

The Christmas Fairy Tale

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Chapter 1 - Real Books

It was the Monday before Thanksgiving, 2019. Jenny had 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 puttered around the store reshelfing books and straightening up displays. Saturday had been a long day. Several customers had stopped in to browse. Jenny had closed late, had no time to clean up, and gone 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 high-backed comfortable chairs scattered throughout the store. Her parents had laid out the shop years ago when they'd opened it as Real Books. The name was a play on words. Real is the Spanish word for 'royal' so the implied 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 just before he died but told her she would understand if she had something better to do. Jenny burst into tears and told him *of course* she would keep it; what could she possibly do that was better than running his bookshop? Jack died peacefully.

Jenny's parents sold real books, the kind printed on paper and 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 the name Real Books meant the shop objected to electronic books. Jenny did not want them to think it was an elitist or anachronistic bookshop, however, so she explained the origin of the name. They always felt impressed and liked that an independent bookstore was named Royal Books. It made customers feel special. That was how her parents had hoped everyone 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 she might not make enough money to pay her bills and debts. This holiday shopping season could end as 'sound and fury, signifying nothing.' Although Jenny felt a miracle was necessary to bail her out, she did not 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. The well-dressed man paused inside the door and looked around the store. His eyes fell on the attractive Black woman behind the counter and he thought he recognized her.

Jenny waited patiently. She did not like to approach people before they had time to take in the inviting and relaxing feel of the store. She wanted customers to feel at home. He did not move from the door, however, and Jenny decided to greet 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 regularly 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 do 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. He nodded. “Yes, there are. Is that a problem?”

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

“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.

His question startled Jenny. No one had used her maiden name in years. “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. *Should I know him? Is he someone famous?* she thought. She looked at him and waited for more. “We went to Springfield High together!” he added as if he felt pleased 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.”

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

“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 commented. She could tell he did not want to talk about it anymore.

“Here’s the thing, Jenny. 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. She had a library. 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 to 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 college-age son Marcus were *all* Jenny loved. “Does that make sense?”

“I think I understand. So, what would you like me to do?”

“Well, could you 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.”

“Yeah, 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 take a quick look, 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'd forgotten 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 don't recall it. Sorry." Charlie shrugged and left. Jenny tried to remember the story he mentioned. Perhaps it was a long-forgotten class project. How could he remember it if she did not? She would have to ask about it the next time they met.

Chapter 2 - Marcus I

Marcus had made a couple of friends during the fall semester. He was easygoing and friendly and his peers felt comfortable with him. One of his new friends was female. He had never lacked for the company of girls. While in high school, girls had occasionally asked him out and he'd also asked out girls. However, he hadn't dated anyone for any length of time. There were never any sudden breakups and the resulting adolescent emotional fallout. After they stopped dating, Marcus still liked the girls and they still liked him.

He didn't know how it would be in college. For one thing, students came from all over, even foreign countries, so there could be regional as well as cultural differences in the way people conducted their personal relations. Marcus had always gone out of his way to be mindful of other people's feelings when everyone he knew lived in the same town. Now the people he interacted with came from all over. Would he still get along as easily as he had before? Marcus hoped he would, but was in no hurry to find out.

For the first month at college, he had concentrated on adjusting to campus life and doing schoolwork. Marcus was fairly smart and the freshman classes seemed mostly easy. He got all his work done with time to spare.

There was a lot to do on campus when students had spare time and Marcus checked out a few activities. He liked playing pickup basketball in the gym but often there weren't enough other players around to make up satisfactory teams. One day he wandered into the gym to look for some guys to get a game going but two girls teams were playing. Marcus sat and watched them while he hoped some guys might show up. One of the girls kept looking at him as the game went on. When another girl said she had to run to class, the girl looked over at Marcus and smiled. He didn't know what to do. She held up the basketball. Marcus wasn't sure why. "You *do* know what this is, right? I think I've seen you playing."

Marcus nodded. "Yeah. With *guys*."

She grinned. "What are you- prejudiced against girls?"

"No, you're all pretty good."

“So, are we good enough for you to play with *us*?”

“If you think that’s fair,” Marcus replied.

“Why wouldn’t it be?”

“I’m bigger and stronger.”

She grinned again. “But not necessarily better and faster.”

Marcus shrugged. He got up and walked over to the group. They played. His side lost but no one cared, They were just there to have a good time and burn off some of the stress of college work.

“You’re pretty good,” the girl said as the other players wandered off.

“Thanks. You guys are, too. I enjoyed the game.”

“Oh, this *wasn’t* a game,” she said. “This was just a practice. We play for real on Saturday nights. You’re welcome to join us if you want.”

“Yeah, I might. Sounds like fun.”

“It is, but it’s serious too.”

“How so?” Marcus asked.

“If you come Saturday night, bring some cash.”

“Cash? Why?”

“We don’t just play for *points*, dude,” she replied. Marcus blinked. “Oh, by the way. My name’s Nancy.”

“Marcus Rogers.”

“Yeah. I thought so. We’re in the same history class.”

“Are we? I’m sorry. I don’t look around much. It’s all a bit overwhelming.”

She grinned. “Small town boy, huh?”

“How did you know?”

“In the high school I came from, the *smaller* classes were bigger than our history lecture.”

“Wow. How did you survive?”

“I barely did.”

Marcus took a good look at Nancy. She was shorter than he was by at least a head, also stocky with dark hair and muscular legs. Her face had a softness and her eyes a dark depth he found interesting. He could tell Nancy’s mouth was used to smiling a lot. She appreciated him checking her out. The only reason she’d invited him to play was that she’d been checking *him* out in class. “You up for a trip to the snack bar? I could use a juice.”

“Sure,” Marcus replied.

“So your mom owns a *bookstore*?” Nancy said. “How quaint!”

“You don’t like books?”

“I guess I don’t have feelings for them either way. But this is the 21st Century and they’re kinda *passé*, aren’t they?”

“Not to me. I grew up with books.”

“But everything’s digital now,” Nancy argued.

“My dad’s a computer guy.”

“Oh, that’s good.”

“But he likes books, too,” Marcus added.

Nancy sighed. They were alone in her dorm room. It was Friday night. Her roommates were at parties or at the library studying. “Let’s not talk anymore.” She started raising her t-shirt. “You’re pretty good at basketball. Let’s see what *else* you’re good at.”

Marcus was pretty sure she had nothing on underneath. He was right. Before he had time to admire her hefty breasts, she stood up, peeled off her jeans, and removed the thong panties. “I don’t usually wear these,” she said. “But I was hoping this would be a special night.” After she was naked, she looked at Marcus. He hadn’t yet removed any clothes. “Um, I thought we were on the same page,” she said, grinning. “So to speak.”

“We are.” Marcus stood up and undressed quickly.

“I know people do this a lot in books,” Nancy said when they were having sex. “My dad had some of those books and I started reading them when I was around 12. Reading about it is not as good as doing it, though, don’t you think?” After about ten minutes of making love with Nancy, Marcus had to agree that books could only get you so far and real life was much better.

It was the first time either of them had made love in an actual bed inside an actual room instead of somewhere they had to rush things because they could get caught at any moment. It was better than either could have ever imagined.

“So this is how adults do it,” Nancy commented as she lay next to Marcus afterward.

“Yeah. It’s different than it was in high school.”

“But that was fun, too.”

“Yeah, but this was way *more* fun,” Marcus commented.

“Because of the bed?”

“No, because of you.”

“Oh, Marcus!”

They dozed off and awoke a half-hour later. “So, any plans for the rest of the night?” Nancy asked.

“Well, I thought I might play some late basketball.”

“Shut up, Marcus!” She shut him up with a kiss.

Marcus and Nancy settled into a casual relationship where neither made any demands on the other. They rarely planned ahead. If one was free and called the other spontaneously, sometimes they got together and sometimes they didn’t. It was no big deal. They both understood that schoolwork came first.

Nancy was the first in her family to attend a regular four-year college. Her parents had finished high school and taken some community college courses (that was how they’d met) but never earned degrees. Luckily, both parents had always worked regularly and earned enough to provide for family necessities. When it came time to pay for Nancy’s college tuition, it helped that she was smart and got accepted to a good school that had a generous financial aid program. Nancy was well aware how important it was that she succeed at college. Marcus felt the same way. Right now, it seemed easy but both students anticipated the work would get harder as they advanced. They were happy they’d found each other and

looked forward to helping each other take away some of the stress of college life as they progressed through the semester and beyond.

Chapter 3 - Thanksgiving

As Jenny expected, her son Marcus and ex-husband David arrived on Wednesday afternoon. David had picked up Marcus at college. She felt delighted to see them both. Marcus had gone 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,” he 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 didn’t answer.

“Debbie dumped him,” Marcus explained. Jenny’s eyes widened.

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

“Not really,” David replied. His worried expression remained. *This is bad*, Jenny thought. *Very bad*. She didn’t know much about David and Debbie’s relationship. Marcus had always come back from summer vacations in the city with his father and Debbie and reported the couple seemed happy. Marcus also liked Debbie, which Jenny had always felt was a good thing. There was an awkward silence.

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

David looked down. “I was hoping I could spend Thanksgiving here,” he mumbled. 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.

Jenny closed the bookshop and they drove back to her apartment. After she gave David the sofa, she went into Marcus’s bedroom to say goodnight before she went to bed. He looked worried. “Mom, there’s more that you should know,” Marcus said.

“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 generously when David asked to spend Thanksgiving with her. Now that he was there, 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.”

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

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.”

His comment surprised her. “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 and they’d always gotten along well. There was never any friction. Sometimes, Marcus wondered why they’d even divorced.

“What’s there to think about, Mom? 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?”

Marcus shook his head. “His stuff’s all in somebody’s basement.”

“Okay. Well, thanks for telling me.” Jenny kissed her son goodnight and left the room. She suddenly had more than her distressed bookstore to worry about and wasn’t happy about it. Had David planned to take advantage of her good nature? Is that why he hadn’t told her what had happened to him? Jenny didn’t know if she ought to confront him now or wait until after Thanksgiving. She didn’t want to ruin the holiday for Marcus.

In the past, she and Marcus had celebrated Thanksgiving 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.

She had trouble falling asleep but slept soundly and awoke refreshed. The excitement of having Marcus home for the first time since he’d started college got her moving as soon as she awoke. She couldn’t wait to ask him more about school.

Jenny worked on Thanksgiving dinner while David and Marcus watched football on TV. Neither was much of a fan, but there was nothing else on to pass the time, and the novelty of being together again in Jenny’s apartment made them feel they were suddenly a family again. Marcus had been in elementary school the last time they’d spent Thanksgiving together.

After Jenny laid out the meal, she called the boys to the table. 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 thanked the Powers that Be for the meal and their lives and ended with a quiet, "Let's eat." They started in on the wonderful meal.

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 as he ate. Marcus felt happy his parents were together again at the same table. He had something unexpectedly special to feel thankful for.

After they'd been eating for a few minutes, Jenny felt they should continue discussing David's problems. She planned not to mention her worries about the bookstore. Marcus already had enough insecurity to deal with.

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

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 had divorced a decade ago and she was *not* in his life anymore but kept quiet. Instead, she thought back to when they'd decided to split up.

They had been alone in their bedroom. Marcus, their seven-year-old son, was asleep in his room. Jenny had just come home late after a busy day at Real Books. She was exhausted, but also happy. Busy days at her parents' beloved bookstore were good for her. They reconnected her with her mother and father's love for books.

David had been waiting for her to return. He'd prepared a simple dinner- spaghetti, meatballs, salad, and jello, with whipped cream from a can. Then he'd helped Marcus with his second-grade homework.

David's mind had not been on homework, however. He'd been musing about his life. Things weren't going in a good direction and his future worried him. David thought he needed a change. An opportunity had arisen that he wanted to discuss with his wife. He hoped the discussion would go well and she would sympathize with his concerns and agree to the change he wanted to propose. If she didn't... well, he didn't want to think about it.

"I've been offered a new job," David told Jenny.

"That's wonderful, David. Tell me about it."

"It's with a bigger company that has offices in several places."

"That's good."

David wasn't sure how to tell her the rest. "Um, none of the offices are in Springfield."

Jenny looked at him. She waited for him to tell her more. He remained silent.

"So, where would you be working?"

"In the city."

Jenny turned away from David. She didn't want to face him or the dilemma he had brought into their family. "The city? It's two hours away. Are you planning to commute?"

David shook his head. "Um, no. That wouldn't work."

"So, I suppose, you plan to *move*?" she asked.

"Well, yeah, I'd have to."

"And what about me? What about Marcus?"

"You guys will come with me. We can start over."

Jenny glared at David. “What if I don’t *want* to start over, David? What if I want to stay right where I am?”

“But, it’s a once in a lifetime opportunity, Jenny,” David argued.

“Maybe for *your* lifetime, David. But, not *mine*. I want to live here in Springfield, not in the city.”

“But my new salary will be more than twice what I’m making here. And it comes with stock options. We could be rich in a few years.”

“I don’t want to be rich.”

“Then what *do* you want, Jenny?”

“I want to raise my son- *our* son- in the town I grew up in and continue running the bookstore my parents founded and loved.”

“What about me?”

“What about you?” she asked.

“Do you want me?”

“The way I see it, David, is that that’s not the real question.”

“Then what *is* the real question, Jenny?”

“It’s which do you want more- me, your son, and a life together in Springfield, or a job, more money, and success in the city? Alone.”

David needed to try a different tack. “Maybe I should explain a little more. I can’t find the work I want here, Jenny. The town is too small. The businesses don’t need what I can do. Even if I were to start my own company, it probably wouldn’t go very far. Running a computer company isn’t like running a bookstore.”

Jenny remained unpersuaded. “I’m staying here, David. You do what you want.”

“That’s it, then?”

“Unless you have another idea, yeah, that’s it.”

“So what’ll we tell Marcus?” David asked.

“We tell him his parents are getting a divorce,” Jenny replied, coolly. She knew it sounded harsh but needed to be frank. There was no other way. Their life as a couple was over.

Since then, Jenny had moved on. So had David. He’d found success in the city. He’d also found Debbie and started a new romance that had worked out well. The couple hadn’t married but had a solid relationship, until David needed to move in with her.

Despite his parents’ divorce, Marcus had flourished in Springfield. He’d gone to the same high school as Jenny and loved it. He also loved spending the summers in the city with David.

Jenny put down her fork and finished chewing a slice of turkey. Then she looked at David. “So what are your plans?” She thought it best to be direct.

“I don’t have any.”

“No job prospects?”

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

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

“It’s changing fast, Jenny. 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 again, 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?” Jenny asked. “I don’t pay much attention.”

“Dad’s got a lot of creative 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 possible 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 last night. 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. Now, she just found it annoying.

“Don’t push it,” she replied.

Marcus grinned. He felt the worst of his father’s crisis was over, at least 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 assured her. “It’s the least I can do.”

Jenny felt relieved they had discussed everything and had a path forward. “Okay! That’s settled. Let’s enjoy the rest of our dinner.”

Their Thanksgiving had not turned out so bad after all.

Chapter 4 - The Collection

Jenny brought David and Marcus to the store and opened early the Friday after Thanksgiving. After showing them around, she explained the cash register and online system, and then left David behind the counter while she went in the back. Marcus wandered off to check the science fiction bookshelves.

Jenny called Charlie and he 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 had started a local variety 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 had been established 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.

A few hours later, Jenny pulled into Charlie’s driveway and got out of her car. He opened the door before she knocked and invited her in. The house was elegant. There was dark paneling, ornate scrollwork, stained glass, and a marble floor. It felt subdued and tasteful. Jenny envied Charlie growing up there. She had grown up in a small, plain house with her parents.

Charlie walked her down a hallway. They stopped in front of an ornately carved heavy door. She had no idea what was beyond it. Charlie grasped the glass doorknob and turned it. As the door swung open, the family’s library came into view. Charlie invited Jenny to enter the room and she 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,” Charlie replied. “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 antique 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.

Charlie smiled. "Only there. Nowhere else in the house." 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."

"Yes, I do," Jenny replied. "And it's already packed."

"Don't you have a basement?"

Jenny nodded. "Actually, I do."

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

Jenny looked alarmed. "No, no, slow down, Charlie. 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," she protested.

"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 and she couldn't wait to dive in. She didn't want to walk away from such a fascinating collection just yet and looked around the room. "Why don't I take a closer look?" she suggested. "It'll only take a few hours and then we can talk."

Charlie felt relieved. "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 abruptly went out the door and left her alone with his family's incredible collection.

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 looked and felt like it came from a different world. It was not a book meant just to be read but to get lost in. 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 had been and looked forward to learning more about them as she looked at their library. Then she reminded herself she wasn't 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 had been part of. Jenny had not seen her copy in at least a decade and was not sure where she'd stashed it in her apartment.

The yearbook felt elegant and had the timeless look of a commemorative volume. 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 had died soon after graduation and Jenny had not wished to recall anything from high school.

She looked at the photos on the page. She recognized Charlie 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.*

Jenny 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 of the names.

Then she noticed loose papers tucked into the back of the book. She thought they were 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. Shocked, Jenny almost dropped the pages. Then 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 wondered. Jenny suddenly felt uncomfortable. She folded the paper and put it back into the yearbook. As she was replacing it on the shelf, Charlie came in. "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?" Charlie asked.

"After Christmas."

"But I need them out *before* then," he reminded her.

"I don't know where to move them."

"While I was gone I had a thought. What about a storage unit? I have to store some furniture anyway."

Jenny nodded. "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 said. "Oh, and I'll pay you."

"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."

"Okay!" 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 desperately 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.”

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.*

As Jenny drove back to her store, she thought about Charlie’s library. Helping him dispose of it could be a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. Jenny felt glad he had come into her bookshop. She couldn’t wait to tell Marcus and David the news.

Chapter 5 - The Yearbook

They ate the last Thanksgiving leftovers for Sunday brunch and then 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 customers 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 kinds of 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 again 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 what an enormous job she was undertaking. Jenny hoped he might reconsider selling the entire collection to a dealer and getting rid of all of the books 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.

After she returned to her apartment, they sat together and ate. Their busy Sunday had worn them out. Jenny still felt anxious at 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 and David felt tired, lonely, and sorry for himself. He had no real job to go to on Monday morning. As he drove back from Marcus's college, he'd been looking beyond the holidays. To say the least, his future looked uncertain. David was scared. What if he no longer had a future in his profession? Christmas could come and go and he might *still* be out of work. After the holidays, Jenny would no longer need him at the store. No one would need him and he would have no place to go. *What will happen to me then?* David had asked himself while he was driving. He didn't like that he had no clue.

"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 didn't 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?"

Jenny stopped eating and looked at her ex-husband. She felt sorry for him but his problems were no longer her problems. She was willing to help, but only up to a certain point. As long as he was useful to her, she would give him a place to stay. After the holidays, he would have to go. She felt she had to make it clear that there was a limit to what she was willing to do. However, because he was her ex-husband and not merely a friend in need, she wanted to be careful about *how* she told him. "David, I need to make something clear. That *isn't* happening. We are *not* back together. Not now. Not ever."

David didn't seem disappointed by her reply. He decided to press her. Maybe she would soften her position. "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?"

Jenny sighed. *Time to lay all the cards on the table*, she thought. "The store is on its last legs, David. This could be the end." Her confession shocked him.

"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."

After a tiring day, she had no energy left for a long discussion. They had laid out an arrangement that would carry them through the holidays. That was as far ahead as she was prepared to look, for now. Jenny sighed. "Yeah, maybe it'll all work out, David. I hope it does. But, I'm tired now and I'm going to bed." Jenny got up from the table and carried her plate and glass into the kitchen. When she came back, she recalled one last thing. "Oh, by the way, we open at ten from now on, so be ready to leave promptly tomorrow morning."

David nodded. "I will."

Jenny went to her bedroom and got ready for bed. After she slid under the covers, she tried to fall asleep but instead started thinking about Charlie's books and remembered his yearbook. *Where's my copy?* she wondered. Then she recalled seeing it at the back of the bedroom closet years ago.

She got up and opened the closet door. There were several boxes on the floor. She moved them aside and saw a pile of books. Jenny did not recall having buried 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 traded the books. Underneath were a couple of Nancy Drew mysteries. 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 her bed.

Jenny propped up the pillows 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. Recollections of her high school years slowly came back to her. Cautiously, she let them.

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

She flipped through the pages. Seeing some of her girlfriends in the group photos, she smiled. Jenny's photo only appeared in the portrait section. She turned to the page she was on and saw the face of the lovely Black girl who had been looking forward to graduation, college, and adulthood. Jenny wondered whether that girl had any inkling that her mother would soon die and the resulting agony she would suffer. 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 in the back. 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 didn't recall noticing before. It read, simply, 'To JC- I'll always love you. CS.' *Holy shit!* Jenny thought. *Was that Charlie Stockton?* Why did he write that? *I didn't even know him back then*, she thought. Jenny felt embarrassed. Could what happened back in high school complicate her present business arrangement with Charlie?

Jenny should have panicked but didn't. If was Charlie who'd written that message, he'd done it twenty years ago. Kids wrote all kinds of goofy stuff in yearbooks just to be funny and memorable. Perhaps he did have a crush on her back then. Charlie likely forgot about it after he left Springfield and never came back. Now, it seemed harmless and silly. She would not mention it to him. *No need to embarrass him*, she thought. *Or, me.*

Charlie went into the library to take one last look at the family's books before the movers arrived to pack them up and haul them away. The books had lived there for years, decades, some more than a century. They were old friends but would all soon be gone. Later, the collection would be broken up and sent to new homes, where new owners would treasure them. Charlie hoped that all his family's books would be happy in their new homes. He knew they had been happy in his family's library.

Why am I getting so sentimental? he wondered. *This should be easy. I'm doing what Mom asked.* Charlie wasn't used to sentimentality. He had always been practical. That's how he'd created his company. He had always been level-headed and focused, too. That was why he had been so successful

Charlie's eyes roamed the room and fell on some of the titles. He had read many of the books but skipped others. The non-fiction had never interested him. He thought it mostly dull and dated. He liked a lot of the fiction and had several favorite authors. Verne, Wells, Faulkner, Steinbeck, Sinclair, a few others. Charlie regretted not knowing which authors had been his mother's favorites. He had never discussed any of the books with her. She might have commented on something he was reading but that was all.

