

An Untold Tale

Elena's Christmas

“Christmas in the middle of summer?” Matt blinked. It was both hot and humid and the gang was sprawled languidly on Mrs. Flowers’s porch.

“Yes!” Bonnie nodded vigorously, setting her strawberry curls quivering. “You know how people are always doing ‘Christmas in July’ just for the fun of it. And Elena didn’t get a nice Christmas last year because of . . .” Her voice trailed off and she lifted one petite shoulder to denote that this subject should be avoided.

Everyone seemed to get the point. The previous Christmas hadn’t been very cheery for any of them in Fell’s Church, and the subject was now taboo. Sitting up fully, Bonnie glanced toward Meredith for support. “So?” she said.

Meredith smiled, although her dark eyes had been focused on some unfathomable middle distance a moment ago. “It’s a good idea, Bonnie. Especially now, since Elena’s got walking and talking down pat. Or at least half pat.”

“I’ve got talking completely down,” Elena said indignantly. “And I almost never lose gravity these days. I vote we do it—even though I didn’t think of it.”

“A miracle,” Meredith said soberly. But she smiled with her eyes and Elena dimpled back.

“That settles it then,” Stefan said. “I think it’s a *great* idea—even if only we ourselves can enjoy it. There are plenty of trees in the wood to cut, and we only need a small one.”

“Right.” Matt stirred himself. “I used to chop down trees that were growing on my grandparents’ farmland. Give me an axe and then watch and weep.” He made a practice swing, the sun shimmering off his fair hair.

His sudden burst of activity was infectious. “We could all go home and sneak out with some ornaments from our houses—” Bonnie was beginning when she was interrupted.

“Oh, my goodness gracious, you don’t have to do that,” said a voice behind them. Mrs. Flowers was in the front doorway. She smiled beneficently and said, “In all the years that the boardinghouse has stood—first as a family home, now as an inn, ornaments just kept accumulating. I’m sure they’re in the storage room. It will take just a little bit of searching.”

At this Elena jumped up, careful to keep hold of Stefan's hand . . . just in case she should lose gravity and shoot up to the top of the porch. "Bonnie and Meredith and I can look for them, and then everyone can decorate the tree with their favorites," she said. "And I bet we'll find more than just ornaments. We'll be creative."

They were creative. Meredith found a large roll of vivid red satin ribbon. Under her deft fingers it became dozens of elegant scarlet bows, each threaded with wire to tie onto the Christmas tree. Elena found slightly crumpled garland to hang and a tree skirt that had seen better days, but which was enormous, white, and flecked sparsely with glitter. They decided to have it lead up to their tree, and sew up the gaps at middle and side, and dub it "snow."

But Bonnie found the most wonderful thing of all. Six large boxes, labeled in shaky handwriting "Christmas Orn." These held a fairytale treasure of ornaments, a few broken, but most perfect as the day they had been carefully packed in newspaper.

Matt and Stefan went out into the wood and came back like triumphant hunters: Stefan floating a tree while Matt guided it. Hastily Meredith set up a Christmas tree holder, and the boys hefted the tree and turned screws and shouted directions until they eventually persuaded the tree to settle into place. It stood only about a foot shy of the den's roof.

"Oh, my gracious heavens!" was all Mrs. Flowers said, ignoring muddy smudges up and down the "snow" and showers of needles that started in the foyer. "It's just the kind *Mama* and I used to have. When *Papa* was still alive and we'd invite all our friends over."

"Well, that settles one thing," Bonnie said in a dire voice, looking at the enormous evergreen. "We don't have to pick just our favorite ornaments. "They'll all have to go on to cover this . . . this . . ."

"This glorious example of the Christmas spirit," Matt said, looking proud.

Meredith quickly pinched Bonnie to keep her from saying anything else about the tree, and then got a broom and swept up the needles from den, foyer, and porch.

