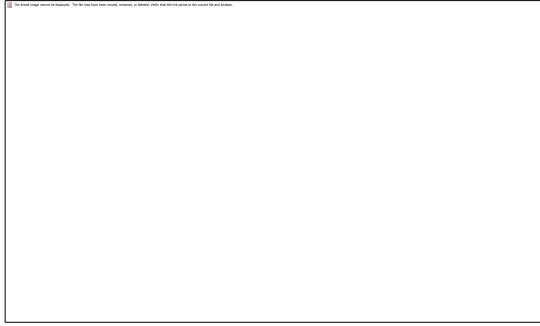


~ At First Sight ~

by Colleen



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No copy write infringement was intended in the use of the song "I Need You"

Thanks, to my beta readers Barbara and Jennis.

All positive comments are welcome at colleen30@webtv.net

Part 1

Chapter 1

The 5:58 AM sunrise peaked over the horizon with a glow that woke the Southern California day to a golden brilliance. The morning view was like any one of a hundred others...beautifully unique in a dozen different ways. But for the dreamer lying in the small bed, in the small apartment, in the large city of Los Angeles, it didn't matter. She wouldn't see it.

The alarm sounded its annoying buzz and long, slims fingers reached over with amazing accuracy to shut it off. Having already kicked off the covers sometime during the night, Jamie Sheridan slowly threw her feet over the side of the bed and tossed back her mane of black hair. She felt the sun on her back as it streamed through the window and heard the quiet hum of the air

conditioner in the next room. For Jamie, the last several hundred mornings played out exactly the same as the one before. One strong cup of coffee, sugar no cream, a forty-five minute workout, a hot shower, another cup of coffee and a light breakfast later and she was ready for a day of work. Holding down two jobs is hard enough for most people, but Jamie was driven by a selfish desire. Selfish in a way that wouldn't hurt anyone else, this time at least, just the fulfillment of a childhood dream, a dream that had disappeared into the dark for awhile, but was now back with a vengeance, thanks to some very meaningful words in a very special book.

Jamie put her dishes into the sink and took her large mug into the living room to finish her coffee. She flipped on the television, but even with over 150 channels, the Saturday morning lineup provided very little that interested her. Not much on television ever interested her though, no matter what day or time. Although she had been known tune in to a program or two on the Discovery Channel or The Animal Planet Network. The reporter on CNN was just starting a story on the latest basketball game. Living in LA and having a team in the finals, it was hard to get away from. She didn't care one way or the other, but after hearing that the Lakers lost to the Pacers, the night before, she hit the off button. Carefully maneuvering around the coffee table, Jamie turned on the radio and swallowed the last of her coffee. A song was nearing its end and she shuddered involuntarily at the last words, not out of repulsion or excitement, but with a sense of, what she could only describe as, familiarity. Something about the song made her think of the dream she had the night before. The dream she felt she had experienced many times, but could never remember. The words and the melody soon faded away, just like the dream upon waking. Jamie shook off her melancholy and moved toward the next room. The telephone rang just as she was entering the kitchen. She took four, careful steps back and picked up the phone from the end table. "Hello."

"Hi Jamie. Are you ready?" the caller asked.

"Yeah Julie, I'll be out front in fifteen."

Julie Maxwell was one of Jamie's co-workers at GB Scrolls Publishing. The thirty something, single mother had to drive right past Jamie's on her way to the babysitters and she had been giving Jamie a ride to work for the last few months. Julie was a friend, but they were not close by any means, only speaking in the car and in passing at work.

GB Scrolls was a big company and the department Jamie worked in had at least twenty people. But Jamie worked directly with only four others. Besides Julie, there was Mark Wills. He was a nice young man just out of college and being his first job he tended to over compensate at everything he did, much to the aggravation of the boss. Jamie thought the over achiever was kind of sweet though. As for the boss, no one liked her. To say she was a cold bitch was an insult to the insult. Luckily, she spent at least six hours a day in her cushy office, only calling on the phone to bark out orders. Rounding out the quintet was Bridgett Nelson. The red head had only been at the company for six months, having decided to return to part time work after the birth of her last child, three years earlier. She was very pleasant and everyone liked her, even if she was a bit assertive. Of all the people Jamie knew, Bridgett was the one she spent the most time with, often having lunch together at a local café.

Bridgett often talked about her near perfect life with her husband and two children and a big house in the Hollywood hills. She was never bragging, just describing facts about her life. But Jamie couldn't relate to Bridgett's life at all. She always listened with interest and never begrudged her friend her happiness. But there was a small part of Jamie that envied what Bridgett had. Not the money or the house, but the family... something she knew she'd never have. A tragic and bloody past had proved to Jamie that she hadn't learned the art of relating to people on a personal level. As much as she wanted to, she knew she could never escape that inadequacy and learn to love.

Jamie stepped out of the elevator and slowly walked through the small lobby of her building. *The cleaning service must have been in last night*, Jamie thought to herself when she smelled the freshly shampooed carpet. *I'm certainly glad they put down the rug over the old tile*, she thought as she reached for the door handle. *My butt probably would have been introduced to the floor half a dozen times in the last few weeks*. That embarrassing, but hilarious mental picture brought a small smile to her face, as she walked outside and across the small cement landing. She paused at the top of the stairs. Taking her cane in her left hand and holding onto the railing with her right, Jamie, cautiously, took one step at a time.

The sound of an electric hedge trimmer came around the side of the building; Mr. Davis had started his Saturday landscaping. The man and his wife had moved into the building after an early retirement and he had volunteered to take care of the grounds, since gardening had always been a passionate hobby of his. Every week he saw to it that all the women in the building had fresh flowers for their dinner table. Jamie loved the fragrance that greeted her as she sat down to her evening meal, that more often than not, consisted of take out from the array of international restaurants within a two-mile radius.

"Careful of that last step, Jamie," the elderly man warned, as he pulled a rag from his pocket and wiped his neck. "There's a crack in it and it's loose. Someone's supposed to come and fix it this afternoon."

She eased herself over it. "Thanks for the warning, Mr. Davis."

The grayed haired gentleman took her arm and helped her to the sidewalk.

"How's your wife?" asked Jamie, as she settled herself onto the wooden bench.

"She went to visit her sister for the weekend," he answered with just a hint of sadness.

Jamie flashed him a teasing smile. "You mean she took the chance of leaving you alone with a single woman like me, living just down the hall."

He lowered his face in embarrassment at the flattery. "Please Jamie, I won't be able to get this old head through the door," he chuckled. "I don't know why a lovely young lady like you doesn't have'em lined up and waiting."

That was one conversation she didn't want to get into, so she sent him on a detour. "Mr. Davis I need a special flower arrangement next weekend. Do you think...?"

"I know just the right thing," he jumped in, excitedly. "My roses out back will be in full bloom by then. I'll make you a great bouquet." She smiled at the kind man. "I'd better get back to work," he said. "I hear my hedges calling me. You have a good day Jamie and don't work too hard."

"Look who's talking. Don't you stay out in this sun too long."

"I won't." He patted her hand and headed back to his gardening. "You know I was thinking," he said, turning back to her. "I should fix that loose carpet inside your door. Emma told me about it the other day. I certainly don't want you to trip over it."

The concern in his voice really touched Jamie's heart. It was the first time, in a long time that someone cared about her for who she was and not what she could give them. "Mr. Davis, I really appreciate it, but everything's okay. I get around just fine. I'll have maintenance take care of it. You don't need to be working that hard."

"All right, but if there's anything you need, you promise to call me. And forgive an old man for being persistent, it's just that you remind me of my granddaughter and I miss her."

Jamie smiled again at the gentlemen and suddenly realized that he and several others in the building, felt like the grandparents she never had. "I understand Mr. Davis and I will, I promise." When she heard the trimmer start up again, she shook her head and gave a sigh coupled with a fond grin. Jamie had purposely moved into a building where two thirds of the occupants were senior citizens. It was quiet and calming after the previous dozen or so hideous years of her life. Another definite plus was the delicious, home cooked meals they brought her from time to time.

Jamie lifted her face to the sky and let the mid-morning sun warm the tan that was already there. She tried to shut off all her thoughts and problems for the few minutes she had before her ride arrived. A myriad of neighborhood regulars passed by on the sidewalk in front of her. A rollerblader, with a loose wheel, zoomed by. A jogger stepped on a twig, which snapped loudly, but he was unfazed by it and ran on. Then came the lady down the street, walking her three dogs, one of whom stopped to sniff at Jamie's feet. Thank goodness that's all he did. But a yank on his harness soon had him back in line with his two canine companions. The California life bustled all around her, but Jamie always felt just outside of everything, always on the edge of having the life she now wanted. The life that just a few short years before, she had tried so hard to throw away. A car horn soon roused Jamie from her thoughts.

"Is everything okay?" asked the woman, leaning out the car window.

"Yeah Julie, I was just..."

"Daydreaming?"

Jamie considered for a moment. *Is that what I was doing?* "Yeah, I guess so."

When two o'clock rolled around, Julie was ready to jump out the door. She only worked on a Saturday morning, because the boss had asked. Jamie, on the other hand, would have kept right on working; there was nothing to occupy the rest of her day. But, unless she wanted to take the bus home, not a pleasurable experience, or spend half the days pay on a taxi, she had to leave then.

After picking up her three-year-old from the babysitter, Julie pulled up in front of Jamie's building.

"I'll see you Monday morning Julie, thanks," Jamie said as she eased her way out of the little car.

"Oh, I almost forgot to tell you," said Julie. "I'm not going to work on Wednesday, Jared has a doctors appointment. Sorry."

"That's okay, I can find a way." Jamie waved toward the back seat. "By Jared. Bye Julie." Jamie took her cane in hand and headed to the stairs, mindful of the cracked first step, which still hadn't been fixed. Once inside, she heard the elevator open. "Hold that would you." The smell of perfume assaulted her nose before she was half way across the lobby. "How are you today, Mrs. Howard?" she asked as she stepped onto the elevator.

The plump, white haired woman set down her shopping bag and shifted the squirming, brown terrier to her other arm. "I'm just fine dear and you?"

Jamie bobbed her head in kind a yes, kind of a no way. "Not to bad."

"I'm glad I ran into you Jamie," said the elderly woman. "My grandson is coming to see me next week."

Jamie's jaw tensed, knowing what was coming next.

"It's been almost two years since I've seen my little Jimmie. I know he hates it when I call him that, but he'll always be little to me."

Jamie just stood there smiling and listening.

By the time they reached the sixth floor, Mrs. Howard had slyly tried to fix Jamie up with her grandson, adding the fact that Jimmie was six years younger than Jamie, wouldn't bother him at all.

The double doors slid open and they stepped out into the hall. Jamie didn't want to insult her, so she began tactfully. "You know Mrs. Howard, I really don't feel up to dating right now. I'm sure he's really nice, I mean he is your grandson, but now is just not a good time."

The woman smiled. "Of course dear, I understand. But I really do hate to see you so lonely."

Jamie removed the wrinkled hand from her cheek and squeezed it affectionately. "I'll be fine, but thank you for caring."

"Always my dear, always."

Mrs. Howard shuffled down the corridor and Jamie heard the small dog yipe once and his owner promise him two doggie treats for being so good. She felt sorry for the woman, who lived alone, her husband having passed on, years earlier. *That'll probably be me someday*, Jamie thought sadly. *But I won't even have the memories of a fulfilled life to keep me company and I doubt even a dog would want to be around me that much.*

After fishing her keys out of the pocket of her jeans, Jamie went into her lonely apartment. The sound of the closing door and her heavy sigh were the only noise in the small room. But that was soon remedied when she flipped on the radio. One luxury Jamie had indulged in was an extensive sound system. The high tech equipment filled the room with an incredible resonance, although she kept it low enough, as not to disturb the building's other occupants. There were extensions in the bedroom and the smaller second bedroom, which now served as her workout room. Her musical tastes ran the range from classical to contemporary with stray 70's and 80's hits and movie soundtracks thrown in. The 70's songs always reminded her of her early childhood, the good part anyway.

She was born in a small city in Missouri, where her father worked in a factory. Her mother practiced her craft as a seamstress in a local tailor shop. She loved her parents very much and she felt loved, at least most of the time. They provided Jamie with all the necessities of life and now and then, some small extras that they could afford on their modest income. As many little girls do, she would sometimes daydream about what her life would be like when she grew up. One thing she knew for certain, she would have a horse of her very own. That was her one great wish for five of her first nine birthdays and Christmas's. Her parents could never make that wish come true, but her visions always included the most beautiful and loyal horse known to man.

Another of Jamie's wishes was that her twin sister would have lived. She always wondered what kind of fun they could have had, what kind of trouble they could have gotten into. Jamie used to talk to her late at night, asking for her help to solve the typical childhood problems and later on, the not so easy ones. She may not have heard her sister's voice, but still there were times when she could have sworn that she was answered.

Jamie raided the refrigerator, but all she came up with was a cold root beer. Just as she hit the couch, the phone rang. "Hello."

"Hey kid what's up?"

"Hi Bridgett. Nothing's up, I just got home and..."

"And you're bored," said Bridgett, before Jamie could finish the sentence.

"I wouldn't say I'm bored."

"Okay, so you're tiresome, listless, suffering from the doldrums."

Jamie chuckled. "What did you do, swallow a thesaurus?"

"I'm just well read," retorted the caller. "Let me guess what you're going to do tonight. It is your night off, right?"

"Yes," Jamie answered. There was a pause from Bridgett. "Come on smarty, what do you think?"

"Well you're probably going to order a pizza and spend the rest of the night reading."

Silence filled both ends of the line for several seconds, until Jamie heard a laugh.

"So did I hit the nail on the head, pick the winning number, answer the..."

"Okay, okay so what if that's what I'm gonna do. I like pizza and I like to read."

"That's fine, but as you say, that's all you do, work and stay home. But tonight we are going to change that," said Bridgett.

"Oh?"

"Damn right. I'm having a backyard barbecue this afternoon and you're coming over."

Jamie shook her head. "Bridgett you know..."

"I know, you can't thank me enough for the invitation. I'll be by to pick you up in 45 minutes. Bye"

Jamie opened her mouth to say something, but before she could get the first word out, she heard a click on the other end.

As Bridgett's car traveled back to her home in the hills, the two way conversation inside meandered from work to tales of traffic mishaps to Bridgett's family, the latter of which was about to play a big part in Jamie's life.

"I hope you're hungry," said Bridgett, as she turned a corner, "...because Brad bought enough food for the Dallas Cowboys. At least that's the way he put it. In case I've never mentioned it before, Brad relates everything in sports terms."

Jamie laughed. "So, I suppose you'll be having pigskins in a blanket, home plate apple pie."

Bridgett laughed. "Oh you and Brad are going to get along great. Just try and remember he's taken."

Jamie raised a dark brow. "Trust me, you have nothing to worry about. Just how many people are going to be at your party anyway?"

"Don't worry, I know you don't like crowds," said the red head. "There will only be eight others besides my family. Which reminds me, there's someone I'm anxious for you to meet."

A sigh was heard from the passenger side of the fast moving vehicle. "Please don't tell me you're trying to fix me up with a friend of your husbands, or a cousin..."

The driver shook her head adamantly. "No, no I don't play matchmaker, that's much to dangerous. I've lost more than one friend that way."

"That's good to hear, because you are one of the few friends I've got."

"Actually I'm hoping that will change," Bridgett mused, happily. "The person I want you to meet is my sister. She lives alone and she also doesn't have many friends and I'm really busy and... anyway I think you'll really like her. Like you, she loves to read and she loves movies. If you ever need a good trivia partner she's the one to have."

