hug, and rested her head on his chest. They both felt contentment, joy, and peace unlike any they had ever known.

“You forgot to bring the coffee today,” Jenny said.

“I could run out and get some.”

“No, I’m okay. I think we can finish up. We made a lot of progress today, didn’t we?”
They both knew she was not referring only to the books.

Chapter 9 - Memories

Emily had never seen Charlie so distracted. She first met him when he still had his company. Back then he was the consummate founder and CEO: always clear, sharp, focused, and driven to succeed. She was not used to Charlie forgetting what he was saying in the middle of a sentence. Emily thought the emotional stress of all that had happened in Charlie's life was catching up to him and she felt sorry for him.

She wanted to take his mind off everything and decided a special dinner and romantic evening would help him relax. She cooked Charlie's favorite foods. He seemed to enjoy the meal. The wine relaxed him. After dinner, she cleared the table, sat on his lap, and moved to kiss him. Her spontaneity surprised Charlie and he allowed her to do it. Emily expected Charlie to kiss her back enthusiastically. That's what he usually did and then continued to do much more. This time he remained passive. She tried not to panic.

"What's wrong, sweetie?" she asked. Charlie did not reply. "Is it me?"

"No, it's *me*, Emily. A lot's going on. This has all been more difficult than I thought it would be. I guess I just wasn't ready for it all."

"Well, let me take your mind off *everything*," she cooed. Then she kissed him again, more passionately.

"I guess I'm not really in the mood," Charlie apologized. Emily had never known him not to be in the mood.

"Oh, okay; are you *sure*?" she asked.

He nodded. "Sorry. I guess I'll be happy when all this is over."

"And when will that be?" she asked, trying to hide her disappointment.

"I don't know. Everything seems to be moving along okay. Then I hit a snag and new problems crop up. Plus, it's emotionally draining, too."

Emily tried one last time. "I know, baby. That's why *I'm* here. I can help you relax."

"You already have," he lied. "That was a *great* dinner. The problem is, it made me sleepy. I think I'm gonna turn in. Gotta hit the books again tomorrow."

Emily thought she ought to try one more time. "Do you want some company?" she asked, sweetly.

"No, thanks. I'm just gonna crash. Good-night." For Emily, it was not a good night. It was downright awful. What the hell was going on?

"I decided to 'hit the books' as Charlie puts it," Emily said when she and Charlie greeted Jenny the next morning. Jenny smiled nervously. Charlie had already opened the storage unit and unpacked a box. Emily looked at the other boxes. "That's a *lot* of books! These were all your family's?" she asked. Charlie nodded. Emily opened one box and looked inside.

"Are they worth a lot?" she asked. Neither Jenny nor Charlie replied. She looked up, noticed Charlie and Jenny looking at each other, and had the feeling they would rather she was not there. She thought her feeling was silly and repeated her question.

"Some are," Jenny answered. "Hopefully, most of them. Charlie's family took good care of them. They're all in excellent condition."

"That's good, I guess," Emily commented. Charlie and Jenny did not reply. "So, Jenny, how did you get into the book business?" she asked.

"My parents opened the store before I was born. I took it over when my dad passed away."

"And how's business?"

"Not bad."

"Not good, either, from what I hear."

“It’s been better,” Jenny admitted.

“I bet *these* will help your bottom line. A lot.”

“Yes. Charlie’s been very generous with my commission.”

“Oh, has he?” Emily replied. She looked at Charlie.

“Jenny’s working *very* hard. It’s her busiest time of the year and she found someone to run her store so she could help me sell these books. That’s worth the commission I’m paying her,” Charlie explained.

“Good on you, Charlie.” Emily made no effort to cloak her sarcasm. “Good on you *both*.”

That night, Emily made another special dinner and tried for another romantic evening. Again, Charlie rebuffed her. He went to bed and left her to clean up the dishes, pots, and pans. She did not mind. After she finished cleaning the kitchen, she decided to explore Charlie’s house.

There were four bedrooms and she had only been in one. It had been Charlie’s parents’ room. They had old-fashioned twin beds. Charlie was asleep in the one next to the window. The door was closed. She assumed he would not hear her if she explored the other bedrooms. Emily went from room to room. She admired some old furniture. There were a couple of pieces she liked. She thought she might ask Charlie to give them to her if he did not want them.

She went downstairs and walked past the library. Charlie had pointed it out when she first arrived. She opened the door, flipped on the light switch, and saw the empty oak bookshelves. Emily looked more closely at the shelves. They were exquisitely made: no nails or screws, all tongue-and-groove construction, with ornate brass corners. She could tell they were very old. As she admired them she noticed a single book across the room and wondered what it was. It seemed strange that any book would remain behind when the movers emptied the library.

Emily walked over to the book, picked it up, and looked at it. It was Charlie’s high school yearbook, *Memories*. She felt thrilled to discover it and looked around for someplace to sit so she could open it. There was no chair in the room. Emily carried the yearbook into the living room, sat down to read, and hoped to learn more about Charlie’s past.

Emily liked Charlie more than she liked other men she had dated but she was not in love with him. She was not in love with anyone, not even herself. She felt skeptical about love. It had messed up the lives of many people she knew and made them do stupid things.

Emily was not stupid. She was careful. Charlie was a great guy, a nice companion, and good-looking in a subdued, dignified way. They got along well and she thought he would eventually propose marriage after he finished all this work with his parents’ house. She would say ‘yes’ and expected they would have a good life together.

Emily did not want much. She was a sensible woman who prized stability above all else. As a lawyer, she had seen people’s lives in crisis. She felt determined never to experience anything like the predicaments her clients had. She looked forward to a quiet, stable, pleasant life with Charlie. They would travel, but not too often. Perhaps they would take time to make some real friends. The pressures of Charlie’s business and her career as a lawyer left them little time to socialize with people other than those they worked with. Emily felt most business friendships were shallow and phony. She wanted real friendships based on who a person was rather than what their job was.

Charlie had told her little about his early life and she assumed it was unremarkable. Now, she hoped to find out if her assumption was correct. What if Charlie appeared in photos of the football team, or the theater club, or shaking hands with someone famous? Maybe she could ask him about his early life and he would tell her a few stories. Emily wanted to get to

know Charlie better. They did not want children and would only have each other for company. She wanted to know as much as she could about the man she would spend the rest of her life with.

