



## Mistletoe Preview (selected excerpt)

The last thing Shelby Scott needed in her life was a hot, sexy man. And yet when the door opened on the pickup truck that had just pulled to the curb near her wrecked car, a hot, sexy man is exactly what stepped out. Tall, dark-haired, and a little scruffy, he'd obviously just come from putting in a hard day's work somewhere. A smudge of dirt streaked the front of his blue T-shirt and his well-worn jeans sported a rip across one knee. But none of that dimmed her instant awareness of his blue eyes, commanding jawline, or broad shoulders.

And sure, she had plenty else to worry about at the moment besides hot, sexy men, but given that the same type of man had brought her to this surreal moment in time—standing along a desolate low country South Carolina highway beside a wrecked car she couldn't afford to repair or replace—it was hard to ignore that particular quality in the guy striding toward her.

"You okay?" he asked as he drew closer.

Despite a few bumps and bruises, she nodded. "Better than the car anyway." They both spared the mid-size sedan a glance where it straddled a ditch, the hood bowed, the grille smashed against a huge old oak tree dripping with Spanish moss. A mere car had no chance against a tree with that much history.

“Looks like you went on a wild ride.” Mr. Hot and Sexy motioned to the twisting black skid marks that snaked up the asphalt behind her.

“A tire blew and I lost control.”

“Well, the important thing is that you’re okay. Probably shook up, though. Got somebody to call?”

She blinked. Such a simple question. She wished the answer were as easy. “Not really. I’m not from around here. I was headed to a town called Sassafra.”

His mouth unfurled into a gentle grin. “Almost made it, too—city limits sign is just around that bend.” He pointed to a wide curve about a hundred yards away. “I can give you a lift. Where ya headed exactly?”

Shelby weighed her answer. Another question that seemed simpler than it was. Did she dare let this stranger know where she’d be staying? At the moment, she didn’t want *anyone* to know—that was the whole point in coming here. But she couldn’t see any other options at the moment. “Cypress Stump Road.”

His nod came with a guarded expression of surprise, uncertainty. “Not much out that way.”

*That’s why I’m hoping you’re a good guy and not a bad one—since you’re my only option at the moment.* “It’s a family place. A cottage at the end of the road.”

“Well, hop in the truck and I’ll drop you off.”

“It’s not out of your way?”

“Nah. Just outside town a few miles.” Then he looked toward the wrecked vehicle. “Need anything from your car?”

Her mind spun. Thank God he’d asked or she might not have realized quickly enough. He was right—the accident had left her unsteady. Calm, though—because she’d taught herself that trait—but still not thinking as clearly as she should. Wrecking the car put a pretty big hitch in her plan and she’d have to wade through all the ramifications once she got where she was going and could regroup.

“Yes, actually—thanks.” She started toward the sedan, aware as she reached for her keys that her hands were trembling. From the accident. From the change in plans. From suddenly being

forced to accept the kindness of a handsome stranger. This wasn't how she'd expected her afternoon to go.

When the man walking beside her through the tall roadside grass peered down into her trunk, his eyes widened. "Wow. All this?"

The space was packed tight with boxes and bags. "Yes. Sorry. And the stuff in the backseat, too." Which was a pile of clothes on hangers, and a laundry basket filled with socks, underwear, and bras. It had seemed the easiest way to move that kind of stuff and she'd never expected anyone to see it all but her. Again, best laid plans.

"So you're gonna be here a while then," he concluded, hefting a couple of small but weighty boxes labeled *Photo Albums* and *Books* from the trunk. "Not just visiting somebody for the holidays."

Christmas was only a few weeks away, so the notion made sense—but as she grabbed up totes and shopping bags filled with towels and sheets, she confirmed what the photos and towels likely made obvious. "Moving."

"What brings you here? A...job?"

"I'll actually be looking for one," she confessed as they plodded toward his truck carrying her belongings. "I, um, wanted a new start someplace quiet. This place came for free, so...here I am."

She tried to sound cheerful about it, even adding a quick smile, but knew the words came out stiff. Stiff enough to turn the conversation awkward as they lowered their armloads of stuff into the bed of his big 4x4 truck. She suddenly suspected that Sassafras didn't draw a lot of newcomers—or have a lot of job opportunities.

"Where ya from?" he asked as they started back to the car.

"Chicago." A part of her didn't like divulging even that. *Don't tell anyone anything*, her friend and ex-coworker Marta had warned before she left. Marta was the only person who'd even known she was leaving, the only person she'd been brave enough to trust a little. But Chicago was a big city, and far enough away that it seemed safe to share.

As they took more stuff from the trunk, Mr. Hot and Sexy laughed. "From Chicago to Sassafras—sorry to tell you, but that seems like a big step down. Not gonna find much shopping or nightlife around here. No big holiday extravaganzas or anything."

"That's fine with me," she assured him. "Like I said, I'm all about the peace and quiet."

“Well, you’ll get plenty of *that*.”

“You don’t like it here?” she asked. An attempt to change the subject from her to him.

“Oh, I like it fine. Born and raised here. Maybe was a time I thought I’d end up somewhere else, but it didn’t work out that way.”

There was a story there, and she was tempted to ask about it. But she didn’t. Because she hadn’t come here to form relationships. She’d come here to lay low. Keep to herself. Figure out how to start over. And that didn’t include trusting or getting to know anyone. And it probably wouldn’t for a very long time. Fate had made her a loner—not by choice but by circumstance. She didn’t necessarily *want* to be alone, but she kept ending up that way, and for right now, it was safer to just accept that.

One more load from the car—she rushed to grab up the laundry basket, along with a shopping bag of pajamas and shorts, letting him take the clothes on hangers, mostly tops and a few sundresses and casual skirts. She’d left every professional piece of apparel behind because that life was over. Well, at least for the foreseeable future.

Even in early December, the sun here was warm enough to make her glad they’d soon be out of it—and as they walked side by side, she wondered if he was noticing the bra on top in the basket she toted, its pink cups adorned with tiny rhinestones. She suspected he did, making her feel still a tad more awkward. A life that included sexy bras was over, too—but she’d brought it anyway because it was comfortable and supportive, and good bras were expensive.

As she climbed up into the passenger side of the truck, she tried to ignore how very masculine the space felt—right down to the scent. From the worn ball cap on the dashboard bearing the words Mid Carolina Speedway to the plaid flannel shirt tossed over the console to the musky smell emanating from the worn leather seats, everything inside the truck told her she was in the space of a guy’s guy. She hated how drawn to that she felt—instantaneously, something chemical in her body connecting, reacting. Because at the same time it repelled her—due to recent history, and the stark fear that invoked. So she didn’t get too comfortable.

And as Mr. Hot and Sexy got behind the wheel, closed his door, and the truck rumbled back onto the road, her sense of unease grew. Everything about her future had *already* loomed uncertainly, and now she’d lost the use of her car and had just accepted a ride with a stranger.

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