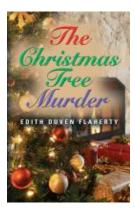


EDITH DUVEN FLAHERTY



Jane had planned a wonderful Christmas for her family in the Sandia Mountains. She hadn't expected their ex-stepfather Everett to arrive or the snowstorm that would trap everyone in the family homestead. But, Christmas spirit seems to smooth out the problems of old family quarrels until she discovers Everett's body under the Christmas tree. When the authorities tell her he was murdered, Jane realizes the killer must be a member of her family.

The Christmas Tree Murder

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The Christmas Tree Murder

Edith Flaherty

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First Edition

Dedication

For my family, Paul and Diane, David and Joanne

ONE Friday: Two days before Christmas

The phone rang just as Caesar and I came into the back hall from his morning walk. Maddy reached for it as I was unsnapping his leash and I called out to her. "I can smell snow in the air, it's certainly cold enough."

"Hold on a sec, I'm not quite hearing you," Maddy said into the phone. She turned to me. "Somebody called Leverett, or Maverick, couldn't quite catch it," she said, "his cellphone was breaking up."

I peeled off my mittens, took the phone and said, "Hello, this is Jane Miller."

"Hi, Jenny, it's Everett Wainwright."

"Everett? Really? Well this is a welcome surprise. We just finished reading your Christmas letter."

"Hang on then, I've got an even bigger surprise. I'm right here in Santa Fe, how about that? My one big movie star client had a financial crisis, he could care less that Christmas is in two days, so here I am."

"Can't afford to disoblige your richest client," I said. "But that's wonderful, that you are this close. I'd sure love to see you and Bertie, is there any way we can make it work?"

"I think we can, Jenny, only Bertie isn't with me. Her mother was taken to the hospital with pneumonia and there's just Bertie to be there with her, so, well, there it is. I'm all done here, I'm on my way down to Albuquerque to catch a flight early evening tomorrow. Okay if I stop by and mooch a cup of coffee or two?"

"Heavens, Everett, I might even spring for a muffin to go with, for my favorite ex-brother in law. Maddy and I will love seeing you. Now that I'm thinking about it, we haven't actually seen each other since you and Adele got divorced. Got a pen handy? I'll give you directions to get here from Santa Fe."

Everett was my sister Adele's third – no, fourth – husband. I always liked him, I was sorry when the inevitable divorce took place. He was the only ex I bothered to keep in touch with, mostly through long letters at Christmas. The husbands both before and after Everett were equally filthy rich but he was by far the nicest of them all. So I was delighted when he and Bertie Pariseau found each other and they have been so happy together, it's good to know it.

"Are you sure it isn't an imposition?" he asked, "I mean with Christmas and all? Are you and Maddy having Christmas guests? I don't want to be a nuisance, Jenny."

"Adele's kids are coming, but they won't be flying in until tomorrow."

"Jenny, I..."

"Don't fuss, Everett, of course you won't be a nuisance, I doubt you'd even know how. Maddy and I will be delighted to see you. Got a pen? Are you ready? This will be a little complicated. You don't

remember, I'm sure, but we're seven thousand feet up on the eastern slope of the Sandia Mountains."

"Good Lord," he said. "Lucky I've got my GPS with me."

"The GPS will get you up the mountain just fine once you leave Route 14, which is the back way down to Albuquerque from Santa Fe. It's easy, Everett. One thing I should mention, though. The last part of it to our house is about a mile and a half of dirt road."

"Really? I don't believe I've ever driven on a dirt road." I could hear him chuckling. "Well, that should be exciting. Okay, Jenny, fire when ready. I've got my notebook and pen right here."

I launched into specific directions from Santa Fe and again I could hear Everett chuckling over the phone.

"I feel a little like Dora the Explorer," he said.

Maddy was coaxing two pies into the oven and she grinned at me as we finished our conversation and I hung up the phone.

"Glad it's the one we both like. Glad it wasn't #3. What's-his-name, Gloster? I'd be tempted to sic the dog on him."

"Everett is the one I always hoped Adele would keep, Maddy, but who listens to a kid sister?"

"Not Adele, that's for sure. I've known her as long as I've known you, and she's always written her own rules."

