



## *Tempt Me Tonight* Preview

Halfway between Cincinnati and Indianapolis, south of I-74, set God's country. Trish supposed many thousands of rural or dramatic landscapes had been referred to using those same words, but she hadn't known that when, at the age of seven, she'd sat perched on her Grandpa Henderson's knee, and he'd told her she was looking out at God's country in all its splendor. All she'd seen was a wide cornfield, a line of trees, and the horizon, feeling – even then – the vague urge to somehow look beyond it all, to whatever was on the other side of the picture. And she never came home to Eden, Indiana without remembering the love of the place she'd seen in her grandfather's eyes on a day when she'd really been much more focused on the fact that she'd scuffed her new black patent leathers coming out of church. A girl had to be concerned about her shoes, after all.

She wondered now if Grandpa Henderson, God rest his soul, would see the irony or humor in the fact that she was driving toward a *bar* on the outskirts of God's country – the Last Chance Tavern. Last chance for a beer before entering God's country, she supposed. Or before leaving it.

"Here – turn here," Debbie said next to her.

Trish's stomach churned lightly as she angled her Lexus into the wide gravel parking lot dotted with cars and a few pickups. She really *didn't* want to be here. "And we're coming here, again, why?"

Debbie shoved a lock of thin brown hair from her face. "Kenny wants to see you, and it's pool night."

Trish nodded dryly, resisting the urge to point out that Kenny had the entire next week to see her. "Well, we wouldn't want Kenny to miss pool night."

Debbie blinked, looking miffed. "Kenny works hard and looks forward to Friday nights when Mom keeps the kids."

"Sorry." Trish sighed, feeling at once guilty and justified. She didn't want to be here because she simply didn't *fit* here anymore. She knew it to the marrow of her bones, and given that she regularly dealt with hardened criminals from all walks of life without flinching, she felt an absurd dread faced with strolling into the Last Chance. She scrunched up her nose. "I guess I just would have enjoyed ... dinner or something – more than this."

"You can come over and watch the boys hurl mashed potatoes at each other one night next week if you want. But Friday night is pool night."

Trish parked beneath a security light mounted on a large pole, choosing a spot a few car widths from a large pickup sporting mudflaps embellished with chrome silhouettes of naked women. She tried not to let Debbie see her grimace, but those mudflaps always gave her the creeps. It was as if they said women were just nameless, faceless sex objects. Bleck. Then she flinched slightly. *Please don't let that be Kenny's truck.*

As she got out, pushing the button on her keychain to lock the doors, Debbie made a face over the roof of the car. "This is home, Trish – not Indianapolis."

Trish raised her eyebrows. "No one steals things from cars here?"

Looking as smug as Trish felt, Debbie shook her head. "No – they don't."

Which was when it hit Trish – they probably didn't. Even now. Not in Eden. There might be bars and chrome women on mudflaps, but she supposed that, in a sense, it really *was* still God's country. "Oh. Guess I forgot that for a minute." But she still left the car locked.

Over the years, *home* had become an entirely relative term in her life – this was where her parents lived, and where Debbie lived, but it wasn't *her* home anymore. She'd been back

countless times over the years – every Thanksgiving and Christmas, sometimes for a Sunday dinner with relatives – yet this was different. This was the first time she'd actually come to stay for a while. A week or so. This was the first time she hadn't just whizzed in and out of town for a day, or maybe an overnight stay that included a quick visit with Debbie and Kenny. This was the first time she'd been here long enough that she had to see people. People she hadn't seen in forever. People she'd never expected to see again. *Double bleck.*

"Rowdy Lancaster owns this place now," Debbie pointed out as they trod through the gravel toward the front door of the flat, one-story building painted a dull shade of brown. Through cloudy windows glowed mini-Christmas lights strung around neon beer signs, and a muted Garth Brooks song echoed through the walls.

She remembered Rowdy as a good-natured boy with red hair who'd raised 4-H award-winning calves in high school. So maybe saying hello to him wouldn't be awful. "I always liked Rowdy," she offered, trying to cheer herself up. Then, three steps from a heavy-looking steel door sporting the stenciled words *Last Chance*, she posed the question she'd been trying to be too mature to ask. "Who else will be here?"

Debbie began rambling off a list of names that conjured vague images from high school, explaining that a couple of them worked at the plant with Kenny, and concluding with, "That's pretty much our Friday night crowd."

