

Title: Family Affairs

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Summary: For Christmas 1945, Livvy's sister Abby has determined it's past time Livvy returns to Denver and makes up with her father. This will be Ray's first opportunity to meet with the reverend.

Family Affairs By Scribblesinink

Ray could tell something was up with Livvy the instant he set foot in the kitchen, even while he was still shaking off the flakes of snow that had gotten stuck to his coat. It was obvious in the way she hovered over the stove, her back to him, and how she fidgeted with her napkin and kept darting glances in his direction when she thought he was too focused on supper to notice.

Finally, after the dishes had been cleared away and Baby Danny had been put down for the night, Ray grew tired of attempting to outwait her. "Okay, Livvy, out with it," he suggested mildly, settling himself in his favorite chair, feet pointed toward the fire roaring in the hearth.

Livvy set down a mug of coffee on the side table next to his chair. "I don't know what—."

Ray snorted a laugh. "I could tell you're worked up over something or other a mile down the track." He smiled at her, both to take the sting out of his words and to thank her for the coffee. "And if I couldn't, Franklin surely can." He dipped his head at the dog, who was lying in front of the fire, seemingly relaxed and unconcerned—except for the way his tail kept swishing and his ears flicked back and forth, even as he rested his muzzle on his front paws.

"Well..." Livvy let out a breath, half sigh, half laugh, and nestled on the sofa across from Ray, curling her legs under her. "I got a letter. From Abby." She paused for a moment, and Ray waited for her to continue. "Kent, that's her husband, has finally come home from Germany. And..." Her voice trailed off a second time, and she worried her lower lip with her teeth.

"And...?" Ray prodded after a few moments, though he reckoned he already knew what else was in Livvy's sister's letter.

"It's not important." Livvy shook her head. "Not like I'd go, anyway."

The last came out so quietly that Ray wasn't entirely sure she'd actually spoken the words out

loud.

"It's an invitation, isn't it? For you to come visit?" Wouldn't be the first time Abby had tried to get Livvy to leave the farm and go back to Denver. That other time he knew of, Ray had been certain Livvy would go. But she hadn't. And now—

Livvy looked back at him unhappily. "Just for Christmas. *To be with our whole family*, Abby says." She sat up straighter. "But I'll tell her I can't. How could I go? With the farm, and Daniel still so small, and—."

"Hey." Ray put down his coffee and got up and knelt before her. Taking her hands between his, he peered up at her. The expression in her eyes told him she was torn between wanting to go and being afraid to. "I think you should. Go make up with your father."

She made a small noise in the back of her throat and he laughed softly. "Surely he's not as implacable as you make him out to be?"

Though maybe he was. Because what kind of father would rather send his daughter away to marry a stranger she'd never even met than have a grandchild out of wedlock? Not that Ray had any complaints about the final outcome. On the contrary: he'd gained a wonderful wife and son because of it. But even after he'd made an honest woman out of Livvy, they'd never seen hide or hair of Reverend Dunne: no visits, no phone calls, not even a letter.

Still, Livvy *was* the reverend's own daughter. That had to count for something, right? Family might argue, fight, even fall out. But, in the end, they were *family*.

"I—." Livvy's voice caught. She shook her head.

"Better yet," Ray put forward, seeing how much she was struggling with the decision, "why don't we all go?" He wasn't sure where the words came from and he half-regretted them as soon as he'd uttered them. Go to Denver? To visit Livvy's sister, and her father? But Livvy stared back at him, a glimmer of hope appearing in her eyes even as they widened in surprise.

"But the farm—?"

"Will be okay for a little while," Ray assured her. Wasn't like there was much in the way of harvesting or planting needed doing, anyway. "I'm sure Hank and the boys won't mind lookin' after the animals for a few days."

She held on to his gaze for a long time before, at last, she whispered, "Thank you." A slow smile lit up her face and any lingering doubts Ray might've entertained about his suggestion melted like November snows before the midday sun.

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His doubts returned, however, two weeks later, as the conductor was helping Livvy step down from the train, Baby Danny securely on her hip. Ray followed them, burdened under the suitcases and baby paraphernalia that Livvy had insisted they bring along.

Livvy was craning her neck, swiveling her head to look around the crowds milling on the platform. "I don't see anyone," she muttered, half to herself, half to Ray, her tone a mixture of disappointment and resignation. Ray looked around as well, though he'd only met Abby once, and Abby's husband and the reverend not at all. A glance showed him Daniel was taking everything in with the wide eyes and solemn expression of a one year old, but to Ray, Denver station was a scene of utter mayhem: the huffing and puffing of the steam train competed with the cries and shouts of passengers and loved ones reunited for the first time in a long time, while people scurried to and fro, swirling around the little cluster of his family and occasionally bumping into him, threatening to dislodge the suitcases he held.

