

The Little Creek Inn
A Christmas Story
By Ria Prestia

The grey clouds were accumulating quickly in the distance and Evie Monroe noticed a sudden drop in the temperature and some snowflakes beginning to fall as she opened the door to her Mercedes and got in. Quickly, she turned on the ignition and the switch to start the heaters in her seat. The warmth magically started, and she was relieved when she began to feel her body warm up.

The news had said there would be a temperature drop with the incoming storm, but Evie, being Evie never paid attention. Her feet felt cold in her black stilleto pumps as she checked out her reflection in the mirror and said to herself, "You should have worn boots." She took out her lipstick and added more to her already red lips and fluffed up her long dark hair. Her dark eyes looked tired and fierce. "Evie, you need a vacation. Some place warm and tropical with a drink and some hot looking guys for fun!" She noticed her white Labrador look up and turn her head in curiosity as she said it. Laughingly, she petted Gigi's head and said, "Sweetie, you're always on vacation."

She raised the volumn on the CD as her cell phone went off. She smiled at the name and hit the blue tooth and said, "Hi Tammy."

"So boss the concert tour was a huge success and ended with a bang in Atlanta last night. You must be psyched! The reviews are fabulous!"

"I know. I read them this morning. The band is so hot! And I mean way beyond their looks."

"Are you talking about the lead guitarist or the singer?"

Evie started to laugh. "Well maybe both, but since John and I are no more an 'item', I guess it doesn't matter."

"You had it bad for that guitarist. So bad that you chose him over William." Evie frowned and got serious. "You know I'm not ready for a serious commitment and William started to want the house and kids, and Tammy . . . it's just not me. Besides, I wasn't in love with him."

"You think it's not you, but as your assistant and friend who has worked for you for quite a while now, I just think it's because you're afraid to fall in love, and that's why you haven't found love. So you're not looking to meet the perfect guy for you, instead you're looking for a little fun, some sex and move on so that you don't have to commit to anyone and fall in love."

"Who gave you permission to be such a sassy ass?"

"Oh, did I strike a nerve?"

"Tammy, there is no Mr. Perfect for me. There is a great job, a fabulous car, awesome fashion, fun, and money, lots of money. I have it all and Mr. Perfect if he existed would ruin what I've accomplished and where I'm at."

"You're kidding yourself, Evie. I think Mr. Perfect will show up when you least expect it. I keep praying you'd meet him and be as happy as Trey and me."

"Listen girl, don't waist your prayers on me. Miracles don't happen. What happens is success from hard work, and I've proven that. Mr. Perfect doesn't exist for me."

"Well, I believe in Christmas miracles."

"Tammy, you're so naive. My Christmas miracle is the bands I promote staying at the top of the charts and my big bonus that I will spend, trust me."

Tammy changed the subject. "How's Gigi? Did she do well on the trip?" Evie looked at Gigi who was sitting on the passenger seat and petted her head. "She's a real trooper and totally enjoyed the king size bed and eight hundred thread count sheets at the hotel. She did what she normally does, eat, sleep, and watch television."

"In my next life, I want to be your dog and not your assistant."

"Oh, you do pretty well. I might force you to be a workaholic too and available 24/7, but you do like your bonuses."

"Yeah, I do even if you're a slave driver."

They both laughed and then Tammy said, "Drive safe. They're expecting snow and freezing temperatures tonight. This storm is pretty big and the prediction is it will freeze the south."

"So much for global warming," Evie said. "Another political ploy to scare the population so that they can control us."

"Well, Evie they said snow accumulation would happen tonight all the way south past Atlanta."

"Don't worry. My car can handle it."

"It better for what you paid for it. Are you stopping at your parents?" Tammy asked.

Evie thought for a moment and calmly said, "No. I'm not going home. I'm not stopping in Sewanee. I know they'd like it, but I'm not in the mood for a family reunion just to hear my mom be critical about my life choices. She never forgave me for not staying there, getting married, having the house with the white picket fence, giving her

grandchildren, and teaching at the university. She's been pissed at me for years. She thinks I'm wasting my masters degree by promoting bands."

"You're the black sheep of the family, but Evie your brother called again today, and he said that your dad really wants you to come home and mend fences."

"I know. He texted me, too. I didn't respond back. I can't, Tammy. This black sheep is staying a black sheep. Pray for me at church tomorrow. "

"Sweetie, I always do. Drive safe, and see you on Monday at the office. Merry Christmas."

"Merry Christmas to you, too. "

Evie shut off the blue tooth and raised the volumn to the CD and then changed it to Christmas music. She placed her hand on Gigi's back and petted her soft fur. "It's you and me for Christmas this weekend. We'll be home by nine and then we'll get some dinner, hot cocoa, and a comfy bed and stay there through Christmas Eve and Christmas Day and watch sappy Christmas movies until we can't stand it anymore and then this holiday will be over and back to work and making more money."

Gigi whined and picked her head up and then dropped it again down onto her paws and closed her eyes as Evie put the car in drive and noticed the snow starting to fall heavier.

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Tammy put her cell phone down and looked over at her Christmas tree and stared at the star that twinkled on top. "Dear God, please watch over Evie tonight and help her to discover what the real meaning of life and love is all about."

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Evie passed Chattanooga and pulled into a truck stop for gas. She opened the door and felt the frigid air pierce her skin. Her toes inside her stilletos cringed. "Holy shit! It's freaking cold!!! Gigi, do you have to pee? Wanna go pee-pee girl?" Gigi just looked up, didn't move and went back to sleep. "Okay, I know. You're a camal. You can

hold it for hours."

