

CHAPTER 1

Today wasn't the first time Samantha Evans had wanted to shoot a man, and it probably wouldn't be the last. How dare Julian break their date in a text message? A text message!

The man deserved a sunset cruise in the belly of a whale.

She threw her phone on her desk at the Moose Creek Free Methodist Church just as the wretched thing had the nerve to chime again. Julian? No. She wouldn't even give him the satisfaction of a reply. She ignored it.

Her Christian values kicked in followed quickly by concentrated guilt. Her stomach twisted. Some days she wished she didn't have such a well-honed conscience. Wasn't it a job requirement for ministers to do the right thing? Most of the time she wanted to. Just not today.

She amended her uncharitable thought. Okay, so she'd throw him overboard, but then toss him a life jacket and reel him back to the boat.

She scooped up her phone and texted back, "No problem, Julian. I understand." But she didn't understand. Not really.

This was absolutely, positively the last time she would ever say yes to a blind date.

Her phone sang out the special ring of her friend, Genevieve. Gen lived just down the street and she'd been the first person to welcome Samantha to town by presenting her with a basket of fresh fruit. Samantha might have preferred cookies, but her hips appreciated the gesture. Even though Genevieve didn't go to church or intend to start, their friendship had blossomed.

Somehow, Gen didn't seem to see her as "the minister," but rather as her friend. Samantha was free to just be herself around Gen—a rare gift indeed.

Her temples ached. She really didn't want to talk to anyone right now, but at least Genevieve would be sympathetic. She pressed *Answer*. "Hey, Gen. So tell me. Why

did I move to Maine again?"

"Because of the trees. You told me you had a special fondness for pine trees."

Samantha snorted in a quiet, lady-like fashion. "What else ya got?"

"Hmmm. Let me guess. Julian blew you off?" Genevieve clucked her tongue.

"Got it in one." Samantha leaned back in her chair and propped her feet on the desk. She could sit in her office any way she liked, at least when no one else was around. Jezebel, her Maine Coon cat, jumped in her lap, circled until she found the perfect lounging position, and purred her contentment.

"Sounds like you need a night out. Camille and I were just heading into town for dinner. Want to join us?"

Samantha sighed. "I wouldn't be good company. I'd planned to haul myself home, fan the flames of rejection into a blaze, and then feel really bad about my less-than-positive attitude. Then I figured I'd have a good old-fashioned pity party, followed by the usual: a bath, a good book, and beddy-bye time."

"Sounds pathetic. Besides, it's Friday night. You can't stay home."

"Why not? I'm home every other Friday night. I feel a funk coming on."

"Honey, you need to be with your girlfriends. I'll buy dinner," Genevieve coaxed. "We'll pig out on lobster rolls and poutine and talk about how lucky you are to be rid of Julian. It'll be fun."

Samantha grinned at the way Gen dropped those "r" sounds or inserted the consonant in strange places. Living in the northernmost county in Maine where the accent was extra-thick meant almost everyone pronounced dinner like *din-nah* and lobster sounded like *lob-stah*.

Lobster rolls and poutine—a strange but marvelous blend of New England and Canadian cuisine. First-rate seafood and cheesy French fries swimming in a light brown gravy. Samantha licked her lips, the tang of imaginary salt melting on her tongue.

"I promise we'll do our best to de-funkify you. Come on, Samantha. Please?"

Samantha cracked a smile. Her French-Canadian friend had the charisma of Shirley Temple in a party dress. “Okay, I’ll come. But just so you know, I refuse to be cheerful. I’m only half finished writing my sermon so I can’t stay too late. When and where should I meet you?”

“The Blue Moose in thirty minutes. *Au revoir.*”

With a groan, she gathered up her jumbo-sized cat, marveled at the two extra toes on each of her kitty’s front feet, and drifted upstairs to the sanctuary.

She’d fallen in love with the church building from the moment she’d been called to Maine. Typical Maine architecture—a center aisle with pews on both sides—and a stained glass window of Jesus the Shepherd gracing the front. She’d felt God’s presence the moment she’d stepped foot in the church.

Now she just had to figure out how to feel God’s presence when all the people were inside.

The dusty scent of an old, slightly neglected church assailed her senses. An unholy sneeze sneaked up on her, and an indignant Jezebel howled and landed on the floor, scurrying under the pews. *Great.* Now she had to catch a cat, and Samantha had promised to keep the sanctuary feline-free. In the last board meeting, old Mr. Clements had mandated an unequivocal no-cats-allowed policy.

Jezebel bounded up on the platform, through the chancel railing, around the pulpit, finally hiding behind the ancient pipe organ. Her haunches twitched as she inched forward and huddled, finally disappearing from view completely.