"Come and look," Elena invited the boys, who came politely and were soon as interested as the girls in the ornaments. There were many from the turn of the previous century: pastel in color, made from a sort of opaque frosted glass, and very breakable-looking. A jolly Santa in frosted red and white toted a green sack of toys over his shoulder. Elena held a frosted pink acorn in one hand and a blue teapot in the other. Matt reached carefully into the box and unwrapped a frosted candy cane. Stefan came up with a drummer wearing frosted purple and gold.

"That one—it matches the tree skirt!" Elena exclaimed, smoothing out the red felt that Bonnie had spread on top of the snow. All around the skirt elaborate figures were sewn on: from

a partridge in a flourishing pear tree to a full (if miniature) contingent of twelve drummers drumming.

“Oh, *that* skirt!” Mrs. Flowers leaned over from the ottoman on which she sat. Her cheeks pinked. “I made that, my dears—oh decades and decades ago! It took me from one Christmas to the next to finish it, but *Mama* was very strict: I had bought the felt, you see, when I was full of excitement for the project, and my mother would never have let me waste anything so precious. My goodness, you can’t imagine how I loathed those drummers in the end. Today I can never hear the song without remembering my pricked fingers—the thimble *would* keep slipping—and wishing I had never started it.”

“But it came out beautifully, and now you have it forever,” Bonnie soothed. There was a chorus of sympathy and awe from the others, with a riff on solemn promises not to spoil the splendor of the finished product.

The boxes Bonnie had discovered had many different kinds of ornaments in them, obviously made or bought from different times in the last century—or maybe centuries. There were wooden ornaments, some jointed, some stiff, some peeling, others still brightly painted. There were the simple colored glass balls that almost all the teenagers knew from their own trees; there were the obviously home-made sort: a mouse made of painted clay, asleep in a half walnut shell, a hand-sewn teddy bear in furry white. And there were some that were simply magnificent. A cascade of clear glass bells, each one still sounding a silver note whenever jingled. An angel with golden wings and a full, white satin skirt. A nutcracker who was so heavy in his perfectly-painted wood that he had to be hung on the lower branches of the tree.

With so many willing hands the tree was decorated in only an hour and Meredith’s scarlet bows filled in any holes. They all sat back, hot and flushed, and admired it.

“We can tack garland around the fireplace,” Bonnie said, “and here’s wreath for the door but what about presents?”

“And food,” Matt added suggestively.

Meredith raised a quelling hand. “I don’t think that Mrs. Flowers should have to cook anything hot in this weather,” she said. “Not even with all our help.”

“And we have to work on presents,” Bonnie insisted. “You know, the joke kind. Like giving Stefan some garlic.”

“Like giving you a trigonometry book,” Stefan shot back and Bonnie fell in a fit of giggles from which she couldn’t revive. The only words the rest could make out were “Like giving a jock—a jock struh—struh—struh—!” Eventually, Meredith thumped her on the back and she recovered.

“Look,” Elena said, “I don’t want *anyone* to have to cook hot, heavy things, and I don’t think I could eat them anyway. But we could make some cookies—”

“Sugar cookies,” hiccupped Bonnie.

“*Mantecados*,” Meredith said. “Spanish lemon zest cookies! I can make those!”

“What happened to good old chocolate chip?” Matt wheedled.

“We used to have honey and mint pastry,” Stefan murmured, a faraway look in his green eyes.

“And if you haven’t tasted *my* cookies, you haven’t tasted Christmas,” Mrs. Flowers put in firmly.

“Let’s not get too elaborate, now,” Elena said hastily. “What about if tomorrow we all bake something and make some presents, too, and then we can celebrate tomorrow evening?”

There was some further commentary and clarification, but everyone wanted to please Elena—she was the reason they were having this misplaced holiday, after all, and eventually everyone agreed. Light cookies, Mrs. Flowers’s fresh lemonade, and milk for anyone who wanted it.

* * *

The next evening everyone was buzzing with excitement as they congregated at the boardinghouse. Stefan and Elena had found some twinkling Christmas lights to frame the front door, and from the kitchen heavenly smells were wafting. Despite the fact that it was just sunset, the Christmas tree showed to great advantage, as all the blinds and curtains in the den were closed, and the only lamps alight were around the tree, which picked out glints of silver and gold, white and red from the ornaments.

