

If We Dare to Dream

Collette Scott

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*This one is for Grandma Bush. All my love.
And for all our brave servicemen and women, may you be safe
and happy. Thank you for everything you do.*

Prologue

April 2006

He was staring again.

Jamie felt the unmistakable pressure of someone watching her, and the weight of the stare was heavy and intent like someone preparing to devour a delicious desert. It was disconcerting, for the presence just would not go away, and Jamie had no desire to be consumed. While in the past she may have found it flattering and even had expressed interest, those days were long gone now. Tonight was supposed to be just the girls. No men allowed.

Reaching for the beer bottle on the scratched and worn table, she raised it to her lips and peered over the neck to meet the stare head on. Just like before, as soon as she glanced at the shadowy corner table where the small group of people laughed with the loud influence of too many drinks, the shaded face glanced away guiltily. She set the bottle down slowly, her eyes remaining on him and a slight frown on her lips. Once again she tried to make a point of letting him know in no uncertain terms that she was aware of his gaze and was not receptive.

Bar scenes had never appealed to Jamie, especially late night ones. Meeting people while under the influence of alcohol was always a mistake in her opinion, leading to regrets the next morning. Besides, she was not interested in meeting anyone. How could she when she sported the shining diamond of a two carat solitaire engagement ring

that Clay had given to her with a proposal for marriage just two weeks before? Nope, she was spoken for and happily at that.

“That guy staring again?”

Marissa followed Jamie’s gaze to the man partially blocked by the group he was with. Seated at a table beyond the tall palm trees decorated with white lights that kindled a gentle glow in the darkness, his face was cast in shadow. Though Jamie’s view was partially obstructed, she could see his tall companion, a young, dark-haired man who was eagerly chatting up two women. His body language spoke volumes as he leaned into them with one hand casually holding a bottle of beer and the other hovering just beyond the blonde’s back waiting for the opportunity to touch her. It was obvious that he was hoping to close a deal that night. Their laughter carried across the thinning crowds; again, the type of laughter stemming from too much alcohol, overly enthusiastic and bordering on obnoxious.

“Yep,” she said.

With a laugh, Marissa reached for Jamie’s drink and downed the remaining beer in two strong gulps. When she set the empty bottle back on the table, she was grinning at Jamie.

“Want me to go over there and chat him up for you? I can tell him you’re a lost cause.”

She reached for Jamie’s left hand and stared pointedly at her ring finger. Jamie pulled away and tucked her hand on her lap. Though she was not sure why, she suddenly felt slightly embarrassed. “No, it’s okay. It’s winding down, and it’s been a long night. I think I may head out soon.”

“What? Heading out? You can’t leave, Jamie,” said Rae. “This is our last time together before you leave us for good.”

“I’m moving one state away, Rae,” Jamie said wryly.

“But you’re getting married. We’ll never be able to hang out like this again.”

Jamie shrugged. Rae was the consummate party-girl; once she got started she had a hard time stopping. Though Jamie loved her dearly, when the clock struck one she was ready to go home.

The evening had been a long one already. They started with a celebratory sushi dinner in Scottsdale and then went dancing at a club in Tempe. Rae and Marissa had fully enjoyed themselves and had begged Jamie to stop off at their old hangout for one last drink before calling it a night. After their tour of the East Valley they were closer to home - close but not quite there. Jamie still had to drive her car back to Clay’s apartment while Rae and Marissa walked across the street to

their complex. At this hour, she wished she still shared the three bedroom condo the girls had roomed in for the last four years.

“One more shot for old-times sakes,” Rae decided. She scooted back and stumbled slightly as she lurched off the scarred wooden stool. With a blasé giggle, she smiled at Marissa and Jamie and sashayed inside.

“Apparently the bathroom is actually the bar,” Marissa said drolly.

Jamie watched her go as well. “You do know I’m not having another shot.”

“Of course. You have to drive. That’s why I finished your beer. Here,” she pushed her cup of water across the table, “take my water.”

“Thanks. I’m going to miss having you look out for me, Issa.”

Marissa’s eyes suddenly welled with tears. With a well-manicured hand, she reached out and covered Jamie’s. Her long nails cut into Jamie’s palm. “Gosh Jamie, I wish you weren’t leaving.”

“I’ll be home to visit,” Jamie promised indulgently.

“Not often enough.” She sat back and sniffled. “We always knew this would happen. We’ve grown up, we have our careers, and two of us have guys that love us. Next come babies and weddings. I just never realized that you would leave the Valley.”

“It’s a good job offer.”

“Still... I thought we’d raise our kids together like family.”

“We still can. It’ll just be long distance unless something else comes up.”

Jamie was rapidly growing tired of the same conversation she had shared with both of her best friends. Ever since she had made the announcement that she and Clay were moving to Las Vegas, Rae and Marissa had been very vocal about their dismay. They believed that she was marrying too quickly. After all, she had only known Clay six months. They also believed it was foolish to leave her tightknit family and move six hours away to the City of Sin. Their economy was not as strong as Phoenix’s. And of course her family did not approve. None of Jamie’s four older brothers particularly cared for any man Jamie had brought home to them, so she had long ago given up ever finding someone that would be good enough for their baby sister. Jamie had good-naturedly taken it all in even though her mind was made up, and Clay had already made the arrangements.

The fact was that she loved Marissa and Rae like the sisters she did not have. After all, they had been inseparable since their freshman year in high school. The three girls had enjoyed many adventures over

the years, and Jamie sincerely hoped that they would continue to do so. However, she was also enchanted with the young lawyer she had met when he stumbled into her office to set up a Roth IRA. When he called her the next day and asked to take her out to dinner, she had not refused. They had been inseparable since, until now.

This first Saturday evening apart had been like a blast from the past. She and her friends had hit up the town like the old days. Nevertheless, Jamie was ready to go home to the man that had captured her heart.

“I’m going to settle up before Rae gets back,” she announced, pushing away from her stool.

“All right... I’ll catch her when she comes out of the bathroom so she doesn’t order another round.”

Most likely due to the lateness of the hour and his eagerness to call it a night, their waiter had long ago disappeared without checking on their table. Taking it in stride, Jamie decided to pay at the bar. It was nearly deserted now that last call was a few minutes away, and only two couples and three men alone sat at various corners of the U-shaped counter. Too captivated by the large-screen televisions strategically placed around the outdoor patio, the men barely looked her way. She placed her elbows on the highly polished but scratched counter and leaned forward to catch the bartender’s attention.

They had just made eye contact when a rough shove from behind threw Jamie into the hard wooden slab. With a startled gasp, she spun around with a sharp rebuke on her tongue but was forced to catch the girl instead as she unceremoniously toppled to the ground, knocking one of the heavy stools over and almost falling atop it had Jamie not been there to ease her fall. Sighing in frustration, Jamie glared down at her attacker. She noticed immediately that it was the red tube-topped girl from the watcher’s table, and she was far more intoxicated than Jamie had assumed. Saved from falling face first, the girl landed askew on the floor with one flip flop under a bar stool and her skirt dangerously high. She gazed up at Jamie with large brown eyes.

“I’m so sorry.”

Jamie rolled her eyes. “It’s ok. Let me help you up.”

The girl’s thankful look eased any remaining irritation, and with a hefty pull Jamie yanked her to her feet. Up close, Jamie noticed that the girl was pretty, young and dressed up for an evening out. Her dark hair was gently curled around her face, and her large brown eyes were covered with dark shadow. However, while Jamie’s modest teal blue top and long jeans gave off a neat but conservative appearance, the

other girl's touch-me ruched tube top was low cut and form shaping, and her come-hither skirt was barely falling to mid-thigh. Yes, she was out for an evening of fun.

"I think I've overdone it a little," she said as she gripped the edge of the counter to steady herself.

Jamie kept a hand on her arm while she continued to sway. "Yeah, maybe time to call it a night."

"We need one more round before last call," she said, her voice slightly slurred.

Jamie did not envy the girl the hangover she would wake up with the next morning. It would be a doozy. Chances were that one last round would put her over the edge to blackout. Jamie was relieved that she would not have to deal with that - or her.

Knowing that the bartender was carefully watching them, she indicated with her hand for the girl to go first, silently hoping that he would hurry so she could pay up and leave. "You go ahead. I'm just settling up."

"Thanks so much; you're sweet."

Rather than responding, Jamie just nodded. The bartender was standing before them now, and his frown was not encouraging. "I can't serve you anything else tonight, Kit."

"C'mon Vic, I just need one more round."

He shook his head. "You're lucky they're not booting you out. Consider packing it up and going home."

Jamie had to agree. She wanted to do just that herself, but she was still waiting as Kit's lower lip protruded sullenly. When Vic's face remained unchanged and unmoved, the girl scowled.

"This is retarded," Kit said.

A new presence arrived at Jamie's side, and she turned to stare up into the palest brown eyes she had ever seen. Deep set and framed by long dark lashes, they were the color of warm honey, and currently they were dancing with unleashed amusement as they flickered between her and Kit. The man's dark hair and tanned complexion enhanced the light color of his eyes, made more striking by the humorous wide-eyed gaze he bestowed upon her. Though she was sure she had never seen this man before, Jamie was struck with a feeling of familiarity. After another moment of staring it occurred to her. She was looking at the man who had watched her since their arrival.

No longer hidden in the shadows behind Kit and her two friends,

the man was making himself known. She was suddenly amused as well, for all evening he had looked away whenever she caught him, and his newfound boldness was completely unexpected at this late hour. Yet he stood near her now, standing proud and tall without a trace of uncertainty in his pleasant appraisal, and Jamie was surprised at how good looking he really was. Tall and lean, his jeans hugged his long legs, and his tight t-shirt outlined the broad curve of his chest. On his forearm she noticed the dark outline of the US Army eagle tattoo. So, he was military, she thought. That would explain his well-groomed appearance and confident stance.

Though he stood close, it was not so close to make her feel invaded, and when he smiled it was a friendly and non-threatening curve to his lips that she found appealing. His boyishly handsome face was far more expressive than she could have imagined, and she had to fight back the urge to return his amused grin.

“Nice catch,” he said, breaking the silence.