His eyes fell on an odd book that seemed out of place in the orderly room. It was lying on top of other books. He lifted 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 along 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 had also been his mother's favorite chair.

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

When he paged toward the back of the yearbook, he noticed some loose papers stuck inside the back cover. Charlie removed the folded sheets. As he opened them, he recalled what they were: Jenny's 'fairy tale'. He'd forgotten he still had it and wondered if he should mention it to her. She might feel embarrassed or think he'd been 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*, he thought. He decided to keep the yearbook and take it back to his house in the city.

Charlie had treasured her story when he was in high school, forgot about it when he moved away, but then recalled it when he saw Jenny in her bookshop. Now that it had resurfaced, Charlie wondered why he'd suddenly recalled it. He'd walked into Real Books

unaware that Jenny was the owner. Had that been a happy coincidence? After finding her story in the yearbook, Charlie wondered if something more than coincidence was at work.

Chapter 6 - Marcus II

Nancy caught up with Marcus after History class on Monday morning. “How was your Thanksgiving?” she asked cheerfully.

Marcus frowned. “It was weird.”

“Good weird or bad weird?”

“I’m not sure. Maybe both. Or, neither.”

“What happened?”

“Well, it’s a 2 hour drive back to Springfield from here. My dad picked me up as he usually does. After we got on the highway, he settled into traffic and we rolled along fairly well. Usually, we chat as we ride. This time was no different. But, then again, it was.”

“What did he say?”

“He told me he’d lost his job, his apartment, and his girlfriend.”

“Oh, shit!” Nancy exclaimed.

“Yeah.”

“So, was *that* the weird part?”

“No.”

“There’s more?”

“Yeah. The plan was for him to drop me off at home, hang out with my mom for an hour like he usually does, and then head back to the city.”

“But there was no reason for him to do that, was there?”

Marcus nodded. “Right. He asked my mom if he could stay for Thanksgiving and she said yes.”

“That was nice.”

“That’s how she always is. She likes helping people. But there was more.”

Nancy frowned. “Uh oh.”

“Yeah. On Thanksgiving, my dad asked if he could stay with my mom in Springfield because he had nowhere else to go and she said yes, again.”

“Wow, she’s *really* nice!”

“Oh, she didn’t say yes because she was being nice. She said it because she had a job for my father.”

“At the bookstore?”

Marcus nodded, pleased that Nancy anticipated where his story was going. “Yeah.”

“Was it just a seasonal job?” Nancy asked. “I’ve done those. They can be hard but at least you know they’re going to end, and the money can sometimes be good.”

“No, she’s always run the place by herself. She needed someone to run it *for* her.”

“Why?”

“A customer with a large library of antique books had come into the store earlier in the week and just about begged her to help him sell his books. She wanted to refuse but felt bad. When my dad asked to stay, she thought they could help each other out. She went to

look at the library the day after Thanksgiving and the customer offered her a commission that was too good to pass up.”

“That’s awesome!”

“Yes it was.” Marcus paused and looked at Nancy. “So, how was *your* Thanksgiving? Everything okay at home?”

Nancy frowned. “I didn’t go home.”

“Why not?”

“I couldn’t afford bus fare.”

“Why didn’t you say anything?”

“What difference would that have made?” Nancy asked.

“I have some money. I would have given you the fare.”

“You would *do* that? That’s so sweet.”

“You were the sweet one when you invited me into that basketball game. If you hadn’t, well...”

“We wouldn’t be where we are today.”

“Yeah. And I wouldn’t have liked that,” Marcus said. “Not one bit.” Nancy kissed him and grabbed his arm so they could stroll to their next class. Neither wanted to go to class but both knew they had to. School came first. What came later was private, and they both knew it wouldn’t be basketball.

Marcus had expected Thanksgiving this year to be the same as last year- he and his mom spending some quiet time together. She’d likely quiz him about how college was going and he would tell her about his classes, roommates, and how he liked the campus. Likely, she would have also asked if he’d met anyone *special* and he would have had to decide how much to tell her about Nancy.

The brief holiday should have been relaxing but turned out not to be and he felt relieved when his father drove him back to the campus. When classes restarted, he had a lot on his mind that had nothing to do with schoolwork. Despite all the adjustments he’d had to make to living in a dorm, eating in the dining hall, and going to class, things had been going well so far. What worried him was what was happening back home.

He kept expecting either his mother or father to call and tell him how the weird arrangement they’d worked out on Thanksgiving was going. *Have they killed each other yet?* he sometimes wondered, only half-jesting. *Should I call one of them?* Marcus was afraid to, so he didn’t. *No news is good news*, he thought.

His parents had gotten along well for ten years because they’d kept their distance. Living in the same apartment and working in the same bookstore was bound to cause friction. How much friction before one of them exploded was anyone’s guess.

Marcus wondered what he would find when he went home for Christmas. He briefly considered finding a job so he could stay on campus and avoid going home. *But, that would hurt both their feelings and I don’t want to do that*, he thought. *Maybe I’ll think about coming back to campus the day after Christmas, even if I have to take a bus to get out of Springfield.* Marcus immediately felt relieved. He had an escape plan if he couldn’t handle being around his parents.

Chapter 7 - Inventory I

Charlie rented a large storage unit with two tables and lights so Jenny could work there whenever she had time. Movers took the books to the unit three days after Jenny first saw them at his house. He dropped by the bookstore to give her the key but she was out. There was a man behind the counter. Charlie had forgotten she'd mentioned her ex-husband and assumed he was Jenny's employee.

David smiled at Charlie when he introduced himself and thanked him for bringing the key. He also mentioned how excited Jenny was to be working with the books. Charlie felt disappointed Jenny wasn't around but tried not to show it. Without saying goodbye, he went back 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 as when you saw them. I hope that will help."

"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 to work through. 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 reveal how much her commission would be but she did not want to mention it. He was a part of her life *temporarily* and did not need to know more than a few details about her business. She did not want David to insert himself into her finances. They were private.

She knew they 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.

Almost as soon as they opened two mornings later, the bookshop phone rang and David answered. "Hello, Real Books, David speaking. 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. The dealers she contacted had 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 half-an-hour."

"Great. I'll see you then."

Jenny finished checking her mail and then opened a box of new books so she could shelve them before she left. Charlie's offer weighed on her mind. She had not planned on him 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. After only a few days, he was familiar with the inventory and computer and felt comfortable working alone in the store. She assured him she would return by lunchtime. After she grabbed her coat and laptop, she 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 didn't know if he'd been 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 and then copy it to emails. The emails would be sent 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 too much work to be done.

Her anxiety rose when she found Charlie waiting for her. He noticed her surprised expression and 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 the publication information to me. I’ll type everything in and then we’ll move on. We should do several boxes in two hours.”

“That’s all?”

Jenny frowned. “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 put the first box on the worktable and opened it. Then he gently lifted out the first volume. It was *Journey to the Center of the Earth*. Charlie held it carefully as if it was something precious. He felt happy to hold the book and recalled reading it a long time ago. Jenny opened her laptop. After booting it up, she 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 had opened books as a child. He’d never known what he would find. Anything could be inside, literally. Jenny wondered what was taking him so long and almost regretted she’d 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 rereading 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 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 couldn't 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 decided to keep 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 the storage unit so he could be with her? She did not know which alternative she preferred.

Chapter 8 - Inventory II

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

Jenny was starting to look forward to their two-hour shifts in the storage unit. On Friday morning, she arrived and found coffee and croissants waiting on the table. Charlie was smiling proudly. "I brought us a treat," he declared.

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 gloves." She shoved a pair of thin cotton gloves toward Charlie. "Put them on so we can get started."

"But what about the coffee and croissants?"

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

They catalogued books for a solid hour and moved faster than they had before. The physical labor tired Charlie. "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 and took off his gloves. Then he poured coffee into the mugs. After he handed a mug to Jenny, he 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,” she replied. “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 but wasn’t in the mood for a chat.

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

Jenny decided to give in. “So, what *have* you been doing for the past twenty years, Charlie?” she asked, hoping he would keep his answer brief.

“About fifteen years ago, I saw a niche opportunity 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?” Jenny asked.

“Most recently, reconnecting with my mother. I was too busy to visit her much 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. She’d stayed with her father throughout his ordeal and it had brought them even closer than they’d been before. She assumed Charlie’s experience had been similar. “I bet it meant a lot to *her*, too,” she commented.

Charlie nodded. “I know this might seem absurd, but she died happy. Her son had come back to her.” Charlie paused and Jenny thought he was about to start sobbing. He controlled himself and went on. “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 the sadness in Charlie’s statement. He was still grieving for his mother and likely felt regret for all the years he’d been away from her and 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?”

Jenny smiled. “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?” he asked.

“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 to 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.

“So, 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.

“I met David, my ex-husband, a year after I came back.

“David? Is he that guy...?”

“Yes. He’s taking care of the store while I’m here. He’s a few 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... Our son is named Marcus.” Charlie suddenly felt he had heard more than he needed to. If her ex-husband was working at the store, did that mean he and Jenny were getting back together? Charlie didn’t want to think about it. 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 morning.” Her statement surprised Charlie.

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

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

Charlie didn’t like her reply but knew there was nothing he could do to change her mind. “Oh. Well, I’ll miss you, Jenny.”

Jenny looked at him and 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 pleading in his voice was plain. He didn’t want to be alone all weekend. She felt sorry for him. Jenny tried to resist.

“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. “You’re the only person I know in Springfield, Jenny. 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*. Not anymore. Many people knew my mom. Nobody knows me.” Charlie seemed heartbroken. His anguish saddened Jenny. After she closed her laptop and put it in her bag, Jenny stood up and walked toward Charlie as he was putting on his coat. Then she 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 and clasped her hands. Then Charlie looked deep into Jenny’s eyes and kissed her. She was so surprised that she couldn’t 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 and 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.”

Jenny smiled warmly “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. He had never even stood close enough to touch Jenny before and had only dreamed of kissing her. Now, he *had* kissed 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 a friendliness, a kindness, and a softness about her. Most of the other girls were hard and sharp. Their harsh comments cut and stung. Charlie had never heard Jenny say an unkind word about anyone. Nor had Charlie ever heard an unkind word said about Jenny. She’d always thanked people and praised them. Also, Charlie thought she was the prettiest girl in the school!

As she drove back to Real Books, Jenny also thought about their kiss. 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 had not abandoned them. Many people rejected their families when they grew up and their rejection caused much pain. His actions had not hurt anyone. He had not lost anything, either. But, Charlie seemed to feel that he had. He was a sensitive guy going through a tough time. Jenny was sorry he was alone right now but there was nothing she could do 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 his money. His life was stressful emotionally but not financially. Her life had been emotionally stable but soon financial stress might dominate it. What would she have to do, then?

Chapter 9 - Girlfriend

A car door slamming outside woke Charlie early on 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. Charlie quickly dressed and then went downstairs as the doorbell rang. When he opened the door, Emily, his girlfriend, stood 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 did not think her physical beauty was anything special.

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

“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.”

Emily walked into the foyer and looked around. “How about I make you a nice breakfast?” she asked. “You can grab my bags from the car.”

Charlie led her to the kitchen. She rummaged in the refrigerator and found enough food to assemble a decent breakfast. As she set the table, she hummed to herself. Charlie did not want her there and wondered what he was going to do about her. *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 but did not reply because he felt his luck had just turned for the worse.

Before today, he had been happy because his high school fantasy had finally come true. He and Jenny were finally getting to know each other. *And, oh yeah, I kissed her*

yesterday! he reminded himself. Now, he felt it had been all for naught. Although he didn't want it to, his adult life had reasserted itself.

Emily and Charlie had been dating for a couple of years. He felt she planned to get married but he had put off asking. Charlie felt Emily would make an okay wife but he wanted the same kind of love his parents, grandparents, and great-grandparents had. Theirs had all been wonderful marriages. The husbands and wives shared deep lifelong loves. Charlie had never experienced that kind of love but still, possibly because of Jenny's fairy tale, believed he could.

Now that he was independently wealthy, he'd thought of trying to find such a love. He might travel and possibly meet an interesting woman in some exotic locale. After getting to know her, he might discover she was his soul mate. Kind of like a fairy tale.

Emily was not his soul mate. She was beautiful and had an agreeable personality but 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'd been struggling up the ladder toward partnership but had not yet made it. The majority of her clients were not very profitable although she brought in enough business for the firm to keep her on. She tried to be like the other lawyers and sought out corporate clients with deep pockets and profitable litigation but also had a weak spot for long-shot cases. A strong sense of justice was a liability in a big law firm. Emily had handled all of Charlie's corporate business but failed to attract any other lucrative 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 her about Emily. He remained quiet as they rode around. She had to tell him to stop so she could look at the older buildings or other local features. When she asked him to tell her something 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 forgot what you're going through. Well, I'm here to take your mind off *everything*."

Charlie did not want his mind taken off anything. He'd stayed to close his life here. After wrapping up everything, he planned to let go of his house, family, history, and Springfield. However, possibilities had arisen with Jenny. Now, he wanted to find out how far things could go with her. Charlie had not yet begun fantasizing about a romance with Jenny but was getting close. Now Emily had shown up and Charlie didn't know what to do. Her presence was likely to ruin everything.

Saturday and Sunday were long, busy days at Real Books and Jenny felt pleased. There had been times when six or seven customers were in the store at once. Several of them actually bought stuff. David was excellent working at the desk as she roamed around the store

helping customers and answering questions. She felt exhausted by Sunday afternoon and looked forward to a quiet Monday morning with Charlie and his antique books.

On Sunday evening, Jenny noticed that David seemed to be dragging. She told him to go home early and rest up for the week ahead. He readily agreed. On the way home, he stopped at the supermarket and bought some special take-out food so he could prepare a small dinner for Jenny when she arrived later. David set the table and heated the food. Then he waited. Jenny came in around eight-thirty and found the meal. David sat her down and served her. He'd even bought a bottle of the wine she liked. 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 now, 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 kind of wasn't your fault." Jenny was being nice. David's choice of job over her and Marcus had devastated Jenny and she swore she'd never forgive him. So far, she hadn't. However, she had tolerated him for the sake of their son. "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 marveled at 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 nonexistent. He had hoped there might be 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 and went into the living room, distraught. *Nobody wants me, he thought. Nobody cares about me. I'm worthless.*

He picked up the remote and turned on the TV. David clicked around looking 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 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 now that she had turned him down. Would he have any reason to stay? *What if he decides to leave?* she worried. *I need 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.

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

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

Jenny felt alone and knew he did as well. She knew they were not the answer to each other’s loneliness, despite what he had suggested. She finished her pie and wished him good night. Then she shuffled back to her bedroom.

David grew drowsy from the wine and drifted off to sleep. He never found out who won the game but 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 10 - Truths

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

“Hello?”

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

“Who’s calling, please?” 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?” Jenny asked.

“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 alone, Jenny tried not to think about Charlie. She had missed him over the weekend and looked forward to seeing him on Monday morning, 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 and it was not as difficult as she had anticipated. *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.

As she pulled into the parking lot, she spotted Charlie waiting outside the store with a tall, stunning woman. Wondering what the hell was going on, Jenny parked her car and walked toward the bookstore entrance. Charlie didn’t smile when he saw her.

“This is Emily,” he announced, coolly. “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.” As Jenny forced a smile, she shook hands with Emily and invited them to go in.

“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 friendly. 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, no. 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. “I had a busy weekend here and 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 left Charlie standing by the door and 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. *Men!*

“I don’t know. You can ask him..., or *her*, if you really 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.

Emily walked out from browsing among the shelves. “Fifty thousand? For some *old* books?” she asked. “I had no idea they 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.

“He didn’t say,” 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 to the shelves and began straightening up after her busy weekend. As she worked, she wondered what the rest of her week would be like. Had this project- and her uncertain relationship with Charlie, such as

it was- just become more complicated? Jenny didn't need or want any more complications in her life right now.

When she arrived at the storage unit on time the next morning, Charlie wasn't there again. She started working alone but paused when she heard voices in the hallway. Jenny heard 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, the woman who managed the storage facility. He introduced her to Jenny. She felt relieved and wondered whether it was because she did not want to see Emily or she wanted to be alone with Charlie again. Both possibilities unsettled her.

After Mrs. Johnson left, Jenny directed him to an open box and waited for him to take out a book and read the copyright page aloud. Charlie wanted to comply but hesitated. He was hoping they could talk.

“Look, about Emily...”

“Who?”

“Emily was, *is*, my girlfriend-.”

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

“Um, thanks. Look, Jenny, 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. 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 already knew to whom he referred. Her sharpness surprised him. She seemed genuinely angry.

“Emily.”

“So?” Jenny asked, frustrated.

“So, I just wanted you to know.”

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

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

Friday's 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 was scarcely able

to keep up with him. After he finished the box and shoved it aside, he opened another, 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?”

Charlie shook his head slowly. “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? How long had they been together? Was it serious? He didn’t mention Emily. Charlie turned, looked at Jenny, and took one of the biggest risks of his life.

“Jenny, our kiss 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, trying not to seem blasé.

“Yes, but she’s not *you*.”

“Oh.” Jenny feared he might say something like that and did not know how to reply. She realized her anxiety about her life becoming more complicated had proven accurate. Then she had another thought. *Maybe everything just got very simple.*

Jenny gazed at her computer screen and tried to block out Charlie. She needed time to think. Suddenly, old books had become unimportant. It seemed old love had resurfaced. Not *her* old love, but Charlie’s. Jenny realized immediately that it could signal possible *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. It was yes.

Charlie interrupted her thoughts. She didn’t look up when he began speaking. “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.

Jenny looked up from her laptop screen. “No, wait,” she 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 felt relieved and smiled for the first time since he last saw her on Friday after they kissed.

“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. He paused. Both of them sensed an opening.

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

“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. After she put her arms around him, she 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, softly.

“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 old books.

Chapter 11 - Memories

Emily had never seen Charlie so distracted.

She’d 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 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?”

Charlie sighed. *What am I supposed to tell her?* he thought. “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.”

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

“I guess I’m not 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 frustration.

“I don’t know, Emily. 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.”

He looked into her eyes and lied. “You already have, baby,” he said. “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.” Charlie eased Emily off his lap and stood up. Without another word, or a kiss, he left the dining room. As Emily watched him go,

she wondered what had just happened. It had not been not a good night. It had been downright awful. What the hell was going on with Charlie?

Her lawyer mind kicked in and she tried to analyze all that had happened since she'd arrived. It was true that Charlie was dealing with a lot right now. There was his grief over losing his mother and the ordeal of selling the house, along with his reawakened memories of growing up in Springfield. *He has a lot on his plate*, Emily thought. *But, those things aren't enough to make him reject me*. Emily wasn't used to rejection. *Something else about Charlie has changed*. Her lawyer mind found the only conclusion that seemed persuasive. *Could it be that woman, Jenny? Who is she, and what the hell is going on?*

Emily decided to find out. She would sleep alone tonight, but was not about to give up on Charlie. *This is temporary*, she reassured herself. *If I can help him get through it, then he'll be all mine*. Emily had no doubt she would succeed.

The next morning, Jenny smiled nervously when she arrived and saw who was waiting at the storage unit. "I decided to 'hit the books' as Charlie puts it," Emily said, smiling. 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. Catching Charlie and Jenny looking at each other, Emily had the feeling they would rather not have her there. She repeated her question.

Jenny tried to remain calm. *This is my business*, she reminded herself. *He's just my client, I think. If he chose to bring her along, there's nothing I can do about it*.

"Some are valuable," 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," Jenny replied, hoping Emily wouldn't ask anything else.

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

"It's been better," Jenny admitted. "The market's changing."

Emily gestured toward the boxes of books. "I bet *these* will help your bottom line. A lot."

Jenny nodded. *How can I answer diplomatically without revealing too much?* she thought. "Yes. Charlie's been very generous with my commission."

"Oh, he has, *has* he?" Emily replied. She looked at Charlie. He looked down. Emily suspected she knew why. *Charlie wasn't just tired last night*, she thought. *He's avoiding my gaze. This isn't just about books. Something else is going on!*

Charlie sensed Emily's suspicion and felt the need to explain. "Jenny's working *very* hard, Emily. 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 said.

His hurried explanation seemed facile and Emily suspected he was covering up his real reason for being there. "Good on you, Charlie." She made no effort to cloak her sarcasm. "Good on you *both*." She wasn't sure what she ought to say or do next. It was time for more analysis.

For the rest of the time they were at the storage unit, Emily quietly watched the pair work. After they left, she sat utterly still on the drive back to Charlie's house. He wondered if something was bothering her. *Maybe I shouldn't have rejected her so abruptly last night*, he thought. *What harm would it have done to let her follow through on what she had planned?* Charlie knew the answer right away. *My heart wouldn't have been in it. I don't want to be with Emily anymore.*

When they arrived at his house, Emily told him brusquely she wasn't hungry and needed a nap. Charlie wondered what she had done that had tired her out. She went to his room but didn't fall asleep. Instead, Emily thought about the situation she had stumbled into. Was she losing Charlie? Worse, had she *already* lost him? She decided not to give up without a fight. Being a lawyer meant she had methods of persuasion that other women didn't have. Being drop-dead gorgeous meant she could use her beauty to bring Charlie's attention back to her. *I can do this*, Emily told herself. *And, I will. He belongs to me!*

That night, Emily made another special dinner and planned another romantic evening. Everything went smoothly during dinner. They chatted amiably about Springfield, Emily's hiatus from her work, the upcoming holidays, and Charlie's plans for selling the house. Emily thought the conversation went well and she had softened Charlie up. After they finished eating, she went to reel him in. *I'll get him in my bed*, she thought as she moved to sit on his lap again. *Then I'll get him in me. He's never been able to resist.*

Again, Charlie rebuffed her. Without apologizing, he went to bed and left her to clean up after the meal. Emily tried not to scream in frustration. Instead, she cleaned the kitchen, noisily throwing pots, pans, and dishes around but not damaging anything, hoping Charlie would hear from upstairs and maybe come down and apologize. He didn't. After Emily finished, she faced another night alone and 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. Emily opened the door carefully and looked in. Charlie was asleep in the bed next to the window. She assumed he would not hear her if she explored the other bedrooms.

