



PROPOSING AT THE WRONG TIME
COULD HAVE ITS CONSEQUENCES...

Mistletoe Misses

JODY
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Dedication

For all the nurses, doctors, and front line worker heroes
who keep the country going. Thank you.

1

Evan stood in the middle of his sparsely furnished apartment in New York watching his frozen dinner go round and round. The microwave dinged, but he just gazed around the room. The rented black baby grand stood out among the cheap furnishings, but the holiday greens display the Cartiers had sent him decorated the piano. His two year Master's Program flew by, mostly. The last few months ruined everything.

The Great What Have You, as Professor Mallard called the pandemic, had trashed his graduation ceremony. Canceled. His girlfriend Risa's RN certification ceremony in Texas had also been canceled. At least she knew what she would be doing now. He had no clue for himself.

Guilt twisted his stomach. The consideration of all the current suffering—sickness, death, and financial ruin—running rampant in the country should be his biggest concern. He did feel concern, but he allowed himself a moment to lament the ruination of the Greatest Plan of All.

The flap of the metal slot on his front door sounded, and he walked toward it as the mail was shoved through and splatted to the floor. The manila envelope addressed to him from the school must be his diploma. At least he'd get to record his graduation recital tonight for online viewing. His hands shook at the thought.

He caught his reflection in the mirror by the door as he knelt to retrieve the mail. Whew, he needed a haircut. The black mess gave him an unkempt look. Since he'd finished all his coursework he'd done nothing but practice and watch movies, waiting for his concert tour to begin. No time for a hair appointment before the recording that night, he'd just have to make do.

His cell rang, and when he answered, Risé didn't even say hello. "It makes no sense for me to come home to Dad every day after being around all those patients. He'll balk, but I'm moving across the street. Carol and Fin gave me the house, so why not, right?"

He hated the stress in her voice, but it was so nice to hear from her anyway. How he longed to see that red silk hair and bright blue eyes. His mind's eye saw small, pale hands grasping her cell phone. He towered over her in height, and he loved that.

"Evan? I mean, you agree with me, right?"

"Of course, and yes, your dad won't like it, but you'll just be across the street. And, hello, by the way." He grinned.

"I'm sorry. It's just so much." He heard her sniffle.

He longed to take her in his arms and kiss the

stress away. Who knew when he'd be able to do that again?

Her graduation had been scheduled for the first weekend in May and his the second. They'd arranged all the plans—He'd fly home to Texas to attend her ceremony. Then, Risé's Mom and her husband, Bud, and Risé and her Dad would come to New York.

He'd planned not to propose on her weekend, because he wanted the day to be all about her hard work. He'd made reservations and arranged a candlelight dinner in New York the evening of his graduation. He'd ask her then. Everyone else would return home and Risé would stay at the hotel and spend a week with him before she returned to Texas to work at the hospital while he began his concert tour for Mr. Cartier.

But, it had all come crashing down with the pandemic. He'd stayed in New York to practice, but the bookings for his concert tour reneged, one by one. A lonely Thanksgiving had come and gone. What kind of Christmas could they have amidst this whirlwind of chaos?

"Evan, are you there? Are you busy or something?"

"No, no sweetheart. I'm just thinking about how much I miss you. I'm sorry you're having a hard time."

"With church shut down and nothing for Dad to do, I'm afraid he'll start eating unhealthy again, messing up his progress with his diabetes. I wish Fin hadn't moved to Florida after Carol passed. They were such good neighbors and friends. Fin would be a

welcome companion for Dad just now. They'd compete with each other for the best light show in the neighborhood. Dad's going to miss that camaraderie this year."

The absence of her usual joy and hopefulness jarred him. What could he do from so far away? He'd found faith when he met Risé. Her strength had helped him grow, but now she needed his strength. Did he even know how to be her rock?

"Look, when all this is over, we'll celebrate our graduations. We'll all be together again. Don't worry." Ouch. That sounded shallow compared to her struggles.

"Are you coming home now, Evan? I'm just wrecked for you about the tour. I need to see those brown eyes."

"I'm not sure, but most likely. I'm waiting for Mr. Cartier to call. He told me not to make any plans just yet. I don't know what he has going, but I'm not the only client he has with a tour canceled. He said he'd call me sometime tonight. I only want to see you; that's all I can think about."

"I've just seen so much this last month. So much fear. Every time someone has a cough, they think they have it. And the ones who are really sick, it's just awful what they are going through. And the people who are really sick are so alone. No family visits. It's difficult to keep their hopes up. Our little hospital in Candle isn't equipped for all this. We have to wait for more tests." Another snuffle.

