

This Winter Night

Formerly titled: Eleven Pipes on a Winter's Night

By PG Forte



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This story takes place eight years before the events in *This Winter Heart*, during the early (and happier) days of Dario and Ophelia's marriage. Enjoy!

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Santa Fe, The Republic of New Texacali, 1862

Ophelia's breath fogged up the glass as she gazed out her parlor window at the wintry landscape beyond. A light snow had begun to fall again, just enough to further obscure her view. She frowned crossly and shivered as she used her hand to wipe the pane clean once again. Despite the fire blazing in the room at her back, the cold seeped in through the thin glass and she pulled her wrap more tightly around her. She'd be warmer if she were seated by her hearth, but she was hoping to catch a glimpse of her husband returning to the house and was reluctant to leave her post.

She couldn't understand what Dario was up to. He'd seemed so anxious to get back home, to have her all to himself once more. Or so he'd said, when he insisted they cut their trip short. Yet, no more than five minutes after they'd arrived home he'd hurried off in the direction of the stables, with an armload of blueprints he'd brought back from Pennsylvania with him, leaving her all alone to see them both unpacked. Whatever Dario was up to, out in the old barn he called his workshop, he'd been at it for hours.

Not that she had any reason to complain overmuch. She'd known when she'd married him that Dario was a man with many interests and many responsibilities. She'd never expected him to dance attendance on her every minute of the day. And, after all, this was her home now too. She should be able to find all sorts of ways to keep herself happily occupied—and for the most part, she could. It's just that it was still the Christmas season and she was not quite ready for them to be done with their holiday yet. Tomorrow was Twelfth Night. Couldn't they at least have prolonged their trip for the traditional Twelve Days?

She knew most gentlemen in Dario's position would likely have insisted they not go away at all, but spend the entire Christmas holiday in their own home. Certainly, that was what her in-laws had expected them to do. The older Leonides had made no secret of the fact that they were counting on their son and his wife to attend all the more important year-end social functions, just as they had last year. They'd been most displeased when Dario decided they'd do otherwise.

Though she'd tried her best to hide it, her husband must have sensed how homesick Ophelia had been last year, how out-of-place and alone she'd been made to feel on that, their first Christmas as a married couple. He'd sworn to her that this year would be different and he'd kept that promise, calmly defying his family's wishes and taking Ophelia to spend almost two weeks at her father's home in Pennsylvania. They'd visited her father and their friends, and gone to parties where she was welcomed, not shunned or stared at. Still, Ophelia couldn't help but wish their holiday could have lasted just a few days more.

"Come away from that window now, missus," Ophelia's housekeep urged as she wheeled the tea-trolley into the parlor. "You're going to catch your death of cold standing there like that. Why not come and sit by the fire now and have your tea."

"Thank you, Mrs. Harrison." Ophelia turned reluctantly away from the window. She gazed in regret at the homey scene before her, the greenery decorating the mantel, the *piñon* logs crackling cheerily in the hearth, the gleaming silver tea service she'd received as a wedding gift, the plates piled high with delicacies. It was all so perfect and it only made her long for Dario's company even more. How wonderful it would be if they could both enjoy spending the holidays here. Perhaps, if they

had children they might, but almost two years had elapsed without a sign that any were forthcoming. Something Ophelia's mother-in-law never seemed tired of mentioning each time she saw her. "Everything looks lovely, but I think I'd rather wait for Dario to return before I eat." Surely, he would not be very much longer?

Mrs. Harrison frowned. "Well, I reckon Mr. Leonides can tell time as well as the next man. But he missed his luncheon too and if his watch hasn't told him it's tea-time yet, I'm sure his stomach will soon acquaint him with the fact. Either way, it's no reason for you to go without. Look here now," she said, indicating a plate of cookies. "Cook's even included some of her special *bisochitos*, because she knows how much you like them. Only imagine the fuss there'd be in the kitchen if I were to bring the tea things back in without your having eaten them. Why, she'd be insulted, she would, and likely get to thinking you prefer the fancy food you were served back East to her own cooking."

Ophelia was touched as always by the older woman's concern for her. Her nose had already picked up the mouth-watering, anise-and-cinnamon fragrance of the little cookies she'd first tasted at her wedding feast and which she'd since come to associate with her new home. They were among Dario's favorites as well, and she knew cook could be counted on to keep baking up large batches for his benefit on every holiday and special occasion, whether or not Ophelia ever ate another. Still, "Well, I certainly wouldn't want either of you to think your efforts weren't appreciated," she said, smiling as she crossed to the hearth.