The deep timber of his voice seemed to match his classic features and well-built physique. In fact, everything about him was attractive in a GQish sort of way. Still held captive by his pale honey eyes, she almost did not turn when he indicated with his thumb toward Kit. The girl was leaning forward on her crossed arms in an effort to promote her cleavage. Again, Vic seemed unaffected.

Jamie nodded. “Yeah, time to call it a night.”

“I tend to agree, though I actually came over here to offer you a drink.”

His self-deprecating grin was a surprise. Instead of bristling, she relaxed her guard enough to smile back. “Sorry, but I’m just waiting to cash out.”

“I suppose it’s pretty late.”

“When it gets to this hour, most people are either puking or passing out.”

Looking pointedly at Kit, he chuckled. Again, it was a warm sound, and Jamie really liked it. Her smile grew as he nodded in agreement. “I agree completely. Luckily, I’m not drunk.”

“I’m not either. I have to drive,” she said with a wry smile.

“Me too. Ah, the joys of being the designated driver. We get to watch everyone make a fool out of themselves.”

Jamie nodded in sympathy. “Are you her DD then?”

The dark brows rose in surprise. “No, no, not at all. I don’t even know her.” He paused to search her face. “I was here with a group, but they seem to have all disappeared.”

“Oh, I thought you were with her.”

“Is that jealousy I detect?”

Jamie shook her head regretfully and held up her hand. The diamond sparkled between them. “I’m afraid not. I’m actually spoken for.”

“Aren’t all the hot ones?”

The mock consternation on his face was so beguiling that Jamie had to laugh. “You’re quite the charmer...”

“Andrew.”

Jamie nodded. “Andrew then.”

“And you are?”

“Engaged,” Jamie quipped.

He chuckled again as he held out a large hand. “Well Engaged, it’s a pleasure to meet you.”

Despite her best intentions of clearing out, Jamie could not resist his friendly smile and warm eyes. She placed her hand in his, surprised at the strength in his fingers which grasped her smaller palm. They shook, and he respectfully released her.

“Well, if you insist on leaving just when I finally get to talk to you, I vow to find you your check.”

“That would be great,” she said, surprising herself.

Returning their attention to Kit and Vic, Jamie noticed that while she was conversing with her new friend the intoxicated girl had become increasingly difficult. Vic had made eye contact with the bouncer at that moment, and a man the size of a house was slowly making his way toward them.

Andrew noticed as well. “Maybe we should get out of the way first.”

Jamie was about to nod when she felt Kit’s hand on her shoulder. Just as she turned to see what the girl needed, she heard Kit’s voice in a high squeak. “I’m going to be ...”

With lightning fast reflexes, Andrew’s arm went around her waist, and she was hefted back against his broad chest with a startled squeak. It was just in time. Kit grabbed the bar stool and leaned over, emptying the contents of her stomach onto the concrete floor. As Jamie hastily danced away, Andrew’s arm tightened, and he swung her behind him with a stealthy, fluid movement. The chivalrous way he placed himself between her and the girl so warmed her that she considered the gravity of her situation. For a second there, she felt as though she was flying through the air, and she liked him all the more for it. That told her that she needed to go - now.

“Thank you,” she said breathlessly.

Releasing the grip around her waist, he glanced down at his splattered jeans and shrugged. Kit was still leaning over the barstool, so he took another safe step away before smiling down at Jamie again. “I’ll accept if you tell me your real name.”

Now indebted, Jamie did not hesitate. “Jamie.”

Before he could respond, she spotted Marissa waving at her. “Jamie, we got our waiter!”

Hearing her friend’s high pitched voice above the nearby shouts of disgust from Kit’s illness, Jamie nodded back at her friends and then glanced up at the man who had so selflessly protected her from a rather large mess.

“I guess I’m good,” she said, hating the disappointment that she was sure he could hear in her voice.

His forehead crinkled when he raised his brows hopefully in a look that reminded her of a growing puppy. “He’s my waiter, too. Maybe I can grab him with you?”

After his gallant deed, Jamie did not have the heart to deny him. “Come on over.”

Ignoring the mess and the now moaning girl, Andrew followed behind Jamie back to her table. Kit’s friend was nowhere in sight, and neither, for that matter, was the group Andrew had said he was with. Kit had certainly created a scene, and Jamie almost did not blame the friends for making themselves scarce. Although she had a sense of guilt for not offering, she knew that the bar would call a cab for Kit - anything to get her out of there as fast as possible. That made it not her problem.

Meanwhile, Marissa and Rae had paid their bill and stood waiting for her, handbags over their shoulders. Jamie smiled as she approached. “If you girls are all set, you can go.”

“And not say goodbye?” Marissa asked tearfully.

“This is it for a while, huh?” Rae did not seem any more reasonable at the moment.

“You know I’ll call every week,” Jamie reminded them.

Andrew stood silent, watching their exchange thoughtfully.

“Well, all right. I love you, Jamie. Good luck.” Marissa grabbed Jamie and encased her in a giant bear hug. Rae followed right after.

“You girls be careful crossing the street,” Jamie said softly. Her own eyes were growing damp amidst the awkward back patting and exaggerated sniffles.

“We’ll be fine. Drive safely, and call me tomorrow as soon as you

get there, okay?" Marissa said.

"I will," Jamie promised.

With another hug and promise to keep in touch, her best friends left arm in arm. Jamie watched them go, suddenly feeling bemused and nervous. While her new life lay ahead of her, at the moment she was only aware that she would no longer be twenty minutes away from them. Instead, it would be six hours at best.

Sighing softly, Jamie placed a twenty into the case the waiter dropped off at the table and watched as Andrew signed his slip. Despite his silence, Jamie was sure he had paid attention to their entire exchange. She felt awkward, but he remained quiet as she re-composed herself.

"So where are you off to?" Andrew finally asked.

"Home."

When he smiled his eyes lit up, even in the darkness of the outdoor lighting. She noticed the laughter lines that crinkled endearingly and a long puckered scar that extended to his temple and beyond. Not finding it at all unattractive, she felt it gave his expressive face even more character. Seeing the direction of her stare, he ducked his chin and angled his face away. "I meant tomorrow. I got the impression that you're going somewhere?"

Somehow knowing it would be futile to fib, Jamie nodded. "I'm moving."

His face crumpled in a comical way. "To add insult to injury. First you're engaged, and now you're moving away."

"I'm sorry."

He shrugged, but his eyes were again dancing with amusement. "It's not your fault. It's mine - my timing is off. I should've met you a few years ago."

Jamie laughed. "If it was meant to be, it would have been."

"Very true. Well Jamie, it was great while it lasted." He smiled again, another eye crinkling one that caused her to smile back. "Maybe I can walk you out to your car?"

Jamie gathered her keys in her hand. As she pulled her jacket on, she studied him closely for any sign of ulterior motives. Sure he was a stranger, but it seemed pretty harmless to allow him to walk her to her car. The bouncers were standing outside, and she would be in plain view. "Fair enough. I'm flattered by all the attention."

"Good. You're far too pretty to be ignored... Besides, maybe I'm trying to persuade you to change your mind."

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“Not gonna happen,” she said with a laugh.

“I can still try.” He was watching her humor with his dancing eyes.

“Are you okay to drive?”

“I’m fine.”

Standing side by side with him, she was again surprised by his height. Though at nearly five foot eight, she still only reached his chin. When they passed the bouncer Andrew nodded politely, and Jamie noticed that even with his height he moved with the stealthy ease of a panther. That, coupled with his obvious attraction to her, made her feel decidedly nervous and clumsy next to him. Knowing that he was observing her to make sure she was okay to drive, she concentrated on appearing as normal as possible despite the awkwardness of the situation.

“What are your cross streets?”

The question was unexpected, and she nearly stumbled when she paused to stare up at him. “What?”

“How far are you?”

She debated again about giving him too much information, but realized it could not really matter at this point. Come that afternoon, she would be back in her car and driving it to her new home. “I’m at Higley and Brown.”

“Okay. I’m out in AJ. I’ll stay behind you as long as I can. If you have any problems, just pull over.”

Jamie nodded and opened the car door, though she was confused by his continued chivalry. After all, he already knew she was not inviting him home with her. People like him just did not exist anymore, not unless there was something in it for them to benefit from. But Andrew seemed different, truly a man of honest intentions. She stared up at him as she climbed behind the wheel, searching his face for any sign of impending trouble. He stood close with his hand on her door, and when she reached for the handle he leaned in. However, he did not force himself upon her, and he continued to regard her with a mixture of interest and regret only.

“Jamie, it was really nice to meet you, although I wish it had been under different circumstances,” he said with a self-critical grin. “Promise me you’ll drive safe... and good luck with your move.”

“Thank you for being such a gentleman,” Jamie replied with what seemed to her a pathetic response.

With one last smile, he released the door and shut it securely. Jamie watched as he walked to a new, shiny black F150. Within seconds, his headlights were on and flashing her to go ahead. For the

second time, she wondered if she was being foolish by allowing him to follow her, but again she shrugged it off just as quickly. She was in control of her vehicle and could drive him anywhere, including a police station.

Confident that he was a good guy, she drove to the exit and pulled out, checking her rearview mirror multiple times on her ride home. He followed her all the way to Brown Road, flashing his headlights one last time before making a right turn out of her life. As his headlights faded off into the night, Jamie felt suddenly lonely and alone. She had never met such a polite and respectful man at a bar before, and it was a shame that he was too late. If things had been different, she would have liked the chance to get to know him better.

Her development lay ahead on the left, so she put on her blinker and slowed. This was it; her last evening in Phoenix. Starting at noon she would be on the way to her new life. As she pulled into her covered spot, she glanced at the clock in her car before shutting it down for its final night in Arizona. The clock read 2 am.

The night had cooled, and a breeze was blowing through the open window straight toward her bed. Kit felt the cool air on her naked shoulders and shivered. She was tired, too tired to get up and shut the window. She would just have to deal.

Where was the duvet?

Still drunk and half asleep, she reached blindly for the duvet to offer her some warmth. Suddenly it was draped over her by unseen hands, and she snuggled down deeper into sleep. Her stomach still roiled from all the alcohol she had consumed during the evening, and the taste of her vomit burned her throat. As she once again entered her stupor, she thought fleetingly of how terrible she would feel in the morning.

