Christmas Kittens

by gneebee

Summary

Beth. He knew her name was Beth. He'd seen it on her I.D badge the day he fixed the scrub sink. That was the day, standing there with her, that something happened to him. He was 32 years old and he had never experienced anything like it in his life.

Part Two will post 12/24
Notes

Good morning! I hope you enjoy this Bethyl Christmas story!

Thank you to my friend CKGCKG who long ago shared with me a story about kittens.

See the end of the work for more notes.
Chapter 1

She'd always wanted to live near the mountains and at 23 years old she was following her dream. She needed a change from the flat farmland where she'd grown up, and she wanted trees, lots of trees.

Her dream came to life when a nursing position became available at a hospital in the mountain town of Ridley, Georgia, located at the base of the Blue Ridge mountains close to the Tennessee border.

She interviewed, got the job and happily made the move. She found a cute little apartment not too far from work that a nice family had built above their garage. Even the reasonable rent fit in with her dream. She was saving every cent she could, hoping to someday have a little cabin nestled in the beautiful mountains she now called home.

By the time Christmas rolled around she'd been working at the small hospital for three months. She loved the job, loved the area and she felt mostly positive about her decision.

There were only a couple of problems. Although she worked with some really terrific people she was having trouble making friends. She had lots of acquaintances and she enjoyed seeing them at work and around town, but she was looking for a real friend. The kind of friend you feel comfortable sharing the deeper stuff with. She hadn't given up, she just hoped it would happen soon.

The other problem...this was the first Christmas she wouldn't be celebrating with her family at the farm. It just wasn't possible. She tried to console herself with the fact she was getting holiday pay and that maybe next year she'd be able to take Christmas off. Plus, Mama and Daddy promised if she didn't have the next Christmas off, the whole family would make the trip to Ridley to celebrate with her.

She smiled as she thought about what it would be like if that really did happen, for one thing she was going to have to rent a much larger place.

She'd expected it to be busy in the ER that Christmas day, that would have made her shift go by so much faster. It would also help keep her mind off of missing the holiday with her family. Instead it had been unusually slow.

There was another nurse working with her and Beth tried striking up a conversation with her, but the other woman was distant like she didn't want to be bothered.

Just to try and stay busy Beth found herself wiping things down that didn't need wiping; and rearranging things that didn't need rearranging.

Then he walked in the room and everything changed.

She thought it odd that the hospital's head maintenance person would be working on a holiday, it seemed like a manager would have Christmas off. But here he was.

He caught her staring at him, raised his chin in a casual greeting and she smiled back. Oh my gawd how she wished that man would speak to her. She'd been attracted to him since the day she came to work at the hospital, that was the first time she laid eyes on him and she'd crushing ever since.
She'd only had one conversation with him in the three months she'd worked there, and you couldn't really call it a conversation. It was the day she had to contact the maintenance department because there was no hot water at the scrub sink. The "big" conversation consisted of him showing up and asking, "What seems ta be the trouble?"

It just took those few words to make her even more attracted.

It was his voice. It got to her. It was low and sort of raspy or coarse sounding, but not in a harsh way. No, it was a very sexy way.

She'd noticed over the past few months it wasn't just her he didn't chat with. He didn't spend time talking to anyone unless it was work-related. It wasn't that he seemed mean or particularly anti-social. Maybe he was just awkward or shy. Maybe he was one of those loner types.

She didn't know much about him and she was too embarrassed to ask anyone at work. But she did know a few things. She knew his name was Daryl because it said so on his shirt. She knew he had a long stride and a pigeon-toed gate. She knew his hair was a little too long but that it looked clean and soft. She knew his blue eyes were sharp, almost piercing when he looked at her. She knew his cheekbones and jawline looked as if they'd been chiseled out of granite. The facial hair, that little scruff on his chin and upper lip, she knew it didn't look scratchy at all. It looked soft and kind of sexy.

Those things were just the start of what she knew about him and found so appealing. There was also the build. His shoulders were broad and squared, and not from working out. That was God given and all him. And those arms, she'd watched the way his muscles seemed to be fighting with the fabric of his shirt sleeves. She prayed for the day his muscles won the battle and popped right through the shirt.