Jamie listened to the love and admiration in Bridgett's words. "It sounds like you two are really close." A slight touch of envy lingered in her voice.

"Yeah, we only had each other growing up, besides our parents I mean. I'm very proud of my little sister. I got into more then a few fights when other kids bothered her and I still would today." Bridgett finished just as she pulled into the long drive behind three other cars. "Looks like everyone's here. Let's go."

Jamie carefully slid her six-foot frame out of the mini van and followed closely behind the hostess, over the stone walkway that led around the side of the huge, two-story house. A part of Jamie still wished she were back in her apartment with a good book and solitude. Socializing was low on her list of skills. "Bridgett, I don't want to take you away from your party, but I really can't stay long."

The hostess spun around. "Hey you just got here and you want to leave already?"

"No, I just wanted you to know, since you insisted, practically demanded I come."

"Well, if you would just allow yourself to, I know you would have a good time. But whenever your ready just say the word and I'll take you back home."

Jamie heard the unmistakable sounds of children playing, as they rounded the corner of the house and into the party area. Two long tables, covered with red checked tablecloths laden with food and two barbecue grills bordered the far side of the brick patio. Several round, white tables, small enough for intimate conversations, sat close to the house. Two larger ones rested farther away from the double glass doors that led into the busy kitchen. A tall, thin man in blue shorts, white T-shirt and a 'Kiss the Cook' apron stood guard over the glowing grills, searing the main

course to perfection. He waved briefly at his wife and then returned his attention to cooking. Most of the other adults were inside the house, catching the last few minutes of the baseball game. Four youngsters, ranging in age from three to ten, were running and tumbling over a patch of perfect green lawn and on their heels leapt a big golden dog.

"Hey you kids quiet down a little will ya," warned Bridgett.

Five heads popped up over the hedge. "Sorry Mom," said a young, sandy haired boy.

Bridgett shook her head. "Do you remember making that much noise when you were a kid?"

Jamie's face clouded over with a mixture of emotions. "No, not when I was a kid."

The hostess didn't want to overwhelm her guest with a dozen introductions, but there was one she just had to make. She scanned the faces looking for her target. "Come on Jamie," she said taking her by the arm, leading her to one of the smaller tables nestled in the corner of the yard. As they got closer, the woman sitting there suddenly captured Jamie's wandering attention.

"Excuse me for a minute," said Bridgett. "I'll be right back." She ran to break up a scuffle between her son and his cousin.

Jamie stood rooted to the spot. She knew her staring was rude, but the woman didn't seem to notice. But Jamie sure noticed her. *She's beautiful.* She then amended her thought. *She's the most beautiful woman I have ever seen.* She looked away and shook her head. *You can't even go there, so just stop it now,* Jamie told herself. Anxiousness washed over like she hadn't felt in a long time. A time, which she could now say, was the worst in her life. But in the next instance it felt like her spirit was being illuminated from the inside. She jumped when Bridgett touched her arm.

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to scare you."

The dark head shook. "No, its okay, I was just thinking."

"Not about leaving I hope."

"No," Jamie said, with a small smile. "Actually, I just realized that it might be a very interesting night."

"Good." The hostess led her over to the table that had garnered Jamie's attention, seconds earlier.

"Erin." The blonde turned in their direction. "Jamie, I'd like you to meet my sister, Erin Casey. Erin, this is my friend, Jamie Sheridan."

The seated woman held out her hand, which Jamie eagerly took. "It's nice to meet you Jamie. Bridgett told me all about you."

"I can't imagine that was a long description," the tall woman chuckled.

Bridgett playfully slapped her arm. "Would you stop being so hard on yourself. Now sit down and talk my sister. She already ate, but she'll keep you company. I'll get you something to eat."

Bridgett scurried away before Jamie could say anything. She turned to the other woman. "Is your sister always so...?"

"Bossy."

"Well, I was going to be polite, but yes." Jamie took the chair closest to her new acquaintance.

"Brig sometimes makes it impossible to be polite. I love my sister and she always...well almost always, means well, but she is pushy. But you should know, you work with her."

"Next to our boss she's a kitten, so I guess I didn't realize it. You know we've only had lunch a few times, so I was a little surprised when she invited me here."

"Like I said, she has a good heart and she thinks you're lonely," Erin added, timidly.

"I'm more like a lost cause," whispered the dark haired woman.

Erin's acute hearing caught the words and let the comment float around in her brain as she got to know the Jamie better. The blonde thought herself to be a very good judge of character and she knew that this woman needed something. *She may not admit she's lonely, but she knows she's alone. And everyone needs someone to love. Love? Where did that come from?*

"Here you go," said Bridgett, as she returned with nourishment for her guest.

Jamie's eyes widened at the sight of the plate, piled high with goodies. "I can't eat all of this."

"Oh sure you can," Bridgett said. "You're always telling me you only eat take out and this is good food, if I do say so myself. Look at it as if you're storing up for a few days." She turned to the giggling blonde. "Can I get you some more iced tea, Sis?"

"Yeah, thanks."

Erin smiled and Jamie almost dropped the fork that was half way to her mouth. That smile seemed to light up the whole world, or maybe just her world.

"My sister seems to think that everyone has my appetite," laughed the younger woman.

"Yeah, but did you eat this much?" Jamie asked, after swallowing the mouth full of salad.

"I had enough to fill up for a week. I'm a pretty good cook, but I don't do it to much, just for me."

"Well that beats me, I can't cook at all," said Jamie, as she continued to sift through the piles of food stacked on the foam plate in front of her. Her thoughts floated back to a time long ago.

"Sweetheart this is the best meal you've ever made," said Michael Sheridan, as he scooped another helping of potato salad onto his plate.

His wife reached down and kissed his cheek, as she passed by. "You say that about every meal I cook. But thank you."

"And our beautiful little girl here, is going to be just like you, when she's grows up. Aren't you Jamie?" asked, the dark haired man.

The seven-year-old just nodded, because her mouth was full of her last bite of hot dog.

Amy Sheridan sat down on the wooden bench next to her daughter. "Do you want something else to eat Honey?"

The dark head shook. "No Mommy, I'm full."

Amy smiled. "Well, that's too bad," she said teasingly. "I've got strawberry shortcake for desert, but if you don't have any room..."

Jamie's blue eyes widened and the little wheels in her brain spun around. She scooted off the bench and ran across the grass, for about twenty feet, and then she ran back and stopped right in front of her mother. "I have room now, Mommy."

Her parents laughed.

Jamie remembered later on, flying a kite with her father. His strong arms held her up, while she held onto the string. They ran across the field as the red diamond dipped and swooped, high in the sky. Her mother sat by smiling, watching the antics of her family. The wind began to die down and Michael reeled in the kite, as Jamie ran over to her mother.

"Did you see, Mommy? Did you see how high I made it go?" she asked excitedly, as she was lifted onto her mother's lap.

"I sure did Honey. You are the best kite flyer ever."

They were soon joined by, a slightly out of breath, Michael. "Well Pumpkin, I think we should be heading home," he said.

A slight frown fell over the girl's face.

"Don't worry Honey," said her mother, with a kiss to the top of her head. "We'll come back again, I promise."

Jamie hopped down off her mother's lap and turned to face both of her parents. "Can we do one more thing?" she asked, emphasizing her point by holding up one small finger.

The Sheridan's had a hard time refusing their daughter anything. "What do you want to do Sweetheart?" asked Amy.

Little Jamie took that finger and pointed to her left, over the hill. Just the top of the colorful, rotating object could be seen, but the cheerful calliope music was letting its notes be heard, loud and clear.

They should have known. The carousel was their daughter's favorite.

"Let's go," said Michael.

Standing in between her parents, holding onto their hands, Jamie looked up at them with twinkling blue eyes and a semi-toothless grin. Her parents looked at her, then at each other.

What Jamie didn't know was what they were thinking. They knew how wonderful it would have been to have two just like her, but after losing Jordan, they vowed to each other, to cherish every moment Jamie's life and give her all the love in the world.

Hand in hand, the happy family ran over the hill, where all three mounted majestic steeds and rode side by side. Jamie never wanted the day to end.

Chapter 2

"Jamie," the sweet voice called again.

A hand on her arm brought her back from the memory. "What? I'm sorry, I drifted away for a minute."

The melancholy in her voice was unmistakable, but again Erin didn't pry. She didn't want this woman to bolt because of her curiosity. "That's okay," Erin said. "I just wanted to give you a little hint." She leaned in, as if to tell a secret. "Leave some room for the desserts," she whispered. "There is a chocolate cake over there that you just **have** to try."

"That good huh?"

"Its fantastic." There was a hesitation before Erin continued. The adorable giggle sounded again. "But chocolate is one of my weaknesses," she admitted.

Jamie ran her tongue along the inside of her mouth. "You didn't happen to make this fantastic cake did you?"

A blush flew to the blonde woman's cheeks and she dropped her head. Jamie suddenly saw how the sun highlighted the vague red accents in the Irish woman's short-cropped hair. Feather like hair that framed an angelic face. She didn't want to be caught staring, so she took a quick sip of her soda. Jamie had been a notorious tease since her teen years, although then it was just used to get something, but she still loved to do it. Now, the only recipients of that facet of her personality

were the older people who shared her apartment building. Watching the cute reaction of the woman in front of her meant only one thing; more teasing was in order. She cleared her throat. "Gee, I'd really like to try that **fantastic** cake, but there's so much food here and I wouldn't want to insult Bridgett."

Erin teased back. "Oh, she wouldn't be insulted...but I might." She flashed that one thousand-watt smile.

I think I just met my match, thought Jamie. "Well in that case, I'll definitely have some later."

Their conversation turned to the normal getting to know one another questions. Erin was very open about herself, but Jamie tended to give short non-descript, although honest answers. Lying made her feel horribly guilty, but there were still things that she couldn't tell anyone and to those questions she simply said she'd rather not talk about it.

"So what do you do at GB Scrolls?" asked Erin, as she sipped her cool drink.

Between bites of the good California cuisine, Jamie explained that she was a proofreader and did some data entry. "I've always loved to read, so it seemed like something I could do. The computer work, I've only learned since I've been there, but it was pretty easy for me to pick up. So what occupies your workday?"

Erin gave a small ironic chuckle. "As a matter of fact, I'm a writer."

That little fact piqued Jamie's attention. "Really, what do you write?"

"Don't laugh," begged the little blonde.

"Why would I do that?"

"Because my literary endeavors run a wide trail of interests and genres. I started out writing children's books."

"Well that's certainly nothing to laugh about. In fact I think early childhood is the best part of any of our lives."

Erin detected a hint of sadness in her response. "I agree," she said. "I love kids. My niece and nephew, over there, have me wrapped around their fingers and they take every opportunity to exploit that fact."

Jamie took a long glance at the children, playing tag across the yard. She had seen pictures of Bridgett's children sitting on her desk at work, so it was easy for her to pick out the sandy haired, seven-year-old, whose name, she knew was Conner. His three-year-old sister, who was now hugging, practically riding the big dog, was named Caitlin. Unlike her brother, mother or her father, she had hair the color of corn silk. She was a miniature version of her favorite aunt. "And you really love it," said Jamie.

Erin drew a lop-sided smile over her face. "Guilty as charged."

Jamie finished her last bite of food, at least the last she dare take. "If you'll excuse me," she said, carefully balancing her plate in one hand and her cane in the other. "I'm going to get a piece of that fantastic cake, before it all disappears. Can I get you something?"

"No thank you. I'm fine."

You certainly are, Jamie's mind shouted as she walked away.

What a totally mysterious person you are Jamie Sheridan, thought Erin. Even though we just met and you certainly didn't give up any personal information, I feel like I've known you forever. It's odd, but nice.

Jamie stood at the desert table slipping a piece of the chocolate confection on to her plate. She couldn't help but to look back at the blonde author, who seemed deep in thought. She tried to be inconspicuous in her study of the young woman. *I wonder what color her eyes are? Blonde hair, hmmm, most people would say blue, but they're green, I just know it. Brilliant green. I wish she'd take off those glasses. Damn California sun.* Jamie returned to her seat and started to dive into her desert. "So what's the next trail you ventured down on your literary adventures?"

Erin hesitated only a moment before answering. "Poetry."

"Romantic or otherwise?" Jamie asked, with a sneaky lilt. "And this cake is fantastic by the way."

"Romantic, of course and thank you." Erin shifted in her seat, stretching out her stiff legs. Her right foot struck something hard.

Jamie gasped and pulled her foot back.

Erin sat straight up. "I'm sorry Jamie, was that you!?"

"Sort of," she chuckled. "I broke my ankle four weeks ago. I hate this damn cast. It's gotten in my way and kept me from doing more things than I can count."

"Did I hurt you?" Erin asked with obvious concern.

"No. No, its fine."

"You're sure?"

"Positive," insisted Jamie.

Erin released a breath and relaxed back into her seat. "How did you do it?" The proverbial cat had nothing on Erin Brienne Casey.

Jamie dismissed it with a casual wave of her hand. "Oh, it was a silly accident. Maybe I'll tell you about it some other time. Right now, I'd much rather hear more about you. You're right, children's books and poetry are certainly different."

"As they say, you ain't heard nothing yet. My latest project was science fiction."

Once again the fork stopped halfway to Jamie's mouth as the bells and whistles went off and connections ran around her brain, finally deciding she couldn't be that lucky. But she had to ask anyway. "Are you E. B. Casey...who wrote *The Noah Factor*?"

A warm smile answered her question before the words did. "Yes, I wrote that."

Jamie was momentarily stunned; trying to form every word she'd ever wanted to say to this woman. "I apologize before hand, because I'm about to gush and most likely make a fool of myself. But I swear, every word will be true."

Children's laughter ran in circles, sounds of nature abound and conversations were all around the small table, but they all filtered down to a whisper, as all Erin could seem to hear, was the rich voice of this new...friend.

Yes, this woman was fast becoming a friend.

Jamie told her it was her all time favorite book. How she'd read it three times and every time she'd found something new that touched her. She failed to add that the words on those pages pulled her back from the brink of self-destruction. But Erin read between the lines, so to speak and caught a hint of the unspoken meaning. Jamie's comments went on for several minutes until she finally had to stop and take a drink.

Erin was incredibly heartened at all the kind words. She didn't know what to say except a simple, thank you.

A force that she couldn't even put a name to compelled Jamie; she reached out to cover the author's hand and with a deep breath, garnered the courage to make the hard confession. "No, thank you. That story literally saved my life. I read it at a time when I was totally giving up on myself. I saw something in your words that no counselor, psychiatrist, psychologist or spiritual leader could have shown me in a lifetime...hope."

The blonde author pushed aside the lump in her throat to release her response. "Well," the word came out as a small breath. "I'm supposed to be that good and I can't think of a thing to say. Actually, yes I can. I have never in my life been so glad to put words to paper. I knew there had to be a reason for the accident. Now I know, because I never would have written that story if I hadn't had that loss. Thank you for being here."

Both women sat back with a heavy sigh. Jamie seemed to have missed last part of Erin's comment; her emotions were just too high. "I didn't mean to make every thing so serious here," she said.

"Yes, I think we could both use a little diversion," the author suggested. "What time is it?"

Jamie checked the leather-banded watch, around her wrist. "Its 8:08."

Erin considered a moment. "Would you like to take a walk in the gardens?"

Jamie mirrored the smile on the other woman's face. "Sure, that sounds nice." Before Jamie could stand, she heard the smaller woman release a piercing whistle.

"Arte, Artemis. Come here girl," Erin called, enthusiastically. In the next second, the big dog that had been playing with the children came lumbering over to her owner. Erin leaned down and vigorously rubbed the dog's head and scratched behind the floppy ears. "Did you have a good time playing with the kids, huh?" The canine responded by painting the woman's face with affectionate doggie kisses. Erin grabbed the leather harness around the dog's body with her left hand and with her right she reached for the handle that had been lying over the arm of her chair. She attached the two ends to the harness and let the dog lead her away from the table.