Evie closed the door and slid her credit card and started to pump the fuel when a big white Dually pulled up next to her. She watched the tall older gentlemen step down from the cab, smile and tip his cowboy hat at her. She smiled back and kept pumping the fuel.

As he slide his credit card and began to pump the fuel, he said, "Are you from around here?"

"Nashville, but I grew up in Sewanee," she said as she rubbed her gloveless hands together to promote heat.

"Heading home for Christmas?" he asked curiously.

"No. I'm a music producer, and I'm heading back from Atlanta and going straight home to Nashville to have a quiet Christmas alone. One of my bands just finished a huge tour that ended with a bang at the Dome in Atlanta.

"Must be exciting?"

"It is and very rewarding financially. This Christmas is about sleeping for a few days and just letting the holiday pass by."

"No family. That sounds pretty lonely. "

"Family is overrated. It's all bullshit. It's about listening to people telling you how to live your life. I sent a gift."

He frowned and squinted his eyes at her remark.

He then slightly smiled and said, "Little lady, in the end family is all you have. Yeah, the money, the success are nice, but only if you have people to share it with. Otherwise, it's just things to make this life a bit more comfortable and nice."

"Well, I like comfortable and nice, and I don't like anyone tying me down or telling me what to do."

"The excitement, the things, the power, the money, even fame all wear out, but family, well they're always there, and sometimes you don't know love until you lose it."

"I don't need love," she said with a serious tone.

"Everyone needs love, Evie," he said as the wind howled.

She rolled her eyes and then saw a glow of light behind him shine, and then it vanished. She said nothing at first and then noticed him staring at her shoes.

"They're not snow shoes," he said.

"No, they're not. I'm not planning on walking in snow," she said adamantly.

"Well, they're expecting a lot more snow to fall tonight. You better be careful walking in those fancy heels. Maybe you should buy something sensible and warm in

the truck stop store."

"You're joking, right? Me shop in a truck stop store! Don't worry. I'm a pro at walking in these. Besides, this car is going straight to Nashville and into a garage and these designer pumps will be safe and sound."

"It's nice to always have a plan and control your destiny, isn't it?" he said as he tipped his hat and smiled.

Evie looked at him confused at what he said and just said, "Yes, it is."

"My name is Beau Stone. Merry Christmas and drive safe."

"Same to you," Evie said as she watched him get into his truck and drive away.

She closed her sweater tighter around her blouse and wished she had brought a coat with her as she got into the car and started the engine and put the heat on high. Her feet were freezing and so were her hands. "God, I could use a pair of gloves and slippers right now. She saw that the outside temperature read 28 degrees. "Damn, it's cold and it's only 6:30 at night. She rubbed her hands together and began to drive off when the name Beau Stone stayed in her mind. "I know that name, Gigi. I'm not sure from where, but I know that name." She started to drive and then stopped and looked at Gigi and said, "Did he call me, Evie?" And then she remembered the light glowing behind him. She shook her head to clear her mind and said, "I must be really tired. How could a complete stranger know my name? I didn't say it. Oh, Gigi, I can't wait to get home." She turned onto the highway and headed north.

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The road was getting slick and ice was forming. Evie slowed down and put her hazard lights on. There was barely anyone on the road but a few trucks and die-hards like her who felt invincible. She headed up the mountain towards Monteagle and felt the car slipping a bit. The temperature kept dropping as she got higher up the mountain and by the time the temperature reached 18 degrees, she became really concerned. She slowed down to a crawl as her visibility greatly diminished as the snow fell faster and heavier. She could even hear ice pellets hitting the windshield. Her hands clenched the wheel tightly and when she reached the exit for Monteagle, she decided to change her plans.

"Okay Gigi, I can't believe this but we're heading to Mom and Dad's. I can't risk the drive to Nashville. The roads are icing up quickly. She exited off the highway and made a left to Sewanee. It was pitch black outside, and she could barely see the road in front of her. There was no one else foolish enough to be driving but her. She kept her high beams and her hazard lights on as she crawled along the road. She noticed a sign that read Little Creek Inn and said, "That's new, Gigi." Who sat up and barked back at her.

"Let me guess. Now you have to pee, right?"

Gigi barked again.

"What else can go wrong. Girl, you have to wait. I can't stop, and I can barely see."

Suddenly, she felt her car go over something in the road, and she began to fishtail as she heard her tire pop.

"Oh, shit! A blow out!" she yelled as she tried to control the car as it slid off of the road and into a small ditch. The seat belt jerked her back, and she sat there shaking. "Shit!" she screamed out loud. "Oh my God, Gigi are you okay?"

Gigi was shaking and whining and moving around in the seat.

"Calm down, girl," Evie said as she unbuckled her seat belt and held Gigi who was now in her lap.

She leaned back into her chair and just sighed. "I could use a big glass of wine right now." She grabbed her cell phone and noticed that she had no bars for service and her car wouldn't start.

"Oh, shit! You have to be kidding me. After so many years, they still have black out areas to cell phone service." Her heart started to race as Gigi started to bark.

"Hold it girl! I have to think here. We're stuck, it's snowing like crazy outside, and the temperature is below freezing. Do you get the scenario. This isn't good."

Gigi moved to her seat and started to look out the window and bark.

"Okay, there was a sign back there. An inn of some sort. We're going to have to walk there and get some help because I don't think anyone will be coming down this road soon."

She looked down at her feet and remembered Beau Stone's words, "Those aren't snow shoes," and she just laughed and said, "This is so my luck. All I have with me are heels and this sweater."