"Risé, you can't do it all. Remember that first

Christmas Day after we first met? Your sweet neighbor Carol came home in remission, and we were just beginning to know each other. We decided to take one step at a time into our future, for us, and for those we love. Take a deep breath, sweetheart." He could use one of those kisses she gave him that day.

He heard her take that deep breath, and exhale. "Yes, you're right. I'd feel a lot better if you were here."

"You and me both."

"Hold on, Evan, they're calling me. I'll be right back."

Busyness ruled her days, but except for his recording session later in the evening, he just twiddled his thumbs. He should be making a different plan for his proposal and implement it right away. Not being on tour might mean they could marry earlier than expected, if she even said yes.

She would, wouldn't she?

He heard her crying into the phone. "Oh Evan, I've lost a patient." She dissolved into tears.

The phone went silent.

"Ris ...Ris !"

~*~

Ris  dropped her phone and ran from the nurses' station into a large storage closet.

Gwen McPherson, Director of Nurses, on loan from Marshall General, followed close on Ris 's heels.

"Get a hold of yourself, Ris , you're still on duty."

McPherson's firm voice didn't match the compassion in her blue eyes. She took Risé by the shoulders.

Risé bit her bottom lip and tried to control herself. She let her superior's firm grip steady her so she could try to swallow her grief. "Yes, ma'am."

"You're still on Mrs. Volkam's watch until the funeral home comes for her. Go to her room, help the other girls with the equipment, and fill out your report."

"Yes ma'am." Risé took another deep breath. "Thank you, Mrs. McPherson. I'm sorry."

Mrs. McPherson put her hand on Risé's cheek. "Call me Gwen. It's your first, I know. You'll have to deal with it later."

"Will I ever get used to it?"

"No, not if you want to be a good nurse, but it will be easier to deal with, over time."

"She was all alone. This will be so hard on her family." Risé straightened her scrub top and pulled a tissue from the pocket to wipe the tears from her eyes.

"Do you want me to call them? I don't mind this time," Gwen offered. A wisp of her graying brown hair escaped from a loose bun. She blew it out of her eyes. "Normally the attending doctor makes that call, but now, since they are usually alone when they pass, we ask the person that spent the most time with them."

"I understand, but thank you. I'll do it."

"Good girl. Now, let's get back out there. Ready?" she put her hand on the doorknob.

Risé steeled herself against the moments to come and then nodded.

Gwen opened the door and they headed for the nurses' station.

Risé went directly to the phone and made the hardest call she'd ever had to make in her life. She managed not to cry until the call was over. She turned to find Gwen standing there with a cup of coffee. Risé took it and wiped her tears. "Thanks," she whispered.

Three other nurses had their gazes on her as she walked back to Mrs. Volkam's room. She stood outside the door for a moment to gather her emotions, then walked in and did her duty.

2

Evan called at least ten times with no response. Finally, Risé texted him that she was OK, and that she'd talk to him that night. He breathed a sigh of relief, but he knew she was far from "OK."

Her pain left him with no appetite. He tossed the TV dinner and then donned his tuxedo and red bow tie. He arrived at the auditorium an hour early to get himself ready to perform. The recording crew was already there. Professor Mallard stood by the Steinway Grand and shook Evan's hand.

"Why do you always wear a red bow tie?" he asked. "Black is more appropriate."

"It's allowed, though, right?" Evan bent and straightened his tie in the reflection of the shiny black piano.

"Yes, but I'm just curious. I've never seen you perform without it."

"It is the color of my true love's hair."

"Ah," Professor Mallard smirked, and then chucked Evan on the shoulder with a laugh. "Young love."

"Ouch," Evan said. He rubbed his shoulder. "Thanks, that's gonna make some passages more difficult tonight."

“You’ll be fine. This is just a formality. You’ve already finished all your coursework and done a recital for the jury board. I just want one of our school’s finest talents available online. You’ll make us look good.”

“Yes, my diploma came in the mail today. No “tada” or “folderol” to speak of.” Evan shook his head.

“Well, you’re not the only one. I’m sure when the Great What Have You is over; your family and friends will celebrate. We’ll all have to be creative in this mess.”

“Ready?” Someone from the tech crew called.

Evan sat at the piano bench and prayed the prayer that he’d implemented since finding faith in Christ. *“Help this music to be a blessing and honor to You, and let it help someone get closer to You and appreciate Your beauty.”*

His last thought before the first note was of Risé. Soon he was in his other-worldly zone. He didn’t know he’d finished until he heard Professor Mallard and the crew clapping.

