



## *Whisper Falls* Preview

*“Meow.”*

Tessa Sheridan frowned at the gray and white cat perched next to her on the sofa. “What do you want *now*? I put your dumb Fancy Feast out, and your special little ball with the bell inside. And your litter box is by the door.”

*“Meow,”* he said again, an insistent look on his furry little face. In fact, Mr. Knightley – who didn’t strike Tessa as being nearly as debonair as the Jane Austen character he was named for – stared at her as if she were ... a cat psychic or something. But she had no idea what his problem was and didn’t feel particularly tolerant. She’d agreed to cat-sit for her close friend, Amy, who was gone for the weekend with her mom seeing relatives a few hours’ drive away. And she’d originally planned to do the job at Amy’s place, but she wasn’t feeling well, so it had just made sense to pack up the spoiled kitty and bring him here to her cabin. Only now he wouldn’t leave her alone.

“What is it, you silly cat?”

*“Meow.”*

Tessa simply rolled her eyes at him, then hugged a throw pillow to her chest. Blegh. Nausea. Not a lot. Just a little. Just enough to make her feel slightly off-kilter.

But she refused to focus on that. So she cast the pillow aside, pushed to her feet, and said to Mr. Knightley, “I’m going to check the mail. Eat your expensive food while I’m gone.” She didn’t bother putting on shoes because it was nice out for early March – around seventy degrees – and the sun was shining bright; the warmth of the concrete driveway would feel good beneath her feet.

The cabin’s inside door already stood open, so she pushed through the screen door – only to see a flash of gray and white fur go darting past her feet! Oh God. “Knightley! You get back here right now!”

Of course, this went much like her previous attempts at communication – he ignored her and promptly scampered around the corner of the small log house, out of sight.

“Mr. Knightley!” She let the screen door slam shut and gave chase, soon running over cool grass instead of warm concrete, and hoped she wouldn’t step on anything unpleasant as she bounded around the cabin and behind it.

And – uh oh. Mr. K. was nowhere in sight. That fast. The realization brought on a fresh wave of nausea. This couldn’t be. If she lost Amy’s cat ... well, it was unthinkable. She frequently teased her friend for her intense attachment to him, yet she could scarcely imagine Amy’s life without her beloved pet. Her chest went hollow.

*But don’t panic. You’ll find him. You have to.* “Here, kitty!” she called in a high-pitched voice. “Here, kitty kitty.”

Her head swam, more from fear now than anything else, as she scanned the area behind her cabin. Beyond the backyard, the land sloped upward toward a small white ranch house with a large garage to one side. Well, at least her new neighbor wasn’t out and about. She hadn’t seen him – or her – yet; all she knew was that the new occupant seemed to have very loud friends with very loud motorcycles and that this was no time for any awkward introductions. And given that she’d moved out here in the woods seeking peace and quiet, the frequent motorcycle noise presented yet one more problem in her life. And now she’d lost Mr. Knightley on top of everything else?

No, she couldn’t have. She refused to believe it. “Knightley!” she snapped impatiently. “Where on earth are you?”

But as she padded onward through the soft spring grass, she heard no annoying meows and saw no signs of cat life. And then she started thinking about exactly where she lived. There were so many trees here. Her log cabin and the neighbor's house were the only two homes for half a mile in either direction, both built on the hilliest stretch of Whisper Falls Road. The shadowy, narrow stretch of pavement twisted past on one side of the houses and Whisper Creek ran along the other, probably fifty yards away through the trees. So many places for a cat to hide. Or get lost. Or hurt. Not that she thought Mr. Knightley would fling himself into the current or anything, but still – how would she ever find him here? “Here, kitty kitty!” Her heart was in her throat by the time she reached the side of her yard that led toward the stream and the small descent of Whisper Falls in the distance. She peered off into the woods, fairly dark already even though it was only late afternoon. “Please, kitty kitty.”

Nothing moved in the forest, but she could hear the *shush* of the falls from where she stood. She began to walk upward, into the yard above, still staring off into the trees to her right. “Mr. Knightley, if you can hear me, I’m sorry I haven’t been very nice. Just come on out and let’s go home. I’ll feed you with a spoon if that’s what it takes. I’ll throw your little ball for you and scratch under your chin and all the other stuff Amy told me to do that I haven’t been doing.”

In the shade now, a breeze chilled her and she hugged herself. She wore only a tank top with jeans, and her bare feet had officially become cold. “Mr. Knightley, please don’t do this to me,” she begged, staring off into the wooded gloom. Desperation tinged her voice, but she couldn’t help it. “Please come back and we’ll work out our differences. We’ll play and cuddle together, I promise.” She knew it was silly to try to reason with him, but she felt at a loss, not sure how to proceed or what to do.