She'd no sooner picked up one of the cookies, however, when the sound of the front door opening reached her ears. Footsteps approached, her gaze flew to the parlor's open doorway. Her breath caught and her lips curved into an eager smile, just as always seemed to happen whenever Dario appeared. "You're just in time for tea," she said in greeting.

Rubbing his hands briskly together, Dario returned her smile. "Can it wait? There's something I want to show you first."

Ophelia blinked in surprise. "All right," she replied, distractedly drinking in every detail of her husband's appearance, just as though they'd been apart for weeks instead of mere hours. Snowflakes dusted the shoulders of his overcoat; more snow glittered in his dark hair. His cheeks were rosy, flushed with cold and his eyes, when he looked at her, glowed even more warmly. "What is it you want to show me?"

"Something I've been working on. It's down in the workshop. Hurry and get your cloak and boots."

"Mr. Leonides," Mrs. Harrison interrupted, her tone scandalized. "Surely you'll want to come in and have your tea and get yourself warmed up before you go out again, or drag Mrs. Leonides out into the cold?"

Dario shrugged. "It's not that cold and, in any case, we won't be out in it very long." He gestured toward the window. "Besides, it'll be getting dark soon, and will only get colder. The tea will keep. Send it back to the kitchen, if it gets to be too long, and ask cook to make us another pot."

"I'll go and get my things," Ophelia said, flashing an apologetic glance at her housekeeper. Mrs. Harrison rolled her eyes but made no further protest. She seemed more resigned to Dario's manner, rather than aggravated by it. Then again, she'd been his housekeeper for quite some time now, Ophelia reflected. She'd been with the family, in one capacity or another, ever since Dario was a little boy and so had probably seen a lot of it.

As Ophelia made to hurry past him, Dario snagged her wrist and brought her to a stop. He lifted her hand to his lips and took a bite of the cookie she'd forgotten she was still holding. Then he licked at the sugar and cinnamon still clinging to her fingertips and smiled. "Delicious as always," he murmured. A wicked smile played over his lips. Ophelia felt her cheeks grow warm. He wasn't talking just about the cookies and, given his tone and the heat in his eyes, she didn't think their housekeeper would be fooled into thinking he was either.

"Dario." Her voice was weak, breathless, embarrassed. He chuckled in response.

"Hurry back."

Her husband was pacing in the front hallway when Ophelia returned, just a few minutes later. He stopped to stare at her as she came down the stairs, still fumbling with the fastenings to the new cloak he'd bought for her last week in Philadelphia. It

was made of red wool, floor-length, with a deep hood and trimmed in white fur. Ophelia thought it quite becoming and, if the look Dario was giving her was anything to go by, he thought so too.

“My God, you’re beautiful. Come here.” Dario’s voice was husky. He took hold of Ophelia’s shoulders, drew her close and slanted his lips over hers.

Ophelia could not repress the moan that slipped past her lips. Her breasts felt heavy and the liquid warmth between her legs had her pressing her thighs tightly together. She leaned even closer to Dario, craving more of his touch, more of his kisses, until the measured tread of footsteps in the back hallway reminded her of their location. She pulled back. “Dario, stop. We can’t. What if someone sees?”

“And? What of it?” He raised one aristocratic eyebrow in a look that was so impossibly—and unconsciously—arrogant that Ophelia couldn’t help but smile. “Let them see. It seems to me I’ve every right to kiss my own wife in my own front hallway. Unless she objects?”

Ophelia shook her head. “No, of course not.” But a few moments longer and they’d be doing more than just kissing. And that was something she would object to—at least in public. “I thought there was something you wished to show me?”

Dario’s smile returned. “Right. Come along then.” He took hold of her hand and led her outside. As they walked through the gently falling snow, Ophelia glanced around appreciatively. Even partially obscured, the rocky landscape around them was nothing at all like the soft rolling hills she was used to. Still, it was a raw, rough beauty to the place and there was no denying it.

They stopped at last by the old barn that housed Dario’s workshop. The doors were massive. Thick wooden planks banded by iron, they looked impossibly heavy. Ophelia’s eyes widened in surprise when Dario pushed them open with ease. Curious, she looked more closely and soon realized it wasn’t just the well-oiled track or the chain and pulley that allowed Dario to accomplish such a feat. She recognized the workmanship on the pneumatic hinges attached to the door’s frame, and knew her father had had a hand in their design.