It was as Bonnie was bringing in her second tray of sugar cookies from Meredith’s car that she heard a voice both familiar and unfamiliar on the porch.

“Let me just put this on the rocker,” it said smoothly, and the tray was lifted from her hands. And then, as Bonnie stood frozen, unsure of whether or not she was in danger, a warm arm slipped around her, a warm hand tipped her chin up and suddenly she was being kissed soundly. It happened so fast that she didn’t even really get to catalog the kiss and then she was released.

She stood, opening and closing her mouth like goldfish until her brain kick-started and she was able to say, “Damon! H-how dare you? You can’t just . . . just . . . just . . .” She was tipping her head back helplessly, when Matt arrived like an avenging knight.

“What are you doing?” he demanded, blue eyes almost radiant with fury. “What did you do to her?”

“I thought we were playing Christmas,” Damon said, flourishing a sprig of greenery in his hand. It was a lovely specimen—lovely and unusual, for it sported no flowers, but instead creamy white berries that looked like pearls in the half-light. Behind Damon all was darkness; the sun had finally set.

“And you—took advantage of Bonnie—with *that*?” Matt raged, shaking Bonnie’s arm slightly to signal that it was her turn to speak up.

“Ooh,” said Bonnie.

Damon gave Matt an incandescent smile, with teeth whiter than the mistletoe pearls, and then dropped it so quickly that Matt had to blink. “I thought it was traditional.” He leaned forward conspiratorially. “I’ve been to lots of Christmas parties.”

“Yes, and left lots of girls wandering around in a daze, not sure where they were or why!” exclaimed Stefan, who was now hovering on the foyer, in a stare-out with his brother. “Bonnie, are you really all right?”

“Ooh. I don’t know. I think I fainted. Maybe I should—”

“You are *not* going to try it again to see whether you’re all right from the first time,” Matt exploded.

“Aren’t I?” Bonnie said, blinking. “Oh, well, I guess I’d better take the cookies inside then.” She slipped into the house just as Meredith arrived and took her place, barring the door.

“You can’t come in,” the dark-haired girl said firmly. “No one’s invited you.”

Just then Mrs. Flowers could be heard from the kitchen, “Is that someone at the door? Come in, come in. I know we may look like loons—” She broke off as she came into the foyer, frowned, and then looked at Damon with her normally mild blue eyes snapping. “So that’s Influence,” she said. “Strange feeling.”

Damon managed a half bow in the crowded conditions of the threshold. “Strange. I should have thought you’d felt it dozens of times by now.”

“From me, you mean?” Stefan went very still. “Do you really think that’s my first solution to every problem?”

There was a moment of threatening silence and then Elena appeared from the den. She’d clearly heard most of what had been going on, and she was in management mode. “Don’t believe a word he says,” she said to Mrs. Flowers. “But don’t throw him out, either, Stefan,” she

added. “I really think it might do him some good”—she looked directly at Damon—“to stay here, this particular evening.”

Then she turned back to Mrs. Flowers. “I’d bet—say, cleaning up all tonight’s mess afterward—that Stefan has only Influenced you once, to convince you to let him rent a room. I swear he’s never told me. Will you take the bet?”

Mrs. Flowers only hesitated an instant before smiling her eyes tranquil again. “No, my dear, and forgive my bad manners. And now I’ll get back to my Chubby Hubbies.”

Damon, still face-to-face with Stefan, said calmly, “Bigamy? Does she kill them by overfeeding them?”

“They’re a sort of cookie,” Meredith put in, in dignified tones. “With a lot of chocolate,” she admitted, looking less dignified. “And honey. And peanut butter.”

“They sound perfectly delicious,” Damon said, beginning to slide around her, eyes still on Stefan, “And so nutritious, too.”

Stefan at last let his brother through. “Guys, I have some information for you. Damon is only here because of what he’s got in his hand—”

“*Phoradendron flavescens*,” Damon put in helpfully. “A parasitic plant—”

“It would be, wouldn’t it?” Matt interrupted in his turn.