His waist was trim and his hips were narrow, and yes, the man named Daryl made her heart kind of pitter patter.

There was just one gigantic problem. He obviously wasn't interested in her. If he were then he would have talked to her by now. But not only had he not asked her to have coffee or anything else with him, he hadn't engaged her in even the most casual conversation. The interest was clearly all on her side.

She kept telling herself she had to accept it. She could look and dream all she wanted, nothing more than that was ever going to happen between them.

Now that he'd unexpectedly walked in the ER that's exactly what she was doing, looking. She'd watched as he walked through the big double doors, went up to the nurse's station and grabbed a couple of Christmas cookies from the tray. He glanced her way, tilted his chin up, then began examining the plumbing under one of the sinks.

She wasn't dumb, she knew he was just killing time. Trying to look like he was checking on some problem. The maintenance department must be as slow as the ER this Christmas.

He had ten years in at the small regional hospital and had eventually worked his way up to Facilities Manager. He thought of it as mostly an impressive title for "head maintenance guy." That was okay by him. He liked the work he did and he felt like it was important. Lives depended on him keeping things running smoothly. He also liked the pay, the benefits and the paid time off. Then there was the extra little bonuses he enjoyed every day, the snacks that always seemed to be around the various nurse's stations.
He wasn't on the schedule to work Christmas day but he'd offered to cover the shift for one of his guys. Caesar had three kids at home, the youngest just two months old and the oldest recently turned four. Daryl couldn't see the man having to be away from his wife and kids on Christmas, not when Daryl didn't have any family around to spend Christmas with and no plans.

It was just so damn slow this Christmas day, everything was dragging. He needed a good diversion so he went ahead and took a little stroll to the ER. Just to have a look at her.

Beth. He knew her name was Beth. He'd seen it on her I.D badge the day he fixed the scrub sink. That was the day, standing there with her, that something happened to him. He was 32 years old and he had never experienced anything like it in his life. He'd never been so deeply attracted another person.

Every time he saw her that feeling was so powerful it nearly overwhelmed him. Even when she wasn't around, when he was out hunting or fishing or working on his bike, she was there in his thoughts and in his heart. The trouble was he couldn't seem to do anything about it.

He'd seen her when she came in the employee entrance that Christmas morning but he was sure she hadn't seen him watching her. She was wrestling a coffee mug, her purse, a canvas lunch bag and a heavy looking backpack. The girl did not travel light. Shit, it was a 12-hour shift, how much crap did she need?

He scowled, fuck you Dixon. If you weren't such a chickenshit you'd run over and help her out. That's what he wanted to do, he just couldn't seem to get up the guts to do something even as casual as say, "Hi" to her.

He was his own worst enemy and he knew it. Too shy and awkward to go for what he wanted. What the hell was the matter with him anyway? Why couldn't he just ask her out for a beer or a coffee, a movie, something. Instead of taking that chance he told himself there was no point, she wouldn't be interested in a guy like him.

He tried to justify it even with himself. He told himself that if he thought for one minute she'd give a guy like him a chance maybe he'd nut up and go for it, and not just because of how pretty she was either. She was a good person, he knew that. He'd seen the way she was with her patients, thoughtful and kind as she treated their ailments and injuries. But shit, a woman like her? She was probably already dating one of the docs.

In the meantime he looked at her and he felt those feelings for her as he worked hard at hiding his attraction. There was just so much that appealed to him. Her blonde hair looked like silk and he liked the way she couldn't seem to keep it all tied back in her ponytail. There always seemed to be lose curls framing her pretty face.

He'd never seen a woman with such perfect and perfectly white skin. It looked creamy and delicate and he was sure it must be soft to the touch. He wondered if she ever spent any time in the sun at all. Her bright blue eyes were quite a contrast against the pale skin. She was small, even in the loose-fitting scrubs he could see she was quite thin.

He'd seen her a few times in the cafeteria with the other nurses. They'd be talking and laughing at some joke or whatever, and he loved her killer smile.

He couldn't think of anything about her he didn't find appealing.

But he kept getting back into that negative thinking. She wouldn't have any interest in him. Why set himself up for embarrassment? With those thoughts weighing on his mind, he didn't bother to ask
her for that beer, or coffee or whatever. 

