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This Year it Will be Different

Written by Maeve Binchy

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This Year it Will be Different

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To dearest Gordon
with all my love and thanks

*The First Step
of Christmas*



Jenny and David gave wonderful Christmas parties. Always on the Sunday before. They asked the whole family, his and hers, they produced Timmy for just enough time for everyone to think he was adorable and never for that one moment too long when people would tire of him. They made the party a huge buffet so that nobody was too trapped with anyone else. The house was festooned with decorations, usually real holly and real ivy gathered from the countryside where it was growing wild. There was nothing vulgar about their tree. Clever ribbons and angels and paper flowers, not expensive-looking packages. But everyone *knew* that somewhere, discreetly, were the gift-wrapped presents that must have poured in to a couple so loving and considerate as David and Jenny.

As the years passed, five Christmases to be

precise, Jenny stood sometimes in her immaculate kitchen listening to the murmurs of appreciation. David's first wife had never done anything like this. Oh, no one had been invited across the door in Diana's day. Diana had been far too hoity-toity to bother with family.

That was Jenny's reward. That was the glory for the weeks, no, months, of preparation and planning and shopping and making it all seem so effortless. David had grumbled slightly when Jenny said they should have a second freezer, but then he wasn't there when she made the mountains of mince pies and the stacks of savouries. David didn't know how Jenny worked in that kitchen on the nights he had meetings or had to stay out of town. He would never know. She would be as different from the beautiful, selfish Diana as it was possible to be. And her child Timmy would be an angel, not a devil, as Diana's child had turned out. Not a dangerous, destructive girl like Alison.

Alison had been nine when Jenny met her first. Very beautiful, with untamed curly hair almost covering her face. She had made no pretence at politeness.

'How much did that cost?' she had asked Jenny about the new dress.

'Why do you want to know?' Jenny was spirited from the very start.

'I was asked to find out.' Alison shrugged as if it didn't matter very much.

'By your mother?' Jenny could have bitten out her tongue the moment she said it.

'Heavens no, Mother wouldn't be remotely interested.' The way she said it, Jenny knew she was speaking the truth; the lovely, lazy Diana would not indeed have cared.

'Who then?'

'The girls at school. One of my friends said you must be after Father for his money.'

It hadn't really got any better.

When she was ten, Alison had come to stay for a weekend and had tried on all Jenny's clothes and used all her make-up. It wouldn't have mattered so much if every single lipstick had not been twisted out of shape, and every garment marked with make-up.

'She was only dressing up, all little girls like doing that,' David said, his eyes pleading.

Jenny decided not to have their first row on the losing battlefield of the stepchild. She managed to smile and planned a lengthy session at the dry cleaners. When Alison was eleven, Timmy was born. 'Did you forget to take your pills?' she asked Jenny when her father was out of the room.

'We wanted him, Alison, just as your mother and father wanted you.'

‘Oh yeah?’ Alison had said, and Jenny’s heart was leaden. It was true that she had wanted the child much more than David had. How could this monstrous stepdaughter have found her vulnerability?

When Alison was twelve, she was expelled from school. The counsellor said that it was all to do with feeling her father had rejected her. She must be allowed to spend more time as part of his life. David was out at work all day, and so was Jenny; they treasured the time they took together with Timmy. Time when the quiet Swiss au pair went to her room and left them to be a family. Now they had Alison on long visits sulking, yawning, contributing nothing, criticising everything.

When she was thirteen, she didn’t want to come near them, which was bliss, except that it made David feel rejected. Jenny worked in a publishing house. She told colleagues ruefully that she could see why there were so many books on step-parenting, she had read them all and she could have written half a dozen more. But none of them had ever had to face anything like Alison.

When Alison was fourteen, her mother died. Suddenly and unexpectedly, after a routine operation. David had gone to Alison’s boarding school. ‘I expect you’ll have to have me now,’ she had said to her father. David said it had nearly

broken his heart to think that his only daughter considered herself a package to be passed from one place to another. Jenny forced herself to think about Diana, dead before she was forty. Dead without ever having lived properly. She put the thought of Alison to the furthest part of her brain. She knew it would spoil everything. There were going to be no happy endings in this story, no one would walk hand in hand into the sunset swearing undying friendship. She would do it, she would do it for David and, oddly, for the dead Diana, whom she had feared and mistrusted in life. If Jenny were to die young, she would like some other woman to look after Timmy, to try to make a life for him.