A warm hand encircled her waist and pulled her up against a hard chest. The body heat warmed her, and for a moment she snuggled up against the warmth.

Lips nuzzled the nape of her neck, and a hand covered her breast. After a moment of play, her tube top was gently pulled down. Once again the hand was there, moving from one breast to the next. Several moments passed before Kit realized that this was all wrong.

She lived alone. She was not dating anyone. Who the hell was in bed with her?

As though sensing her return to consciousness, Kit heard a chuckle

near her ear. It was a frightening sound, cold and malicious. Then everything happened so quickly that she had no time to react. Before she could scream something was shoved into her mouth. When she attempted to remove it, hands grasped her wrists, and she was straddled by a very large, very strong body. It pushed her deeper into her mattress and pinned the duvet against her body. She could not kick out.

As both her hands were drawn over her head, she began to shake wildly. This could not be happening. Her eyes were wide, and she desperately tried to wiggle her hands free while her tongue wrestled with the gag. Then the cruel bite of a zip tie dug into her wrists. It was pulled tight, and the plastic cut painfully into her soft skin. While one hand pinned her hands above her head, the other hand reached beside her. She could feel his hand fumbling near her leg. Pinned as she was, panicked sounds escaped her throat. They were muffled by the gag in her mouth.

A rope appeared. It was wrapped around her bound wrists and then around the bedpost, securing her hands above the bed. When her attacker had secured it tightly, he sat back on her thighs and chuckled again.

“Let’s play a game.”

The voice was deep and slightly familiar. Through her alcohol drugged mind, she remembered a man she had spoken to before. Did he see her come home? Did she invite him in?

No, she never would have done that.

She vaguely remembered Vic and the bouncer getting her a cab. The cab brought her home. She was alone at the time. Going through the door was fuzzy, but she remembered being alone when she fell into bed.

Apparently, she had been followed at some point.

The heavy weight on her midsection was suddenly gone and the cool breeze again reached her clammy skin as the duvet was pulled off her and bunched up on the other side of the bed. Rough and urgent hands grasped her thighs before she could kick out, and her thong was sawed off her by a previously unseen knife. As Kit watched on, it glinted in the moonlight. She knew then that she was about to be raped.

With a new sense of urgency, Kit began to fight in earnest. However, her bucking hips and kicking feet only served to irritate him, and his hands came up around her neck.

“Stop moving.”

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The threat was plain, but Kit could not stop. She was afraid, more frightened than she had ever been before in her life. She fought as hard as she could, aware of the biting sting of the zip ties as they cut her wrists, and the pressure of the hands around her neck. She wanted to scream, but the gag was in too far. She could not spit it out.

Frustrated with the continued fighting, the hands around her neck tightened even more. Her panicked moans were cut off, and she struggled for air in her deprived and burning lungs. Easing her struggles, she prayed that the pressure would ease. But it did not. Despite her submission, those hands kept squeezing in rage. Unable to take in any more air, her last struggles stopped and her grip on consciousness slipped away.

Kit's last coherent thought was of her mother.

As her eyes fluttered closed, she glimpsed the bright green numbers on her clock. It read 2:10 am.

Chapter 1

Fall 2009

Hitting rock bottom for Jamie was almost like falling into a deep well from which there was no escape. The walls were smooth, and there were no hand holds. While she knew she could claw all she wanted to at the slick sides, there was no hope of reaching the top. Instead she had to tread the murky, icy cold water until she was rescued or exhaustion took over and made her give in to oblivion.

At the moment, Jamie Morton, formally Evans, was in the process of being rescued. It could have been a welcome rescue if not for the ‘I told you so’ looks that her rescuers threw her way. As the last of her belongings were pulled from the moving truck parked in the driveway of the large, five bedroom house belonging to her oldest brother, each and every one of them glanced at her as they passed.

Far away from Vegas, her brother Ford had built his home up in the Red Mountain area of Mesa, and now all of her belongings were neatly stacked in one of the oversized garages on his property. She was suddenly a renter in his guest quarters until she re-established herself. That could not happen fast enough, she thought sullenly.

In all fairness, it really could be worse. The guest house at Ford’s had a separate entrance and was more like a studio apartment than a spare bedroom. She had her own small kitchen and bath in addition to a spacious closet and dresser for her clothes. While she knew she should be thankful, instead she felt like a failure running home to the closest thing she still had to a parent. So much for independence.

“This is it,” Ian announced, brushing his hands off on his jeans.

Four pairs of eyes stared at her expectantly. Again she almost wished she was succumbing to the exhaustion. All four of her brothers

were present, from Ford down to Ian. And all four had immediately stepped in to take control of her suddenly spiraling life, taking matters into their own hands while she cried herself to sleep every night.

Overprotective was an understatement.

Looking at them now, they were all so similar and yet so different. All of the Evans kids had their father's mahogany colored hair and brown eyes. They were all tall and slender, including Jamie, with long limbs, graceful postures and expressive demeanors, and with a single glance she could determine what each was thinking.

The eldest, Ford, was the only one to show the signs of approaching middle age with a slight hunch to his broad shoulders and a small spare tire around his waist. It suited his somber and formidable personality well. At that moment Ford appeared exasperated, as though he was ready to lecture her again on the foolishness of running off and getting married so quickly only to run back home as soon as things took a turn for the worse.

Grady, the generous and practical one, argued both sides of each story. In one breath he would tell Jamie that Ford was right, but in the next he would agree that she had done what she thought was best at the time.

The third and happy-go-lucky son, Hayden, cheerfully offered to put a hit out on Clay for disgracing his little sister so shamefully while his fists clenched by his side. As he did so, the youngest and most intense brother, Ian, glared at Hayden and threatened to arrest him if he did. Then he turned to Jamie and said that he would pull Clay over and give him the biggest ticket of his life if he ever saw him on the road during his shift again.

They were her brothers, and she loved them more than ever today.

Yet the truth was that she was raw and hurting and hated being at their mercy. What they viewed as taking care of their baby sister, she saw as a constant reminder of her mistakes. She had valued her independence, and now she was back where she started from - under their thumbs and feeling like a total failure.

"Thanks guys," she said softly.

Seeing the emotion rising on her face, Hayden placed his hands on his hips and grinned. "Work's done; let's eat!"

Ian nodded enthusiastically. "Good idea." He patted his very flat and toned stomach. "This big boy needs some steak. Hey Ford, whatcha grilling?"

Ford shrugged. "If you can find it, you can cook it. I'm going to take a minute to straighten out a path to my workbench."

Jamie held back while her three other brothers disappeared inside to see what they could find. All three lanky figures marched with their inherited purposeful stride to the front door, eager to empty Ford's pantry. A line of hungry soldiers, their only differences from behind were their various hair styles and range of physique, with Ian being the burliest and Grady being the thinnest. When they disappeared from sight, she turned her attention to Ford. Her oldest brother had gone back into the garage that now contained her life, and after drumming up the confidence to follow she headed across the paved driveway to thank him in private.

He was shifting a box away from his meticulously ordered and pristine work area when she stepped inside the garage. It had been custom fit with a workbench and tables, and tools of varying shapes, sizes and uses hung from clips neatly arranged upon the walls now hidden by her belongings.

"I'm sorry about all this," she said.

Glancing up, Ford stared at her for a few seconds and then straightened slowly. "Don't worry about it. Hayden just never listens to me when I tell him where to put things."

Jamie felt a smile. Hayden never listened to anyone. He was the free-spirit of the family. "That wasn't what I meant."

"There's nothing to apologize for. You belong with us. We're family."

"You have your own family. How will they feel when they get back and your little sister is freeloading off of you."

"Don't be ridiculous. Isabel was going to fly back here to be with you. You would offend us more if you refused to stay here, Jamie."

The stern look he sent her way was a bitter reminder of how long it had taken her to confess to her brothers the state of her marriage. High profile clients, a fast lifestyle and too much pressure had turned Clay from the attentive man she had met shortly after college into an out of control fool. In customary Jamie style, she had stayed too long in the hopes of mothering him back to her, ignoring her inner voice that warned her to leave after a year of marriage. A divorcee, rapidly approaching thirty and starting a new job in a slow and bungling economy, Jamie was everything she had hoped she would *not* be at her age. It was her worst nightmare, and she felt shame down to her inner being.

"Well, when you speak to Isabel next, please tell her I send my love

and thanks, and tell her I promise not to stay too long. Just long enough for me to find my feet again.”

Ford’s hand came down on her shoulder, and he squeezed it gently. “You stay as long as you need to. I mean that.”

Feeling emotional again, Jamie forced a laugh. Her vision blurred as the tears filled her eyes. “I guess this is when I say that I’m going to arrange my room for a little bit and make my graceful departure. Is that okay, or do you need any help out here?”

Ford shook his head. “Take all the time you need.”

With trembling lips, Jamie spun on her heel and walked from the garage to the paved and floral landscaped path down to her new home. The door was still cracked open, and she could hear the air conditioning running. Oh Hayden, she thought, closing the heavy territorial-style door behind her. Though the desert heat had eased quite a bit, it was still warm during the day and running the air with the door open was a total waste. She shook her head. Some things never changed.

Taking a quick sweep of the single cream colored room that was now hers, Jamie realized that one of her brothers, most likely Grady, had neatly stacked her suitcases in front of the door to the closet, and the box marked ‘bathroom’ was resting on the sink down the short hall to the back of the quarters. Her kitchen utensils were lying haphazardly on the granite counter, and three of the cabinets were open as though someone had started putting her dishes away. The rest sat in the open box on the floor.

While she and Ian had driven her Volvo down from Vegas late in the morning, her other brothers had left with the truck at the crack of dawn. Apparently they had tried to give her a helping hand by unpacking necessities since they had arrived two hours before her and Ian. The thought of their kindness made Jamie’s tears spill over her lashes, and she sank to her bed and placed her face in her hands.

What had she done wrong?

Promising herself just a few moments of self-pity, Jamie curled into a ball and thought back over the years that had passed since she had first left the Valley. She should have known then that she was making a mistake. All the warning signs had been present.