For now, with the work so painfully slow he decided he could use a pleasant distraction and he knew where that sweet distraction would be, working the ER.

When he walked in she was standing near one of the beds, it appeared she was straightening things up. Whatever she was doing she looked pretty doing it. Just like she always looked. Although, when he sneaked a closer look it did seem like something was a little different this Christmas day.

She appeared a little sad and he wondered if maybe it was just the holiday blues. Working in a hospital for ten years he'd heard all about that. This time of year could be hard on a lot of folks. She glanced over at him and he acknowledged her with a simple tilt of his head like it was no big thing. But he felt the warmth in his heart when she smiled back. He figured that was that, it was the most he could ever hope for with her. Then something happened.

Her phone must have buzzed or vibrated because she gave a quick look around then pulled it from her hip pocket. She read whatever the message was and immediately started wiping away tears. Shit.

Seeing her that way, looking so sad and with tears in her eyes, he forgot to overthink. He forgot to just turnaround and pretend he hadn't seen anything. Instead he went to her and standing close with his voice low and trying not to sound gruff, he asked, "Hey, Beth, ya okay?"

Oh no she thought, he was finally speaking to her and she probably looked awful, plus she needed to blow her nose. Well what could she do? She looked at him with those big blue tear-filled eyes and answered, "You're probably going to think I'm being silly. It's...this is my first Christmas without my family and I just had a text from my Mama. It made me a little emotional."

He wanted to be able to say something comforting, or at least not sound like an idiot. All he could think of was, "Yeah I know folks sometimes get down around the holidays. Sorry." Then, still forgetting to think about how he might embarrass himself, he mentioned, "I could show ya sumthin' real special that might cheer ya up."

If they were in a bar, if they were just about anywhere but work, she would have thought that was the worst and sleaziest come-on line ever. For some reason she didn't think that with him. He just didn't seem at all the type and besides, his face looked a little flushed like he was embarrassed. Maybe that had been the problem all along, Daryl really was a little shy.

She did her best to smile as she nodded, "Yes, okay show me."

"Can ya get outta here for ten minutes or so, ya got a break comin?"

She wasn't going to miss her chance to spend time with him, even if it was just ten minutes, "Well it's slow as molasses in here. I can ask Amy to cover for a few minutes. If an ambulance drives in we're definitely going to hear it."

He had the tiniest smile she'd ever seen but she could tell he was happy she said yes. He nodded his head as he chewed on his lower lip then asked, "It's gettin' cold out, ya got a coat handy?"

"Yes, let me get it real quick." She had no idea what he could possibly have to show her outside. Was it some fancy car or truck? That sounded like a guy thing, other than that she couldn't imagine.

She asked Amy, "Can you cover me? I just need to run out for ten minutes but I'll hurry back if I hear an ambulance."
Amy didn't even look up from her magazine when she answered, "Yeah, okay."

He walked her down the hall to an exit door she hadn't even been aware existed and opened it with a key card. She'd never been on this side of the lot, she never had a reason to be. It all appeared to be utility parking and work stuff, no employee parking or public access.

They'd walked a few yards with neither of them saying a word when she spotted it. It was a heavy blanket, the type used when moving furniture. It was butted up to the wall and appeared to be covering something.

He seemed happy and excited when he declared, "This is it." Then he crouched down and slowly moved the blanket aside. He smiled again and she was smiling too. There they were in a cardboard box, a Mama cat and four little kittens.

He took a baggie full of kibble from his jacket pocket and slowly poured the food out for the Mama cat. He stood and backed a couple of feet away from the box until he was standing next to Beth. They were both being still as they watched the Mama cat eat while her kittens tried to cuddle close to her and nurse.

"Oh my goodness, it's the sweetest thing," She whispered.

She was pleasantly surprised when Daryl, the man who'd hardly spoken to her in three months, took her hand and she saw that smile of his again when he quietly whispered, "Nice, huh?"

"Yes, beautiful. But where did they come from? Are they yours?"

"Nah. Well they weren't mine before but I suppose they are now. I found em yesterday. Mama's feral and she probably would have have me gettin' close but she was too hungry ta fight. I had a tuna sandwich I was gonna eat for lunch so I gave it to her. I fed her again 'fore I went home last night and managed ta get her and her babies in the box. I stopped on my way home last night and bought cat food and this mornin' I fed her again. I think she's startin' ta think I ain't such a bad guy."