Samantha dug for the small can of treats she kept in her purse. Her phone chirped and she reached for it. *Mother.* She’d call back later. There was no time to lose before the fur started to fly. She shook the can. “Bel. Come here sweetie.”

The unrepentant glutton scurried down the aisle toward her, springing and landing with panache in her arms. “Gotcha.” Samantha held the cat close to her chest—she was not getting away again today! —and headed out the back door, locking up

behind her. She tramped across the parking lot to the teeny tiny parsonage and deposited Jezebel on the loveseat in the combination living room/dining room/kitchen/bedroom. At least the bathroom had a door.

With seconds to spare, she tugged on an outfit, pulled her parka closer against the late October gale, and slid into her wagon. Genevieve Leblanc and Camille Caron had taken her under their wings and helped her acclimate to her new life, but tonight, with sparks shooting from her eyes, they'd most likely back away slowly when they saw her.

Jerking the car into drive, Samantha headed for "The Moose" as the locals called it. The Black Bears of the University of Maine were playing tonight and the place was sure to be packed. Ice hockey was a sacred sport in this town. *Darn*. She'd forgotten to wear her T-shirt emblazoned with a black teddy bear cradling a hockey puck. The savvy saleswoman at the thrift store had declared the blue matched her eyes.

Samantha finally snagged a parking place a few blocks away, moseyed into the restaurant, and searched for her friends. They weren't hard to miss. Seated at the bar in front of a giant screen TV, Camille wore a University of New Hampshire Wildcat shirt, and Genevieve—always the fashion plate—looked smashing in something shimmery and definitely non-sporty. Her friends waved and motioned Samantha over.

"How in the world did you guys manage to get seats?"

Camille moved her purse so Samantha could have the barstool in between them. "Genevieve buttered-up the bartender. She batted those brown doe eyes and the poor guy didn't have a chance. He would have booted his own brother out so she could have a seat."

Samantha shook her head and turned towards Genevieve. With dark hair piled into a French roll, her friend was drop-dead gorgeous. Kind of funny Gen was an elementary school teacher. Half the young boys in the class must be in love with teacher.

Camille, a barista at the coffee shop in town, was quite a stunner herself, but in a bosomy pom-pom girl sort of way.

Samantha pushed a hand through own her baby-fine hair devoid of body, grabbed a seat, and hooked her feet around the chair legs. She always felt like a kid next to these two. As it was, not a day went by without someone saying she looked too young to be a minister. What she needed was a complete overhaul before she was officially voted in—assuming the church decided to keep her. Her probationary period was up at the end of the year.

Camille nodded sagely. “Yep, men gather around Genevieve like a flock of mustangs, don’t they?”

Samantha flashed a grin. “You mean like a *herd* of mustangs?”

“Yeah, I heard of mustangs.” Camille smirked and the ladies rolled their eyes at the stupid joke.

Samantha raised her shoulders in a shrug. “All of my mustangs trot around outside the fence, and then the suckers get spooked when I get too close. Genevieve, did you tell Camille about my latest bucking bronco?”

Samantha lifted a hand to get the bartender’s attention.

“You mean did I tell her about Julian the Jerk?” Genevieve seized a small handful of shelled peanuts from a bowl on the bar.

Camille’s mouth turned down in a frown. “She told me. What exactly did he say in this infamous text?”

“He said, and I quote, ‘Samantha, you’re just too religious for me.’ Story of my life. Can you believe that?” Samantha’s blood pressure jumped ten points and hit the ceiling.

Camille smacked her forehead with the heel of her hand. “This was supposed to be your third date, right? Didn’t I tell you not to date a younger man? There’s a world of difference between a thirty-year-old *woman* and a twenty-six-year-old *boy*. Didn’t you

tell me he doesn't even have a full-time job?"

"He's trying to start his own moose watch company. His buddies are chipping in money so they can float droves of tourists up and down Moose Creek. The four of them lurk in the woods searching for moose and... and..." Samantha thwacked the bar with her hand and laughed. "And yes, I'm an idiot. Obviously, it's just an excuse for them to hunt and fish. How could I have ever thought we'd have any type of a future?"

"You know what I'm going to say, right?" Camille shook her head in disgust and slid the bowl of peanuts closer with a crooked finger.

"Yes. I'm better off without him." Samantha's eyes narrowed to slits. "Just color me stupid. Why did I even go out with him in the first place?"

"You told it me was because he's Alma Chilton's grandson, and she's one of your few staunch supporters at church."

Samantha's sagging spirits oozed onto the carpet. "Yeah."

Genevieve leaned in, raising her voice over the cheering crowd. "Don't worry about it, Samantha. If your congregation doesn't love you like they should, I'll take a shotgun to them myself."

