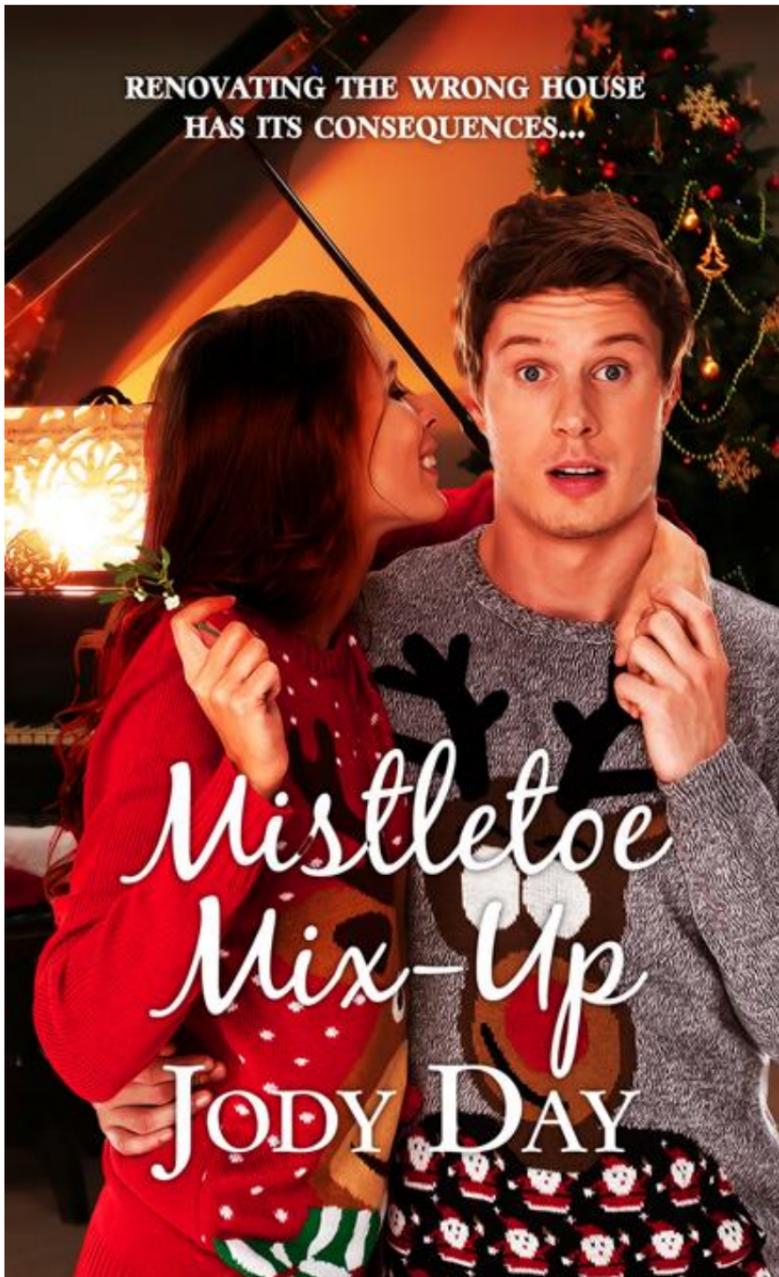


RENOVATING THE WRONG HOUSE
HAS ITS CONSEQUENCES...

*Mistletoe
Mix-Up*
JODY DAY



Mistletoe
Mix-up

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Mistletoe Mix-up

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Dedication

For Rise' Uttley, faithful prayer partner. Thanks for
your ever-ready support.

What People are Saying

"An enchanting, heart-warming Christmas gift of a story."

~Lisa Hannon, Author of *This Little Pig*,
A Flak Anders Mystery, and
Volumes 1 and 2 of *She's Thinking Out Loud*.

"The suspense and tension increase until the author brings everything together in a satisfying resolution. This is a delightful Christmas novella and will leave the reader wishing for more."