"Yes she has. But mostly it's just that she has never cared about what people thought, she just goes ahead and lives her life as she wants to. Whereas you and I, as you know, have always obeyed all the rules. And each of Adele's husbands have been richer than the one before. So which of us turned out to be the smarter?"

"Oh, horse manure," Maddy snorted. "You wouldn't have swapped Danny even for Bill Gates with all his billions, and you know it."

That's true, of course. I never felt the need of a rich husband. High school English teachers earn enough to live on (if they are very careful and don't yearn after things like Lamberghinis), and Danny had a good job up until the MS hit us in the face. We were always supremely happy. I'm not sure Adele ever was, at least not in the same way. But she had a source of happiness that I didn't – she wound up with three children. Danny and I never had any children, so we made do with Adele's kids and Maddy's kids. We could do all the spoiling, with none of the hard parts of raising them.

Maddy and I had already finished most of the Christmas busy-ness, their rooms were ready for our guests; my niece Chloe, my nephews Jack and his wife Stephanie, Simon and his wife Phyllis. There would just be my family for the holiday, because Maddy's two daughters lived in Florida and at Christmas time were always up to their necks in holiday goings-on. Maddy and I usually flew down to visit them for a good long stay after New Year.

Maddy, as kids today say, is my BFF. I met her that first frightening day of kindergarten when Mom brought me into my classroom, gave me a hug and let go of my hand. I watched her slip out of the

room and stood frozen in the spot where she had placed me, too intimidated by all the other children to even move. Maddy came over to me as selfpossessed as any adult, and offered me a bite of her gingersnap, carefully holding out the side she had not bitten into. I took only a small bite so as not to look greedy, and that was the beginning of a lifelong friendship. After all these years, we can finish each other's sentences and occasionally, sometimes alarmingly, home in on each other's thoughts.

Madeline and Tony DeAngelo were married a month after Danny and I, so we always split the difference and celebrated anniversaries together as the years went by. Danny and Tony got along almost like brothers which was wonderful luck for Maddy and me. If the husbands don't like each other, it makes things difficult for the wives. Danny and I loved being honorary uncle and aunt to Maddy's girls, Margaret and Delia, as they grew up, left school, married, and moved away to Florida. Jobs certainly split families up these days.

Then, we had barely reached our early forties when Danny was diagnosed with MS. As it progressed over the years, bringing increasing disabilities, Maddy and Tony were a wonderful help. They would come up often and stay for a day or so, so I could then drive down to Albuquerque and get necessary errands done. When Danny died, Maddy and Tony got me through those first numbing weeks and months when the bottom has dropped out of the world and there's no safe footing anywhere. Ultimately, with both Delia and Margaret married and gone, she and Tony sold their home and moved into a condo. They had barely gotten all the furniture in place when Tony was killed by a drunk driver with three previous DUI's to his credit, if 'credit' is the right word.

It's one kind of grief to watch a loved one die slowly – it's another story altogether when someone goes out on an ordinary errand and an hour later is dead. Somehow we survived that too, because you do. You have to. But Maddy and I share a lot of history and with both of us widowed with no intention of seeking another mate, it just made sense to combine forces and fortunately Maddy likes this mountain home as much as I do. We've never regretted it.

Everett made a couple more cellphone calls as he weaved his way down the back way out of Santa Fe just to verify his directions through Cerrillos, through Madrid, and on down into Sandia Park but he was doing very well. Or his GPS was. About an hour or so after Everett's initial call, Caesar's ears came to attention. He cocked his head for a few seconds, then went over to sit by the back door, making excited-sounding little whines deep in his throat. And almost immediately we heard the sound of tires crunching over the gravel as a car made its way up my long hilly driveway.

I met him at the back door. It was great to see that he had barely changed over all these years between – still slender, hair mostly white, still the same old-fashioned dark shell-framed glasses he always preferred, and the same air of – what? - not

elegance, not foppishness, - unself-conscious sophistication, I guess. Closest I can come, anyhow.

Everett had skipped breakfast so we all immediately sat down at the kitchen table and drank up the last of the breakfast coffee, together with scones and blackberry jam, all the time chatting non-stop. Maddy decided we needed a fresh pot of coffee, so she got up to get it started. Everett was very interested in Maddy's degree in nutrition, and asked her heaps of questions about the years she spent managing the lunch room in the same high school where I taught. I'd forgotten how interested he always was in other people's jobs, I've always thought it was one of his most endearing qualities. Who doesn't love to talk shop with someone who really listens?