And Trish's stomach hollowed. At the strange realization that ... life had gone on here. All the same people were still here – only grown up now, living their lives. Debbie and Kenny had a "Friday night crowd" made up of people Trish barely knew, only remembered dimly from her past. How had that happened? How had she ended up knowing so little about her best friend's life?

It wasn't as if she'd thought life in Eden had come to a grinding halt at her departure, but she supposed she'd been so caught up in her own existence all this time that she'd somehow forgotten everything else. And walking into the Last Chance was going to give her a taste of something she hadn't thought about in a very long while – the life she'd once planned to lead here. *Bleck to the tenth power.*

Not that Eden was an awful place. It was quaint in its way. But its way wasn't *her* way and hadn't been for a long time. It was hard to believe she'd *ever* belonged here.

Trish flicked her gaze to Debbie then, hating herself for even letting this enter her mind, but ... "Anybody else I know?"

"I wouldn't expect Joe to be here, if that's what you're wondering."

She shrugged. It was exactly what she was wondering. “Not that it really matters,” she assured Debbie. And it didn’t. As life had worked out, she hadn’t seen Joe Ramsey since she’d left for college and that suited her fine. After mailing off a long, angry letter to him a week after departing for IU, in which she’d reiterated the “never want to hear from you for as long as I live” part, she’d done exactly what she’d told Debbie she was going to do – she’d moved on. It hadn’t happened overnight, of course; he’d broken her young heart, which had taught her to guard it a lot more closely. But she had long since gotten over him – she just didn’t particularly wish to run into him in a bar nearly fifteen years after he’d made a colossal fool of her.

*And for heaven’s sake, why does any of this even matter? Just go in, have a glass of wine, talk with Kenny – then claim exhaustion and leave. Getting this evening behind you will put you one night closer to going home – to your real home, your real life.*

Having steeled herself with that little pep talk, she boldly grabbed the door handle and pulled.

Garth’s “That Summer” filled her ears as she followed Debbie inside. A long bar lined the left wall, two pool tables set in the back near an old-fashioned juke box, and the rest of the room was dotted with mismatched tables and chairs. Few of the tables were occupied, but a small group stood around watching Kenny and an older version of a boy she recognized from high school shoot pool. Light laughter rose at something Kenny said.

Trish spotted Rowdy behind the bar then – older, too, but still red-haired, although it looked thinner than when she’d known him before. He chatted with a dark-haired guy seated on a stool across from him, and her eyes stuck on the tattoo of a cobra coiled on the guy’s muscular biceps, which moved slightly when he lifted his beer bottle for a drink. Something inside her stirred unexpectedly, making her wonder when she’d started finding snake tattoos sexy.

She usually thought anything having to do with snakes was pretty ooky, and if she were going to get something permanently engraved on her arm, it would not have been a member of the reptile family. But something about *this* snake seemed to appeal to her inner biker chick. Although it was the first time she realized she *had* an inner biker chick.

It was only when the tattoo guy glanced in her direction that she nearly fainted.

Joe.

His warm gaze locked on her instantly and she knew he was just as surprised to see her as she was to see him. She couldn’t blame him – it had been almost half their lives ago that they’d spent long summer nights writhing against each other in that old Trans Am, or anywhere else they could steal a few minutes alone, and suddenly, here she was, walking into The Last Chance.

Of course, nearly fainting wasn't just about seeing Joe. It was about seeing Joe looking like the hottest thing ever poured into a pair of faded blue jeans. It was about his thick, dark hair – just as lustrous as when she'd last run her hands through it. It was about his jaw, covered with heavier stubble than when he'd been a boy. It was about broad shoulders and well-muscled arms and suddenly being faced with an all-grown-up version of Joe Ramsey who could probably get a woman on her back with no more than a look – the look he happened to be casting in her direction right now. Oh boy.

"Don't kill me," Debbie begged next to her, voice quiet. "I didn't know, I swear."

Trish switched her gaze to her friend and spoke lowly through clenched teeth. "Too bad. You're dead."

Debbie tried to look hopeful, although her eyes were still bolted open too wide. "You look great, though – if it helps."

Trish glanced down at her capri pants and sandals, fleetingly wishing she'd paid more attention to what she wore tonight. Not that she cared what Joe Ramsey thought. She most certainly didn't. But thank God she at least had on a pretty top that showed a little cleavage.

