

# JUKEBOX GIFTS

**Dean Wesley Smith**

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*Dean has a series of stories written around the time-travel powers of music, using the device of a jukebox. One such story has appeared in Night Cry Magazine, another will appear in By Any Other Fame, and then there is this one, "Jukebox Gifts." Perhaps, someday, he will collect them all so that we can read the adventures of Radley Stout, his bar and his magic jukebox all in one sitting.*

The stereo behind the bar was playing soft Christmas songs as I clicked the lock to the front entrance of the Garden Lounge and flicked off the outside light. I could feel the cold of the night through the wood door and the heat of the room surrounding me. I took a deep breath. Christmas Eve was finally here.

I could see the entire lounge and the backs of my four best friends sitting at the bar. I had never been much into decorating with Christmas stuff and this year was no different. My only nod to the season was small Christmas candles for each table and booth. Some customer had tied a red ribbon on one of the plants over the middle booth and the Coors driver had put up a Christmas poster declaring Coors to be the official beer of Christmas. The candles still flickered on the empty tables, but the rest of

the bar looked normal. Dark brown wood walls, dark brown carpet, an old oak bar and friends. The most important part was the friends. My four best friends' lives were as empty as mine. Tonight, on the first Christmas Eve since I bought the bar, I was going to give them a chance to change that. That was my present to them. It was going to be an interesting night.

"All right, Stout," Carl said, twisting his huge frame around on his bar stool so that he could face me as I wound my way back across the room between the empty tables and chairs. "Just what's such a big secret that you kick out that young couple and lock the door at seven o'clock on Christmas Eve?"

I laughed. Carl always got right to the point. With big Carl you always knew exactly where you stood.

"Yeah," Jess said from his usual place at the oak bar beside the waitress station, "what's so damned important you don't want the four of us to even get off our stools?" Jess was the short one of the crowd. When he stood next to Carl the top of Jess's head barely reached Carl's neck. Jess loved to play practical jokes on Carl. Carl hated it.

"This," I said as I pulled the custom-made felt cover off the old Wurlitzer jukebox and, with a flourish, dropped the cloth over the planter and into the empty front booth. My stomach did a tap dance from nerves as all four of my best customers whistled and applauded, the sound echoing in the furniture and plant-filled room.

David, my closest friend in the entire world, downed the last of his scotch-rocks and swirled the ice around in the glass with a tinkling sound. Then, with his paralyzed right hand, he pushed the glass, napkin and all, to the inside edge of the bar. "So, after hiding that jukebox in the storage room for the last ten months, you're finally going to let us hear it play?"

"You guessed it." I ran my shaking fingers over the cold smoothness of the chrome and polished glass. I had carefully typed onto labels the names of over sixty Christmas songs, then taped them next to the red buttons. Somewhere in this jukebox I hoped there would be a special song for each man. A song that would trigger a memory and a ride into the past. My Christmas present to each of them.

I took a deep breath and headed behind the bar. "I hope," I said, keeping my voice upbeat, "that it will be a little more than just a song. You

see, that jukebox is all that I have left from the first time I owned a bar. Since I've owned the Garden Lounge, it has never been played."

Jess, his dress shirt open to the third button and his tie hanging loose around his neck, spun his bar napkin on top of his glass. "So why tonight?"

"Because a year ago on Christmas Eve I made the decision to buy another bar -- the Garden. Lounge -- and try again."

"And I'm glad you did," David said, lifting his drink in his good left hand in a toast.

"Here, here," Fred said, raising his drink high above his head and spilling part of it into his red hair. "Where else could we enjoy a few hours of Christmas Eve before going home to be bored?"

All four men raised their glasses in agreement as I laughed and joined them with a sip of the sweet eggnog I always drank on Christmas Eve. No booze, just eggnog.

"It's been a good year," I said, "especially with friends like you. That's why I've decided to give each of you a really special present."

"Oh, to hell with the present," Jess said. "How about another drink? I've got a wife to face and knowing her, she ain't going to be happy that I'm not home yet."

"Is she ever happy?" David asked.

Jess nodded slowly. "And I wonder why I drink." He slid his glass down the bar at me as he always did at least once a night. I caught it and tipped it upside down in the dirty glass rack.

"I'll fix everyone a last Christmas drink as you open the first part of your presents." I reached into the drawer under the cash register and pulled out four small packages. Each was the size of a ring box wrapped in red paper and tied with a green ribbon.