First, her brothers warning her that Clay was not all that he seemed. While she had always had trouble introducing boys to her brothers in the past, this time all four brothers, including open-minded Grady, had not made any effort to like Clay at all. She had

disregarded their warnings, chalking it up to the words of overprotective siblings and behaved in typical Jamie manner by rebelling.

Then, during her final night out with Marissa and Rae, her two best friends emphatically warned her off Clay. Their wise words of not rushing into things and taking more time to get to know him had fallen on deaf ears. She had been so enraptured by his charm and subtle pressure to commit that she ignored their advice.

The largest and most frightening warning sign fell with the man she met that last night out. Three weeks after she had moved, Marissa had called to tell her that the girl who had nearly vomited all over her had been murdered in a rape gone wrong that night. While she had been a little frightened, when Marissa told her who was arrested for the crime Jamie felt as though the rug had been pulled from her feet. The man they had arrested was the very same man who had followed her home. That charming and friendly guy that she had let her guard down for, had even wanted to know more about, had been charged with the crime and now sat in prison convicted of murder.

Jamie still went cold as ice thinking about how close she could have been to being a victim herself. He had followed her almost to her development door. What would have happened if he had come closer? Could he have run her off the road in that big truck he had been driving? Had he given up because she was not intoxicated and went instead to someone he knew was? Whatever the case, she had learned a valuable lesson that night. No matter how good a judge of character she thought she was, she was wrong.

Embarrassed at how foolish she had behaved that night, she never told a soul how close she came. Not even Clay during their happier days. She never told, but she remembered. When Clay had proven that he was not all he seemed to be as well, it had cemented her inability to trust her instincts.

A knock on her door brought her back to the present. She sat up and wiped at her eyes, calling out to whichever brother it was to enter. The door swung open silently on well-greased hinges and revealed Ian. His close cropped hair was glistening with drops of water, and he had changed from his shorts and t-shirt to a pair of swim trunks. Jamie grimaced when she noticed he was dripping on the travertine flooring. Brothers, she fumed.

“Don’t you have a towel?”

Ian glanced down and then shrugged. “It’s white. He’ll never notice.”

“But I will. Hold on.”

She slid across the bed and hurried to the bathroom. Finding the box marked ‘linens’, she pulled it open and tossed a towel back at him. He caught it in one hand and shook it open.

“So are you going to come and join us?”

“I just needed to be alone for a second...to take a look around and see what needs to be done.”

His astute and observant gaze told her that he did not believe a word she said. “Whatever.”

She raised her chin. “Well, I did need time. Having all you guys hovering over me all weekend has left me exhausted.”

“You and me both,” he muttered.

He padded over to the refrigerator and pulled it open. Ducking his head inside, he withdrew a moment later with two beers in his hand.

“Where did those come from?”

“Courtesy of Grady. Apparently he insisted on hitting the grocery store before we got here. He didn’t get a lot, but at least there’s a few things to tide you over until you get a chance to go.”

Twisting the tops off both, he handed one to Jamie and took a deep swig of his own. He pulled a chair out from the small dining table and sat down, the towel wrapped around his waist. Jamie held the cold bottle in her hand as yet another wave of emotion washed over her.

“Just beer?” She chuckled. “You guys are amazing, you know that?”

Ian’s face was serious, but his eyes danced with mirth. “Of course.”

They enjoyed their beer in silence for a few moments until Ian came to his feet. “So are you going to throw on a suit and enjoy the barbecue with us or what?”

Though she really just wanted to hide in her room, Jamie knew none of her brothers would accept that. After they had made the drive up to Vegas and then back again with all her belongings, she owed it to them to give proper thanks. If that meant a family dinner in Ford’s beautiful back yard, well she was in no position to say no. “What’s cooking?”

Ian’s love of food was evident in the dreamy, faraway look he bore. “Sirloin tips and baked potatoes, plenty of beer to go around and Hayden’s found some chips in the pantry.”

“Sounds like good times,” she murmured.

“It will be once you get there. C’mon, sis, get a move on... The

pool's heated..."

Coming to her feet, Jamie reached forward and gave her brother a hug. When she pulled away, he was grinning down at her. "You make it sound so appealing, how could I say no?"

"Then let's go. I'll meet you in the deep end," he encouraged warmly. Spinning on his heel, he paused at the door and sent her one last smile. His voice was deep as he spoke, and the way he said her nickname warmed her inside. "Hey Jame? One more thing..."

She cocked her head to the side.

"I'm glad you're home, brat."

The door closed behind him with a solid click. Though not overly expressive with affection, the use of his childhood pet name for her brought a smile of nostalgia to her lips.

Reaching for her suitcase, Jamie went in search of a bathing suit. While some of her clothes made the long drive on hangers and were already put away, the items from her dresser were all neatly packed in her matching luggage set. Using the opportunity to unpack as well, she took a little longer than she expected, and dinner was just about ready when she walked out back wearing her suit and a towel as a cover up.

The scene that greeted her in the backyard with the glorious desert views was one direct from her childhood. Hayden and Ian were doing what they did best, and what they had always done to her second oldest brother. Grady was currently being held under the water while Ford watched on with a fatherly eye from his position at the grill. Two steaks were already on a plate, and a separate plate held foiled-wrapped baked potatoes. As Jamie made her way through the maze of luxurious patio furniture, she sent a worried glance over at Ford.

"Are they going to kill him?"

At that moment both men released Grady, and he came to the surface sputtering and cursing. "Damn you both."

One of Ford's dark brows rose. "Probably. Maybe you ought to get in there and referee."

She shook her head wryly. "Like old times?"

"Just like old times," he agreed. "Go on; I'll finish dinner."

"Some things just never change, do they?"

She heard Ford chuckle behind her as she crossed over to the side of the pool. Dropping her towel to the deck, Jamie pulled her knees to her chest and cannonballed into the water alongside the recently surfaced Ian and Hayden. They called out in surprise as Jamie reappeared between them.

“Are you two ever going to grow up and leave poor Grady alone?”

“Yeah, she’s right,” Grady grumbled.

“When you don’t need to hide behind your baby sister for protection, Grady,” Hayden said with a laugh.

Ian submerged again, and moments later Grady’s head disappeared under the surface. As Jamie cried out her protest, she too was pulled under the water.

Just like old times, she thought as she kicked at Hayden. One foot slipped free and caught Hayden under the chin. When he released her with a surprised gurgle, she swam for the surface laughing. This game of water tag continued on for another five minutes or so while Ford completed dinner. When he finally called them to exit the pool and eat, Jamie was out of breath and her sides hurt from laughing too hard. She wrapped herself in her towel and joined her brothers at the table, suddenly feeling as though life could go on.

It was nice to laugh again, and good to be home.

Wait a minute, she thought, good to be home?

The echo of a closing door somewhere off in the distance did little to break the tendrils of the dream that snaked out of his memory. He was eight again, sleeping in the small twin bed in the trailer belonging to his mother.

A terrified scream, the sound similar to someone who has just come face to face with a murderer, woke Andrew in the night. Initially he reached for his constant bedfellow, a stuffed bear that was the last gift he received from his father before he left. Clutching Dexter to his small chest, Andrew lay awake in bed with wide eyes, his ears straining as he wondered what had awakened him. Was it the masked murderer from the scary movie his mother had watched with her friends during Halloween? Was he in the house?

Before he finished his last thought, another whacking sound reached him from down the hall, followed by laughter and another cry. Andrew frowned. The cry sounded just like his brother Adam. This time the shrieks had developed into the sustained cries of pain. Lifting his head slowly and cautiously so as not to be noticed by any monsters in the house, Andrew looked over to his brother’s crib and found it empty. Where had Adam gone? How did he get out, and why was he crying now?

Though so scared that his arms could not release the tight clutch on his beloved teddy, Andrew’s protective instincts kicked in. As

slowly as he could, he slipped from beneath the thin sheet that covered him and slid to the floor, holding Dexter in one hand against his chest while he crawled to the closed bedroom door. He heard voices on the other side over the continued crying. They sounded annoyed. One of the voices was his mother's, and he did not like it when she was annoyed. However, he could still hear his baby brother, crying in pain.

Terrified to open the door and see what lay beyond, terrified to see what had happened to Adam, and terrified of the blows that would surely come when he interrupted his mother while she was entertaining company, Andrew's shaking hand reached up and grasped the handle. None of that mattered at this moment. He had a job to do.

He had to make sure Adam was all right. He had to protect Adam.

The dream shifted in a swirl like the smoke rising from a burning Bradley. Dark wisps curled around his memory, bringing with it the pain and anguish that he struggled to keep at bay.

Shouting voices, raised in panic, mingled together to form a cacophony of noise. It was impossible to make out who was saying what. The team was losing it. Why? What lay ahead? Had the insurgents found them again? The scent of burning flesh, the cries of the wounded, blood staining his hands, all seemed so far away. In the next moment, his ringing ears were jolted yet again. A blast, so loud that all the noise faded to a high pitched hum, rocked the vehicle, throwing him clear with a burst of pain and a startled cry. He had been hit. He knew he was dead. He stared up at the millions of stars in the black sky until his world turned to black.

As quickly as the image appeared, it was gone. Though he tried to fight it and escape from the dream, he once again was returned to his childhood. His mother's gaunt but smiling face appeared before him.

"You're my little man of the house," Lisa said softly, stroking Andrew's reddened cheek gently. "You take care of us."

Though her fingers brushed painfully against the rapidly growing bruise, Andrew stood still and erect. He refused to allow the tears burning the backs of his eyes to fill and spill over in front of his mother and her friend. There was a time when Andrew had thought his mother was the most beautiful and loving woman in the world. Over the two years since his father had left, he had watched her lovely dark hair grow thin, and her startling pale brown eyes become lackluster with the effects of the smokey stuff that the men

she invited inevitably brought with them.

He did not like those men.

He did not like what they did to his brother.

Though the blood still filled the inside of his mouth where his mother's new friend had backhanded him and split open his cheek, Andrew remained still. His new front teeth felt loose in his mouth from the blow, and he allowed his tongue to carefully run along the inside to see if any others had come loose. Fighting against the trembling in his body and the pain in his elbow where he landed when he fell, Andrew shot a quick glance out of the corner of his eye to where Adam lay prone.

"Leave him. He's fine," his mother said cheerfully.

