

ERIN STEVENSON

THE LODGE AT  
CHRISTMAS LAKE



# The Lodge at Christmas Lake

Erin Stevenson

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**The Lodge at Christmas Lake**  
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## *Dedication*

To anyone praying for a broken marriage to heal.

## *What People are Saying*

### **A Dream of Christmas:**

“The theme of forgiveness operates on many levels here, but always centers around family, faith, love, and the hand of God... Guaranteed you are not going to want this book to end.”

~ Regina A

“Erin Stevenson has created a beautiful world filled with uplifting and encouraging characters. This story is all about forgiveness and second chances. About faithfulness and family.”

~ Bookwoman

### **Carol Award Finalist, A New Hope for Christmas**

“WOW, what a GREAT book! ... I really LOVE how the Author shows how 2 Christians deal with [grief], one walking away from God, and one leaning on their Faith. I HIGHLY recommend this book to anyone who enjoys Christian Romance books!

~ familymgrkendra

If you enjoy Christmas stories that will make you laugh, cry, and experience a range of emotions, check out this book for yourself. The author masterfully weaves a story of hope, faith, and finding joy after devastating events. I highly recommend this book.

~ Patti Pierce



# 1

*Pregnant.*

Jillian blinked, and then shook her head. She stared at the wand. *God, is this real, or am I dreaming?* Her heart broke into a canter, then a gallop. She ran into the bathroom, grabbed the instructions, and pored over them to ensure she had completed the steps exactly right. She stared into the mirror, her heart still hammering. "You're going to be a mother," she whispered. "Finally." Her gaze sparkled, and her mouth broke into a full grin.

Downstairs, the kitchen door slammed with enough force to shake the house, jolting her back to reality. How did it come to this? She and Tanner had been drifting apart for months. He was either attentive and loving, or cold and angry. Increasingly, their conversations ended with one of them leaving the room or, in this case, the house, with him off to work.

Jillian carefully placed the test wand in the top drawer. She would decide later what to do with it. Maybe wrap it up as a gift for Tanner. She dressed, went downstairs, and sank into a chair at the breakfast nook. What now? How would she share her life-changing news with him, and how would he react? She stared out the bay window that framed a sunny

morning ablaze with autumn color. The new tan and white checked valances and swags were the perfect finishing touch for the window. How could Tanner not see that? He was only concerned about money. If it was such an issue, why had he agreed to buy this house? It was nothing like the two-bedroom condo on the other side of town that had been his since before their marriage. This sprawling five-bedroom home was in one of the most prestigious neighborhoods in Ann Arbor, fitting for an up and coming professional and his family.

*A family. We'll be a real family.* Jillian hugged herself, then walked into the kitchen to fix her customary cup of coffee. As she reached for her mug, her hand stilled. Should she be drinking coffee? Now that she was pregnant she had no idea what she should be eating or drinking. She filled a glass of water, returned to the breakfast nook, and scrolled through her phone, looking for answers.

When the doorbell rang, she jumped up and peeked outside. *Drat.* It was their next-door neighbor, Brad, coming to pick up the large box Jillian had signed for when he was out of town. She wasn't in the mood to chat.

When she opened the back door, there stood her handsome, single neighbor in his pilot uniform. Tall and broad with chestnut hair and emerald-green eyes, he could be a model. She wondered if his airline had ever considered using him in their marketing materials.

"Hi, Brad."



“Hey, Jillian. I just flew a red-eye in from LA.”

Jillian fought a cringe. *How can he look that good after working all night?* “Um, you’ve been out there a lot lately.”

“I take every west coast flight I can get. I love the vibe out there.”

That explained his tan.

“Your box is in the garage.”

“Thanks for signing for it. There was a delay getting it here.” He flashed her a perfect grin. “It’s a new, bigger wine fridge. It’ll be great for the next block party.”

Jillian turned her head. “Yeah, great.” She and Tanner enjoyed getting to know their neighbors at their monthly get-togethers. Increasingly, she found herself chatting with Brad. He led such an exciting life, and she enjoyed hearing about all the places he’d visited on his travels.

“We can go this way,” she said. Brad followed her through the foyer into the kitchen. Just before she reached the door into the garage, he touched her arm.

“Jillian, are you OK? You seem a little different.”

“I’m fine, just, um, not feeling too good.” She produced a sniff for effect. Maybe that would hurry him along.

He smiled. “Morning sickness?”