~Donn Taylor, author of the *Preston Barclay
Mystery Series*

1

Evan bit his pencil so hard his jaws hurt. The Baroque and Classical periods blurred together, even after all he'd studied. The difficulty mounted as he tried to concentrate on his Music History final. He'd face Christmas break with no place to go as soon as he turned in his paper.

What was it, Mom's fourth or fifth marriage? For Evan, her honeymoon cruise meant another holiday in the dorm. She'd resorted to texted him her news this time. He didn't know what hurt worse, the text wedding announcement, or the "Surely one of the churches would have a meal or celebration you could join? I'll make it up to you when I get back."

She would. She'd descend on him with lavish gifts and apologies. College was a welcome relief from another new daddy, or rather, sugar daddy. Still, he couldn't bear another lonely Christmas.

Would Mom keep her apartment this time? Could it really be love if she insisted on a backup plan? What would happen to his piano?

He closed his eyes and mentally put himself on the piano bench next to Mrs. Miller. He'd been small for a fourth grader, and she wasn't much bigger.

"If you're going to be here every day until your mom gets off work, you may as well have a lesson too," she'd said at the end of a long day of teaching. Since Mom had started dropping him off at Mrs.

Miller's while she worked, he'd do his homework and then sit on the couch while she taught at the piano. One student after another came and went, some putting joy on her face, and others not so much. He'd watched her close the door behind unprepared students with a heavy sigh, and had determined to be one of the ones that made her smile.

She fed him things he liked to eat, let him read her books, and sent him outside to shoot baskets into an old hoop nailed to the back of the garage. He developed a pretty good three-pointer, but none of the guys at school seemed to care.

After lessons, she'd fix his dinner and tell him funny stories. He loved her funny accent. As his skills increased, Mrs. Miller featured him in recitals. Then his nickname changed from "four eyes" to "Maestro" to "Mozart".

She'd worked tirelessly to get him scholarship auditions. If it hadn't been for her, he'd never have gotten into college. Mom never stayed with anyone long enough for the guy to help him out. Evan didn't care; he didn't want their money, anyway.

Mrs. Miller had died his junior year. She left him her piano. He realized he'd never heard her first name, Dominique, until the funeral. Where were the students she'd spent her life teaching? Just a few members of her church showed up. He overheard someone say her much younger brother was out of the country on business.

After that, Evan had thrown himself into his studies with a vengeance. He'd spent what little money he had on moving Mrs. Miller's piano to his mom's house. He'd dreamed of her beaming face at his program. Would Mom make it at least?

There was no money for graduate school. He had no idea what he would do after graduation. Nothing would happen, however, if he didn't finish the final.

He chewed on his pencil and pushed his sliding glasses back into place. Seriously? A brief essay on the differences between Baroque and Classical? He reigned in the urge to just blow it off.

Let's see. The Baroque music was more complex and the Classical more conservative in form and theory. Or was it the other way around? The clicking of the clock on Professor Maybank's classroom boomed in his ears. *Focus, Evan.* He summoned a little more determination and zeroed in on the essay.

He looked up as he put the period on the final sentence, his pencil chewed to pieces. "*I'm last?*" Of course. Everyone else was anxious to get home for the holidays.

Professor Maybank took the ornaments off of a bedraggled tree in the corner of the room. It reminded Evan of their tree before Mom started looking for a rich husband. He kind of hated to see the little tree come down.

"Sorry I made you wait. I'm sure you have plans." Evan placed his final exam on Professor Maybank's cluttered desk. If it wouldn't sound so lame, he'd ask to have the tree in his dorm room.

"Hey, no problem. Where you headed?" The professor folded the little blue blanket that had circled the bottom of the forlorn tree.

"The dorm, I'm afraid. My mom's on her honeymoon." No use explaining. His heart fell as Maybank stuffed the tree in a muslin bag.

"Well, congratulations. I'd invite you, but we're going to Florida," he said. "I've been promising my

wife a trip, and this is the longest I have off.”

“Well, enjoy it.” Florida sounded like the least Christmassy place on earth. Except maybe the deep dark Amazon forest. Could he help it if he loved Christmas?

