

Red Dirt Road – An Excerpt

2:33, setting up tables and wiping off counters. Heavy boots hitting the floor as she walks in, setting up the bar for another night and getting ready for hundreds of nights just like it. *Frank's stopping by tonight*, she reminds herself. *Look nice if he has his friends over*. That's how it always goes. Wisconsin was always better than this, a thousand times better than running such a dead end place like this instead of hunting. The things Dolly liked doing before West Virginia was even on the list of places they just might move. But it happened, and she just had to suck it up and remember what his mom said. *It don't matter how you feel, just remember he's happy here and that's all you gotta care about*. That's it. *Now that you're married, your life's finally starting*. That and so much more all of the aunts and uncles and distant cousins told Dolly over and over again. Life doesn't start cleaning tables at 37, that's for sure.

2:41, not a stain or puddle of unnamed liquid left. Just that nice, spotless bar on its third month of being open. Untouched since the 90's, complete with a little jukebox that may or may not work and that hunting game every Pizza Hut in the country has. The perfect southern stereotype, where all the guys hang out or something like that. While she stands behind the counter and watches everyone else get to enjoy themselves. Seeing Frank living the life he's begged her to get for him like it's a puppy. And she finally caved and bought it for him, but what now? Clean up all the mess, buy it food, watch him play with it and give it more love than he ever gave her. *That's how he's been treating this new arrangement for weeks. Like it's a little present I just so kindly handed right over to him. D'that make sense?*

Three o'clock rolls by. Two hours til' opening. When the sun goes down in November, just about every loud and obnoxious and hillbilly guy in the state walks in here. Dolly's clearly used to it. Not hardly more than a handful of girls walk in here every week, easily her number one issue with this part of town. Sure, there's people, but it's like they all just decided to sit back and let her be the only one doing work for miles. Like they're only citizens when it's five o'clock somewhere.

And just like it's been for months, they roll in group by group, hollering like dogs instead of nicely calling her over. Danny's getting here late tonight, the only reason Dolly's manning all the tables and taking care of all these unruly customers by herself. Just a little traffic. Code for his mom shouting at him all night like she

does, maybe even tossing his car keys into the pond again like she does. *That poor kid never says more than a couple words an hour; it's almost impossible to know what he's tryna' say. Y'know? But he's just a kid, I get it. Just breaks my heart.* She's just trying to stay in one piece tonight, hopefully not let her head explode if one more old man snaps at her instead of raising his hand.

Almost half an hour in, and Frank just so happens to decide to finally show up. Group of his buddies from the company in tow, all walking around someone much shorter than the lot of them. Dolly's hand froze when it's wrist-deep in a glass. That towel gets left in it while she's trying to sneak a look at whoever it is as calmly as possible.

It's a girl. Probably no older 30-something, fun-sized in comparison to the guys pushing 6 feet that walked her in. The guys all covered in dirt and such from working on the power lines. Frank's buddies all sit down at a table, leaving her at the booth right to the left. Completely alone. Looking absolutely heavenly in that bright orange light. Brunette, freckles all over her face, hair cut short just at the neck line. The girl Dolly's been picturing all night this week, the only thing on her mind; the perfect girl for her.

That glass fell right down to the ground.

Like a deer seeing the red dot on its forehead, the girl's head perks up and sees Dolly disappear under the counter. Just guessing it was a ghost before anything else. Not before the noise all returns to the bar, the mood going right back to normal as Dolly cleaned up broken glass with her bare hands. An art she's basically trained in at this point, dropping glasses nightly and reluctantly going back to the store in the morning to grab another 12-pack of those beer pitchers. Hardly five bucks, they don't even notice if it's not real glass or not. Now all of those are totally broken. After this one, it's right back to the actual glass bottles. Least these don't hurt as bad as the real ones.

She just can't get that girl out of her head.

Frank didn't even smile at her when he got here. Just ignored her and went right to his buddies, laughing too loud and shouting when he talks like he usually does. Obnoxious like he always is. But this girl—this random woman she hasn't known for more than a minute—caught her eye like Frank never did when he met Dolly. She almost doesn't recognize that the girl had been looking back at her. Gesturing to her

hands, mouthing something probable along the lines of “There’s glass sticking out of those”. Instinctively, Dolly turns her back to the girl and wipes the glass shards right off on her overalls. Trying to find those little wrap bandages she keeps around in the first aid kit, the one the sheriff dropped off after the little fight here last month. The fact she made eye contact with this girl is seriously doing something. Dolly—This tough girl, born and raised to shoot deer for a living—getting all nervous over this. It’s beyond stupid. *She’s* beyond stupid, right now, that is.

“Did you want something?” Dolly almost didn’t catch that she’s standing next to the table now. Blinking her eyes like she just got up from a nightmare, she shakes her head and looks down at the woman. Same as she saw from behind the bar. Just the prettiest thing ever.

“Well— Didn’t *you* want something? Kinda why you’d call over the waiter, huh?” Dolly’s seriously trying to act like she’s got this in the bag. Under zero circumstances did Dolly Allen ever know how to talk to a pretty woman.

“No, actually. Just wanted to say hi.” She’s a city girl, too. No way she isn’t. Everyone around here has that same hillbilly accent, but she’s the only one who doesn’t sound like she’s hacking up a furball every time she talks. Elegant, almost.

“And you ain’t just sayin’ that?”

“Course I’m not.”

That warm smile coming from the girl almost drove Dolly insane. She needed to know who this girl is, where to find her again and just about everything about her. Yet there was an unreadable name tag, and absolutely zero way to figure out where she came from before this. Just a pretty outfit and her own beautiful self to top the whole thing off.

“On second thought, think I could get your name?” Just like before, the girl’s ears perked up like a deer again. Her phone momentarily buzzed in her pocket, and all that noise from the bar around them seemed to die off for a moment.

“Hannah. I can see your name tag, so I don’t really have to ask— Dolly.” Even the girl’s laugh set off that ticking in Dolly’s heart. The way her eyes lit up, those little lines always on her face from how much she smiles already. Everything about her from the neatness of her outfit to the curliness of her hair, the look she was giving

right back to Dolly making her want to change out of an only slight blood-stained pair of overalls that certainly don't belong to her.

“You’re comin’ back here tomorrow night, huh? For that– festival, something a couple guys told me about.” Hannah nodded, the politeness in how she spoke to Dolly making her heart warn her it was definitely about to explode now. “Oh, you bet I will! Here, I’ll leave you with my address,” And just like that, without a moment of thinking through handing that off to a stranger, she wrote it down on a torn piece of paper and slid it across the table to the blonde woman. Dolly looked it over, wondering how on Earth her handwriting looked that nice. “It’s just past the book place at the light, right behind th–”

“Berkeley, we’re headin’ out,” Frank’s loud and grating voice shouted across the already loud enough bar. Hearing the sound of it made both of them clearly annoyed, but even more for Dolly. Just as politely as she’d called Dolly over, she left, going back with Frank and his buddies from work again. A quiet smile on her face, seeing Dolly tightly hold the paper in her hand.

And Dolly watched Frank wrap his arm around Hannah’s waist.

She felt her wedding ring, heavy and burdening against her middle finger. Right back to cleaning tables again, stepping out of her little fantasy that cheap diamond brought her right out of.