Beth felt her heart do a little backflip.

He shrugged and added, "I guess I'm kind of a big sucker for animals. Anyway, I brought a kennel in today and after my shift I'ma get Mama and her babies in it. They're comin' home with me. Winter's about ta hit us hard and they'll freeze out here."

She hadn't taken her eyes off him. His story seemed to warm up even the cold air surrounding them. She smiled and said, "Oh that's so wonderful and you're so lucky. I love cats and these kittens are adorable."

Wherever his mind was this Christmas day he forgot to overthink again. He just asked her like it was his everyday behavior, "You can come with me if ya wanna. When do ya get off?"

"My shift ends at four." She'd be crazy to go with him. To his house? Not hardly. She didn't even know him. It would be taking a foolish risk.

"We're cool then. My shift is over at four too, so yeah, well, I mean if ya wanna you can come with me. It'll be just the seven of us for Christmas dinner, you, me, Mama and the kittens."

That sold her. She knew for sure this man wasn't going to hurt her. To think, just a few minutes before she'd been crying and now she was laughing and smiling, "That sounds really good Daryl."

He was smiling too, "I'll come by the ER for ya as soon as I'm off."
It was then he seemed to realize he was holding her hand. "Sorry."

She smiled, "No, please don't be sorry. I liked it Daryl, it felt very nice."

That's when he finally got a grasp on what was happening. He was living a Christmas Miracle. He liked her a lot and she must like him. He couldn't have meant it more when he said, "I'm glad you're comin' with us."

By the time their shifts ended the snow had begun to lightly fall, big fluffy looking flakes were drifting down and slowly covering the lot and vehicles. He nodded absentmindedly and said, "Yep, it's gonna come down hard tonight."

"Is that what the news said?"

"No, that's what I know."

He seemed so sure of himself she didn't question him. He probably did know.

His vehicle was just the sort of thing she expected, a big dark gray Rubicon. He opened the back end, pulled out the kennel and she knew right away it wasn't designed for cats. It was huge, obviously made for a big dog, but it would work just fine for Mama and the babies.

He surprised her again and her heart was warmed again when she saw what he'd done. He had the inside fixed up with a thick and soft looking blanket and what looked like an old bed pillow.

She watched as he set it down near the box, opened the door and put a handful of the kibble right at the opening. He slowly pulled the blanket off the box and the Mama cat let him rub her neck when he asked, "Hey, ya wanna go home where it's warm Mama? You can bring the kids."

She couldn't believe what a sweet and sensitive guy he was, he sure didn't look the part. He'd always appeared to be a little rough but now she knew better, she liked knowing this softer side of him.

They'd been driving for about fifteen minutes and were well passed the city limits. Even though it was only 4:30 the sky had grown dark. In the glow of the Jeep's headlights they could see the snow falling so much harder and the road and the trees were quickly becoming covered in a thick blanket of white. She was starting to get a little concerned, "How much further is it Daryl?"

"Not far, another fifteen minutes or so." Then he got concerned, "Why? Ya change your mind?"

"No, not at all. It's just that this is my first winter in the mountains and I'm a little nervous about driving in the snow."

"Don't worry, I've been doin' it for years. I'm careful and Ruby knows what she's doin'."

"Ruby?"

"The Jeep, the Rubicon."

He'd made her smile again, "Oh, okay." She trusted him, he seemed so sure and so capable.

The Mama cat and her kittens had finally quit crying in the back and he thought he ought to try and make a little conversation. It wasn't exactly his forte, he wasn't even sure how to start. He jumped in and tried though, "Ya sure do carry a lotta stuff ta work, backpack, lunch box, a purse and I don't
She smiled and shook her head, "No." Then she explained, "The first day I ever worked in an ER a patient came in by ambulance. The poor guy had a burst vessel in his esophagus and he was throwing up what seemed like gallons of bright red blood. Me and my shoes took a bad hit. An hour or so later, when we finally got him stabilized, I was able to change into some hospital scrubs. They were way too big and I still had those nasty shoes on."