She grabbed her keys and Gigi's leash, and threw her cell phone into her hand

bag and placed the bag on her shoulder. She opened the car door and felt the freezing air hit her at full force. The wind was blowing hard and the snow was blinding her. She closed the door and walked gingerly to the trunk as her heels sunk into the snow and the wet mud below the snow. She grabbed her overnight bag from the trunk and closed it. She walked over to the passenger door and opened it. Gigi sat there as Evie clicked the leash onto her collar. She held the leash tightly as Gigi stepped out of the car and shook fiercely as the cold snow hit her fur. Evie closed the door and hit the clicker to lock the car and put her keys in her handbag. She waited for Gigi to pee and then started to walk back to where the sign was. It must have been about four hundred yards away, but it seemed like forever till she reached it. There was a small light by the sign, so she looked at the sign and wiped off the snow, so she could read it. The inn was a mile down the road and sat on the bluff.

"A mile!" She yelled. "In these shoes! This must be a freaking test. Holy shit, I can't believe this, God, why are you testing me this Christmas. I know I'm a bitch! I promise to be nicer, okay? Please, let a car come by."

After a few minutes, no car showed up.

"That's what I get for praying, Gigi . . . not a damn thing. Please God, I'll be a better person just don't let us die of hyperthermia out here tonight."

She began to walk down the road and her mind began to wonder. What if there's a crazy person out here or wild animals. Then she shook it off and said, "Get it together, Evie."

About thirty minutes later the cold began to be too much and walking against the wind in heels and just a sweater was unbearable. Her toes felt like ice and she could barely move them anymore. Her hands were frozen with no gloves on and she started to think that she made a bad mistake and should have stayed in her car. Gigi was whining and suddenly Evie lost her balance and fell. Her ankle had a sharp pain and Evie couldn't get up. Gigi ran over to her and started to lick her face as the snow fell.

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Time passed when finally a truck made a turn from the side road. Gigi was barking and jumping up as she saw the headlights approach. The driver pulled up and stopped the white Dually. He hopped out of the cab and ran over to them. He noticed that the woman was not awake, but breathing. He petted Gigi. "Okay, girl. I'll help. She'll be

okay, and you too. He shook Evie a bit until she finally opened her eyes.

"Hi, I'm Tanner. I'll help you. Can you stand."

She shook her head no. "My name is Evie. My car had a blow out up on the road. I'm trying to get to the inn. I fell while walking and my ankle hurts."

"Well, don't chance it. I'll carry you. Just relax and don't talk. You're freezing."

Tanner scooped her up into his big strong arms and carried her to the truck.

"Come on girl, you look cold too," he said to Gigi who followed behind .

He gently placed Evie on the seat and helped Gigi hop in. He went back and picked up the bags and placed them into the back seat. He hopped into the driver seat and closed the door and raised the heat to its highest level. "Let's take that wet sweater off and those shoes. He removed her sweater and threw it in the back seat. Then he took off her shoes stared at them in disbelief, shook his head, and tossed them into the back. He quickly took off his jacket and his flannel shirt that was over his t-shirt and put it on her. Then he put his coat around her. Gigi laid on top of Evie and whined.

"She'll be okay girl, I promise," he said as he petted her.

He grabbed the blanket from the back seat and wrapped it around her making sure he covered her toes which were losing color to them.

"I hope you don't mind, but it's my dog's blanket. He likes to snuggle in it when he's in the truck.

"It's . . . fine. It's warm. Thank you. My hands are freezing."

"Put on my gloves." He took them off and gently took her hands and started to rub them for body heat. He placed his warm gloves on her hands, and she smiled at him.

"Th . . th . . thank you so much."

Her teeth were chattering as she pulled the blanket around her and Gigi and felt Gigi's warm body start to warm her.

"Your shoes were not snow shoes."

She smiled. "I know. You're the second person tonight who told me that. I'm a band promoter. I was heading back from Atlanta to Nashville. I didn't know about the intensity of this storm"

"Yeah, it's a doozy. It'll freeze the south for Christmas. I had to check my grapes."

"Your grapes?" she asked.

"Yes Maam. I have a vineyard."

"Close by?"

"You're on it."

"I'm on it. But this is the road to the inn."

"The inn is mine, too. I open in January. I was coming back from checking the grapes and protecting them from the frost when I found you," he said as he put the truck into drive and slowly headed down the road.

Evie tilted her head back against the seat and closed her eyes. When she opened her eyes the truck was stopped in front of the inn and Evie's eyes opened wide when she took a look at the inn. The wrap around front porch was enormous and the huge house was covered in Christmas lights. There were large Christmas trees on each side of the inn and cobblestone paths that lead to numerous sitting areas and also to a bridge that lead people over the little creek.

"Wow, this place is beautiful. I didn't expect it to look like this."

"What did you expect? A shack?"

She said nothing and Tanner laughed and said, "Small town people like big homes, too. This old place belonged to my granddad along with the seventy-five acres it sits on. He left it to me when he died last Christmas. It took me all year to do the renovations and work the vineyard. He started growing the grapes a few years back and the inn was my idea. It doesn't open till New Year's Eve, so I hope it doesn't make you uncomfortable that it will only be us here."

"Well, I don't think I really have a choice. It's either here with you or dieing in the snow."

"I'll come around and pick you up. I threw those shoes in the back seat, and I don't think it's wise to put them on with that ankle until we see if its sprained."