Placing her lit cigarette in the ashtray on the table, she slipped from her chair and came to her knees in front of him. He averted his gaze when her loosely tied robe opened revealingly. Unfortunately, by avoiding her nakedness, his eyes landed on the man who had just struck him. Seeing the man staring at his mother as though she were an ice cream cone that he wanted to eat made him angry all over again. Luckily his mother's voice again reached his ears.

"I'm sorry that you got in the way, Andrew-babe. Adam was being fresh, and Keith had to reprimand him. He'll wake up in a few minutes. Worthless kid causes so much trouble. Look at you now. Does it hurt?"

He shook his head bravely.

"All right then, my precious boy, go back in your room and play with the door shut while I play with Keith."

Though only eight and a half and weighing in the 25% for his age group, Andrew nodded solemnly before hurrying to Adam's side. He went down on his knees and picked up his brother. Though not yet two, Adam was heavy, and it took all of Andrew's strength to carry him back to their room. As soon as the door closed behind them, Andrew placed Adam on his bed while his tears finally fell free. Though his cheek stung, he disregarded his own pain and stared at his brother, willing the toddler to open his eyes. Already Adam's eye was swelling, and it appeared an angry red against his smooth, soft baby skin.

Ignoring the soft sounds of pleasure and the low growl from the man who had struck him, Andrew cracked open his door and peeked, seeing only his mother's back with the man's arms around her hips as she straddled him. Knowing they would be too distracted with

their game to notice him, he tiptoed down the hall to the bathroom where he found a clean washcloth hidden in the back of the cabinet under the sink behind half empty bottles of shampoo and an empty box of cotton swabs. He held it to the faucet and turned on the water at a slow drip, waiting for the cloth to become fully saturated. The soft sounds had grown more rapid and urgent. He knew he only had a few more seconds before they were done. Shutting off the water, he hurried back down the hall and closed the door behind him just as the man let out a ragged groan. The sound muffled the soft click of the latch behind Andrew's panicked shove. He breathed a sigh of relief and leaned against the door for just a moment before hurrying back to Adam. The toddler still appeared asleep, though he stirred when Andrew placed the washcloth across his forehead and gently over his swelling eye.

Andrew was relieved when Adam finally opened his good eye. It took several heart stopping seconds of panic and fear before he was able to focus on Andrew.

"Dew?"

"I'm here," Andrew said softly.

"Booboo," Adam moaned, his good eye filling with tears.

"I know," Andrew whispered. He reached out and stroked the dark fuzz on the top of Adam's head. "I'm sorry I was too late, Adam, but I promise I won't let him hurt you again. I'll protect you."

With a muffled cry, Andrew finally succeeded in tearing himself out of his dream. Chest heaving and covered in sweat, he ran his hands over his body to confirm that he was truly awake and not still caught in his nightmares. His resulting sigh did little to calm the pounding of his heart. If they were not so realistic, he knew he would be able to deal with them better.

Careful so as not to draw attention, Andrew sat up in bed and ran his hands over his face. Breathe, he reminded himself. Fight the anxiety, fight the panic and focus on your breathing. In and out. Now one and two and three and four. He went through the motions for several minutes, conjuring up the one image that always seemed to calm him.

Jamie.

Perhaps it was because she was the last friendly face he had seen, or maybe it was because he had felt so connected to her in that brief meeting, he was not sure. All he knew was that her face did more to ease the pain than any other. Her round, brown eyes dancing in the dim light and her full, pink lips spreading wide to reveal even white

If We Dare to Dream

teeth slowly took the dream away. He went over the events of that evening again, remembering their conversation, almost every word, until he was able to lie back down.

Sending a silent thank you to the charming and lovely young woman from that evening, Andrew closed his eyes and then sent another, thanking her for not knowing what had happened to him. He needed her vision of him to be laughing, not looking at him with fear and disgust. The shame was nearly unbearable.

He wondered what she was doing at that moment, if she was laughing the way she had for him that night. He wondered if she was happy still.

Sighing at the cruel twist of fate that had him stuck with only his dreams, Andrew closed his eyes. It would be another long night, he thought dismally.

How much more could he take?

Chapter 2

Another two months passed before Jamie began to feel as though she was human again. Two months before she found a new routine and stopped thinking about Clay on a daily basis. Divorce was a difficult and trying time, and though she and Clay had not found the raging success they had dreamed of at that point in their relationship, splitting everything equally was a long and hard battle. However, all of that was past her now, and she was re-established back in her hometown with a new job. Her bills were paid, and she had a large enough cushion to purchase her own home. She had plans, though she listened to Ford when he warned her to hold off for rock bottom housing prices. It was coming, he advised. His own business had slowed tremendously, and seeing the stress on his face on the rare occasions she joined his family in the big house was enough to make her believe what he said.

Though the guest quarters were small, she was more content to stay as long as she could. Having her family so close did end up being helpful, and she had everything she needed right at her fingertips. Though Ford had refused, she insisted on paying him a small amount monthly to reimburse him for utilities. With holiday bills to pay and his business not doing so well, she hoped her little bit helped.

Christmas dinner had been the most relaxed meal she had enjoyed in ages. Her entire family was there, minus Clay, and they all enjoyed the casual repartee that had gone missing when her ex-husband was in the picture. Over the last few years, instead of laughing and enjoying their meals, all or most of her brothers had spent the time glaring across the table at Clay. He had never felt welcome with her family, and those family dinners over holidays had been a trial for all of them. Though Clay had tried his best to remain positive, Jamie

knew that he resented their trips home and her to a certain extent for forcing him to go along.

Now Clay was gone, most likely celebrating the holidays with his family in California. A twinge of nostalgia gripped her briefly for she remembered Clay's mother and step-father affectionately. They were good people, even if their son had gotten caught up in situations that had ruined their marriage. She had to remind herself that although she enjoyed them that part of her life was now over. She had not spoken to Clay since they had met in court to sign the divorce papers, and she preferred it that way. Actually, she needed it that way for now.

Strolling into the kitchen with the last of the dirty dishes perched precariously between his hands, Ian placed them on the counter where Ford's wife Isabel and Jamie labored away at cleaning and wrapping the leftovers. As he set them down, he let out a loud belch and smiled appreciatively at them both.

"Really, Ian?" Jamie snapped. "That was gross."

"No, that was awesome," he responded with a satisfied smile.

"Ian, if you cannot behave in my kitchen - get out," Isabel grumbled.

"Ouch ladies, you wound me." He grimaced at Jamie and their sister-in-law. "That was a sign of contentment and compliments to the chef. A good meal always produces a good burp."

"Muffled under one's hand," Isabel advised.

"With a resulting 'excuse me'," Jamie added.

"Wow ladies, I know where I'm not wanted," Ian whined.

"That's right. Go join Ford and Ana in the game room. They're just setting up a new game of pool now."

"A new table for Christmas? Love it."

With as much nonchalance as he had entered the kitchen with, he sauntered off, leaving Jamie to finish loading the dishwasher. Once it was full, she turned the cycle on and leaned against the counter, glancing around with satisfaction. "Well, we did it."

"Yes we did, Jaimita. Now go relax with everyone else. I'll be out soon."

What Jamie wanted to do at that moment was sit back and put her feet up. After everyone had opened their presents, she and Isabel had spent the entire morning in the kitchen preparing the meal for the twelve of them. A long but glorious day and she was ready to relax with a nice glass of wine. Reaching for the last of the red, she poured

what remained into her and Isabel's glasses.

She held hers out. "To a successful Christmas celebration."

"I'll second that."

Their glasses clinked and both women took a sip. "I guess I'll go see what Grady and Hayden are up to."

"I think they're watching television," Isabel said over her shoulder.

Jamie grasped her wine glass and slipped from the room, wandering through the spacious interior that sported the wear and tear of a large Christmas celebration. Though not her home, she felt safe and welcome within these walls. Without her family's support, she was not sure she would have made it through the last months with her sanity still intact.

With Clay calling her nightly and begging her to come home when she first moved out, Jamie had been alone and scared. The fear that she was making a huge mistake and running when she needed to stay had haunted her every night in that small hotel room a few blocks off the strip. She had almost given in and gone back to him three weeks later when Clay showed up at her hotel room high on ecstasy. She had thought that she could nurture him back to her, but then she watched him come down and sink into a depression she never would have imagined possible. The anxiety that gripped him shortly afterwards had him sobbing and threatening her until she finally broke down and called Ian out of fear. All four of her brothers arrived by morning. So even though she felt as though she had lost much, she still had the loyalty and love of her family. For that she felt supremely blessed.

She found Hayden with her two nephews, David and Kyle, hanging out in the media room. At ten, Ford and Grady's sons thought that Hayden was the best uncle, though Ian's police officer status came in a close second. The boys were often trailing after her fun-loving brother, and he was corrupting them every chance he got. Tonight it was with true crime shows.

"I don't think Torie or Isabel would approve of you showing them these modern day murders," Jamie said as she plopped down on the recliner next to Grady's son, Kyle. Reaching out to tousle his hair, she made a stern face at her brother.

"But this is about the girl who was killed in the Valley, Jamie," David said excitedly.

Jamie went still. "What?"

"Yeah, right when you moved away. Some girl went out partying and was killed when she got home. They did a documentary on the case. Something like, 'war hero gone nuts'."

Jamie straightened in her chair, the cold grip of fear like a vice around her heart. She began to rise to leave the room, but suddenly the girl's face was filling the screen. She froze. Marissa had been right. It was the girl who had made the scene that night. Guilt joined shame and embarrassment, and she sank back into her seat weakly.

Was there anything she could have done to prevent that murder? She was, after all, one of the last people to see the girl alive. She took a deep and shaky breath as the photo faded and the ads began.

"Jamie, what's wrong?"

Hearing the concern in Kyle's voice, Hayden sat forward and closed the legs of his recliner with a snap. "Hey Jame, are you okay? You're white as a ghost."

Jamie tried to smile. "Of course I'm fine."

He frowned in answer. "What happened? Did Ford snap at you again?"

"Oh gosh, no. I was in the kitchen with Isabel."

"Then what's going on?"

She decided that she must have looked bad, because the concern on Hayden's face did not waver. "I wasn't expecting to see this on the television."

"This? You mean the girl who died?" He shook his head in confusion.