Emily opened the yearbook, paged through slowly, and spotted Charlie in a few photos. She read several messages from his classmates at the back of the book. Then Emily noticed papers stuck inside the back cover. She removed the papers, unfolded them, and read the words at the top of the first page. *The Fairy Tale*, it said. *I seem to have found a story*, she thought, and then read a little more. The author was not Charlie Stockton but someone named Jennifer Collins. Puzzled, Emily began to read the story. ‘Once upon a time,’ it started. “Oh, how *original*,” Emily remarked aloud. She grinned. Then she went on reading...

Chapter 10 - The Fairy Tale

Once upon a time, there was a beautiful princess named Anne whose best friend was a magnificent white horse named Snowflake. The horse was a gift from her father the King on her eighth birthday.

The King built a track inside the castle grounds so she could ride safely as much as she wanted to. Her mother the Queen complained that Anne was too young to have a horse but Anne quickly learned to ride Snowflake and spent as much time as she could riding or grooming him.

The track was all right when she was a little girl but when she became a young woman she wanted to explore the kingdom. The King would allow it only if she had soldiers or guards to escort her. Princess Anne yearned to roam free without anyone telling her where to go.

She found a passageway that led to caves beneath the castle and discovered a secret escape route. Anne immediately decided to take Snowflake beyond the walls. Outside, she mounted him and rode away. She was now free to explore the hills and vales, forests and fields of the kingdom, alone and happy.

Her father never found out.

One afternoon Snowflake was trotting along in the woods and a huge snake panicked him. The horse reared up, caught Anne by surprise, and toppled her to the ground. The startled snake glided away; the terrified horse bolted and ran away. Anne sat alone on the dirty forest floor. She tried to get up but stopped when she felt a sharp pain. "Ow!" she exclaimed. She called out for Snowflake but he did not return. Anne felt helpless. She could not move and did not know what to do.

A nearby peasant boy was gathering firewood. Jesse had a large ax and a cart loaded with wood. He heard a cry and noticed someone on the ground. He approached cautiously and saw a dark-skinned young woman, wearing dusty clothing. Jesse wondered who she was. She seemed disoriented. He feared she was hurt.

"Hello?" Jesse called out to her.

"Who's there?" Anne replied, her voice trembling.

"I was just collecting firewood. Are you alone?"

"Yes. My horse threw me. You haven't seen him, have you?"

"No, I'm sorry. Are you hurt?" he asked.

"No!" she lied hoping to disguise her fear.

"I haven't seen you in the forest before."

"I ride here sometimes," Anne responded. She tried to move, found the pain had gone away, stood up, and looked at Jesse.

Jesse had cautiously approached her as they talked. When he finally got closer and saw her face her beauty enthralled him. She looked as if she could have been a princess but her dirty clothes made him feel certain she was not.

"Do you know your way back?" he asked.

"Of *course!*" she lied, again.

"Well, how will you get there without your horse?"

"I'll walk."

"Is it a long way?"

"I can't say."

"Do you want me to walk with you?"

Anne considered his offer but then came up with a better idea. "I would prefer that you help me find my horse."

"Oh, sure. There's a creek nearby. I bet your horse went there for a drink. Do you

want me to show you where it is?”

“That would be nice.”

“It’s that way,” Jesse said, pointing. He led her down a path through thick underbrush toward the creek. Snowflake waited calmly by the water.

“There he is! I’m so relieved.”

“He’s beautiful!” Jesse said, in awe. “I’m glad you found him. Will you be all right, now?”

“Yes, I think so.”

“Good. I’ve never seen you in these woods before. Do you *truly* ride here often?”

“I like it here. I might come back.”

“Well, I gather wood here a lot. Maybe I’ll see you again. Goodbye.”

“Wait! What’s your name?”

“Jesse. What’s yours?”

“Anne.”

“It’s nice to meet you, Anne.”

“Nice to meet *you*, Jesse,” she gushed. Anne mounted Snowflake and started to ride away. Jesse wondered if he would ever see her again. He wanted to but did not know why.

Jesse went back to the creek the next day but Anne did not show up. Anne went back another day but never saw Jesse. They felt frustrated. One day as Jesse wheeled his cart through the woods he heard a horse galloping in the distance. He was close to the creek so he hurried there and waited. Anne arrived soon after he did. She acted surprised to see him although he was the reason she went there. He tried not to seem excited about meeting her. They both played it cool.

“So, we meet again,” Anne said, trying to seem casual.

“Yes. Nice day, isn’t it?” Jesse replied.

“Are you busy?”

“I was working hard today. I just came here to rest and get a drink.”

“What a coincidence! So did we.” Anne dismounted and led Snowflake to the water. He lowered his head and drank. Jesse watched.

“That is a *really* beautiful horse. What’s his name?”

“Snowflake. *I* named him,” Anne bragged.

Jesse smiled. “Perfect name. He’s as white as snow. Do you ride him a lot?”

“All the time. I’ve been all over the kingdom.”

“I’ve never ridden a horse,” Jesse admitted. “I’ve never gone anywhere except these woods, my parents’ farm beyond the woods, and to the village on market days.”

“You’ve *never* ridden a horse?” Anne asked, shocked. “Won’t your father let you ride?”

“We don’t have a horse. Just some cows, pigs, and sheep, plus a big ox for plowing.”

“That’s a real shame,” Anne replied. “Riding is the most wonderful thing in the world.” Jesse immediately disagreed. From where he stood looking at her, he felt certain Anne was the most wonderful thing in the world.

“I’m happy for you... that you can do it,” he said. Anne felt touched by his kind comment and had a thought.

“Would you like to do it, too?” she asked.

“I don’t know how.”

“Snowflake is strong. He could carry both of us easily.”

“Do you think so?”

“I’m sure of it. Would you like to try?” Jesse felt eager to try anything that would allow him to get closer to Anne. However, he didn’t want to seem too enthusiastic.

“Okay, um, sure.”

“Great! Come over here. Climb up behind me. You better hold on, tight! We like to run, fast, don’t we, Snowflake?” The horse whinnied, nodded his head, and flicked his tail.

Jesse walked toward Snowflake. The horse seemed bigger as Jesse got closer. He tried to figure out how to mount up. Anne anchored her feet in the stirrups and reached for his hand. Jesse reached for her hand and felt an electric shock when they touched. She told him to leap up. When he did, she pulled him up behind her. Jesse was astride the horse in a second, wondering how he would stay there when Snowflake started to move. Anne had the saddle to anchor her. He thought about telling her he had changed his mind.