Her heart gave a jolt. Was her condition apparent? “Oh, no. Nothing like that.” She didn’t even know how far along she was. Perhaps the nausea would start soon.

His handsome face showed true contrition. “I

apologize if I overstepped.”

She shook her head. Everything was suddenly overwhelming, and to her surprise, tears gathered.

He took a step closer and gently grasped her upper arms.

This didn't feel right. "I'm sorry—" Jillian's voice trembled.

Brad gazed at her, and one side of his mouth tipped up. "You have nothing to be sorry for, Jillian," he murmured.

*No, this is wrong.* Alarm bells rang in her head. She wanted to step back but couldn't bring herself to move. His gaze darkened a shade. Did he just move a bit closer?

"You want to get your hands off my wife, neighbor?"

What was Tanner doing here? Jillian jumped back, terror and remorse flooding her. "Tanner—this isn't—nothing—"

"Nothing happened," Brad stated firmly. "She was upset, and I offered a little friendly comfort."

Tanner's face contorted in anger. "Well, keep your *friendly comfort* to yourself. In fact, don't ever set foot on my property again, or I'll call the authorities. Got that?"

Brad nodded. Two red spots stained his cheeks. "I'm sorry, Jillian. I'll retrieve my box from the garage and be on my way."

Tanner stepped aside to make room for him. "You do that. And don't you ever speak to my wife again."

After Brad exited into the garage, silence reigned.

Jillian's heart thundered. "Tanner, I promise, that was nothing." She hated how her voice shook.

His brown eyes blazed. "Yeah, well, why don't I believe that? I've seen you two talking and being all *friendly*. You probably call and text all the time. For all I know—"

Jillian grabbed her phone off the counter and thrust it into her husband's hands. "Look. He's not even in my contacts," she cried. "I've never had a phone conversation or texted him. You've got to believe me."

Tanner tossed the phone on the counter and strode out of the kitchen, Jillian trailing behind. "I left something on the printer," he said in clipped syllables as he marched into the study. "If I hadn't come back, you'd probably be upstairs with him by now."

Jillian gasped at the ugly accusation.

He picked up the pages, slipped them into a folder, and pushed past her, his jaw set in stone.

"Tanner, that is completely untrue. You're the only man I've ever kissed. Would you *please* look at me?"

He didn't break stride. "I don't have time for this. I need to get to work so you can buy another set of three-hundred-dollar curtains." His voice dripped with anger, and he left the kitchen. For the second time that morning, a slam shook the house.

## 2

Tanner drove too fast to the office, fuming all the way. How could Jillian have betrayed him? How could he have been so blind? He was working too much, but this house was eating them alive. Those stupid curtains had been the final straw.

And then he'd seen his wife looking into the eyes of another man.

By the time Tanner got to the office, his head throbbed. He tossed his things on his desk, opened the top drawer, and rooted around for the plastic bottle he kept there. When he picked it up, it didn't make a sound. Great. He stood and peered over the short divider of his cubicle. "Hey, Mark, you got any aspirin?"

"Yeah, somewhere," his co-worker muttered. He moved some papers around and produced a large bottle.

"Thanks." Tanner popped the top, shook four pills into his palm, and washed them down with yesterday's cold coffee. He winced.

Mark's expression was serious. "You OK, Holt? You don't look so good."

Tanner sighed. "Not really."

"I'm here if you ever want to talk."

“Appreciate that, man.”

“We can go get a drink sometime.”

“I don’t—”

“Yeah, I know you don’t drink. But you can get something else.”

Tanner’s face warmed. “No—I meant I don’t have a lot of time right now.” He’d been taking on extra projects and working longer hours, anything to keep his name and face in front of the big bosses.

Mark’s expression softened. “I’m sorry, man. Well, um, if you change your mind, you know where to find me, for at least fifty or sixty hours a week.”

Tanner released a sigh. “Yeah, I sure do.”

Mark shrugged. “Maybe instead of inhaling lunch at our desks, we can go in one of the small conference rooms one day and eat together.”

“I’d like that, thanks.” Tanner glanced at his watch. “Yikes. I’ve got a meeting. Catch you later.” He unhooked his laptop and gathered his materials. Just as he reached the door of the conference room, his cell buzzed.

“Mom, I’m going into a meeting. Is everything OK?”

“Yes, but I wanted to talk with you about Christmas.”

*In early October?* Tanner swallowed a sigh. “I’ll call you tonight. I have to go.”