"Ever since then I've been paranoid. I always bring a change of clothes and shoes. Just more scrubs and an old pair of running shoes, but at least they're mine."

He glanced over quickly, "I couldn't do that stuff ya do. I got lotta admiration for ya."

She hadn't expected it and it was so nice, "Thank you Daryl. Sometimes it's rough but I do like the work and feeling like I'm helping people."

They seemed to drive quite a ways before he turned off the main road. "You live a long way from work Daryl."

"Yeah, but I don't mind the drive. The highway's mostly quiet, not a lotta traffic out this way and it's worth it ta live where I live."

They pulled off the road, drove another mile or so down a dirt road heavily treed on each side, and then it came into view, a log house.

There was an outdoor light glowing and the way it made the snow glisten was so beautiful, she felt like she could just sit and stare at it for hours. Especially if Daryl was standing next to her and holding her hand.

It was exactly the image she'd had in her mind for so long, the perfect home in the woods. Not in some big fancy way. This was so much better. It looked so cozy and she was anxious to see inside.

Her musings were interrupted when he said, 'I'll get your stuff, walk ya in and then come back for these critters. Ya ready ta brave the snow?''

"Yes, it looks so beautiful."

"It is beautiful but it's also cold and wet so we'll move kinda quick."

She hadn't gone five feet when she slipped and was going down fast. Before she realized what had happened, he'd dropped her things and she was in his arms. She'd never had a man carry her in that way and with Daryl it was so special. It felt protective and warm.

He made no attempt to explain himself as he hurried to the door. He didn't need to, she didn't mind at all.

When they got on the porch and he did set her down she felt a little wave of disappointment but she smiled up at him and he smiled back at her. He teased, "Ya ain't allowed ta bust your ass on your first visit. K?"

She didn't know why it struck her as so funny but she started laughing and agreed, "Sorry, I won't let that happen again."

He was sliding the key in the lock when she quit smiling and laid her hand on his arm. It surprised him and he stopped what he was doing. As they stood looking in each-other's eyes she admitted, "I
didn't mind you carrying me at all though. In fact I liked it, a lot."

He wasn't going to be anything but honest, there was no reason not to be. He lay his hand softly on her cheek and said, "Yeah? I liked it too. A lot."
Chapter Two

Chapter Summary

Thank you for coming back for the second part of Christmas Kittens. We'll see how things go for our couple and the kittens, all tucked away in the little log house in the snow.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

He reached his hand inside the door, flipped a switch on the wall and said, "Get inside now before
ya freeze ta death. I'll be right back with your stuff and the kids."

She'd been attracted to him for months but she was quickly becoming so much more than just that. She liked **him**. The person he was. He was sweet and funny and she was so happy to be in this moment with him.

She bent down, untying her work shoes and slipping them off. Then she stood and took a good look around. She couldn't believe what she was seeing, it was as if her dream had come to life.

It was one open room, what those TV home shows called a "great room." As far as she was concerned it was so much more than just great. It was perfect.

Off to the right there was a nice kitchen area, not fancy looking but so perfect. It was warm and rustic and welcoming. The appliances were modern but with a retro look, and there was a big butcher block island and a nice eating area with the table right under a window. She found herself smiling as she thought, "a table with a view."

There was a small den-like area to the left with a tall wood bookcase, a desk and two comfortable looking chairs. She was already imagining herself sitting in one of those comfy chairs on a cold snowy day, sipping coffee and reading a good book. "Slow down Beth," she whispered.

Straight ahead was the living area that spanned the width of the house. At the far end there was a wide double door framed in oak but with huge glass insets. On either side of the doors were large windows. Even though it was too dark to tell, all that glass told her that beyond the glass was the view he loved.

There was a large area rug, a comfortable looking sofa, a couple of big chairs and a low wood coffee table. On one side of the living area was an oversized woodburning stove, and on the opposite wall a huge mount. It was a bull elk that she thought had to have been a record breaker. He looked majestic as he appeared to be overseeing the room. Next to the elk hung a big crossbow and a single arrow. Daryl was a hunter.

It was about that time the front door opened. He stood just outside the entrance covered with a layer of fresh snow and his hands and arms were full. She rushed to him and quickly made a grab for her things, trying to help him out as she apologized, "My goodness, I do carry a load of stuff, don't I? Sorry."