“Put your arms around me,” she directed, “and hold on tight.” As soon as he did, Snowflake began walking through the woods. Jesse thought he had somehow gone to heaven.

“This is *nice*,” he said. His mouth was behind Anne’s head, and his soft voice in her ear was the sweetest sound she had ever heard. His arms tightly around her made her feel different than she ever felt before.

“This is nothing,” she said. “Are you holding as tight as you can?”

“Yes,” he whispered in her ear.

“Good.” She leaned forward. “Run, Snowflake.” The magnificent horse took off. Snowflake ran swiftly and effortlessly through the woods. Jesse felt terrified and held tightly to Anne. She anchored him on Snowflake’s back. Trees sped by. Jesse felt the wind. They rode as one. It only took a couple of moments for him to feel at home.

He also felt something else but did not know what it was.

They met at the creek every three or four days and spent a few hours together. Jesse would have gladly met all day, every day, but he had work to do. Collecting firewood was difficult. His father expected him to come home with a full cart every day. The family earned money from selling the firewood in the town. Without it, they might go hungry.

He assumed Anne also worked but did not know what she did or where she came from. The kingdom was big and Snowflake was fast. Anne probably lived far away and rode a while to meet Jesse. He felt grateful that she did.

Anne never told Jesse she was a princess and he never figured it out. He had never seen the King, only heard about him. Jesse’s father praised the King, who was well-liked by his subjects. Jesse did not know the King had a beautiful daughter. Even if he had known it, he would never have suspected the princess would be meeting him every few days by the creek. But, she was, and she was falling in love with him.

They rode Snowflake together a few more times and then Anne suggested Jesse ride solo. Snowflake was used to Jesse and liked him. The horse nuzzled Jesse whenever they met. Anne felt pleased they liked each other.

“I want you to feel what it is like to ride in the saddle. You’ll like it. It’s a lot better than holding on to me.” Jesse knew *that* could not be true. There was nothing better than holding on to Anne, but he agreed to give it a try.

Anne held the reins as Jesse put his foot in the stirrup, lifted himself, swung his leg over Snowflake’s back, and then planted himself solidly in the saddle. He immediately felt at home.

“This is nice,” he said.

“That’s nothing. Wait until Snowflake starts to move.” Jesse was not sure he felt ready for that. He liked sitting on a still horse but had no idea how he would handle a moving one. Anne handed him the reins and told him what to do with them.

“It’s easy. Just tell him what to do. He’s smart,” she explained. Then she stepped back. “Trot, Snowflake,” she said. The horse trotted away. Jesse held on and hoped he would survive the ride. He did not want to fall off and make a fool of himself in front of Anne. He

held the reins and learned to direct Snowflake where he wanted the horse to go. Snowflake gently followed every move Jesse made with the reins. Jesse soon felt he had command of the horse. They trotted back to Anne. She smiled.

“How did *that* feel?” she asked.

“Great! He’s a magnificent animal.”

“Wait ‘til he runs,” Anne replied. “Go, Snowflake. Run!” she said. The horse took off.

“Ooohhh!” Jesse yelled. “Wait! Stop! Whoa!” Snowflake abruptly stopped, hurling Jesse from the saddle. Anne ran to Jesse, who lay on the damp ground next to the creek.

“Are you all right?” she asked, trying not to panic. “I’m so sorry. That was my fault. I should have warned you.” She knelt, put her arms around his shoulders, and helped him sit up. He had some trouble sitting, moved awkwardly, and pulled her down next to him. They were face-to-face. Anne looked into Jesse’s eyes. He looked into hers. They saw themselves in each other’s eyes. Anne spontaneously kissed Jesse and then immediately stood up.

“I’d better go,” she exclaimed.

“Do you have to?” Jesse pleaded. Anne nodded. “Are you coming back, sometime?” Anne looked at him. She felt puzzled by his question.

“Of course,” she replied. Jesse sat there, distraught.

“I’ll miss you,” he confessed.

“I’ll miss you, too, Jesse.” She called Snowflake, mounted up, and rode away. Jesse sat by the creek. He wondered if he somehow fell asleep, dreamed what had happened, and just now awoke. He looked down, saw Snowflake’s hoof prints, and knew he had not been dreaming. He still felt Anne’s kiss on his lips. It had all been wonderfully real.

The next time Jesse went to the creek he found soldiers waiting for him. They arrested him but would not tell him why. Jesse went with them obediently. He was taken to the castle and found himself before the King.

“What is your name, boy?” the King demanded.

“Jesse Di Terra, Your Highness.”

“And where are you from, boy?”

“My family’s farm is on the other side of the forest.”

“Why have you been meeting my daughter?”

“What daughter?”

“Don’t you know the princess?”

“No, Your Highness. I’ve never seen her.”

“You *lie*, boy!”

“I would never lie to *you*, Your Highness. You are my King. I am a loyal subject, as are my parents.”

“You have been meeting the princess by the creek.”

“I’ve been meeting a girl named Anne, but I never met any princess.”

“Anne is my daughter, the princess. Her horse is Snowflake. I gave him to her when she was eight years old.”

“Oh,” Jesse replied, nervously. He had begun to realize why the King had him taken from beside the creek. Jesse knew he might be in trouble.

“*Why* have you been meeting her?” the King asked.

“We’re friends.”

“And you did not know she was the princess?”

“No, Your Highness, she never told me.”

“Well, you cannot meet her again.”

Jesse did not reply immediately. The King didn’t like waiting. He expected instantaneous obedience. Finally, Jesse replied, boldly, “I will stop, Sire, if *she* tells me to.”

“*What?! I am your King, boy, and I am telling you to!*” Jesse did not know how to respond. He did not wish to disobey the King but knew that he loved Anne and did not care that she was the princess.

“I cannot do that,” he affirmed.

“You *will* do that or I will send you into exile!” the King threatened. Jesse remained silent. The King waited. “Answer me, boy. It’s your choice. Stop seeing her or I will banish you for the rest of your life!”

“I don’t know if she loves me, Your Highness, but I love her,” Jesse replied. “If she wishes to see me, then I *will* see her. I will not stop.”

The King turned to the Captain of the Guards. “Take him to the dungeon, for now. See that he is put on the next ship that sails from the harbor.” The guards took Jesse away. All that he could think about was how disappointed Anne would feel when she went to the creek and he was not there.

Anne returned to the creek the next day, eager to meet Jesse. But, he did not come. She felt heartbroken and determined to come back every day until she saw him again. On the third day, Jesse was still not waiting. An old woman sat on a large rock beside the creek. Anne greeted the woman respectfully. The woman smiled and greeted her by name.