“—called mistletoe—“—Damon.

“—which I am taking away at this moment in time.” Stefan plucked the waxy-leaved sprig from his brother’s fingers and turned on his heel toward the kitchen.

“Good thing I brought more,” Damon said, smiling at the five humans left. “Here’s some for you, redbird—that’s for remembrance. And here’s some for Elena, pray you, love, remember. And some for Meredith—call it pansies, that’s for thoughts. And here’s some for you guys.” He tossed the last two sprigs in the general direction of Matt and Stefan.

Elena looked at the lovely, harmless-looking, milky berries on her twig. “What are we going to do?” she asked Damon, meeting his eyes directly. “Chase each other around the room in a circle?”

“Well . . .” Damon looked upwards as if trying to recall.

“No, we are not,” Elena said flatly. “I think what would be best would be if we tack them up on the ceiling, and then if somebody catches you standing directly beneath it, they can kiss you—platonically. What do you think, Bonnie?”

“Ooh—I mean good idea. Really good idea. What’s ‘platonically?’”

“It means, like a friend, not like an ‘ooh’,” Meredith said in a taut voice.

“But I already told you I don’t remember it. I fainted,” Bonnie protested as Matt took her hand to lead her to the ladder they’d stored in the back parlor just in case. He hammered her mistletoe and his to the top of the ceiling right against the wall, where no one could possibly walk under it.

He was climbing off the ladder when a soft hand touched his and a soft voice asked, “Are you done with it now? I want to hammer the other three up.”

Matt opened his mouth, then closed his mouth, then opened it again when Elena moved the ladder to the center of the room.

“Elena—we’ll all have to walk there to get to the kitchen,” he protested. “Or else go the long way by going through the back parlor.”

“Ah fink”—Elena stopped to remove nails from her mouth. “I think that will make it more fun this way. After all, it’s not just boys catching girls, is it?. It’s girls catching boys, right?”

“Uh, right.” Matt looked suddenly more animated. “Here, can I hold the ladder for you?”

When all seven sprigs were up (Damon had rescued Mrs. Flowers’s from the garbage) they gathered around the fireplace which was coldly burning some red and orange tissue paper flames that Meredith had constructed. There were plenty of hastily wrapped presents under the tree and Bonnie and Elena had hastily been relabeling some of them. There was also plenty of ice-cold lemonade and home-made eggnog, and tiny glasses of mead made from Mrs. Flowers’s own clover honey.

When they had eaten enough cookies to make them sick and were gingerly trying the mead, they sang Christmas carols, every so often laughing because of references to snow, while it was still warm outside and warmer in the house.

Finally when they’d sung every carol they could think of, Bonnie jumped up. “Santa Claus time, I think—don’t you?. I’ll pass out the presents.”

It turned out that Bonnie and Elena had relabeled all of Stefan’s silliest gifts for Damon. That meant that he got three cloves of garlic, a mirror frame with the glass taken out (Matt’s work), a container of dental floss, and a pair of very cheap sunglasses. Damon turned the tables on them, though, by taking each item reverently, admiring it minutely, and thanking them profusely while appearing to have forgotten the mistletoe completely.

Meredith was the first to get caught. She was carrying an empty glass of lemonade through the middle of the den when suddenly there was a blur and the sound of glass falling on “snow” and then there was Damon holding her—they were about the same height. Meredith’s long dark hair obscured all else.

But separation came very quickly and Damon stood patiently, resigned, only rocking slightly with the slap. After which Meredith bent quickly to pick up the sticky glass and went on walking to the kitchen.

“Tricky, really,” said Damon, coming back to rejoin their group.” He smiled suddenly. “Maybe she can consider it training.”

“Training?” said Stefan. “For what? Being assaulted by the village idiot?”

“You could have stopped it,” Damon said coolly, one eyebrow up, “Why didn’t you?”

“I don’t believe in interfering with peoples’ lives unless something drastic is going to happen. I don’t have the right!” Stefan said, pulling Elena into the crook of his arm and holding her firmly. For just an instant Elena’s eyes met Damon’s and there was a flash of shared amusement in them. But at the next moment all attention turned to Matt.