"Awful little," Fred said as I slid one in front of each man and then put four special Christmas glasses up on the mat over the ice. I'd had the name of each man embossed on the glass.

"You know what they say about small packages," Jess said, twisting the package first one way, then the other while inspecting it. "But knowing

Radley, the size will be a good indication."

"You just wait," I said.

"Great glasses," David said, noticing them for the first time. "They part of the present?"

"Part of the evening," I said. I let each man inspect his own empty glass before I filled it. The names were etched in gold leaf over the logo of the Garden Lounge. I'd had them done to remember the night. I hoped I would have more than a few glasses left when it was all over.

Carl was the first to get his present unwrapped. "You were right, Jess. It's a quarter." He held it up for everyone to see. "Looks like old Radley here is giving us a clue that we should tip more."

I laughed as I filled his glass with ice. "No. It's a trip, not a tip." I finished his drink and slid it in front of him. "Since you unwrapped yours so fast, you get to go first." I nodded at the jukebox. "But there are rules."

"There seem to be a lot of rules around here tonight," Fred said. Everyone laughed.

I held up a hand for them to stop. "Trust me. This will be a special night."

"So give me the rules," Carl said.

I leaned on the dishwasher behind the bar so no one could see that I was shaking. "On that jukebox is every damn Christmas song I could find. Pick one that reminds you of a major point in your life -- some thing or time or event that changed your life. After you punch the button and before the music starts, tell us what the song reminds you of."

Carl shook his head. "You know, Stout. You've gone and flipped out."

"Sometimes I think so too," I said. I wasn't kidding him. Sometimes I really did think so.

"Tonight seems to be ample proof," David said, holding up the quarter.

"Just trust me, that is a very special jukebox. Try it and I think you'll discover what I mean."

Carl shrugged, took a large gulp out of his special glass and set it

carefully back on the napkin. "What the hell. I've played stranger games."

"So have I," Jess said. "I remember once with a girl named Donna. She loved to --" David hit him on the shoulder to make him stop as Carl twisted off his stool and moved over to the jukebox to study the songs.

I watched as he bent over the machine to read the list. At six-two, two hundred and fifty pounds, Carl was all muscle, with hands that looked like he was going to crush a glass at any moment. A carpenter in the real world outside the walls of the Garden Lounge, he sometimes employed four or five workers at his small business. Mostly he built houses, although his big project this year had been Doc Harris's new office. That had taken him seven months and helped him on the financial side. He had never married and no one could get much information about his past out of him. He had no hobbies that I knew of and winter or summer I had never seen him dressed in anything other than work pants and plaid shirts. He kept his graying black hair cropped short and never wore a hat, no matter how hard it was mining.

After he bent over the jukebox for a moment, Carl's large shoulders slumped, almost as if someone had put a heavy weight square in the middle of his back. With effort he stood, turned around, and faced the bar. His face was pale, his dark eyes a little glazed. "Found one. Now what?"

I took a deep breath. It was too late to back out now. These were my

"Put the quarter in and pick the song." My voice was shaking and David looked at me. He knew me better than anyone and he could tell something was bothering me.

I took a deep breath and went on. "Before the song starts tell us the memory the song brings back."

Carl shrugged and dropped the quarter into the slot. The quiet in the Garden seemed to almost ring as he slowly punched the buttons for his song. "Anything else?" he asked as the jukebox clicked and the mechanism moved to find the record.

"Just state what the song reminds you of. And remember, you only have the length of the song -- usually about two and a half minutes. Okay?"

Carl shrugged. "Why?"

"You'll know why in a moment. But remember that. It might be

important. Now tell us the memory."

He glanced at the jukebox and then quietly said, "This song reminds me of the night my mother almost died."

I thought my heart had stopped. This wasn't what I had planned. Why did he have to pick a memory like that? This was Christmas Eve. Most people would have memories of good times. Times they wanted to relive. Damn, it was too late now. "Two and a half minutes, Carl," I managed to choke out. "Remember that."

He glanced over at me with a frown as "I'm Dreaming of a White Christmas" started. Then he was gone, back into his memory.

And there were only four of us left in the Garden Lounge.

The urine and disinfectant smells of the nursing home washed over Carl like a wave over a child on the beach. He grabbed the door frame and held on, feeling dizzy, confused. A moment before he had been standing in front of the jukebox at the Garden Lounge, playing a stupid game that Radley Stout, the owner of the bar, had insisted on playing. Carl had that memory firmly placed in his mind, as well as the memories of the last twenty years.