"Yes."

"But you weren't here when it happened."

"Actually I was... I was there that night," she said softly.

She watched as the atmosphere in the room changed. In a reaction so similar to hers, Hayden's face drained of color while her nephews stared in shocked silence. Like twin gaping fish, their mouths fell open as their ten-year-old imaginations ran wild. Suddenly she felt very exposed.

Hayden reached out and tugged on David's arm. "Scoot over to my seat, Squirt. I want to sit next to Jamie."

"But I want to hear this," he complained.

Hayden gave him a threatening stare, and David sighed dramatically. However, he did come to his feet and they swapped spots.

"Tell me," Hayden ordered.

"There's nothing really to tell. I saw the girl while I was out with Marissa and Rae. She almost puked all over me, but this guy pulled me out of the way."

“Why haven’t you ever said anything?”

“Clay and I left the next day, and I didn’t hear about the murder until after he was arrested. I didn’t follow the trial or anything; I was too spooked.” She did not add that she was embarrassed and frightened that she had allowed the man to follow her home that night.

Hayden’s eyes were still wide. “Damn, Jamie. That’s just crazy.”

“Quiet! It’s coming back on.”

Jamie’s head swung in the direction of the screen. Ford had installed a complete home theater room, complete with viewing chairs and projection screen. The surround sound system filled the room with the introduction, and the narrator’s voice had replaced those of cheerful women selling mop heads. Jamie and Hayden turned to watch, and when *his* face appeared it took almost the entire back wall of the room. Jamie’s breathing ceased at the sight of the man who had intrigued and then terrified her for the last three years. There were the deceptively friendly honey eyes and the small, straight nose that led to his strong jaw. It truly was a shame, for he was good looking even in a mug shot. She remembered how those eyes had danced that night, but they were not dancing in the picture at all.

“Andrew,” Jamie whispered.

Without warning the name suddenly popped into her head. Despite the passage of time, she remembered their brief interaction as though it was yesterday. He had been so charming, friendly and gentlemanly to her. That he had turned off that night to go murder another woman seemed so implausible and surrealistic. Things like that just did not happen to everyday people... or so she thought. To her surprise, she decided she wanted to hear more, to learn about the man who had fooled her.

“Andrew? Andrew Sheehan. That’s the guy’s name that did it,” Hayden said.

“I just can’t believe it.”

Both boys sent an irritated hush their way this time, so Hayden reached out and patted her knee. “Let’s talk about it after.”

She sat back and watched, sipping first but then gulping her wine when Hayden left the room during an ad and returned moments later with a new bottle and a second glass. Together the four of them learned about the wild party-girl, who was actually the daughter and sister of a nice family that had settled in Scottsdale back in the early 70s. Kit had grown up in the city and attended NAU, returning home again after graduation. Her blonde friend Molly was interviewed.

Jamie remembered her and the man she had hooked up with that night. They had disappeared before Kit had been escorted out. Who had been the man? She had never seen his face full on, but she remembered how intently he had been focused on Molly.

The answer was not quite forthcoming. They segued into the events of the night, all supposition and put together through what evidence they could find since the man convicted of the crime maintained his innocence from the start. Investigators presumed that after Kit was escorted out, she made her way home and apparently had gone to bed. Bouncers at the bar testified that she was seen to have left with the man accused of murdering her. They had found him three days later via the card he had used to pay his bill, and then those very same bouncers picked him out of a lineup and confirmed his appearance on their closed-circuit cameras.

Jamie stiffened. That was not right. Sure they had seen him, but he had left with her.

To her surprise and dismay, the inconsistencies grew throughout the story. Despite the welcoming comfort of the plush leather recliner, Jamie sat forward and watched the program intently, occasionally shaking her head with disbelief. This was just not right. Kit was reported to have been murdered between two and three in the morning. If Kit resided in Gilbert, how could Andrew have stopped following her at two and then driven over twenty miles to Kit's, broken into her home, and attacked and killed her in less than an hour? The killer had removed all the bedding following the attack, which was never found, so there was no DNA evidence at the scene. However, they had found traces of DNA on Andrew's shoes from that night. Of course, he had shielded her when Kit threw up. Jamie specifically remembered him staring down at his clothing that night with a mixture of disgust and resignation. It was feasible that the DNA they had found was remaining splatter.

Everything was all wrong. How could she have missed this for so long?

The next segment focused on Andrew's side of the story – his defense. Suddenly, his lawyer appeared on screen. Feeling a growing sense of panic, Jamie watched in horror as she heard about the missing witness who could verify Andrew's alibi. They had reported her appearance, advised the investigators of her presence, and told of Andrew following her car home. They even had a general description of her car. Apparently since she had settled her bill with cash, they

were unable to confirm her identity, and she was chalked up as a figment of desperation.

However, Andrew still had more evidence on his behalf. He turned in a time stamped receipt from Denny's restaurant for three in the morning. With her calculations, she concluded that it would have been timed perfectly for his right turn when he left her. The far East Mesa restaurant would have taken him less than 10 minutes to reach, and then with time to be served and eat 3 am would have matched up perfectly.

This dramatic piece of evidence had not been presented due to the eyewitness testimony that placed him leaving with a dark-haired girl with a black jacket right around the time Kit was escorted out. Jamie had worn a black jacket out that night and had put it on right before they left. The closed circuit cameras could not distinguish between her blue top and Kit's red one when both of them had worn black out the door. She began to feel sick to her stomach, and she placed her glass of wine down in the cup holder on the recliner with a trembling hand.

His trial had lasted eight days. The guilty verdict was returned in just an hour and a half, sending a man who could very well have been innocent off to life in prison. Aware that she was breathing irregularly and on the verge of hyperventilating, she ignored her queasy stomach, lifted her wine glass to her lips and downed it in a single gulp. Hayden watched her in surprise. When she lowered the glass, her eyes were wide.

"This is all wrong," she whispered. "I don't think he did this."

"What? He was convicted. He's in jail."

"He couldn't have done this, don't you see?"

Hayden shook his head.

She was shaking and felt cold down to her bones. Hayden watched her with concern and curiosity, obviously wondering what on earth could have upset her so.

She shook her head emphatically. "He just couldn't have done it. I know this..."

"How?" Hayden asked impatiently. "What are you saying?"

"I know this because he left with me."

A fire smoldered in the outdoor fireplace. The soft red glow radiated heat against Jamie's legs as she sat slowly rocking in the cushioned patio rocker. Hayden sat beside her, nursing a beer and sending an occasional worried glance her way. He had disappeared several minutes prior and returned with a blanket, which he draped

over her shoulders. But she barely noticed. Her mind was still spinning with the story she had viewed. A mixture of emotions tormented her: guilt, panic, fear, regret and most of all, sorrow. If she was right, this man had been convicted of a heinous crime that he did not commit. Either that or she had been spared from being the victim of a seriously sick individual.

She just needed to figure out which was right.

“Grady and Torie just left with their boys, Ian took off to meet Kat, and Ford and Isabel are watching a movie with Ana and David. That leaves just us. So start from the beginning.”

“First promise me you’re not going to run and tell the others about what I tell you tonight... at least not until I have time to think about all this.”

Hayden did not look very pleased but nodded his assent reluctantly. In fact, he looked very worried and seemed as tormented as she felt, which explained his hesitation to not involve the others. Whenever the family had run into problems, they always worked together to find a solution. With the balance of differing personalities and points of view, they always managed to come up with reasonable and effective ideas. That was, when they worked together. But Jamie was not ready for that yet. She needed to sort things out on her own before unnecessarily drawing everyone else into her current problem.

She wiggled her toes where they were growing warm from the heat of the fireplace and silently pondered for a bit longer while Hayden patiently waited for her to speak. Taking a deep breath, she decided that she needed to just start from the beginning and tell everything, giving Hayden the opportunity to decide if she was right or not.

“The night before Clay and I left for Vegas, Marissa and Rae took me out. We had dinner and then went dancing. We ended up at the bar because it was across the street from their condo. Do you remember where I lived before I moved in with Clay?”

“Of course,” Hayden said.

“We had a couple of drinks. I didn’t even finish one beer because I was driving home to Clay’s that night instead of staying with them. I was just getting ready to leave when I noticed the girl, Kit. She was pretty drunk and getting loud, so I told Marissa I was going.”

Hayden nodded encouragingly.

“Our waiter had pretty much disappeared, so I went up to the bar. Kit bumped into me then. She was so drunk that she took a spill at my feet.”

Hayden's brows rose in surprise. "They didn't kick her out?"

Jamie shook her head. "Not then... the bartender kid did shut her off, though. He knew her name, so I assumed she was a regular there. That's pretty weird since she lived all the way in Gilbert. It's a long drive for a heavy drinker."

"Her Gilbert address was actually just down the road. She was on the Mesa line in some complex off Val Vista Road."

"How do you know that?"

He waved a hand in dismissal. "I remembered the case."

"Well, it still would have been a twenty-five minute or so ride from Clay's."

"And that matters?"

"It could, yes."

Her cryptic answer seemed to catch Hayden off guard again. She continued her story before he interrupted. "While I was waiting to pay my bill, a man came up and we began to talk. I'm pretty sure it was the same Andrew that's now in jail."

"Scary."

"It gets creepier, trust me."

She took another sip of wine and laid her head back against the soft cushion of the rocker. "He was nice. Polite. He tried to hit on me, but I told him about Clay. He was okay with it. While we were talking, Kit was arguing with the waiter about another round. That's when she puked."

"Gross."

Jamie smiled thinly. "It was. The guy, Andrew, grabbed me and pulled me out of the way. I thanked him, and Kit was escorted out. That's the last time I saw her."

"Wow. That's just crazy."

The patio fell silent as Jamie paused. All she could hear was the sound of the pool equipment making its cycle. Over and over again she replayed the events of the night in her head. While these thoughts had come upon her many times in the past, fear had always forced her to deny them. Tonight, she struggled with the idea that he had not committed the crime. How could he have?

After another minute, Hayden spoke. "So how are you involved in all this?"

Shaking her head, Jamie glanced at her brother. "I don't know. Maybe it's nothing. It was a long time ago."

"Tell me the rest."