He smiled as he set the kennel just inside the door, brushed the loose snow off his jacket and kicked it off his boots. He quickly stepped inside and shut the door. "It wouldn't a been any big deal if I didn't have a family of five ta pack in too." She watched as he removed his jacket and hung it on a hook by the door, then said to her, "Here, hand me your coat and I'll hang it."

He loosened the laces of his boots and toed them off, then started carrying the kennel over toward the woodstove. She wasn't sure what else to do so she followed him. He set the kennel down, glanced over his shoulder at her and said, "I still got some coals in here. I'ma just add some wood and the place will be warmed up in no time. Then we can see about these cats and some dinner."

She smiled as she watched him load up the stove like she was sure he must do every day. He placed some kindling and the split logs strategically on the still-warm coals, blew on them softly and watched as small flames began to appear. He made it look so easy. He'd probably done the same thing hundreds of times.

"It smells delicious in here Daryl."
He shrugged, "I like ta set a timer for things like the outdoor light and the oven. I don't like comin' home to a dark place and the stove kickin' on gets my dinner cookin'. It's ready when I get home. Tonight it's sumthin' a little different than usual, ya know, since it's Christmas and all. Well the dinner part ain't too different, but last night I made a pie for dessert."

"Wow, you made a pie? What kind?"

"Don't get too excited. I ain't ever made one before and it might not be any good. I bought some a them already made crusts ya roll out, but I made my own apple pie fillin'. Don't worry, just in case the pie ain't any good I also got a half gallon of vanilla ice cream we can drown it in."

He surprised her and she was giggling. She hadn't expected him to be the kind who joked around. "Well that sounds wonderful. I never miss a chance to have apple pie with vanilla ice cream."

The fire caught, she could see through the woodstove's glass door the flames now brightly flickering. He walked to a panel of switches by the big glass door and smiled, "I'll show ya the good stuff."

The lights in the room dimmed to almost nothing, while the outside was now brightly lit. It was one of the most beautiful sights she'd ever seen. The outdoor lighting illuminated the snow making it appear to sparkle, while it also lit up the huge pines that surrounded his property. The tree branches covered in snow gave them the appearance of Christmas trees.

They were standing side by side and so close she could almost feel him as they gazed out at the gorgeous view. The snow was falling heavily, quickly covering the big wooden porch and the yard. As if to avoid disturbing the peacefulness she whispered "It's beautiful Daryl, like a Christmas card."

Then it occurred to her, "Are you going to be able to drive in this?"

Shit. He'd screwed up. Bad. He'd known the weather was going to get rough but he selfishly brought her out here anyway. He didn't intend for her to get stuck, he just hadn't bothered to think it through. Not when he asked her if she wanted to come home with him, and not even when the snow first began to fall.

All he'd been thinking about was that he'd finally gotten the guts to ask her to go somewhere with him and she'd said yes. Now he chewed on the side of his thumb, looked at her like he was afraid he was in trouble and faced the music, "Um, I ain't sure. Maybe not. You gotta be at work tomorrow?"

She wasn't scared but she was a little nervous and a little concerned, "No, today was my Friday. I'm off the next two days."

He felt like an asshole but truth seemed like the best course of action and he confessed, "Listen, Beth, I'm sorry. The truth is I been tryin' ta get up the guts to ask you out for a while now. Like since the first time I seen ya. He chewed his bottom lip and added, "When things were goin' like they were today and I asked ya ta come, I never even thought about gettin' snowed in."

He tried to smile like it was no big deal but he was worried she was going to be pissed and hate him. "I couldn't believe I really asked you and that you said okay. Shit, I didn't worry about snow or what would happen next or nuthin' else. All I could think about was the woman who I'd wanted ta get ta know for months was comin' out here with me."

It was the sweetest confession she'd ever heard, and she had one of her own. "I've wanted you to
ask me out since the first time I saw you. I just assumed you weren't interested or you would have. When you asked me today I thought about it for maybe a split second before I agreed. I was so excited to have the chance to spend some time with you."

Even though she was embarrassed and she knew her face had to be bright red, she added, "I guess you're stuck with me now."