Yet he also had fresh memories of driving to the nursing home this Christmas Eve. Memories of wishing he could go back to college, wishing he could do something to put Mother out of her pain and suffering. And a very dear, very fresh memory of his decision to help her die with some dignity as she had asked.

It had been a Sunday afternoon right after the second stroke. She had not only asked, she had begged him to help her if another stroke took her mind and left her body alive. That had been her worst fear. Yet he hadn't done anything. The part of his mind that remembered the Garden Lounge knew that she had suffered three more strokes. He had been too afraid.

He squeezed the door frame until his hand hurt. Christmas music played softly down the hall. "I'm Dreaming of a White Christmas," the same song he had just punched up on the jukebox at the Garden Lounge. How . . . ? This made no sense.

He forced himself to take a deep breath and look around. There was a white-haired nurse sitting behind the counter of the nurse's station. His mother was in her bed across the small room. Slight, wasted remains of

the woman she had once been, she no longer recognized him or anyone else from her life. Most of the time she sat in a wheel chair and just drooled, her head hanging limp.

The doctors had said she would never recover from the series of strokes. She would spend the next five years in that bed and chair. He would grow to hate this room, hate his own fear, hate his own inability to do something to help her.

He glanced over at his own hand against the door frame. It was his hand all right, only young. No scar where the broken window cut it last year. No deep tan from being outside for so long. He was somehow in his young body, with his old memories combined with his young ones. He felt dizzy with the conflicting memories and thoughts. His mouth was dry. He could really use a drink.

From down the hall the song reached its halfway point and Carl felt panic filling his mind. Radley Stout and that damn jukebox of his had given him a second chance. An opportunity to do what he had always wished he had done. Now he was wasting it by doing what he had done the first time.

Nothing

He took a deep, almost sobbing breath. This time would be different. He checked the hall and then moved across the room and around to the other side of his mother's bed. She smelled of urine. Many times in the next five years the nurses would change her diapers and many times he would be forced to help.

"This is what you wanted, Mom." He swallowed the bile trying to force its way up into his mouth. "I'm doing what you asked."

He pulled the edge of the pillow up and over her face, pressing it hard against her mouth and nose.

"I love you, Mom," he said, softly. "I've learned to be strong. I hope you would be proud of me."

She struggled, trying to twist her head from side to side. But he held on, wanting to be sick, wanting to let go, wanting to let her breathe, but not wanting her to suffer day after day for five long years.

Finally the tension in her body eased and her head became heavy in his

hands. Very heavy.

He gently stroked her soft hair as he held the pillow in place for another fifteen seconds. Then he eased his mother's head back into a more comfortable position.

He stood up straight and took a deep breath, never taking his gaze from the face of his dead mother. A feeling of sadness filled him at the same time as a lightness, as if a great weight had been lifted from his shoulders.

"Thanks, Stout," he said out loud as the last faint chords of the song died and took his future memories with it.

As the last few notes of the Bing Crosby song faded into the carpet and booths of the Garden Lounge, the air shimmered as if a heat wave had passed though the room. None of the plants moved. And I felt no heat. But I knew what it meant.

I glanced around the room. Fred was sitting where Carl had sat, and the planter that Carl had built for me under the east window was gone, replaced with two chairs. Carl wasn't coming back, that much was clear.

During the song I had calmed the other three men down, explained that Carl had gone back into a memory. Then, on the excuse of Carl needing a drink when he returned, I took his glass and moved over to the jukebox. I had stood there with one hand on the cool chrome of the jukebox for the last half of the song.

I glanced down at the glass with Carl's name in my hand. So it had worked. Anything I held as I touched the jukebox stayed in this time line after the switch. Good. And because I was touching the jukebox I still remembered Carl. Carl had changed something in his past and his new future no longer brought him to the Garden Lounge. I hoped it was a good new future for him.

I studied the jukebox to see if anything had changed. Damned if I knew how it worked. I had just taken it from storage in my old bar and fixed it, put a favorite record in and the next thing I knew I had found myself facing my old girlfriend, Jenny, in my young body.

Scared me so bad all I did was sit there and stare at her. I had wanted to be with her more than anything else, but I had not had the courage or the desire to ask her to stay with me. On our third year of being together she had gone back to college while I stayed in our hometown to work. That



semester she met someone else and by Christmas she was married to him.