Emily went quietly from room to room. Some of the old furniture looked interesting. She saw a couple of pieces she liked and thought she might ask Charlie to give them to her if he no longer wanted them. However, acquiring old furniture wasn't the reason she'd come to Springfield. She wanted Charlie, and felt no closer to having him.

When she finished exploring upstairs, she went downstairs and walked past the library. Charlie had pointed it out when she first arrived. After Emily opened the door, she flipped on the light switch and saw the empty oak bookshelves. Walking around the room, she looked more closely at the shelves. Exquisitely crafted, there were no nails or screws, just

tongue-and-groove construction with ornate brass corners. She could tell they were very old. As she admired them, she noticed there was a lone book sitting on a lower shelf and wondered what it could be. It seemed strange that *any* book would remain behind after the movers emptied the library.

Emily picked up the book and looked at it. She read the word *Memories* on the cover and assumed it was Charlie's high school yearbook. Feeling thrilled with her discovery, she looked for a place to sit so she could open it. There was no chair in the room. Emily carried the yearbook into the living room. After she turned on a light next to the recliner, she sat down hoping to learn more about Charlie's past. Maybe the yearbook would help her better understand what was happening in the present. Maybe it would help her reel in Charlie, once and for all.

Emily liked Charlie more than she had liked any other men she dated, but she was not in love with him. She was not in love with anyone, not even herself. Emily felt skeptical about love. She'd seen it mess up the lives of people she knew. Love had made them do stupid things.

Emily was not stupid. She was careful. Charlie was a great guy and a nice companion. He was good-looking in a subdued, dignified way. The couple got along well and she thought he would propose marriage after he finished all the work with his parents' house. She planned to say 'yes' and expected they would have a good life together.

She did not want much. Emily was a sensible woman who prized stability above all else. As a lawyer, she had seen people's lives in crisis. Emily felt determined never to experience anything like the predicaments some clients of her law firm faced.

Emily looked forward to a quiet, stable, pleasant life with Charlie and thought they might 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 had left little time to socialize with people other than those they worked with. Emily felt most business friendships were shallow and transactional. 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 had been unremarkable. Now, through his yearbook, she hoped to find out if her assumption was correct. *What if Charlie appears in photos of the football team, acting in the theater club, or maybe shaking hands with someone famous?* she thought. *Wouldn't that be something?* Maybe she could ask him specific questions about his early life and he would tell her his favorite memories.

Emily needed to know Charlie better. Neither of them wanted children (they had discussed the subject once) and, going forward, would only have each other for company. She wanted to know as much as possible about the man with whom she hoped to spend the rest of her life. It wasn't merely a hope. Emily *needed* Charlie. Even though she wasn't in love with him, he fitted her. It felt right to be with him. He was comfortable to have around. She wasn't about to let another woman steal him.

Emily opened the yearbook and paged through it slowly. She spotted Charlie in a few photos. There were several messages from his classmates at the back of the book. Then Emily

noticed loose papers stuck inside the back cover. She removed the papers and unfolded them. At the top of the first page, she read the words, *The Fairy Tale*.

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. *Could it be...?* she thought. Curious, Emily began to read. ‘Once upon a time,’ it started. “Oh, how *original*,” she remarked aloud, grinning. Then she went on reading...

Chapter 12 - The Fairy Tale I

Once upon a time, there was a beautiful princess named Anne whose best friend was a magnificent white horse named Snowflake. The horse had been a gift from her father the King on her eighth birthday. Her mother the Queen had 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 King built a track inside the castle grounds so she could ride safely as much as she wanted to. The track had been all right when she was a little girl but when she grew older she wanted to explore the kingdom. The King would allow it only if she had soldiers or guards to escort her. She tried going out with an escort a few times but the soldiers slowed her down. Princess Anne yearned to roam free without anyone telling her where to go.

Exploring the castle grounds one day, Anne found a passageway that led to caves beneath the castle and discovered a secret escape route. She immediately decided to take Snowflake beyond the walls. Once they were 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.

Neither the guards nor her father discovered she had snuck out.

One afternoon Snowflake was trotting along in the woods and a huge snake fell out of a tree and panicked him. The horse reared up, caught Anne by surprise, and toppled her to the ground. The startled snake slithered away; the terrified horse bolted and ran away. Anne sat alone on the forest floor. She tried to get up but stopped when she felt a sharp pain in her leg. “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.

Jesse, a peasant boy, was gathering firewood nearby. He had a large ax and a cart loaded with wood. He heard someone cry out and ran toward the sound. As he drew closer, he noticed a person on the ground. He approached cautiously and saw a dark-skinned young woman, wearing dusty clothing. She seemed disoriented. He feared she was hurt.

“Hello?” he called out.

“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 and found the pain had gone away. Anne stood up and looked at the boy.

He 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?” he asked.

“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?”

Anne nodded. “That would be nice.”

“It’s that way,” he said before 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!” the boy 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?”

Anne went up to Snowflake. “I like it here. I might come back.”

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

She turned as he started walking away. “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. As Jesse watched them leave, he wondered if he would ever see Anne again. He wanted to but did not know why.

Jesse went back to the creek the next day but Anne didn’t show up. Anne went back another day but Jesse wasn’t there. 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’d gone 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.

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

Anne looked at Jesse. “Are you busy?”

“I’ve been working hard all day. 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 *very* 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.

Jesse frowned and looked down. “I don’t know how.”

Anne had an idea. “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.”

Anne mounted Snowflake and settled into the saddle. “Great! Come over here and climb up behind me. You’d 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 lifted him and 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 trotting 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’d 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.

Anne steered Snowflake back to the creek where Jesse’s cartload of firewood waited. He didn’t want their ride to end- ever!- but knew it had to. When Snowflake stopped, Jesse hesitated to get down. “I have to go,” Anne said, sweetly. Jesse knew she didn’t want to. Nor did he. He got down from Snowflake and looked at Anne. They were separated again but didn’t want to be. “Goodbye, for now,” Anne said before she rode off.

“Bye,” Jesse said. He wondered if he’d dreamed their ride. He also wondered if there would ever be another.

The pair 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 eternally 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. However, she was, and she was falling in love with him.

They rode Snowflake together a few more times before Anne suggested Jesse ride solo. Snowflake liked Jesse and nuzzled him 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. As he lifted himself, he swung his leg over Snowflake’s back and then planted himself solidly in the saddle. Jesse 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* yet. He liked sitting on a still horse but had no idea how he would handle a moving one. Anne handed him the reins.

“It’s easy to ride him. 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 and threw 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.” After she knelt, she put her arms around his shoulders and tried to help him sit up. He had some trouble sitting and accidentally 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 said, softly.

“Do you have to?” Jesse pleaded. Anne nodded. “Are you coming back, again?” 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’d somehow fallen asleep, dreamed what had happened, and just now awoke. He looked down at the soil. When he saw Snowflake’s hoof prints, Jesse knew he had not been dreaming. He also felt Anne’s kiss on his lips. It had all been wonderfully real.

The next time Jesse went to the creek he found several soldiers waiting for him. They took him into custody but would not tell him why. Jesse went with them obediently. The soldiers took Jesse to the castle and he 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,” Jesse replied, meekly.

“Why have you been meeting my daughter?”

“What daughter?”

“Don’t you know the princess?” the King asked.

“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.”

The King glared at Jesse but his eyes were downcast. “You have been meeting the princess by the creek!”

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

“Stupid boy! 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. *Big* 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 expected instantaneous obedience and didn’t like waiting. 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 declared.

“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!”

Jesse no longer felt intimidated by the King. He looked up bravely. “I don’t know if she loves me, Your Highness, but I love her,” he 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 be when she went to the creek and he was not there.

Eager to meet Jesse, Anne returned to the creek the next day. However, 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 there. 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, 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 have been 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, warily. 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 agreed?”

“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?” Anne asked, dejectedly.

“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 got there too late.

Enraged by what her father had done, Anne rode swiftly. 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 he had betrothed her 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. 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 been sent away.”

“I *know* that. But where’s he gone?”

“I don’t know, Anne.”

Anne glared at the old woman angrily. “You’re not *much* of a Fairy Godmother, are you?”

“I do what I can,” the woman replied.

“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.

Determined to escape marriage and look for Jesse, she snuck out of the castle in the dark of night. The King found out she’d run away and sent soldiers to bring her back.

Emily stopped reading. There was nothing more on the page. She wondered what happened next. Then she noticed another 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 keep this?* she asked herself. *And who is it about?*

Chapter 13 - The Christmas Tree

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

Jenny was used to the bookstore’s seven-day-a-week holiday schedule. She was not used to being with her ex-husband every waking hour. Even back when they were still married, he had his computer 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 felt too tired right now to think about what that new 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 holidays. *What if he wants to remain in Springfield?* she thought. *What if he finds a job, gets his own place, and starts hanging around the bookstore hoping to rekindle our relationship?*

No!

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, Jenny had 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 to the apartment, he passed a Christmas tree lot. Feeling inspired, he turned around and parked his car. David saw a tree he wanted as soon as he walked up to the display. “I’ll take *that* one,” he told the pimply-faced adolescent who asked if he needed help. The kid seemed pleased that he’d made such an easy sale. After tying the tree atop David’s car, he 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 bookstore and came home.

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

She arrived at the apartment around nine pm. As she unlocked the door, she wondered if David had put together another surprise Sunday dinner to soften her up for a romantic overture. He was in the bathroom.

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. 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 some 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 annoyed Jenny. *I thought he was broke, Jenny thought. 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, anyway."

"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?"

Shocked that he said what she feared he would say, Jenny glared at her ex-husband. "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.

Jenny frowned. "It didn't happen like that, David. You fell asleep not long after Marcus did. I had to put the two of you to bed. Then I finished wrapping, cleaned up after decorating, finished cooking, and prepared the kitchen for a special Christmas breakfast I had planned. I fell into bed exhausted." She glared at him to make certain he was listening. "You snored all night."

David tried not to feel stung by her recollection. "You make it sound so awful, Jenny. Was it really 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."

David saw an opening. Maybe he could still persuade her. "This Christmas could as wonderful as that one was." His pressure was starting to annoy her.

She nodded. "It *could* be, David. But, not here 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 as 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 found a job you wanted there. But, you knew that I already had the work I wanted *here*."

David didn't respond.

"It was the same way I felt when my father told me my mother got killed in that car accident." Jenny 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 I'd lost my father, as well! Now, do you understand why we can never go back to where we were?"

David's expression changed from hopefulness to mortification. "Jenny... I guess I 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."

Jenny looked at her ex-husband. He saw exhaustion, fear, worry, and exasperation in her eyes and felt sorry for her. "Real Books *can't* die, David. It *can't*! I have to save it no matter what it takes."

He opened his arms to offer his ex-wife a hug. She walked toward him and let him do it. It was the first time they'd hugged in a while. Neither felt any pleasure.

David needed to find a way to rebuild his life. He had hoped to start by rekindling their romance. Jenny wasn't looking for romance. She had to save her family's dream. He

also knew that if anyone could do it, Jenny could. Her devotion to that dream was what had attracted him to her when they first met at the bookstore. Jenny's commitment to their marriage and their son had convinced David every day that she was the right woman for him and he was lucky to have found her. But then he left. *There's no going back*, he thought.

David held on to Jenny, not merely to comfort her, but to comfort himself as well. Clinging to Jenny seemed the only way to face his unknown future. If she didn't want him, what was he going to do?

Chapter 14 - Complications

The unfinished story surprised Emily. It revealed a romantic side of Charlie's personality she hadn't seen before. She assumed Charlie had kept it for some special reason and wondered if she should tell him she found it. Perhaps it was private and personal and Charlie would not like that she'd read it. She decided to wait.

Charlie was gone when she awoke. She had told him she wanted to go back to the storage unit again and asked him to wake her when he got up. However, Charlie had deliberately left early so he could avoid taking her. Emily suspected why. *He wants to be alone with her. But, why? Is it because of that stupid fairy tale? Surely, he can't be naive enough to think the woman's amateurish story means anything.*

Jenny felt relieved when she arrived and saw that Charlie was alone. The day before, Emily hadn't slowed them down much, but her presence made Jenny uncomfortable. She hadn't been able to shake the feeling that Emily might stand up and demand that they leave at any moment, leaving her alone to finish the work. *There's still a lot to do and I need his help*, she thought. *I'm glad he's here by himself.*

"No Emily today?" Jenny asked as she took off her coat.

"She was asleep. I didn't want to bother her. I guess she stayed up late last night."

"And you didn't?"

Charlie shook his head. "No. I went to bed right after dinner. I was worn out."

Jenny looked at Charlie and wondered if he was joking. "This isn't hard work, Charlie. What else did you and Emily do?"

"Nothing. After we left here, we went back to the house. She took a nap. I puttered around. When she woke up, she made dinner. We ate, and then I went to bed."

"I went back to my store and, for a change, things got busy. Thank God for the holidays. I was glad I was there. David needed my help."

There was a pause. Emily finished setting up her laptop. Charlie waited for her to tell him she was ready to begin.

"So, what's David's deal?" Charlie asked.

"He's between jobs."

"Does he live here?"

"Oh, no," Jenny replied. "He moved away ten years ago. That was why we got divorced."

"I'm sorry."

“Don’t be. Things have worked out well for me. They had for him, too, until he lost his job, apartment, and girlfriend and ended up coming back here.”

“Is he staying?” Charlie asked.

“I hope not, but I have no say in the matter. Is Emily staying?”

“Just until after Christmas and then she says she going back to work.”

“You don’t sound convinced she’ll leave.”

“Well, she says she likes Springfield. I can’t imagine her relocating here, but maybe becoming a hotshot lawyer in a small town could be right for her. Less stress, but a decent reliable income. She’s never had expensive tastes.”

“And what about you?”

“Me?” Charlie asked.

“If she moves here, would *you* stay?”

“Where? My house will be going up for sale soon.”

Jenny grinned. “Maybe Emily would let you live with her.”

Despite not wanting to, Charlie grinned. “That’s not funny, Jenny.”

Neither Jenny nor Charlie wanted to be with the other people who complicated their lives. Did they want to be with each other? Neither knew the correct answer but hoped they would find out, although it might take a while. There were still many books to get through so they had plenty of time to be together, if only the other people in their lives would let them.

Of course, those other people had agendas of their own, and they weren’t about to let go.

Emily had tried twice to seduce Charlie’s and neither attempt worked. *I’m done playing softball*, she thought. Being a lawyer, she knew how to marshal all the persuasive power at her command and get the result she wanted. *Time for some hardball*.

She drove to the mall outside of Springfield. It wasn’t big, but it had a nice variety of stores. One of them sold women’s clothing. Emily walked in and asked to see their lingerie selection. She immediately saw a light blue high neck hosiery teddy with mixed patterns and cutout half-length sleeve that she liked. *I could serve him dinner in this*, she thought. After completely undressing and putting it on, she stepped out of the dressing room to look in the full-length mirror. The saleswoman gasped. “You should be in our catalog,” she commented.

“You probably say that to everyone who comes in,” Emily replied. The woman didn’t say anything. “I’ll take it. Now show me your separates.” She chose the geometric lace and micro spandex high-waisted cut out panty and matching bralette in orange. Emily left feeling she was certain to get her way. *Charlie won’t be able to resist me, now*, she thought. *He couldn’t. He wouldn’t dare!*

I am a genius, Emily thought later as she stood in her bathrobe at the kitchen counter making Charlie a hamburger, fries, and a salad. She’d decided that feeding him fancy food might have been too much and a simple but nourishing meal would accomplish her purpose better. *A plain meal with a very fancy dessert*, she thought. *Me!*

“I hope you don’t mind,” she said to Charlie after he sat down at the dining room table. “I didn’t feel like going all out again.” Emily went back into the kitchen.

That's great, Charlie thought as he smiled. Maybe she's giving up.

When Emily returned, Charlie knew he was in trouble. Emily had left her robe in the kitchen. The light blue high neck hosiery teddy she wore looked as if she'd sprayed it onto her skin. Charlie swore she looked more naked, what with all the openings in the mesh, than if she had actually *been* naked.

Emily sat the plate in front of Charlie. "Dig in," she said. "Eat before it gets cold." *Then we can get hot, she thought.*

She wasn't just feeling horny. She felt Charlie was slipping away from her and needed a way to bring him back. They'd always had good sex- *memorable* sex- and she hoped another round of great sex would remind Charlie of what a fantastic woman she was and how much he liked making love to her.

Charlie knew none of this. He chewed his hamburger and wondered how he was going to get out of doing what Emily obviously wanted to do after dinner. *I can't just say I'm tired again, he thought. Stomach ache? No, she'll think it's due to her cooking and I don't want to hurt her feelings. Toothache? That's a possibility. Food doesn't cause toothaches. Maybe I can get away with it. Or, maybe not. She seems determined.*

Opposite him, Emily sat calmly eating her hamburger, wearing nothing more than that damned teddy. She looked very, very sexy. *Oh, well, he thought.*

Not long after they ate, Charlie did it with Emily, but his heart wasn't in it. He just didn't want to disappoint her more than he already had. *She doesn't mean any harm, he thought. Charlie's heart had never belonged to Emily, nor to anyone else. However, maybe that statement was a mistake. Maybe his heart had always belonged to Jenny but neither he nor she knew it.*

Afterward, Emily felt a sense of accomplishment. She hadn't noticed that Charlie had just been going through the motions. *My money was well spent, she thought as she laid next to Charlie. She had long ago removed the teddy. Wait'll he sees me in that orange cut out panty and matching bralette. He won't be able to resist me then, either.* Emily was back in control and planned to stay there.

When Charlie awoke the next morning and found Emily sleeping peacefully beside him stark naked, he recalled what they'd done the night before and felt guilty. *That never should have happened, he thought. Charlie headed off to take a shower. Luckily, Emily was so worn out that she slept soundly and never heard him moving around when he dressed and left the bedroom. He felt relieved when he was finally in his car. If she had awakened, I know she would have started again, and I would have had to resist. I'm glad I avoided that.*

Charlie couldn't avoid feeling what they had done was wrong, however. He arrived at the storage unit looking glum. "Mornin'," Jenny said cheerfully when he walked in. Charlie didn't reply. He took off his coat and headed for a box of books. Jenny shrugged and looked at her laptop screen. She waited for Charlie to open a book and start reading but he hesitated. "If you're too tired to do this, I can handle it alone," she said.

"I'm okay."

"You sure?"

Charlie nodded. He opened a book and flubbed the title. She had to ask him to repeat the words several times and finally to spell the words so she could be sure she typed them correctly. Charlie became irritated. "Do I talk funny?" he asked.

"No. It's not your speech. It's that book title. I know a lot of books but I never heard of that one."

"I thought you were an expert."

"I'm no expert. I'm just a book lady. But I know some experts and they might find that book interesting." Jenny paused and smiled. "As long as I don't screw up the title."

"So now I'm a screw up?" Charlie asked.

"No, no, Charlie. I never said that." Charlie looked down at the book he was holding and remained silent. "You're not your usual cheerful self today. What's wrong? Something with Emily?" Charlie nodded and then immediately wished he hadn't. "Oh, what was it?"

Charlie closed the book. "We had sex last night."

"Well, she *is* your girlfriend," Jenny replied, smiling.

Charlie didn't smile. Nor did he look at Jenny. "I didn't want to have sex with Emily, Jenny." Wondering if he should go on, Charlie paused. "I want to have sex with-." He stopped himself. Had he said too much? Jenny looked at him with a mystified expression on her face. She didn't want to ask whose name he was going to say, but wasn't sure *why* she didn't want to ask. Was it because she already knew or because she didn't want to know?

"Oh, Charlie, what am I gonna do with you?"

David's request to stay at Jenny's apartment had saved him a lot of money. He had money from his severance package, but didn't want to spend any more of it. *What if it takes longer than it used to find a job?* he thought. *I'm not going to use that money until I really need it.*

He'd been spending much of his idle time behind the counter at the bookstore wondering how he could get Jenny to want to be with him again. After making a special dinner and getting a flashy Christmas tree, Jenny still treated him like an employee and houseguest. David wanted more. *What else could he try? Maybe an awesome and amazing Christmas present?* he wondered. *But, what? Jenny has never had extravagant taste. That was what I liked about her. She was always down to earth.*

When they were alone in the bookstore before they opened one morning, David approached Jenny. "Can we talk for a moment?" he asked.

"Sure. What's up?"

"It's not about the books, Jenny. It's about us."

Jenny frowned. "David, I told you before, there is no us."

"Look, Jenny, I made a terrible mistake 10 years ago and I want to make up for it."

"David, you made a choice and chose your career over your wife and son. People do stuff like that all the time."

"But I was *wrong!* Can't you see that?"

"It doesn't make any difference now," Jenny replied. "Why are you obsessing about it?"

“Because I still love you and I want to get back together.”

“You’ve said that before. I didn’t believe you then and I don’t believe you now.”

“Do you think I’m lying?” David asked.

“Oh, no. I don’t feel that way at all. I believe you’re feeling *lost*. Everything you had over the past 10 years is gone. Like you said awhile back, all that’s left in your life is Marcus and me. You were *right* about Marcus...”

“How can I persuade you that I’m right about you, too?”

“You *can’t*, David. Our romance ended 10 years ago.”

“So what about what’s happening now?”

“We have a business relationship. I’m helping you because you’re helping me. When you’re finished helping me... then.”

David knew what she was implying. When Jenny no longer needed him, he would have to leave. However, where would he go? And, was there something he could do to convince her to let him stay? His idea for the extravagant gift became more important, but he still couldn’t think of what to buy. He hoped, in the short time left before Christmas, something would come to him. His time was running out.

Chapter 15 - Wrap up

Charlie and Jenny cataloged books for another week. He came alone to the storage unit every day. Jenny didn’t ask about Emily and Charlie didn’t mention David. Nor did they say much about themselves. They seemed content just to be together. For the moment, that was enough.

Finally, Charlie replaced the last book in the last box. “Well, we’re done, Charlie. I can’t believe we did it!” Jenny said. “Now I can get back to my store full-time and you can get on with selling the house.”

Charlie somehow wanted to stay with Jenny forever if he could.

“Yeah, about the books, um, I could help with packing and shipping,” he said.

“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.”