“Hey, Edwards, I saw an ad on the bulletin board outside. Somebody needs a house-sitter over the holidays. Might be better than the dorm, and maybe there’s cash involved.” Professor Maybank put some papers in his briefcase and snapped it shut.

“Thanks, I’ll check that out.” Sounded good, but maybe too good to be true? They’d have to have a piano so he could practice for his recital. “Merry Christmas, Professor, see you in January.”

“And to you. I’m really looking forward to your recital. How’s that Chopin coming? It’s my favorite,” he said as he headed for the door.

“I still have some tricky measures to master, but I think it will be ready in time.” He hoped he could get it perfectly accomplished over the holidays.

Evan left the building. A cold rain splashed in the street. He ran through the freezing deluge to the University quad and found the ride board, notices trying to detach from thumb tacks in the wind.

Christmas Room and Board in Exchange for Holiday decorating in Candle, Tx.

At least he thought that’s what he read. The phone number, the only part of the message not smeared in the rain, might be his holiday salvation. He punched it into his cell and sought cover under the student center awning.

“Yes, hello, I’m calling about the room and board over the holidays? This is Evan Edwards. I’m a music student at East Texas University.”

"Oh, wonderful. Can you climb a ladder? Put up Christmas decorations? Make sure they all stay in working order while we're away?" The man's thick French accent seemed cheerful and hopeful. "I'm Francis Cartier, by the way."

"I've done it many times for my mom. Sure, I think I can handle that."

"Well, it's a big house and we have a lot of decorations. We will be out of the country until Christmas Day, and want to return home with everything ready. We're hosting a large party on the 25th."

"Sounds good. Will it be a problem for me to stay until the new term begins in the middle of January?" Evan gulped and crossed his fingers in his jacket pocket.

"Not at all, figured as much. Look, if you can give me a reference to call, we can seal the deal. Can't let a perfect stranger in the house without a reference, you understand," Mr. Cartier said.

"Of course. You can call Professor Maybank. He's also Dean of the Music School, and my piano teacher."

"The number, *s'il vous plait*?"

Evan gave him the number. Surely the professor wouldn't mind him giving the number out since he'd suggested the lead in the first place.

"*Merci*. I'll call you back when I've spoken to him."

Please pick up. He hoped the professor would answer since he was trying to get out of town. Nearly everyone was gone, or in the process of leaving.

His cell buzzed a few minutes later.

"It seems you come highly recommended. The address is 500 N. Frond Street. The key is under a pot

by the front door. You will have to dig a little for it. When can you get there?"

"I can leave today. It's just a couple hours' drive." He felt his face lift in a smile. Christmas in a home, a nice one, at that.

"Great! Your room will be just off the kitchen. You are welcome to spend Christmas with my wife and me. We'll only be there for a few days, and then we will have to return to London. You'll have the place to yourself. The pantry is stocked, and there's an envelope of cash in the drawer next to the stove for incidentals. There's a list of numbers to call posted on the refrigerator in case anything happens. You shouldn't be bothered. The cook and the gardener are away for the holidays."

Cartier must be rolling in the dough. Must be the kind of people who hung out with people like his mother. Or rather his mother and whatever money bags she'd attached herself to.

"Sounds good," Evan said. *Sounds amazing.*

"You can take the decorations down any time you want before you go back to school. Merci, of course. Oh, I forgot. Our neighbor's daughter is a chef, and she will be coming in Christmas Eve to prepare the meal for us. She's a bit temperamental, so you'll need to stay out of her way. I'd appreciate it if you'd be her runner if she needs anything," Cartier said.

"Sure, whatever you need." Evan couldn't believe his luck. What if he'd just given up and stayed at the dorm? His friends always invited him home with them, but he hated feeling like the third wheel. Plus there was the whole gift thing, something he didn't have the ready cash for. Unwanted guest, freeloader, and no gift to give. No way.

“Oh, and one more thing. The chef’s father will try to help you with the decorating. Under no circumstances must you allow him. He has a heart condition,” Cartier said.

“I hear you. I’ll be sure and not let that happen.”