Evie decided that resistance was useless, so she just shook her head in agreement. Tanner opened the door and Gigi jumped out and wagged her tail while Tanner picked up Evie and covered her tightly with the blanket. He carried her up the steps to the house and opened up the door. Evie took note of the beautiful wrap around porch that was inviting with chairs and rockers to sit on. As Tanner opened the door, a big brown German Shepherd named Shep came running up to them.

"Easy boy," he said as the dog sniffed the blanket. "I think he likes you."

Evie smiled at Tanner's words and pulled the blanket up to her chin as he placed her on the sofa.

"I'll start a fire. That'll help you to thaw out."

Shep barked a bit at Gigi who cowered down to him. The two of them sniffed each other and ran around in a circle. Tanner laughed and finally said, "Enough Shep.

Be a good boy and play nice.” Shep stopped and sat down by the fire place waiting for direction from Tanner.

“He’s very obedient,” Evie said surprised.

“He’s very well trained.”

Tanner grabbed a few more blankets from the basket by the fire place and placed them on top of her.

"You need a glass of brandy to go with those blankets to warm you up."

He started the fire and then went over to the bar and poured a glass of brandy for Evie.

He handed it to her, and she downed the shot quickly. She took a deep breath and said, “Wow, that was good,” as she felt the warm liquor move throughout her body.

"Grandpa liked the best of everything. I'll make you some hot cocoa to go with that."

"Thank you," Evie said.

“Lay down Shep and take care of our guests while I go into the kitchen.”

Shep laid down on the carpet and Gigi followed him. They snuggled by each other at the foot of the hearth and enjoyed the heat from the fire.

Evie watched Tanner tend to the fire one more time before he left for the kitchen and thought to herself how handsome he was. After he left the room, she turned to Gigi and said, "God, Gigi, Tanner is really goodlooking. The way he picked me up and rescued me. I think I could fall in love with him."

Gigi tilted her head and Evie shook her own and thought, *you're crazy. Love doesn't exist and if it does it doesn't happen this fast. The only thing that happens this fast is lust. She sat her head back onto her pillow and thought, damn it Evie, you are so cynicle. Besides, a guy this gorgeous and this nice probably has a girlfriend.*

Within time Tanner returned with hot cocoa and placed his mug onto the coffee table and handed her a mug. She took a sip and said, "This is really good."

"I use real chocolate and half and half mixed with whole milk. It's pretty rich, but worth it."

"Oh my God, you cook too."

"Actually, I do," he said as he walked out of the room again and returned with socks and slippers.

He sat down next to her feet on the sofa and lifted up the blanket and gently took hold of her feet and began to rub them to promote warmth. These toes were pretty frozen. I called a family friend who's a doctor while I made the hot chocolate because I

was concerned since the color in them was really bad, but they look pretty good now that they have warmed up. He gently placed the socks on her feet and the slippers. "I have a little spa shop here at the inn and these are some of the items we sell. It was my sister's idea."

"I like it," Evie said as her eyes scanned the home in awe. It was a magnificent log cabin with high ceilings and a gorgeous staircase and huge fireplace that was in the middle of two rooms. "This place is gorgeous. How many bedrooms does it have?" she asked.

There are eight bedrooms and ten bathrooms, and a huge kitchen, family room, library, study, wine cellar, a big old dining room and a living room. Outside the porch totally wraps around the house and there are some decks upstairs off of the bedrooms that show beautiful views of the bluff and the vineyards. My grandfather had a few homes. This is the one he chose to leave to me which I think is sort of funny since I left here to roam the world and some cities."

"Maybe he felt that this was home for you," Evie said.

She stared at the picture on the table as Tanner tended to the fire.

"That's my grandfather," he said.

"He played the guitar?" Evie asked as she looked up at him with curiosity.

"Yes, he did. He's young there. He was starting out with music."

She looked at the picture again and felt a familiarity in his face like she knew him.

"My grandpa was a musician his whole life. He played in a lot of bands and toured a lot. He did well and made a lot of money that he spent. He was driven to succeed, but in the end it cost him."

"Cost him? With this house and property and all the others he aquired?"

"Well, it cost him my grandma."

"Oh . . . I'm sorry," Evie said quietly.

"Every family has their story," he said.

"Tell me about it," she said as she drank the cocoa.

"How about we get you a hot bath?"

She looked up at him suspiciously.

"I don't mean I'd be there with you," he said while blushing. She noticed his cheeks turn red and thought it was adorable. "But when you're ready to see if you can walk, I'll help you up the stairs and show you your room. But there is no rush."

"I am warming up, but I admit that a warm bath sounds really great."

Tanner put his arms around her and waited as she slowly stood up. At first, she was nervous to put her foot down, but when she finally did, she realized it was good.

"You were lucky. Walking in those stilettos in the snow! You could have broken it."

"Do you always save damsels in distress," she said as she stared into his eyes and gave a coy smile that had flirtation written all over it.

He smiled back as he kept the stare with her eyes, "You're the first one."

"Lucky me," she whispered into his ear as he pulled her tighter to him.

"How about that bath and some sensible shoes?" he whispered back.

She felt so attracted to him, but didn't want to show it. Being in his arms was drawing her closer in and all she wanted to do was kiss his beautiful lips, but instead she said, "My shoes again. They seem to be a big topic tonight."

"How about I still help you up the stairs. Let me grab your bag. Just lean on me for support."

Evie didn't resist. Even though her ankle felt fine, she decided to play along and let her warrior save her. She leaned into him as he held onto her waist and they slowly walked up the stairs. When they reached the top of the staircase, Evie saw the beautiful sitting room with a large bay window. "This house is so beautiful. Did you decorate it yourself?"