When she heard a masculine throat-clearing sound directly behind her, she nearly jumped out of her skin. Whipping around to face the noise, she found ... oh Lord. Surely this wasn’t her neighbor. At the intimidating sight of him, she almost jumped again, but forced herself to stay on the ground this time. He stood at least 6’3”, with long, dark hair that fell past broad shoulders. His black Harley Davidson t-shirt molded to his body, and his tan, muscular arms sported numerous tattoos. She sucked in her breath as her skin prickled.

“You lose somebody?” he asked, his voice as deep as she might have expected. His expression said he suspected she was a little crazy, though. Probably since she’d been staring into the woods having a conversation with someone who wasn’t there. About playing and cuddling, no less.

“My friend’s cat,” she said. But did that make the situation any better? Given that she’d been saying dumb things about working out their differences? “He ran away. I’m cat-sitting,” she added. Something about this guy’s deep brown eyes on her was unnerving. He possessed ... shockingly *pretty* eyes, framed by thick, dark lashes. Their warmth contradicted everything else

about him, all of which was definitely hard, rough, and even a little scary. “His name’s Mr. Knightley,” she added dumbly.

“Weird name for a cat.” His voice came flat, devoid of emotion.

“Yeah,” she agreed. She’d considered saying more, explaining the whole Jane Austen connection, but in the end had decided to just keep it simple. “Have you seen him?” She was nervous now – suddenly speaking around a disconcerting lump in her throat.

And even as the brawny guy gave his head a shake, saying, “Nope, I just came outside,” she realized that besides looking sort of menacing, he also seemed ... familiar in some way. Was it his voice? Those eyes? Something more subtle in his tough-guy stance? Then it occurred to her that he looked like ... a Romo; the Romo family had roots in the town of Destiny going back half a century.

And then it hit her. Could this possibly be ...? Was this ... Lucky Romo, who’d left town years ago and never been heard from again?

No, surely not. Because if Lucky was back in town, she’d know. Her friend Rachel was engaged to Mike Romo, Lucky’s older brother.

Unless ... could Lucky have come back without telling anyone? Her neighbor had moved in a couple of weeks ago, after all. And the Whisper Falls area was pretty isolated, a good place to keep to one’s self – which was exactly why she’d chosen it.

Still, it made no sense. If Lucky had come home to Destiny, why wouldn’t he contact his family? And she certainly saw Rachel and Mike often enough to know nothing monumental like that had occurred.

“Uh, you okay?” he asked, eyes narrowed slightly.

*Oh crap. Not really. I’ve lost Amy’s cat. I’m still a little woozy. I’ve got a big, burly biker neighbor who may or may not be the long lost Lucky Romo. And I just keep standing here staring at him while my heart beats too fast.* “No,” she answered honestly – despite that his question had sounded more like ‘you seem odd’ than ‘I’m concerned for you.’ “If I don’t find that cat, I’m dead.”

He gave his head a slight tilt and spoke matter-of-factly. “Must be an important cat.”

“It is. Very.” Then she pointed vaguely toward the log cabin thirty yards down the hill. “I’m ... your neighbor, by the way.”

She'd started to say her name, yet somehow hadn't felt completely comfortable divulging it to this particular guy. Although she'd hoped maybe he'd introduce himself anyway – but instead he just said, "How'd the cat get out?"

"When I opened the door, he ran past me."

For the first time, she detected a glint of amusement in his eyes. "Doesn't sound like you're a very good cat-sitter."

Something about it softened her uneasiness a bit. "Lost my training manual," she said.

"Well, he couldn't have gotten far."

She disagreed with that assessment, but the notion propelled her to consider ways she might lure Mr. Knightley back if he was still nearby. Besides being the most practical thing she'd done since the cat's escape, it seemed like a better use of her time than trying to make out all the tattoos on her well-muscled neighbor. Even so, she'd instantly caught sight of an inked chain circling one biceps several times, and now couldn't help noticing some kind of orangey flames on his forearm. "Do you have any yarn?" she asked.

Her broad-shouldered neighbor blinked, back to looking at her like she was a little nuts again. "Any *what?*"

"Yarn." She swallowed nervously around that dumb lump in her throat. "Mr. Knightley likes to play with yarn. Red's his favorite." *Shut up, shut up, shut up.*

"Afraid I haven't unpacked my knitting basket yet," he said, his dry tone confirming what she already knew: Biker dudes didn't *have* yarn, red or otherwise. Only then he looked over his shoulder, toward his house. "But hang on a minute – I've got an idea."

And as he turned and walked away, toward his house, she realized his t-shirt didn't only advertise Harley Davidson. On the back, in red lettering, were the words: Lucky's Custom Bike Painting.