After just a few steps, Erin could tell that her friend wasn't following and she turned back. "Is something wrong Jamie? Is your ankle hurting?"

Jamie felt like a total idiot. *Why didn't Bridgett tell me...? How could I not have...?* She knew Erin was waiting for an answer and that her silence had probably already insulted the gracious woman. "No, no I'm fine. It's just...I'm sorry...I didn't realize..."

"That I was visually impaired?" supplied the younger woman.

"Yeah." Jamie kicked her self mentally. *Well you did it again, chased away another friend.* Then something totally unexpected happened. A smile greeted her when she looked back up.

"That's okay," said Erin. "I didn't know you had a broken ankle, until I kicked it. Let's go."

The gardens consisted of meandering, embedded stone pathways bordered on one side by perfectly sculptured green hedges. The inside area of the walkway, greeted its visitors with a rainbow of petals of all shapes and heights. A spectacular rose garden of white and red was the next area they quietly passed through.

The charming Irish author with a smile that could chase away the world's cares quickly alleviated the earlier feelings of embarrassment Jamie had felt. Now a comfortable silence fell between them. Besides the occasional birdcall or clicking insect, their footfalls were the only comforting sounds, having left the bustle of the party behind them.

Lilac permeated the air as they walked through the lavender budded bushes. Jamie was content to follow wherever the other woman would lead her. They rounded a curve and encountered a footbridge over a small water garden, complete with falls and floating water lilies. Jamie was actually quite surprised with herself as she took in all the beauty around her. Normally she wasn't

one to stop and smell the roses of life, but being in the present company and the nature that surrounded them, she felt...alive.

Finally they arrived at their destination. Erin seated herself on an intricately carved, stone bench and invited her guest to do the same. Artemis sat obediently at her owner's feet, looking tired after hours of chasing after the children.

"These gardens are absolutely beautiful," said Jamie, wistfully.

"Yes, they are. Bridgett and I used to play here when we were kids. She says they're exactly the same, except for the water garden that they added."

"Was this your parents' house?"

"No, it belonged to a family friend and when they were ready to sell a few years ago, Bridgett jumped at it." Erin pointed to the huge expanse directly in front of them. "This is my favorite spot in the whole place. As much as I like the scent of roses and lilacs, this wildflower patch is the best." Erin sat there, enjoying the perfect moment, listening to the quiet, slow breathing next to her. "Are the butterflies here?" she asked softly.

"Yeah." An unconscious smile formed on the tall woman's face as she watched the delicate, winged creatures flitting about, their colors rivaling the blanket of petals below them.

A few minutes passed before anything else was spoken. "You can ask," Erin finally said.

Jamie feigned ignorance. "Ask what?"

"You would like to know what happened. How I lost my sight. It doesn't bother me. I know its only human curiosity. And if it wasn't for curiosity, no one would read my books."

"Well, I guess I was wondering."

The blonde head nodded. "It was an accident. Almost four years ago, I was in Houston, meeting with a new publisher about some illustrations for my children's books. I left the appointment and was walking back to my car. I had to pass by this chemical plant...they had a spill and then an explosion. Bad timing. I was right in its path. When I finally woke up, a few days later, it was gone."

"With all the advances in medical science, they couldn't do anything?"

"Then, no. But as a matter of fact, a doctor, doing research on injuries like mine, contacted me recently. He's made some breakthroughs with a new, experimental, treatment and surgery. But it also requires an organ donor. I do want to try it, so I went to the bottom of a very long list of other people waiting for transplants. Unfortunately not enough people think about organ donations. But, I can't really blame them. Before this happened, I never gave it a second thought."

Jamie looked away with guilt. "Neither have I...until now. Maybe you could give me some help on how to do that."

Erin smiled. "I will." This time it was she who reached out to put her hand on Jamie's arm. "Thank you. You know, I actually consider myself lucky. Four other people died in that explosion." Again the mood was getting to heavy. "It should be just about time."

"Time for what?"

The author turned to the other side and pointed in the direction of the sky. "For that."

Jamie's eyes drifted to the area. What she saw immediately sent her back to the pages of Noah Factor. Her mind re-reads the last passage.

Simeron Noah slipped her hand into Jessie's. Her faithful horse, Star, nudged Sim's shoulder with her white muzzle. Star's new colt Sierra, asked Sim to explain, what was happening in the sky ahead of them.

Sim smiled and her pale blue eyes glowed with the reflection of the beginning sky show. "The sun that provides us with light during the day, moves away from us, pulling the darkness across the sky, behind it," she explained. "That means that this day is coming to an end. When you go to sleep in the dark and wake up again in the light, it will be a new day."

The little horse didn't fully understand the meaning of her words. She was only a week old and the big world and all of its simple and complex happenings were proving to be overwhelming. But Sierra knew that her mother's best friend Sim would be patient and teach her everything she needed to know. What she didn't realize was that she would need to pass on her knowledge to her own children. She was the first in line of this new evolution of the animal species. Sierra didn't know enough yet to be proud of this. But her first friend, Simeron Noah, smiled with that emotion, as she hugged the little horse's brown neck.

Sim, Jessie and mother and child, peered out over the edge of the canyon. The glowing ball of fire was just beginning to dip between the tall mountain peaks. The surrounding sky swirled, gently painted with the almost indescribable colors of flaming red to fluffy pink to wispy purple. All draped over a sky of pale blue and dotted with puffs of ivory. The peace it ignited in every soul who gazed upon it, man and animal, was enough to insure a beautiful future for all the planet's new inhabitants.

The shimmering edge finally disappeared completely, beyond the horizon, signaling the close of the first day of a new life on Terra Two.

"That's where you got it." Jamie's whispered voice dripped with awe.

"I thought you might recognize it."

Jamie sat there watching, until the glowing sphere completely sank below the horizon. She looked to see that Erin was still facing in that direction, not knowing that the amazing show was over and Jamie didn't quite have the heart to mention it. A single butterfly lit on the tip of her shoe before it took off to find cover from the coming darkness. "We'd better get back," Jamie said quietly, as if the previous moments had been constructed of glass and would shatter upon the sound of her voice.

"Yeah, I guess," Erin said, wistfully. "Knowing Bridgett, she'll come hunting us down before long." She was strongly regretting the evening's end.

Dusk settled over the fragrant gardens as the three visitors, two humans and one canine, slowly made their way back to the party. Small talk passed between the two humans, but after the dramatics that dominated the previous conversations, Erin and Jamie both wanted to end the night on a pleasant note.

Notes of a melodious kind greeted them upon their return. Soft strains of music floated through the yard and tall torches lined the perimeter of the party area. Dancing flames provided a sensual shimmer, as the stone patio became an impromptu dance floor for three couples. The hostess and her husband were one of the swaying pairs, so involved in each other that Bridgett didn't even notice her sister's return.

Jamie watched the romantic scene with a profound sadness, a self-imposed ache, but somehow that didn't seem to ease the pain any. Suddenly a warm hand slipped around her upper arm. Usually an unexpected touch would startle her, but not this one. It did however send an even stronger pain, accompanied with a sense of guilt, straight to her heart.

"Jamie," said the silky voice she'd been listening to all evening.

"What? I'm sorry, is something wrong?"

"I was going to ask you the same thing. You were so quiet, I just wanted to make sure you were still here," Erin said with a smile. Even though she couldn't see it, she just knew that it was returned.

"I was just listening to the music, I guess," Jamie said, as she looked over the group.

"Is Brig around?"

"Yeah, she's dancing."

"Well, that figures. My sister is a hopeless romantic."

"And you're not?" The words left Jamie's mouth before she could stop them. *Damn, why did I ask that?*

The torchlight, behind Erin's head, softly highlighted the slight blush that rose to her cheeks. "Of course, I am." *Or at least I want to be.*

The next song started and that shudder went up Jamie's spine again. *Damn! What is it about that song? It makes me feel so strange. It's a love song, so it obviously has nothing to do with me, but...*

And I'm meeting you again for the first time

Two hearts, but one soul

Two halves are now whole

Cause you know who I am

And you know what I need

I'm safe in your arms

And you make me believe

The song continued on and Jamie suddenly realized that the small woman had not removed her hand. She reached up to cover the fingers around her arm and smiled. "A...Erin..."

"There you are," said Bridgett as she approached them, interrupting Jamie's words. "I was just about to come looking for you two."

The dark haired woman jumped at the voice and her thought flew away with the moment. "It's a good thing you were pre-occupied then." Jamie nodded toward the other dancing couples.

"Hey, don't knock it till you've tried it," said the red head.

Erin felt the tall woman stiffen beside her. Her natural curiosity was screaming at her to find the answers to this mysterious and troubled woman.

"Are you ready to go Jamie?" asked the hostess.

There was a hesitation during which a small part...okay a big part of her wanted to stay. But she knew it was over. It was time to go. *Maybe it would have been better if I hadn't come at all,* she thought. "Yeah, I'm ready," she said, trying to keep the sadness out of her voice.

"Okay, give me about ten minutes. Can I get you anything sis?"

"No, I'm fine."

"Why don't we sit down?" suggested Erin. "My sister said you live close to Paramount Studios?"

"Yeah. Are you living here with your sister?"

"No, actually I have a place at the beach, but since it's so late, I'm staying here tonight. Brig will take me home in the morning."

"Well, Erin it was nice meeting you. Thank you for showing me the sunset and the other beautiful sights."

Bridgett came bouncing back to the table. "We can go now Jamie."

"Nice meeting you to Jamie. I hope we can talk again sometime."

"Maybe," came the forced cheerful response. "Goodbye Erin."

The two women walked away, leaving Erin in her silent contemplation. Her left hand affectionately stroked the golden head sitting at her side. The evening had been a total surprise to her. She had expected to sit alone, enjoying the sounds of her family having a good time, exchanging the occasional words with her sister or maybe reading to her niece. And she would have been content with all those activities. But meeting Jamie stirred something inside of her. Something she hadn't felt in a long time. If she were totally honest with herself, something she had never felt. During their short time together, Erin was captivated by the enigmatic quality the woman had. She longed to know what she looked like, drawing several illustrations in her vivid mind. *I have to talk to her again. I can get her phone number from Bridgett. I can invite...*

"Aunt Ewin," said the small voice, interrupting her thoughts. "Can I sit in you wap?"

"Sure sweetie." She picked up her niece and settled her sideways. "Are you tired honey?"

The small head bobbed up and down and lay back against her aunt. Erin rocked the tiny body and softly hummed a lullaby, while thinking about her future.

Bridgett's van cruised down the LA freeway, cutting through the darkness, nearing the lights of the city. The radio had been the only sound in the car for the first few miles, but Bridgett thought it was about time. "I told you so," she said, as they passed under the one-mile warning sign for her exit.

Jamie kept her steely gaze forward. "You told me so what?" Jamie asked, hiding a small smirk.

"That you'd have a good time."

"And how do you know I had a good time?"

"That's easy. I figured you'd stay at least an hour to be polite. An hour and a half if you liked the music and the food. Two hours if you snuck one of your books in under your shirt and found a quiet corner. But four hours, you must have been deliriously happy."

"Smart ass. You're pretty proud of yourself huh?"

"Absolutely. Even if you did monopolize all of my sister's attention."

Jamie turned to the driver at the mention of her favorite subject. "Why didn't you tell me she was a famous author?"

The older woman shrugged. "I guess I don't think of her that way. To me, she's just my sister."

"Well, she's the most interesting person I've met in a long time. No offense."

Bridgett laughed softly. "None taken. And I agree with you. She's great. But I know she's lonely. I don't understand why she won't go out with any of the dates I offer to set her up with. They're all nice men."

"I'm sure your sister will find her happiness," Jamie said as the car pulled into the parking area behind her apartment building. Stopping under a brilliantly lit lamppost, Bridgett parked the car, intending to wait until her friend was safely inside. Jamie lifted a casted foot and slid out of her seat. She closed the door and stuck her head back into the rolled down window. "I'll see you Monday, Bridgett." She started to walk away, but turned back again with a crooked smile. "And I did have a good time. Thank you."

Jamie dug the keys, to her apartment, out of the pocket of her snug fitting jeans. She didn't know what was worst part about breaking her ankle, having to cut back on her exercise regiment, having to maneuver with the stupid cane or having to split the leg of all her jeans to fit over the huge, ugly hunk of plaster on her left foot.

The overhead light in her small living room sprang to life with the flick of a switch. The clunk of keys hitting the coffee table was followed immediately by the punch of the button on the stereo.

A Miller Lite, which she had pilfered from the party, with two swallows missing, soon sat next to the keys. Jamie reached for the TV remote and hit the power button, then the mute. She flipped through two dozen channels, not really seeing what was on any of them, before she turned it off again.

Jamie thought she had the restlessness beaten. There was something inside, chasing around her nervous system like two roller coasters on a collision course. She hadn't felt this since her teen years, when she was fighting herself. Before Jamie left her foster home, she had been through four counselors. One she scared away, two just gave her up as a lost cause and one had more serious problems than she did, she'd found out first hand. Only years later, after the string of tragedies, did she discover that she could lose herself in books. That's when her life, such as it was, started to come together.

Jamie swallowed the last of her beer, dropped the bottle in the recycle bin and headed to the bathroom. She caught a glimpse of herself in the mirror and brought a hand up to rub her jaw. *Why does my face hurt?* she thought. *Because you haven't smiled that much in a long time,*

dummy. She stared at her own reflection, but only saw the beautiful, blonde headed author. *Her smile was infectious though*. The grin soon faded as two other faces flashed across her memory. A tear slid down her cheek and plowed another deep furrow of grief on her well-worn soul. Jamie scowled at herself. "You could hide behind her mask of blindness for awhile, but eventually she'd still see right into your soul and go running into the night. I can't do that again. I can't do that to her."

Chapter 3

Dust danced along the shaft of light, filtering through the blinds, into the small bedroom. It slowly warmed the t-shirted back of the sleeper and soon, drowsy eyes pried open to face the bright green, digital lights staring back at her. Seven, zero, zero exactly. Even though it was Sunday and Jamie allowed herself an extra hour of sleep, her internal time clock kept its perfect record.

She kicked off the light cover and padded into the bathroom where she took care of personal business, including brushing both teeth and hair. Having switched her sleeping attire, which consisted of her favorite, blue Sylvester and Tweety T-shirt and blue plaid sleep shorts, for her workout clothes, she went to the kitchen for her morning fuel.

Her spare bedroom barely held the three pieces of equipment that she deemed necessary to maintain her good physical condition. The treadmill and stationary bike had to be passed up for the last month due to her busted appendage, so the weight bench got overtime. As Jamie moved the heavy barbell from mid-air to her chest and back again, she kept her thoughts far away from the previous evening.

The clock on the wall read 8:45. She wanted to go fifteen more minutes, but less than twenty seconds later the phone rang. Her first thought was to let the machine get it, but she hated talking to those things and decided to give the caller a break. Still lying down on the bench she grabbed the cordless, on the floor next to her. "Hello."

"Hi Jamie, it's Erin Casey."

Jamie shot up, narrowly missing hitting her head on the bar above her. She squeezed her eyes shut in an attempt to control the conflicting emotions firing inside her brain.

"I hope I'm not bothering you," said Erin. "I didn't wake you did I?" she added with alarm.

"No. I've been awake for a while and of course you're not bothering me. What can I do for you?"