"Well, yes and no," he said. My sister lives in Sewanee and she helped me a lot. Actually, my family is scattered between here, Nashville, and Chattanooga. Have you heard of Sewanee?"

"Yes, I have."

"It's a great little town beautiful over by the University of the South."

"I've heard that they have some great programs there," she said.

Tanner led her down the hallway. "Each room is a full suite with a private bath and sitting area. I'll give you this room," he said as he opened the door and walked into the spacious room. "This room has the best view of the bluff. From the front suites you can see the vineyards."

The room was beautifully decorated with country wood furniture, a large burgandy area rug, a king size bed with a plush comforter of greens and wine shades, and a sitting area by the fireplace with a comfy chair and an ottoman. There were french doors that led to the deck where Adirondeck chairs sat.

"I'll start a fire for you."

"Thank you," Evie said. "I love this room and the house itself is like this huge

Christmas cottage. It is totally amazing how you have created this. I'm actually impressed. You seem to be more rugged than domestic."

Tanner laughed as the fire began to roar in the fireplace. "Actually, I am pretty rugged. I think my sister did most of the decor. I had a lot of insight and ideas, but she sort of brought them to life for me. Now the vineyard. That's a different story. My grandpa gave me a lot of advice before he died, and I plan on having the best wine in the state of Tennessee."

"Oh, so you're an ambitious man."

"Never in the past, but in my roaming around and bar tending, I sort of acquired a bit of intellect in the area of what people like in wine, but I have to work with the land here and what I can grow."

She was engrossed in his words and loved looking at him.

"Dinner is whenever you want to eat. It's nothing fancy but beef stew and homemade cornbread with apple cobbler for dessert."

"Nothing fancy! That sounds fantastic. I haven't eaten all day," Evie said.

He smiled. "Well, welcome to The Little Creek Inn."

For the first time since she met Tanner, she really realized how wonderful he was besides being so damn goodlooking. He wasn't 'model gorgeous' or 'banker gorgeous' or 'rocker gorgeous', he was that down-to-earth good-looking country boy gorgeous. The sweet gentlemen who would pick up a stranger and her dog in a storm and give them a home for the night. His dark hair was cut short and had a slight wave to it on top. His brown eyes were dark and inviting, and when he smiled, his dimples showed. His arms were nicely built, and he was dreamy to look at in his Levis and black T-shirt.

"Take your time. We'll eat when you're ready. Come on, Shep," he said. "Let's give the ladies some time to freshen up."

Evie watched as the dog got up and followed him out. Gigi just stared at Evie for a minute and then curled up on the rug by the fireplace.

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Gigi walked quickly down the stairs and followed the aroma and found the kitchen where Shep got up and went over to her. The two dogs sniffed each other and laid down together on the rug under the kitchen table. Evie walked in behind Gigi and stared at her dog and smirked.

"It looks like your dog likes Shep a bit," Tanner said with a smile.

"Mmmm . . . Yeah. I think I need to talk to her about rushing into relationships too fast."

"Maybe she has good instincts. Don't you believe in love at first sight?"

"No. I don't." But Evie blushed as she said it, and she hoped Tanner didn't notice because at this moment in her life, she was totally lying, and she knew it.

"Thank you for leaving more socks and a sweater by the door."

"Well, based on how you were dressed, I sort of figured that socks and slippers and possibly a sweater wouldn't be in your luggage."

"No. You were right. They weren't, but I did bring my leggings. That's a fashion must these days. And this comfy sweater is amazing! It's so soft."

"It's my sisters. She made the sweater. She knits them by hand and sells them on *Etsy*."

"It's absolutely beautiful."

"Not too small town for you?" he asked as he handed her a bowl of stew.

"Funny," she said as she took the bowl and said, "Thank you."

"Dig in!" Tanner said as he sat down in the chair. "The butter for the cornbread is in the butter dish, or do you city gals not eat butter."

"Okay, as the innkeeper of this establishment, I don't think that sarcasm is something that you should give to your paying guests."

"I didn't take your credit card number when you arrived," he said with a smile.

"Oh, so this is a free stay for me."

"How could Shep and I charge such a beautiful damsel in distress and her beautiful dog."

"Oh such flattery," Evie said as she blushed.

"I only speak the truth."

Evie felt her face turn beet red and thought to herself, *holy cow this guy is good. I am so falling for him. Damn it Evie, control yourself. This is no time for a one-night-stand, but oh damn would it definitely be good to have those arms around me all night and those lips touching mine.*

He folded his hands and said grace.

Evie was taken back as she watched him thank God for his food. At first, she felt awkward because it was a tradition that she had stopped. He looked up and saw her staring at him. "What?" he asked.

"Can you say it again out loud?" she asked.

"Sure," he said with a smile. He leaned his hand over and took hold of hers and she felt such warmth and goodness in his touch that she was overwhelmed as he said grace again. She started to weep a little and stopped herself.

"What's wrong?"

Evie wiped her tears. "I just feel really bad and yet grateful at the same time. I am grateful that you showed up, and I didn't die out there in that freaky storm, but I also feel bad that I haven't really shown God any appreciation for anything in my life for a really long time. I feel like he's talking to me and sent me an angel to wake me up."

"Well, my grandmother and my mom always believed in Christmas miracles and in angels around us."

"So you're an angel?"

Tanner laughed. "Well, that's questionable."

Evie was intrigued with him and wanted to know more about him.

She took a bite of the stew and said, "This is delicious. It really is. Compliments to the chef!"