He blew out a breath, wiping his face with his coat sleeve before shifting the luggage for a better grip. To be honest, Ray wasn't surprised no one had come to pick them up. Though Livvy'd tried to keep it from him, he knew the news he and Danny would be coming along had cooled Abby's enthusiasm for the visit considerably. Ray didn't mind for his own sake—he already knew Abby didn't think much of him—but it had made Livvy even more nervous, and he did care about that. "Let's get out of here," he suggested.

Livvy nodded, preceding him out of the station toward the taxi stand. The square in front of the station building was as chaotic as the platform had been: cars came and went, swerving around one another, while impatient drivers honked or yelled at each other through open windows.

It abruptly dawned on Ray how utterly desolate the farmhouse must seem in comparison. Not silent—never silent, with the wind rushing through the grass and the cluck of chickens and the whirr of the little windmill Livvy had so lovingly restored—but *quiet*. Did she miss... this? Ray found it hard to believe anyone could, but truth was, she'd grown up here, and he hadn't forgotten the way her face had fallen when he'd told her about the nearest phone box being in Wilson. He'd since rectified that problem, but....

He tried to gauge the expression on Livvy's face now, but he couldn't really tell if there was longing there. She mostly seemed to be intent on finding an empty taxi to take them to the Dunne residence, rather than paying attention to what was going on around them.

"There." She pointed out an empty cab, and Ray shrugged off his misgivings. He'd urged her to make this visit; now he should stick with it, no matter the consequences.

Nevertheless, a few minutes later, he couldn't help the long breath of relief that escaped him when everything had been stored in the back of the car and the closing door had muted the ruckus outside. Livvy offered him a faint, absent-minded smile as she gave the driver the address and then hoisted Daniel on her knee so he could look out at the houses as they passed by.

They didn't have to go far. Less than ten minutes later, the taxi drew up in front of a three-storey house with white trim and a heavy front door. When Livvy had written back that Ray and Baby Danny would be coming with her, Abby had declared the place she and her husband lived in too small and unsuitable for so many guests, and ordained they should stay at their father's house. Ray wasn't entirely sure Abby didn't have an ulterior motive for that. In any

case, he doubted the reverend was any happier about the arrangement than he was. But money didn't grow on trees, and the hotels in Denver were real expensive during the holidays. So, other than canceling the trip altogether, Ray and Livvy had no choice but to accept.

And perhaps it would be a good thing, Ray thought, paying the driver once he'd put their luggage on the stoop. Perhaps it'd help Livvy and her father bridge the rift between them. Not as easy to ignore your own daughter when she was actually staying under the same roof, after all, as it was when she was living hundreds of miles away in the country.

A thin woman in her fifties opened the door. "Ah. Your father is waiting for you in the sitting room," she announced without any preamble, before directing Ray to put their suitcases down at the foot of the staircase.

Walking behind his wife down the hallway, heading for what he presumed was the sitting room, Ray was again struck with the marked differences between this house and the farmhouse back home. He took in the curving, bannistered staircase leading up to the second floor, the gleaming wood floors covered with thick carpets, the heavy drapes at the windows that kept out the winter chill. Crystal chandeliers hung from the high ceiling, and the gilded frame of the painting over the hearth in the living room gleamed dully in the afternoon light. Ray chuckled inwardly as he noticed it: no old ox yoke for Reverend Dunne, then.

But, he thought, his humor fading as he shifted his gaze from the decorations to the tall, stern man waiting for them next to the hearth, the house was lacking something, for all its splendor. *A soul*, he decided the next instant. This was a house, not a home. Just as, for years, the farmhouse had been nothing but a place to rest and eat. It hadn't always been like that, and it had changed again, once Livvy and later Baby Danny had arrived, bringing warmth and life with them. Ray felt a sudden stab of pity for the reverend, alone in this big, cold mansion.

"Hello, Papa." Livvy's voice was small, and Ray stepped a little closer to her, trying to offer her support by his presence.

Dunne nodded tightly at his daughter, his face impassive. "Olivia."

"Um, Papa, this is Raymond." Livvy gestured at Ray, who snatched off the hat he realized was still perched on his head and stuck out a hand.

"Pleased to meet you, sir."

The reverend looked at the proffered hand for a moment, before reluctantly accepting it. His grip was as aloof as his expression. "Mr Singleton."

"And this," Livvy shifted Daniel on her hip, smiling warmly at the baby, "is Daniel. Say hello to your grandfather, Danny."

Dunne's glance toward the boy was cool and brief, though Danny was staring back at him with curiosity.

"I trust you had a pleasant journey?" Reverend Dunne's tone was clipped, despite the courtesy,

and he had turned his gaze to some point just across Livvy's shoulder.

"Yes sir, we did," Ray answered, before Livvy had a chance to. Well, as pleasant as could be expected in a train overfull with people going home for the holidays.

"Good." Dunne gave a curt nod. "I've asked Mrs Holm to prepare the front guest room for your use. She'll show you up." He flicked a hand and, looking back, Ray noticed the woman who'd opened the front door for them earlier was now hovering just outside in the hallway. He guessed she was the reverend's housekeeper.

Dunne spoke again. "I suppose you'll want to freshen up a bit."