"Actually... I wanted to invite you to lunch. Brig was going to drive me home, but she wants to go shopping and I'm not in the mood for that. I thought instead, she could drop me off at DeeJay's Cafe' and you could meet me there." She hesitated then added. "It is close to your building isn't it?"

"Yeah, it's only a couple of blocks from here."

But with no further comment, Erin asked, "Unless you have other plans?" Her disappointment was evident.

Jamie wiped the sweat at her temple. Whether it was from the exercise or the fear, she didn't know. *Say yes, you have plans, say yes, yes*, her mind yelled. But other parts of her body told the truth. "No, I don't have any plans."

"Well, would you like to have lunch? I'd really like to get to know you better."

"Okay, that sounds nice."

"Great!" Erin practically jumped through the phone with her answer. "How about 11:30?"

"That's fine."

"See you then, bye."

Jamie heard the smile on the other end of the line, but as she disconnected, her face held a heavy frown. She scolded herself. *Why did you do that?* Jamie used the white, terry cloth towel and vigorously rubbed her damp face. *I thought we had this settled last night.* Several more minutes of internal contemplation followed. "What's one more lunch," she shrugged and finished up her fifteen minutes.

The sun was nearing its highest point as Jamie rounded the corner onto Rosewood Avenue and approached the busy café. She stopped on the sidewalk and scanned the outdoor tables for the familiar face. She found it, sitting at a small table in the back corner, reminiscent of her first glimpse the night before. *I could leave, she'd never know. But that would hurt her. We just met though; it couldn't hurt that much.* She debated with herself. *I could make up a good excuse.* Just then something startling happened. Erin turned in her direction, as if she were looking right at her. Jamie didn't know what that meant, but she knew she couldn't leave then.

She slowly maneuvered through the close set tables and stopped right in front of the author without a word.

"Jamie?"

"Yeah, how did you know?"

Erin smiled. "I heard the heavy fall of your cast on the cement."

"Oh, that's good. I never would have thought of that." Jamie pulled out the chair and sat down. "Have you been waiting long?"

"Only about five minutes. I'm hungry. How about you?"

Jamie glanced over the many lunch selections on the menu. "I thought sure I'd still be full from all the food I ate last night, but yeah, I am a little hungry."

The waitress soon took their orders to the kitchen and returned with their drinks.

"So how did you break your ankle?" Erin asked, jumping right into conversation. "You did say you'd tell me sometime."

Jamie started grinning again. *Boy, am I in trouble.* She took a long sip of her coke.

Erin waited a few seconds, but the ensuing silence was too long. "You don't have to tell me. I'm being to nosy."

"No, it's not that. I told you it was a silly accident. And it's really embarrassing."

Erin smiled deviously. "Now I know I want to hear it." She crossed her heart with her right hand. "I promise not to tell another soul."

"Especially your sister," said Jamie, adamantly. She twisted in her seat, but continued. "Okay my short, but dirty little tale goes like this. I pulled my limo into the drive..."

"Wait!" Erin blurted out. "You own a limo?"

"No! No, I drive a limo. It's my second job."

"Oh. Okay. Sorry I interrupted."

Jamie went on. "The lot was all wet, where they'd been washing the cars. My boss is a real tight wad. He won't use automatic washes. We have to do it ourselves. Any way it wasn't just wet, there were standing puddles everywhere. I didn't want to get my new eighty-five dollar shoes, wet." She paused to take a drink. "There's a small grassy area next to the building and it's slightly uphill. I pulled the car up there and got out, so proud of myself for staying dry. I took three steps and my left foot went one way and I went the other."

Erin cringed. "Ow, that hurt."

"Uh huh."

"But, I don't understand what's so embarrassing about that?"

Jamie blushed, even though her companion couldn't see it. "Well, the grass wasn't totally clear of its own obstacles. It had been recently visited by one of our canine friends...or for me, enemy." She shook her head. "Ruined my shoes anyway."

Erin put a hand to her mouth. Her shoulders and head slightly convulsed.

Jamie bit back her own smile at the cute woman, trying so hard not to laugh at the situation. "You're going to bust if you don't let that laugh out," Jamie told her.

"I'm sorry," Erin said, through the chuckles. "I'm just glad Artemis wasn't here to hear that." She heard Jamie begin laughing with her and that sound sent warmth over her lonely heart.

The waitress delivered the food to the two friends sharing merriment and Jamie started in on her chicken salad and fries. The conversation stayed away from anything long and complicated, although there were still many things that each wanted to know about the other. But Erin was certain there was time for that. Jamie had even relaxed enough in the woman's company that her fears had momentarily dissipated.

Erin finished the last of her drink and dabbed the corners of her mouth with her napkin. She leaned forward. "I don't suppose the waitress left a dessert menu, did she?"

Jamie looked down to the brightly colored piece of cardboard. "As a matter of fact, she did. You still have room for something else?"

Erin giggled. "I always have room for dessert and I don't mean Jell-O."

"Well..."

"Come on, we can split something," urged the blonde.

Jamie was learning that it was going to be almost impossible to refuse that smile anything. "Okay, you talked me into it. But I don't think anything on this list will come close to your cake."

Erin was startled by the compliment. She knew the night before, Jamie had been teasing her about touting her own cooking, but this was a genuine comment. "It's too bad they don't have ice cream."

"You like ice cream do you?"

"Ice cream is my worst weakness." The Irish face filled with decadence. "I would do anything...well almost anything for ice cream."

Jamie felt guilty about being able to observe this woman unnoticed, but she couldn't help herself. "How about turtle brownie?" she finally asked.

"Ooo, that sounds good." Erin motioned the waitress and gave her the order. "You know I was wrong."

"About what?"

"The ice cream. If you add hot fudge, whipped cream and nuts I would do **anything**."

I wonder what you would do for a cherry on top, Jamie thought, but then gave herself a mental slap for such a wicked thought.

After finishing the scrumptious dessert and settling the check, which Jamie protested she should pay half, but Erin wouldn't allow it, they decided to walk to a near-by park to talk some more.

As they stood to go, Erin hesitated. "Could I ask you a favor?"

"Sure, what is it?"

"I left Artemis home because it's a little close here and I didn't want her to be in anyone's way. So could I take your arm?" Even after all the time had passed since her accident, Erin was still reluctant to give up her independence, but she also realized that there are times when sighted people have to lean on others. There was also a small part of her feeling guilty because she was going to take pleasure in being that close to her new friend.

"A...of course." Jamie hoped her nerves weren't showing through in her voice.

Side by side they walked slowly down the street, Jamie guiding them through the other pedestrians going on about their busy lives. Erin walked on her right side listening to the cars driving by, several reckless ones surpassing the posted limit. One irritated and irritating driver leaned on his horn for reasons Erin couldn't detect. She caught snippets of conversations from passers by, topics ranging from political comments to marital complaints to a lone stranger humming Stayin' Alive to himself. She smiled, not at his action, but his choice of songs. Her taste in music could definitely be called eclectic, but that particular selection not being a favorite.

The skin on Jamie's upper arm was warm under the yellow shirt she was wearing. Knowing it had nothing to do with the 83-degree air temperature and everything to do with the fingers gently resting there. She found herself relaxing a little more with every step. As they waited at the corner, to cross the street to get to the park, Jamie took a quick glance at her watch. It was one fifteen, which gave her a little over two hours before she had to leave to get ready for work.

"If you don't mind my asking," said Jamie. "How are you going to get home?"

"Bridgett will be at the mall all afternoon. I'll give her a call when I'm ready."

Once in the park, Jamie found a bench under a nice shady tree and seated them both. The conversation continued, with Erin doing most of the talking as usual. But that was fine with Jamie. She was never any good at small talk. After a few false starts she finally jumped into the fray and asked an important question. "How did you come to write Noah Factor?"

"Well that's kind of a long story," Erin said and paused for a long breath. "I'll give you the short version. When I got home from the hospital, after my accident, I went through the normal adjustment period, which is usually dominated by anger and I was no exception. I asked all the questions, why did this happen to me, what did I do to deserve this? I went through all the 'I hate the world' curses and I didn't want anything to do with life. I spent two weeks sitting in the same

chair in my dark living room, not listening to a television I couldn't see. I went from the chair to the bed and back again the next morning and that's all I did. Brig brought me two meals a day and I always ended up yelling at her to leave." The blonde head shook at the memories of her sister's love during that hard time. "I put her through hell, but she never gave up on me."

"You're lucky to have a sister like that. I don't have any siblings and they say you can't miss what you never had or at least don't remember, but part of me always has. I didn't mean to interrupt, please go on."

"One day while I was still in full anger mode, I was sitting there and I started to hear this soft squeaking sound. I thought it was the water heater, air conditioning, something. But the noise got louder and started to sound like something alive and something definitely in distress. I made my way to the door, banging into every piece of furniture along the way. When I opened it, the sound became very clear and very close. I eased my way down the stairs and then practically crawled across the ground toward the noise. For some reason my fear felt like nothing compared to whatever it was that was crying out. I reached the small flower garden and felt around through the neglected plants and found the problem. A kitten, that couldn't have been more than two months old, was entangled in the weeds and vines. I had no idea how it got there; the nearest house is half a mile away. Fighting with tiny claws and teeth, I finally managed to free her. I picked her up and then she started trembling. I just sat there on the ground patting her and holding her close. Soon she settled down and began purring and I laughed as she rubbed against my face."

Jamie smiled at the thought.

"I took her inside, but was afraid to put her down. I didn't want to step on her. So I carried her around and had the store deliver some things to take care of her, temporarily. I wasn't sure what to do, I couldn't take her to a shelter and I couldn't keep her. I had finally decided to let Brig find her a good home. The next day there was a knock at the door. With kitten in hand, I answered it, navigating the room much better by then. A little voice called out, "Snickers!" The mother explained that the kitten had wandered away when they were visiting the beach the morning before. I told the little girl to keep a close eye on Snickers. I felt the tears on her face when she hugged me and thanked me for saving her pet." Erin paused for an emotional breath. "Snickers found her way home and I opened my eyes for the first time in five weeks. I realized that that tiny thing survived against incredible odds. But she survived only because she let me help her. She was scared and she fought me, but she still let me help. I knew I wanted to survive, but only then did I realize that I couldn't do that without getting help. I went to San Diego to a school for the visually impaired. A few months later, I returned home, once again an independent person. It was by brief stint with animal rescue and my personal survival that gave me the idea for Noah Factor."

Jamie covered the author's hand with her own. "Well, Snickers and I had a lot in common. I was trapped in a web too, a self-spun web of deceit and betrayal. But we both had you for a savior."

Erin dropped her head in an attempt to hide the blush creeping onto her face. After several silent moments she finally composed herself enough to ask, "Now its your turn. Why two jobs? I mean maybe it's none of my business, but I know the publishing company pays well."

The dark head nodded. "Yes it does, but I don't work there full time and I don't want to be there until retirement. I'm saving up for something that's always been a dream of mine...but it's an expensive dream."

"What is it?"

Jamie thought about her secret wish, the dream she'd never told anyone about. "How about if we save that for another time." She realized she'd just committed herself to spend more time with this woman, but she was starting to like the sound of that. *Maybe I can do this, she thought; maybe I can have a friend.*

"That's a deal," said Erin, as she felt for the time on her watch. "I'd better give Brig a call. I'm sure it'll be at least half an hour before she can tear herself away from the stores." She made the call and sure enough, Bridgett told her she'd pick her up in about forty minutes. "I don't want to keep you," she told Jamie. "I assume you're driving tonight."

"Yes I am, but I've got some time. Besides I don't want to leave you here alone. I wouldn't leave anyone alone," she added, trying not to insult the sightless woman.

"Actually I wish I could just sit here all week," Erin said, wearily.

"Problems?"

"I'm not supposed to tell anyone this, but I trust you. And I think you'll be particularly interested in this. I am in negotiations to turn Noah Factor into a movie. But I want it done right! I'm going to be in meetings all day tomorrow with the producers. They're going to let me write or at least co-write the screenplay. I won't just sell the rights, its important to me, especially now," she added with a smile.

The dark haired woman was oblivious to that part of the comment, but she added her encouragement. "Go get'em tiger."

"Are my stripes showing?"

"Oh yeah."

"So have you ever chauffeured a movie premiere?"

"A few."

"Well," Erin prompted for more. "I don't want to sound like a star struck fan, but what about celebrities? Who have you driven?"

"Well, I've never had you in the back of my limo." *Oops that went beyond teasing girl, flirting is off limits.* Jamie fumbled to save herself. "I mean you're the most important person I've ever met."

She shyly accepted her friend's compliment. Erin was sure the driver only said it to cover her flirting, but she found that even more flattering.

The remainder of their time in the park was spent talking about casting for the movie. All in fun suggestions, from Sarah Michelle Geller to Brad Pitt were made and quickly rejected, for various reasons.

Minutes later Bridgett pulled up to the curb in her green mini van. After strong requests from both Erin and her sister, it was the word please, uttered by the blonde author that finally got Jamie to accept a ride home.

Continued in Part 2.

The Athenaeum's Scroll Archive

~ At First Sight ~

by Colleen

General Disclaimer: This is an alternate uber story. The physical descriptions of the two lead characters may remind you of two others we all know and love, but all characters in the story are from my own imagination. This story is an original work and is copyrighted by the author. It cannot be sold or used for profit in any way.

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No copy write infringement was intended in the use of the song "I Need You"

Thanks, to my beta readers Barbara and Jennis.

All positive comments are welcome at colleen30@webtv.net

Part 2

Chapter 4

The gray Monday morning that greeted Jamie upon awakening, did nothing to dampen her unusually good mood. Although she wasn't sure if she would ever see Erin again, Jamie couldn't help but feel a weight lifted from her spirit. She couldn't explain why or how it happened, but she definitely felt freer than she had in years. Jamie wanted to spend more time with the delightful blonde woman, but she knew she could never bring herself to make contact.

After her amended morning workout, shower and breakfast, Julie picked her up for work. The usual carpool small talk filled the fifteen-minute drive. Once at work, Jamie settled in behind her computer, worked for four hours, during which her attention only strayed once or twice...an hour and always to the same green eyed subject. A quick lunch of salad and breadsticks was followed by four more hours of work. Finally, a ride home with more chitchat brought Jamie back to her small and even lonelier apartment. The television wasn't touched that night. Noah Factor was pulled from her bookshelf and the inspiring pages kept her company for the rest of the evening. Only when her eyes couldn't process the small black print, did she relent and drag herself to bed.

Tuesday brought an almost carbon copy of Monday. Workout, breakfast, carpool, work, lunch...well you get the picture. By eight in the evening the monotony was grating on her and even the reading wasn't helping. *Maybe I'll take a nice long walk and get some fresh LA smog to clog up my brain.* "If it wasn't for this damn cast, I'd take a long hard run," she said. But no one was listening. She grabbed her keys and cane and headed out the door. The elevator door closed behind her and she descended out into a mid June, California evening.

Back inside the small apartment, a ringing phone broke the silence. A call that would go unanswered because of a broken machine.

The bottle of aspirin opened under her strong fingers and two of the pain ending pills were chased down by the last of her diet coke. Erin removed her glasses and rubbed her temples to help send away the pounding beat. She was hoping a friendly voice might have helped.

A small bark, from her right, drew her attention. "It's okay Arte. I know it's been a long day." She reached down to scratch her loyal companion's golden head. "We'll be going home in a little bit."

Erin reached to pick up her glasses on the table, passing over the cell phone she had just used. She hurriedly put them on when she heard footsteps approach the door. She didn't like to be seen without her tinted eye guards. For all her self-confidence, that was one thing she couldn't get past.

"So, what do you say we get back to work," said the tall, dark haired man as he sat at the table across from her.