“You know my name?” Anne asked, surprised.

“Of course. I know all about you, princess, your horse, Snowflake, and Jesse, too.” Anne felt embarrassed.

“Who *are* you?” she asked.

“Who I am is not important. Do you feel that Jesse loves you?” Anne nodded, shyly. “I thought so. Do you love him?” Anne nodded, vigorously. “Good. Jesse is in trouble. The king found out you and Jesse were meeting. He summoned Jesse to the castle and confronted him.” The old woman suddenly stopped and Anne feared something terrible had happened to Jesse. “Your father, in his benevolence, offered Jesse a choice.”

“What choice?” Anne asked. She feared the worst because she knew her father could be kind when he wanted to be but harsh when he felt it necessary.

“He told Jesse he had to either stop meeting you or be banished.”

Anne hung her head. She thought that she understood what the old woman meant. “You mean that Jesse will not be coming to meet me anymore?”

“Oh, *no*, child. Jesse *refused* the King’s command. He said he would only stop meeting if *you* told him to. Jesse loves you.”

“So, he’s banished, then?”

“I’m afraid so,” the old woman replied, nodding.

“Where is he, right now?”

“He’s in the dungeon. He’s due to be put on a ship to carry him far, far away, forever.”

“I *must* save him!” Anne cried. She jumped onto Snowflake and commanded him to run like the wind back to the castle. The old woman watched Anne gallop away. She did not know if Anne would arrive before the ship had sailed or what the princess would do if she was too late.

Anne rode, enraged. She arrived at the castle and hurried to the dungeon but Jesse was no longer there. She ran to the King’s chamber and confronted him. He stubbornly refused to answer her questions about Jesse. Instead, he told her she was now betrothed to Prince Owen from another kingdom. Anne angrily left the King and went to her room. The old woman from the creek was waiting for her.

“We meet again,” she said, smiling serenely.

“Who *are* you?” Anne asked.

“Isn’t it obvious?” the woman replied. Anne looked at her, a puzzled expression on

her face. She felt so angry she could not think. "I'm your Fairy Godmother," the old woman explained.

"Oh. Then you'll help me."

"If I can."

"Where's Jesse?" Anne asked.

"He's on a ship."

"I know that. But where's he gone?"

"I don't know that, Anne."

"You're not *much* of a Fairy Godmother, are you?"

"I do what I can," the woman apologized.

"Well, you're no help, at all!" Anne exclaimed. The old woman vanished in a puff of smoke. Anne immediately knew what she had to do.

She left in the dark of night, determined to escape marriage and look for Jesse. The King found out she ran away and sent soldiers to bring her back.

Emily stopped reading. There was nothing else on the page. She wondered what happened next. Then she noticed there was one last page and read it.

'Plot notes:

'What happens? Does Anne find Jesse? Do her father's soldiers find *her*? What happens to Jesse? Where is he? Does he forget about her?

'Do they ever get to live *happily ever after*?'

Emily wondered the same thing. *Why did Charlie write this?* she asked herself. *And who is it about?* It never occurred to her that Charlie hadn't written it. If she had thought of it, she would have awakened Charlie and asked him why he had kept a story someone else had written. As it was, Emily decided to wait for the right opportunity to ask Charlie about it.

Chapter 11 - The Christmas Tree

There were only two weeks left until Christmas and no customers on Sunday night. Jenny felt bad keeping David at the store. *He must be tired. He's been here every day since Thanksgiving. I'll let him go home and rest.* Plus, she wanted some time away from David. She told him to go home early.

Jenny was used to the bookstore's seven-day-a-week schedule. She was not used to being with her ex-husband every waking hour. Even back when they were still married he had his job and she ran the store without him. Plus, she didn't want to wear him out. Two weeks remained until Christmas and she continued to hope business would pick up enough to save Real Books.

Jenny had no idea what she would do if the business didn't pick up. The large commission from Charlie's books would be a windfall but plowing the income back into a failing business might be a bad idea. She might be better off closing the store and using the windfall to seed another business. Jenny, however, felt too tired right now to think about what that business might be. She decided to put that consideration off until after the holidays when David would be gone from her life.

Hopefully.

She didn't like thinking about the possibility that she would not be rid of him after the New Year. What if he wanted to remain in Springfield? What if he found a job, got his own place, and started hanging around the bookstore hoping to rekindle their relationship?

Jenny felt certain she could never love David again. His decision to leave Springfield- and her- for greener pastures in the big city had soured her on any possible reconciliation. Once he had gone, she put David out of her life. *He was part of my past,* she reminded herself. *He will not be part of my future. And that's all there is to it.*

David, however, was not ready to give up.

As he drove back from Real Books he passed a Christmas tree lot, felt inspired, turned around, and parked his car. "I'll take *that* one," David told the pimply-faced adolescent who asked if he needed help. The kid seemed pleased that he made such an easy sale. He tied the tree atop David's car, took his money, and sent David on his way with a cheerful 'Merry Christmas.' *Oh, it's gonna be,* David told himself. *I don't know why I didn't think of this before.*

It wasn't until he brought the tree into the apartment and stood it against the wall in Jenny's living room that he realized he hadn't thought his great idea all the way through. *What good is a Christmas tree by itself?* he thought. *It needs a stand and plenty of decorations.* Out he went to buy what he needed. He still had time before Jenny closed the store and came home.

David had no trouble finding lights, Christmas balls, and a gaudy star for the top of the tree. He had everything finished in an hour and then relaxed until Jenny came home.

Jenny arrived at the apartment around nine pm. She wondered if David had put together another surprise Sunday dinner to soften her up for a romantic overture. David was in the bathroom when Jenny came through the front door.

She saw the tree as soon as she came in. "What the?" she gasped. "David!"

"I'll be right out!"

"You'd *better* be right out."

David sauntered out of the bathroom.

"What is *this*?" Jenny asked.

"Has it been so long since you had a Christmas tree in here?" David quipped.

"No, it hasn't, David. Marcus and I had a little one just last year."

"But not a magnificent one like this, I bet."

“Where did you get the money? I thought you were broke.”

“I don’t have an income right now but I still have a little money left. I borrowed it from myself. I’ll pay myself back when my unemployment checks start coming in.”