Maddy leaped up to check on the pies in the oven, and Everett said, "This kitchen smells like a baker's shop. Even the aroma is fattening. Jenny, I don't see how you can stay so slim surrounded by so much temptation."

"Genetics," Maddy murmured.

"There'll be six of us here for Christmas," I said. "Can't run out of things for dessert, not over a holiday. I'm pretty sure there's a law against it."

As we chatted family news it developed he actually knew as much about Jack and Simon's lives as I did which surprised me, neither of them had ever mentioned that they had kept in intermittent touch with their former stepfather. Perhaps they didn't want their mother to know, not that Adele would have minded. Everett even knew about Jack's recent promotion to vice president in his investment firm and he also knew all about Simon's newly acquired exercise gym.

"Jack has done well," I said. "He was enormously pleased when his firm made him a vice president."

"Yes," Everett said. "He is extremely good at his job."

Something in his tone, his expression - I'm not sure what exactly. A tiny red flag popped up in my head. Men laugh at women's intuition but there was something out of sync here, I could tell. I almost followed it up with a question but I dislike poking into other people's business, so I didn't.

"You said five people are coming for Christmas," he said. "Who isn't coming?"

"Adele and #6. She and Baxter always go to Europe for the Christmas season. She phones us all regularly, though."

"Is this Baxter guy a good husband to her, Jenny? I mean, sometimes these really rich guys play by different rules."

I had to smile. It always amuses me how everyone tries to treat Adele like a delicate flower. Adele is need of protection in about the same degree as a Tyrannosaurus Rex. She is my sister and I love her dearly, but I also see her clearly as only a sister can. So I reassured him that Adele and No.6 were doing just fine. Actually, Maddy and I find #6 quite likeable, he doesn't have any of that rich-guy arrogance that is so infuriating.

"Adele would never come here for Christmas holiday, Everett. When she comes for a visit she stays in Albuquerque, not here. She has always hated Pop's mountain home. She told him once, 'Don't for God's sake leave any part of it to me, Pops, I don't want it.' So it came to me. Maddy and I both love it, however. Would you like a tour?"

"Why don't you two go ahead and do that," Maddy said, "and I'll contemplate lunch. Probably left-overs."

"Maddy's left-overs are like other people's gourmet," I said. "Okay, Everett, the dining room is right here off the kitchen, naturally. You'll notice the whole house is designed for slews of people, Pops and Mom both hoped for an army of grandchildren I think, but the good thing is it gives us lots of room for guests. This is just your gardenvariety dining room, chairs against the wall and a table that could stretch to infinity with the addition of extra leaves that mostly live behind the pantry door. Maddy and I usually have our meals in the kitchen."

The living room was huge, filled with comfortable leather sofas and chairs, circled more or less around the big fireplace with the travertine hearth. The pictures were all ones Mom and Pops accumulated over the years, all Western scenes. A tall Scotch pine stood next to the fireplace, naked at the moment, waiting for the Christmas decorations and lights. From there we went out to the hall.

"Notice the width of the stairs, Everett?" I said. "Here's why. Pops demanded a tiny office tucked underneath the stairs – his personal refuge. The contractor nearly threw in the towel when Pops hit him with those plans."

I opened the door and showed him the small desk, lamps, and one recliner chair wedged under the lower part of the stairs. Everett looked at it, and chuckled.

"Good thing your Dad wasn't claustrophobic," he said.

There were five bedrooms upstairs - Maddy's and my room each had a tiny attached bathroom, there were two hall bathrooms for guests. When we got to our bedrooms, I suddenly began to see it all through Everett's eyes. It was a strange feeling. Maddy's room was all in soft blues and grays, her comforter was in pale blue stripes, her drapes a solid soft agua color, her whole room as clean and serenely tidy as is her kitchen. Mine on the other hand, was not. Slippers next to my twin bed, the comforter a vivid orange, the drapes a soft brown with scattered tiny orange colored geometric blocks of color. Maddy always laughed at me and said the colors were so vivid they were practically an assault on the eyes. She always said I was probably compensating for years of a subdued teacher wardrobe. The table next to my recliner was piled high with books, markers poking out the top, and a forgotten coffee cup sitting atop the pile. Everett looked at the muddle and smiled. I was embarrassed. I decided my New Year's resolution would be to keep my room a little tidier, like

Maddy's. I rushed him along to the end of the hall and opened a tiny door.