“Flawless,” Mallard said.

“Thank you, Sir.” *And thank You, Father.*

“Why the heck do I always feel as if I’m in church when you play? The darndest thing.”

Evan smiled. He thanked everyone again and then headed back to his apartment. He had some decisions to make before his agent called him later in the evening. He hoped Mr. Cartier would understand and help him.

He thought of a Christmas two years before when he’d faced another lonely holiday in the dorm. Thank

heaven for the job he'd gotten for that Christmas break. He'd messed up royally, and then had his life changed forever.

The only thing he knew for sure at this moment was that he had to get to East Texas.

~*~

At the end of the second worst day of her life, the first being the day her mother died, Risé sat in her car trying to sort out her brain.

Mrs. Volkam had died at only 62. She was such an active, vital person until she contracted the virus. She'd smiled every day and tried to encourage the nurses. Nothing they did kept her from deteriorating.

"It's not fair!" Risé yelled. She pounded the steering wheel, and then shredded the paper mask she tore from her face. She couldn't even pray. A glance in the rear view mirror at her distraught face shocked her. Who was that? Her face looked different somehow. Hard.

The emotions derived from losing Mrs. Volkam solidified Risé's decision. She would do everything in her power to make sure her father did not get sick. He was also 62. He could rant and rave all he wanted, but she would move into the house across the street before the night was over. She used the surprising anger that welled inside her as strength to start the car and head home.

Dad's car wasn't in the driveway. *All the better.* She went inside and gathered a few things, some clothes,

scrubs, cosmetics, her pillow, and framed pictures of Mom and Dad, and Evan. Across the street, she set up in one of the two guest rooms. The familiar indentation on the living room couch, just Risé's size from many hours visiting Carol and Fin, cocooned her as she took a shawl from the back of the couch and wrapped it around her. She kicked off her shoes and pulled her phone from her scrubs pocket.

Dad's old pick-up roared into the driveway. Where had he been? She gave him a few minutes to get inside, but he'd beat her to it. She answered the phone.

"What are you doing over there?" he asked.

"Dad, I'm moving over here for the duration. I can't risk making you sick."

Silence, then, "But I thought if you lived together, you could stay together."

"But I'm around viral patients all day long. We just can't risk it."

Again, a moment passed before he responded. "But, I'm cooking dinner."

"I'm not hungry, Dad, just exhausted. I'll give you a wave when I leave in the morning."

"Risé, your voice, it's different; it's something more than just exhausted. What's wrong?"

"It's just been a long day. Dad, what I've seen," — she tried to steady her voice — "I don't want to see you die that way."

"Did you lose a patient today, sweetie?"

She let the tears come. A minute later, she managed to say, "I can't talk about it, Dad."

"All right. I'm so, so very sorry. Have you talked

to Evan? Is he coming home?"

"He's not sure. He'll let us know something soon."

"OK, then. Listen. If we're extra careful, I'm sure I won't get it from you. You don't need to be alone. Let me come over."

"Good night, Dad." She hung up, curled into a ball, and cried herself to sleep.

~*~

"So, Evan, how did the recording go?" Mr. Cartier's voice sounded far away. His European connection must be weak.

"Pretty good, I think. What are we doing now? Wait, before you say anything, I just really need to get back to Texas. I need to be with Risé."

"Merveilleux! La Perfection! It fits right in with my plans."

"Oh? What is the plan, exactly?" Relief washed over him as he mentally flew himself to Texas.

"We'll tour via live stream. People will buy tickets and everything. It's not like an in-person concert, but it will keep you exposed and whet the public appetite to attend a concert when the world returns to normal. Where did you plan to stay? We can set up the live concerts anywhere. We'll need a venue from which to broadcast."

"I haven't thought that far ahead." He'd only thought of taking Risé into his arms.

"Why not my house in Cradle? The piano is perfect and the room is beautiful with the piney woods

showing outside the big windows.”

“I, I suppose that would be fine, yes.” *It’s only an hour’s drive to Candle, to Risé.*

“Again, la perfection. Book your flight right away, tout suite! Use the credit card I gave you for the tour. I’ll email the live stream schedule to you. I’ve hired a crew to handle all the tech. Don’t worry. *S’il te plaît*, make yourself at home.”

“Thank you so much. How are you and Mrs. Cartier?”