The song I had played on the jukebox had been our song. It had been playing the night before she left for school. And that was where the jukebox took me and left me for the entire length of the song.

The next day I played the song again and the same thing happened again. I did nothing but sit and stare at her.

I didn't play another song on the jukebox until I had all the possibilities figured out, including what would happen if I changed something, as Carl obviously had done.

"What the hell are you doing over there?" David said, twisting his custom drinking glass in his good hand.

"Yeah," Jess said. "You going to tell us what we're supposed to do with these quarters?" He flipped it, caught it and turned it over on the bar.

"Play a song," I said. None of them remembered Carl or my explanation of where he had gone or anything he had done which included playing the last song. He had never existed for them because they had not been touching the jukebox.

I moved back around the bar, dumped the remainder of Carl's drink out and set the glass carefully on the back bar.

"Who's Carl?" David asked.

"Just another friend I wanted to give a glass to."

"So how come you want us to play a song?" Jess asked.

I took a long drink off my eggnog and let the richness coat my dry throat. I was going to miss Carl. I just hoped he was happy. Maybe sometime over the next few days I would look up his name in the phone book. Maybe he had stayed around town. He would never remember me, but it would be nice to see him again and see how things ended up for him:

"You all right?" David asked. All three men were staring at me.

"Yeah, I'm fine. I was just thinking about how songs are like time machines. When you hear one it takes you back to some special moment when the song was playing."

I pointed at the little boxes and the quarters. "Those are for your memory trips. Fred. Why don't you try. it? But you've got to follow my rules."

"More damn rules, huh?" Fred said. "Can I at least get off my bar stool or do I have to toss the quarter at the machine from here?"

I tried to laugh but it came out so poorly that David again looked at me with a questioning look. "Go pick out a Christmas song that reminds you of something in your past. Then after you've selected it, stand beside the machine and tell us the memory."

Fred picked up the quarter from the bar and swung around. "I think I can handle that."

"I'll bet that's not what your ex-wife would say," Jess said.

Everyone laughed and that started the nightly joking about Fred's ex-wife. She was well known to the group because it seemed at times that was all Fred could talk about. Her name was Alice and she and Fred had gotten married young had one child, and gotten divorced in an ugly fashion about ten years before.

Fred was tall and thin, with about twenty pounds of extra weight around his stomach. He used to have bright red hair that was now sun bleached because he worked for the city streets department. He said that almost a quarter of his salary every month went to paying child support, even though his ex-wife very seldom let him see his daughter. He claimed he loved his daughter and one Saturday had brought her in for all of us to meet. Sandy had bright red hair like her father.

"Got one," Fred said as he dropped the quarter into the slot and quickly punched two buttons.

"So what's the memory?" I asked. My stomach felt weak. Was I going to lose Fred, too? Maybe I shouldn't warn him that he only had the time of the song that if he wanted to change anything, he would have to do it fast.

"The first time I got laid," he said, smiling. "The night Sandy came to be."

God, what was I doing to my friends? What kind of presents were these?

"Stout," David said. "You all right? You're as pale as a ghost."

I nodded and looked up at Fred. "You only have the time of the song. Remember that. Just over two minutes."

Jess laughed. "More than enough time for Fred to get laid, from what I hear."

Fred had taken a step to come after Jess when the Gene Autrey song started and Fred vanished from the bar.

The snow blew hard against Fred's face as he dodged across the rush of pedestrians on the busy sidewalk and in the front door of Abraham's Drug Store. The bell over the door jingled as he entered. The store smelled clean, with a faint background of medicine. The tile floor looked slick from polish.

Old man Abraham was behind the druggist's counter in his white smock. Judy, the clerk, was at the cash register waiting on a heavysset man who was buying cough syrup. In the background the song "Rudolf the Red-nosed Reindeer" played. That was the same song he had punched up a moment before on the Garden Lounge jukebox. How the hell had Radley Stout done this? What was going on?

Fred glanced down at himself. He was still young, dressed in his high school clothes. How could that be? He had been in the Garden Lounge drinking eighteen years in the future. This was some practical joke. He'd get Jess for this. And Stout.

He was about to turn and head back into the storm when the younger memories that were mixed with the older ones reminded him of why he was here. He had come to the drugstore to buy a rubber. A condom.