"Just look at this, Everett. It's a tiny stairway that goes down to the back hall right off the kitchen," I told him. "Pops thought it would be a great extra escape route in case of fire. Fortunately, the contractor also thought it was a good idea – one of Pop's better second-thoughts. Another of his second thoughts is – well, follow me."

I led him to the stairs going up into the attic. At the top, on the left, was still another bedroom. Quite large, actually, with a skylight plus a dormer window, and the room was filled with that steely winter light.

"The contractor was really miffed about that dormer window," I told Everett. "He said 'it'll ruin the symmetry of the outside,' but Pops said, 'who the hell cares? The room needs a window or two besides the skylight' and obviously, Pops won. I still remember how alarmed I was at all the yelling. The room has its own electric heating unit, twin beds for sleep-overs, dresser, a couple of chairs – Simon and Jack both loved it when they were growing up and came here summers for a few weeks."

"What a great room for kids, no wonder they loved it." Everett said.

"Maddy and I also loved this room back when we were growing up. The house was barely finished when we had sleep-overs in this same attic room. It was our own little world."

The rest of the attic was as usual – crippled furniture, discarded kitchen appliances that might have some life left in them if needed some day, cartons of clothes that were too good to throw out and too shabby to donate.

"While we're here, Everett," I said, "I'm going to bring down some of the Christmas boxes. I have to get the tree decorated this afternoon. Should have done it a couple days ago, but we didn't."

"Good. I'll help, I can't check in at the hotel before mid-afternoon anyway," Everett said, "I can show off my he-man stuff, and prove this grayish hair doesn't mean I'm old."

"It's really quite white, Everett, and very attractive."

"It's only white in the wrong light," he said. "In the right light, it's still gray."

I laughed at him and he was a good enough sport to join me. His hair really was mostly white, but everyone has a right to a little vanity.

It took us two trips each, laden down with cartons and plastic storage boxes but we got it all down and dumped the boxes on the living room floor. I turned to thank Everett for his help and got a nasty shock. He was slumped in a chair, ashenfaced and breathing in short pants.

"My God, Everett what..." I said, but he broke in.

"It's okay, Jenny, it's okay, it's a bit of angina, just give me a minute. I guess it was all the stair climbing, I'll be fine."

He reached into his jacket pocket and pulled out a small brown bottle. He shook out a tiny pill – nitroglycerine. I recognized it from when Mom took

them. He put it into his mouth and in a few minutes his color seeped back, his breathing leveled, and he sat up in the chair.

"I apologize for scaring you, Jenny," he said. "I don't get these very often, it's nothing, the doctor is keeping an eye on it."

"I should hope so," I said. My heart was still thumping a little.

Just then Maddy called out from the dining room. "Lunch, you guys! I set up lunch in the kitchen, I hope you don't mind, Everett."

I spoke very softly, I didn't want to alarm Maddy.

"Are you okay Everett? Want to lie down a bit? Perhaps I should call 911, get some paramedics here."

Everett's hand went up in a halting gesture.

"No, please, don't do that, there's no need. I'm fine, Jenny, just a bit wobbly, it'll pass in a minute."

I watched him and in a few minutes I could see he was breathing easier and his color came back. He smiled up at me.

"See? I'm okay now, Jenny. Let's go in to lunch." He stood up and started for the kitchen, leaving me no choice but to follow.

"Good heavens," he said as we went into the kitchen. "This certainly looks very festive."

He was looking at the table, covered in a dark green cloth, glass plates ringed with shiny silverware, crystal wine glasses sparkling, and in the middle a platter of sandwiches – ham, cheese, tuna salad, egg salad, a bowl of baked potato slices, and a bowl of Maddy's home-made bread-andbutter pickles.

Caesar's small black woolly body was already parked next to Maddy's chair, nose testing the air as he picked out the smell of ham and tuna.

Maddy almost blushed as Everett stared admiringly at the table, then she went to the fridge to pull out a bottle of Chardonnay. Everett smiled at both of us.

"How about this, ladies?" he said. "Let's have our lunch, then why don't we work on decorating the tree?"

"That would be great, Everett," I said.

Maddy went over to the window and looked out.

"We should hurry up, then. I think Jen is right, about snow in the air, just look up there at the crest."