It had been a day of firsts for him and it remained so as he bent down and kissed her cheek, "It's the best kind of stuck I ever been." The he laughed just a little, "I guess it's good ya got those extra clothes."

He flipped a switch that turned on just an overhead light in the kitchen, "If I got ya stuck out here I guess I better get ya a drink and feed ya sumthin'. What can I get ya? I got the usual kinds a liquor and I have beer, coke, coffee, tea whatever ya want."

"Wine?"

"Yeah, I got wine. Red. Is that good?"

"Yes, wonderful. Can I help?"

"Nah, I got it. You sit, get comfortable. I'ma just give Mama some food then I'll get the wine."

She sat on the sofa and they chatted while he took care of the cats. She was watching flames dance in the woodstove but mostly she was watching him. She smiled at how sweet he was with cats, and she saw that even the feral Mama was warming up to him.

When he was done he brought their wine and she was happy he didn't take a chair, he sat next to her on the couch. She asked him, "Have you lived out here long Daryl?"

He wasn't used to talking to people much but she was different and he was hopeful this was just the start of something. Once he began to speak he ended up telling her the whole story. "It's been about nine years. It was a year or so after I started workin' at the hospital. I was livin' on the cheap and savin' my dough. At that time I was really only hopin' ta maybe buy my own little place in town."

"One day I was ridin' my bike, motorcycle, out this way when I seen the For Sale sign on the property. I was sure whatever they wanted for the land I couldn't afford it, but when I got home I called anyway."

"Some guy and his wife owned it and he was anxious to talk business. I guess they bought it thinkin' they wanted ta live in the mountains. Of course they bought after the snow had melted and everythin' was in bloom."

"They started buildin' late that summer. Then an early winter set in. They hadn't expected how cold the cold can be, or the amount of snow that could fall. They decided they'd made a mistake. Life in the mountains wasn't for them. So that's how it happened, I lucked into sumthin' good Beth."

"The work they'd already done saved me a lot of time and dough too. They'd put in a well, septic and power to the place, and they even had a little fruit cellar dug and the foundation built. Can ya believe it? They done all that and all they could think about was sellin' and gettin' out from under it."

"I had a down payment but not enough ta buy it and build, I had ta get a loan. It was worth it to me. It took me about three years ta finish the house itself. I's workin' here when I wasn't workin' at the hospital." He smiled, "It was fun for me though, satisfying. My brother he come up and helped me
for a couple weeks when I framed in the walls and the roof. Once I got it all done on the outside, I worked on the inside. That took another year."

"Wow, good for you Daryl. I'd say your hard work paid off. This place is wonderful. I'm anxious to get a better look outside."

He was smiling now, "Really? Ya like it huh?"

"Are you kidding? I love it. I moved to Ridley hoping someday I could afford to buy a little place in the mountains. I don't think I'd ever be able to afford something this nice, but just something."

"No shit? I mean, really? Ya don't think you'd mind the cold and the snow in the winter?"

"Yes really, and no. I've already been picturing myself over in that chair, reading some cheesy novel and sipping coffee while the snow falls."

As soon as the words were out of her mouth they both realized the implication of what she'd said. He forgot to overthink again, he followed his feelings when leaned in and kissed her. She enjoyed the kiss even more knowing she hadn't scared him off.

They had their dinner in the living room, roast, potatoes and green beans and she was a little surprised and impressed by how tasty it was, "You're quite the cook Daryl."

He got a little shy-looking, shrugged and said, "Thanks. I been livin' alone a long time and I like ta eat. I thought I'd best try'n learn ta cook."

After their dinner he warmed them each a slice of pie and added a scoop of ice cream on top. She smiled, took a bite and told him, "Oh my gosh Daryl, this is delicious." And she meant it.

They sat together on the floor and he let the kittens out of the kennel, but their Mama stayed close. He and Beth were both surprised she seemed to trust them with her babies, she even let Daryl rub her neck again. Even more amazing was when Mama begin to glide her body slowly along his leg and purred. He tried, but she still drew the line at being held.

As they played and cuddled the kittens Beth asked, "Are you going to keep them all Daryl?"