Charlie looked down as if what he was thinking embarrassed him. Jenny wondered what was going on. She waited. He finally looked at her. “Jenny, I don’t want to be around Emily. I want to be with you.” There. He finally said what he’d 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 had it been so hard even to *think* of saying it when they were teenagers? Had it been something about Jenny or something about him that kept him from talking to her back then?

He didn’t give Jenny time to respond and went on. “Jenny, these past few weeks have been the happiest of my life. I feel like I lost my mom only to find you.”

His admission surprised Jenny. “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 hoped her kind voice meant that she would 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 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 didn’t. Charlie felt worried. Maybe she didn’t feel the same way he did.

Charlie put on his coat and started for the door. “Jenny, I’m sorry if I seemed 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, *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. Later, I read it, liked it, and always wanted to ask you what the rest of the story was. I also hoped it might be a way I could finally get to talk to you and maybe get to know you. But, I never worked up the courage to even mention that you’d left it. I still have the story.”

Jenny decided to pretend she hadn’t found the story stuffed in the back of Charlie’s yearbook. “It’s funny, I don’t remember writing it,” she said. “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.

After Charlie was gone, Jenny sat wondering why she didn’t remember the story. She wanted to read it just to remember what it was about and possibly recall why she’d written it. Jenny did not know when or if that might happen. She feared she and Charlie might never see each other again and immediately felt convinced that she did not want their short relationship to end. *But, she wondered, how can it continue?*

Emily made a ‘normal’ dinner that night and didn’t wear the lingerie she bought. She was saving it for Christmas. Charlie felt relieved. *Maybe she won’t pressure me again*, he thought.

“Um, I found your yearbook,” she said as they ate. Charlie didn’t 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 didn’t 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.

“That’s right, you didn’t. I came because I wanted to be with you. Was that so wrong? Do you want me to 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. She started out of the room.

“Emily, wait. You’re right,” Charlie said. “This has all been 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 emotionally, perhaps by an insurmountable distance.

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

Two days later, 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 called?” 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 had 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 early in January and 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 anticipated how hard it would be to let them go. Charlie would soon be cut adrift, alone, no longer with roots or an anchor. His comfortable, modern house in the city was just a building. The Stockton family house he was about to lose was his *real* home.

Selling his company had been a big loss but market pressures had given him no other choice. He had given up everything including many loyal employees who were also his friends. Charlie had seen to it that they were all well compensated but saying goodbye to everyone was harder than anything he had ever done before.

Now, on the verge of saying goodbye to everything *else* in his life, he realized once his home in Springfield was gone, he would lose what was left of his identity. Charlie couldn't imagine who he would be or what his life would be like afterward.

It dawned on Charlie that he could make a choice. He could live in a house or live in a home. The only real home he'd ever had was in Springfield. Charlie decided he no longer wanted to let everything go. Maybe it was because of Jenny or his family's history in the town, or possibly something else in his life that he hadn't figured out yet.

He called the realtor and told her to take the house off the market. He then 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.

After making the three calls, Charlie felt better than he had in over a year.

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.

"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."

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

"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?" Jenny asked.

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

"Not too busy to visit you in 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 but didn't say 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 the hell is going on?* David thought.

Chapter 16 - The Fairy Tale II

When Jenny arrived for dinner, she expected to see Emily waiting with Charlie. “Where’s Emily? Won’t she be joining us?” Jenny asked. 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 you did, but she’s a big girl. She’ll be okay, Charlie.”

Charlie nodded. Jenny had voiced what he felt. Moreover, he was relieved Emily was gone from his life. “Yes. You’re right.”

Jenny opened the bag of take-out food. “It’s not very special,” she apologized as she removed the containers of hot food from the bag. Charlie had already set the table.

“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 Charlie’s books. He asked more about her bookstore and if business had picked up for the holidays. Then they shared 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 but she confessed it had been best time she’d 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, Charlie, but not a lot. I liked to imagine flying above the town and then soaring 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 me refresh your memory.” He started to read it aloud. “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. Her mother the Queen had 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 do remember this now!” Jenny exclaimed. “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?”

“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.” Jenny paused and looked down. “Later, I learned ‘happily ever after’ was a lie,” she said in a quiet voice.

“What do you mean?”

“My mother died after 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. After Charlie put the story down, he 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 between sobs. “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. 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.”

Charlie nodded. "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 Anne and you haven't found your Jesse."

"You might be right," Jenny replied. She understood what his comment implied.

"Until now," Charlie went on. "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*." Charlie leaned down to kiss Jenny. Her lips clung to his for a long time. Their 'happily ever after' began at that moment.

Charlie's fantasies about Jenny back in high school had never gotten this far. Back then, Charlie didn't know anything about sex. He had only dreamed of talking to her and maybe kissing her. Now, they were lying side-by-side in his bed.

Their dinner sat in the containers on Charlie's dining room table. The food had cooled a while ago. When Charlie had kissed Jenny, the couple immediately stopped being hungry for food and realized they were hungry for each other.

"I'd love to see more of your house," Jenny had whispered. *Especially your bedroom*, she thought. Charlie had read her mind. He took her hand and led her upstairs. The bedroom where he and Emily had slept was at the end of the hall. Jenny knew as soon as she saw it that it had been Charlie's parent's room. He opened the door but she hesitated to go in. "This is a lovely room, Charlie, but I'd like to see *your* bedroom."

"It's just down the hall. We passed it."

She pulled on his hand to lead him out of the room. "Please show it to me."

Charlie's room held a double bed with an antique carved oak headboard. A thick quilt covered the mattress. Jenny led Charlie to the bed and sat down. "Is this where you sat when you read my story?" she asked.

"Sometimes. But I also read it *there*." He pointed to a wide window seat.

Jenny didn't move. "Show me what you did," she said. Charlie wasn't sure what she meant. "Were you sitting up or laying down? Were you under the quilt or on top of it?"

"Oh. Well, I used to read it in the afternoons after I came home from school. Not every day, though. Mostly on the days when I happened to see you."

"Seeing me reminded you of my story?" Jenny asked. Charlie nodded. "That's sweet."

"Yeah. I'd come home and get it out and reread it and then think about possible endings."

"What did you come up with?" Jenny asked.

"Nothing as good as I'm sure you could have come up with. I wasn't as creative as you were."

"I don't believe you. Maybe you didn't write stories, but you created a successful company."

Charlie shook his head. "It's not the same, Jenny."

“Let’s see if we can come up with an ending together, shall we?”

“I’d like that.”

“Let’s pretend you’re Jesse and I’m Anne. Okay?” Charlie nodded. “Imagine Jesse and Anne found a way to live happily ever after.”

“But what about Anne’s quest to find Jesse?”

“Oh, that’s over. She was successful. She brought Jesse back and the King relented and allowed them to marry. He knew it was useless to resist. Even he could see they were made for each other.”

“Yeah, I guess they were.”

“You should know, Charlie. You read my story a lot more times than I did. I actually forgot about it, but you kept it.”

Charlie smiled. “I loved it. I felt if I couldn’t have you, at least I could have your story. I’m sorry, but it’s true.”

Jenny smiled sweetly. She liked that Charlie was revealing his adolescent feelings because it meant that he trusted her. It made her feel closer to him. “Don’t be sorry. I’m glad you felt that way. I’m only sorry that I didn’t.”

“Well, how could you? I never spoke to you. You never knew I existed. That day I came into your store and told you who I was, you didn’t even recognize my name.”

Jenny frowned. “Yeah. Sorry about that.”

“It’s okay, Jenny.”

She looked into his eyes. “Charlie, I hope I never did anything to show you any meanness or indifference or hostility. I’d hate to think I did anything to hurt you.”

“No. Never. You were always kind to everyone. That’s why I fell in love with you.”

“You... you *did*?” Jenny asked.

Charlie nodded. “Sorry.”

“Please don’t be. I should be apologizing to you.”

“Why?”

“I made you wait twenty years.”

“I wasn’t exactly *waiting*, Jenny. I had moved on. But, I never forgot you.”

“Charlie, you told me your parents, grandparents and great grandparents all had lifelong timeless loves. Is that what *you* want?”

“I know it seems like love like that can’t exist in this crazy modern world, but yeah, that’s what I’ve dreamed of.”

“With me?” she asked. Charlie nodded. “Good. Are you ready to start our happily ever after right now?” Charlie smiled and nodded. “Me, too.”

Jenny unbuttoned her blouse and slipped it off. She unclasped her bra and dropped it beside her on the bed. Then she stood up and slipped off her pants. Enthralled by what he saw, Charlie watched her undress. She was even more beautiful than he imagined. *Truly, she is a princess*, he thought.

When Jenny was naked, she threw back the quilt and sat on the bed. "Charlie, if I'd known more back when I wrote that story, the times Anne and Jesse met by the creek would have been a little different."

"What do you mean?"

Jenny smiled and looked at him. "They wouldn't have *just* ridden Snowflake," she replied, hoping he would get the hint.

He did.

Charlie undressed quickly and sat next to her on the bed. "If I'd imagined Anne and Jesse like *this*," Charlie said, "I probably would have gone crazy. But, luckily, I didn't."

"I'm glad you didn't. The real thing will be so much better than any fiction."

Twenty years of adulthood dropped away as the couple became Anne and Jesse discovering love for the first time. Jenny ached for Charlie to enter her. She opened her legs and waited. Charlie eased himself over her and their bellies touched. She felt his hardness and knew doing this was right for both of them. "Oh, Charlie, you've come home," she said after he was inside. He knew it before she said it.

"Jenny, I love you."

"I love you, too."

Chapter 17 - Aftermath

It was six-thirty a.m. Jenny hoped she could sneak in without waking David. After she unlocked her apartment door, she tiptoed in. She didn't want to have to explain where she'd spent the night, or who'd she spent it with. The apartment was dark because of the lateness of the winter sunrise but she didn't turn on the light as she made her way toward her bedroom.

Jenny had slept, but not very much. She and Charlie spent much of their first night together talking about themselves, the town, their pasts, and the future they had decided to make together. If Jenny had her way, she wouldn't have left. Around six, Charlie reminded her she had a business to run. After Jenny dressed reluctantly, she kissed Charlie goodbye and promised to return as soon as she could. Charlie told her he'd be waiting. Then she drove home in the cold.

David wasn't on the sofa. Jenny looked at the bathroom and saw a light under the door. *Oh, shit!* she thought. *I was hoping I could sneak in while he was still asleep.* Just as she realized how unrealistic her hope was, the door opened and David saw her. Jenny prepared to greet him but David didn't say anything, not even a sleepy, 'good morning.' Jenny continued to her bedroom and found the clothes she wanted to wear to the bookshop. As she was dressing, she wondered if David would be accompanying her there.

He was already in the kitchen when she came out of the bedroom. "Morning," she said, hoping she sounded cheerful, and innocent. David didn't reply. He was in the process of getting out a box of cereal and some milk. Jenny noticed he had nuked day-old coffee in the microwave. There was none left in the carafe for her. She decided she didn't feel hungry and left David to eat alone.

She'd planned to ask how it went when he was alone in the shop the night before but decided that might give him an opening to complain about her staying out all night. *He's not my father*, Jenny thought. *He's got no right to ask me where I was. Or, who I was with.*

As soon as she had those thoughts, Jenny knew David was likely to ask both questions, eventually. He had no other choice. She had a decision to make. How would she reply? Would she tell him she spent the night with Charlie? Could David handle that? Jenny wasn't sure. He might be too vulnerable to accept that his ex-wife was seeing another man, especially since David had been trying to win her back.

Although Jenny had dated after they divorced, and David was frank about his relationship with Debbie, he and Jenny had never discussed relationships after theirs came apart and Jenny didn't feel comfortable changing that pattern now. However, she might not have a choice.

She still needed David for several more busy days at Real Books. And, she hoped to find more time to spend with Charlie. One night wasn't enough. The lovers wanted more of each other, lots more if they could get it, but just a little more time alone might have to do for now. Jenny hoped something would work out.

"I'm going in early," Jenny said while David was still eating. "See you in a couple of hours." He didn't reply. Jenny wondered if he would set foot in Real Books ever again. However, she didn't regret what she had done. How could she? She was in love.

After she left, David thought about his dilemma. Because he felt hurt, he wanted to leave. However, he couldn't. Where could he go? He needed Jenny because she gave him a place to stay, but he knew she would only let him to stay as long as he helped her run Real Books. The pair needed each other, but not in the way that David had been hoping.

Now that he was available, and back in Springfield, he'd wanted Jenny to fall in love with him again, or at least be open to exploring a possible relationship with him. She'd already made it clear she wasn't interested, but her disinterest hadn't dampened David's hope. He thought it was only a matter of time and proximity before he could rekindle their romance. And, besides, Christmas was almost here and the whole family would be together again. That had to count for something.

Now David wondered if she would kick him out on December 26, right after the Christmas rush at Real Books ended. *She wouldn't kick me out while Marcus is here*, he reminded himself, *so I'm safe for a while longer.* He hoped he was right.

His ex-wife had changed and David suspected he knew why. *She spent the night with someone*, he thought. *I don't know who, but I don't like it.* David wondered if there was something he could do about it. Despite Jenny's several rejections, he wasn't ready to give up.

When Jenny arrived at the bookstore, she briefly considered opening early but instead decided to straighten up so the place would be ready for what she hoped would be a surge of last-minute shoppers. When she was in her office, she heard a tapping on the door and saw David through the glass. *He's not due in for at least two hours*, Jenny thought as she hurried to unlock the door and let him in.

“How’d it go last night?” she asked as soon as he took off his coat. “Things look pretty good this morning. Did *anybody* come in?”

“It was a mob scene,” David lied. “I had trouble keeping up. People asked for you and I told them you weren’t here. I tried to help them and sold a lot of books, but I think some customers left unhappy that they had to wait for me to take care of them.”

Jenny brushed off his indirect complaint. “Sounds like you handled things very well. Thanks.”

David wanted to ask the question that was eating him up inside but wasn’t sure how to do it. He hadn’t minded being left to tend the store alone and there hadn’t been an overwhelming number of customers. Everyone had been taken care of and, when he locked up, he felt proud of how well he’d handled things alone. However, when he’d arrived at the apartment and found Jenny wasn’t there, and when he called her cell phone and she hadn’t answered, he’d begun to worry.

“I tried to call you but you didn’t answer. I got worried something had happened to you.”

“You called? I didn’t hear it. I think the battery must have gone dead.”

Or you turned it off, David thought.

What really bothered him was not that Jenny hadn’t answered her phone but that she’d stayed out all night. David wanted to know where she’d been, but wasn’t sure how to ask.

Jenny thought she ought to try pre-empting his inquiry into her personal (and romantic) life. “I had dinner with a friend and we got to talking. And talking. And talking. I stayed over because I was tired and it was late and, oh yeah, we’d had some wine, too.”

“You could have called,” David said, in a softer voice than Jenny would have expected. He almost sounded contrite.

“I forgot.” Jenny knew he was waiting for her to say she was sorry but refused to because she wasn’t. Her night with Charlie had been the happiest since before she and David split up, back when they had still been in love. She never thought she’d ever be in love again but now she *was*, and wasn’t about to apologize to David or anyone else.

“Who was the friend?” David couldn’t resist asking.

“No one you know,” she replied. It wasn’t a *total* lie. David and Charlie had met once but, technically speaking, they didn’t *know* each other.

He knew she was lying but didn’t say anything. If he said aloud what he was feeling, she might throw him out. David wanted desperately to spend Christmas with Marcus and Jenny. He had nowhere else to go. He needed to continue sleeping on Jenny’s sofa. He also thought he needed Jenny.

During the time they spent together at the bookstore and apartment, David had watched his ex-wife and discovered he regretting ever leaving her. He hadn’t exactly fallen in love with her again, but he wanted Jenny, and continued to hope their close proximity might reawaken her attraction to him. Even though she’d been clear that they had no future together, David continued to hope.

He knew Jenny had friends in Springfield. She’d grown up there and many people she went to school with still lived there. It was not unreasonable for her to spend time with a

friend. Nevertheless, why *now*, at the peak of her busiest season at the bookstore she claimed to love more than almost anything else in her life (except Marcus)? The only thing David thought could pull her away from the bookstore she loved so much was someone else she *also* loved.

Who is he? David thought. And what can I do to change her feelings?

As Jenny gazed upon her ex, she realized that, although they had once been happily in love, theirs had never been a fairy-tale love. There had been no ‘happily ever after.’ *Maybe our marriage was doomed to fail*, Jenny thought. *But, Charlie’s and my marriage won’t be doomed. We already know we have our own happily ever after.*

David interrupted her thoughts of Charlie. “What about *me*, Jenny?”

She looked at him. “What *about you*?”

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

“We’ve been over this, David. There’s nothing to *think*. 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 as much as I can, but your answers lie elsewhere.”

“You’re sure?”

“Yes.”

David didn’t say another word. He went to counter and started up the computer. After checking the cash register, he sat quietly and closed his eyes hoping to shut out Jenny, his problems, his fears, and everything else in his past except his son.

Unless he did something drastic, he knew he would soon have to leave Jenny and Springfield and they would go back to being no more than exes and parents of Marcus. He didn’t like it but it seemed there was nothing he could do about it.

Or, was there? David refused to admit defeat. He’d already lost his job, apartment, and girlfriend. All he had left were his son and ex-wife. David knew his relationship with Marcus was strong. *How*, he wondered, *can I reawaken my relationship with Jenny? There must be a way*. For the rest of the day, as David took care of customers, he thought about his dilemma. *There must be a way*.

All he had to do was find it.

That night, David had difficulty falling asleep after his busy day at the bookstore. Also, the approaching end of his time with Jenny was on his mind and he worried about where he would go when she told him she no longer needed him and it was time to leave. He thought about pleading to stay awhile longer and knew Jenny would likely relent but rejected the idea. *I’d rather sleep in my car than beg her to let me stay*, he thought. Then he realized what a stupid idea sleeping in his car was. There were places he could go and friends he could ask to help him. The problem was that David *wanted* to stay in Springfield. And, he wanted to stay with Jenny. He wasn’t yet ready to give up trying to change her mind about him.

What I need is a big gesture that will convince her I’m serious, he thought. *I know she must still have some feelings for me. We share a past. We were in love. Surely, that matters to her. How can I matter to her again? There must be a way.*

After he fell asleep, David dreamed about the first time he and Jenny celebrated her birthday. He was already in love with her but unsure how she felt about him and wanted to do something grandly special- a gesture that would persuade her to fall in love with him. He'd hit upon the idea of buying her a ridiculously extravagant gift just to show how much she meant to him. *She'd look great in diamond earrings*, he'd told himself. He'd gone shopping but when he saw the prices, he realized buying them would be impossible on the meager salary he earned. He had no savings.

David's grand romantic gesture had gone down the drain. However, he and Jenny celebrated her birthday anyway and had a wonderful time. Afterward, they both knew there was something special between them. David awoke remembering that special feeling and the grand gesture he'd planned. *I've got my severance money*, he thought. *Maybe this time, I can afford to buy her the diamond earrings I'd wanted but couldn't afford back then. She'll be blown away, I'm sure of it.*

As they shared breakfast the next morning, David reminded Jenny that he had to drive to Marcus's college to pick him up for the Christmas break. "Oh, right," Jenny replied, sleepily. "Drive safely. Don't hurry. I can handle things at the store." David nodded. He knew where he wanted to go before he picked up Marcus. He returned in the late afternoon with Marcus and a gift for Jenny he felt sure would melt her heart and finally win her back.

Chapter 18 - Christmas Eve

Charlie called Jenny to invite her, David, and Marcus for Christmas Eve dinner in his new home. Jenny told him she would love to accept his invitation but didn't know how the others would feel. He told her whatever worked out would be okay with him.

After David returned from picking up Marcus at school, Jenny, David, and Marcus were eating pizza at the bookshop. "Charlie's invited the three of us for Christmas Eve dinner. He's all alone since his mother died. He spent Thanksgiving alone and doesn't want to spend Christmas by himself. I kinda feel sorry for him. So, I'd like to go. But if you guys don't want to, I'll tell him we're not coming."

"What happened to that girlfriend of his?" David asked.

"He didn't mention her and I didn't ask."

David knew Jenny had always had a soft spot in her heart for people who were lonesome or needy. That was one of the things he'd loved about her. She was always giving children's books to kids who came in with their parents and spotted a special book that they couldn't put down. Jenny never let her generosity get out of hand, but also found it difficult to say no to anyone who needed help. Luckily, no one had ever taken advantage of her.

David wasn't certain that wasn't happening now, however. Jenny had spent a lot of time with Charlie cataloging his books and David didn't know what else might have been happening while they were together. Jenny stood to make a lot of money from Charlie's books and perhaps that was her sole motivation. However, what if their relationship was no longer just business? *Nah*, David thought. *Jenny only took that job to save Real Books. Charlie's just someone she went to high school with. She didn't even recognize him when he first came into the shop.* David told himself not to worry.

“Oh, and there’s something else, David. I told Charlie about you and he thinks he has contacts in the computer industry who could help you. He’s willing to make some calls, but only if you agree. He’d like to discuss it with you before he does anything. Think of it as professional courtesy.” David felt a little uncomfortable going because he’d only met Charlie once and didn’t know him. However, maybe Charlie *could* help him find another job. He’d be a fool to refuse the offer.

Marcus also felt reluctant to go. He and Charlie had never met and he knew nothing about him. Jenny had explained that Charlie was her old friend from high school but Marcus wondered why his mother suddenly seemed interested in this particular old friend when she’d never mentioned any other old friends before. When Marcus returned to school after Thanksgiving, Charlie had just been a new customer she was helping. Now that he was home for Christmas, he suspected Charlie had become more than just a customer. He had no idea how or why that happened. The weirdness multiplied. He couldn’t wait to tell Nancy.

After David’s life fell apart and he came to Jenny for help, Marcus had considered the possibility that his parents might rediscover what had originally attracted them to each other. However, there were no new signs of affection between his parents. They were cordial and friendly but that was all. Jenny still had a failing bookstore. David still had no job. Marcus didn’t know if he would have a sophomore year at college. *Merry Christmas!* he thought, bitterly. The holiday seemed unlikely to be jolly and bright.

“Sure, Mom,” he said. “I’d like to meet this guy. He sounds interesting.”