"All right, then, let's hurry." Everett said. "There'll still be plenty of time for me to get down to Albuquerque before the weather changes. Bertie says I'm a great tree-decorator."

TWO Friday morning

We lingered over our lunch – and the Chardonnay – but finally I could see that Everett was beginning to act uneasy. He pushed his chair back, went in to the living room window and looked out at the mountains and the length of driveway.

"I'm seeing some mean-looking clouds out there," he said, "I'm loving this great pampering, ladies, but I'm beginning to think that perhaps I should leave you to your tree decorating after all, and start right down to Albuquerque."

Then I did something that I bitterly regret to this very day.

"I have an alternate suggestion." I said. "Why not stay here overnight? Your plane doesn't leave until late tomorrow and if you have another little nudge of angina you'll not be alone among strangers in a hotel."

"Angina?" Maddy said. Her frown at Everett was a little accusatory. "You have angina? Did you just have an attack of chest pain? You did, didn't you."

So in spite of Everett's negative head shakings, I told her about his angina attack. I may have even spoken loud enough accidentally-on-purpose for Maddy to catch it, who knows? Two against one never hurts, and I knew Maddy would agree with me about his staying overnight once she knew of it.

"That settles it," Maddy said. Maddy can be very positive on occasion. "You must stay, at least overnight. It is just plain good sense. No need to be alone in a hotel tonight, not at all, that would be plain silly."

Even in the light of what later happened, I don't see how we could have allowed him to go off to a hotel with a heart condition that could erupt at any time without at least offering hospitality. Being ill in the midst of total strangers is something to dread, in my opinion.

I interrupted Everett's on-going protests with my most convincing teacher-voice.

"Back when my folks used to have dinner parties most people stayed over because of the distance, late hours, maybe a few drinks. As Maddy said, it just makes good sense. We have the room and heaven knows we'll welcome the company. So now let me show you something I skipped on the tour."

It was a small room right off the kitchen, sideby-side with the pantry. I call it my hidey-hole. It held my desk, my lap-top, a comfy chair, a twinsized bed, tiny dresser, one of those portable closets, and a little bathroom. Shower, no tub.

"It's all yours, Everett. No stairs to climb, and a straight path out to the kitchen, the pantry and the fridge. What more could you ask?"

"Good Lord, Jenny," he said, still protesting. "it was not my intention to fall out of the sky and foist myself on you completely without warning like The Man Who Came to Dinner."

"Stop fussing, Everett," I said. "It's just an overnight, for Pete's sake. Tell you what, you can

help Maddy and me do the Christmas tree after all, okay?"

"All right then, I'll stop arguing. I guess I should phone the hotel and cancel for tonight. This is certainly very kind of you, Jenny and Maddy, I thank you both. Everybody should have former relatives-by-marriage like you two. So let's clear the lunch dishes and go get at that tree."

Everett cleared the table as fast as either Maddy or I could do it – it was obvious he was used to the job. You can always tell. Once the dishwasher was loaded we moved to the living room. Maddy began to unpack it all – ornaments, bunches of tree lights twisted up like a nest-full of snakes – and while she was doing that I pulled on my heavy parka and called Caesar for a quick walk. I think he suspected that it was cold outside. I picked up the leash and he backed away, refusing to meet my eyes, telling me in every way he knew how that he didn't need to go out. I knew better.

"Trust me, you aren't the best judge of these matters, Caesar," I told him.

I snapped on the leash and he gave in to the inevitable. Reluctantly, he finally found a spot that suited his requirements. Once done, he pulled me rapidly back up the hill onto the back porch, and burst through the door. I unleashed him, and kept my jacket on. Everett was right, the sky did have a threatening look.

"I'm going to pile up some fireplace wood," I called out to them. Everett must have started to get up because I heard Maddy say, "No you don't,

Everett Wainwright, not with angina, Jenny will never let you."

As I've mentioned, Maddy can be very positive. Everett protested, but he didn't have a chance.

I'll admit I'm a little compulsive about keeping the porch ring-holders full, and I had a feeling I'd be glad later, that I'd filled them as well as the bronze holder next to the fireplace. With a house full of company, it would be one less thing to take care of. Everett, bless him, climbed up onto the stepstool and draped the strings of lights strategically over the branches, while Maddy fidgeted anxiously right behind him. I suppose she thought he might get dizzy and fall. Doing the tree lights is the part of the decorating job I always disliked. When I do it, parts of the tree end up looking like Las Vegas on New Year's Eve, and whole areas seem to have no lights at all, but Everett did a very skillful job.