He was on his way to Alice's house. Her parents were at a Christmas party and would be gone for a long time. He and Alice would start out on the couch watching television and work their way naked to the floor. It would be their first time and because he had chickened out and not bought the rubber on the way to her house, she had gotten pregnant and they had gotten married right out of high school. Sandy had followed three months later.

He grabbed hold of the door frame, then touched a bottle of hair oil on a nearby shelf. Everything felt real. Damned if he knew what was going on.

He turned back to face old man Abrahams who was now watching him. It was no wonder he had thickened out the first time. He had bought condoms hundreds of times in the last twenty years and right now he still felt afraid. But what the hell could the old man do to him? Fred shook his head. He didn't want to think about that.

He took a deep breath and moved up to the counter.

"Can I help you ?" Abrahams said, staring down from his high perch. The guy looked like a cross between God and his dad.

"I'd . . ." His voice broke and he cleared his throat and tried to lower the pitch to a more normal range. "I'd like to buy a . . ." He glanced quickly around. Judy was watching him and smiling. He'd had a crush on her for years. It was no wonder his younger self had chickened out.

"Well, young man?"

Fred turned back to face Abrahams. He could feel his face getting hot. If he didn't ask now, Alice would get pregnant and they would end up married. That had turned out to be a fate much worse than asking one simple question. Much, much worse. All those years of shouting and the hate and the ugliness their marriage had been. The only slightly good thing had been Sandy. But who knew how screwed up she was going to be because of the ugly marriage he and Alice had had.

He looked up at Abrahams. "I'd . . . I'd like to buy a condom." There. He had done it.

Old man Abrahams had the good sense not to laugh. But Fred could tell he was holding back a smile. "Well, son, they come in packages of three or six or twelve."

"Six," he said quickly. No point in having to go through this too often. But a dozen would seem like bragging.

Abrahams nodded and rummaged behind the counter. "Now, which brand would you like?"

At that Judy giggled and Fred could feel his face and neck burning. His younger self wanted to flee the store. He'd never be able to face her.

But his older memories kept him there. "I . . . I . . . I don't care. Your best."

Again Abrahams nodded. "That would be Trojans." He slid the box across the counter. "Pay Judy."

Damn him. He was doing this on purpose. He had a register. He could take the money. Again Judy giggled as Fred picked up the box and turned. At that very moment he noticed that the song was almost over and he knew without a doubt that his face was as red as Rudolf's nose.

He pulled a five dollar bill out of his pocket and tossed it on the counter. "Keep the change," he said to Judy and, without looking at her, he sprinted for the front door and the snow beyond. At least now he had the choice to have Sandy or not. He'd have to give this some serious thought.

As the door slammed shut and the song ended, the memories of the choice, Sandy, the marriage to Alice, and the next twenty years faded and were gone.

When the lounge finished shimmering I let go of the jukebox and moved around behind the bar. Carefully I dumped what was left of Fred's drink and placed his glass beside Carl's on the back bar. I hadn't felt this tired in years. I looked at the two glasses. "Good luck, guys," I said softly. "I hope life is better for both of you." But now I only had two friends left in the bar. I could stop this at any time, while there was still someone left to talk to.

"So what are we supposed to do with these quarters?" Jess asked. "I got to get home before that bitch of a wife chews my head off."

I glanced at Jess and then at David. He was looking worried. "You play a song. That's all." I motioned at the jukebox. "But find one that has a strong memory with it." I took a deep breath. I might as well give him a real present. "Maybe even one that was during the time that you met your wife."

Jess laughed. "Why the hell would I want to do that?"

"Trust me," I said. "Just find a song." I dropped down onto the counter behind the bar and concentrated on taking deep breaths and not thinking about Carl and Fred.

"You all right?" David asked. I looked up into his worried face. What would I have done over the last few years without David's friendship? What was I going to do without it over the next few years if I let him play a song?

"Just suddenly got tired. Nothing big." I stood and moved to pour myself another eggnog and watch Jess pick over the tunes. Jess was the best joker. He said he needed the practical jokes to keep his sanity with his bitch of a wife.

But when asked why he didn't just leave her, he always said marrying her was his mistake and he would live with it. That was what he had been taught. Then he would make a joke and change the subject.

"Found one," Jess said. He held up the quarter. "You want me to play it?"

"Yeah. But after you select the song tell Dave and me what memory it reminds you of."