His casual admission that he had money angered Jenny. *I thought he was broke. He just about begged me to let him live here. Could he have afforded to live somewhere else? Maybe not in his old apartment but with some roommates?*

David admired the tree and began to reminisce. “Doesn’t it remind you of that first real Christmas when Marcus was two and he understood what was going on? I remember his excitement. Seeing Christmas through his eyes made it extra special for me that year. Now that we’ll be together this year, for the first time since- well, you know- I wanted it to be like that for us again.”

“David, it’ll never be like *that* again. Not for us.”

“But it *could* be, Jenny. It would be so easy. We’re already living under the same roof. What’s to keep us from taking the next step?”

“David, we’re done taking steps together. The only steps our futures hold are apart. Yours are in your life and mine are in my life. We share Marcus, but that’s *all* we share.”

David was not ready to give up. “Don’t you remember that Christmas Eve, Jenny? Marcus was so exhausted that he fell asleep right after we decorated the tree. I carried him to bed while you finished wrapping his presents. Then I took you to bed and unwrapped you and you were the best gift I ever received in my life. I never forgot that night.” His misremembered scenario surprised Jenny.

“It didn’t happen that way. You fell asleep not long after Marcus did. I had to put the two of you to bed, finish wrapping, clean up after decorating, finish cooking, and prepare the kitchen for a special Christmas breakfast I had planned. I fell in bed exhausted. You snored all night.”

“You make it sound so awful, Jenny. Was it that bad?” Jenny thought for a moment.

“Of course not,” she replied. “It *was* Marcus’s first real Christmas and we were just as excited as he was. And it was wonderful.”

“This Christmas could as wonderful as that one was.” David’s pressure was starting to annoy her.

“It could be, David. But not in *this* apartment. Maybe for some other family in some other apartment where lucky parents are preparing for their toddler’s first real Christmas. I envy them, in a way. But I don’t want to repeat that part of my life.”

“But, I do, Jenny,” David pleaded. He approached her. “I think we could have that happiness again- all of it, the ups and the downs.”

Jenny put up her hand to stop him from getting any closer.

“David, do you have any idea how I felt when you told me you thought it would be better for you to move to the city?” David shook his head. “You said it was because you could find the work you wanted there. But, you knew that I already had the work I wanted *here*.”

David didn’t respond. Jenny went on.

“It was the same way I felt when my father told me my mother was killed in that car accident.” Jenny could not go on. She started sobbing. “That accident robbed me of my mother. You robbed me of the happiness I had found despite losing her the way I did. And after losing my father, as well! *Now*, do you understand why we can never go back to where we were?”

“Jenny... I guess never realized.”

“You *should* have realized! I told you everything there was to know about me, my whole life, all my feelings, my most intimate secrets. I thought I could trust you with them. I found out I was wrong.”

“Do you want me to leave?” David asked. Jenny shook her head.

“I need you to help me save my store, my father’s store, my mother’s store. I don’t know if we’re gonna do that.”

“I told you I would help you in any way that I can. I meant it.”

“Real Books can’t die, David. It can’t! I have to save it no matter what it takes.”

David opened his arms to offer Jenny a hug. She walked toward him and let him do it. It was the first time they touched in nearly ten years. Neither felt any pleasure.

David knew that moment there would be no Christmas miracle for him. He wasn’t certain who needed one more- him or Jenny. He needed to find a way to rebuild his life and had hoped to start by rekindling their romance. Jenny wasn’t looking for romance. She had to save her family’s dream.

David also knew that if anyone could do it, Jenny could. Her devotion to that dream was what had attracted him when they first met at the bookstore. Her commitment to their marriage and Marcus convinced him every day that she was the right woman for him and he was lucky to have found her. It had been his choice to leave. Now he knew it had been the wrong choice and it was too late to do anything to change it.

Despite his disappointment, David held on to Jenny, not merely to comfort her, but to comfort himself, as well. She had been correct when she told him they were through taking life steps together. He was on his own now. After the holidays he would have to find a new life. David wasn’t so sure that would be possible, but he said nothing to Jenny.

Chapter 12 - Complications and Resolutions

The unfinished story delighted and charmed Emily. It revealed a romantic side of Charlie's personality that surprised her. She assumed Charlie wrote it using a pen name to avoid embarrassment and wondered why he never finished it. She also wondered if she should tell him she read it. Perhaps it was private and personal and Charlie would not like her reading it. She decided to wait to ask him about it.

Emily slept late and Charlie was gone when she awoke. She had planned to go with him to work on the books again and had told him that she wanted to go. Charlie deliberately left early so he could avoid taking Emily. He wanted to be alone with Jenny.

"Well, we're done, Charlie. I can't believe we did it!" Jenny said a few days later. "Now I can get back to my store and you can get on with selling the house." Charlie did not want either to happen. He wanted to stay right there with Jenny forever if he could.

"Yeah, about the books, um, I could help with packing and shipping, I think," he said, hesitantly.

"Oh, I can handle that. Don't worry about it. You've got more important things to do. I'm sure Emily will be happy to have you around more."

"I don't want to be around Emily, Jenny. I want to be with you." There. Charlie finally said what he wanted to say when they were in high school over twenty years ago. It was easy to say it now that he was an adult. Why was it so hard to even *think* of saying it when they were teenagers? Was it something about Jenny or something about him that kept him from talking to her back then?

"These past few weeks have been the happiest of my life," Charlie admitted. "I feel like I lost my mom only to find you." His admission surprised Jenny and she felt sorry for him.

"Charlie, I'm just some girl you knew back in high school. That was a long time ago."

Charlie remained quiet for a few moments. Then he spoke. "Jenny, I don't know what happens, now," he said.

"What would you *like* to happen?" she asked. Her voice was soft and gentle. Charlie thought that Jenny might also miss him.

"I'd like to see more of you, but..."

"But, what, Charlie?"

"Everything seems so complicated. You've got your store and your ex-husband. I've got my mom's house... and... Emily. The books don't seem so important anymore."

"But they are, aren't they?" she asked. He did not answer. "Well, they're still important to *me*, Charlie." He wanted her to add 'and so are you' but she did not. Charlie felt worried. Maybe she didn't feel the same way he did.

"Jenny, I'm sorry to seem so pathetic. I do appreciate your help. I won't bother you anymore. Let me know what happens next when you figure it out, okay?" Charlie said. He put on his coat and started for the door. Jenny did not know what to do.

"Charlie, wait. Remember the first time you came into my store? You asked me about a fairy tale. What were you talking about?"