"It's my mom's recipe and her mom's before her. The cornbread, too."

"This is just perfect. Maybe I did die, and I'm in Heaven right now," she said with a smile.

"I can assure you that I am not an angel and you didn't die, but I am trying to make the Little Creek Inn feel like a bit of heaven."

When they finished eating, Evie got up to wash the dishes.

"I'll do that. Guests do not clean up. Besides your ankle should rest."

"Well, I won't fight, but how about I dry. My ankle feels pretty good."

He stood next to her and she could smell the freshness of his cologne. It wasn't overpowering or intense. It was soft and nice with subtle undertones that made her melt a bit. She felt her attraction to him grow, and the closer he stood next to her, the more excited she became.

She took the plate from him and accidentally touched his hand. She felt a sensation go through her and as she turned to look at him, their eyes met. The moment was perfect and the feeling was so intense that when he began to lean into her, she

followed his lead and gently their lips touched. His lips were soft and felt like velvet against her skin. The kiss was nice and warm and inviting. Then Evie took hold of herself and pulled away quickly.

She took a deep breath and said, "I need to get my car fixed tomorrow so that I can head back to Nashville."

"Um . . . Yes, you're right." Tanner picked up a towel and quickly dried his hands completely and leaned against the sink and looked at her. "The garage should be open tomorrow unless this storm doesn't let up. Then there is a possibility that Jake won't open."

"Jake?"

"Jake Walters owns the local garage in Sewanee that I use. Do you know him? You sound as if you do," he asked curiously.

"No, no . . . no I don't. I don't know what I was thinking." Evie placed the towel down.

"You know if this storm doesn't let up, you might be stuck here with Shep and me for Christmas Eve. I mean storms like this are pretty big in shutting down the south."

She smiled. "I think you're flirting with me."

"Well, Evie, yes I am, and I think that you like it."

"Oh, you do!"

He leaned in closer to her and said, "You know that you want to kiss me again. Don't you?"

"Is this part of the amenities at this inn?" she asked with a coy smile.

"Not for all guests," he said.

The attraction to him was there and it was intense and as their eyes held a gaze with each other, she found herself leaning further and further into him until their lips met again. They began to kiss, and Evie melted as he put his arms around her waist and pulled her very close to him. She could feel the strength in his muscles engulf her like a well-fitted glove. The kiss was magical and took her breath away. No one ever made her feel this way not William, not Jake, not even Damian. She wanted to kiss him more, and she did.

They broke apart and Evie felt herself blush. Tanner smiled and reached for the wine glasses on the table. He handed her her glass of wine and picked up his own glass and led her into the living room. They sat on the leather sofa by the fireplace. Evie grabbed the throw and placed it around herself. The two of them sat there in the dim

lighting of the Christmas tree and watched the fire burn as Shep and Gigi followed them into the room and snuggled next to each other on the area rug.

"Your tree is beautiful."

"Thank you. Now that I did decorate."

"Well, I am impressed. I don't even put a tree up at all. I haven't had a tree in a really long time, probably since I left home. I have been pretty much working and William was as bad as me."

"William?" Tanner asked.

"My ex boyfriend." She said quickly. "We were two workaholics. That's why we worked together because it was all about work and making money until he all-of-a-sudden wanted the house and fence and kids. That's when it all fell apart."

"You don't want that?"

"I didn't want that. It was too restrictive, and I felt that I would lose too much of my freedom."

"I can understand freedom. I like it myself."

"Oh, so we're two of a kind."

"Well they say birds of a feather flock together."

She laughed.

"I like you, Tanner James."

"I like you too, Evie Monroe."

She did like him and it was causing a huge conflict inside of her. *This is crazy, she thought. He is a stranger. Why do I feel like this. Evie get yourself together. Tomorrow you fix the car and head home. But not Jake. Jake can't fix the car. You cannot go there. That would be a disaster. You'll have to insist on a bigger shop in Chattanooga. Just play the city girl attitude. Oh, God, I'm weaving a web of lies. What if he is my destiny? No, he can't be. He's too cute, he's too nice, and he's too perfect.*

"Tomorrow, I'll call Jake and as long as the storm is over, he'll fix your car."

"No, I'd rather call a bigger shop in Monteagle to fix the car or even Chattanooga. These small town mechanics probably don't work on Mercedes."

"Jake is really good. He's been working on cars for years and his shop is pretty current with computers and all. He is certified to work on foreign cars. I mean we do have more than beat up old trucks in Sewanee."

Just then she realized how much of a bitch she sounded like and stopped. *I like him too much*, she thought to herself. Suddenly, she sat up and spoke seriously. "Tanner, I know Jake."

"You know Jake?" he said surprised. "How do you know, Jake?"

"I grew up in Sewanee. I'm not a big city girl."

"What are you talking about?" He pulled back and looked at her with a surprised expression. "What's with all the lies?" he asked.

"Well, let's just say . . . not wanting to go home. I haven't done in life what my mother wanted and so, I stay away and when I met you, I just felt that the less I told you about me the better it would be, but now, I realize that it was stupid because I really do like you."

He sat there and said nothing at first. "So what are you a player?"

"No! I'm not!"

"Well, you sound that way to me. I open my home to you and take you in to help you and you lie to me this whole time. I actually liked you."

Tanner stood up and Evie grabbed his hand and said, "Tanner, wait! Please let me explain. Oh, God. I really have turned into a bitch."

He said nothing and then with an annoyed look he took his hand away from hers and sat down on the chair next to the sofa. "I can't say that you're a bitch, but I don't like being lied to."