"Rae and Marissa had found our waiter, so he and I went back to

the table and paid there. The girls left since they were just walking across the street. The guy walked me out. Hayden, it was me in the black jacket. I still have it - it's hanging in the closet in my room."

"Wait. You said he walked *you* out?"

"Yes. He walked me to my car." She bit her lip. "And he followed me almost all the way to Clay's."

"You let him follow you home?"

The disbelief in his voice was enough to cause Jamie's cheeks to flush with color. "He wanted to make sure I made it safely."

"You allowed a murderer to follow you home?"

The question was spoken with so much disbelief and anger that Jamie fell silent as she considered her answer. Hayden was staring at her, his eyes round with shock.

"He didn't follow me all the way home. He turned off before Clay's development. Besides, Clay was there if I ran into trouble."

"Oh... your ex-husband would've been so helpful."

"Perhaps he would've at that point in our relationship," she snapped. Hayden snorted in disgust, so Jamie sent him a fierce frown. "This has nothing to do with Clay, so don't change the subject."

"But you could've been hurt by a man that's really sick in the head."

"That's just it," she protested. "If he was with me, how did he kill that woman?"

Silence fell as Hayden realized the extent of her words. His voice was low when he responded. "I can't believe this."

Hayden placed his hands over his face and sat forward in his chair. The firelight danced in his hair, making some strands appear red. It almost matched the angry color that suffused his face. "This is bad, Jamie. This is just unbelievable."

Jamie nodded. "I don't know what to do. I've thought about it all evening, and I can't believe this guy did it. He never could have followed me and gotten back to kill her in the timeframe they have."

"He had a receipt, right?"

"Which makes perfect sense. I got home at two. He could've turned off and gone east to that Denny's. That would've fit the timeframe."

"How do you know what time you got home?"

She remembered. That was one thing she was absolutely certain about. When she had pulled in, her car read two in the morning, and when she had climbed into bed with Clay, he had rolled over and made a comment about how tired she would be when they left. "Clay

woke up when I got home. He laughed at me for getting home so late.”

“Ok, so let me get this straight.” He paused for a moment to think. Frown lines appeared on his forehead, making him appear every bit of his 31 years. Gone was his normal nonchalant expression; in its place was a man feeling weighed down by the pressure of a momentous decision. “You say that you’re the missing alibi, the one that walked out the door with that guy?”

She nodded.

“And you were wearing a black jacket? Both of you had dark hair, almost the same length at the time?”

“Yes, I suppose.”

“Are you sure that it’s the same man, Jamie? Can you say that honestly, even after all this time?”

She thought for a moment. After all, this was the very same conflict she had felt. But that scar and those unique, pale eyes. She remembered the scar when he smiled. It had to be the same man. “Unless he has a twin brother with matching eyes and a scar that reaches his temple, yes.”

“Shit, Jamie, what have you gotten yourself into now?” Hayden asked sourly.

Jamie sent him an exasperated look. “I didn’t ask for this.”

“What do we do?” Hayden shook his head. “What do we do now?”

“I don’t know.”

“Well, that’s what we need to decide and soon. If you keep your mouth shut about this, some innocent guy’s rotting away in prison and the real murderer is free somewhere... You need to tell.”

“But what if I’m wrong?”

“If you’re wrong, then at least you came forward and let them check out your story. I think you need to say something.”

Jamie grimaced. “I’m not sure I want to get involved.”

“Well, you never should’ve let some strange guy follow you home. Since when do you pick up random strangers?”

Jamie glared at her brother. “How many times have you hooked up after a night out, Mr. Commitment-phobe?” Hayden had the grace to look a little embarrassed, so Jamie softened. “It’s a serious thing. What if he did do it? What if he turned off and hurried back to Gilbert? If I come forward and give him an alibi, I could be letting a murderer out of prison.”

“All right. We should run this by Ian and Grady first. See what they think.”

“Grady’s a malpractice lawyer, not a defense attorney.”

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“He still may know someone. Ian has to know about this.”

Jamie shuddered. Ian would be even more upset with Jamie than Hayden appeared to be. His wrath could only be comparable to Ford’s.

“I need to think about this. Just let me think about it for a day or two, okay?”

Hayden grimaced. “Two days max, Jame, and I’m calling a family meeting.”

She nodded. “Fine.”

Chapter 3

Winter 2009

For two days she pondered, ignoring all of Hayden's calls and shutting off her mobile phone as soon as she got home from work in case one of her brothers called her while she was thinking. She considered keeping her mouth shut and letting Andrew Sheehan work his own defense, but then she thought about the evils of the world and how humanity tended to turn a blind eye on injustice to better serve their own interests. Those ideas made her feel ill, sending her to start her pondering over again.

By the afternoon of her second day, she pushed aside her stubborn streak and finally conceded that she did need the input of her brothers and that she could not figure everything out on her own. She was too frightened of making the wrong decision. To do so could ruin lives. With that thought in mind, she sent Hayden a text message during her lunch at the office and asked him to set up his family meeting.

Twenty minutes later, she received the response: "After dinner. Ford's office."

She shivered with dread.

The rest of the afternoon was spent in a haze of worry. Her receptionist, Melissa, noticed her distraction and offered to reschedule her remaining appointments, but Jamie managed to slog through with only a minimum of stumbling. She even managed to set up three accounts that afternoon – a good thing for all of them. Still, she felt no triumph in her productive day. Instead she continued to worry. She was

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fifteen minutes early to the family meeting, sneaking inside Ford's office so she could compose herself alone.

The silence did not last long. One by one her brothers filed into the room, taking up various positions in the small room with the large mahogany desk that suddenly reminded Jamie of a judge's bench. Ian arrived last in his uniform, having made the drive over to Ford's straight after work. Though she was never afraid of her closest sibling, this evening he looked every inch the intimidating cop. The way he leaned over her with an angry scowl, gripping the arms of the chair she sat in with white knuckles once she had completed her story only confirmed her thoughts.

"You did what?"

Though he was not shouting, Ian's tightly controlled anger was as disheartening as Ford's. A quick glance at her eldest brother told her that he was just waiting for his turn.

"I can't believe you were so careless," Ford said firmly.

"You should've known better," Ian snapped.

Hayden pushed away from the wall he was leaning against and came to stand beside Ford. Jamie was gripped with the same fear Clay must have felt when all four tall, intimidating brothers hovered with scowls on their faces. Though she knew Hayden was on her side, he remained obstinately silent. That defection stirred her stubborn streak again.

She met their glares with her chin held high. "Technically, this is my problem to solve, not yours, and if none of you can see beyond the reality that I once allowed a stranger to follow me partway home then I'll just leave and figure it out on my own."

"She's got a point." Luckily, Grady jumped in to save her. "What happened isn't the issue. What matters now is what we do with the information she's giving us."

"That's obvious. We do nothing," Ford said abruptly.

"What do you mean - nothing? We can't keep quiet about this. This is serious," Hayden protested.

"She could be wrong," he replied.

Ian nodded in agreement. "It could be a different guy altogether. Look, it was what... almost four years ago? She's talking about a guy she met once, in the dark."

"You make me sound like an idiot," she growled.

"That night you were," Ian shot back.

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“Give me a break.”

Hayden spoke up this time, his voice calm. “Jamie remembered his name even before the program announced it. That has to count for something.”

Ian threw himself into the worn leather chair across from Ford’s desk. “I want the whole story, beginning to end again,” he said.

All brothers nodded in agreement. Feeling as though their initial disappointment with her had passed slightly, she sighed and recounted the events of the night a second time. Hayden nodded occasionally as if to confirm what she had previously told him, and Grady’s brows drew together in deep thought.

Ford and Ian just stared at her intently. But at least they were quiet.

The room was silent when she finished. All four seemed lost in thought. Finally Ian laid his head back against the cushion of his chair. He spoke into the ceiling. “Do you know how hard it is to reopen a closed case? I’m not a detective, but I can tell you that it’s not pleasant. Just ask Chuck.”

“All the more reason for her to put this all behind her,” Ford snapped.

“I disagree,” Hayden said.

“Her life’s a mess already. After Mom and Dad died, she decided that she’s going to mother every creep she can find. She’s already got a drug addicted ex-husband. Don’t add getting involved with a murderer to her list,” Ford insisted.

Feeling as though she had been struck, Jamie shot from her seat and leaned over the desk to glare at Ford. “I may not have been as great a success as you, Ford, but I have made a pretty decent life for myself. I have a career and until this moment thought I had a supportive family that was helping me recover from a terrible divorce.”

The room fell silent as Ford and Jamie stared angrily at one another. Neither willing to back down, the two stubbornly held their tongues. Finally, Ford shook his head. “I was in the right place at the right time, Jamie. I made money due to a housing boom. You, on the other hand, were in the wrong place at the wrong time. Now it could potentially expose you to questionable situations and questionable people. I’m sorry, but I have your best interests at heart.”

She blinked in disbelief. “Best interests?”

“Her best interests would be to report what she saw and what happened to the proper authorities and let them decide what to do with

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the information,” Grady said firmly.

“And who would that be? Should she walk into the police station and find the detective that picked this guy up?” Ian asked.

“Or the prosecutor? That would be rich,” Ford said.

“How about the lawyer? I’ll take her to see him,” Hayden suggested. “Or how about Chuck? He’s a detective now.”

“I thought he was still healing?” Grady said. Their cousin had been in a motorcycle accident while on duty and had been confined to a wheelchair while his injuries healed.

“He’s back to work,” Ian said offhandedly. “He’s taken that detective position he wanted before, so he’s one we should consider talking to.”

Jamie sat back down in her seat and closed her eyes. As her brothers argued over what her next step was, she tried very hard to put Ford’s careless insult behind her. Though she knew that she was being overly sensitive, his words had cut her mostly because she knew deep down that he did have a very good point. She was a nurturer at heart, and she had tried to take care of Clay in the same manner she had cared for her ill parents before they died. That did not make her feel very good about herself and her life choices.

“Ford’s right,” she announced. Four dark heads turned back to her, and all four pairs of eyes shone curiously. “I’ve made a mess of everything. If I report this now, something terrible will probably happen. I should just keep my mouth shut and let the authorities come find me if they can.”