She slaved as never before over their Christmas party. Sometimes she got up ludicrously early in the morning. David would come down to breakfast and find a smell of cooking in the kitchen, even though all the mess had been cleared away.

'You are a funny little thing,' he said to her, giving her a squeeze.

Jenny was not funny, nor was she a little thing. She would look at herself thoughtfully. She was tall, not as willowy as Diana, but tall. She was deadly serious about her family and her work. Why was it the action of a funny little thing to get the party right? He used to tell her how much

he loved it, that he had always been one for ceremony and for celebration, but Diana had never wanted to bother. But Jenny would pick no fights, manufacture no rows. Not at the festive season.

Alison arrived a day earlier than she was expected. Jenny came back from work and found her halfway through eating a tray of intensely complicated hors d'oeuvres. Each one had taken three minutes to assemble, they would take one second to eat, and Jenny had made sixty of them, shaping the curls of filo pastry with endless patience, and leaving them to cool before freezing them. It represented three hours of her life. She looked at Alison with pure hatred.

Alison looked up from behind the curtain of hair.

'These aren't bad. I didn't know you were a homemaker as well as a career woman.'

Jenny's face was white with rage.

Even Alison noticed.

'These weren't for supper or anything, were they?' she said with mock contrition.

Jenny took the deep breath that all the books on step-parenting seemed to recommend. It was so deep, it reached her toes.

'Welcome home, Alison,' she said. 'No, these weren't for supper . . . not at all. They were just something for the party.'

‘Party?’

‘Yes, on Sunday. We have the family. It’s a tradition.’

‘I think things have to be more than just three or four years to be a tradition,’ Alison said.

‘This is our sixth Christmas together, so I suppose that feels like a tradition.’ Jenny’s shoes were hurting, she wanted to take one of them off and beat her stepdaughter senseless with its high sharp heel. But she felt it would have been both unseasonal and counter-productive. There was no way Jenny was going to enjoy this Christmas; what she must try to do was to contain it. She tried to remember that phrase people used – what was it? Damage limitation? – she had never known quite what it meant. Had it something to do with saving what you could? She often found at work that if you thought of something quite irrelevant and allowed your mind to click through the motions, then it prevented you from flying off the handle.

She saw Alison looking at her with interest.

‘Yeah, I suppose six years is a tradition,’ Alison agreed, as if she were struggling to be fair.

A glow of sympathy towards the girl began to shine through the mists of dislike and resentment. But Jenny was too experienced to mistake it for the swell of violins surging at the end of the movie.

‘About the party,’ Jenny said. ‘Are there any of your mother’s relations that we might ask?’

Alison looked at her in disbelief. ‘Ask here?’

‘Yes, it’s your home now, they are your relations, too. We want to make it a family Christmas, we would be very happy to have them.’

‘What for?’

‘For the same reason that anyone asks anyone under their roof at Christmas, for goodwill, for friendship.’ Jenny hoped her voice wasn’t getting tinny, she could feel the edge developing.

She willed her eyes away from the tray of canapés that she had worked on so meticulously. The crumby, mangled remains. Even those that had not been eaten were somehow used-looking.

‘That’s not why people have Christmas parties, it’s for showing off,’ Alison said.

Jenny took off her shoes and sat down at the table. She reached out for the perfectly formed pastries with their exquisite fillings. They tasted very good.

‘Is that what you think?’ she asked Alison.

‘I don’t think it. I know it.’