“Very busy trying to arrange online concerts for all the clients. We can’t breathe in these blasted masks, so we don’t leave the apartment very much. Paris cases are on the Risé, but we are fine. Call me when you get to Crandle.”

“Yes, of course, Merci,” Evan said, using the tiny bit of French he’d picked up from the Cartiers.

“Remember to go to Crandle, not Candle, to my house and not to Fin and Carol’s,” he said, laughing.

He loved to refer to Evan’s mistake of two years ago when he’d accepted a house-sitting job from Mr. Cartier over the phone. The crazy mix-up that sent him to Candle instead was the best wrong thing he ever did. He’d found faith, purpose, a family, and Risé.

“And how is your pretty little red head?”

“She’s officially an RN now. But I think she lost her first patient today.”

“Oh, no, how sad. We will add her to our prayers. Yes, you must get to her right away. Oh, by the way. Brush up on your Christmas carols. Add a few to the repertoire for the concerts. Maybe put our Christmas

tree up, near the Grand. Au revoir!" Mr. Cartier ended the call.

Evan immediately booked his flight and started packing. Within twenty-four hours, he'd be holding her.

Thank you, Father God!

3

Evan paid the taxi driver and then stood with his suitcases in the driveway of the Cartier Mansion. The scent of pine permeated the air as the wind picked up among the trees. The walkway azaleas had stopped blooming, but the trees were circled with luscious fronds of caladium. Christmas two years ago came back to him in a wave of memory.

He laughed aloud again that he'd decorated the Carter's house in Candle instead of the Cartier's house in Cradle. He marveled anew at the crazy similarities that kept him in the dark about his mistake until it was almost too late. He'd fallen in love with Risé, and he'd thought she didn't care for him, so he was headed back to the cold dorm. At the last possible moment, he saw a newspaper ad for the Grand Christmas Party at the Cartier Mansion.

The Carters lived on Front Street in Candle, the Cartiers on Frond Street in Cradle. Mr. Cartier's thick French accent contributed to the mistake, but, where would he be now if he hadn't gotten mixed up?

His mind's eye watched Risé's dad and the men from their church stringing lights at the Cartiers'. He'd always be grateful that they gave up their Christmas Eve to help him keep his promise to Mr. Cartier. What

a mad dash that had been! His whole life changed that day with the acquaintance of Mr. Cartier, the famous music promoter. All in the same day he'd made peace with his new stepfather and found purpose for his passion on the piano.

That passion had become fueled by his new faith in Christ. He wondered what sad path he might have taken if he'd not made that bizarre mistake. He felt that his life began when he'd said "Yes" to Christ, and when Risé kissed him that Christmas night. Their long distance relationship, he in New York and she at school in Texas, had been a challenge, but they saw each other as much as possible.

The only sadness, before the pandemic, had been the death of their good friend, Carol. She'd rallied and enjoyed a time of remission, but gained her heavenly home later that year. Risé was still not over it, and now she was in the throes of nursing through a pandemic.

The thought of her shook him to the present. He went inside and stowed his things. He checked his email for the concert schedule. The first one would go live in only three days. He should sit down and practice, but if he didn't get his arms around Risé soon, his mind would be jelly.

He locked the house and drove the hour to Candle. She was at work so he went to the hospital. He jogged to the entrance, but was stopped at the door.

"Do you have an appointment with one of the doctors?" A formidable, guard-like nurse held up her hand.

"Why, no, I'm here to see, well, one of the nurses."

She held out a strange instrument. "Touch thermometer." She moved it across his forehead after his nod, and took his temperature. "I'm sorry, no visitors allowed. You understand."

Of course. He knew that. What made him think he could just waltz in there and see her?

"You're right, certainly, I'm not thinking straight. Could you get a message to Risé Larkin that she has a visitor?"

"I will try, but you'll have to step outside. And where is your mask?" The nurse didn't mean to be rude, but she seemed a little short with him.

He took it out of his pocket and put it on. "I'm sorry, there you go." Did that blue paper on his face really protect anyone?

She motioned him outside. He stood out there and waited so long that he decided to text her and let her know he was there. Sort of ruined the surprise, but he just couldn't wait any longer.

He sat on a bench just outside the entrance and waited another half hour before he saw her appear on the other side of the entrance. She didn't come out.

She said something to the guard nurse, and then she stepped forward so the automatic doors opened. She held her hand up.

"Evan! I'm so happy to see you. But you can't come in, and I can't come out. I'm so sorry!" She smiled and just kept waving at him.

The disappointment that he couldn't go to her made him anxious. She was right there! But of course, he understood. She looked different. She was beautiful