Erin had spent most of Monday in the plush office of movie producer, Joseph Hudson. She sat by quietly, while her agent negotiated the monetary part of the deal. When she was first approached about turning her best selling science fiction novel into a movie, Erin hesitated for many reasons.

But her family soon convinced her it would be a good move for her career and she had gotten several letters from fans wishing for a big screen version of their favorite book. But she still held some reservations as meetings were being planned and talks with her agent proceeded. Not until her conversation with Jamie, did Erin finally know she was making the right decision to go through with the movie deal.

Erin's thoughts reeled as she listened to the incredible dollar figures bandied back and forth. She wasn't really concerned with earning a fortune. She lived a very comfortable life, not wanting for anything she couldn't already afford, so the zeros weren't all that important. But upon second consideration, she prompted her agent to go for the throat, as he had so amusingly put it. Erin decided to divide a large part of her salary between the blind school that had helped her back to life and the World Wildlife Fund. It was very fitting to her story, both personal and fictional.

Once the dollar figure was decided upon, Erin knew the next step would be the hardest. She was adamant that no deal would be made, no contracts signed, unless she could have major input on the final script.

Three hours of point, counter points were made; point being Erin had never written a movie script before. Counter point being that she created the characters, she knew them inside and out, they were part of her being and only she would care enough to handle her story with love, which was the ultimate moral of the story.

With a final long expelled breath and a stroke of his moustache, Joseph Hudson finally agreed on letting her share writing duties, with a partner of his choosing.

That co-writer was now sitting across the table from her, handing her the coffee he'd brought. He placed the cup in front of her and caressed the back of her hand before pulling away. The coffee and the gesture were left untouched.

"Why don't we call it a night," she said. "I'm exhausted and I have the worst headache." *Worse since you walked in Mr. Tyler.*

Ten minutes after meeting Ethan Tyler, Erin knew he was a misogynistic, egotistical ass...and those were his best qualities. He had boasted about his past writing credits on multi-million dollar movies and how much money that he had made from other brilliant investments. He dropped enough names to fill the first five rows at an Oscar awards ceremony. And the one thing that outdid all of his irritating actions... he kissed her, uninvited. Granted it was on the cheek, but came just short of touching her lips.

For once in her life, Erin was glad she didn't have to look at the phony smile, she just knew was plastered all over his face.

"Maybe we should find a more comfortable place to work tomorrow," he said. "These hard chairs would give anybody aches and pains. I was thinking..."

Don't you dare suggest we meet at your place.

"...Maybe we could write at my place. I have a penthouse apartment with a balcony and a view overlooking the ocean." His over-inflated ego didn't even register what he had just said to a blind person.

"Well Mr. Tyler..."

"I thought I asked you to call me, Ethan."

"To tell you the truth," she continued. "...beautiful views, ocean or otherwise, really don't interest me. And this chair is quite comfortable. So I will meet you right back here in the morning." She walked out, laptop and dog in hand, leaving behind the stunned writer.

On Wednesday night, instead of having her dinner delivered, Jamie decided she needed some fresh air and walked to the little Italian restaurant on the next street. She was seated at a small table in the corner and took particular notice as the waiter removed the second place setting, when she announced she was alone. While waiting for her food, she sipped her water and looked around at the other diners. There were about fifteen tables scattered around the room and all but two, were filled. She wondered if she had missed the sign on the door, stating double occupancy preferred. *It looks like Noah's Ark in here, the way everyone is paired up.* She put the white napkin in her lap and stared at the empty chair across from her. *Since when does eating alone, bother me?* She wondered, but shook it off with a shrug. Her spicy food was delivered shortly after and consumed between thoughts of a pleasant lunch conversation, of a few days earlier.

Erin checked the time on her Braille watch. At 5:05, she knew they should work at least another hour or two, but another headache was coming on. *Funny how I hardly ever get headaches, but now two in three days in and the same three days I have worked with him. But I can't complain to Mr. Hudson. If I cause too much trouble, he'll probably want to pull the deal. But what do I do now?*

"Ethan, I think this is really a good place to stop for today," she said, while gathering her things together.

"So soon."

"Yes. We worked late the last two nights and I didn't promise to give up all my time to this project. I do have a life outside this room." She wasn't normally that short tempered with people, but he just gave her the creeps. "We'll pick it up at nine o'clock in the morning." She grabbed her briefcase and let Artemis help her to the door.

Erin waited by the elevator, returning greetings from others she had met in the building in the last week. Everyone who met Erin was instantly taken with her charms... one in particular was a little too taken.

A shiver went down her spine as she heard the soft footfalls of the expensive Italian shoes, coming up behind her. When the doors parted, he had the nerve to put his hand against her lower back guiding her inside the small enclosure, made even smaller by his presence.

Erin stood against one wall of the elevator and put Artemis on the other side to keep him from getting too close, as he liked to do. The hum of the machinery began to gently lower the small car to the ground floor. She listened very carefully as he shifted, pulling something from his pocket, but she couldn't tell what. Then she felt him kneel down beside her and reach for the dog.

"How long have you had her?" he asked.

"Since right after I lost my sight." She purposely kept her answer vague. Erin didn't want this man to know anything about her private life. A few seconds later, she heard the dog chewing on something. "Artemis, what have you got?"

"It's just a dog treat."

"Don't do that!" she said. "Don't give her anything again!"

"Sorry. I just wanted to make friends with the dog, then I could make friends with her owner. To that end, let me take you out to dinner tonight. Then I can drive you home and you won't have to bother with a cab. *Then I can drive us both back here in the morning,* he thought to himself.

The doors opened and they stepped out, Erin cringing at his invitation. She knew it was coming since the first day they met. "Ethan, I prefer to spend my evenings home, alone. I don't like to socialize."

"You don't have to socialize with anyone but me," he whispered near her ear. "We'll go somewhere very private."

"I said no!" Her loud voice startled a couple passing by. "Please don't ask me again."

"I'll see you tomorrow Erin," he called out, as she headed across the lobby and out the door. He continued watching, with a smug smile as she got in the taxi. "I'll get you to go out with me yet, lady. No one turns down Ethan Tyler."

"Who is Julius Caesar?" answered Jamie, before putting another bite of chicken fried rice into her mouth. She continued to answer the questions that the game show host asked, getting more right than wrong, as she finished off her meal. Thursday was always Chinese take out and Tiki Gardens had the best ribs and they delivered. Jamie swallowed the last of her beer and debated on another as she flipped through the channels. Friends, next, Who Wants to be a Millionaire, *I do, but for one reason only.* Two more channels went by, landing on the PAX cable network and Touched by an Angel. *Where was my angel when I needed one? And maybe still do.*

Across the room the telephone rang. *Let the machine get it,* she thought. *I'm not in the mood to fend off any telemarketers.* When the third ring came, the machine failed to pick up. *Answer it,* her mind whispered. It was on the sixth ring before Jamie could get to it. "Hello."

"Hello," responded the caller. No answer. "Hello," she repeated louder. "Jamie, is that you?"

The chauffer stood there in her living room, slightly stunned at hearing that voice, but pleasantly so. "Yeah, I'm...here."

"It's Erin Casey."

Like she needed to identify herself. Jamie doubted she'd ever forget those silken tones. "It's good to hear from you."

"I almost thought I'd missed you again," said Erin.

"No, I was just watching television. My stupid machine must be broken. You said again?"

"Yeah, I called night before last."

Jamie slapped her own forehead. *Stupid!* "Yeah, I took a walk. Sorry about that."

"That's okay. I was just a little worried about you," Erin admitted shyly. "I mean, you said you never go anywhere during the week."

She was worried about me? Jamie almost fell, into the chair next to the phone. "I don't usually. It was just...well sometimes these four walls get a little," she fumbled to find the right word. "...close."

"I understand. I track more sand into this house, than the dog, from my long walks. Speaking of which, there are absolutely no walls out here on the beach. If you're not busy on Saturday...I thought maybe you'd like to come out here for lunch."

Jamie slightly panicked. *Now what? Now what? Say no! Say Yes! Say no!* "Well that sounds good...but..." Jamie's inner voices warred for the dominant answer. One finally got on the final path from her brain to her mouth.

"If you've got other plans..."

"No! Actually that sounds like fun. I'll be there." Jamie smiled into the phone. "I haven't been to the beach in a long time and..." A beep, beep, beep cut off her sentence.

"I'm sorry," said Erin. "I have to take this call."

"That's okay. You can call me tomorrow with time and directions. Bye Erin."

After hearing the spoken farewell, Jamie slowly sat the phone back into its cradle, thinking about what would happen in a little over thirty-six hours. Absently, she reached out and snagged the fortune cookie. She snapped it open, popped half into her mouth and tossed aside the message. She looked at the small, white strip of paper on the coffee table. *These things never apply to me.* Another pause. *Oh, what the hell.* She picked it up and read it.

You have reached a fork in life's road.

One way leads to deeper sorrow and the other, to riches of the soul.

Choose wisely.

"Oh yea, that's me, wise. Instead of Confucius they should have called him confusing."

Friday night, Jamie got home three hours later than usual because of an impulsive buying escapade. She shut the door to her apartment, dropped her cane into the corner and flopped down onto the couch. She fiddled with the small ring in her hand. *I hate these things.* She tried four times before she was able to pry open the silver, metal rings. Jamie slipped the new key over one end and made two rounds until it was secure. She gave a small, satisfied smile and tossed the keys into the air, catching them with ease. The 1997 blue, Ford Explorer now bore her name on its pink slip, or soon would. She had no intention of buying a car anytime soon, that is until she got the invitation from the author to visit her beach house. When Erin made the invite, she was unaware that Jamie had no form of transportation. Jamie could have easily used that as an excuse for declining, but that override in her brain wouldn't let her. She could have taken the bus, but that was a big no, unless it was an emergency. Taking a taxi all that way, would have cost almost as much as the down payment on the used vehicle. Renting a car for the day was a waste of money. When all other possibilities were discarded, getting a car of her own seemed the only option. Although monetarily, it would set her back slightly in the quest for her dream, but she rationalized she would have needed a car then anyway, so why not.

Chapter 5

"All right, all right," said Erin, to the golden snout licking her face. "I'm up Atre, I'm up." The dog barked happily as Erin made her way toward the bathroom. "We're having company today girl. So be on your best behavior." She bent over and kissed the fur-covered head and scratched behind the ears. "But you're always a good girl, aren't you?"

Another hearty bark was her answer.

Artemis waited outside the door, until her freshly showered and dressed human reappeared. Erin walked over to the window and pulled back the curtains on the double doors. Her fingers barely reached the handle before Artemis was barreling down the stairs into the fenced in, side yard. Although Erin couldn't see the sunshine glimmering off the blue water, she felt it's warming rays on her face. *This is going to be a great day! I don't think I've been this excited about something in a long time. I guess I have missed having a friend around. I've got some catching up to do.*

Jamie made the last turn heading to Erin's house, having called and gotten the directions the night before. The immaculate houses and perfect yards sat side by side as she made her way down the road. While Jamie was never impressed with wealth, she wasn't beyond perusing the architecture of the area. She soon came to a stretch of road with no houses or businesses. It went on for half a mile before she saw the turnoff that had to lead to Erin's house. The green mailbox

with E. Casey written on the side, greeted her as she turned into the long drive up to the big white house.

The dog's barking and the sound of tires rolling over gravel alerted Erin that her guest had arrived. She waited until the bell rang, not wanting to seem as overly anxious as she was. The smiling author opened the door. "Hi Jamie, come on in. I'm really glad you could make it today."

"Me too," said the dark haired woman, as she stepped in, hesitantly. "I'm always glad to get out of the city for awhile. A little too much noise for me."

"I know what you mean. I practically went crazy in New York, even though I was only there for a few months. But the ocean air and open spaces of this place really make me feel content."

After giving Jamie a tour of the house, she led her down to her private section of beach. A huge blue and red blanket with an umbrella off to one side, waited for them, invitingly.

"Did you bring sunscreen?" asked Erin. "If not, I have about a dozen different kinds. I don't want to be responsible for you getting a sunburn."

"I put some on before I left, but thanks anyway," Jamie lowered herself down onto the colorful material. "Everybody always teases me about having a permanent tan anyway, but it's just my natural skin tone."

Erin formed that piece of information into a mental picture that would last a long time. She often thought of herself as a mental voyeur, but it's really the only way she could get a likeness of the people she couldn't see.

The next few hours were spent getting to know each other more, although Jamie still wasn't very forthcoming with information and Erin didn't want to pry, at least not yet. A delicious lunch of chicken and potato salad was heartily consumed by the sunbathers.

A short while after the meal, Artemis pranced over and dropped a disk of neon orange onto Jamie's reclining back. "I think somebody is giving me hints," she said with a little chuckle.

"Artemis, what have you got? She didn't drag out that Frisbee, did she?"

"Yeah, she did."

"No Artemis, Jamie doesn't want to play. Now go on."

The tall woman picked up the disk and stood, taking a few minutes to stretch. "That's okay, I miss playing with man's best friend or in this case woman's best friend. I'll play with her... if you don't mind."

Erin shook her head. "No, of course I don't mind. I just wanted you to relax and enjoy yourself."

Jamie smiled down at the still reclining woman. "Oh, I'm enjoying, myself believe me. But to tell you the truth, I can only take so much relaxation," she said, as she sailed the toy down the beach.

After fifteen or so rounds with the energetic canine, Jamie sat down and retrieved another cold drink from the cooler.

"I hope you don't get sand in your cast," said Erin, as she heard the woman next to her scratching.

"It wouldn't matter. The dumb thing itches all the time anyway."

"When does it come off?"

"In another week, hopefully. The doctor said depending on the x-rays, but I've always been a fast healer although in this case, six weeks wasn't fast. But I remember when I was eight; I was trying out the new pogo stick, the kid down the street got for his birthday. My pogoing was less than stellar. I fell in the bushes and got covered in scratches." She laughed. "I looked like I went ten rounds with all the neighborhood cats. I also broke two fingers on my left hand. Three days later, I ripped off the splints." Jamie heard a small chuckle. "Well, they were in my way, when I was trying to make mud pies...to throw at the kid with the defective pogo stick. Anyway, Mom found out and took me back to the doctor. He took x-rays and was stunned, when the fractures were already healed."

That was the first really personal story Jamie had relayed since they met. Erin was very happy that her new friend was feeling comfortable enough to finally share her memories.

Jamie pulled her watch from the pocket of her jean shorts. "I hate to have to say this, but I'm gonna have to be going in about half an hour. I have to work tonight. Besides I don't want to wear out my welcome."

"That would be impossible to do. In fact I'm hoping you'll come back for dinner sometime soon."

"That sounds nice," said Jamie, without a debate from her inner voice.

Erin got up from the blanket and slipped her sandals off, making her slightly shorter than before. "Could I ask you one favor before you go?"

"Sure."

"I hope it isn't rude of me since you can't get in the water, but I haven't been for a swim in a long time. I won't go alone, because it's hard to judge how far out I go and that's dangerous. So could you kind of keep an eye on me while I take a quick swim?"

Jamie took a deep breath, realizing that she would be responsible for this sightless woman's safety. If something did happen, she couldn't go in after her with the heavy cast on her foot, but she didn't want to deny this woman the small pleasure. "Sure that's no problem. Go ahead."

"Thanks." Erin proceeded to pull off her shorts and top to reveal her sky blue, two-piece swimsuit.

Jamie sputtered her coke and began coughing at the sight before her.

"Are you okay?" Erin was totally unaware that she was the cause of the mishap.

"Yeah...yeah. It just went down the wrong way."

"Okay, I'll be right back." Erin ran off to the water's edge and carefully jumped into the white surf.