"Oh, it was something you wrote that I found on the printer in the computer lab. I think there was a surprise fire drill that day. Everyone ran out. You didn't come back so I saved it for you. I read it, liked it, and always wanted to ask you what the rest of the story was. I thought it might be a way I could finally get to talk to you. But I never worked up the courage. I still have the story."

"It's funny, I don't remember writing it," Jenny said, pretending she had not found the story stuffed in the back of Charlie's yearbook. "You know more about it than I do."

“Maybe I should give it back so you can read it and finish it, finally.”

“Maybe, when all this is done, we can read it together, okay?” Jenny suggested. *And maybe finish it together*, she thought. She assumed Charlie would seem pleased but he nodded glumly and then walked out. Jenny watched him leave and felt sadder for him than ever before.

She wondered why she did not recollect the story. She wanted to read it now just to remember what it was about and possibly recall why she wrote it. Jenny did not know when that might happen. She feared she and Charlie might never see each other again and immediately felt she did not want their short relationship to end. *But*, she wondered, *how can I make it continue?*

“Um, I found your yearbook,” Emily said over dinner. She tried another romantic meal, hoping to turn Charlie’s attention to her. Charlie did not reply. “It was interesting,” she added. He ignored her. “Especially that story in the back.”

“What story?” Charlie pretended not to know about Jenny’s ‘fairy tale.’

“That fairy tale. Was it a school project? Why did you use a pen name? Was it too girly?” she teased. Charlie did not reply. “It’s nice, but you never finished it. What happens to the couple, Anne and Jesse?”

“I don’t know.”

“You have no idea?” she pressed him.

“Not a clue. I guess I flunked that assignment,” Charlie joked. He got up from the table, thanked Emily for dinner, and walked out of the dining room. Emily wondered why he seemed upset. Was it the story or her? She followed him.

“Look, Charlie, I know this is a rough time for you but you don’t have to go through it alone. I’m here for you.”

“I didn’t ask you to come,” Charlie replied, emotionlessly. His reply stunned Emily.

“No, you didn’t. Would you rather I leave?” she asked. Charlie did not give her an immediate answer. She understood what his lack of response meant. “Okay,” she declared and felt as if everything had just become painfully clear.

“Emily, you’re right,” Charlie apologized. “This is a lot to deal with. It’s been more emotional than I ever could have imagined.”

“That’s why I came.”

“I’ve got nothing left over for you, right now. I’m sorry.” She tried to kiss Charlie but he pulled away. The pull separated them by only a few inches but Emily felt they had just separated much further apart, perhaps by an insurmountable distance.

“Okay,” she said, quietly. She did not know what to do next.

Jenny called Charlie to tell him she had sold more books. Emily answered the phone. Jenny felt disappointed but gave her the news. “I’ll tell him, right away,” Emily said, cheerfully. She mentioned Jenny’s call when he came into the room.

“She did?” Charlie seemed happy for the first time in days. Emily had decided to hang around, hoping he might need her eventually. Christmas was only a few days away and she hoped his mood would change. She understood how overwhelmed Charlie was by everything he had to deal with and felt sorry for him. If she could not make him relax with good dinners or her company, at least she could be there for him if and when he needed her. She decided to stay in the background but remain available.

The end was in sight. The realtor had already received inquiries about the house. The ordeal of letting go of the Stockton family’s possessions would soon be over. The estate appraiser had scheduled a sale and she was confident it would be well-attended and very successful. Charlie should not have been brooding but he was.

It was not letting go of the Stockton family's possessions that caused Charlie's sadness. It was the ordeal of letting go of the Stockton family's *memories*. One hundred and fifty years of family history were about to go out of his life. He had not expected how painful it would be to let them go. He would be cut adrift, alone, without roots or an anchor. He would no longer have a home in this world. His comfortable, modern house in the city was just a building. The Stockton family house he was about to lose was his real home.

It dawned on Charlie that he had to make a choice. He could live in a house or live in a home. The only real home he ever had was here in Springfield, and he did not want to let it go.

Charlie called the realtor and told her to take the house off the market. He called the estate sale agent and canceled the sale. He called a realtor in the city and put his house up for sale, furniture and all. Charlie had come home. He planned to stay for the rest of his life.

Lastly, he called Jenny and told her the news.

"I'm staying in Springfield," he said. She heard the delight and relief in his voice.

"Really? That's wonderful, Charlie! I'm so happy for you. Does that mean you're keeping the house?"

"Yes, and everything in it."

"Um, the books, too?" Jenny asked, apprehensively. She had already sold and shipped a few of them and doubted she could buy them back.

"No. My mother's last wish was for them to find new homes. That was all she asked me to do. She never asked me to stay here or even keep the house and rent it out. She cared about those books more than anything else, and so do I."

"I'm happy to hear it, Charlie. I would have difficulty getting them back." Jenny felt relieved.

"There's something else I care about, too," Charlie added. "Or, more accurately, *someone* else." He paused. Jenny waited. Emily eavesdropped from the next room. She hoped fervently that she was the 'someone else' to which he referred.

"Um, remember we talked about getting together to read your story?" Charlie asked.

"Yes."

"Would you like to come over to my new house and do that?"

"When?"

"Whenever you're free. I know your store's busy right now."

"Not too busy to see your new house! How about this evening? I'll bring dinner."

"Okay. I'll get the story out. See you then."

Jenny told David she was taking the evening off. She did not tell him why. She was so dedicated to Real Books, and worried about keeping it open, that David wondered how she could leave so late in the Christmas rush. The closer they got to the holiday, the more customers came in. He felt certain he could handle the store for an evening but wondered what lay beyond. Had Jenny suddenly decided to give up on Real Books? If so, why? What else was going on in her life? David immediately became suspicious.

"Where's Emily? Won't she be joining us?" Jenny asked when she arrived. She hoped the answer would be no.

"She left to go back to the city. I told her I decided to live here from now on and she realized there was no future for us. I feel bad but I think it's for the best."

"And you didn't love her, anyway," Jenny commented, but not cruelly.

"No, but I cared about her."

"Of course, but she's a big girl. She'll be okay, Charlie."

"Yes. You're right."

Charlie had already set the table. Jenny opened the bag of take-out food she bought.

“It’s not very special,” she apologized as she removed the containers of hot food from the bag.

“Oh, but it *is*, to me, anyway. It’s our first meal together in my new home.” *And maybe our new home*, he thought.