"I'm sorry. See, I have a degree in English Literature, and when I finished grad school, I met Damian."

"Damian? What about William?"

She realized how bad this was starting to sound. She took a sip of wine and collected her thoughts. "Damian was before William. He was wild and very carefree and everything about him was freedom. He swept me away. I had had enough of college, my masters program, teaching, and my mother, and so I took off with him. I met him at a bar while he was performing. It was love at first sight, or I thought so, but I learned afterwards that it was lust at first sight. I can't believe I am telling you this."

"Go on," he said. "I'm listening."

She looked at him and didn't know if he was serious or just playing her to kill time, but she had felt a genuine warmth in him as if he was an old friend when she met him, and so she continued to talk even though at this moment she noticed that he had suddenly become a bit distant and cold.

"Damian was hot and sexy and yes the sex was really amazing." She began to blush. "I needed something, someone. I needed to escape from my life of routines, and rules, and boringness, and my mother's criticism. So, I left. I hopped onto the back of his Harley, and I took off with him to Nashville. I had one bag and very little money. He

was a guitarist in a band. My mom and I fought badly the night before I left, and when he showed up at four am in the morning, I left with him and never came back."

She saw Tanner's surprised expression on his face.

"Yeah, I'm not such a good country girl. Things were exciting and fun till Damian started to get popular at the local clubs and within three months, he was sleeping with this older woman who was a music promoter and let's just say that he dumped me. I was devastated, and I wasn't going to go home to my mom and dad who would say, "I told you so." So I called connections I made with people through Damian. One of them was William. And I manipulated William, and he helped me land a good job. I used William. I really did. Tanner, I'm not so nice. The past few years I have really been a power hungry bitch. I realized that a few hours ago when I thought I was going to die in that storm. My priorities since my days with Damian have been about money and promoting and using others for my own gain. I haven't talked to my mom since the night we argued."

Tanner was quiet at first as he let all she said sink in. "Evie, no one is perfect and everyone has a past. I think your being too hard on yourself. I mean, I don't like that you lied or led me on to believe that you were one way when it's obvious that your not, but I know that sometimes we don't make the right life choices. I don't think your a heartless bitch. I think your hurt and bitter, and I think you got off track. I did, too."

Her eyes widened. "I would have never thought that about you. You seem so put together. You're so sweet."

"Yes, I am a sweet hell raiser. That's what my mom calls me," he said.

She wasn't sure how to react to what he said. "I've been determined to not need my parents at all. I used the sassy bitch attitude and worked my ass off to get where I'm at. It's cost me a few relationships," she said as she took a sip of her wine.

"You were heading home?"

"Under duress. If the storm hadn't hit, I would have driven right by the exit and never stopped. I would have never gone home. I'm really not very nice. Tanner, my mom is sick. My brother sent me a text, and I still haven't responded to it."

"You still can."

"Oh family." She laughed. "You know, I met this stranger at the truck stop in Chattanooga, and he was telling me about how family was all you have in the end, and I told him that that was bullshit. That family just tries to tell you what to do and love is just work, and the normal life is bullshit, too."

Tanner laughed at her words. "Evie, my grandpa was like that. Even though he

married and had kids and had homes, he craved freedom. He was always on the road, always making money, and always more away than here. Grandma held down the fort, and when he was home, he was always busy. I'm a bit like him. Hell, maybe a lot like him. I took off after high school."

Now Evie looked shocked.

He sat back and smiled. "I needed to get as far away as possible, so I joined the Air Force. It was easy. I went all over the place and then when I came back, I stayed a month and took off again. My mom wanted me to settle down and finish the college I started in the Air Force. My dad did too, but he wasn't as vocal about it. I did get an associates degree in business, but I didn't use it. Instead, I took off to Florida and became a bar tender in a venue by Clearwater Beach. It was fun. No stress, hot babes, good tips. I had a few hook ups with some attractive, wealthy cougars who wanted to feel young again. After Florida, I went to California for a bit, but then I returned to Nashville and tended bar there. I committed to no one. I needed my freedom until one day my grandfather showed up out of the blue and said, 'Tanner, it's time to get your shit together boy and become responsible. You're coming home with me.' I said to him, 'You mean meet a good girl, settle down, get a real job and raise a family? And he said, 'Yes,' and I said, 'No! I'm not ready. It's a bullshit life and not for me.' He just laughed at me and said son, 'No one is ever ready.'"

Tanner poured more wine for both of them. Evie sat back against the sofa and just listened. She loved his voice. It was soft and nice and deep. It was soothing. She felt bad inside again for lying to him.

"I went home with him. He had that way about him. Grandma said he was the hardest man to love because he was so distant, but when he wanted you to do something, he knew what to say and how to say it. He gave my grandmother everything except for what she wanted the most."

"What was that?"

"His time, and his conversation. She wanted to hold hands and go for walks and talk. It wasn't him."

"What happened to her?"

"She died of a sudden heart attack while he was on the road performing. It left him with intense guilt and sadness that never left him after that. Life for him wasn't the same anymore. It's funny, but it took Beau Stone his whole life to find out what was important. I guess that's why he was so insistant on me coming home. He didn't want me to end up like him."

"Beau Stone?"

"Yeah, my grandpa was well known in the industry."

"I know that name, but he's dead."

"Yeah, Evie he died last Christmas. I told you that."

"No. I mean . . . wait." She got up and went to the picture on the wall and scanned them all. Then she saw one of Beau before he died and she gasped. "Was this picture up here before?"

"Yeah. That's him right before he died."