"No problem. I'll keep an eye on you. Make that both eyes," said Jamie for Arte's ears only. *I shouldn't be enjoying this so much, she thought. Damn she's a friend. But she's the one who said to watch her. No she said watch out for her. Don't pick nits I have to watch her. But I shouldn't be enjoying it so much.* She sighed as the argument went on, until she saw the vision in blue, rise from the ocean.

"Can you say something so I can get headed back in the right direction," yelled Erin.

Still a little tongue tied Jamie said, "A...yeah. How's the water?" A couple of strong barks were added to the location beacon.

Erin had only re-emerged a few feet to the right of where she went in. Sandy feet followed the deep voice back to the blanket, where she accepted the towel that was handed to her. "Thanks. The water feel's great. I wish you could see for yourself. But I guess that's something else you'll have to come back for."

Not needing to torture herself anymore, Jamie turned away as Erin dried off her petite, but muscular body. "Yeah, I guess."

They worked together to pack away the beach gear and the cooler, and then headed back to the house. With everything put away, Jamie said, "I have to be going now, Erin. I had a really good time today. I'm glad you invited me."

The blonde gave her a charming smile. "I'm glad you came today. Like I said before, when that cast comes off we'll have some real fun."

Erin's exuberant attitude was infectious and Jamie couldn't wait for that time to come. "Yeah, I'll let you know."

Erin followed her movements to the door and waited for her friend to reach the bottom of the stairs. "Bye Jamie. I'll call you during the week," she said with a wave.

Jamie returned the greeting as she got into her car, but without the hand gesture. "Okay. Bye."

With a panting dog by her side, Erin stood in the open doorway, listening to the car drive away. Already, her soul felt a pull in the direction of the departing vehicle.

They talked on the phone three times in the following week, just to share the everyday happenings and job complaints. Just hearing a friendly voice after a long day, seemed to lift any lingering blue moods for both of them.

Chapter 6

The next Friday was liberation day for Jamie. She finally had two good feet, with which to walk, dance and ride. She got home from the doctor's office with a smile on her face, happier than she had been in a long time. Of course she assumed it was all because of her cast coming off, but the much deeper reason still eluded her conscious mind. *I am going to spend all day at the ranch on Sunday!* But the smile that had been plastered on her face suddenly fell. The thought of going alone brought an unfamiliar ache to her heart. She'd always relished the feeling of riding through the woods, just the wind and the horse beneath her for company. But something had changed. She didn't know what and she didn't try to take the time to try and figure it out. She just knew she didn't want to go alone. And only one person came to mind. *Erin*. The smile returned. *Maybe it's time I share my dream with my new friend.*

Jamie picked the author up, bright and early on Sunday morning and they headed out on the long drive. She still hadn't told the blonde where it was they were going, but Erin trusted her implicitly. That made it even more special to share her surprise. Music and laughter made the time slip away faster, but curiosity never left Erin's wondering mind.

Erin checked the time on her watch. "Are we even close to where ever it is we're going?"

"Oh, we'll be there in about twenty minutes or so."

"Okay. If I guess where we are, will you tell me?" Erin asked with an irresistible smile.

"You're on. Go for it."

"Well, we've been driving for almost an hour and a half and we're headed northeast of LA," mused the blonde. "We got off the highway about forty minutes ago. We have to be in the mountains with all these twists in the road and I haven't heard too many cars pass by...so am I getting warm?"

Artemis spoke up from the back seat with two barks.

Jamie caught sight of the big dog in the rear view mirror. "No interference from the peanut gallery."

Erin laughed. "But I am right, aren't I?" she gloated.

Jamie spared glances at the grinning woman and became infected with her joy. "Yes you're right. And you're also incredible." Her eyes went wide, realizing how that could have been interpreted. "I...I mean, it's incredible, how you can do all the things you do, not being able to..."

Erin decided to let the embarrassed woman off the hook. "Thank you. But I do the same things everyone else does. I just have to find an alternate way to do them, that's all."

"Well I don't think I could do it."

Erin placed a hand on Jamie's arm. "Don't under estimate yourself. You are an incredible person to. I hope you never have to prove it to yourself in a way like this, but I'd like to help you realize what a good person you are."

The encouraging words, the caring touches; it was all so foreign to Jamie. No one had ever been so completely honest and open with her and for her, ever before. The friendship she was forming with this woman was a soothing balm to her callused soul. She was light in the darkened abyss Jamie had lived in since the death of her parents. The hope she had garnered from Erin's words was now strengthened by the woman's actions...her very presence. But still that fear, that feeling of inadequacy hovered inside her, like a dense fog. Romantic love would never touch and comfort her, her past had seen to that, but the love of friendship, that she subconsciously craved, was being offered openly. All she had to do was accept and give back everything she was being given. Jamie had been a champ at taking what she wanted. Her troubles came in recognizing what she needed.

She pulled into the long drive and finally brought the car to a stop. Jamie took a long hard look at herself in the mirror and then at her friend. *This is good beginning. I won't hurt her. I won't.*

"Here we are," said Jamie, as she got out of the car. She opened the back door and Artemis jumped out, but instead of running off to enjoy the open grounds, she circled the vehicle and came to rest at her human's side.

"Good girl, Arte," praised Erin, with a stroke of her head. "Where exactly is here?" she asked of the tall woman who was now on her other side. "And don't say in the mountains. I already know that. Give this place a name and a description and clear up the big mystery."

"All right, all right. I'm really sorry I kept it from you." They started to move toward the big brown farmhouse that dominated the immediate view. "This is the Lazy Horse Ranch."

Erin chuckled.

Jamie bent down to the shorter woman's ear. "I know, I hate the name too, but I plan to change it...someday."

A curious face looked up at her. "What do you mean?"

"I'm saving up to buy this place. Well I'm saving up the down payment," Jamie explained. "Then I'll be in debt to the bank for the rest of my life, but that is the American dream. And this is my dream."

A woman in her late sixties opened the front door and smiled. "Jamie, it's so good to see you back again," she said as she came down the walkway. "We've missed you." She pulled Jamie into a bear hug.

"I've missed you to, Elizabeth. And I missed coming out here, but now that my body is back in full working order, expect to see me pestering you quite a lot."

"Listen to you... pestering me? Besides Bill and the ranch hands, you are practically my only contact with the outside world. I love this place, but I will be so glad to see some of the rest of the beautiful planet we live on." Her manners finally stepped in after her excitement in seeing Jamie again had calmed. "Speaking of beautiful, I see you're not alone this trip."

"Definitely not alone," Jamie muttered. "Elizabeth, this is my friend Erin Casey. Erin this is Mrs. Phillips."

The author extended her hand in the general direction of the older woman's voice and smiled. "It's nice to meet you Mrs. Phillips."

"It's nice to finally meet a friend of Jamie's, since she always claimed not to have any. I see she was exaggerating. Please call me Elizabeth. Now let's go inside and have some lunch. I just finished cooking it up."

Erin was talked into relating the story her short friendship with Jamie over a meal of home-made chicken and dumplings, which she found out was one of her new friend's favorites. In return, she got the abbreviated life story of Bill and Elizabeth Phillips. A fascinating tale of soul mates, being brought together through the tragedy of war, becoming parents to three beautiful children, but sadly losing one much too early and of a never ending, all encompassing love.

Some exercise was much needed after the big meal and Jamie took Erin through the back door, across the small field to the stables. She finished her previous explanation along the way. "I've always loved horses. At first I came out here to see about buying and stabling one, but I got to talking to Bill and he said he was toying with the idea of selling the place, but he would only sell it to someone with as much passion for it as he had. At first I just kidded around about buying it. I never really thought I could handle something like this. But the more we talked and the more research I did, I became really excited about it."

"I know, I can hear it in your voice." Erin held onto Jamie's arm, across the unfamiliar territory, even though Artemis was doing her job perfectly.

Not that the tall woman minded. Her need to return the kind touches became ever increasing, surprising herself to no end. They strolled along at a leisurely pace, having all day to enjoy themselves.

"Right now, Bill stables horses and has an apple orchard and grape vineyard. I plan to change things just a little. I'll keep offering stabling options to bring in a steady income, but I want to get into breeding. I also toyed with the idea of training horses for the entertainment industry. After all, I do have an inside contact in the business now."

"Well, I don't know about that," Erin chuckled. "But you certainly have my complete confidence and my help, whenever and however needed."

Jamie stopped them at the front entrance to the main barn. She turned to the woman by her side. "You really mean that don't you?"

"Absolutely, that's what friends do. They stand by each other." Erin reached out and hugged her friend.

Jamie didn't hesitate for a second in returning the hug. She finally pulled away from the affectionate gesture. "Come on, I want you to meet another friend of mine." Half way into the long barn, they came to a particular stall. "Hey girl," Jamie said to the big yellow head, snorting at her. "Did you miss me, huh?" She took Erin's hand and placed it on the white muzzle. "Erin, I want you to meet Teegan. She's a big, golden Palomino with white mane and tail and she's all mine or at least she will be. But she's mine when I come to visit."

Erin gave the horse a good rub and received a whinny as a greeting. "It's nice to meet you Teegan. She has a wonderful Irish name."

Jamie reached for the halter, hanging on the wall, next to the stall. "I can't take credit for that, I'm afraid. She already had that name when we met." She proceeded to put the leather device over the horse's head and attach the buckles.

Erin stepped back when she heard the stall door open, to allow room for the big animal to be led out. "Speaking of that, did you know that your middle name Shea is Irish?"

Jamie's dark brows furrowed together. "Really? Huh, no I didn't know that. I think I remember my Dad saying my grandmother suggested the name. I guess she could have had the heritage, but we never celebrated March 17th or anything like that. But that is interesting, thanks for letting me know."

She continued to prepare the animal for travel, as Erin stood by, listening to the horse, impatiently pawing the ground and snorting. She heard Jamie huff with exertion when she threw the heavy saddle across the animal's strong back. "Do you need any help?" she asked jokingly, as Jamie was tightening the cinch.

The dark haired woman smiled. "No, I think I got it, but thanks anyway."

"Oh, you're welcome."

"But, one day I will teach you to saddle her," Jamie said as she led the horse out the back. "If you want to that is," she added, not wanting to appear forceful.

Erin and Arte followed them out. She grinned. "I'll try anything once."

Once out in the bright sunshine, the horse was raring to go, waiting for her favorite rider. Jamie took a sugar cube from her pocket to placate the animal, temporarily. "I forgot to ask you, do you even know how to ride?"

"Oh, yeah, I love it," said Erin. "Of course I can't ride alone now, but I could probably get up there behind you," she added, sheepishly. When she didn't hear an answer, she worried. "Why don't I just wait here for you?"

"What? I'm sorry." Jamie shook her head. "I just phased out there for a minute. You're good at making me do that," she teased. "And I would be glad to share a ride with you." The smile she received outshone the sun. "What about Arte?"

"I'll just take off her leash and she can run with us. She could use the exercise too."

Jamie mounted the magnificent beast and pulled Erin up into the saddle behind her. Hands came to rest against her stomach and her insides fluttered. Of course, Jamie didn't recognize the feeling for it's true meaning and brushed it off. But she did allow herself to enjoy the closeness.

They took off at a fast gallop, to expend the horse's initial burst of energy. Across the field they flew, racing toward an unknown future and rejoicing in the freedom of the moment. A time of healing was beginning for the dark haired woman. A task that would be hampered by inner battles and the flaws she saw staring back at her in the mirror. Only the unconditional love and acceptance of the fair-haired author would carry her through the turmoil, into the peace waiting on the other side.

Eight legs trotted down the well-worn path, winding through the tranquil forest. Artemis occasionally looked up to see her human, smiling, cuddled against...her. The sounds of a babbling brook reached Erin's ears when they slowed the horse to a walk. Artemis barked and ran ahead, in anticipation of the cool refreshing water.

Erin released a huge peaceful sigh. "We've done this before," she said quietly.

Jamie leaned forward and turned her head to see the other woman's face. "What?"

The blonde head nodded with confidence. "I can't explain it, but we've done this before. Ridden double, just like this, through a quiet forest. It was a long time ago...." her thoughts trailed off. She felt Jamie staring at her and she gave her a crooked smile. "You think I'm crazy, right."

She shook her head silently and gestured for the horse to move. When they reached the stream, Jamie helped Erin down and hit the ground with a thud, herself. She let Teegan wander close enough to get a drink, while she thought about Erin's comment. "I don't think you're crazy," she

finally said. "I...it just...I guess it scared me to hear you say that because...I was kind of feeling it to. What do you think it means?"

"I don't know. But I don't think it's scary. It just makes our friendship seem...destined."

"Like something you'd write about," suggested Jamie, trying to dismiss the truth.

Erin reached out and put a hand on her shoulder. "But this isn't fiction, it's very real."

Jamie studied the face that looked at her and she could swear that Erin was actually seeing her. They both lived in darkness, one who couldn't see and one who wouldn't see. But the veil over Jamie's eyes was slowly receding, leading her to a whole new beautiful world.

They returned to the house, after several more hours of riding and exploring. Neither mentioned the unusual memory they had shared, but it was firmly planted in both of their minds for future thought. Elizabeth sent them off with sandwiches and pie for the long trip home. She also extended a standing invitation for Erin to return and the author promised she would. The bonus of a delicious meal was only added incentive.

Fifteen minutes into the drive, the sky darkened and Jamie watched as dark, ominous clouds rolled across the horizon ahead of them. "It looks like we're heading right into a storm," she said, as splashes of rain started hitting the windshield.

The blonde head snapped around. "Are you sure?" Erin asked nervously. "Maybe it's just going to rain." That's what she prayed.

Jamie reached down and turned the radio on. "I don't think so. Maybe we can get a weather report." The song faded to annoying static every few seconds and she turned it off. "We're still out of range of the signal."

The rain fell harder and a streak of white lightning reached the ground ahead. Three seconds later, a crash of thunder rocked the car. Erin nearly created a sunroof with her reaction.

"That was a good one," Jamie chuckled.

They drove on and the storm raged harder. It soon became nearly impossible for Jamie to see the road because of the blinding rain. The sky lit up like the 4th of July and thunder rolled across the sky like the timpani drums of a thousand symphonies. It was the worst storm Jamie could ever remember since being in California. She was concentrating so hard on keeping the wheels to the pavement, that she didn't notice the condition of her silent passenger. Only when Artemis stuck her head between the seats and barked, did she glance over. What she saw, scared her. She slowed the car to take a closer look. "Erin, what's wrong?" The woman was incapable of responding. "Erin, talk to me!"

The blonde was on the verge of hyperventilating. Her entire body was shivering and her skin was pale.

"Is it the storm?" asked Jamie, as she pulled off to the side of the road. "Is it scaring you?" She barely saw the nod as a boom of thunder sounded, making Erin shake even harder. "What can I do?" She asked more to herself, since she didn't really expect an answer from the trembling woman. Jamie looked out the window between swipes of the windshield washer and she didn't have much hope that it would be in better anytime soon. She started the engine and got back onto the road. "Erin, listen to me, you are safe in this car. But I'm going to take us somewhere, where we can go inside and get out of the rain. Will that help?" This time she couldn't tell if the head was saying yes or no. She just drove on and turned down the road with the sign, leading them to the Mountain Top Motel.

Ten minutes later, Jamie pulled up to the registration office and hopped out after telling the dog to watch out for Erin. She was already drenched by the time she slid back into the driver's seat. She pulled around to the back of the motel. "Erin, I'm going to come around and open the door and help you inside. Do you understand me?"

"Yes," Erin answered with trembling lips.