At the other end of the bar, Joe set his beer down and leisurely pushed to his feet. Wow. If the profile had been good, the full frontal was no less than devastating. A snug white t-shirt bearing the Porsche logo stretched across his chest. He was bigger than in high school – not muscle-bound, but the kind of guy you knew could win a bar fight hands down, and probably *had* won a few. And his eyes – oh God, his eyes were still just as blue, even from across the room. She stood frozen in place as he moved toward her, trying like hell to look as confident as she'd planned before coming inside. Of course, that had been before Joe.

His gaze paralyzed her further. "Hey, cupcake."

Damn, his voice had gotten deep. And the old pet name was almost enough to bury her.

"Hey," she managed. *Why couldn't you be fat and bald and ugly?* And why on earth hadn't Debbie told her? Debbie had told her a lot of things about Joe over the years, but she'd neglected to mention that he'd turned out sizzling hot.

He looked to Debbie. "Deb."

"Hey, Joe." Debbie lifted a hand, but looked uncomfortable, even though Trish knew Debbie saw him all the time.

The most gorgeous blue eyes God had ever made turned back to Trish, reminding her once more – this really was God’s country. “Been a while.”

*A lifetime. Are you thinking of it, too? That last night? Hell, that whole last summer. All that kissing and touching.* “Yeah.”

“I’m gonna go talk to Kenny,” Debbie said in a rush, then flitted across the room before Trish could stop her. She firmly planned to murder Deb for leaving her, but she had bigger things to deal with at the moment.

“What brings you to town?” He spoke in so unhurried a manner that Trish thought she must have imagined his surprise at seeing her – he was utterly cool and collected, his every word somehow seductive.

She swallowed, trying to clear the nervous sludge from her throat. “Just here to help my parents with some legal issues.”

He tipped his head back lightly. “Heard they’re selling the diner.”

She nodded. “Retiring. They’ll just be running the farm now.” Her dad had always kept a herd of beef cattle in addition to running the restaurant on Main Street.

“So ... Deb says you live in Indy.”

Another numb nod on her part.

“And you’re a lawyer, right? She said you worked at a big firm downtown. Sounds like things turned out good for you.”

“Yeah.” *Although you wouldn’t know from my sparkling conversation that I have half a brain in my head.* Time to rectify that, act more like a normal person just running into an old ... *friend.* “She tells me you bought Shermer’s Garage.” He’d always loved cars and had worked there repairing them in high school. It’s where he’d gotten the money for the used Trans Am.

He nodded. “I specialize in foreign makes now, though.”

Yeah, she knew that, too. Given that he was still Kenny’s best friend, it was impossible not to know things about him. Not that she’d asked. Okay, maybe she had. Occasionally. Just casually, whenever his name came up.

But she didn't see any reason to act like she and Debbie sat around talking about him all the time, so she didn't admit she knew. And she even considered telling him she was happy he'd done well for himself – but instead she simply forced a small smile and said, "That's great. So ... how's your family?"

He shoved his hands in his front pockets and she cringed inside, remembering. His mom had died. Less than a year after Trish had left Eden. A bad car accident. She'd cried for him when she'd heard.

"I'm sorry," she said quickly. "I mean, Debbie told me about your mom back when it happened." For some reason, she couldn't quite meet his eyes any longer – the topic was too awful, and she'd just tossed it carelessly out between them without meaning to.

"It's okay, Trish – it was a long time ago."

She raised her eyes automatically – it was the first time he'd said her name. She sighed, bit her lip, and tried to move on. "Your dad? Your sister? She must be all grown up now. How are *they*?"

"Dad lives in Florida – he remarried. And Jana just moved to Ohio – she got a job there, and met a guy. She's twenty-five now." He didn't look particularly happy about any of it, but Joe's family life never *had* been particularly happy and she regretted bringing it up.

Time to go. "Well ... it was, uh, nice to see you." She pointed absently toward the pool tables. "I'm gonna go catch up with Debbie and Kenny."

She started to walk away – when a warm vice closed around her wrist, stopping her. She glanced down to see Joe's large, tan hand – and dear God, moisture surged between her thighs, just from that.

She jerked her gaze up to his, still deep blue and penetrating.

"It was nice to see you, too, cupcake."

Their gazes held for another scintillating moment.

And then he let her go, and she was treading across the floor, but she didn't feel it beneath her, didn't feel the greetings from old friends suddenly being passed her way or the hug from Kenny – all she felt was Joe's stare on her backside and the tingling sensation still pulsing in her panties. And there suddenly wasn't a *bleck* to be found in her mind. Nope, it was all about *wow* now. And *mmm*. And maybe *ah*.

\*\*\*

*Order Tempt Me Tonight*