

A Tough Nut to Crack

“Is that the last one?” Jenny asked her husband Dave.

He grunted as he placed the cardboard box on the floor. “I think so.” As he straightened, he rubbed his lower back. “Enough anyway. Where are you going to put these?”

She looked around their large living room. The Christmas nutcrackers they had unpacked occupied every surface. Dressed in ornate red and blue uniforms, they guarded the mantle with its evergreen swags and shiny ornaments, outflanked the magazines on the coffee table, and mustered on one end of her sideboard. The built-in bookcases around the fireplace looked like an international parade of the square-jawed wooden soldiers.

“Under the tree?” she suggested.

“We could tie little nooses around their necks and hang them on the branches,” Dave said, as he ripped off the masking tape to open the carton.

“You know we can’t do that. What would Aunt Rosalind think?”

“That we don’t need any more?” He frowned at the tissue-packed contents of the open box. “There must be twenty in here, and I think they’re the larger ones, the estate sale bunch. We won’t be able to see the presents if we put them under the tree.” He scratched his head, which was now nearly bald. “How about out on the front porch? They’re already at attention. Ros can inspect them as she comes in. We could start a new tradition and put these guys to work for a change. It’s not like they’re cracking any nuts these days.”

Jenny put her hands on her hips and gave him a look that she suspected other wives of sarcastic, grumbling husbands would recognize. “You know they’re ornamental, and no, they’re not going outside.”

Dave sighed. He kneeled next to the box and began to rummage through the tissue paper.

As she watched him unwrap a nutcracker dressed in a bold blue and gold jacket, she took pity on her long-suffering husband. He helped her every year with this tradition that had become more of a chore that neither of them enjoyed. As silly as his suggestion had been, he was at least trying to help.

“I’ll make a place under the tree for them,” she said. “We have to hurry, though. You know Aunt Ros is always the first to arrive.”

He reached for her hand and gripped it. “You have to say something to her, Jen. This collection is out of hand. We only display them once a year, and tomorrow you’ll want to pack them up again. You have to admit they’re a lot of bother.”

She gazed around the room again. “They don’t leave much space for my other Christmas decorations, do they?”

“Exactly. More the point, the basement has become a nutcracker barracks. If any more of these worthless wooden pikers move in, there won’t be room for my workbench and tools.”

She knew that was an exaggeration, but he had a point about the storage space they consumed.

“It’s just that Aunt Ros has always been so kind and generous to us. Remember the gas grill she gave Scott and Josie for their wedding last summer? Besides, we’re the only family she has here. Ever since Uncle Andy died—”

“I know.” He released her hand. “It’s a shame her sons never spend the holidays with her. I’m happy to have her here for Christmas with us, but can’t you tell her that it’s time to stop already with the gifts? She doesn’t need to be out shopping at her age, anyhow.”

Jen bit her lip. They'd had this conversation last year and probably the year before. She would just have to think of a way to make the suggestion without hurting her aunt's feelings or sounding ungrateful.

Dave picked up the blue-clad nutcracker and waved it at her, causing the jaw beneath the figure's luxurious white moustache to clack. "Onward, into battle," her husband said in a deep voice. "Victory shall be ours!"

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Twenty unpacked soldiers had surrounded the Christmas tree by the time the doorbell rang. As always, Aunt Rosalind arrived first for dinner. She looked younger than her 78 years, with hair still dyed blond and a trim figure. She handed Jen a familiar-looking rectangular box wrapped in striped red paper.

"For you and Dave," Rosalind said. "Merry Christmas!" Her smile and hugs were warm.

"Thank you. We'll put it under the tree," Jen said, handing Dave the present. Her husband raised an eyebrow. Their regiment had no doubt just increased its ranks. "That's a lovely pin you're wearing, Auntie."

Rosalind fingered the poinsettia on her cardigan. "Thank you, Jen. It's so nice of you to invite me to Christmas dinner every year. Are the children home?"

"Only Meg, but the boys should be here soon. Des is bringing his girlfriend, Tracy. You met her at the wedding last summer. The newlyweds stopped at Josie's mother's house. They're joining us for dinner, but they're spending the night there. Meg is upstairs getting dressed."

They walked into the living room, where Rosalind stopped and stared. Her jaw dropped like a nutcracker ready for action.

"Good gracious!"

Behind Ros's back, Dave mouthed "Tell her."

Before Jen could speak, Rosalind said, "You know, I think this will be my last year to give you a nutcracker. Your collection is taking over your house, dear."

"It is, isn't it? As much as we enjoy them," she started. She ignored Dave's eyeroll and summoned her courage to continue. "I think we have more than enough. You know, Aunt Ros, maybe it's time we stopped exchanging gifts. You always say there's nothing you want or need, and Dave and I should start thinking about downsizing with Meg going off to college in the fall. Why don't we just enjoy each other's company next year? That's gift enough for me."

There, she'd said it. She held her breath, waiting for her aunt's response.

Rosalind squeezed her arm. "That's a great idea. No more nutcrackers. You know, Jenny, dear, my feelings won't be hurt if you decide to thin the ranks, so to speak."

Dave gave her a thumbs up. "I'll go open the wine."

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Later that night when she had returned home, Rosalind unpinned her poinsettia brooch from her cardigan. She smiled as she thought of the Christmas dinner and gift exchange with her nieces and nephews. They were a lively bunch and full of stories. Such a lovely family! She had long ago given up hope that her own sons would want to return home for Christmas. They lived too far away and were too busy with careers and wives who chose to spend the holidays with their own families.

Yes, she was lucky to have Jenny. Her niece was an excellent cook, and the tree was beautiful. She thought of the colorful lights on its branches and brightly wrapped gifts underneath. All of those nutcrackers. . . She hoped Jenny wouldn't feel obligated to keep them all. She knew what a burden it was to store them, wrapping and unwrapping each one before

Christmas. Her mother-in-law had given her and Andy one each Christmas for sixty years. Andy refused to say anything, so their collection of nutcrackers continued to increase until the old woman died at age 96. While she was alive, they displayed them for several weeks each December, just in case she surprised them with a visit.

When Jenny married and started inviting them to her house for Christmas, she had seen her opportunity. She suspected Andy had guessed where she obtained the nutcrackers for her niece to “carry on the tradition,” as she’d told her husband. He knew their boys had no interest in the wooden soldiers. And so the nutcrackers had moved on, one by one. The Christmas after Andy died five years ago, she’d wrapped up twenty, an entire box. The little white lie about finding them at an estate sale was mostly true. Now they were all gone, bivouacked at her niece’s home. She smiled, relieved that Jenny was so agreeable to stopping the tradition. She hated shopping. Did they even sell nutcrackers anymore?

Still, she couldn’t let Jenny go to all that trouble fixing a dinner and decorating without some kind of hostess gift, at least. She fingered the poinsettia pin, remembering how her niece had admired it. She opened the velvet-lined box in her closet where she kept her Christmas brooches. It was almost full. She already had two dresser drawers jammed with jewelry boxes of pins her sons had given her. How many did they think she could wear?

She placed the poinsettia back in the box and picked up a sparkling Christmas tree pin she hadn’t worn in years. Jenny would love this one. It would be the perfect hostess gift for her niece.

Rosalind smiled. Next year she would start a new holiday tradition.