As soon as they arrived at Charlie’s house, Marcus noticed something unusual about the way his mother and Charlie greeted each other. There was something extra in their smiles and he sensed a special connection between them. (Also, Emily was nowhere around.) Jenny had told him about Charlie’s books and the way they had worked together as they catalogued them. *But, that project is over*, Marcus thought. *What else is going on?* He wondered if his father also noticed.

Jenny and Charlie had agreed to keep their newly declared love private for the present. They didn’t want to make a big announcement or show off their affection. Nor did they want to embarrass David and Marcus. It was just going to be a Christmas Eve dinner among friends.

“So, Mr. Stockton, my mom told me you had a pretty impressive library,” Marcus said after they sat down to eat.

“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.

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.”

David looked up from his plate. “But you’re not...,” he said.

“That’s right. I’ve changed my mind and decided to live here. The place needs some work and 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, Marcus. 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.”

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

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

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

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

“I mostly worked with older systems, legacy stuff. I started out in high school working for a small company right here in Springfield. That was when pcs were just getting popular. Seems like ancient history now.”

“P-what, Dad?” Marcus joked as he 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 a good idea at the *wrong* time.”

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

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

“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 very important. You might not have a blockbuster, or get rich, but you could change the world,” Charlie said.

David smiled. “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 Eve dinner and not a business meeting. Charlie and David could discuss the computer industry later. She decided to change the subject and turned to Marcus. “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.”

David put down his fork and looked at Jenny. “You’ve been here before... for *dinner*?” he asked, trying not to seem overly inquisitive. His question embarrassed him and he looked quickly down at his plate. Charlie and Jenny looked at each other.

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

“Oh,” David said. He immediately knew what night that was. “That’s nice.”

Charlie quickly changed the subject. “So, David. I know things are changing in our industry but I know people who value genuine experience. If you like, I can put you in touch with a few.”

David nodded slowly. “I’d appreciate that, Charlie. That’s very nice of you.”

“It’s only good business, David. The industry can’t afford to lose mature people who have experience the youngsters just graduating from college just don’t have. Sorry, Marcus. I don’t mean to offend.”

“You didn’t. I’m not a computer science major like my dad or a literature major like my mom was. I’m thinking of becoming a philosophy major.”

Charlie nodded. “That’s good. You could have a future in computers.”

“I could?” Marcus asked.

“Yeah. Now that they’re getting smarter, people who know how to use logic and intelligence and how to keep everything human will be more in demand. Think about it.”

Marcus thought about Nancy. *Wait ‘til I tell her this*, he thought. *It’ll blow her mind.* “I will. Thanks.”

After dinner with Charlie, they went back to the apartment and Marcus went to his room to study. Finals would start soon after he returned after Christmas break. David couldn’t put off asking Jenny the question that had been nagging at him since dinner. “So what’s going on between you and Charlie?”

Jenny looked at David. She knew why he had asked. *He’s not stupid*, she reminded herself. *He knows where I spent the night last week*. However, she didn’t want to talk about it. *David’s my ex. My personal life is off limits*. “That’s none of your business, David,” she replied in a quiet, firm voice. Her reply confirmed David’s feeling that it *was* his business and he thought he knew why.

“What about *me*, Jenny?”

She looked at him. “What *about you*?”

“We’ve been working together at the bookstore, and living in the apartment together. 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’ve helped you as much as I can, but your answers lie elsewhere.”

“You’re sure?”

“Yes.”

David wasn’t ready to give up. He had a secret weapon that was sure would convince Jenny he still loved her. “So, what did you and Charlie talk about when you were over there for dinner?”

Jenny thought about an answer. “Happily ever after,” she replied.

“What?”

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

“Weird conversation.”

“Not at all.” Jenny tried not to smile as she recalled what had happened. “It was actually a very *good* conversation.” *Both the talking part and the sex part*, she thought.

“I’ll take your word for it,” David replied, curtly. He felt desperate and hoped the diamond earrings would finally change her mind. David tried not to think about what would happen if they didn’t.

Chapter 19 - Christmas Day

Marcus and Jenny had always had low-key Christmases. It had been more meaningful to be together than to give gifts. The plan for this one was no different, despite the fact that David was there.

Jenny had found two books she thought David and Marcus would like. Someone had bought a box of old science fiction books into the shop and she found a fifty-year old Science Fiction Book Club edition of Asimov’s *Foundation Trilogy*. It had been one of David’s favorites when he started reading sci-fi as a teenager. “Wow!” he said after he unwrapped it. “This is *great*, Jenny! I’ve been wanting to reread it. I lost track of my copy years ago.”

For Marcus, she’d saved one of the nonfiction books from Charlie’s library. It was a first edition of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. Jenny had never been a Nietzsche fan, and didn’t know how Marcus felt about his philosophy. However, she appreciated that the book had been beautifully made and she thought Marcus would treasure it even if he ended up not liking it. As it turned out, he knew who Nietzsche was and had planned to get a paperback copy.

As Marcus handed his father a small wrapped gift, he joked, “You can probably guess what *this* is.” Being the son of a bookstore owner, he’d become infected with a love of books and bookstores at an early age and enjoyed browsing in the used bookstores near the college campus. David unwrapped the volume, read the title, and grinned. *10101001 Facts About Retro Computers*.

David’s face lit up in surprise. “Marcus, this is awesome. Where did you find it?”

“One of the small used bookshops near campus specializes in computer books. Most of them are fat volumes about things I couldn’t even guess at, but this little gem jumped out at me and I thought you would enjoy it.”

David started thumbing through the book. “I recognize some of these old computer brands, but there are several I never heard of. This is gonna be so much fun to read. Thanks, son!”

Marcus beamed. *One down, one to go*, he thought, hoping the book he’d chosen for his mother would be as well received. He handed Jenny her present and she began to unwrap it. When all the paper was off, the book she held in her hands amazed her.

“*The History of Springfield?*” she said. “I’ve never heard of this book. No one’s ever bought a copy into the shop.”

“Look at the date,” Marcus said.

“1935. Wow, Marcus. This is a real historical artifact.” She started thumbing through the volume and noticed a photo she recognized. “Oh, my God!”

“What, Mom?”

“It’s *Charlie*’s house. Says here it was the third one built in the town.”

Hearing Charlie’s name, David suddenly became agitated. “Oh, I just remembered. I’ve got a very special gift for you.” He pulled a small wrapped present out of his pajama pocket and handed it to Jenny. She had to put down the book but didn’t want to, just yet.

“Thanks, David. I wonder what it could be?”

“Open it,” David said.

Jenny removed the wrapping paper and noticed the name printed on the small white box. *Excelsior*. She pulled off the lid and lifted the cotton pad. Underneath were two diamond round Tulip Stud earrings. Jenny gasped.

“They’re your birthstone, in case you didn’t know,” David said. Jenny didn’t respond. Marcus wondered what was happening. “I’ve always wanted to get something like this for you. I thought they’d look wonderful on your beautiful ears.”

“David, I-.” Jenny wanted to say she couldn’t accept them, and ask how dare he get them for her, and where had he gotten the money, but kept quiet.

“Put them on, Jenny. Let us see them on you.”

Marcus didn’t know if he should also encourage his mother to do what his father asked or just wait to see what happened next. Or, maybe, he shouldn’t even be there right then. Jenny didn’t do what David asked. She sat there looking at the earrings.

“There are a lot of diamonds. These must have been very expensive, David.”

“I saw them and couldn’t resist.”

“But the money!”

“Was no object. I should have bought them for you years ago. I’m sorry it took so long.”

“David, I don’t know what to say.”

“Put them on, Jenny.”

“Not now. Maybe later.” She put the cotton back in the box and put the lid back on. Then, still in shock, she sat the box on top of the book Marcus had given her. She felt her life had just gotten way more complicated.

“David, I think you and I need to talk.” Marcus got up and started toward his room. “But, not right now. Later. Let’s enjoy the rest of our Christmas Day.”

On Christmas night, just after Marcus had gone to his room, Jenny sat the small white box on the kitchen table and pushed it toward David who sat opposite her. “David, I can’t accept these,”

“Why not? Don’t you think they’re beautiful? Don’t you think you deserve them? Well *I* do. I should have bought them for you years ago to show how much I love you.”

Jenny sighed. “I’m glad you didn’t.”

“What do you mean?”

“You would have wasted your money then. Just like you’ve wasted it now.”

“But I *didn’t*, Jenny. I still love you. I wanted you to know.”

“David, we’ve gotten along well since the divorce. Our separation hasn’t harmed Marcus and I’ve been happy about that. But, no gift, however ridiculously extravagant it is, will make me love you again. Like I told you before, we’re through.”

“So now you love Charlie?” David asked.

“David, even if Charlie had never come into my life, I still wouldn’t have accepted these earrings.”

“So, you *do* love Charlie.”

“My relationship is none of your business. Just like your relationship with Debbie wasn’t any of my business.”

“I didn’t love her, you know.”

“I don’t care.”

“I still love *you*,” David insisted.

Jenny shrugged. “And, I *still* don’t care. You ought to take these back and get your money. You’re going to need it to live on. Your time here is almost finished.”

Jenny didn’t say anything else. She left the earrings on the kitchen table and went to her bedroom. After closing the door, she fell onto the bed and started to cry. She hated to hurt David but felt he had seriously hurt himself. *He never should have done what he did*, Jenny thought. *We were doing okay. How could he have assumed something else between us was possible? I’ve been very clear every time he made a gesture, but I guess he didn’t believe me. Now I don’t know what kind of relationship we’ll have in the future. We’re still Marcus’s parents. If we weren’t, I’d have thrown him out tonight.*

Marcus had heard his parents conversing but couldn’t make out what they were saying. He hoped they weren’t discussing him. If his father had mentioned the earrings beforehand, Marcus would have told them buying them was a bad idea. His mother had never developed a desire for expensive possessions. She had simple tastes and was happy if life rolled along without any major problems. The possibility that she might have to close Real Books was likely the worst thing that she imagined could happen in her life. He hoped she’d found a way she could save his grandparents’ bookshop. Next to him, it was what she loved most in this world.

Marcus opened his bedroom door and walked into the living room to see what his father was doing. David was sitting on the sofa staring at the TV, which was off. “Dad? You okay?” Marcus asked.

David wanted to reply that he *wasn’t* okay but couldn’t bring himself to do it. *Why ruin Marcus’s Christmas*, he thought. *None of this has anything to do with him.*

“I’m just tired, Marcus,” David replied. “I’ve only been working at the bookshop for a month but it seems a lot longer. I don’t know how your mom’s done it all these years.”

“It’s because she loves that place. She’d be lost without it.”

“I think you’re right.” *But, she won’t be lost without me*, David thought. *Her life will go on as it was before I showed up. But, my life... Even with Charlie’s help, finding another job won’t be easy.*

“Everything will work out okay for you, Dad,” Marcus said, as if he’d read his father’s mind. He didn’t have to. David’s sad, worried expression told Marcus what was

going on inside him. Despite David's trying, it had not been a merry Christmas. Unless a miracle happened, his New Year was unlikely to be a happy one.

On the 26th, Jenny went to the bookstore alone. She urged David and Marcus to spend the day doing guy stuff. "Go see a movie, get a pizza, hang out by the pond in the park," she suggested. David and Marcus insisted they wanted to help out in the shop. Jenny lied and told them it was likely no one would be coming in.

As soon as she opened Real Books, she called Charlie. He offered to come over and hang out with her for the day. Jenny almost took him up on his offer but decided it would be risky. What if David and Marcus decided to stop in to surprise her? "How about I stop by after I close?" Jenny suggested. She felt comfortable calling the apartment to tell the guys to do something for dinner by themselves. There were leftovers in the refrigerator or they could order out.

"Great," Charlie replied. "Will you be coming by yourself or are the guys coming too?"

"Just me, if that's okay," Jenny joked.

"Will you want dinner... or...?"

"Charlie! What do you *think*?"

"Okay, no food then. I'll be ready."

He was.

Jenny only stayed two hours but went home feeling happier than she had since before Christmas. *Even if I can't save the store, I've got Charlie now, and that's something*, she thought as she looked ahead to the new year.

As soon as she walked in, David asked, "How was Charlie?" Marcus was in the bathroom and didn't hear the question.

"He's fine. He wants to talk to you some more. Could you call him to set something up?"

"Sure. Will you be there, too?"

"Why would *I* be there? It's between you guys."

David thought he might have one last opportunity to woo Jenny back. If he could somehow find out something terrible about Charlie, he could use it to scare Jenny away. It was a long shot, but it might be the only chance he had left. Unless he could think of something negative to tell Charlie about Jenny, well, that might work, too.

On the Sunday after Christmas, Jenny didn't open the bookstore. She, David, and Marcus sat at the dining room table. There was no food awaiting them. This was not a time for meal sharing. Jenny needed to talk about the future.

"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.

Marcus grinned. "Mom, I'm doing pretty darn well in my first semester."

"I know. I was just kidding."

"Look, if it's a hardship, I could transfer to a community college."

"No," Jenny said. "You're staying right where you are." She turned to David. "So, 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."

David felt grateful but didn't smile. "It does, Jenny. Thank you."

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

"What about Charlie?" David asked.

Jenny looked confused. "What do you mean?"

"Is *he* gonna be around for a long time?"

"He says he's staying in Springfield."

"I know that... but is he staying in your life?" David asked, bluntly. Jenny did not reply verbally but David knew what her answer was. He didn't like that he so far had failed to win Jenny back. Was there anything else he could try, or was it too late? He would have to think harder. Time was running out.

Chapter 20 - Doubts

Charlie's cell phone rang. He read the caller ID before he answered. "David! Thanks for calling."

"Hi, Charlie. Jenny said you wanted to meet with me."

"Yeah. I've got some good leads. I think most of them would be perfect for you, but that's your decision, of course. Let's go over them soon."

"How about this afternoon?" David asked.

"Great. Can you stop by?"

"Sure."

Charlie welcomed David when he arrived around two. They sat in Charlie's office planning to go over the list of contacts. However, David had something else he needed to mention. "So, um, Charlie. It seems you have a thing for my ex-wife."

Charlie had wondered if the subject of Jenny would come up and decided to be honest about his feelings if it did. "Yeah. I think I fell in love with her when I saw her in ninth or tenth grade." He paused and smiled as he recalled that time more than twenty years earlier. "But I was an even nerdier guy then than I am now."

David nodded. "And, back then you weren't a millionaire- *yet*."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

“Didn’t you wonder why she fell for you so fast? She’s had an okay life so far but things haven’t always been easy. There have been hard times. Hooking up with you would make her future a lot more secure than her past was.”

Charlie didn’t know how to react to David’s inference. Until this moment, he’d believed he and Jenny had fallen into the perfect fairy tale kind of love. Then he recalled her written tale. There was no ending, no happily ever after. The King had sent Jesse into exile and Anne had gone looking for him. Charlie believed the fact that he and Jenny had found each other finished the story. But, what if it hadn’t? What if the real ending *wasn’t* the couple getting together but remaining apart?

And, what if David was right? What if Jenny had fallen for Charlie not because of who he was but because of his wealth? Charlie found that possibility that she could deceive him unbelievable. However, he had never felt comfortable with emotions and didn’t know if his longing for Jenny that had lasted decades had misled him. *Maybe it’s my fault*, he thought. *Maybe meeting Jenny again made me crazy. Fairy tales aren’t real, but it seems I’ve been assuming they were.*

Charlie looked at David. “Well, David, I’ve made the contacts for you, so you should just take them and run with them and see what happens.” Charlie handed David a paper filled with names, contact information, and brief descriptions of the companies. “Here’s the list. Good luck.”

David took the sheet. “Oh, okay. Don’t you want to talk about them?”

“No. I’m too busy. Just take them and go.”

“All right. Well, thanks, Charlie. I’ll let you know what happens.”

“Yeah. You do that,” Charlie replied, coolly. David left and drove home.

Charlie didn’t know what to do after David left. Part of him wanted to call Jenny and tell her what David had implied. Another part was afraid of how she would respond. *She might throw him out*, Charlie thought. *Or, God forbid, do something worse*. Then he thought that perhaps David deserved whatever punishment Jenny would inflict on him for saying what he’d said. He’d never seen Jenny angry but wondered if she could be as motivated as Anne was in the story to fight for her love.

However, maybe she wouldn’t fight at all, Charlie thought. *Maybe she’d just lie*. Charlie had a nagging suspicion that if he told Jenny what David said, she might lie about her real feelings just to placate him because she really was into him only for his money.

The only friend he had in Springfield was Jenny. There was no one else in his life he could talk to about the doubt and confusion David had caused. Charlie might have to sort this out on his own. However, for him, figuring out emotions was more difficult than starting and running a successful company. A *lot* more difficult.

At that moment, Charlie realized that he was helpless.

The next time Jenny talked to Charlie on the phone, she mentioned her ex-husband. “David told me you gave him a huge list of contacts.”

“Well, it wasn’t *that* big.”

“That’s really nice of you, Charlie. I appreciate what you’ve done.”

“What’s David’s deal, anyway?” Charlie asked.

“What do you mean?”

“Why is he living with you?”

“I thought I’d explained all this. We’ve been divorced for ten years. He’s lived in the city all that time. Just before Thanksgiving, I learned he’d lost his job, his apartment, and his girlfriend. He drove my son back to Springfield from college and asked me if he could stay for Thanksgiving. I didn’t want to agree at first, but then I realized he could be useful to me. If I could get him to take over the bookshop, I could work on your books for you. If it wasn’t for him, I would have had to turn down your job. And if *that* had happened... well, we never would have...”

“Fallen in love?”

“Yeah, Charlie. Fallen in love.”

“But *did* you, Jenny? Really?”

“Did I what, Charlie?”

“Fall in love with me?”

Jenny’s jaw dropped. “Charlie! How could you ask me that? What’s happened?”

“Jenny, we met just over a month ago. And we don’t know that much about each other.”

“I know. It happened fast. But it also feels *right*, Charlie.”

“But *why* does it feel right? Because it is, or because we *want* it to be? Maybe it’s all happened because of that fairy tale- and that’s just a story.”

“I thought you loved my story.”

“I did, back in high school. But, that was twenty years ago. And, I was just a kid.”

Jenny didn’t say anything. She didn’t know how to reply. Was Charlie implying that he was no longer a kid but had been acting like one and had finally realized it? Jenny hadn’t been acting like a teenager. She’d fallen in love with him and was ready to commit her life to being with him. That was all she wanted.

“Charlie, maybe we should take a step back. Maybe we’ve moved too fast.”

“Maybe you’re right. I’m sorry, Jenny.”

“Don’t be. I’m glad you were honest. But- I have to say this- I’m still in love with you.” Charlie didn’t reply. Jenny waited for more but ended the call when he didn’t say anything else. Maybe her future with Charlie was gone.

Later, after Jenny came home from Real Books, she talked to David. “What did you and Charlie talk about when you went to see him?” she asked David later.

“Contacts.”

“That’s all?”

“What *else* would we have discussed, Jenny? We hardly know each other.”

David suspected his conversation with Charlie had affected the way Charlie now thought and felt about Jenny. “Why do you ask? Has something happened?”

“We had a weird conversation.”

“It probably doesn’t mean anything.”

“No,” Jenny replied. “It meant *something*, but I’m not sure what.”

Good, David thought. I got to him. Maybe now things will change.

Chapter 21 - Chaos

Marcus decided to go back to school right after New Year's Day. Although he loved his mother and father, he didn't feel right being around them because he couldn't tell how they felt about each other. Some days were better than others, but he felt a tension when the two were together.

Jenny offered to drive him back to college. "I could use a break," she told her son. "A nice drive will be fun." David offered to go with them but Jenny told him she'd rather go alone. The terse exchange between his parents made Marcus even gladder he was leaving.

They drove in silence for about a half-hour and then Marcus decided to ask some questions. "Mom, what's going on between you and dad? And, what about Charlie? You haven't mentioned him since Christmas."

"Well, I'm still working on Charlie's books."

"But you haven't seen him, have you?"

"Uh, no," Jenny replied.

"Why not? I thought you two were acting..."

"Acting how?"

Marcus felt awkward. "Kinda like you were into each other."

"We were."

"Were? Mom, what happened?"

"I don't know, Marcus. Charlie and I talked after your father went to see him. Charlie was different, but I don't know why."

"Did you ask dad?"

"Yeah," Jenny said. "He said they talked about the contacts list Charlie put together."

"Do you think he's telling the truth? Is that *all* they talked about?"

Marcus had voiced the questions Jenny had been afraid to ask herself and didn't reply. As he looked out the window and she drove the Interstate, she became lost in thought. *What could David have said to Charlie?* she wondered. *We were doing so well. Then it all seemed to come apart. Why?*

After they rode in silence for fifteen more minutes, Marcus sensed something was preoccupying his mother. "Mom?" he said. "You wanna talk about it? There's a nice little rest stop just up the highway where we can talk."

"Yeah. Okay. Maybe that would be a good idea."

Jenny pulled the car into a spot under the trees. Marcus waited for his mother to speak but didn't want to rush her. Not looking at her son, she began talking in a low voice. "Charlie and I had fallen in love, Marcus. I'm not sure exactly how and why it happened, but I was delighted that it did. He's different than any man I've ever met."

"How?"

"Charlie's shy in a sweet way. He'd fallen in love with me back in high school-."

“Really? That long ago?”

Jenny smiled. “It’s not *that* long, Marcus. I’m not that old.”

Marcus grinned. “Tell me more.”

“He’d kept a story I’d written for a class project that I’d totally forgotten.”

“What kind of a story?”

“It was a fairy tale.”

“I never knew you were a writer,” Marcus said.

“I wasn’t. I don’t recall ever writing anything else.”

“How did it go?”

“It was very simple. I was only seventeen and imagined how people fall in love, but I idealized it in a way most teenagers do.”

“Most teenage *girls*,” Marcus commented, wryly. He knew how most teenage boys thought about love, and it didn’t involve idealization in fairy tales. It mostly involved practical things, especially sex.

Jenny looked at her son. Sometimes she forgot he was no longer the boy who’d spent his afternoons after school at *Real Books*. She’d often found him huddled in a corner of the store reading something he’d picked off a shelf because of the cover art or interesting title.

