

On Christmas Avenue

by
Ginny Baird



Mary reached the town square right after nightfall. Evan got to the gazebo at the same time, walking towards it from the courthouse.

“Mary.” He tipped his hat. “You all right?”

She’d worked up her nerve to say this and wasn’t backing down. “Do you mind if we sit?”

He joined her on a bench in between two prettily decorated Christmas trees. A circle of lights shone dimly above them, and snow coated the darkened stretch of ground extending toward the ice rink. Children laughed and chattered, skating along with each other. Some with adults that Mary guessed were their parents. She questioned if she’d ever become a parent one day. She’d like to, if she married somebody as wonderful as Evan.

“I was worried when you called,” he said. “I thought you might be backing out of Christmas dinner.”

“Oh no, it’s not that.” She inhaled deeply. “I just have something to tell you.”

His brow creased, and Mary pressed ahead. “It’s about...

what we talked about earlier.”

He looked hopeful for a moment, and she felt like a jerk for making him believe this was something it wasn't.

“What I mean is, Evan.” She set her hands on her knees and glanced down at the gazebo floor. “I'm sorry.” She met his eyes. “Sorry that I reacted the way I did when you were talking about a relationship. It's not that I don't want one.”

“Do you?”

“I would if I could.”

His shoulders sagged. “I'm afraid we're back where we started.”

“No. I wanted to tell you. Admit how I feel.”

He took her hand and held it. “You can always share your feelings with me. Even if they're not what I hoped. I've come to care for you deeply. I also know from experience that emotions can't be forced. If you don't feel the way about me that I do about—”

“But I do.” She squeezed his hand and he held on tight.

“Do you?”

Mary's heart pounded and her lips felt dry. “Yes, Evan. I do. So, so much. Only...” She licked her lips. “I don't think I can do long-distance with you.”

“Why not?”

“It's complicated.”

“Then explain it.”

“All right. It's hard because of who I am.”

“I get that.” He leaned nearer and her face warmed. “You're afraid of commitment.”

Mary knew she'd commit to him in a heartbeat if she could honestly believe he'd be different. That things could be different, and promises could last a lifetime. But they didn't. Her mom and dad were evidence of that. So were all her previous broken relationships. “That's not it,” she said. “I'm afraid of not being committed to.”

Evan studied her a long while. “Life's been pretty hard

on you, hasn't it?"

"I've had a good life. Lots of advantages."

"Yeah, but. Maybe not the sorts of advantages you wanted."

He was so intuitive, and really *saw* her on a much deeper level than any other man had. Maybe he was right about that. Despite the good things she'd been provided, maybe she'd been lacking in other areas: compassion, stability, emotional warmth, and enduring romantic love.

"Anyway." She hung her head. "I just wanted to tell you. It wasn't about not wanting to be with you. It's the opposite. Because I've come to care for you too. Deeply. I have. I just can't be with you like that. Not with us living in different places. I hope you understand."

He sat there a moment beside her, staring out at the skating rink. Then, he turned and met her eyes. "Believe it or not, I do."

Somehow, she felt better, though still awfully sad about going to Seattle. She'd probably feel differently once she got there, and the excitement of being in a new place took over.

"So," he said after a beat. "Are we still on for Christmas dinner?"

"Boy, are we ever!" She grinned at him, her heart feeling lighter. Evan always improved her mood. It was one of his gifts. "Does your mom make a great stuffing?"

"My dad makes the stuffing, and it's delicious."

Mary laughed. "I can't wait to taste it. I wish there was something I could bring. Maybe some wine?"

He shook his head. "Just bring yourself."

They both got to their feet, and Mary felt like something had been settled between them. Things didn't feel awkward anymore. They'd arrived at an understanding, as imperfect as it was. She was still going away, but she'd been honest with Evan about her feelings like he'd been honest with her, and communicating openly had felt so good. Relationships

weren't just about finding the right one. Often, they were about timing, too. And the timing for her and Evan just didn't seem to be right.

She thought they were about to say goodnight, then Evan surprised her with a request. "Since you're leaving here anyway, do you think you could do me one last favor?"

Her eyebrows rose.

"Dance with me."

Mary's pulse raced and her cheeks burned hot. "What? Here?"

"I would like that very much."

"But there's no music."

"No?" He cocked his chin. "Listen."

She did, but all she heard were the happy sounds from the skating rink.

"Harder," he urged.

She homed in on her surroundings and then—she heard it. The very faint tune of Christmas music spilling onto the ice...and the sound of heavy wet snow hitting the trees in the town square...the cool wintry breeze sifting through the gazebo and riffling her hair...

And the symphony of emotions written in Evan's eyes.

"What do you hear?" he asked, his voice husky.

Her smile trembled. "Christmas."

"That's what I hear, too." He shot her a lopsided grin and her heart thundered. "Thanks to you." He stepped toward her and held out his hands. Mary walked into his embrace, longing to be near him. Aching to feel his arms around her, even if this was the last time.

They surrounded her with their sturdy warmth, and she slid her arms around his neck. He gently tugged her up against him and held her tighter, as they swayed together—heart to beating heart—beneath the colorful glow of Christmas lights in the gazebo.

Evan was right. They didn't need any music. It was here

all around them, and also inside them, although nobody else could hear it. She giggled, loving this moment, but also realizing how they must look to passersby. “People are going to think we’re nuts.”

He whispered in her ear and tingles tore down her spine. “Let them.”

Mary sighed in his embrace, not wanting to think about Seattle or moving so far away. All she wanted to do was dwell on the present, so she could remember this night forever.