They ate and chatted about the books, her bookstore, the holidays, some high school memories, and childhood recollections of Springfield. Charlie liked the way she laughed when he reminded her about the sledding hill in the park. She told him the story of how she wiped out going down the hill and tumbled into a tree. He winced in sympathy with her pain but she confessed it was the best time she ever spent sledding. Then they talked about how kids used to climb the old water tower so they could look out over the almost flat town.

“I used to go up there a lot,” he said, “whenever I felt sad or lonely. It reminded me I wasn’t alone. There was a whole town around me.”

“I went up there, too but not a lot. I liked to imagine flying above the town and then flying away from it, maybe forever.”

“But *you* stayed, and I was the one who left,” Charlie remarked.

“And now you’ve come back.”

“And found you here, after all these years.”

“Yes,” Jenny replied. Her feelings soared. Charlie abruptly got up from the table. Jenny assumed he felt as she did and was coming to kiss her. She waited eagerly. Charlie left the room. He came back a moment later with the yearbook.

“Remember this?” he asked. Jenny nodded. Charlie took out the story. “But still not this?” he asked. She shook her head, smiling. “Okay. Let’s refresh your memory.” He started to read it. “The Fairy Tale, by Jennifer Collins,” he said. Jenny giggled.

“You don’t have to read it out loud.”

“Yes, I do. That’s the way I used to read it when I was alone in my room.” His confession startled Jenny. Charlie read the first line: “Once upon a time there was a beautiful princess named Anne whose best friend was a magnificent white horse named Snowflake.” Jenny began to cry. Charlie stopped reading and looked at her.

“Her name was Anne?” Jenny whispered. She had forgotten.

“That’s what it says,” Charlie replied.

“That was my mother’s name.”

“Oh? Um, should I stop?” Jenny shook her head. Charlie continued reading. “The horse was a gift from her father, the King, on her eighth birthday. The King built a track inside the castle grounds so she could ride safely whenever she wanted. Her mother, the Queen, complained that she was too young to have a horse but Princess Anne quickly learned to ride Snowflake and spent as much time as she could riding or grooming him.”

“I remember this, now,” Jenny said. “I was doing what all seventeen-year-old girls do, probably.”

“What’s that?” Charlie asked.

“I was trying to understand how two people fall in love. I wrote it about my parents.”

“So, the fairy tale was about *their* love, then?”

“Yes. It isn’t literally about them, of course.” Jenny said. “I felt my parents’ deep love for each other, for me, and the bookstore. They often joked it was their second child.”

“But you didn’t finish the story. Did you have an ending in mind?”

“I think I wanted to end it like all fairy tales end: Princess Anne and Jesse lived happily ever after. I couldn’t think of an ending at the time, so I let it go. Later, I learned ‘happily ever after’ was a lie.”

“What do you mean?”

“My mother died in a car accident the summer after we graduated. I saw what losing her did to my father. He was never the same.” Jenny began to sob. Charlie put the story down, got up, and went to her chair. He gently pulled her head to his chest so she could weep.

“I knew he loved me,” Jenny went on. “But he seemed lost for the rest of his life. I think he devoted his life to Real Books because it was so much a part of mom. I’ve kept it going because it was part of them *both*. But, ‘happily ever after’ is a lie,” she repeated, sobbing. Charlie held her while she cried.

“It’s not a lie,” he said, gently. “It’s the truth.” Jenny stopped sobbing and looked at him.

“How do *you* know?”

“My parents, my grandparents, my great grandparents... all of them had great loves that survived even though one of them died. Your father never stopped loving your mother, did he?”

“I don’t think so. But they were different than we are.”

“How do you mean?”

“My ‘happily ever after’ lasted until David left me. You had Emily but you didn’t seem to be in love with her.”

“That’s right. But, the way I see it, the answer is not that there’s ‘no happily ever after.’ It’s that I still haven’t found my princess and you haven’t found your Jesse.”

“You might be right,” Jenny replied as she understood what his comment implied.

“Until now,” Charlie added. “Maybe I’ve found new love the way Anne and Jesse did in the fairy tale.” Jenny looked up at him.

“With *me*?” she said through her tears. Charlie started to cry, too.

“With *you*,” he affirmed. Charlie leaned down to kiss Jenny. Her lips clung to his for a long time. Their ‘happily ever after’ began at that moment.

Chapter 13 - Ever After

Charlie invited Jenny, David, and Marcus for Christmas dinner in his new home. David felt a little uncomfortable because he did not know Charlie. Jenny persuaded him to go because Charlie had contacts in the computer industry that might be useful to David in his job search.

Marcus also felt reluctant to go. He had never met Charlie and knew nothing about him. Jenny told him Charlie was an old friend from high school but Marcus wondered why his mother suddenly seemed interested in this particular old friend when she had never mentioned any other old friends before. When Marcus left after Thanksgiving, Charlie had just been a new customer. When he returned for Christmas, it seemed Charlie had become a close friend. He had no idea how that happened but wanted to find out.

Marcus had considered the possibility that his parents might get back together after David's life fell apart and he came to Jenny for help. Marcus hoped they had rediscovered what had originally attracted them to each other. However, there were no signs of affection or intimacy between his parents when Marcus returned. They were cordial and friendly but that was all. Jenny still had a failing bookstore. David still had no job. Marcus did not know if he would have a sophomore year at college. *Merry Christmas!* he thought bitterly. The holiday seemed unlikely to be jolly and bright.

Marcus noticed something unusual about the way his mother and Charlie behaved around each other. He sensed there was a new connection between them. Jenny had told him about Charlie's books and the way they worked together as they cataloged them. But working together did not usually create the kind of connection Marcus sensed. He wondered if his father had noticed it.

Jenny and Charlie had agreed to keep their newly declared love private for the present. They did not want to make any big announcement, show off their affection, or embarrass David and Marcus. It was just a Christmas dinner with friends.

"So, Mr. Stockton, my mom told me you had a pretty impressive library," Marcus said.

"Please call me Charlie. Yes. I didn't know it, though. To me, they were just old books that had been in this house for as far back as I could remember. It turned out some had been here almost as long as the house."

"Wow. Why did you get rid of them? Is it because you're a digital guy and you hate all that analog stuff?" Marcus teased. He liked Charlie the moment they met. Charlie smiled.

"Not at all," he replied. "It was my mother's last request. I could easily have kept them but she asked me to find new homes for them with people who would love them as much as she did. I think she knew I would be selling the house."

"But you're not..." David said.

"No. I've decided to live here. It needs a little work. I have some money. It will give me something to do for a while until..."

"Until what?" David asked.