Jess dropped the quarter into the slot and punched two buttons to start the jukebox. "You remember the song, 'Snoopy Versus the Red Baron?'"

David and I nodded.

"That was playing the moment I asked my wife to marry me. Figures, doesn't it?"

David laughed.

But I didn't. I knew I was going to lose Jess also. "Remember that you only have the length of the song. Not one second longer. All right?"

Jess shrugged and started back toward the bar. "Whatever you . . ."

The song started and he vanished.

"What the hell?" David said, standing and moving toward the jukebox.

I picked up Jess's mostly empty glass and moved around toward the jukebox.

David glanced at the two glasses on the back bar and then at the glass I held. Then he looked over to where Jess had been. "You want to explain exactly what the hell is going on here?"

I nodded, too tired to argue. "But come on over and touch the jukebox. It's the only way you're going to remember."

Snoopy and the Red Baron were just starting to go at it on Jess's '65 Ford car radio as Jess found himself face to face with Mary, his soon-to-be

bitch-of-a-wife.

"What the . . . ?"

"Is something wrong, Jess, honey?" Mary said, her hand stroking his arm up and down and up and down. She looked more beautiful than he had ever remembered and she smelled wonderfully fresh, as if she had been outside in the country all day. But he knew the look and the smell wouldn't last long. Six months after they were married she would gain fifty pounds and a few years later she would level out a hundred over her marriage weight. But now, in this dream or whatever it was, she looked sexy and very trim in her low-cut blue dress.

Jess pulled back away from her and looked around. This was his car all right. The same one he had sold in '71. The same one that he and Mary had first made love in. He rubbed his hands along the steering wheel to make sure it felt solid. They were parked just down the tree-lined street from Mary's house.

So how had Stout pulled this off? This had to be some kind of dream or hallucination. That was it. Stout had hypnotized him and he was still sitting in the Garden Lounge while they laughed at him. He'd get them for this.

Mary scooted over closer to him and rubbed his leg real nice, getting the reaction in his crotch she wanted. "Were you going to ask me something?" she said, looking up at him with her large brown eyes.

"That I was," he said. It was a clear memory that in this exact situation he had asked her to marry him. He knew that's what his younger self had been planning to do. He was currently a second year law student and he remembered his classes that Friday morning real well. Yet he also remembered sitting having a Christmas Eve drink with his friends at the Garden Lounge twenty some years in the future. Strange. Too damn strange.

On the radio the Red Baron shot down Snoopy. Stout had said Jess only had the length of the song. Whatever was going on, it was halfway over. Mary rubbed Jess's leg and waited. Waited knowing what the question would be. Waited knowing that she had led him right to where she wanted him.

Well, this time around she would get a surprise because dream or no

dream, this was going to be fun. Hell, after all the years with her, he deserved a little fun.

"I wanted to ask you," Jess said, then paused, trying not to smile.

The Red Baron and Snoopy drank a Christmas toast.

"Yes," Mary said, her voice low and sexy. She had been one beautiful woman on the outside. That had kept him blind to all the ugliness that was just under the surface. Blind until it was too late.

"I wanted to ask you if it would be all right if I slept around with a few other women? You know, sow a few wild oats before I settle down?"

That did it. The sultry look drained from her face like wet makeup, to be replaced by the bitch look he had grown so familiar with. "What did you say?" she asked, her voice low and mean and controlled. He knew that voice real well, too.

He smiled, easing toward her, trying to act romantic. "I was just thinking that for a few years, maybe five or ten, we could have an open relationship. I'd love to sleep with a few other women. It would be good for us. Honest. You know, free love and all." He moved as if to kiss her and she backed away across the seat.

"Wouldn't you like sleeping with other men? Then after we've both got a little more experience we could live together for a few years. Trying on the old shoes, as the saying goes." Jess knew that would get her. She had said a hundred times how much she hated the thought of living together. For her it was marriage or nothing. Damn, it was hard keeping a straight face. He was going to thank Stout for this one. Best Christmas present he had ever had.

"You're sick!" she screamed. "Sick! Sick! Sick!"

Jess tried to look innocent and sad.

On the radio Snoopy flew off singing about Christmas Cheer as Mary rammed against the car door, opened it and ran up the sidewalk.

"Thank you, Radley Stout. I've been dreaming about doing that for years."

The song ended.



And so did the dreams.

I moved slowly around behind the bar, dumped out the remainder of Jess's drink and set his glass beside the others on the back bar.