Marcus had already left home. He was in college now and was unlikely to live with her ever again except for summer holidays and semester breaks. Jenny was approaching middle age and would be facing it alone. The only thing she had left that she loved was *Real Books*.

That Christmas miracle I needed to save Real Books really happened, she thought. *Charlie’s books came into my life, and then Charlie did*. Thanks to Charlie’s antique books, *Real Books* was saved, for now. Jenny yearned to save her newfound love, too. However, that seemed harder than saving her store. Jenny realized she didn’t need a miracle this time. If something had happened, she had to find out what it was. If something was broken, it was up to her to fix it.

Jenny turned to Marcus. “We’ve spent enough time here,” she said. “Let’s get moving.” Marcus felt something about his mother had changed. He hoped she had somehow solved her dilemma.

After she said Goodbye to Marcus at school, Jenny called Charlie on the way back to Springfield. “Charlie, we need to talk.”

“About *what*?”

“Us, of course.”

“Um, okay.”

“Can I come over?” Jenny asked.

“Sure. When?”

“I’m on my way back from dropping my son off at school. David’s minding the store. I could be at your place in an hour.”

“Okay. I’m not doing anything.”

Charlie didn't reach out to kiss or hug Jenny when she arrived. Nor did she make any affectionate gestures. *This could be worse than I expected*, Jenny thought. "Charlie, I've only known you for a little over a month but I have fallen in love with you. I'd planned to *stay* in love with you for the rest of my life. But, if that's not what you want, just tell me and I'll stop being your lover and go back to just being a book lady."

"Jenny, I don't know what I want. I thought I did. All those years, I never forgot you, but I never thought I'd see you again, either. Then, when I met you again, my life changed. It happened fast. Maybe *too* fast." Charlie paused. "I'm scared, Jenny."

"Of *me*?"

"No. I'm scared about how fast *everything* in my life has changed. A year ago, I was a successful entrepreneur and my mom was still alive. Now she's gone and I have no company. All the changes are catching up to me and I feel overwhelmed."

"I understand. Maybe too much happened too soon."

Charlie nodded. "I'm not good with feelings, Jenny. I kept my feelings for you suppressed in high school. I should have said *something*."

Jenny looked at Charlie wistfully. "I wish you *had*, Charlie."

"But I *didn't*. I was a fool, and maybe a coward, too."

"No! You were just shy and I like that you were. I like that you read my fairy tale and remembered it long after I'd forgotten it."

"That's the problem, Jenny. When I met you again and we started seeing each other, I believed I was *living* in a fairy tale. But, fairy tales aren't real."

"No, they're not. I learned that when my mom was killed after I graduated and my dad never recovered. There's no happily ever after."

"But, for a while there, I thought we'd found *ours*. I guess I was stupid to think that."

"You weren't stupid, Charlie. I felt the same way. And, I shouldn't say this, but I think if we found a way to solve our *immediate* problem, we would get our happily ever after back. But maybe I'm wrong."

"I hate to think you could be wrong about *anything*."

Jenny grinned. "It's been known to happen."

Charlie didn't smile at Jenny's wry comment. Instead, he looked like a lost and forlorn little boy and her heart went out to him. She recalled seeing Marcus look the same way when he was little. *Sometimes words are not what a person needs to make them feel better*, she thought. *They just need a hug*. Jenny took several steps toward Charlie and threw her arms around him. Her tight reassuring hug was just what he needed.

"Jenny, I'm so sorry," Charlie said, in a soft voice. She thought he was about to start sobbing.

"Go ahead and cry if you need to. I won't let go."

Charlie cried. All the grief caused by the changes that had happened in his recent life came out. First, he'd sold his company and said goodbye to loyal employees and friends. Then he came back home to be with his mother until she died. Saying goodbye to her at the gravesite was hard but he got through it. Afterward, he realized he was alone in the world and

started emptying the house that had been in his family for 150 years. He met Jenny at her bookstore and his life began to change in a good way but it hadn't lasted. Emily showed up and tried to reconnect with him but then got frustrated and left. And now, he was maybe losing Jenny. It was all too much and Charlie felt he no longer knew who he was. If he had any hope of surviving, he would have to start over.

To build a new life, he would have to decide what to include and what he could do without. Despite the doubts about Jenny's true motivation David had planted, Charlie felt he wanted her to be part of his future. Maybe their love could even become the bedrock on which they would build a new life.

However, he wasn't ready to say it aloud and didn't know why. As an entrepreneur and CEO, he'd learned to trust his instincts and most of his decisions had turned out right. Now, his instinct was to forget what David had intimated, take Jenny in his arms, and pledge his undying love. However, lingering doubt held him back. Charlie didn't know it, but his doubts were not about Jenny but himself. He no longer knew if he could trust his feelings. Maybe the fairy tale was all wrong, his high school love had been just a fantasy, and letting that affect him now was foolish or stupid. Or both.

After a few moments of sobbing, Charlie pulled away from Jenny's hug. "Thanks. I needed that," he said.

Jenny smiled. "I'm glad to help. Do you want to talk some more or should I leave?" "Leave, I think. For now, anyway."

"Okay. See you, Charlie. Call me if you need me."
"I will, Jenny. I will."

As she drove home, Jenny wondered what would happen. *I might never hear from him again*, she thought. *One sincere hug can't solve all his problems. I'm not even sure he knows what his problems are. I'd like to do more, but can't if he doesn't want me to.* Jenny sighed. *Oh, Charlie. Why did I fall in love with you? Why did you save that stupid story? Why can't everything in life be as simple as it is in fairy tales?*

Then Jenny recalled the details of the story she'd written twenty years earlier. She'd never finished it because she stopped when the ordeal of the separated lovers complicated the plot. *What happens after Anne leaves to find Jesse?* she asked herself. *Maybe I should try to figure out the answer.*

When she arrived at her apartment, another part of her complicated life confronted her. David was sitting on the sofa watching a basketball game on TV. He greeted Jenny but she didn't reply. Instead, she leaned down and picked up the remote control. The TV went dark. David knew what was coming next.

"It's time for you to go," Jenny said.

"I'm sorry, Jenny."

"There's nothing to be sorry for. I helped you, and you helped me, but I no longer need you and you should move on. You need to find a job. I need to run my bookshop. Life needs to go back to normal."

"It doesn't have to," David said.

"What do you mean?"

“Maybe the old normal is done and there can be a new normal.”

Jenny shook her head. “I can’t have this conversation with you. I’m tired. It’s been a grueling six weeks. Right now, I feel like screaming and running away but I can’t. Like I said a moment ago, it’s time for you to leave. I am sure of *that*, David.”

“Jenny, I’ve got nowhere to go. I don’t have money for a motel.”

“Take back those earrings and you’ll have plenty of money.”

“But I bought them for you!”

“Is that what you believe? No, David, you bought them for *you*. Not to wear, but to fulfill your fantasy about getting back with me. I told you several times I wasn’t interested. You refused to listen. I’m telling you for the final time, and this time you’ve got to go.”

“Please, Jenny.”

Jenny glared at him. She meant it. This time there would be no reprieve. “No! Leave! Now!”

“Tonight?”

“Yes. Pack up and go. I don’t want you here another second, David. You’ve got to move on, and so do I.”

“To Charlie?” David asked.

Jenny burst into tears. “I... I... don’t know what’s happening with Charlie and me. I feel so lost. Everything’s fucked up. If I could, I’d just run away. But, where would I go? My life’s always been here.”

David saw an opening and made another try. “Run away with *me*, Jenny. We can start over. Marcus is grown. All he needs from us now is tuition. We could become young lovers again. I would be different. I’d never choose my job over you-.”

“And your son. Don’t forget *that*! You left *him*, too.”

Her accusation stung but David quickly thought of a response. “I’m sorry I left the way I did but I made it work with him. We’re okay, now.”

“That’s great. I’m glad you and your son are okay. But, I’m *not* okay, David. I feel as if I’m in a nightmare that won’t end. You’ve got to leave. If you don’t, I won’t be responsible for what might happen.”

“Did you just *threaten* me?” David asked, aghast. Jenny had always been the kindest, gentlest, most reasonable person he’d ever met.

“Take it any way you want,” she replied coldly and then hurried to her bedroom and slammed the door.

She’s coming apart, David thought. *That’s something I never thought could happen. Is it my fault? Maybe I shouldn’t have said what I did to Charlie.*

David dialed Charlie’s number. “Hi, Charlie. Sorry to call so late.”

“It’s okay. What’s up? Need more help with those contacts?”

“Uh, no. I’ve only looked at them. I haven’t called anyone yet.”

“So, what’s going on?” Charlie asked.

“Jenny just came in. She seems messed up. Did something happen between you two?”

“She just left here. We talked.”

“What about?” David asked.

“Us.”

“Is there still an *us*, Charlie?”

“I don’t know.”

“Do you want there to be?”

“I don’t know,” Charlie repeated, forlornly.

“I think you do, but you’re afraid to say.”

“I loved Jenny...”

“I think you still do,” David insisted.

“But I don’t know if she loves me.”

“She does.”

“How can you be sure, David?”

David didn’t reply right away. He wondered how honest he ought to be. “Because she’s rejected *me* every time I came on to her. She’s been emphatically clear she doesn’t want me anymore.”

“But you wanted *her*? ”

“Yeah. Even though she told me no every time I kept trying.”

Charlie sighed. “You sound as messed up as I am.”

“You’re right.”

“You wanna come over and talk about this?”

“Sure,” David replied. “She’s throwing me out, anyway. I was going to go to a motel.”

“Stay here tonight. I’ve got lots of room.”

“Thanks. But only for one night, that’s all. Jenny thinks it’s time for me to move on.”

“Okay, but what do *you* think?” Charlie asked.

“She’s probably right, but...”

“But what?”

“I’m scared, Charlie. Really scared.”

Charlie sighed again. “Oh. Yeah. Join the club, David. Join the club.”

Later, after Charlie and David had dipped into an old bottle of Scotch in an attempt to drown their sorrows, David felt like talking. “What I said about Jenny just wanting your money,” David confessed. “That was wrong. I should never have said it. Jenny’s not like that. She’s *never* been like that. She would rather be alone than use someone for her personal gain.”

“I know, David. I should have known better. I’d read her fairy tale... like... a *hundred* times.”

“What fairy tale?” David asked.

“She wrote it in high school. I saved it. When I asked her how it ended, she’d forgotten all about it. To her, it had just been a class project. To me, it was a treasure from

her. And, I think it *is* her, in a way. I don't think anyone else could have written it. There's only one Jenny."

David nodded drunkenly. "Yes. And, she loves *you*, Charlie. Not your money."

"I know that, too. What I don't know is what I should do."

"What do you mean?"

"I screwed up, David."

"What did you do?"

"I pushed her away," Charlie replied, hopelessly. "Now I don't know if I can get her back."

"You have to try," David replied, unconvincingly. He still hoped there was a chance for him. Charlie suspected as much but didn't say anything.

Chapter 22 - Fairy Tale III

After Jenny heard David leave the apartment, she went out of the bedroom to get a drink in the kitchen and found a short note.

'Jenny. Sorry for everything. Also, thanks for everything. I'm such an idiot. Take care of yourself. -David.'

Jenny immediately wondered where he'd gone and whether he would be okay. *I'd hate for anything to happen to him. He's not a bad person. He's just messed up. Like me and everyone I know right now. Well, everyone except our son.*

Jenny felt relieved that her apartment was hers again. *David is gone. Marcus is gone. He'll be back, though. David won't, I hope. Finally, I get some time alone. I can relax.*

Jenny couldn't recall the last time she'd luxuriated in a bubble bath and listened to her favorite chamber music cd. *It must have been way before Thanksgiving. Well, I'm gonna fix that right now.* She went into her bathroom to look under the sink for her bottle of lavender chamomile bubble bath liquid and then turned on the bathtub faucet and waited for hot water to flow. When she felt the temperature was right, she plugged the drain and poured bubble bath into the tub. Then she went to undress and get her fluffy terry cloth robe.

Why didn't I think of this sooner? Jenny thought as she eased herself into the hot bubbly water. It wasn't until she fully immersed herself that she realized she hadn't brought in her cd player. *Oh, well, no music, but I don't think I need it. I'm just gonna have to be careful not to fall asleep.* Although she stayed in the tub for a long while, and refreshed the hot water and bubble liquid a couple of times, Jenny remained wide awake. When she got out and put on her fluffy robe, she felt refreshed.

Now I can begin the rest of my life, she thought, smiling. *Where should I start?*

Jenny pondered for a few moments.

Oh, I think I know. I'll start by ending something I should have ended twenty years ago. She went to the kitchen to get her laptop and brought it back to her bed. Propping up her pillows, she crawled under the covers in her terry cloth robe. After opening the laptop, she

searched her email for a message from Charlie. Attached was a scan of her story he'd sent the day after he read it aloud before they made love for the first time.

Let's see what happens next, Jenny thought. Then she began to type.

The king decided not to send Jesse into exile. Instead, he had his soldiers return Jesse to his parents' farm with explicit orders never to leave there again. "But the firewood," Jesse protested.

"Someone else will have to collect it," one of the soldiers replied before they departed. "You're to remain here. King's orders. Don't do anything to make us come back for you." Jesse resigned himself to his fate.

Meanwhile, Anne rode away from the castle but had no idea where to start looking for Jesse. *If he's been taken on a ship, I'll never find him,* she thought. *I'm never going back. I'd rather live in the woods and scrounge for nuts and berries than ever see my father again.*

Anne rode back to the spot where she and Jesse had met so often. She needed a quiet place to think. As soon as she arrived, she saw the fairy godmother sitting on a rock dangling her naked feet in the cool creek water. "Um, hello, again," Anne said.

"Hello, child. Your boyfriend's not here."

"I know. My father had him sent away on a ship."

"Oh, no. Your father sent him back to his parents' farm."

"He did?" Anne asked. The old woman nodded. "Where is it?"

"I have no idea."

"You're not much of a fairy godmother, are you?"

The fairy godmother smiled. "You've said that before, child. I do what I can to help. But I can't do *everything*."

"So I guess I'll have to search every farm until I find him"

"I guess you will."

"Okay, Snowflake. Let's get started."

"Bye, child." the fairy godmother called cheerily. "And good luck!" Anne didn't reply. She knew it would take more than luck to find Jesse.

Back at the castle, the guards reported that the princess had disappeared with her horse. The king knew immediately what she was doing. "She's looking for that boy. If I know my daughter, she won't quit until she finds him. Go bring him back to the dungeon." The soldiers left.

Back at the farm, the soldiers told Jesse the king had summoned him again and he went with them reluctantly. As he rode behind one of the soldiers on his huge horse, Jesse recalled riding behind Anne on Snowflake. *I'll probably never see her again,* he thought. *I don't want to go on living. When we reach the river, I'm going to jump off the horse in the middle of the bridge and drown myself.*

Jesse listened for the sound of rushing water and prepared himself. Then, as they were crossing the bridge, he slipped off the horse and jumped over the side before the soldiers

could stop him. As he fell, he whispered Anne's name over and over. Hitting the river, Jesse went below the surface and didn't want to come up. Surrendering to the swift current, he sped downstream. However, he was a good swimmer and his instincts kicked in. There was no way the soldiers could catch him.

Jesse grabbed onto a large rock and pulled himself out of the water. He stepped from rock to rock until he reached the shore soaking wet, but free of the soldiers. He still felt like dying, though. *Why go on living? There's no point. I've lost Anne.*

Just then, miles away, Anne rode Snowflake onto Jesse's parents' farm. "The soldiers just took him," Jesse's mother told her. Anne felt overjoyed. She knew the road they would take back to the castle. Snowflake was fast enough to catch them easily. Anne ordered Snowflake to run like the wind. He did.

Back on the shore of the river, Jesse started walking back toward the bridge where he'd jumped from the soldier's horse. He kept out of sight in case the soldiers were still there but thought they had likely left after he hit the water because they assumed he'd drowned. Just as Jesse approached the bridge, he saw a princess riding white horse and called out. Anne saw him right away. "Jesse?" she cried.

"It's me!" he replied.

Anne leaped off Snowflake and ran to meet Jesse after he climbed up from the river bank to the bridge. She went to hug him. "I'm all wet," he said.

"I don't care."

They hugged long enough for Anne to get almost as wet as Jesse was. Snowflake waited patiently. The fairy godmother watched from behind a tree. She smiled. *I do what I can*, she thought, and then vanished in a puff of smoke Jesse and Anne never saw. They only saw each other.

Anne led Jesse back to Snowflake. "Mount up, Jesse," she told him. "We're running away."

"But where can we go?"

"We're leaving this kingdom."

"No," Jesse said. "I can't let you give up your kingdom for me. We'll go back to the castle and throw ourselves on the mercy of your father, the King."

"I don't know what he will do."

"I don't care as long as we're together," Jesse replied.

"But he might punish us."

"And he might not. Maybe he'll let us marry after he sees how we've found each other again, despite all he did to separate us."

Anne wanted to believe Jesse but knew her father well. "I don't know, Jesse."

"I don't, either. But I have hope."

"Where did you get it?"

"From you, my love," Jesse replied. "From you."

"From *me*? What did I do?"

"You didn't give up on me. You defied your father and ran away."

“What *else* could I have done?” Anne replied. “I love you.”

“And I love you, too. That will convince the King, I’m sure of it.”

Jenny stopped writing and looked at the bedside clock. It was already past two am. *Where did all that come from?* she wondered. *Have I kept it in all these years?* She had no idea. While it was all still fresh, she read over what she’d written and made a few corrections. *Now what?* she asked herself. *What does the King do? Do Anne and Jesse get to live happily ever after?* She still didn’t know and had a nagging suspicion that whatever happened to Anne and Jesse would depend on what happened between her and Charlie. She decided to close the laptop and go to sleep. *I’ve written all I can for now,* she thought. *I have no idea what happens next- to Anne and Jesse as well as me and Charlie. Maybe I should just sleep on it.*

Chapter 23 - The Fairy Tale IV

After she awoke from a deep, refreshing, dreamless sleep, Jenny reread what she had written in the middle of the night. *I like it,* she thought. *But, the story’s still not finished. There’s no happily ever after, and I don’t know what to do next.*

After she closed the laptop and began her day, the newly written part of the story remained in the back of her mind. As she worked at the bookshop, there weren’t many customers and she had time to focus on Charlie’s books. One or two sold every day. Jenny kept careful records of the sales in a spreadsheet. She decided it might be a good idea to update Charlie on the payments and ask how she should transfer the income to him. They hadn’t yet set that up.

Jenny decided to email Charlie. She was afraid calling might make him feel uncomfortable. *Maybe he’s not ready to hear my voice,* she told herself. *I should keep this businesslike and do everything in writing.*

‘Charlie,

‘This is my first report on income from the sale of your books. As you can see from the attached spreadsheet, sales are going well. The money’s in my bank account and I’d like to transfer it to you. Could you give me an account number to use?’

Jenny read over her email and thought it seemed too detached. Would he think she was deliberately being formal and distant? Should she say something personal?

‘Oh, by the way. I’ve written more of the fairy tale. After all the holiday craziness, I finally had time to unwind and more of the story came to me last night. I don’t know where it’s been all these years, but I kind of like it. I’ve attached the file so you can read it.’

Jenny wrote the final sentence without thinking about it beforehand. It just came out. When she reread her email, she wondered if she should change that sentence or remove it. *Does Charlie even care about my story now? Does he care about me? Maybe we're just doing business but no longer doing anything else.* Jenny still hoped there was a spark between them. She left the email as she'd written it and attached the two files. Then she hit send.

Charlie didn't feel he could simply *tell* Jenny he was sorry and ask her to forgive him. He assumed she would ask what she should forgive him *for*. Then he'd have to tell her what David had told him, and (worse) that he'd *believed* what David said. *How could Jenny ever trust me or love me if she knew I doubted her sincerity?* he asked himself.

He'd never had problems like this when he and Emily were together. Their feelings didn't come much into play. *Maybe I shouldn't have let her go*, Charlie thought. *Maybe that's the only kind of relationship with a woman that works for me.* One where there's a safe emotional distance, as he had with his mother after he left Springfield.

Charlie switched his train of thought. *But, if that's true, why did Jenny's fairy tale affect me so much? And, more to the point, why did I fall in love with Jenny in high school? I didn't fall in love with anyone else. I didn't even notice the other girls, except to see how inferior they were to Jenny.*

Back in high school, he'd never had the nerve to speak to Jenny and moved on after they graduated. He even forgot he'd hidden her fairy tale in the back of his yearbook. When he found her working in Real Books, his life suddenly changed. *Why did that happen?* Charlie asked himself. Why had his long buried feelings for Jenny erupted fresh and new after twenty years of dormancy?

Why? Why? Why?

Charlie didn't know. What was worse, he worried that finding out would reveal something he'd hidden from himself for years. It could be that he didn't deserve happily ever after. Maybe that's why he'd treasured Jenny's story so much. He'd wanted true love but felt he couldn't have it because nerdy guys like him can never get amazing girls like Jenny.

As soon as that thought entered his mind, Charlie knew it was wrong. Jenny had fallen in love with him. Not back in high school, when she hadn't known he even existed, but *now*, at this time in his life. And, he had pushed her away.

Charlie realized that he'd believed David's insinuation about Jenny only being interested in his wealth not because he had doubts about her true feelings, but his own. He'd always believed he was inferior. Now, maybe it was too late to change what he had done.

He thought back to his childhood. He'd always felt like an outsider but got so used to feeling that way that he never thought about it. That had been just the way things were. A sort of nerdy, introverted, and shy guy who had few friends, Charlie had been smarter than the other kids but they didn't tease or bully him; they just left him alone. He also came from one of the biggest and oldest houses in Springfield and perhaps his family's history had put the

other kids off. Whatever the reason, Charlie had felt awkward around his schoolmates even though he did well in school and every teacher he had praised his schoolwork.

When Charlie reached adolescence, and begun to notice there was more to growing up than merely attending school, he felt even *more* left out. He occasionally overheard boys talking about girls and girls talking about boys. However, no one had ever talked about *him*. Nor did anyone talk *to* him very much. Part of the time, Charlie hoped someone- *anyone* - would notice him. Other times, however, he was glad no one did and he could remain in the background. That's where he felt he belonged and where he stayed. He felt safe there, until he saw Jenny for the first time.