Before any of her brothers could respond, she pushed herself out of the chair and brushed between Hayden and Grady. She hurried from the room as fast as she could and closed the door behind her, biting back tears. It was a short walk to the front door, and she headed that way blindly. As much as she loved her brothers, this was not their concern and she should not have considered involving them.

But what was done was done, and now the problem would be convincing them of that.

Ford was at a site when he called her the next morning. It was almost as though he knew the exact moment she entered the office, for she had just set her purse in her lower desk drawer and closed it when the phone rang. Jamie could hear the sounds of a nail gun blasting like a gunshot in the background and felt a twinge of pity for her brother.

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Just a few short years ago he was busy with large jobs and so much work that he was constantly looking for new hires to help him. That busy time also found him confined pretty much to his office, where he was scheduling and arranging crews. The large builders in the valley had slowed tremendously when the housing market crashed in the area, and Ford had to let several crews go. Now he had so much extra time that he could personally visit his work sites, which were down to home remodels and foreclosure clean-ups.

And he had mocked her life?

As she muttered her tentative greeting, she wondered exactly what he wanted now. If it was a fight, she was ready. But to her surprise, Ford sounded a little nervous, perhaps even hesitant, when he spoke.

“Hey, Jame.”

“Hi.”

She could hear the sounds of the workers fade in intensity as he moved away from their work to a more private area. She heard a door close and then all was muffled. That had to mean that his reason for calling was serious. She sighed.

“I was up all night last night thinking about what you said.”

Jamie stiffened. She was in no mood to deal with a pity party. Unfortunately, she was sure her impatience was apparent in the chilling tone of her voice. “And?”

“Well, I wanted to talk to you about it. Are you busy for lunch today? I’m at a job out your way.”

Though she tried to come up with an excuse not to, Jamie knew that to delay would just be putting off the inevitable. Ford would only find her later. “Hold on,” she stalled. “I’ll check.”

Though her desk was always neat, she made a point of rattling some financial statements in a folder marked for one of her clients to make it appear as though she were busier at work than she was. It was not her usual sort of behavior; usually she was first one to stand up for her pride. However, Ford had hit a sensitive spot the night before, and she was still smarting.

After a moment of rustling papers, she pulled up her calendar and checked her schedule for the day. Melissa usually took her lunch at 11 am, so Jamie knew she would be there to hold down the fort if she left once her hour was up. That just left any outstanding appointments. To her dismay, she found nothing around lunch.

“I’m free after noon.”

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“Good. I’ll pick you up then. You can take an hour, right?”

“Of course.”

“I want someplace quiet where we can sit and speak like adults. Fair enough?”

“I suppose.”

“Good. I’ve got to get to work. I’ll see you in a little bit.”

She hung up her handset and sat back in the soft leather chair. It tipped back as she spun the chair around to view the window and the clear, sunny day beyond. As she expected, the parking lot beyond her window was empty. In the week between Christmas and the New Year, she hardly anticipated anyone visiting her office in the small strip mall containing only a dry cleaner, sub shop and three vacant offices. After all, it could be classified as the slowest week of the year for most businesses with the exception of retail. Why she and Melissa were even working escaped her understanding; they should have just closed up for the whole week. Chances were pretty good that no one in corporate would even have noticed.

As if on cue, she heard the front door to her small office open and Melissa called out her morning greeting. Jamie continued to rock as she returned the greeting, wondering exactly what Ford was going to say that struck him as so important.

The phone rang on her desk again. The number was not one she was familiar with, so she replaced her nervous anxiety with professional calm and answered. “Jamie Morton,” she said smoothly.

Ford and her worries would just have to wait. She had work to do, and it was important that she focus. Focus, Jamie, focus!

She managed to do just that, all the way until Melissa ran next door to order a sub for lunch. The vibrant twenty-year-old she hired on to help her around the office and work as secretary had proven a Godsend to her. Melissa had completed high school with a year old daughter and currently worked full-time to provide for her and her baby. She had started taking classes at a local community college three evenings a week in addition to working. Though Jamie had initially been skeptical about hiring the young, petite blonde who was definitely over-stressed for her age, her ambition to do well for her daughter had cinched the deal. Jamie had not regretted her decision once.

Always prompt, Melissa returned with her sandwich and worked on her homework for exactly one hour before calling out to Jamie that she

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was done. It was right at that moment that Ford came strolling in the door, and Jamie scowled at their punctuality. She still had two phone calls to return. The stock market had dropped again, and one of her highest maintenance clients was in a panic. Another client with a 529 college savings plan needed to make a withdrawal and could not get the website to work. So much for a quiet week between Christmas and New Year's, she thought peevishly.

When Jamie held up a hand to stall Ford, he nodded and busied himself at Melissa's desk. The pleased assistant colored under his attention, as she did for all four of her brothers. Admittedly, they were a handsome group of men, and Melissa's crushes changed whenever one stopped by. Jamie grinned as she reached for her handset knowing that Ford would be Melissa's next flavor of the week by the time she was done on the phone.

Granted some peace, she hurriedly returned her calls, luckily leaving a message for her high maintenance client and then walking her other one through the website in record time. She was done and had her handbag over her shoulder by ten past the hour. Ford nodded coolly as she came to her feet and then bestowed Melissa one of his friendliest smiles.

"It's good to see you again. Make sure you give Zoe a big hug from me."

Melissa beamed excitedly that he remembered her daughter's name. "Of course, Mr. Evans. Thank you very much."

"See you in an hour," Jamie said over her shoulder as she passed.

"Take your time," Melissa called back cheerfully.

While she wanted to shout back that this meeting was not going to be pleasant, Jamie glanced instead at Ford. He brushed past her and pushed the door open gallantly, even stepping aside to let her pass. Her suspicion increased. There was no doubt about it; he was definitely up to something. She only had a few minutes to figure out what exactly that could be.

Thankfully, Ford cut straight to the chase as soon as they climbed in his work truck. "I thought a lot about what I said to you last night and want to apologize. It came out all wrong, and I didn't mean it the way it sounded."

Taken completely by surprise, Jamie fumbled with her seatbelt. It slipped from her fingers and snapped back with a whishing sound that echoed throughout the now silent cab. Ford watched her reaction

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cautiously while Jamie licked her lips. Her suspicions had not eased despite his uncustomary apology.

“I don’t know what to say.”

“I understand that you’re angry. I don’t blame you.”

“So why are you apologizing?”

“It was the right thing to do,” he said shortly.

Inserting the key into the ignition, he turned his attention to driving. It gave Jamie time to ingest what he was saying, and one thought popped into her head causing her eyes to narrow.

“You spoke to Isabel,” she said in an accusing voice.

Easing the truck to the exit, Ford sent her a quick glance. She also noticed that his cheeks colored slightly. “Yes... She wasn’t very happy to hear all of our raised voices last night. But actually it was Ian who laid it on the thickest. He had some very valid points about everything.”

“Like what?”

“You have done pretty well for yourself, really. I know losing Mom and Dad so close together was harder on you than any of the rest of us, save maybe Ian. Even though you were in high school, you were still a kid. Having to watch them...” He paused, unable to speak the words aloud. “You were the one who really took care of them. First Dad; then Mom. Losing two parents to cancer in a space of three years could’ve turned you into quite a different person... But you’ve done well.”

Twisting in the soft bucket seat until she was facing Ford, Jamie stared at him in surprise. Hearing him say the words aloud, words none of her brothers had ever admitted in the past, was a huge deal to her. She could feel the emotion rising, even though Ford was not done.

“You went off to school, you got your degree, and you met a guy who most likely was a good catch initially. No one should blame you for his weaknesses; in fact, you should be commended for not falling into the same lifestyle. It’s pretty amazing that you didn’t. Instead you tried to help him overcome it for a year before you said enough was enough.”

“Wow,” Jamie said aloud. “I’m stunned.”

Easing off the gas at a red light, Ford glanced in her direction. “Just because I don’t always say it doesn’t mean I don’t think it. I’m very proud of what you’ve become. That’s why I wanted to straighten this out. I don’t want you to think I believe you’re a train wreck, Jamie. Nothing could be further from the truth.”

“Ian told you to say that?” Jamie sputtered.

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Apparently her reaction was not what Ford expected. He nearly missed the turn into the restaurant parking lot. “What? No!”

Finding a spot at the back of the lot between a red Toyota and black Mercedes, Ford squeezed in deftly and shut the truck down before turning his attention to her again. “No, I’m saying this.”

Jamie hid a smile behind her hand. “Where is all this coming from then? I’m confused.”

“What Ian did convince me of last night is that you would never have mentioned running into this guy if you weren’t convinced it was really him... I have to agree. You’ve more than proven that you’ve got a good head on your shoulders and aren’t some floozy that would come up with such an elaborate story unless you were absolutely convinced of the truth.”

“Of course I’m not!”

“I know that,” he said hastily before her temper could rise further. “After you left, Ian convinced all of us that you had a serious problem. While none of us really like the idea of you getting involved, that’s because we worry for our own selfish, overprotective reasons.”

“At least you admit it.”

He nodded. “Yeah, well don’t think I’m going to stop either. I’m the closest thing you’ve had to a dad for the last fourteen years.”

She had to agree. It was Ford that had stepped up when her parents had died, moving with Isabel back to the States from Isabel’s home country of Italy and beginning his business, which thankfully had boomed soon after. Ian was graduating high school, Hayden was already in college, and Grady was in law school at the time. With five kids born within eight years, it had been left to Ford as the eldest to come home and make sure the remaining siblings completed their education and dealt with the trauma of losing both parents in a healthy manner.

“At any rate,” he continued. “I called Chuck this morning and talked to the others. Chuck thinks you need to speak up, and we all finally agreed that if you want to come forward we’ll help you in any way we can. So that’s why I’m here – to help you decide how you want to proceed.”

Instantly forgiving her brother, she leaned across the center console and threw her arms around his neck. “Thank you for understanding.”

He chuckled and awkwardly patted her back. “We can’t let you do this alone, kiddo.”

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“I’m scared; I don’t know what to do.”

“Well, that’s what we’re going to talk about at lunch. We’ve got to decide how you should go about this. Hopefully you’ll do the right thing, and hopefully three years in prison hasn’t ruined this guy. Come on, I’m starving.”

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