"Got quite a collection there," David said as he moved over to take his stool. "So Carl and Fred were friends of mine on another time line?"

I took a long hard drink of my eggnog and then nodded.

"Jess," David said, "was sent back by the jukebox to his memory and he changed something that moved his life in another direction. And with that new direction he didn't end up coming in here. Right? And he would have no memory of ever being in here because he hasn't been."

Again I nodded and finished off the drink.

David picked up the quarter in front of him and glanced over at the jukebox. "You know this is a wish that everyone has had at one time or another? How come you've never done it?"

"Oh, I did. Actually twice when I first discovered what the jukebox could do. But I didn't change anything. Too afraid, I guess. And, I suppose, not that unhappy with this life." I nodded at the three empty glasses. "That is, until tonight."

David took a sip of his drink and looked at his name on the glass. "So you gave the gift of a second chance to your friends for Christmas."

I laughed. "Seemed like a good idea at the time. But I didn't expect to lose everyone. Not exactly sure what I expected, to be honest with you."

"I'm still here."

I glanced over at my best friend. He worked as a vice president of a local bank and enjoyed flying his small plane on the weekend. But back twenty-some years ago he and his new wife, Elaine, had been driving home from a Christmas party. David was scheduled to finish flight school that next spring. He had a dream of flying for the airlines.

That night David had had a little too much to drink and the car missed a slick corner and plowed into an embankment. Elaine was killed and David lost most of the use of his right hand. End of flight school. End of dream.

I reached out and slid the quarter at David. "Your turn."

David shook his head. "No chance. There's no way that I'm leaving you after what you've done for Jess and those two other guys." He pointed at the glasses lined up on the back bar.

I laughed a laugh that sounded bitter even to my ears. "I don't know what exactly I've done except change their life in some fashion. I can only hope it is for the better. But you I do know the jukebox can help." I reached across the bar and patted his mired right hand. "Go back to before the crash and save Elaine. And yourself."

David jerked as if he had never thought of the possibility.

"You saw it work," I said. "If nothing else, give it a try. You don't have to change anything. Just go back and see Elaine again. It's not a one way trip if you don't change anything."

He looked dazed. "If I don't change . . ."

I nodded and picked up the quarter and placed it in his good left hand. "Go say hello to your wife."

Still looking dazed, he slowly stood and moved toward the jukebox. "Is it really possible?"

"Yes," I said. "Now pick the right song."

He nodded and turned to study the song list. His tie hung loose in front of him, his right hand useless against the glass of the jukebox.

My stomach hurt and I downed a little more egghog. I knew that once he saw Elaine he would be unable to stop from changing the past. I was going to lose my best friend. But maybe someday I would see him again, striding through an airport in his pilot's uniform. That alone would be worth it.

"Found the song," he said and turned to look at me.

"Then go for it," I said.

He paused, as if he wanted to say something. Then he turned and dropped the quarter into the machine and punched the two buttons.

"State the memory," I said. "Got to follow the rules, you know."

He smiled. "This song reminds me of the night my wife died."

I nodded. "Good luck. And say hello to Elaine for me."

"I will," he said. "And I'll be back."

"In case you're not, I'll be holding onto your glass and the jukebox."

He smiled. "Thanks." The song started and he vanished.

A light snow kept the old Ford's windshield wipers busy as David and Elaine headed down the gravel country road toward the lights of the city.

"Silent Night" was playing on the portable radio on the seat between them. She was singing along, her voice pure and clear, even though a little drunk. The party, just south of town in the foothills, had been a good one and they had stayed far later than they planned.

David looked over at his wife of six months. She had dark brown hair that flowed long and straight down her back. Her eyes were a dark green and her face lightly wrinkled with laugh lines. While David was in school she worked at a dress shop. Her desire was to someday design clothes and he knew she would be, would have been, good at it.

"Son of a bitch," he said out loud. "Stout was right."

"Who was right?" Elaine said, then went back to singing and watching the beautiful wooded countryside flash by through the snow.

David glanced once more at her and then back at the road. He couldn't let her die. Stout had known that.

David braked the car to a quick stop on the side of the road. He turned off the car, yanked the keys out of the ignition and got out. Then as hard as he could, he tossed the keys into the woods. In the silence of the night he could hear them catch brush as they landed.

That was his only set. Now there would be no way he could drive again tonight.

"David," Elaine said, getting out of the car and coming around to him. "What are you doing?"