"Nah. I'll give the kittens away when they're old enough ta leave Mama. It'll be easy, folks love kittens. Mama won't be so easy. No one wants an older cat. I'll get her fixed and just keep her here with me. She can spend her days laying around in front of the fire while I'm workin'." His soft spot was showing again and she liked it.

He couldn't believe that they'd just been sitting there sipping wine and chatting for hours. He never could have imagined himself just kicking back and talking to a woman this way. Especially not a woman like her. But talking to Beth seemed to come so easily. Even when they got on weighty subjects it felt fun and natural. Nothing seemed forced.

He got up to use the rest room, glanced at his watch and said, "Holy shit, it's damn near midnight."

He offered her his bedroom but she refused to kick him out of his own bed. They went back and forth on the subject until finally he gave up, "Ya got a stubborn streak girl, but that's okay. I got one too."

She teased, "Why Daryl, I'm always agreeable."
"Whatever. You've forced my hand Beth." He disappeared into his room and when he returned he was bringing the mattress with him. He leaned it against the big double doors, and she sat grinning while she watched him move some furniture around. When he'd made the spot, he set the mattress down close to the fire.

He disappeared into his room again and this time when he returned he had a big quilt and bed pillows. She just watched him in action, a smile on her face.

He had the bed ready, and then he handed her a t-shirt, "Here. I got ya a new nightie for Christmas." They were both blushing at the remark but also sharing a good laugh.

She held it up as if she were admiring it and said, "Oh thank you, it's beautiful."

They got themselves ready for bed and even though she thought she should be nervous about spending the night with someone who just hours before was almost a complete stranger, she wasn't nervous at all. Daryl already felt like her best friend and so much more.

He crawled in first and lay his arm across her pillow, inviting her to snuggle in. She smiled as she laid down close to him, resting her head on his shoulder as he wrapped his arm around her and whispered, "Merry Christmas Beth."

"Merry Christmas to you Daryl, thank you for making it so special."

He propped himself up on an elbow and gazed down at her. She could see by the light of the fire he was smiling when he asked, "Ya got plans for New Year's Eve?"

She was grinning too, "I work until four, then I thought you could give me a ride out here. I'm off New Year's Day."

"Sounds good. I got a snow machine and we can do some ridin'."

"Oh my gawd, really? I love that idea."

"Yeah? Well then we're gonna hafta get ya the right clothes for that and a helmet. Scrubs ain't gonna work."

She smiled and teased, "I love getting new clothes and I bet I'll look awesome in a great big helmet."

He was smiling but serious, "Yeah ya will. You always look awesome ta me."

He couldn't wait any longer, his lips were on hers and all the warmth and desire he felt was expressed in the kiss they shared. He was done with overthinking for good. He was going for what he wanted. As he drew back just a little he told her, "I s'pose we don't have to worry bout next Christmas. By then, one way or the other, you'll be livin' here with me."

She smiled, "Really? You think so? That's what I was hoping might happen. But it wouldn't just be us for Christmas Daryl, my folks said they're coming to celebrate with me next Christmas."

"Yeah? Okay, we'll make room. Anyway, your Daddy and me will have gotten to know each other by then."

"He's going to like you Daryl and he's been looking for a new hunting partner."

"Cool, and I bet your Mama's sweet."
"She is and Mama's gonna love your apple pie." She touched his face, combed the hair out of his eyes with her fingers, and smiled, "I was thinking Daryl, I should probably keep that gray kitten. The poor little thing seems awfully attached to me."

He was smiling too when he agreed, "Yep, I noticed that. Besides, it seems only fair if I got a cat you getta have one too."

He was laying half on top of her, his hands cradling her face as his fingers threaded through her soft blonde curls. His lips were on hers and the kiss they shared was warm and wet and full of promise of things to come.

It didn't take long for it to get hotter than the 4th of July on that snowy Christmas night in the mountains.

Merry Bethyl Christmas! I hope you enjoyed the story and that you'll leave a comment. I wish you all a very Merry Christmas / Happy Hanukka, and I thank you for reading my stories. I love ya large! xo gneebee

Well there's our start :) I hope you enjoyed it and that you'll leave a comment. I'll be back tomorrow with part two of Christmas Kittens. Until then remember, I love ya large! xo gneebee

Please [drop by the archive and comment](#) to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!