He then joined Maddy and me in hanging our hodge-podge of ornaments on the tree. Many of the baubles were Pop's and Mom's, a canoe from their white-water rapids adventures, a bear from a trip to Alaska, a hula girl from guess where. Plus some delicate German pieces Maddy and I had ordered over the internet, a shepherd, a drummer boy, a nutcracker. It was fun picking out show-off spots on the tree.

"I like a tree like this," Everett said. "All the things you hang on it mean something. My mother always had a theme for our tree – everything red one year, blue the next. One year all the ornaments

were just red bows. I didn't think that one looked like Christmas at all, I remember."

After a moment, he said, "I've been thinking about something, tell me what you think. There's a thing I need to discuss with both Jack and Simon. Not the same discussion, two different issues. I planned to do it after Christmas and when I got back home, but this seems like such a good opportunity. I'm wondering, what time will their plane get in tomorrow?"

"Early," I said. "Like around nine or nine-thirty, give or take."

"Perfect. Would it be an imposition for me to linger just long enough to have a quick chat with them both before I head down to the city?"

"Good Lord, Everett, of course it wouldn't be an imposition," Maddy said.

I couldn't help but remember the odd tone of voice in which he had said that Jack was extremely good at his job. There was a distinct emphasis on the word 'job' which I took to mean there was something else Jack wasn't good at. Oh well, I decided, it wasn't my business anyway, nothing I needed to concern myself with. As things developed, I would be bankrupt as a fortune teller.

Caesar wandered in and discovered all the tissue paper the ornaments had been wrapped in and of course plunged head first into the pile. By the time that mess was cleaned up, we decided we'd earned a cup of hot chocolate, and perhaps a few Toll House cookies to go with. "There's only the mantel left," Maddy said. "I'll just stash the knicky-knacks down behind the tree, nobody'll even notice them there. While I'm doing it, I'll give the wood pieces their oily polish. They're overdue and it's one less thing to do after Christmas when we put everything back."

Said 'knicky-knacks' were a beautifully carved ivory figurine of an Oriental gentleman, my large heavy heart-of-palm carved elephant, and Danny's equally large, equally heavy, koa-wood carved tiki from Hawaii. It was a particularly ugly war god, I believe – huge head, flattish face, wearing a threatening grimace. Ugly as it was Danny had liked it, so I keep it next to my elephant on the mantel.

"We forgot the greenery swag for the mantel," Maddy said, and dashed up the stairs.

"Doesn't she ever slowdown?" Everett asked.

"Not since I've known her."

"An unusually strong friendship, yours and Maddy's," Everett said. "You're both lucky."

"I know quite a few women's friendships like ours Everett, but you're right, we're very lucky."

Maddy came down with the swag, Everett draped it over the mantel and anchored it with a candlestick on each end, and we pronounced the decorating done, except for the Christmas things I hang on the bedroom doors.

"Do the two of you keep this whole place up just by yourselves?" Everett asked.

"Jen does," Maddy said. "I'm not handy and if it's a machine my skill ends with the on and off button, but there's not much she can't fix."

"I was all over this place when Pops was building it," I said. "He didn't have any sons so I suppose I was a kind of substitute, and he made sure I knew how everything worked. Later on Maddy's Tony taught me how to fix it when something didn't. We are well prepared for mountain living Everett, there's a big generator in the tool shed, a huge freezer out in the garage, an extra-large fuel tank buried in the ground, and our cars always have all-wheel drive."

"The thing is," Maddy said, "we like being way up here. We have nice neighbors, the quiet is almost absolute, we have our birds and the wild turkeys who come for food when there's snow on the ground, we can hear the coyotes yipping in the night silence, and occasionally a bobcat will wander through our yard. I even remember one time a black bear checked us out."

Everett looked so startled I spoke up quickly. "He didn't hang around, of course."

"I should hope not," he said.

"If you'll give me your car keys, Everett, I'll go bring in your luggage. I'm presuming there's a laptop too, nobody moves without one these days."

"No, no, you mustn't wait on me like that," Everett protested. "I can surely get my own luggage."