Thankfully, there was no sound of thunder between the time it took for them to get from the car to the door. Jamie flipped on the light in room number eleven to see what she'd gotten them into. She'd seen worse in New York, much worse. The room was painted beige, but on second look, she could tell that the walls were just stained from years of cigarette smokers. Other than that, the room looked clean, but sparse. One full size bed sat in the middle of the room, covered in a blue blanket. One chair beside a small table sat in the far corner and that was it. But they weren't there for decorating tips.

Jamie sat the shivering woman down in the chair and went into the tiny bathroom. She threw a towel around her own neck and took one back into the other room. "Here, let me help you," she said, drying the pale face and rubbing the short blonde hair. "Are you feeling any better?"

"I'm sorry," came the pitiful answer.

"What? There's nothing to be sorry about," assured Jamie, as she continued her efforts. "You need to get out of these wet things. I don't want you to get sick." She looked around the room and grabbed the blanket from the bed. She helped Erin peel off the soaked shirt and jeans and then wrapped her in the dry, but itchy cover. She helped her to her feet and guided her over to the bed. "I think you'll be more comfortable lying down," explained Jamie.

The storm had begun to calm, bringing the same to Erin. "Yes," she agreed, curling up on her side. She soon resumed a more normal breathing pattern.

Jamie pushed the damp bangs off her forehead, watching the woman carefully, hurting for her, whatever the reason for the bad episode. "I'm going to try and dry off a little," she told her. "I'll be right back, if you need anything, call me."

"I will."

Artemis hopped up on the bed and lay down behind her human.

It was impossible for Jamie to get her clothes dry with just a towel. She pulled them off and hung them over the shower rod, next to Erin's. Leaving her underwear on, she wrapped herself in a short white towel; at least it was short on her. She went back into the other room and pulled the chair over to the side of the bed. She felt guilty staring at her friend, but she didn't know what else to do. All Jamie knew was that she needed to protect Erin, more than anything else in the world. She just sat there listening to the rain falling against the roof. Before she knew it, 30 minutes had passed, but it was still too early for her to fall asleep. She contemplated going back to the car for awhile and listening the radio even through the static, but again, the pull of the sleeping woman was too great; her own boredom was secondary. She got up, walked to the window, pulled back the thin curtain and watched the drops hit the car, just outside. *I could go back to the office and see if they have anything to read; maybe the Sunday paper.* Jamie looked down at her current attire. *Scratch that idea, I'm not into exhibitionism. I'll just have to wait until.. .*

"Jamie."

She turned from the window at the sound of her name and pulled the chair closer to the bed. "Yeah Erin, I'm right here. I thought you were asleep."

Erin pulled herself to a seated position, careful to keep the blanket around her shoulders, covering her current state of undress. "No. I was just trying to get over my embarrassment." The blonde head shook in chagrin and dropped to her chest. "I've never had an attack that bad before, I don't understand it."

Jamie moved over to the edge of the bed and rubbed a covered shoulder, comfortingly. "There is nothing to be embarrassed about. But I was worried about you. Can you tell me what happened?"

Erin cleared her throat and reached out to pat the golden head in her lap. "I had a panic attack."

"Because of the storm?"

She shrugged a shoulder. "Really it's just the thunder that gets to me. The noise..." She hesitated, still having trouble talking about it.

"Take your time," encouraged Jamie. "You don't even have to say anything if you don't want to."

Erin smiled at her friend's caring attitude. "I do want to. I scared you and you deserve to know why." She took a deep breath and continued. "Just before the explosion, there was a long, deep, rumbling noise, it shook the ground and the windows...just like loud thunder. Now, whenever I hear anything like that, but mostly thunder, I go right back to those first few terrifying seconds."

"I'm sorry you had to go through that and still have to relive it at times like this. You said this was the worst attack?"

Erin simply nodded. "You know we don't get a lot of storms back home, especially bad ones."

"Yeah. I haven't seen one this bad since I was a little kid in the mid-west. We had them a lot."

"That must be it then," said Erin. "It was just so intense."

Another thought occurred to the tall woman. "Have you always been at home when this has happened?"

Erin considered the question carefully. "Now that I think about it, yes."

Jamie frowned. "That could be it then to. You were way out here in unfamiliar territory, away from the feeling of safety that your house provides." She kicked herself. *So typical for you, huh.* "I should have checked the weather this morning. If I had..."

Erin reached out from the blanket and grabbed Jamie's arm, not caring that the cover fell away. "Hey, this is not your fault!" she said, then added more gently. "I had so much fun today...with you. I wouldn't change that for anything. These panic attacks are just something I have to live with. The therapist said, as time goes on, they will probably lessen and maybe go away all together. But, I'm not going to stop doing things because of them. I just won't be moving to the mid-west any time soon," she chuckled, trying to lighten the mood.

"I'm glad to hear that."

"In fact I hope you will invite me to go riding with you again...like I said I had a really good time." Another rumbling, this one from her stomach, interrupted her sentiment.

"Should I panic now?" teased Jamie.

They both laughed.

Jamie headed toward the bathroom. "Why don't I run out and get those sandwiches, Elizabeth gave us," she said, discarding her towel. She slipped into her damp clothes and dashed to the car. The rain had slowed, temporarily and with a quick stop at the vending machine near their room, Jamie returned none the worse than when she left.

After their meal, including home made apple pie, conversation carried them to the eleven o'clock hour and it didn't take much persuasion for Erin to call it a night. Jamie told a small fib to the tired woman, claiming that there was a comfortable chair in the corner that she could sleep in. Of course sleeping on a bed of nails would have been more comfortable, but Jamie gladly made the sacrifice of a good night's sleep.

Several hours later another storm front moved in. First came just a light rain and that had lulled Jamie to sleep. But the lightening began to flash and the wind blew harder, as she twisted her tall body in the small chair, trying to find a spot that didn't hurt her back. It went on like that for a while, but suddenly a crash sounded. Simultaneously, Jamie's eyes flew open and Erin screamed.

"No! No!" Erin wanted to run fast and far, but something was holding her and she couldn't move. The sense of fear soon faded, as the voice in her ear whispered soothing words.

"You're okay Erin. You're safe. I'm here. You're with me and everything is okay. It's just noise, nothing is going to hurt you. I will never let anything hurt you, I promise." The comforting words poured from Jamie's heart without thought. A need drove her to hold this woman in her arms and protect her. She placed a kiss on top of the blonde head as she rocked her, still providing solace.

When Erin had finally calmed back down, Jamie pulled away, suddenly feeling awkward. "Why don't you try and get some sleep," she said. "I'll bring the chair over here right next to the bed. It'll be okay."

A slightly trembling hand grabbed hers. "No, please. Could you just...I think I'll be okay if I could just feel you...next to me." She scooted back against the dog. "There's enough room. I just need...you" The last word was barely a whisper and was missed by the dark haired woman.

Jamie lay down next to her, trying to get close enough to help Erin's fears, but at the same time keeping her own personal space, personal. Both were wearing their shirts, which now bore enough wrinkles to put a Shar-pei to shame, but below the waist there was only underwear. The room was warm and Jamie was glad, Erin didn't insist on sharing the single blanket...for more than one reason.

Erin adjusted the cover over her shoulder. "Thank you," she whispered.

Even in the dark, Jamie could see the face that was beautiful, but sad at times and wise, but still innocent enough to be awed at life; a woman so opposite from herself, yet familiar like...the oldest of friends. *I don't quite understand why we're such good friends, but for the first time in my life, I'm not going to question it.* "You're welcome Erin. Goodnight."

Jamie's accurate internal timepiece did its job as usual. While her mind was shaking away the last fuzzies of sleep, her wide awake body tried to stretch, but was hampered by...

Erin felt the mattress move. *Probably just an AM tremor*, her slumbering mind thought. She snuggled in tighter and clamped down on the pillow she was clutching. A pillow with a...heartbeat. Sleep flew from her mind and she eased her head from Jamie's shoulder and her arm from around her waist.

"Good Morning."

"Good Morning."

The awkward moment that could have happened didn't. Nothing was mentioned of the position, their slumbering bodies had gravitated into during the night. Jamie simply climbed to her feet and went to the window. "It looks its going to be a nice Monday," she said of the sun peaking over the farthest building.

Erin sat up and ran her fingers through her short hair, smoothing the bed head look as much as possible. She pushed the blanket off her shoulders, letting it pool around her waist. She may not have said anything about the previous night, but it was definitely on her mind. *That was certainly...* "Monday!"

Jamie turned back from the window and reached for her now stiff jeans. "Yeah, that's what usually comes after Sunday."

"I know that smarty, but what about your job? You're definitely going to be late. I know you didn't get much sleep last night," she rambled on. "You shouldn't go in at all, but I don't want you to get in trouble..."

"Erin, it's all right. I'll take care of it," said Jamie, as she stepped into the bathroom.

There must be something I can do, thought Erin. A slow smile crossed her face.

When she returned, Jamie laid the smaller pair of jeans on the foot of the bed. "I'll let you get dressed. I'll be back in a minute."

About ten minutes later, she walked in to find Erin just saying good-bye to someone on her cell phone.

"Don't worry," said the smiling author. "You are set for the day. Bridgett is going to cover for you, because you took such good care of me last night. You've got the rest of the day to relax."

"Wow, it pays to know people in high places, doesn't it," laughed Jamie. "Here." She carefully handed Erin a small paper cup, filled with a dark, hot liquid. "It's probably not the best tasting coffee, but I had to have my morning fix."

Erin took a swallow and grimaced. "Well, we won't need to stop for gas, we'll just put this in the tank, unless that's where you got it."

Jamie was just recovering from her own first taste. "No way, I need to keep that car for a few years. We'll stop on the way back and get some real breakfast. Are you ready?"

"Yeah, I hate to leave this paradise, but let's go home."

They stopped at the drive through of the first McDonald's they came to, choosing not to go in, because they both resembled something from *Night of the Living Dead*. On the drive back, Erin asked Jamie's opinion on certain aspects of Noah Factor and how she thought they would come through on film. Jamie was happy to give her humble opinions, but of course never expected them to be taken seriously. Upon reaching the beach house, Jamie left Erin with a promise that she would call later. And Erin once again thanked the dark haired woman for a fun Sunday adventure and for taking such good care of her in her time of need.

"Why don't you go pick out a movie, while I put these in the dishwasher," said Erin.

Jamie had come back to the beach house the next Thursday, for the second time, at the invitation of a home cooked meal, which as with everything Erin did, was perfect. It still amazed her how someone with no sight could do all the things that the incredible young woman did. Her respect for Erin grew by leaps as they spent more time together. "I can do that," Jamie said to the busy woman. "Any preferences?"

"No, I'm really easy to please," she said, innocently.

Jamie's internal voice wouldn't even touch that comment. She surveyed the vast video library, realizing that one-day in the not too distant future, she would see one of the spines read *The Noah Factor*. *She's definitely a romantic*, thought Jamie as such titles as *Shakespeare In Love*, *The Way We Were*, *Love Story* and *Ghost* stared back at her. But at the same time there were many comedies, along with action adventure, science fiction and documentaries.

"See anything you like?" asked Erin, as she walked into the room carrying a tray with two pieces of chocolate cake and a pot of steaming coffee.

Shut up, Jamie immediately scolded her self. "Well, there is certainly a lot to choose from."

"Oh yeah. But that's not all." Erin sat the tray on the coffee table and made her way over to stand in front of the videos and Jamie. She tilted her head up and with a most devious smile, she purred, "I could show you my secret stash."

The timber of the young woman's voice sent a chill down Jamie's long spine. She tried to keep her feet planted to the dark carpeting, but the traitors shifted nervously and took a small step back. "A... secret stash?"

"Yeah, the ones I have to keep hidden from young eyes when my niece and nephew are visiting." Without moving Erin reached to an upper shelf and felt around for the black pencil cup, she knew was close by. Pulling the container down, she turned it over and into her other hand landed a shiny piece of metal. She held the gold key up for Jamie's closer inspection. "So what do you say, feeling adventurous?"

"I'm not sure," said Jamie, in a nervously excited sort of way. *This night has definitely taken an unusual turn*. "I never would have thought you were someone who..." she left the sentence hanging as she followed the blonde author to a wall cabinet.

A twist of the wrist unlocked the oak door and slowly it fell open. "You didn't think I would enjoy a good..."

Jamie blinked in nervous anticipation as the doors parted to reveal two shelves of brightly colored video cases. *Wait a minute!*

"...Disney movie," finished Erin, with a huge smile that turned to a jovial laugh.

Jamie's heartbeat slowed, but she didn't quite know if it was with relief or disappointment. She smirked at the shorter woman, knowing it would be read in her voice. "Very funny, Ms. Casey. You really had me going there for a minute."

"I'm sorry," Erin said, between laughs. "I just couldn't resist. You're always so serious. I had to something to shake you up. I wish I could have seen the look on your face."

"Well, my friend it was a good one, I assure you."

Erin turned away, her own joke now bringing a slightly rosy hue to her tanned face. "What would you have done if I had been talking about those kinds of movies?"

The traitorous feet took that small step forward, bringing Jamie back closer to the suddenly timid woman "Well now, I guess you'll never know." With a small chuckle, Jamie allowed Erin her personal space once more. "So why do you have to keep these movies locked away from your niece and nephew?"

"Are you kidding? When they're here I want them to spend time with me. If these were in easy reach they'd be plastered in front of the TV, especially Caitlin. Brig says she watches these over and over and knows them by heart. Don't get me wrong, I love Disney movies, always have, except Hercules. They made a mockery of Greek Mythology with that one"

"Let me guess," said Jamie, as they went back to the couch to retrieve their desert. "You have studied mythology in depth, hence the name of your dog."

Erin gingerly reached for the hot cup of coffee. "Absolutely. Surely you saw the influence in Noah Factor."

The dark head nodded. "I did, but I wasn't sure if it was intentional or just my interpretation." The discussion about mythological happenings went on for the next half an hour. The cake and coffee were soon devoured, the movie seemingly forgotten about. For once, Jamie held the bulk of the conversation as she had done more and more often as she had come to know Erin better.

That particular discussion ended when Jamie excused herself and left the room. Erin's thoughts drifted away to a matter that had filled many a solitary time in the past weeks since she had met the tall, limo driver.

Jamie noticed her distraction when she stepped back into the room. "Is something wrong Erin?" she asked, taking her seat next to the woman, on the soft couch. "Is that jerk, Tyler, still bothering you?"

Erin gave half a shrug. "Well he's still being his jackass self, but that isn't what I was thinking about."

"Is there anything I can do to help?"

Erin dropped her head and gave a shy smile. "I hope so. I...I...When I said earlier that I wished I could see your face, I meant it." She paused for a moment. "Would you tell me what you look like?"

Jamie sat back against the sofa and sighed. "I'm just an ordinary looking woman. Nothing special."

Erin pulled one leg onto the couch, bringing her sideways to face Jamie. "I've come to realize that everyone is something special," she said, softly. "And most people take for granted the face of another human being." Sadness crept into her voice. "You know I've never even seen my niece. She was born after I lost my sight. I try to imagine her all the time. Brig says she looks a lot like me, when I was that age, but I don't know. Sometimes it's hard to even remember those photos." She reached out to touch Jamie with her hand and with her words. "Will you please tell me what you look like?"

Jamie studied the author's delicate face for a few deep seconds, realizing just how important this was to her friend. "Okay, I'll do my best. Well, I have straight black hair, just past my shoulders, my eyes are blue and I guess you can tell how tall I am. I've always felt too tall, but..."

"I think you're just the right height for you," Erin interpreted with the compliment. "I also think that your modesty won't allow you to give an accurate description of yourself. There is another way I can sort of get an image of you in my mind."

"How?" she was afraid to ask.