It was clear what he had been doing—leaning against the wall and gazing up at the Christmas tree appreciatively. It was also clear what had happened next: Bonnie had just jumped up and kissed him. And if you traced a line above his head it was completely clear why she’d done it. Matt was leaning under his own nailed up mistletoe.

“I’m sorry,” she said now—holding both small hands up. “I . . . just saw where you were standing and I thought, well, those are the rules, so I kissed you. Was it that awful?”

Matt softened visibly. “Sorry, Bonnie. I just . . .” He held out a hand and then, quick as a snake reversed her positions and as her head brushed the wall he’d been leaning against, kissed her.

“Is your head all right? Are *you* all right? Are you mad?” he went on from there, not letting Bonnie stop to catch her breath. He looked relieved when she blinked and smiled.

“I suppose that was only fair,” she said thoughtfully, and he hugged her quickly.

“Is that what I have to do to you?” Stefan whispered to Elena.

“What? Knock me against a wall till I’m delirious?” Elena smiled mischievously. “No, it isn’t,” she added suddenly. “For you, I give discounts. Not even a mistletoe berry required.” And she turned her face up to him.

That was the scene Damon strolled back in to find; two couples embracing, one platonic, and one . . . not. He stood and stared at it for a very, very long moment, and then he turned and moved silently into the foyer, toward the door.

One second, two, and then the non-platonic couple broke apart, Stefan clearly very reluctantly.

“He left,” Elena said.

“Maybe Santa recalled him because of defects,” Stefan suggested.

“No,”

“Elena”—a shade impatiently. “What do you think that entire business about the mistletoe was for? It was for one reason and one reason only. And it failed.”

“I know,” Elena said, getting up and hurrying to the front door.

It was cooling down fast outside, clouds gathering. Elena recognized angry-Damon weather. But at least she could see him, walking away from the driveway. He hadn’t turned into a crow and taken off.

“Damon!” she called. “*Damon!*”

He didn’t turn.

Elena, running down the driveway, wished that she was wearing shoes. “Damon, you forgot your present!”

“Give it back to Stefan along with the others.”

“Are you *sure*?”

Something in her voice made Damon hesitate and finally stop, turn about face and come back toward her. “Aren’t you afraid I have another sprig of mistletoe?”

“No. I *know* you don’t, even if I don’t know how I know it.”

Damon gave one skyward glance, where thick and heavy clouds were rapidly obscuring the stars. “And Little Brother isn’t going to come rocketing out of there like a dragon, ready to kill me because we’re alone?”

Elena laughed. “Not if he keeps his word, anyway.”

“And . . . if I just decide to seize you and make off with you?”

“Ah . . . then Stefan might do the dragon thing.”

“Then what *are* you out here for?”

“Your present,” Elena said, still smiling, even as he glanced ostentatiously from one of her empty hands to the other.

She put a hand on his arm, effectively keeping him from turning his back to her. Then she leaned in close and kissed him warmly and sweetly.

“I meant to let you catch me in the house,” she said, “but that might have made Stefan unhappy. Merry Christmas, Damon.”

Damon was tempted to say “Ooh,” but resisted it. Stars began to show above as the dark clouds parted.

After a moment he stepped back from her. “And this is the part where I don’t grab you and kiss you back. Because of the Christmas spirit.”

Elena smiled. “Exactly.”

“Well, then . . . Merry Christmas, Elena.”

“Merry Christmas, Damon. And Happy New Year.”

“Does that really come along with it? I’ve always wondered.”

“Well . . . traditionally it does. Let’s just say an interesting New Year.”

“An interesting New Year to all, then, Princess.”

“And to all—a good night.” She watched him shimmer until he disappeared then watched a black shadow soar over the suddenly-visible moon.

Then she turned back toward the boardinghouse. None of it was promised, she knew. They’d had a merry Christmas, but there was no guarantee that the next year would be interesting. She just had to have faith.

Merry Christmas, Fell’s Church, she thought. God bless us, every one.

Happy Holidays!