"Yes, thank you." Ray reckoned they could all do with a few minutes to recollect themselves. Meeting the reverend for the first time hadn't gone as well as he'd hoped—clearly, the man wasn't overly pleased to see them—but Ray thought it probably hadn't gone as badly as Livvy had perhaps feared, either.

He turned toward the waiting housekeeper, but beside him, Livvy hesitated. "Papa—."

"Oh, and Mr Singleton?" The reverend spoke over his daughter. "Once you've taken your belongings upstairs, I'd like you to join me in my study for a few minutes."

"Yes, sir."

Livvy gave him a worried look, but Ray smiled back encouragingly. He'd be fine. The reverend might seem a formidable man, and he doubted the subject of their conversation would be anything pleasant, he wasn't as affected by her father's manner as she clearly was.

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Another ten minutes on, after having lugged everything upstairs, Ray wasn't feeling quite so self-assured. Reverend Dunne had been seated behind his desk when Mrs Holm showed Ray into his study: a gloomy room filled with heavy furniture and books.

"Mr Singleton." The reverend didn't get up, but gestured to a chair across from the desk. "Did you want something to drink? I don't abide alcohol in my house, but I can call for some tea, or lemonade?"

"No, thank you, I'm fine." Ray perched on the chair, wondering if he should ask the reverend to call him Ray, but after a moment's contemplation decided against it; the reverend seemed to wear his stiff formality like a cloak. No, best Ray go along with that for now.

He waited for the reverend to explain why he'd called Ray to his study, but the other man didn't speak again, and the oppressive silence that fell on the room was only broken by the occasional sound of traffic moving past the house and the soft scuffle of feet overhead. Ray had left Livvy unpacking their things, while Danny was taking a much-needed nap in the crib that had been put up in a corner of the bedroom. Catching sight of it as they'd entered the room, Livvy had stared at it for a long time, before letting out a strange noise Ray hadn't quite

been able to place and walking over to it. "I think that's Abby's and my old crib," she'd whispered, half-disbelieving, while trailing one hand over the smooth, wood railing.

"So...." Dunne clearing his throat brought Ray back to the present. "Mr Singleton, I want to formally thank you. For taking on my daughter and her... her progeny."

Ray sat up straight. "That's my son you're talking about..., sir." He only added the courtesy at the last instant. Because he'd try to be nice to the reverend, for Livvy's sake, but he'd be damned if he let him say anything bad about the baby.

The reverend's own head snapped up at Ray's outburst. For the first time Ray thought the man actually looked *at* him, instead of letting his gaze slide over him. Ray also thought he saw something besides cold displeasure in Dunne's eyes, though it was gone before he could pinpoint what it was. "Hm, I see." Dunne stapled his hands in front of him on the desk. "That's... good." He nodded, as if to confirm it to himself. "Anyway, please accept my gratitude."

Ray waited to see if the reverend would continue to say more. Ask questions, maybe, about how Livvy was adapting to farm life, or about Daniel, or perhaps to make sure Ray himself was treating his daughter right. But Dunne seemed to have sunk deep into thoughts of his own.

Ray coughed softly. "Perhaps," he offered quietly, "I should thank you."

Reverend Dunne blinked. "I beg your pardon?" He arched an eyebrow.

"Yes. See, if not for you," Ray leaned forward, putting his hands on his knees, struggling not to wipe his palms on his pant legs, "I'd never have met Livvy. And she—and Daniel—are the best thing to ever happen to me."

Dunne stared at him, his expression skeptical. "What she's done—."

"Doesn't matter." Ray didn't let the reverend finish. He wouldn't allow the man to badmouth Livvy any more than he'd allow him to say anything about his son. "She's the best wife a man could want." Even if she was still a lousy cook, he added in his own mind. Best not say that out loud, though.

Dunne continued to regard him quietly for a very long time. "She was always full of promise," he muttered. Ray thought he was only half-addressing him. "When her mother fell ill...." Again, the reverend's voice trailed off for a moment. "She was a good daughter."

"She still is." Ray kept his voice low, quiet, as if talking to a skittish lamb that might dart away if he spoke too loudly. "Maybe she made a mistake, but she's paid for that, don't you think?" He held his breath, waiting to see if the crack he'd detected in the reverend's armor would widen.

Dunne gave a shudder, lifting his gaze to Ray's. The coldness that had momentarily lessened was back, and Ray's heart sank. "She brought shame to this family. That is not so easily

forgotten or forgiven."

Somewhere in the house, a bell rang.

"Dinner is ready." Dunne pushed his chair back, his tone brusque; clearly, the interview was over.

Ray pulled in a lungful of air, knowing it'd be futile to protest the reverend's accusation. He was starting to see, though, why Livvy thought her case might be hopeless. Sighing to himself, he followed Dunne out of the study. It was going to be a long Christmas.

But at least—Ray smiled up at Livvy as she came down the stairs, apparently also in response to the dinner bell— they'd be facing her family together.

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