

## Southern Fried Heaven

Elizabeth smiled tightly, nodding her head in acknowledgement of their big grins and waves, and returned her gaze to her book. *Typical Americans, see you more than once and think you're best friends.* The group had a few extra people tonight, she noticed.

Usually it was a heavy set older man and a corpulent older woman, with a reedy, balding younger man, and a younger woman. Elizabeth thought the younger woman, so clearly her mother's daughter, must be about her own age, and untroubled by genetics as destiny. *Do you like seeing your future? Does your husband?*

Tonight two additional couples clustered with them, the women unmistakably additional daughters. A gawky teen, trying to be Goth without the piercings, glanced up, saw Elizabeth and looked away. She turned her back to the merry group, absorbed in her phone.

Elizabeth enjoyed observing the local fauna and theorizing about their motives and behaviors. She dined in this restaurant every Sunday and for the past six weeks had encountered this family. The strong resemblance between the two women had, for Elizabeth, immediately settled their relationship. The older man had to be the mother's husband. The younger man's easy manner with the others indicated a long term familiarity, and Elizabeth allowed herself to tag him as the son-in-law. From overheard snippets of conversation (and it was impossible not to overhear them at times), she deduced the son-in-law worked in the older man's business.

Elizabeth liked the small, family owned restaurant. She appreciated the lack of TV sets, tee-shirts and flip-flops. If you closed your eyes and wished very hard, the food gave a decent imitation of Italian. Best of all, almost nothing on the menu was deep-fried. After two visits they remembered her preferences in wine and seating. And they always addressed her as "Miss Toliver", never evincing that ghastly American penchant for putting everyone on an immediate first name basis.

The door opened and a man in his thirties entered, his eyes sweeping the room. "Over here," several people in the family group called. He waved and pointed to the bar, then mimed hoisting a glass. They laughed and showed him their own, half-empty, beer mugs.

Elizabeth, who'd glanced up at the man's arrival, returned to her book. *Good, maybe the last of the tribe has arrived and they'll be seated soon. I expect they haven't seated me yet because they're still figuring out how to seat that horde.*

Sensing someone approaching she looked up and saw the hostess. "I'm so sorry to keep you waiting," she said. "As you can see, we have a large party tonight. If you'd care to sit at the bar we could seat you immediately?"

Elizabeth smiled at her. "I can certainly wait another few minutes," she said.

"Are you sure? Can I bring you a glass of wine while you wait? On me."

"Thank you, that would be lovely."

Elizabeth barely had time to resume reading before someone else approached. Assuming it was a waitress she looked up and reached for the glass of wine. Except it wasn't the waitress, it was the young man who'd just entered. Elizabeth's smile disappeared.

“Yes?” she asked.

“Um, hi, I’m Bob. Bob Matthews.” He held out his hand but Elizabeth didn’t reciprocate. After a moment he withdrew his hand and said, “We, ah, we couldn’t help noticing you’re alone and my folks said you’re a regular here and they feel bad you haven’t been seated, I guess that’s ’cause of us?”

“I believe so,” Elizabeth said, no warmth in her voice. “However I’ve been assured my table will be ready soon. Ah, and here’s my wine. Thank you,” she said to the waitress. *What on earth does this man want? What possible business could it be of his whether I’m alone or not? Bloody Americans, think they can butt into anyone’s business will-he nil-he.* She looked back at her book but the man didn’t leave.

“Um, look,” he said, “I don’t mean to be in your business or anything, but my folks feel like they know you, they see you here so often and we’re celebrating and, well, they wanted to ask you to join us.”

*Know me? Because we happen to meet at the same restaurant once a week? Honestly.*

“Thank you, Mr. Mathis,” she said, deliberately mispronouncing his name. “I’m quite fine as I am.”

“Matthews,” he said. “Okay, fine. Sorry I disturbed you.”

*I’m going to have to find a new place to eat, this is really too much. Sad, I was just getting comfortable here.*

She kept her eyes on her book and sipped her wine, but couldn’t concentrate. Annoyance and hunger gnawed at her, and the wine went straight to her head. *If they don’t seat me in the next three minutes I’m leaving.*

The hubbub died down and she looked up. As expected, the family party had been led into the dining room, leaving blessed calm in their place. But Bob Matthews hadn't gone in with them. He walked toward her and smiled.

"I'm sorry if I made you uncomfortable before," he said. "Look, this is dumb. They don't have a big enough table for all of us, unless they add your table, which isn't fair to you. And we really do feel bad that you've been kept waiting because of us. So please, would you be my guest tonight? We don't have to sit with the clan, I don't mind, but I do want to have dinner here. Please? It's my folks' anniversary."

*Why won't this man leave me alone?* "No worries, I'll just dine in the bar and they can add my table to yours."

He looked stricken. "We've really ruined your evening, haven't we? I'm so sorry. Look, at least let me pick up your bill tonight, okay?"

"That's quite all right," Elizabeth said. "I don't need looking after. Enjoy your party. Good night."

She rose and walked past him, to the hostess station. "I'll take that seat in the bar after all," she said and followed the hostess to her seat.

She fumed through her meal, barely tasting it. Although she hadn't ordered it, another glass of wine appeared, and she drank it. Adding to her annoyance, the bar was too dim to read her book, so she pulled out her phone, read her e-mails and a few texts, then began perusing news sites. *War, flood, famine, drought, murder. Nothing new under the sun.*

Tired, sated and a bit tipsy, she asked for her check.

"All taken care of," the barman said. "Would you like a coffee? Tiramisu? You

know we make it in house.”

She started to ask by whom but didn't bother. *That man, Bob, simply doesn't understand the meaning of "no"*. Instead she guesstimated the tab and left a handsome tip.

“That was close,” Tiff said, snuggling deeper into Elizabeth's arms. “I thought I'd faint dead away when I saw you sitting there. But you just played the ice queen. And Uncle Bob, pestering you to join us, I almost died.”

“I've had a lot of practice,” Elizabeth said, stroking Tiff's hair. “I had no idea that was your family. But I did almost laugh out loud when you started texting me. What were you thinking?”

Tiff shrugged.

“How was the party?” Elizabeth asked.

“Ghahstlee” Tiff said, in her most exaggerated Southern drawl. “Think about it, what can you expect from a family that named me Tiffany?”

“Could have been worse,” Elizabeth said. “I could have accepted Bob's invitation.”

They laughed and laughed – laughed until it hurt and laughed some more. *This is all I need, all I could ever want. I found heaven in this Southern-fried hell.*