Jenny did a calculation in her head: fourteen now, Alison might be with them until she was eighteen. With any luck, this school might not expel her, so it was only the school holidays and half-terms they had to consider, four Easters, four

summers, four Christmases. Timmy would grow up in the shadow of this moody girl. He would be a grown-up seven-year-old by the time Alison left their home. She would lose these lovely years because of the hostile girl who sat at her kitchen table. She wondered what she would do if it were a problem at work. But that was not a useful road to go down. If Alison had been a mulish, mutinous junior, she would have been sacked or transferred with such speed that it would have electrified everyone. She contemplated telling this discontented girl that life, far from being a bowl of cherries, could often be a bed of nettles and that everyone had to make their own happiness. But Jenny was familiar enough with teenagers to know that they wouldn't share that kind of pain as an older woman might. Someone of Alison's age would shrug and ask, Why bother?

She wondered, was there a chance that Alison might be into the bond of the friendship? Should she offer to exchange some of her blood with her and swear eternal solidarity?

But sadly, she remembered the school reports. They had all stressed how much Alison resented any of the school conventions, even those enjoyed by her peers. No, the sisterly loyalty act didn't look as if it would work.

She ate her fifth canapé, thinking that this now

represented a quarter of an hour's work early that morning. Soon David would be home, tired and anxious to have a restful evening. She hadn't even seen her beloved Timmy since she came in the door.

All over the country, families were getting ready for Christmas, some of them certainly had tensions . . . but not one family, in the entire land, had Alison. The time bomb. Theirs for four long years, ready to explode at any time.

She saw Alison's luggage strewn all around the place. She would *have* to get an agreement with David that Alison keep everything in her room. Her room! Nothing had been done to it.

In fact, it was filled with boxes; worse still, packets of fir cones and a huge canvas bag of holly sprigs. If ever the child was going to feel unwanted and unwelcome, it would be because of Jenny. She had intended to leave many, many clothes hangers and a small understated vase with greenery and a couple of flowers as welcome . . . nothing that could be considered showy or vulgar or uncool, or whatever were the favourite hatreds of Alison this festive season.

She had been silent as she had been glumly rejecting every possible method of relating to her stepdaughter. Alison must have noticed the lack

of chatter. Her eyes followed Jenny's and landed on the luggage.

'I suppose you want me to take all that out of your way,' Alison said in the voice of a martyr who had met a particularly unpleasant torturer.

'About your room . . .' Jenny began.

'I'll keep the door closed,' Alison groaned.

'No, not that . . .'

'*And* I'll keep the music down,' she said, rolling her eyes.

'Alison, it's the room I wanted to explain . . .'

The girl stopped in her bag-laden trudge to the bedroom.

'Oh God, Jenny, what is it *now*? What else can't I do?'

Jenny felt so tired, she could cry.

'I just wanted to explain what there was in there . . .' she said in a weak voice. Alison had opened the door.

She stood looking around her at all the preparations, the trimmings and the garnish for a festive Christmas. She lifted a fir cone and smelled it. Her eyes went all around the room as if she couldn't take it all in. 'We didn't think you were coming until tomorrow,' Jenny apologised.

'You were going to decorate my room.' Alison's voice was husky.

'Well, yes. Well, with whatever you thought . . . you know.' Jenny sounded confused.

'With all this?' Alison looked around her.

Jenny bit her lip. There was enough greenery in that room to decorate a three-storey house, which was what they lived in. The child couldn't possibly have thought it was all for her bedroom.

Then with one look at Alison's radiant face she realised that that was exactly what the tall, rangy Pre-Raphaelite with the wild hair and the sullen mouth was. She was a child. A motherless child who was going to have a room decorated for the first time.

In publishing they always told you that the best decisions, the best books, came by accident, not by dint of long and clever planning.

'Yes, well, with most of it. I thought we'd make it look really nice, nice and welcoming for you. But now that you're here . . . maybe . . .'

'Maybe I could help?' Alison said with eyes shining.

It wouldn't last for ever, Jenny knew that. The road ahead was not lit with soft, flattering lighting like a movie. They wouldn't fall into each other's arms. But it would last a little bit. Maybe through the party and through Christmas Day.

She heard the sound of her son running to find her.

'Where were you, you didn't come and see me?' he called.

She picked him up in her arms. 'I was just welcoming your sister home,' she said, almost afraid to look at Alison's face.

Alison leaned out and tickled Timmy with a frond of ivy.

'Happy Christmas, little brother,' she said.