Dario twisted a small handle located on the wall beside the door and blaus gas lamps set along the walls and rafters flared to life, illuminating the barn’s interior.

“What have you been doing in here all day?” she asked, still looking around. A large worktable, draped in a canvas tarpaulin, dominated the space.

“Come and see.” Dario grabbed hold of her hand again and led her toward the table. With a flourish, he whisked the canvas away, revealing a miniature landscape. Ophelia recognized it as a replica of their house and the surrounding property. “Well?” he asked eagerly. “What do you think of it?”

Ophelia stared at it in puzzlement. “It’s beautiful but...what’s it for?”

“It’s for you. It’s a model of the garden I’m going to build for you utilizing some of your father’s technology. I know you’ve been feeling homesick. I thought this might help.”

He was building her a garden? Something to make her feel more at home—here in his home. Ophelia blinked back her tears, so moved by Dario’s gesture that she could not find the words to express it. Not that she could have spoken them, even if she had found them. As it was, she had to swallow hard before she could talk at all. “Oh, Dario, thank you.”

“Wait.” He smiled again. “That’s not all. There’s still one more thing more you have to see.” He pressed a button on the side of the display and suddenly the air was filled with an almost-unearthly music.

“What are those?” Ophelia asked staring, mesmerized at the odd figures that had appeared within the display. They were strange little things, hunched-backed little creatures with feathery head-dresses. Each one carried a tiny flute and danced merrily amidst the miniature landscape.

Dario picked one up and place it on his open hand, where it continued to dance and play. “This is Kokopelli,” he said, his tone reverent. “The flute player. He’s a very important spirit here. It’s said that it’s his song that melts the snow and brings

winter to an end. It's also claimed that it's he who fertilizes crops, who makes the land and all the plants and creatures on it conceive and bear new life. Although he's also known as a Trickster, occasionally."

New life. Ophelia studied the little dancer more closely. Strange though it sounded, she could well believe the claims. There was something magical about the song. She felt it reverberating deep inside her, resonating with everything she was or felt or dreamed of being. Her head swam suddenly and she drew a long breath, feeling distinctly shaky. "And are there always so many of them?" she asked, gesturing at the table.

"Oh. That." Dario laughed and gently returned the little doll to the table. "No, not usually. But I was so eager to get back here and get started on this that I completely forgot what day it was, along with the fact that you'd wanted to stay until after Twelfth Night."

"I...it-it's all right," Ophelia stammered. She ducked her head, feeling guilty now for her earlier unkind thoughts. "I do understand that you have important things to do and cannot spend all your time with me. I'm grateful we were able to go at all."

Dario reached out and drew her into his arms. "It's not all right," he said as he lifted her chin and gazed down at her sternly. "And there's nothing more important to me than you." He nodded at the table. "It's the Eleventh Day of Christmas, Lia. And those eleven pipers are piping just for you." He leaned in and brushed a tender kiss across her lips. "Because you are, and always will be, my own true love."

"Oh, Dario." Tears sparked in Ophelia's eyes. "I do love you so."

"And I you, Lia," Dario answered drawing her close. "No matter what happens. Always."



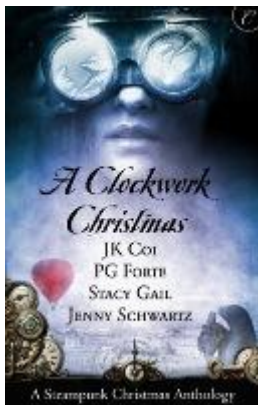
Santa Fe, The Republic of New Texacali, 1870

Eight years ago, Ophelia Leonides's husband cast her off when he discovered she was not the woman he thought she was. Now destitute after the death of her father, Ophelia is forced to turn to Dario for help raising the child she never told him about.

Dario is furious that Ophelia has returned, and refuses to believe Arthur is his son—after all, he thought his wife was barren. But to avoid gossip, he agrees to let them spend the holidays at his villa. While he cannot resist the desire he still feels for Ophelia, Dario despises himself for being hopelessly in love with a woman who can never love him back.

But Dario is wrong: Ophelia's emotions are all too human, and she was brokenhearted when he rejected her. Unsure if she can trust the man she desperately loves, she fears for her life, her freedom and her son if anyone else learns of her true nature...

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