“Well, all right, then. We can be hard to reach sometimes, but as I said, the numbers of my people in the states are posted. The decorations are in the basement. You won’t have any trouble finding the door in the kitchen that leads down.”

“Fine, thanks very much. Mr. Cartier, you wouldn’t happen to have a piano, would you?” Evan asked.

“*Oui*. A Steinway. Will that do?”

“Oh, yes. I need to practice for my graduation recital.” This just kept getting better and better.

“Well, you’re welcome to play it. Possibly you could play some Christmas carols at our party that day?”

“Sure! Perfect. Thanks again. Bye.”

“*Au revoir*.” Mr. Cartier ended the call.

The increasing rainstorm and Cartier’s thick accent made Candle sound like something else, but Evan knew where it was. Just two hours down I-20 East toward Dallas. Alone again, but at least it wouldn’t be in the freezing dorm where they turned down the thermostat over the break. He’d be in a home, with decorations.

He splashed through puddles to the dorm and scrounged his closet for a backpack. Some jeans, a couple of sweaters—that should be enough. He scooped up his car keys and made his way to the parking lot. Maybe he’d run by the dime store and grab one of the giant candy canes his mom used to

stick in his hot chocolate. No matter how broke she was, she always got him hot chocolate and a big one-dollar candy cane.

His mother texted him just as he started the car. *'Bout to board, Merry Christmas, sweetheart.*

He returned with, *OK Mom. Found a job in Candle, TX over the break.*

He'd barely inserted the key into the ignition when she replied. *Text me the address so I can send you something.*

He decided to call her. He wanted to hear her voice.

No answer.

Onward to Candle, Texas.

~*~

Risé stood staring out the kitchen window. She scrunched her nose against a burning smell. "Oh, the cookies!" Ugh, she'd burned them. So much for trying sugar-free, gluten-free treats for Dad. Maybe the health food store downtown could fix him up. She dumped the whole mess in the sink.

Not like she had anything on her mind, right? Not thinking about Jeff. Nope, nada, no way.

"What happened in here?"

"Oh, hey, Dad." She pulled down her sleeve to cover a bruise on her arm. "Sorry, I burned your tree bark cookies." Risé tried to laugh as she pecked her father on the cheek.

"That was your idea, not mine. I don't have to eat cookies at all," Dad said. He wrapped his arms around her. "I'm just glad to have you home."

"Your diabetes diagnosis changes everything, Dad. Can't have you eating all that calorie- and fat-laden Christmas food." She patted his stomach, which competed with his belt for notches.

He laughed. "It's not that bad." He ran his hand through graying red hair.

Risé pulled away from him and grasped his shoulders. "This is serious. I have to take care of you."

"I may be getting older, but I think I can handle my problems and take care of myself. I've been doing great since the doc laid it on me. It's you I'm worried about," he said. His blue eyes searched hers.

She looked away. "What? Why, Dad? Just because I burned the cookies?" *This holiday can't be about me. Hard enough without Mom here.* She'd tell him her news, all of it, after Christmas.

"You're about to graduate with a degree in Home Economics, specializing in Culinary Arts. I've never seen you burn anything. Well, not counting the cake you made me in the fourth grade. Plus, you haven't been yourself since you got home. What's up?" He crossed his arms and leaned against the kitchen counter.

The pride in his voice at the mention of her degree made a lump in her throat. How could she tell him? "Nothing, Dad, I just burned a batch of cookies, that's all." She turned to the sink.

"Still hard to come home to a house without your mom here, especially at Christmas time, I imagine." He looked down and tightened his lips.

"Always, and definitely harder during the holidays. Mom loved it so much. But really Dad, I'm fine. Let me clean this up, and I'll fix us some dinner." With a steel wool pad, she scraped at the black bits of

cookie on the baking pan.

"Two years and it's still hard. But we're making it, right? Just so sorry that Carol and Fin won't be across the street for you either. I don't think she'll be coming back from the hospital this time," he said.

How could she be so selfish? Her troubles were nothing compared to her beloved neighbors'. To think that family friends were experiencing what she and Dad went through just two years before. Too much. *I hate cancer.*

Dad shook his head. "What's wrong with me? I came in here to see about you, and I turned the whole thing into a downer."