“Oh, that’s all right, honey.” Her voice had that thin, reedy quality that meant she was about to cry. “It’s just that the holidays will be so different without Riley. I’m sorry I bothered you.”

Tanner leaned against the wall and looked at the ceiling. "You're not bothering me, Mom, but I'm almost late for a meeting that I'm running. How about I pick up Carmine's for dinner?" The local Italian eatery was one of her favorites, and it would give him an excuse not to go home.

"You're such a good son, Tanner." Her voice was brighter now. "I'll see you after work. Love you."

"Love you, Mom, bye." He squeezed his eyes shut. He wanted to pray, but his spirit was completely dry. Tanner drew in a breath, opened the door to the conference room, and tacked a smile on his face. "All right, team, who's ready to tackle these cost projections for next year?"

### 3

After Tanner left, Jillian trudged upstairs and crawled into bed. She burrowed under the covers and lay there, numb, as her head spun with thoughts. How could Tanner *ever* think that she would cheat on him? She had been completely in love with him from the day they met just over six years ago and had eyes for no other man. Moreover, it went against everything she believed as a Christian.

This year had begun with so much promise. They moved into their new, beautiful home in early January. Tanner was up for a promotion, and Jillian's clientele list for her private catering business was growing.

Best of all, Tanner had agreed that they could start trying for a baby. When it failed to happen each month, he would take her in his arms and give her the look that made her weak in the knees. "We'll just have to keep trying, then." One of his trademark delicious kisses followed.

But after the accident that took his brother, everything changed. Tanner was flooded with grief and struggled to be the main support system for his mother. Then his company set a freeze on hiring and promotions, but that caused him to work longer hours. Each day, he slipped away from her a little more.

Now she was pregnant. She had always thought that once it happened, Tanner would be so excited, he wouldn't ask questions. But they promised they would never lie or keep secrets from one another, so not telling him wasn't an option. Jillian's stomach dropped. She had deceived him. How would he react? After this morning's incident, she had no idea whether he would forgive her. She curled into a ball and lay on her side, crying. What would she do?

~\*~

Tanner exited the conference room and headed for his cubicle. The meeting had been a complete disaster, and it was his fault. He couldn't concentrate and pulled up the wrong slide deck not once, but twice. He didn't realize the error until the first slide was up on the screen for all to see.

Three of his co-workers disagreed about what formulas to use for the cost projections. When their squabbling reached a peak, Tanner's head pounded louder than ever. He cut them off, told them to email him their spreadsheets by end of day, and stormed out of the room.

One of them, an analyst named Mara, scurried up from behind. "Tanner," she hissed, "I cannot believe Tom and Sandy want to—"

He didn't break stride. He and Mara usually worked well together, but he put up his hand. "Mara, we're not discussing this. Send me your recommendations as I asked."



She clamped her lips together.

"Please," he added to soften his response.

"Tanner, are you OK?"

"Not discussing that either." She didn't say anything. "But I appreciate you asking." At the next aisle, he peeled left toward his cubicle. "See you later."

He plopped into his chair and put his head in his hands. When he attempted a deep breath, bands of steel squeezed his chest. It was too much. Grieving his brother's death, helping his mother cope, juggling the demands of his job. The house. The money. Jillian hounding him for a baby. A hamster on a wheel had a better life than his. *God, I can't take anymore. My life is caving in on me.*

He had almost given up listening for God to answer his prayers, but the still, small Voice whispered across his soul. *I have provided.*

Tanner lifted his head. Of course. He grabbed his phone and texted Nate. SOS.

He stared at the screen. Bubbles appeared, and the constraints around his chest relaxed, ever so slightly.

*Bobby Jake's, 12:30?*

*Yes. Thanks.*

Tanner let out a cleansing sigh, once again able to breathe. *Thank you, Lord. You provided my best friend here on earth half a lifetime ago, and I thank You for that.* He opened his laptop, answered a few emails, and pulled on his jacket.

Mark was on the other side of their shared cubicle wall, staring at his screen, nibbling a sandwich. Since he had his ear buds in, Tanner waved to get his

attention.

“Hey, Mark.”

“Hey.” He pulled one of the earbuds out, and his eyebrows raised. “Don’t tell me you’re taking a lunch break.”

“I am.”

Mark smirked. “Slacker.”

Tanner laughed, and it felt good. “We’ll both slack off sometime soon, OK? My treat. We’ll go maybe every other week and take turns buying.”