Charlie recalled the 9th grade. That was when he first saw Jenny in one of his classes but couldn't recall which one it was. It didn't matter, anyway. After Charlie had noticed Jenny, he'd watched for her to arrive in class and hoped she would speak whenever the teacher asked students to respond to the lessons. Jenny often spoke and her sweet, clear voice enchanted him. She seemed interested in the subject matter and pleased when she got an answer right. Charlie liked that she seemed eager to learn. Many of the other kids seemed uninterested in learning. Charlie suspected they only showed up at school because of other things that went on there. Classes were a nuisance. Their adolescent social lives had been much more important.

Charlie hadn't had a social life. All he had was an intellectual life. He began to wonder if Jenny was the same way. She hadn't been a loner as he had been, however. He recalled seeing her chatting with other girls in the lunchroom. When he sat close enough to eavesdrop on the girls' banter, he never heard Jenny criticize or make fun of anyone. The others she sat with never seemed to *stop* criticizing, and their comments could be brutal.

Jenny sometimes countered with a kind word about someone the girls were making fun of. When they criticized Allison Haynes for wearing too much makeup, Jenny reminded them how good Allison was at basketball. When they rolled their eyes as chubby Gloria Watson passed, Jenny greeted the girl with a cheerful hello.

Charlie had known for years he wasn't like other kids and gotten used to feeling different. Jenny had seemed different too, and he began to wonder if the fact that they were both different meant there was a way they could be different *together*. However, he had never moved beyond wondering and never talked to Jenny even though they were occasionally in the same classes.

Then Charlie found Jenny's fairy tale on the printer in the computer lab. He thought returning the story would give him his first opportunity to talk to her and began rehearsing what he would say. "Um, you left this in the computer lab. I thought you might have forgotten it. I hope you don't mind that I read it. It's very good. Do you know how the story ends?" Charlie had hoped his interest would spark a conversation. Maybe she would thank him for returning the story and for his praise and promise to talk to him again when she'd figured out the ending. He excitedly anticipated that follow-up conversation. He might even have tried to initiate another conversation, just to be able to chat with her.

However, Charlie had never returned Jenny's story. Instead, he waited and hoped she'd come back looking for it so he could talk to her about it. Unfortunately, she never did.

He hadn't known that Jenny thought she'd lost the story and printed another copy the next time she came into the computer lab when Charlie hadn't been around.

When Charlie read the newly written part of the story, he realized what he'd hoped would happen twenty years earlier was happening now. Back in high school, he'd hoped they could discuss the ending. Now, although it was still unfinished, Jenny had shared more with him. It was his chance to follow up. *We don't have to talk about ourselves*, Charlie thought. *We can just talk about her fairy tale.*

'I love it,' Charlie emailed Jenny. 'Do you have any idea what happens next? Do Anne and Jesse live happily ever after?'

'I still haven't figured that out yet. Maybe they do, and maybe they don't. It's just a fairy tale, and everybody knows they aren't real. Which means happily ever after isn't real, doesn't it?'

'I don't agree, Jenny. I think happily ever after is not something that only appears in fairy tales. I think it's real.'

'I think it's great that you feel that way but I don't know if I agree.'

'Maybe we could talk about it,' Charlie suggested.

'Yeah. That might be good. Maybe I could get an idea of how the rest of the story goes.' And, maybe they could figure out what was going to happen with *their* story which was also stuck.

Chapter 24 - Reality

Charlie invited Jenny out to dinner and she accepted. They had a lot to talk about and both felt it might be safer to talk in public where both would have to control their feelings in case things became heated or not to embarrass themselves. After they ordered their food, Charlie looked around to see if any people sitting at nearby tables seemed to be showing interest in them. He wasn't being paranoid, just cautious. Satisfied that everyone in the restaurant was focusing on his or her own table, Charlie decided to start the conversation.

"So, Jenny... the story. I like what you've added. Have you thought of an ending?"

Jenny liked that he'd started out with something impersonal. She shook her head. "Not yet, Charlie. Any ideas?"

"Oh, I couldn't guess. It's really *your* story."

"Yeah, it is, isn't it? I guess I'm stuck with it. And, I haven't got a clue about the ending."

"Well, I have a suggestion. But, it's not about the story. It's about us."

Charlie's statement surprised Jenny. Their chat was getting personal sooner than she'd expected. She took a chance and asked the question that had been at the back of her mind since the last time they talked. "Is there still an *us*, Charlie? I wasn't sure."

"There is for *me*, Jenny. What about you?"

"I don't know."

Charlie was shocked. "What happened?"

“You tell me. You’re the one who agreed to slow things down. At first, I was hoping you wouldn’t agree but now I think it was a good idea.”

“You do? Why?”

Jenny frowned. “Because I’m feeling overwhelmed.”

“By me?”

“Not only you. Everything.”

“What do you mean, Jenny?”

“It started with David at Thanksgiving. When he told me he’d lost his job, apartment, and girlfriend, my heart went out to him. But, then he asked me to let him stay. If I hadn’t agreed, I wouldn’t have been able to work on your books. You don’t know how close I came to telling you I couldn’t take the job! I felt it would be impossible. But he solved my immediate problem and I jumped at the chance to work with your library.” Jenny paused and sighed. Charlie sensed she had more to say and waited for her to go on.

“But then David started trying to get me back. He kept at it and I didn’t know what to do. I told him it was over and I wasn’t interested but he wouldn’t listen. I needed him for the store because I wanted to work on your books and be with you, but if I hadn’t needed him, I would have thrown him out. It was crazy.” Jenny paused again and Charlie waited again.

“Then, you and I started getting closer. But, I didn’t know how serious your relationship was with Emily. At the same time, I was worried about saving my bookshop. It had been my parents dream and I was afraid I would fail them if it went under, which, until you came along, was a real possibility.” Jenny paused as if she needed to gather her thoughts.

“So, Charlie, it was all too much and I’m still feeling overwhelmed. All I feel sure of is that I can keep my bookstore open and your books will continue selling. Everything else- everything *personal*- well, I’m not sure about any of that. I’m sorry, Charlie.”

“Why didn’t you talk about this sooner?”

“I guess I didn’t acknowledge what I was feeling. Everything was happening at once and I had to struggle to keep up. Now that the holidays are over and things have quieted down, it’s all caught up to me.”

“Jenny, I’m sorry.”

“No, Charlie. I’m the one who should apologize. That was quite a tirade I let loose. It was nice of you to sit through it.”

“I’m glad you were honest with me, and I’m *still* sorry.”

“What for?” Jenny asked.

“Believing your fairy tale could become real for us. It was stupid and naïve.”

Jenny sighed. “You weren’t the *only* one who believed that. For a while, I believed it, too.”

“So what happens now?”

“I wish I knew.”

Charlie smiled. Maybe he should take a risk. “I guess you wouldn’t consider coming back to my place?”

Surprised but pleased, Jenny smiled at him. “Before my tirade, that was *exactly* what I’d considered doing. Now, I’m surprised you’re even asking.”

“I still want to be with you, Jenny. It doesn’t have to be in a fairy-tale way. Just in a regular way. The way life actually is without hoping for happily ever after.”

“Just happy right now?” Jenny suggested.

Charlie nodded. “Yeah. I like that. Being with you makes me happy.”

“Okay. But how about I show you *my* place, instead?”

“I’d love that!”

David’s Christmas tree was gone. Jenny had taken it down right after he left. The diamond earrings were gone, too. She assumed he’d taken them when he left and hoped he would return them and get back his money. What else happened to David was of no concern to her. *I’ll hear from him, eventually, she thought. Or, if I don’t, I might call in a few months to see how things are going. But, I don’t want to see him again anytime soon. I’ll get Marcus at school from now on. It’s kind of a pleasant drive to and from the campus.*

“My bedroom,” Jenny said when she opened the door and switched on the light. Charlie saw her double bed with the plain wooden headboard, the nightstand with a clock radio and several books in a pile, and a thick bedcover that looked toasty warm. He imagined Jenny snuggled in bed on cold winter nights reading or listening to music, or doing both, and enjoying the luxury of just *being*.

Charlie hadn’t had that luxury in the years he’d owned his company. The work had been frantic. It went on day and night, and weekends, too. He had never spent time with Emily without a work problem lurking in the back of his mind. He’d never given himself fully to her because he couldn’t. His company had claimed every aspect of his life.

However, all that was done now and he was in the bedroom of the woman he’d thought he’d fallen in love with, and felt pretty sure he was *still* in love with. He also felt she was still in love with him, although neither seemed to know what being in love meant, exactly. *Maybe this is how it is for most couples, Charlie thought. Well, I’m glad we’re together. That means there’s hope.*

“I like your bedroom,” Charlie said. “It’s you.”

Jenny grinned. “It’s a *mess*. I wasn’t expecting company.”

Charlie looked around. If, by ‘mess’, Jenny meant the nightgown thrown over the chair, the bathrobe hung on the door, or the partially-open bi-fold door that revealed her clothes hanging in the closet along with small piles of books on the floor, Charlie liked what he saw. *Jenny loves books*, he thought. *She’s lived with them her whole life*. Books were full of stories.

Charlie realized he’d hoped (back when he was in high school) that he could be a character in a story- the one Jenny had written. He’d wanted to be Jesse. Then, when he met Jenny in the bookstore before Thanksgiving, he made the mistake of thinking he had found the princess from that unfinished fairy tale.

However, Jenny was no princess. She was just a Book Lady. Charlie fell in love with her anyway, but didn't realize it right away. He mistakenly thought he'd fallen in love with his fairy-tale princess when actually he'd fallen in love with a complicated, flawed, regular human being, someone just like he was.

Now they were together in her bedroom wondering what they were going to do next.

Jenny turned to Charlie and smiled. "So, Charlie, what's new and interesting in *your* life?"

"Well, I met this woman."

Jenny grinned. "Ooh, tell me *more!*"

"It's gonna sound like a cheesy Hallmark Channel story, but I knew her back in high school, sort of."

Jenny frowned. "Sort of? What does *that* mean?"

"I knew of her, but she didn't know anything about me."

"I'm sorry. That was her loss."

"Was it?" Charlie replied. "I'm not so sure."

"Okay, forget I said that. So you met her again after *how long?*"

"Twenty years."

"That's a long time, Charlie. A lot can happen in twenty years."

"A lot *did* happen."

"Oh, what did you do?"

"After graduation, I went to college, of course. And then I went into business."

"Did you! How nice. How did it go?" Jenny asked.

"Very well. I started my own company and ran it as CEO."

"*You're* a CEO?"

Charlie shook his head. "Not anymore. I sold it."

"So what are you doing *now?*"

"Pretty much nothing. Except... well, I fell in love."

Jenny nodded. "Yeah, you mentioned that. Who's the lucky lady?"

"Oh, she's awesome. I've never met anyone like her."

Jenny looked skeptical. "Guys say that all the time."

"I mean it, Jenny."

"Tell me about her."

"Well, she's very beautiful. She's also smart, warm, charming, clever, funny, and, I almost forgot, she owns a bookstore. Is that cool or what?"

His last question surprised Jenny. "You *like* bookstores?" she asked.

"Well, I didn't think much about them until now. But I like her bookstore, a *lot*."

"Why?"

Charlie smiled. "Because I like *her*, of course."

"So- I have to ask this- does she like *you*?"

"She *loves* me."

“You seem pretty sure,” Jenny commented.

“I’m absolutely certain.”

“I’m happy for you, Charlie. She’s a lucky woman.”

“No, Jenny. *I’m* the lucky one.”

Jenny took two steps closer to Charlie and put her head on his shoulder. “Oh, Charlie, I’m so sorry about everything,” she said.

“What do you mean?”

“Well, I had no idea you existed in high school. Then I accidentally left that story and you found it. Then you read it and got ideas from it and now I feel like I messed up your whole life.”

“Jenny, what happened in the past hasn’t messed up my life. But you know what *would* mess it up?”

“No, what?”

“What’s gonna happen in the future.”

“Yeah. The *future*. That future we didn’t even think about twenty years ago when we were in high school and it seemed as if we would always be young and we would never stop dreaming.”

“*Life* happened, Jenny. You lost your mother and later your father and then met David and married him and had Marcus and then got divorced.”

Jenny interrupted him. “And *you* went to college and started a hotshot company. Then you made lots of money because you’re so smart. Then you met Emily, sold your company and came back home in time to be with your mom until she died.” Jenny stopped to get her breath and then continued her summation. “Afterward, you had to get rid of her library, and sell her house. But, then you changed your mind and decided *not* to sell it. Finally, Emily left and now you’re in that big house all alone.” *Whew!* Jenny thought. *A lot’s happened in Charlie’s life. Maybe it all overwhelmed him the way what happened in my life has overwhelmed me.*

“You left something out,” Charlie said.

“What?”

“Meeting *you* again at the bookstore after 20 years. And then falling in love with you.”

“Oh, yeah,” Jenny replied. “That happened too, didn’t it?” Jenny paused and looked into Charlie’s eyes. She wasn’t sure what she would see there, but hoped it would be a reflection of what she was feeling. “Are you happy it did, Charlie?”

He nodded. “Yes I am. Very much so. Are you?”

Jenny sighed. “Yeah, I am. But I still don’t know what to do about it.”

“Why do we have to do *anything*? Why can’t we just be in love?”

“Like in my fairy tale? Just Anne and Jesse meeting at the creek as if they’re the only two people in the whole world?”

Charlie nodded. “Yeah. Just like that!”

“I *like* that idea.”

“You wanna start now?”

“Yeah. What did you have in mind?”

Charlie smiled. Jenny knew what he was thinking. “Let’s do what Anne and Jesse *didn’t* do in the fairy tale.”

“You mean-?” Jenny asked. He nodded. “Oh, Charlie!”

The third time Jenny and Charlie made love was unlike the other two. Maybe it was because they were in Jenny’s bed. Charlie felt free of his family, free of the past, free of Springfield, even though that was where they still were. Her bedroom felt more like home than his house did.

Their entire world became just the two of them. He was Charlie, a lucky guy in love with a wonderful girl. That was all he’d wanted in high school, and it was more than enough for him now. For Jenny, too.

Chapter 25 - Normalcy

It was a frigid late January afternoon and Jenny was alone inside Real Books. Not a single customer had dropped in since she opened but she wasn’t worried. She was busy packing several of Charlie’s books to ship to an antiquarian book dealer who’d made a generous offer. Other offers were pending. At any moment, she could receive confirmation emails from other buyers for one or more of Charlie’s books. Jenny was happy.

The little bell on the front door jingled. Jenny looked up and saw a man wearing a black puffy winter jacket, jeans, and sneakers. He closed the door and looked around the store. She waited patiently. The man stood there and Jenny thought he might need help. “Looking for anything special?” she asked.

He turned to look at her. “Yes, I am. I understand there’s a Book Lady who works here who’s *very* special.” Jenny grinned. *Charlie’s playing a little game*, she thought.

“Well, *I’m* a Book Lady. Did you need help finding something? We have lots of great books.”

“I’m not much of a reader anymore. I used to be, when I was a kid. We had a wonderful library at home- you wouldn’t have believed it!”

“Sounds great. Why did you stop reading?”

“I grew up, moved away, and got busy,” Charlie replied. “You know how it is, real life took over. No time for books.”

“There’s *always* time for books, sir.”

“You *would* say that. You’re a book lady.”

“I’m not just *a* book lady. I’m *the* Book Lady, the one you’re looking for.”

Charlie walked toward the counter. “Indeed you are,” he said, softly. “You’re *my* book lady. Do you mind if I hang out here on this cold winter afternoon?”

“Isn’t your house warm?” she joked.

“Yeah, it’s warm there, but there’s a problem.”

“What’s that?” Jenny asked.

“You’re *here*.”

Jenny thought she would continue teasing him. It was fun. “So you didn’t just come in to get warm?” Charlie shook his head. “But you don’t want to get any books, either?” He shook his head, again. “So what *do* you want to do?”

“Like I said, just hang out.”

“I guess that would be okay.”

“Just *okay*?”

“Don’t push it, Charlie,” Jenny said. He grinned.

“So, ya busy?”

“No customers today but I have some shipments to prepare.”

“Awesome.”

“Yes it is.” Charlie stood and watched as Jenny finished packing the books and then sealed the boxes. “Um, since you’re here, why not look around?” Jenny said. “You’ve got lots of free time now, why not start reading again?”

“I guess that might be fun, but there’s so much stuff here, I wouldn’t know where to start.”

“Well, what did you like reading when you were a kid?”

“Old stuff. Jules Verne, HG Wells.”

“That’s science fiction.”

“You got anything like that?”

“As a matter of fact, I have a whole section.”

“Would you have time to show me where it is or should I just wander around until I find it on my own?”

Jenny grinned. “No, I can help you. That’s what book ladys do.”

Charlie smirked. “That’s not *all* book ladys do, from what I’ve heard.”

“What are you suggesting?” Charlie rolled his eyes and didn’t answer. Jenny came out from behind the counter and walked toward the shelves. Charlie followed, happy she was closer now, hoping he could touch her, maybe even give her a quick kiss. She remained businesslike, however. “I’d recommend you start with the classics- space exploration, robots, galactic civilizations, time travel. That sort of stuff. Anything sound good?”

“Well, I used to work with computers. Got any books about computers?”

Jenny nodded. “I think I have a copy of a good one that you’ll like. Yeah, here it is.” She handed him *Colossus*.

“Is it good?” Charlie asked.

“I’ll let you decide. You can sit over there, start reading, and see what you think. You don’t have to buy it unless you like it.”

“Wow, that’s very nice of you. Do you treat all your customers this way?”

Jenny batted her eyes. “Only the *special* ones,” she lied. Charlie didn’t get the fib but didn’t care. He was with Jenny and that was all that mattered to him.

Jenny showed up at Charlie's house in the oldest and rattiest clothes she could find in her closet. The pants were tattered and the oversize man's shirt stained but she had no idea with what and didn't care. All she needed was covering so she wouldn't get paint on herself. That was why Charlie had invited her on the one day a week Real Books was closed- to help him paint a couple of rooms. He'd done the spackling, patching, and sanding already. Now it was time to put on some paint. Jenny was eager to help.

She'd helped Charlie choose the colors but had tried not to make it seem as if she was influencing his choices. She didn't want him to think she was considering moving in anytime soon. "That's a nice neutral color," she commented. "But not *too* neutral. If you plan to redecorate, you can match stuff to it easily." Charlie had chosen it because he was partial to blue. Any blue. Jenny had nudged him until he chose just the right shade.

It didn't go well from the beginning. "Charlie, where are the drop cloths you bought?"

"You mean those round plastic things?" Jenny nodded. "I left them in the bag."

"They're supposed to be on the *floor*. Do you want to get paint all over everything? Go get them."

Charlie left the room and came back with the hardware store bags. Jenny reached in and found the drop cloths. She ripped open the bag and started unfurling the plastic. It wasn't easy. Charlie watched as if he had never seen anything so fascinating. When Jenny had unfurled a large section, she looked at Charlie. He looked quizzically at her. "Take the edge and pull," she ordered. "We need to open it all the way."

"There's *more*?" Charlie asked, astonished.

"It's big enough to cover the entire room."

"No way! This I gotta see."

The plastic drop cloth was huge and it was hard to unpeel the layers. When they'd finally covered the entire floor, Charlie looked down in awe. "What do you do with it when we're done?" he asked.

"Throw it in the trash."

"That seems like such a waste."

"Well, keep it for a souvenir if you want. Let's do the other room." They repeated the drop cloth procedure in the adjacent room. "Now, where's that ceiling paint?" Jenny asked. Charlie went and got the paint. "What about the stirrers?"

"The *what*, now?"

"The wooden or plastic paddles they should have given you with the paint."

"Oh, I guess they're in the bag." Charlie replied. They were.

"Okay. You need a screwdriver to open the can. Do you have one?"

"Yeah. Let me find my toolbox." Charlie left the room. It took him so long that Jenny thought he forgot she was there. Finally, he came back with a large Phillips screwdriver. Jenny put her face in her hands. "Where's that toolbox?" she asked.

"Down in the basement."

"Show me."

A few minutes later, Jenny had the paint can open. She'd already attached the rollers to the poles so they could do the ceilings. She showed Charlie how to manipulate his pole so he wouldn't drip paint all over himself. Then they started painting.

Jenny's room went well. Her father had taught her how to paint when she was young and she had repainted the bookstore and her apartment a couple of times. Apparently, Charlie had never used a roller on a pole before. "Let me do it," she said after she finished her ceiling and walked into the adjacent room. "Otherwise we'll be doing this for the rest of our lives."

"I'm better doing walls," Charlie muttered before she pushed him out of the way and started painting. Ten minutes later, she was finished.

"Okay, walls," Jenny said.

As it turned out, the only thing Charlie was good at was making a mess. A very big one. Luckily, what got messed up wasn't the floor, it was him. When Jenny left Charlie alone to work on the walls he hadn't had a speck of paint on him. After she finished her walls, she came back to see if Charlie needed help. Only about half the room was painted and Charlie looked as if he had somehow put more paint on himself than he had onto the walls.

"Charlie! What the hell are you doing?"

"Painting."

"Painting *what*?"

"The walls, of course," Charlie replied.

"Then why do you have more paint on yourself than on the walls?"

"Jenny, you exaggerate."

"Yeah, maybe a little. But you're a mess."

Charlie pouted. "But you still love me, *right*?"

"I don't know, Charlie. If you can't paint, what *else* can't you do?"

He smirked. "Well, you know what I *can* do, and do very well."

Jenny grinned. "Shut up." She grabbed Charlie's roller and loaded it with paint. "Step back and watch a master at work," she said. She applied the paint in a large W pattern that she then filled in. Charlie watched in awe as huge swaths of the walls seemed to change from the old, dull hue to the new vibrant color almost magically.

"Wow, you're good at that," Charlie said.

"I know."

When Jenny finished, she sealed the cans and rinsed the rollers. "Now you gotta clean yourself up," Jenny said. "You're a mess. Strip and get into the shower. You have paint just about everywhere."

"Is it in my hair?" Charlie asked. Jenny nodded. "Is it on my face?"

"Yup. A lot of it."

"I'll never get it all off if you don't help."