How blessed she was to have friends who understood. "Thanks."

The bartender wandered over and beamed a brilliant smile at Genevieve. "What can I get you ladies?"

Genevieve tossed him a coy, practiced smile. "My friend here will have hot tea" —she looked at Samantha for confirmation and Samantha nodded— "and I'll take another strawberry slushy thing. Camille?"

"I'm good." Camille drained her root beer and plunked the glass on the counter.

Genevieve touched the bartender's hand ever so slightly. "Thanks, Philippe."

Clearly dazed by Genevieve's abundant charm, the poor man reeled away.

Samantha huffed. "How do you *do* that?"

"What?" Was it possible Genevieve didn't know the effect she had on men?

Samantha ran her fingers over the smooth varnished wood, lifted her eyes, and glanced at an adorable guy at the other end of the bar. Was he staring at her? She glanced over her shoulder. No one else was there and he didn't appear to be gawking at Gen or Camille. The corners of his mouth curved into a pleasant grin and his dark eyes twinkled. Something about the set of his jaw sparked a memory deep down in the depths of her brain. She knew him from somewhere ... and he *was* staring at her. She was sure of it.

The restaurant host strode over and graced Genevieve with a blazing smile. "I can show you ladies to your table now."

As they followed the host, Samantha whispered in Genevieve's ear. "Seriously. How *do* you do that?"

"I simply mentioned we'd like a table as soon as he could make it happen, so Andre did me a favor and squeezed us in. Is that so bad?"

Camille chimed in. "Yeah, Gen. Leave some for the rest of us."

Whatever Genevieve was doing, Samantha needed lessons. She hadn't gone to seminary to find a husband, but a serious relationship in the four arduous years she'd attended would have been a nice bonus.

Samantha chose the side of the booth with a view of the man at the bar. Her gaze flicked up. Yep. He was still staring. Her face flamed and she lowered her eyes to the menu. If she knew the secret of confidence like her friends, she'd be hoofing it across the room right now, charming the socks off the cute guy.

Eric Palmer propped his elbows on the bar and swiveled his barstool for a better line of sight. He was almost sure the woman on the other side of the room was Sammie Evans. She looked a bit different with longer, shoulder-length hair, but it had to be the same girl he'd befriended during those idyllic summers when he was a teenager.

How well he remembered her. His family had lived next door to her Aunt Clare,

and shortly after school let out, Sammie would visit her aunt. Every year he couldn't wait for June to arrive, and every August he missed her when she returned to Maryland.

He scanned her up and down, admiring her quiet beauty. She still had the same cute little upturned nose, and soft, robin's-egg-blue eyes, but a few things were most definitely different. Seems she'd filled out in all the right places. How long had it been since he'd seen her? Fifteen years? They'd been best buddies, the two of them against the world.

He should go talk to her. He signaled the bartender. "Philippe? I'll eat that captain's platter here instead of to-go, and be generous with the fries. Been a long day."

Philippe smirked and refilled his soda glass. "She's a looker, isn't she?"

"Huh?"

"The curvy brunette you've been staring at."

Evan's brow furrowed. "No, I was wondering about the pretty blonde woman next to her. Do you know if her name is Sammie?"

"Yeah. Samantha something. Her picture was in the paper a couple of weeks ago. Can you believe she's the new minister at the Methodist church? Doesn't seem old enough. The word around town is the last minister bit the dust, and they had to find a new pastor. From what I understand, she's got her hands full."

Sammie? A minister? Good old Sammie. She'd always dreamed of pastoring her own church. She'd even practiced sermons on him. Imagine her ending up here after all these years. He hadn't had much luck with women, but Sammie was okay. He didn't doubt she'd be under fire. His formidable Uncle Simon ran the board at her church, but the Sammie he knew would be up to the task. That woman had a will of iron and a core of steel.

He sipped his soda, a smile creeping across his lips. His day just got a great deal brighter.

His friend and coworker, Travis Gibbs, crashed through the front door of The Blue Moose. His wind-blown gray hair stuck out at odd angles as he threaded his way to the bar. "Thought I'd find you here, Palmer. We have a situation."

"Oh?"

Travis swiveled and pounded on the bar, yelling over the hubbub, "Anybody own a Subaru Outback?"

Five people scattered around the dining room waved their hands.

"A white Outback."

Two hands went down.

Travis rolled his eyes. "One with Maryland plates."

Only one hand still hung in the air.

From across the room, Eric could just make out the crease on Sammie's forehead. She scrambled to her feet and hollered back. "That one's mine. Why?"

"Because Matilda's doing her best to roll your car."

"Matilda? Who's Matilda?"

"The town moose. We'd better hurry."

Sammie gasped and hurtled toward the door, Eric and Travis following hot on her heels.