*Holy crap.*

She'd been right. This was Lucky Romo! In the flesh! It was a miracle!

Because his family hadn't heard from him in so long they'd actually feared he was dead. Which was because – uh oh, she just remembered – they'd also gotten word at some point that he'd joined an outlaw biker gang out west.

Oh boy. Bikers were one thing – *outlaw* bikers were another. Did she have some vile and dangerous criminal helping her look for Amy’s cat? Should she just forget Mr. Knightley and run? Maybe the sense of danger that hung around her neighbor was what had kept her from giving him her name. And if she *didn’t* run, should she tell him she knew who he was?

Before she could think further, the door on the white house opened and Lucky Romo came walking back out – carrying a small bowl of milk in one large hand. Huh.

He said nothing as he rejoined her in the yard, so she cleverly remarked, “Milk.” Then cringed. *Stop with the brilliant comments already!* Lucky Romo lowered the dish to the grass halfway between Tessa and the woods, then stepped back beside her. And that’s when she realized what Mr. K. had wanted when he’d been meowing at her. Amy gave him a saucer of milk every night with dinner – and Tessa had forgotten. Stubborn, spoiled cat.

“Is that him?” Lucky asked.

Tessa’s heart rose to her throat when she followed his pointing finger toward the edge of the yard, where the forest met the lawn – Mr. Knightley crouched there in the taller grass, peering at the milk as if it were prey. “Uh huh,” she whispered.

Both of them stayed quiet as Knightley slowly, silently inched toward the milk, his movements implying he thought he was being very sneaky about the whole thing. Once he started lapping at it, Tessa gingerly moved in to kneel beside him. He didn’t flinch when she reached to stroke his fur, too caught up in the milk, and she sighed, “Thank God,” giving the spotted cat an affectionate squeeze. For the first time since Knightley’s escape, Tessa felt like she could breathe again. She hadn’t lost Amy’s cat. Life would go on.

But then she remembered the weirder part: Lucky Romo, of all people in the world, had helped her find him. She still couldn’t fathom that this big, tough guy was him – he’d left town at eighteen, which was – she did the math – sixteen years ago now. But this had to be him. The whole motorcycle thing fit. As did the name on the back of his shirt. Sure, it *could* be somebody else’s business, but he looked so much like Mike with that thick, dark hair and olive complexion.

So this was him. Lucky Romo. Home at last.

But ... if he wasn’t here to reconcile with his family, why was he in Destiny?

The second Mr. Knightley reached the bottom of the shallow bowl, Tessa anchored one arm snugly around him and pushed to her feet. “Thanks,” she said. Although peering back up into that tough-guy face and those captivating eyes made her a little dizzy. She’d never known a guy with muscles like this. With long hair. With so many tattoos.

“No problem.” He was still Mr. Unemotional, though, his voice flat and detached.

“You saved my life,” she felt the need to add.

He gave his head a pointed tilt. “I wouldn’t go *that* far.”

His words made her remember the whole outlaw rumor. Maybe an outlaw biker dude took that kind of statement a lot more literally than she did. And did this mean she should be scared? She’d been a *little* scared even *before* remembering that part.

And yet ... even as her muscles stayed tensed, she felt a response to him in other places, too. In her breasts. Between her thighs. Good lord – what was *that* about? Or – wait. Maybe it was all just nerves, her whole body getting into the act because he was so freaking intimidating. Hopefully. She couldn’t tell.

So she dropped her gaze briefly and bit her lip, her heart still pounding too hard, before forcing her eyes back to his one last time. “Well, I better get him into the house before he tries to make another break for it.”

Mr. Unresponsive didn’t reply, so with cat in hand, she turned to go.

That’s when he said, “See ya later ... hot stuff.”

The last words halted Tessa in place. What had he just called her? Looking over her shoulder, she raised her gaze back to his – to find another tiny hint of amusement there as he said, “Your shirt.”

Glancing down, Tessa wanted to die. She’d completely forgotten she wore a snug white tank with the words *Hot Stuff* written in script across it, actually half of a pajama set Rachel had given her for her birthday; the matching pants had little smiling hot peppers all over them. But the worst part was – she wasn’t wearing a bra, a fact that was scandalously apparent. She even caught a hint of color through the thin cotton. Dear God in heaven.

Any portion of the lump in her throat that had receded now swelled once more, and an intense heat climbed her cheeks. “Um, see ya,” she said. But she couldn’t meet his eyes again – no way – so she just hightailed it briskly back down the hill through the cool carpet of grass.

With lightly clenched teeth, she glared down at the cat in her arms. “You are in *so* much trouble, mister.”

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