"Saving our lives," he said. He grabbed her and held her tight, relishing the feeling of her against him after such a long time. He had never

remarried because there had never been anyone again he felt this way about. No one woman who had felt this good.

The faint sounds of "Silent Night" drifted from the portable radio in the car. The song was about half over. He didn't have much time.

"Are you all right?" Elaine asked. "Why did you throw the . . ."

"I'm fine. Like I said, I was just saving our lives. But now, before that song ends, I need to save a friendship. A very important friendship to me. And I'm going to need your help."

I let my hand slip off the jukebox as the last of the song faded into the empty Garden Lounge. David's glass was in my hand and I looked down at it, feeling its heavy weight.

David must have stopped the wreck.

"Well, Stout," I said to myself out loud just to hear some noise. "Looks as if you've gone and done it now."

I moved slowly around behind the bar and set David's glass beside the other three, name out. "I'm going to have to find some special place for these." I laughed. "To remind me of another life that never was."

The silence seemed to echo in the room. It was going to be a very long, very quiet Christmas.

I refilled my glass of eggnog and moved around to what had been David's favorite stool. The jukebox seemed to call to me. "Come play me, Mr. Radley Stout. Come and see your old girlfriend again. Ask her to marry you. What would it hurt?"

"No," I said loud enough to echo between the empty tables and booths. I squarely faced the glasses on the back bar and held up my mug in a toast. "Merry Christmas, my friends."

Then I added softly, "Wherever you are."

The empty glasses didn't return my toast, so I went ahead and drank alone. I had the sneaking feeling I was going to be doing that for a while.

I had finished the eggnog and was about to start closing down when someone knocked on the front door.

"I'm closed," I yelled. "Merry Christmas." I was in no mood for visitors now.

But the person knocked again. "All right, all right. Hang on a minute."

I went around to the back bar and, being careful to not look at the four glasses lined up there like so many tombstones, retrieved the keys and headed for the front door.

As I unlocked it and swung it open I heard, "Merry Christmas, Mr. Radley Stout."

David and a woman about his same age stood arm in arm facing the door. He wore an airline overcoat and she had on a nice leather jacket. "David," I said. "How . . . ?"

He unhooked himself from the woman's arm and extended a perfectly healthy right hand for me to shake. "Your hand," I said as I shook it. "You didn't . . . ?" Again I stopped. There was no way he could know about the wreck and his lame hand if it hadn't happened. And in this world it hadn't.

"This is my wife, Elaine," he said.

"I don't know what to say," I took her hand. I felt as if I was shaking the hand of a ghost. "Please come in." I stepped back, the feeling of shock washing over me.

David and Elaine moved into the bar. Both of them walked directly to the jukebox.

"But how could you remember?" I asked, moving up beside them.

"He doesn't," Elaine said, laughing with a tense sort of laugh. David only nodded and then turned to face me.

"Christmas Eve, twenty years ago, Elaine said I suddenly called out the name Stout, then stopped the car. I proceeded to toss the keys to the car into the trees. For what crazy reason I have no idea."

I laughed. "I do. Pretty smart thinking if you want to make sure you can't drive that night."

"But why would I want to do that?" David said. "And how would you know anything about it? This entire thing has been driving me nuts for

two decades."

I waved my hand. "I'll try to explain in a minute. For now please go on."

Elaine reached into her purse, pulled out a few tattered pieces of paper, and handed them to me. "For the next minute after he tossed the keys into the brash, David madly wrote this while repeating your name and the name of this bar over and over again so that I would remember it. He made me promise that no matter what he claimed he didn't remember, we would go to this bar on this Christmas Eve at this time to meet you. Not one minute before or one minute after."

David looked at me and shrugged. "Dammed if I can remember why. It was as if I was possessed."

"In a way, you were," I said.

"You know what else he said?" Elaine asked. She looked at David and he motioned for her to go ahead. "He said it was his Christmas present to you."

David looked at me. "Did it work?"

I nodded, afraid to say anything. But I could feel the smile trying to break out of the sides of my face. And after a moment all three of us were laughing just because I was smiling so hard. I was going to enjoy these new friends.

I motioned for them to take a seat at the bar. "Boy have I got a story to tell you." I scampered like a kid around behind the bar and grabbed the glass with his name on it.

"And for you, David," I said as I held the glass up for them to see. "A very special Christmas present and a toast to friendship."

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