"I come up with a new business to try. I have some ideas but I'm not ready to jump back in yet." Marcus and David suspected Charlie was not being completely honest with them.

"So, Mom, how are Charlie's books selling?"

"Pretty well. They were well cared for. Most were like new. Word has gotten around about Charlie's collection and now dealers are calling to ask what we have."

"Jenny's done an amazing amount of work in a short time," Charlie said. Jenny smiled at his compliment. Charlie smiled back. Marcus noticed there was something extra in their smiles.

“Your father’s done amazing work, too,” Jenny said. “He kept the store going while I worked on Charlie’s books. Thanks, again, David. I’m grateful for all the work you did.”

“So, does that mean you might consider paying me?” David joked.

“Actually, yes. We’ll talk later, okay?”

“Merrrryyy Christmas!” David clowned. They all laughed.

“So, David, what kind of programming did you do?” Charlie asked.

“I worked with older systems, legacy stuff. I started out in high school working for a small company right here in Springfield. That was in the early days of pcs. Seems like ancient history now.”

“P-*what*, Dad?” Marcus joked and pulled out his smartphone. They all laughed again.

“So you’ve seen it *all*, then,” Charlie commented.

“Seems like you have, too. But I only worked for someone else. You started your own company, right?” Charlie nodded.

“Yeah. I got lucky. I had the right idea at the right time and it worked. I can’t tell you how many people I’ve met who weren’t so lucky. It’s a lot easier to get the right idea at the wrong time.”

“Or, have your idea stolen,” David remarked. Charlie nodded.

“Dad’s got ideas. Don’t you, Dad?” Marcus jumped in.

“Yeah, a few. They’re not good enough to run with, yet.”

“Keep working on them, David. It might surprise you how a simple idea that doesn’t look like much can turn into something really important. You might not have a blockbuster, or get rich, but you could change the world,” Charlie encouraged.

“You’re right. I hadn’t thought of it that way. Thanks.”

Jenny felt delighted everyone was getting along so well. However, it was Christmas and not a business meeting so she wanted to change the subject.

“Last time I was here for dinner, Charlie and I talked about the old sledding hill. Do you remember it, Marcus? Your dad and I took you there a few times when you were little.”

“You were here before..., for dinner?” David asked, surprised. His question embarrassed him and he looked down at his plate. Charlie and Jenny looked at each other.

“Why, yes. A little over a week ago,” Jenny answered.

“Oh,” David said. “That’s nice.”

“So what’s going on between you and Charlie?” David asked after they went back to the apartment and Marcus went to his room. David was sleeping on the sofa again.

“That’s none of your business.” Her reply confirmed David’s feeling that it was his business and he thought he knew why.

“But, what about me?”

“What about you?”

“We’re working together at the bookstore, and living in the apartment. Well... I thought...”

“There’s nothing to *think*, David. I’m sorry. I know this is a rough time for you but I’m not the solution to your problems. I care about you, and I’ll help you if I can, but your answers lie elsewhere.”

“You’re sure?”

“Yes.”

“So, what did you and Charlie talk about when you were over there for dinner?” David asked. Jenny thought about an answer.

“Happily ever after,” she replied.

“What?”

“Fairy tales. We talked about fairy tales. That’s all.”

“Weird conversation.”

“Not at all. It was actually a very *good* conversation.”

“I’ll take your word for it,” David replied, curtly. He sensed his time with Jenny had almost come to an end.

“I asked you both to sit down with me so we can go over a couple of things,” Jenny said. David and Marcus waited for her to continue. “Financial things,” she added.

“Thanks to your hard work, David, the store did okay this Christmas and I can keep it open for another year.” David did not smile or react to her compliment. “And, thanks to the huge commission from Charlie’s books, Marcus, I can afford to pay for the next few years of your college career. Assuming you don’t flunk out,” she joked.

“Mom, I did pretty darn well my first semester.”

“I know. I was kidding.”

“Look, if it’s a hardship, I could transfer to a community college.”

“No. You’re staying right where you are.”

“So, David, I hope you know what I’m saying, here. You won’t have to worry about paying for Marcus’ tuition. You can just worry about taking care of yourself. I hope that helps.”

“It does, Jenny. Thank-you.”

“Thank Charlie’s books. I have many left. If they all sell as well as the first ones sold, Real Books will be around a long time.”

“What about Charlie?” David asked.

“What do you mean?”

“Is he gonna be around for a long time?”

“He says he’s staying in Springfield.”

“I know, but is he staying in your life?” David asked, bluntly. Jenny did not reply. David knew what her answer was.

“It will be a small wedding. Neither of us has many friends in Springfield.”

“Will dad be there?”

“He said he would come. We won’t do it until you’re home for the summer. Charlie’s done fixing up his house so you’ll be living there with us.”

“Awesome! I liked the place when we were there on Christmas.”

“I like it too. We’ve lived in a cramped apartment for too long. I haven’t lived in a house since your grandfather was alive.”

“I’m happy for you, Mom.”

“Thanks.”

“Will you be keeping the store?”

“Of course. It’s all I have left of my parents. It was their other child, my sister, as they used to call it.”

Marcus laughed. “I never realized I had an aunt!” he joked. “What’s her name? Aunt Real? I’ll call her Aunt Ree.”

“That’s perfect!” Jenny replied, laughing. “Maybe she’ll be yours one day; and maybe not. It will be up to you.”

“A lot can change...”

“A lot *has* changed... in a short time; mostly good changes. Not like when my mother was killed after I graduated.”

“You never talked about that.”

“It’s still painful,” Jenny replied. Marcus wished there was a way to hug his mother through the phone.

Jenny and Charlie chose their own vows. The words were simple but bewildered everyone who heard them. Charlie put the ring on Jenny's finger and mumbled, "Happily ever after." Jenny, trying not to cry, took his hand, slipped the ring onto his finger, and repeated the same words as she looked into his eyes.

A lot had happened because of Jenny's fairy tale. She wrote it when she was a seventeen-year-old girl trying to figure out what true love was. Twenty years later, she finally understood. In their wedding vows Jenny and Charlie affirmed their understanding that 'happily ever after' was not an ending but a beginning. They felt determined to make each other happy for as long as their 'ever after' lasted.

In their minds, they pictured Anne and Jesse riding Snowflake together. Jesse's arms were tight around Anne. Snowflake galloped off into the woods carrying the couple into their new life together. They were both smiling, happy to have merged into one, with only the wind to buffet them.