"Why do you need me?"

"I can't see the paint, Jenny. You'll have to wash it off." At that moment, Jenny wished they had used old-fashioned oil-based paint instead of latex paint. She would have enjoyed vigorously scrubbing Charlie's hair and skin with smelly paint thinner. *Would serve*

him right if I took off a layer of skin, she thought. And it might be fun to make him squeal. Jenny grinned at her evil thought.

“So?” Charlie asked.

“So, what?”

“Shower?”

“You’re sure you need me? You’re a big boy. You’ve washed your face before.”

“But I’ll never get all the paint off. Please, Jenny.”

She relented. “Okay. I could use a shower, too.”

“And you’ll help me remove the paint?”

“I’ll try. But there’s a lot of it.”

“We’ve got lots of time.”

It took them awhile. Charlie found other things to do in the shower and Jenny let him. When they finished doing the other things, she got as much of the paint off him as she could. Then they stepped out and towed each other off. By the time they were done, they had completely forgotten they had left the painting unfinished. They hadn’t edged around the top of the walls. When Jenny thought about it later, she knew she would have to finish the job. There was no way she was letting Charlie anywhere near paint ever again.

Jenny stayed over. They chatted in bed later.

“That book, *Colossus*,” Charlie said. “I looked it up. It’s an old film, too.”

“I’ve never seen it.”

“And, there’s two sequels to the novel.”

“I didn’t know that, either.”

“Can you get me copies?” Charlie asked.

“Shouldn’t be a problem. You liked it, huh?”

“It scared the crap out of me.”

“It did?” Jenny asked.

“Haven’t you read it?”

“Never got around to it. Science fiction wasn’t my thing. But, I remembered David liking it.”

“Speaking of David, he texted me.”

“How’s he doing?”

“He hasn’t been in touch?” Charlie asked. Jenny shook her head. “One of the contacts I gave him hired him during the interview.”

“That’s great!”

“Yeah. He had to move out west, but they took care of everything. He’s living in Denver, now.”

“I hope he’s happy. Thanks for helping him, Charlie.”

“Well, he helped me.”

“He did? How?”

“He made me see how much I was in love with you.”

“David did that?” Jenny asked, aghast. Charlie nodded. “Wow!”

“Surprised?”

“Yeah. I thought he was jealous.”

“Oh, he was. But, you’d made it clear there was no chance you would ever be interested in him again. He didn’t give me any details, though. Said it was private.”

“He blew a lot of his severance money on diamond earrings and gave them to me on Christmas morning. I was shocked. And, pissed off. I would have thrown him out right then if our son hadn’t been there and it hadn’t been Christmas.”

Charlie nodded but didn’t say anything. He made a mental note never to buy diamonds for Jenny. He didn’t want to get thrown out.

Marcus decided he wasn’t going home for Spring break. Jenny felt disappointed but felt happy he’d settled into his new life as a resident college student. *I knew when he went away in the fall that he wasn’t a little boy living with mommy anymore. Now, he’s a big boy and no matter where he lives, I’m still his mommy.*

“If you miss him, why not go visit him on campus?” Charlie suggested. “You could stay overnight at a motel. You could use a break, anyway.”

“But what about my store?” Jenny asked.

“Close it for a couple of days. I’m sure it’ll be okay.”

“Would you stop by and check on it for me?”

“Sure. I’d be happy to.”

A week later, Jenny and Marcus were chatting in his dorm room.

“So, Marcus, are you in touch with your father?”

“Yeah, we text all the time. He’s doing great. I might go out there this summer if I don’t get the job here in town.”

“You’re getting a job?” Jenny said. “You don’t have to. Your tuition’s covered. You shouldn’t have to work.”

“I don’t *have* to work, Mom. But, I want to.”

“Where is it?” Jenny asked.

“You’re not gonna believe this, but it’s at a bookstore.”

“That’s awesome, I think.”

“You *think*? I thought you’d be happy.”

“I am, but bookstores don’t make much money so I’m guessing you won’t be paid very well. And the work can be hard.”

“It *can* be, but it’s also fun. And you get to meet the most interesting people.” Jenny nodded and thought of the first time she and David spoke at Real Books. “Isn’t that how you met dad?” Marcus asked as if he’d read her thought.

“Uh, yeah, it was. He struck up a conversation about an obscure volume he was looking for. To this day, I’m not sure if he was *really* looking for that book or he was hitting

on me.” Marcus grimaced as he imagined his father hitting on his mother. *I’m glad I wasn’t there to see that. Eew!*

Just then, there was a knock on the door. Jenny assumed it was one of Marcus’s roommates. “Come in,” he called. The door opened and a striking young woman walked in. *I didn’t know both sexes shared the same cluster of rooms*, Jenny thought. *But I guess it’s okay.* The young woman went to Marcus and kissed him. Jenny’s eyes widened. Then the woman approached Jenny with her hand outstretched and a warm smile on her face.

“You must be Marcus’s mom,” she said. “I’m Nancy. He’s told me *so* much about you.”

Jenny took Nancy’s hand and tried not to frown. “He hasn’t told me *anything* about you.”

Nancy looked at Marcus. “Yeah, I know.”

“So, how long-?”

“We met last fall,” Nancy replied. “Playing basketball.”

“Marcus never mentioned you at Christmas. Does your father know?” Marcus shook his head. “Where were you when I drove Marcus back here in January?”

Nancy blushed. “I, um, was right here waiting for him. We had some catching up to do.”

Jenny grinned embarrassedly. “*No wonder* he didn’t want me to come up to his room.”

Marcus shrugged. He knew his mother wasn’t angry with him.

“So, Nancy, where are you from?”

“Philly. I grew up there. The rest of my family’s all there. I’m the first one to go away to college.”

“How nice for you,” Jenny said. She meant it. She liked Nancy immediately and was happy for her son. *I’m glad Charlie told me to take this trip*, she thought. *I’ll give him extra special thanks when I get back.*

Chapter 26 - Complications

Jenny persuaded Charlie to consider hiring professionals to finish the rest of the work at his house. His mother had taken care of the big repairs such as roofing, heating, bathroom, and kitchen upgrades, but she had neglected many smaller jobs. There was more painting and some carpentry. (Jenny dreaded thinking about what could happen if Charlie worked with power tools. He could injure himself for life.) There was also plumbing work he thought was necessary.

Charlie was good at assessing potential contractors and evaluating what they could bring to the projects he wanted done. He revived his CEO skills as he interviewed workers, discussed costs and timelines, and evaluated proposals. Jenny liked seeing him enjoying his project manager role. She also liked that he was unlikely to lose any fingers or toes as long as he stayed away from power tools. He did.

Jenny gave up her apartment and moved in with Charlie when the work was almost finished. The couple spent most days apart. Charlie puttered around his house as the contractors wrapped up their projects. Jenny continued running Real Books. In the nighttime, however, they were inseparable.

Marcus didn't come back for Spring Break and Jenny knew why. It wasn't just because he'd gotten that bookstore job. It was because of Nancy. Jenny was happy for her son. She was also happy in her new life with Charlie. It occurred to both of them simultaneously that they ought to make their new arrangement permanent.

"You know, I never thought I'd-." Jenny began one Sunday when they were eating dinner in the redecorated dining room.

"You know, I never thought I'd want to-," Charlie said at the same time. They looked at each other and laughed.

"But *now* I do!" both exclaimed.

Charlie got up and left the room. Jenny wondered what he was up to. He came back with some papers. "What do you have there?" she asked.

"Your story. Both parts."

"Oh, are you gonna read to me again? That was *so* romantic the last time. It'll be even more romantic now, I think."

"No, I'm not, Jenny."

Puzzled, she looked at him. "Then, what...?"

"We're gonna finish it together."

"Oh?"

"Yeah. We're gonna figure out the ending."

Jenny thought she knew what was coming next. Charlie was about to ask her to marry him. However, he didn't. Instead, he reminded her of the story.

"Last time, you remember," Charlie began and Jenny rolled her eyes. "Anne and Jesse were together on the bridge and Jesse proposed that they go back to the castle together and throw themselves on the mercy of the king."

"Yeah, I know," Jenny replied, drolly. "I wrote it."

"What's been driving me nuts since I read that is what the king does."

"I have no idea."

"You don't?" Charlie asked. Jenny shook her head. "None at all?" She shrugged her shoulders.

"I think the fairy tale will always remain unfinished, Charlie. Get over it."

"I can't let that happen. It's too important."

"Since when are you obsessed with fairy tales?" Jenny asked.

"Since I became obsessed with *you*, Jenny, a long time ago. This story has to have a happy ending and we're gonna find it together."

Jenny was about out of patience. "Okay, Charlie. Get to the point."

"What point?"

"If you're gonna ask me, just *ask* me, and get it over with."

“Ask you *what*?”

“To *marry* you, of course!”

“Oh, you think *that’s* what this is about?” Charlie asked. Jenny nodded slowly. *What else could it be?* she thought.

“No, Jenny, that’s too easy. I do not doubt that Anne and Jesse get married and live happily ever after, but I want to know *how* it happens. And I won’t rest until we figure it out.”

“Um, sweetie, that might be a very long time.”

“I’m in no hurry.”

He wasn’t.

It was important to Charlie that the last challenge to Anne and Jesse’s happiness be met and overcome. They had to go before the king and Charlie wasn’t sure what he would do. Until he was sure, Charlie felt he couldn’t ask Jenny to marry him. He wanted to make certain there was nothing left to get in the way of their happiness.

Charlie knew that, no matter how good things seemed, life could take a sharp turn and go downhill in a heartbeat. He wasn’t a fatalist, however. He considered himself a practical man.

“Okay, Charlie. I’ll humor you. Who’s the king?”

“I think it’s David.”

“*What?* Why him?”

“I got mixed signals from him the times he and I talked. Even though he encouraged me to move forward with you, I never got the sense that he had let you go.”

“Well, I let *him* go and made that clear to him.”

“I know, Jenny.”

“So what do you want to do?”

“I want to ask him for your hand in marriage,” Charlie replied. He was perfectly serious.

“That’s crazy. He has nothing to do with us.”

“You told me he tried hard to get you back.”

“Yes,” Jenny replied, glaring at Charlie for emphasis. “And he *failed*.”

“I want to be sure in his mind that he knows he’s done with you.”

“But, as I said, *I’m* done with him.”

“I know you are, Jenny. But, it’s not the same. I’m gonna call him and ask for his blessing.”

Jenny looked at Charlie in disbelief. “Dude, you’re *way* too far into fairy tale shit.”

“No, I’m just old-fashioned. My parents, grandparents, and great-grandparents all did this. The prospective husbands asked the fathers for their daughter’s hands in marriage.”

Jenny felt rising frustration. “But, I’m not David’s daughter!”

“I know, but David might still have feelings for you, Jenny, and I want to make sure he doesn’t. I want you to be free.”

“But I *am* free, Charlie.”

“Not until he frees himself from you.”

“You’re serious?” Jenny asked. Charlie nodded. “This is what you think the final obstacle to happily after is? The one that Anne and Jesse, and you and I, have to overcome?” Charlie nodded again. “Well, I’d rather mount up on Snowflake and ride away, but if you want to do this, I guess I have to let you.”

“Thanks. I was hoping you would say that.”

“Charlie!” David said when he answered his phone. “Nice to hear from you. How are you doing?”

“I’m good. How’s everything with you?”

“The job’s great. Thanks again for your referral.”

“I was happy to do it. Say, I was wondering if I could get you to do something for me.”

“Sure. Need a job?” David joked. “We have some openings.”

“No, thanks. I’m getting used to not working and I like it.”

“So, what else can I do for you?”

“I need to talk to you about Jenny,” Charlie replied.

“Oh? Is something wrong?”

“No. She and I want to get married.”

“That’s great! I’m happy for you.”

“Well, there’s a problem, David.”

“Oh, I’m sorry. Is that what you need my help with?”

“Yeah.”

“Okay. Shoot.”

Charlie took a moment to reply. He had to ask the question but feared what would happen after he did. “David, are you still in love with Jenny?”

“Am I *what*? Why do you ask?”

“She told me how hard you tried to get her back when you were living here.”

“Yeah. Charlie. And she told me to get lost.”

“I know. But, I need to know your *real* feelings. I don’t want complications down the road. I’d like it if we had your blessing. So, please be honest with me, are you still in love with her?”

David ignored Charlie’s question. “Look, Charlie, my life got messed up a few months ago. Everything just fell apart. Jenny was kind enough to take me in. I shouldn’t have tried to take advantage of her kindness but I did, and I’m sorry about it.”

“I understand, David. And, I sympathize. But, you didn’t answer my question. Are you still in love with Jenny?”

There was a long period of silence and then David hung up.

Charlie didn’t know what to do. Should he call David back immediately or wait to see if David called him? *Maybe I shouldn’t have asked so bluntly*, Charlie thought. *Maybe I shocked him. Or, maybe he needs time to work out his real feelings.*

Charlie wasn’t sure he should tell Jenny that he and David had talked. All she knew was that he planned to call. *Maybe I’ll wait until she asks. That way, David might have more time.*

However, Charlie still felt confused. *Why did David hang up? Does it mean he’s still in love with Jenny? What would that even mean? Yeah, taking some time will be best*, he decided. *Maybe this will all work itself out. Then again, Charlie realized, maybe it won’t.*

“Didn’t you tell me that you were gonna call David?” Jenny asked when they were eating dinner a week later.

“Uh, huh,” Charlie muttered. His mouth was full of food and it was the best he could do.

Jenny felt curious. “Well, did you?”

“Uh, huh,” Charlie replied and then kept on chewing. Jenny waited patiently.

“What happened?”

Charlie swallowed. “We had a nice short chat. He’s doing well. He offered me a job-.”

Jenny grinned. “He *did*? Did you take it?” Charlie shook his head. Jenny decided to have a little fun. “Were you tempted?”

Charlie shook his head. “Why would I be tempted? I’m happy being retired. That’s what I told *him*, anyway.”

Jenny thought she detected some evasiveness. *Is Charlie implying that he’s getting bored? she wondered. I hope not. But, I guess it would be better to find out he wants to change his life before we get married instead of after.*

There had been enough change recently. Jenny wanted things to be stable after they married. She was happy with the way everything had worked out and just wanted to know what she was getting into if they moved forward. *If Charlie wants to start a new business, I’ll support him up to a point, but I won’t let the business be his second wife. Or, first.*

“So, what else did you talk about?”

“Oh, stuff. The computer industry, the weather in Denver, our work on the house.” Charlie hoped Jenny wouldn’t detect his fibs.

“Did you talk about *us*?” Jenny asked.

“Yeah.”

“What did he say?”

“He said he was happy for us.”

“Did he give us his blessing?” Jenny asked.

“I don’t know.”

“You don’t know? It’s a simple yes or no request. What happened?”

“When I asked if he was still in love with you, he hung up,” Charlie replied.

“Oh, shit.”

“Yeah, oh shit, Jenny.”

“So what happens now?” Charlie asked.

“I don’t know.”

“You mean you don’t want to marry me anymore?” Jenny asked.

“Of course, I want to marry you.”

“Then why don’t we just do it?”

“But, *David*,” Charlie said.

“*Screw David!*”

“It’s not that easy. If he still has feelings for you, that could mess up our future.”

“How, Charlie?”

“He might come back here and try to get back into your life.”

“I won’t let him,” Jenny declared.

“I know you don’t want him, but what if he refuses to let you go?”

“You think he would do something to me or you? He’s not capable of that.”

“No, I didn’t mean anything like that. I want a fresh, clean start, Jenny, with no complications. I don’t want anything in our pasts hanging over us. The king has to give his blessing.”

“And, what if he doesn’t?”

Charlie didn’t answer.

Jenny called David’s cell phone from the bookstore. She hoped he kept his phone on during work hours. “Charlie told me he called you,” she said after David answered.

“Yeah,” he replied. “We had a nice chat. When’s the wedding?”

“I don’t know if there’s gonna be one.”

“What do you mean?”

“He doesn’t want to get married if it’s possible that our pasts could have any impact on our future.”

“Is there something in his past that could be a problem?” David asked.

“No. It’s not *his* past that concerns him.”

“Then it’s... *yours*?”

“Yup.”

“Well, *what*?”

“He thinks you still have feelings for me, David. And he won’t feel everything’s okay until he knows you don’t.”

“But, what difference would *my* feelings make, Jenny? You don’t have any feelings for *me*, so there’s no problem. You’re his.”

“That’s what I’ve told him several times but he’s obsessed with this fairy tale I wrote in high school and thinks it’s relevant to our relationship.”

“So he wants to live happily ever after? That seems okay. Doesn’t everyone want that?”

“Of course, but there’s a problem with the story.”

“What is it?” David asked.

“It’s unfinished. The lovers in the story are facing their biggest obstacle and no one knows what’s gonna happen.”

“What kind of an obstacle is it?”

“It’s the king,” Jenny explained. “He banished the boy- Jesse- because he was hanging out with the princess- her name is Anne.”

“Did you name her for your mother?”

“I probably did, but I don’t exactly remember.”

“So what’s the deal with the king?” David asked.

“The couple has to throw themselves on his mercy. He could either give his blessing or separate them forever.”

“What does he do?”

“I don’t know,” Jenny replied.

“Why not?”

“Because I don’t know what’s in the king’s heart.”

“What do you mean?” David asked.

“Does he love his daughter enough to let her go so she can live happily ever after, or does his love only mean possession and control?”

“So, what’s the answer?”

“You tell me, David.”

“Wait! Am *I* in this story?”

“Yup.”

“Am I Jesse?” David asked.

“Nope.”

“Then I must be the king.”

“Yep.”

David hung up.

“I called David,” Jenny said.

“Oh, what happened?”

“He hung up.”

“I’m not surprised. What do you think is going on with him? Does he still love you?”

“I don’t think so, Charlie.”

“Then what’s going on?”

“I think he just won’t let me go.”

“But why?”

“I don’t know. It’s not as if I’m the only woman in the world. He had a long-time girlfriend and probably some others after we divorced.”

“But, maybe there was a difference,” Charlie suggested.

“What kind of difference?”

“Maybe he regretted leaving you and now sees it as a huge mistake that ruined his life. Guilt can be a powerful motivator.”

“But that was ten years ago!” Jenny exclaimed.

“It was, but maybe it still hurts.”

“How can I get it to *stop* hurting?”

“I don’t know, Jenny. But if anyone can figure out a way, I think you can.”

Jenny suspected what Charlie was implying. “This isn’t a fairy tale, Charlie. It’s real life.”

Together, Jenny and Charlie called David at work. Before they could explain why they were calling, David started to talk. “Jenny, back when I was there and I tried to persuade you to get back together, I knew what I was doing and I was okay with it. But when Charlie asked me about my real feelings I couldn’t answer. That threw me for a loop and now I’m very confused.”

“You don’t know what your real feelings are?” Jenny asked.

“That’s right. I’m sorry about this. I’m making things complicated and I don’t mean to.”

“Well, you’re part of the story,” Charlie said. “Which means we can’t finish it until this gets worked out.”

“You’re lucky, Charlie.”

“How so?”

“You’re romance is part of Jenny’s fairy tale. Mine never was. I know that now.”

“David, as Jenny reminds me from time to time, fairy tales aren’t real.”

“Well, I don’t agree,” David replied. “If fairy tales aren’t real, then that would mean happily ever after isn’t real, either. But, I believe it is.”

“Why do you say that?” Charlie asked.

“Because of you two. I’m jealous, Charlie. You’re a lucky man. You’re part of Jenny’s fairy tale love. I never was. Good luck to both of you. You have my blessing.”

Just like that, it was over. The way was cleared. Jenny didn't know if David had resolved his issues but they were *his* and no longer concerned her. *I wish David luck*, Jenny thought. Then she turned to Charlie and said, "Yes, I'll marry you."

Chapter 27 - Snowflake

Jenny and Charlie worked out the details and were ready to announce their wedding. She called Marcus at school. "It will be a small one. Neither of us has many friends in Springfield."

"Will dad be there?"

"He said he would try to come. We won't do it until you can take a few days off. Charlie's done fixing up the house so you'll be staying there with us."

"Awesome!" Marcus replied. "I liked the place when we were there on Christmas Eve."

"I like it too. You and I lived in a cramped apartment for too long. I hadn't lived in a house since your grandfather was alive."

"Um, can I bring Nancy?"

"Of course. We have plenty of room for you both."

"Great, thanks. I'm happy for you, Mom."

"Thanks."

"Will you be keeping the store?" Marcus asked.

"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! 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, Marcus... in a short time; mostly *good* changes. Not like when my mother was killed after I graduated."

"You never told me much about that."

"It's still painful," Jenny replied. She recalled the identical pain David had caused when he left her but didn't mention it to her son. He felt her wave of grief anyway and wished there was a way to hug his mother through the phone.

During their ceremony, Jenny and Charlie uttered simple vows that bewildered almost everyone. After Charlie put the ring on Jenny's finger, he mumbled, "Happily ever after." Trying not to cry, Jenny, took his hand and slipped the ring onto his finger. Looking into Charlie's eyes, she repeated the same words.

David knew the significance of their vows and smiled. Marcus noticed him doing it and felt pleased. Despite having left Jenny ten years earlier, David had never stopped loving her and had always hoped they would one day reunite. Finally, he had realized that was never

to be. Although he still loved Jenny, she was never going to be his again. He had broken the sacred connection between them when he decided to move away. Jenny had made it clear how much what he did hurt her. There was no way he could undo the damage.

David was happy Jenny and Charlie had found each other. *Charlie's not the kind of guy who would ever run away*, he thought. *He won't have to. His work will never be more important than she is.* David wished them every happiness.

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

As they departed for a short honeymoon, in their minds they pictured Anne and Jesse riding Snowflake together with Jesse's arms tightly encircling Anne. Snowflake galloped 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. And, they had the King's blessing.

Charlie and Jenny didn't have Snowflake, but they had each other, and that was enough for them. Whatever winds buffeted them in the future, they felt confident they could survive. That was what true love could do.

Jenny finished writing her fairy tale not long after her daughter Anne was born. She read the story to the baby frequently even though she couldn't understand a single word at first. When Anne was old enough to say her first word, Jenny hoped that word would be 'snowflake.'

It was.

The End