Then she noticed the hat on the shelf and walked over to it and picked it up.

"That was his favorite cowboy hat. He wore that thing everywhere," Tanner said with a smile.

Evie put her hand over her mouth and sat down on the sofa again.

"Tanner, this is going to sound crazy, but the oldtimer I met at the truck stop told me his name was Beau Stone, and he was wearing this hat and driving a white Dually."

He laughed. "You're imagining things, Evie. The white Dually is mine. I mean well it was his, but he left it to me. I was driving it when I picked you up, and I also had on his hat. "

"No, I'm not imagining this."

"Evie, you were not awake when I found you in the snow. You were really cold and your memory has probably been compromised somehow by it."

She sat there confused and tried to get her thoughts straight.

"Tanner, I know that the cold weakened me, but I didn't pass out."

"Actually, you did. I had to shake you a few times to wake you."

She looked concerned.

"I didn't want to tell you because you were better quickly after I got you here and you warmed up. Maybe it was a dream?"

"I swear he said his name was Beau Stone."

Tanner realized that she was getting upset, and he started to think that maybe it really was his grandfather.

"I don't know Evie. Maybe it was my grandfather. "

"You believe me?"

"Well, I mean you did end up on my road. Maybe this is meant to be. Maybe we were destined to meet each other."

"Are you teasing me?"

"No Evie. I'm not. I'm being serious."

"I don't know if I believe in a destiny that I didn't plan," she said.

"Why not?"

"It's not logical, and it makes me feel vulnerable and not in control of my life. It just doesn't seem real. Meeting someone randomly that is your destiny seems too made-up."

"What's real anyway?"

She didn't answer him.

"Evie, a few hours ago you were heading home to an empty home and now you're here with me. I don't think you planned it."

He gently touched her hand, and she looked at him.

"Evie, I think we both have made some choices in the past that we're not proud of, but this is the present."

"Are you saying that you forgive me for lying?" she asked.

"Well, that depends on how well you knew Jake Walters."

"Oh, Jake." She smiled and said, "You have nothing to worry about. We dated in high school for a while. I liked him in that first time boyfriend way, but it was just a friendship. I didn't want to use Jake to fix my car because my parents would then know I was in Sewanee. I avoid this area like the plague."

"So would sparks fly if you saw him again?"

Evie didn't answer at first. "Um . . . I don't think so. I mean it's been a while since I've seen him. Why, would you be jealous?" she asked flirtatiously.

"I don't get jealous."

"Oh, you don't." Her eyes popped out a bit. "You seem a bit jealous now."

"No, I don't. I just wanted to know how well you knew Jake. I mean he is a friend of mine, and I don't want things to be awkward."

"Awkward? Why would they be awkward? Unless . . . it's because you really do like me," she said with a smile.

Tanner started to massage her hands as he held them.

"Maybe I do. You'll have to wait and see."

"I don't know if that man was a dream or real, but I am glad that I decided to get off the highway," she said.

"You know, my grandpa told me right before he died that when I met the right girl who'd put up with my need for freedom and understood me, to never let her get away. He brought me home to help him with the vineyard project. I did come home and

after he died, it was the first time that I didn't feel the need to run, so I stayed. Maybe he sent you to me."

"Oh, Tanner this isn't a romance novel."

"It can be. How about you stay here and help me promote the vineyard and inn? Maybe you could teach again. Besides, I'll be building myself a house close by on the property, so maybe you could help me decorate it."

"A simple life. You want me to try to have a simple life. This high powered, stilleto heeled, power bitch," she said with a smile.

"Well those attributes can be very sexy in the right environment."

"Oh, so you really do like my shoes."

He laughed and said, "I didn't throw them away. I put them in the corner over there by the fireplace to dry. I do think that they look great on you."

She blushed and said, "I'm leary about love at first sight. My track record stinks."

He looked at her seriously and realized how very beautiful she was. Gently he touched her face and kissed her soft lips and then slowly pulled away.

"Well, mine isn't any better, but I'm willing to try one more time. Evie, this is different than a flirtatious attraction. I've had a lot of those, but I never felt this comfortable so fast with someone, and this isn't a line just to get you into bed."

"It isn't! Oh, no . . . I'm dissappointed," she said with a laugh.

She placed her arms around his neck and said, "I really do like you, and I really am sorry for the charade."

"I forgive you, but always be honest with me. It's important. I don't like to play games. I really like you. You'll stay?"

"I'll stay through Christmas and then we'll see how we like each other after that. I think I need to make a call and make something right again."

"I understand," he said. "The cell phone service is pretty bad with this storm, so why don't you use the phone in the study."

Evie got up and went into the study while Tanner got up and walked over to his grandpa's hat. He picked it up and smiled. Looking at Shep and Gigi snuggled on the rug by the fireplace he said, "Shep, I think gramps brought us both a good woman. What do ya think? Is it time for us to settle down?"

Shep barked and placed his paw around Gigi, and Tanner laughed.

"What's so funny," Evie asked as she returned from the study.

"I think Shep and Gigi are starting a little romance."

Evie walked over to Tanner.

"Are they the only ones?" she whispered.

He smiled as he put his grandfather's hat on her head.

"Tomorrow night I'm going home for Christmas Eve, and Tanner, I'd like you and Shep to join Gigi and me. It's time I faced my past and mended it."

"We'd love to join you," he said.

She smiled as they held each other and kissed in the glow of the fire.

"Thank you for rescuing me," Evie whispered.

"Thank you for needing to be rescued," Tanner whispered back.

And then they kissed, and the passion between them ignited.

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