"No, Dad. It's OK. Let's don't talk about it anymore. It's Christmas. Let's go look at the lights after dinner, like we used to before I went off to University. I'll take a thermos of hot chocolate, and it will be fun." Did they have any sugar-free cocoa mix?

"Yes, let's. Will Jeff be coming to see you at all during this holiday? You know he's welcome to come."

She dropped the baking pan into the sink. "Oops, I've splashed water everywhere. I'll clean it up. Why don't you go get your jacket, and we'll leave in just a few."

"Ris ?"

"Yeah, Dad. I'll clean this up, and we'll just drive through somewhere for cocoa. Just give me a minute." *Please don't ask me any more questions.*

"Ris , look at me." He took a dish towel from the drawer by the sink and handed it to her. "What's going on, and where'd you get this bruise?" He reached for her wrist and squinted at the dark spot on her forearm.

She dried her hands, and then dabbed at her eyes

where tears began to form. Her dad opened his arms, and she fell into them. "Oh, Dad," and the tears flowed.

His cell phone rang. He kept one arm around her while he reached in his pocket for the phone. "Hey, Henry, what's up?" He nodded as he listened.

"What is it now?" Risé whispered.

Old Henry Gray called her dad for help all the time.

"I see. OK. Don't worry, I'll check it out. Bye now."

Whatever it was, it might get her out of having to spill it about Jeff. For now, anyway.

"He says some stranger just let himself into Carol and Fin's. I'll go check it out. You stay here."

2

He could have sworn that Cartier said Frond Street, but the thick French accent distorted what was apparently Front Street, which was the only street in town that remotely sounded or was spelled with Fro. Evan pulled into the driveway. 500 N. Front Street was the only black hole on the block. All the other houses vied for the attention of a satellite with their cheery Christmas lights decor.

Somehow Cartier's impression of opulence seemed overstated. A modest, one-story wood-frame home painted white nestled behind a border of boxwood. Hunter green trimmed windows flanked both sides of a red front door. Nice enough dwelling for his break, so what did it matter? His visions of tedious hours of decorating the large house he'd presumed about vanished into a much smaller operation. *Piece of cake.*

He located the flower pot and moved it aside. The key was visible, not buried like Cartier said. Oh well, as long as it works. He slipped the key into the lock and let himself into the dark home.

He ran his hand over the wall inside the door, found the light switch and flipped it on. Again, the word modest played in his mind, but added a few notes of cozy, quaint, and comfortable.

He looked for his off-the-kitchen guest room. Room? More like a pantry, fully stocked as promised,

but no bed. Wait, was that a sleeping bag in the corner?

Ha! He should have checked Cartier's references instead of the other way around. Oh, well, better than the dorm. He wouldn't try to cram himself into a sleeping bag on the pantry floor, "guest room" or no.

A strange inkling in his stomach made him wonder if he was in the right place. He looked around the kitchen. The promised list on the refrigerator, mostly doctor's numbers, but it was there nonetheless. He pulled open the drawer by the sink for the envelope of cash. It was there, but contained five dollars. *Seriously?* What kind of exaggerator was this guy? A small framed picture of a middle-aged couple in front of the Eiffel Tower put him at ease. The inscription on the frame read C & F Forever.

Whatever.

Evan left the pantry holding the green, military issue sleeping bag in one hand, and a can of chili in the other. He stepped into the family room and tossed the sleeping bag on the floor. He dropped his backpack beside it. A very large Bible lay open on the coffee table.

He plopped down on the couch and flipped through it. The massive book resembled his music scores or textbook notes. Underlined, highlighted, earmarked, and spots. Coffee, or maybe tears?

The display made Evan think there might be something going on in the Cartier family. His growling stomach sent him back to the kitchen. His thoughts were confirmed by the basket full of prescription medicines on the kitchen counter. He spun the can of chili around the electric can opener, rummaged for a small saucepan, and then spooned in the chili. He turned the stovetop burner to low, and then perused