Mark’s face brightened. “Sounds like a plan, Stan. Enjoy your lunch.”

“I will, thanks.”

~\*~

When Tanner arrived at Bobby Jake’s, Nate was in their regular booth at the back. The BBQ place had been their favorite hangout for over a decade.

“I ordered you iced tea,” Nate said.

“Thanks, man.”

Tanner folded his hands in front of him. “Thanks for coming.”

“Hey, when you text SOS, I know what it means.”

Tanner nodded. “Same with you.”

“Drop everything. I need to talk, now,” they said in unison.

“It’s been a long time since one of us sent an SOS,” Nate said. “I think it was me last time. You’ve always been there for me, brother.”

The server set a glass in front of Tanner. “Do you

need some time?"

"No, I'm ready." Tanner hadn't even opened the menu. He placed his order, and Nate did the same.

When the server left, Tanner raised his glass. "It's good to know we're still in each other's corner."

Nate clinked his glass with Tanner's. "A friend who sticks closer than a brother."

"Amen." Tanner took a long swallow. The cool liquid slid down his throat. "I can't believe it's been fifteen years since you led me to Christ. I'd been raised in a religious home, attending church, and all that, but you were the one who showed me that I needed a saving relationship with Jesus." He looked at his friend intently. "Have I ever thanked you for that?"

Nate pursed his lips. "Not in so many words, maybe, but I knew." He smiled. "You're welcome."

Tanner sighed. "The wheels are coming off my bus. It's about to go over a cliff." He swallowed. "Ever since Riley—" *Say it.* "Ever since Riley died, I barely sleep." He touched a fist to his chest. "There's a boulder in here that won't go away. My concentration at work is shot."

"That's not good, man."

"I keep asking myself if I could have done more to prevent his destructive lifestyle. No matter what I said or did, he kept making terrible choices. Drugs, alcohol, jail." He stared at the water ring on the table left by his glass. "Trying to outrun the cops on his motorcycle on wet roads." His chest tightened, and he slammed a fist on the table. "He didn't have to die." His voice broke at the end.

Nate pursed his lips together and shook his head but stayed silent.

Tanner looked away. "Maybe if I would have—"

Nate raised his hand, palm out. "Tanner, you can't live in the world of woulda, coulda, shouda. It'll eat you alive."

"I shouldn't have cut him off."

"You didn't. You just stopped giving him money. There's a difference." Nate accepted a refill of iced tea from the server. "You still spoke with him, didn't you?"

Tanner raked a hand through his hair. "Yes. I made it clear I would help him get sober, get clean, and get on a productive path. But I wouldn't fund his destructive lifestyle." He swallowed, hard. "And every time our phone calls ended, I told him, 'I'll always be your brother, and I'll always love you.'"

Nate's eyes took on a sheen. "You did more than most brothers would, and for longer."

"But did it do any good? I took him to church when Mom couldn't make herself go. I enrolled him in community basketball and soccer leagues and drove him to practices and games. He always seemed to drift toward the troublemakers at school, and I wanted him to find a higher purpose. When I went to U of M, I skipped the dorm and lived at home so I could watch out for him." His shoulders sagged. "None of it mattered. He still chose that devastating path."

"I don't have an answer, Tanner. You loved him and wanted him to have a rich, full life, but only he could make his own decisions. God loves all of us but

gives us the power of choice. You don't know what was in Riley's heart at the end. He could have cried to God for forgiveness, just like the thief on the cross."

The icy knot in Tanner's chest melted a bit. "That gives me hope. I guess I have to let go and trust that I'll see him in Heaven when I get there."

"How's your mom doing?"

Tanner grimaced. "Not well. It's been six months, but she's still grieving deeply and practically wasting away."

"Everyone grieves in their own way. And losing a child has to be—well, I can't imagine."

Tanner nodded.

The server arrived with their food. Nate said a quick blessing, and the two friends ate.

"There's a lot more happening," Tanner said. "The company put a freeze on promotions."

Nate's gaze widened. "Oh, wow. You were counting on that pay bump when you bought the house."

Tanner took a swig of his tea. "Don't I know it. We're in over our heads. Summer was hotter than normal, and our energy bills were sky high. Then we had to buy a new stove. And Jill is spending money like crazy on stupid stuff like curtains and rugs and pictures. She wants to 'commission' her best friend to make stained-glass windows for the house." He met Nate's gaze. "At least she's stopped talking about having a baby."

"You started trying back at the beginning of the year, didn't you?"