THE CHRISTMAS TREE MURDER

I grinned at him. "Just look at those beautifully shined shoes! I'm dressed for it, it'll only take a minute. And we don't want you getting chilled."

"You're making me feel like a china doll," he said.

"It's okay, you don't in the least look like one."

I went out quickly before he could protest some more. I brought in his carry-on bag and his laptop, put them in the hidey-hole, hung up my parka and joined them in the living room. The three of us stood at the big window for a moment. The Ortiz Mountains loomed up in the distance, and in the near-view the tiny birds, the towhees, juncos, sparrows, were pecking over the ground. *Got to put out more seed in the morning*, I thought. As if she was in my head, Maddy said, "I think I'll go put out some grain for the wild turkeys before it gets too dark."

I glared at her. "Madeline DeAngelo," I said, "if you don't sit down in that chair and relax I'm going to Velcro your butt to the cushion. No more birds will be around before morning, they've all gone to bed. I'll do it then, when I take Caesar out. Okay?"

I got one of those suffering eyes cast to heaven looks, but she did give in and sit down. In no time at all, she was shifting in her seat.

"I need to go think about something for dinner," she said.

Before I could speak, Everett did.

"You know one of my all-time favorite things to have for a casual dinner? Bacon and eggs. Crispy bacon, two eggs, nice hot toast with maybe a little

jam, that's hard to beat, in my opinion. I can't quite justify the carbohydrates for a routine every day breakfast, but I do love bacon and eggs once in a while for a treat."

"Would you like that?" Maddy asked, clearly surprised. I could tell she was thinking Everett looked a bit sophisticated for such a simple dinner.

"I'd love it," Everett said. "In fact, that's what Bertie and I often have for a Sunday night meal."

"Then you shall have it," Maddy said, and headed for the kitchen.

Everett was sitting there, looking just a tiny big smug, and not quite meeting my eyes.

"You probably just short-circuited an enormous dinner," I said.

He smiled at me. "Hell, Jenny, she's doing all the holiday cooking for a houseful of people, she's been cooking all day, we don't need a big elaborate dinner tonight."

"Just the same, that was thoughtful. There aren't many men who would even think about the amount of work involved in holiday cooking."

"Then I guess we can thank my mother that I was brung up proper."

"Oh, I can tell you were brung up real genteel."

We both laughed a little and Caesar seized the moment to leap up into Everett's lap for a little extra attention. Not that he is ever lacking in attention. Maddy loves spoiling him and I've given up explaining why she shouldn't ruin his training.

Over dinner, Everett first grilled Maddy on managing a cafeteria budget, source of supplies, inspection oversights, then somehow the three of us got onto talking about high school literature books.

"I remember loving *Tale of Two Cities*," Everett said, "but if you admitted it, you were a square. Or a nerd, or whatever the term is now."

"I'm pretty sure that's still the case," I said. "Some things never change."

"Then we had to read John Steinbeck. *Of Mice and Men.* I've never forgotten it, but I've never been able to re-read it."

"Lucky you. I had to, Everett. Every single year, it's still on the required list. It took all my will power not to cry right there in front of the students."

"I'll bet it isn't as bad as *The Yearling*," Maddy said.

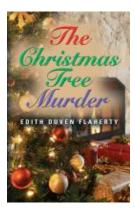
I thought about it. Hobson's Choice, I guess. Both are an emotional wringer if animals are special in your view.

Everything cleared, dishwasher chugging away, we adjourned to the living room, curled up in chairs before the leaping dancing fire, and settled down.

"If you don't think it's painfully sentimental, Everett, how about we find that Jimmy Stewart Christmas movie," Maddy said.

"I love painfully sentimental, isn't that what Christmas is all about?" he said.

We looked, but it wasn't listed anywhere. So we found *Christmas Story* with Darren McGavin instead. Later I took a seriously disapproving dog out for his final walk which he accomplished in record-time, and we all went off to bed.



Jane had planned a wonderful Christmas for her family in the Sandia Mountains. She hadn't expected their ex-stepfather Everett to arrive or the snowstorm that would trap everyone in the family homestead. But, Christmas spirit seems to smooth out the problems of old family quarrels until she discovers Everett's body under the Christmas tree. When the authorities tell her he was murdered, Jane realizes the killer must be a member of her family.

The Christmas Tree Murder

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