



The Christmas Secret in Mistletoe Courtship

by Sara Mitchell & Janet Tronstad

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When the organist launched into the hymn for the fifth time, Ethan's restless gaze fell upon the tall figure of a woman who glided from a side door across to the pile of 'burdens.' Winter sunlight streamed through the stained glass windows, highlighting the solemn curve of her cheekbone and a wide unsmiling mouth. Her dark hair was worn in an uncompromising knot on the top of her head. Unlike most of the ladies present, she wore no hat. Something about her struck Ethan as both poignant, and proud.

A frisson of memory rippled through his mind.

He knew this woman. Someplace, somewhere, he remembered her. Scalp tingling, he followed her every movement, from the soft swaying of her skirts to the slight tilt of her head when she reached the front of the sanctuary, to the taut line of her spine beneath her gaudy green overblouse.

She laid her object down a little apart from the rattle-taggle mound of other objects. Then, still within an invisible pool of isolation she melted back into the shadows beyond the sunbeams. The music ceased at last, the minister spoke the benediction, and with the conclusion of the service people gathered around Ethan to speak with him, to shake hands with the stranger.

He smiled and responded politely, all the while keeping the corner of his eye on the woman in green. She wove her way across the sanctuary, and the sting of recognition now prickled Ethan like hundreds of tiny needles. She reminded Ethan of—himself. Acknowledged, but apart. Known by all, understood by none. On the surface, serene and confident.

Her eyes would be deep pools the color of bitter chocolate, a mysterious blend of intelligence and...he blinked, impatient with the nebulous wisps of memory.

“Do you know that young woman?” he asked Otis Skelton, a merry-faced little man who had introduced himself and for some reason refused to budge from Ethan's side. “The one with the dark hair, wearing the bright green overwaist?”

“Ah, she’s wearing the green one today, then?” Otis gave a dry laugh. “That would be Miss Clara Penrose, Albert’s sister. She’s a strange one, right enough. Seeing as how you’ve only arrived a week ago, might be Albert wanted you to settle in a bit, before he trots her out your way. He’s a good man, is Albert, but his sister has a way that seems to twist his bowtie in a knot.”

Albert’s sister? A ‘strange one?’ The revelation teased him with an even stronger sense of *déjà vu*, almost as vexing as a welcome note from someone who hadn’t bothered to identify himself. “What do you mean by *strange*?” he asked Otis.

“Well, now,” Otis ran a finger around the bow tie strangling his throat, slid a sideways look as though to see who was close enough to overhear, then jerked his chin once.

Seemed Miss Penrose was the family oddity, a public-spirited young female with a mind of her own, smart as a whip but always dressed more like a floozy than an old maid, much to the despair of her elegantly turned out family. Never married. Nobody quite knew what to do with her “...spends her days teaching younguns piano, and doing good works. Myself and the wife, we always had a soft spot for the girl. Brings us vegetables from her garden, fresh-baked bread. I remember one time when she—”

Someone called Otis’s name, and with a faint air of wistfulness the man left Ethan’s side. Clusters of parishioners still stood about talking, one of the groups including Albert Penrose. Not wanting to intrude, Ethan debated briefly before making his way to the other end of the aisle. If his calculations were correct, when Miss Penrose finished speaking to a pair of fidgety girls, she would have to pass him to reach the door.

Sure enough, after the two girls darted off Miss Penrose walked toward him, one hand idly brushing over the ends of the pews, her step brisk and her gaze focused inward.

She would have run smack into Ethan if he hadn’t pointedly cleared his throat. “Miss Penrose? We haven’t officially been introduced, but—”

“Yes, we have.” Startled dark brown eyes searched his face with unnerving intensity. A flicker of some deep emotion stirred, then vanished. “Dr. Harcourt, formerly Congressman Harcourt of Pennsylvania.” Her voice was a clear contralto, unforgettable. “We met several years ago, at one of those holiday levees in Washington. I don’t expect you to remember.”

Like the Red Sea, the veil shrouding Ethan’s life parted in a rush of memories, once again sweeping him three years into the past, only this time to a vast terrace behind a mansion filled with people. He’d been sitting in stupefied misery on a garden bench, and a willowy woman dressed in a plain dark blue gown materialized out of the night.

“But I do remember, Miss Harcourt.” He smiled down into her wary eyes while the tug of that encounter filled the air with the same brilliant colors as the sunlit stained glass windows. “Back terrace, Senator Comstock’s Annual Christmas Fete. I rescued you from a nasty tumble.” Without warning his palms tingled from yet another memory—the feel of that stiff, slender waist beneath his gloved fingers.

“Yes. I don’t see very well in the dark.”

His gaze swept over her with sufficient thoroughness to infuse the pale cheeks with color. “You mentioned as much that night. I escorted you to a patch of moonlight, and we enjoyed gazing at a moon as round and white as a pearl. We...talked.”

“I understand you’ve lost your wife. I’m very sorry.”

“Don’t be. It was a long time ago.”

She flinched at the curt tone, but to his surprise—and relief—did not retreat. “She was...very beautiful.”

“You were more honest three years ago,” Ethan returned quietly. “Lillian was also shallow, and insensitive.” Among other, far more reprehensible flaws. “I apologized on her behalf, and you told me not to, that I was not responsible for my wife’s lack of manners.”

The flush in her cheeks deepened to rose, and her mouth half-parted. “I—I—you really do remember. I never expected, I mean there was no reason...there were so many people—*fiddlefaddle*.” Ethan watched in fascination as her hands clenched into fists, and a vein in her forehead pulsed. Her chin lifted, and before his eyes she transformed from startled doe to a proud lioness on the verge of attack. “This is ridiculous. We shared a brief conversation. That’s the end of it. There is no reason to attach any importance to the exchange, Dr. Harcourt.”

Lightheartedness, an emotion he almost didn’t recognize, sawed at the rusted bars around his heart. “Until a moment ago I would have agreed with you, Miss Penrose. Now...I’m thinking that brief exchange on the terrace might turn out to be one of the most significant in my life.”

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