"By touching you." Erin felt her friend stiffen and pull away from their close proximity. "I know that you're a very private person Jamie, but we are friends and this is very important to me." Silence. "But if you can't..." She felt a strong hand grasp her own and bring it to the brunette's face.

No words were spoken as fingertips traced the planes and curves, mapping out the beauty that she knew was before her. Several eternal minutes passed as Jamie tried to keep her nervous body still and her breathing calm, which was a monumental task.

Erin took extra time with the intimate touches, but she had to know, had to be sure. The swirl of ears, strong, high cheekbones and soft lips were all platonically caressed to complete a picture. Finally she pulled away and Jamie's eyes fluttered open.

"Well, what do you think?" she said with a slight laugh, needing to break the tension. "Like I said, pretty plain huh?"

Erin smiled and moved, still a little farther away. She took a moment to draw the face she had just felt and carefully wrapped words around the image. "The writer in me would say something like, gleaming strands of raven hair framed the gracefully curved, but strongly noble face. Skin, bronzed from the sun's rays stretched across a frame of lithe bones and bold muscles, putting to shame all in her presence. But the most startling feature, seen in the mind's eye, is the piercing

gaze released from the endlessly cerulean eyes. An icy gaze that would rival the thrust of a silver sword into the soul of any man or woman."

A blush spread over Jamie, threatening to burn from the inside out. "That's...very flattering...but not quite fair," she said, quietly.

"What do you mean?"

"That's almost exactly the way you described Simeron in your book."

"I know. You are exactly the way I've always imagined her. You were my inspiration, without my even knowing you. But I'm so glad I know you now."

Jamie closed her eyes in panic as the other faces flew across her memory, taunting her. The swirl of raging emotions sent her into turmoil, disrupting the calm she usually felt in Erin's presence. She shook her entire body, desperate to reign in those explosive feelings. "That's the problem Erin," she finally said, with a clinched jaw. "You don't know me and I pray that you never really do. I have to go." Jamie jumped up and headed for the nearest door.

"Wait! What's wrong? What did I say wrong?" The confused author stood on shaky legs. The feel of almost hatred, lingered in the room as she listened, hearing the front door open seconds later. "I don't understand," she said with desperation.

Jamie stopped, but didn't look back. "I know," she said sadly, "...and I'm sorry."

The sound of a closing door rang in her ears. A wet nose brushed against Erin's hand. "I don't know what just happened here Arte, but I'm not going to let her just leave it at that."

Chapter 7

The next two weeks passed in a lonely wave of solitude for both Jamie and Erin. Keeping to herself at work, Jamie arrived home every night to find apologetic messages from the author on her answering machine. And every night, she hated herself a little more for avoiding the problem. Hoping it would just go away, but at the same time, terrified that her new friend would go away, even if she thought that was the best thing.

Erin spent the fourth of July with her family. They had all come to the beach and the entire day was spent swimming, building sandcastles and eating. At the end of the day they sat on the deck and watched a private fireworks display, arranged by Erin's wealthy father. Caitlin and Conner snuggled down next to their aunt and between ooohs and aaahs, they described to her, the colorful sky bursts they saw. Many times during the day, Erin had thought of Jamie. Knowing the woman was all alone, had caused many frowns to slip in between the smiles. Without her friend's presence, Erin felt an emptiness that even her family couldn't fill.

The rest of her time was spent trading verbal jabs with her co-writer, the Hollywood sleaze, Ethan Tyler. His point of view always being that the male character in the story needed to be more important than Erin's heroine.

"This is a movie sweetheart," he said, leaning forward and taking a whiff of her very alluring perfume. "And if you want this movie to make big bucks, then we have to do it my way. People won't pay eight dollars of their hard-earned money to see some babe in a dress, leading an army. Television is the only place that will work. Now if we remove half the dress and have her following muscle man, then we got it made."

When Tyler had made that asinine statement, Erin had been so furious, she threw her tepid cup of coffee in his general direction and stormed out. Of course he followed her, brushing away the sparse drops of java that did manage to land on him.

"Come on babe. Maybe I was a little harsh. Look we can work this out," he said, following her down the long hall. "I forgive the little temper tantrum back there. In fact it's nice to see that you have a little spark inside that beautiful head."

Erin continued her long trek, blocking out most of his offensive words, letting her silence speak her anger. She stopped by the elevator and only then did she turn to address him. "Mr. Tyler, I am taking a week off from your dreadful company. When I return, I suggest that you drastically change your attitude or you may find out that this spark can become a raging inferno. And I would hate to have to ask the janitorial staff to sweep up your pitiful ashes."

She didn't see the flashy smile that slowly turned to a scowl as she stepped onto the elevator. Oh, her threat didn't scare the macho writer in the least. But her attitude was starting to make him angry. And when he got really angry, people tended to get hurt.

Erin was still seething when she arrived home. She was not going to put up with that arrogant little ass any more. *I'll give him one more chance, not that I expect any difference, but then Hudson will have to put an end to this partnership.* Everything was in turmoil at the moment, her career and her personal life. *I won't give up on Jamie, I can't. Maybe I should just tell her; if she's waiting for me to say something. Maybe that's why she got upset. We did get more intimate that night then ever before, except for the night of the storm, when she held me. I know what it feels like being near her and I'm sure she feels it to. We both need to know one way or the other.*

Two bare feet rocked back and forth on top of the coffee table. The owner connected to those fidgety feet, stared blankly at the TV screen. Another night of brooding lay ahead of her. The air in the room was just cool enough to keep Jamie from sweating, but if her night ended like the past several had, sweating is exactly what she would end up doing. The equipment in her exercise room was her only company. She threw her head back and released an explosive breath. *What the hell are you waiting for J, just go.*

She had made about twenty reps with the barbell when the phone rang. "Hello," she answered out of breath.

"Hi Jamie, it's Erin."

With the sound of her favorite voice, Jamie's sour mood began to melt away, lifting her soul back to a resemblance of contentment. "Hi."

Several seconds passed as each tried to think of exactly what to say.

"I'm sorry."

"I'm sorry."

The simultaneous apology made them both chuckle, dissipating some of the tension on both ends of the line.

Erin quickly continued to make amends. "Jamie, whatever I said or did that night, I'm sorry. I want to understand what happened, so it doesn't happen again. Will you give me that chance?"

Jamie took a deep breath. "Erin, you have nothing to be sorry for. Everything was my fault. I over reacted. You didn't do anything, but be the sweet, gentle soul you are. My own personal demons chose that particular moment to rear their ugly heads and pounce on my back. I'm the one who's sorry. These last two weeks have been pretty awful."

"For me too Jamie. It's been so lonely, not talking to you every night."

"Yeah, I know." Jamie began her next question hesitantly, daring her inner voice to challenge her. "Can we... just forget that all this ever happened and go on from here. I don't want this to change things between us."

Erin smiled into the receiver. Those were the best words she'd heard in a long time. Even though she wanted things to change between them, but for the better. "I'd like that," she said. "So, tell what's been going on since we last talked?"

For the next hour, the renewed friendship was revealed across the miles, from the heart of the city to the quiet expanse of beach. Jamie told of her boring days at the computer and her five nights of driving the limo. Tales of the stereotypical blue-blooded passengers made Erin laugh, another sound Jamie would never tire of hearing. Both went to sleep that evening looking forward to their weekend routine returning to normal. *I didn't scare her away*, thought Jamie excitedly. *I can do this. I can be a friend.* That thought sent Jamie to sleep with a tiny smile on her face.

The barking dog stood at the edge of the surf, watching the two swimmers splash and play around in the water like a couple of kids on summer vacation. Erin found particular joy in hearing her sighted friend's laughter. She also felt the protectiveness emanate from Jamie, as she stayed close by, keeping her safe. All the awkwardness of their short estrangement was completely gone, as they played the Saturday afternoon away.

"Now that was fun," said Erin, as she was guided back to the big green blanket, guarding them from the gritty sand.

Jamie nodded her head in full agreement. "Yeah, I haven't felt like this in...well since I was nine."

Erin wiped away as much of the seawater from her body as possible. Unlike before, she had chosen a yellow one-piece bathing suit with orange trim. It wasn't a conscious decision, since she was unaware of the effect her previous swimming attire had on her friend. A truly conscious choice would have seen them both frolicking in the water sans clothing at all. But that was a dream from the night before, from several previous nights actually; one that had flashed into her mind a few times during the day's water activities. Thankfully, the cool ocean had kept her libido down to a dull roar. But she had decided that tonight was the night. She couldn't, wouldn't put it off any longer.

"I don't know about you, but I've worked up quite an appetite," said Erin.

"I could do with a bite or two myself."

"Well, why don't you use the downstairs bath and grab a shower. I'll grab a quick one too and then I'll fix us some dinner."

"That sounds like a plan."

Jamie shook out the blanket and began folding it up as Erin headed back to the house, following Arte's lead. Half way up the beach, she turned back. "Oh, by the way, I got some new videos you might be interested in." A teasing smile covered the author's face as she took off again, not waiting for a response.

After a meal of homemade vegetable-beef soup and fresh baked bread. Erin and Jamie went into the upstairs den for coffee and dessert. A short time later Jamie stood next to the unlit fireplace, admiring the painting hanging above the mantel. Erin explained that she fell in love with the piece immediately, at a gallery in Houston the day before the accident. She had it shipped back to LA, but hadn't rediscovered it until months later, after her return from San Diego. Her first instinct was to sell it, because it was too much of a reminder, but she soon realized that it was one of the last vivid things she had seen and in a strange way it continued to give her hope to see it again.

Erin set the multi-colored coffee cup on the matching saucer and took a breath. *Here goes.* "You know it's the things I will never see that I'll miss most, if the operation never happens; my child's first smile, first step...if I ever have a child that is. Seeing Ireland, the home of my ancestors." She took another calming breath, before continuing. "Most of all, I'll miss really seeing your face, besides the vision I have in my mind." Erin stood and walked to the end of the long couch. "Jamie, the time we've spent together has been the best of my life. I feel like you understand me. You are very important to me...and I've come to realize that...I've fallen in love with you."

She waited.

Jamie felt as if the breath had been knocked from her lungs. She hadn't seen this coming, or maybe she was just suffering from emotional blindness. But there it was, six little words that had the power to paralyze. The room suddenly became an abyss, her on one side and her friend on the other, with an infinitely wide, empty space looming between them.

In the time it took for a heart to beat...or to break, Erin had her answer. An answer screamed in the sound of silence. "Well, I guess I just made a total fool of myself," she chuckled, totally embarrassed. "I read things all wrong. My stupid eyes couldn't see your face, couldn't tell that all you wanted was friendship. And now I've lost that too." Erin started to back away. "I would tell you to forget what I said, but I guess that's impossible." She shook her head desperately. "I'm sorry. I have to get out of here." Erin hurried from the room, bouncing off the doorframe as she made her escape.

Jamie hadn't moved, except to drop her head and squeeze her eyes shut, before the tears from Erin's words were wrenched from her heart. Struggling with the guilt, she finally realized that the author was gone. "Erin wait!" *I can't let this happen again!* She ran through the house, following the trail of overturned chairs and a broken lamp, to the blonde's bedroom. White curtains were blowing from the ocean breezes, wafting through the open sliding door.

A scream and a thud were the next horrifying sound to reach Jamie's ears. She ran out the door and stopped at the top of the stairs, at the horrifying sight. Erin's unmoving body lay in a heap on the wooden deck below. *Oh God no! Not again!* "Erin! Erin!" Jamie frantically ran down the steps. Reaching her fallen friend, she felt for a pulse. When she felt the weak beat beneath her fingertips, only then did she allow herself to shed a tear. Jamie ran back up to the room and called the paramedics. Seconds later she returned to find the golden retriever standing guard over her injured human. Artemis looked up at the dark haired woman with sad eyes.

Jamie approached cautiously. "It's okay girl. I just want to help her."

The dog cocked her head sideways, hearing the tall woman's tone of voice. She backed away, slightly.

Still moving slowly, Jamie knelt down and placed a blanket over Erin. The dark glasses had fallen from her face and Jamie saw the slight scarring around her eyes, as she held the small towel against Erin's bleeding head. She wasn't about to let the almost over whelming, feelings of guilt keep her from helping her, until medical personnel arrived.

The dog whimpered.

"She's going to be okay Artemis." She said it as much to herself as to the worried canine. "She will be. She has to be. We can't lose her. I can't lose her."

Erin began to moan and shift her body, even though she wasn't quite conscious.

Jamie bent close and spoke into Erin's ear. "Sweetheart, listen to me. You need to stay still. Don't move around. Help is on the way. You're going to be okay. I promise."

Erin did as she was told and drifted back into unconsciousness. A few seconds later, Jamie heard the sirens and instructed Artemis to bring them around to the back. The nervous woman stepped aside and let them work on her friend. She knew they contacted the hospital, but their words eluded her as she paced and prayed. There didn't seem to be an extreme urgency in their actions and Jamie wasn't sure if she was relieved or if she wanted to beat the crap out of them for inadequate care.

Soon they lifted the small body onto the gurney and headed around the side of the house. She was loaded into the back of the ambulance. Jamie started to climb into the vehicle, but was stopped by the paramedic.

"Are you family?" he asked.

Jamie hesitated. "No."

"I'm sorry, you'll have to take your own car."

She nodded and stepped back, as he pulled the heavy door shut. Jamie took one last look in the tiny window at Erin's pale face and the white bandage wrapped around her head, already stained with crimson. *What have I done?* The vehicle sped away, lights twirling and sirens blaring, leaving Jamie rooted to her spot. Only the dog's bark pulled her from her guilt trip. "Come on girl, we have to go." She hurried and locked up the house, and then she and Artemis piled into her car and hurried after the emergency vehicle.

She had grabbed Erin's cell phone before she left and now she had to make the call. Getting the number from the operator, she dialed as she sailed down the highway.

Continued in Part 3.

The Athenaeum's Scroll Archive

~ At First Sight ~

by Colleen

General Disclaimer: This is an alternate uber story. The physical descriptions of the two lead characters may remind you of two others we all know and love, but all characters in the story are from my own imagination. This story is an original work and is copyrighted by the author. It cannot be sold or used for profit in any way.

Violence Disclaimer: This story depicts scenes of mild violence and/or their aftermath.

Hurt/Comfort Disclaimer: This story has some elements that may be best classified as such.

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No copy write infringement was intended in the use of the song "I Need You"

Thanks, to my beta readers Barbara and Jennis.

All positive comments are welcome at coleen30@webtv.net

Part 3

Chapter 8

"What happened?" demanded the scared woman, as she rushed in the hospital emergency entrance.

Jamie sat on one of the hard plastic chairs and tried provide some explanation to the confused woman. Not being able to meet her eyes, Jamie took a deep breath and began, leaving out the true nature of the conversation that led to the accident.

"I don't believe this!" said an angry Bridgett. "You were supposed to be her friend Jamie. She thinks the world of you. What did you say to upset her enough to run away from you?"

Sad, blue eyes finally rose to meet flashing green. "That's between Erin and me. If she wants to tell you that's okay, but I won't. It was just a misunderstanding."

Bridgett shook her head. "No! My sister wouldn't run away from a simple misunderstanding. She..."

"Anyone here for Erin Casey?" asked the doctor, stepping around the corner.

"Yes, I'm her sister." Bridgett turned her attention to the short, brown haired woman, scribbling notes on a chart.

"I'm Doctor Crawford," she said finally, extending a hand and offering a caring smile.

Jamie stood back away from the two, but still close enough to hear.

"Your sister is very lucky," said the doctor. "There are no breaks or spinal injuries and no internal injuries. I had to put ten stitches in her forehead and she does have a concussion and a severely sprained wrist. Because of the previous head injury, I want to admit her overnight for

observation and do another CAT scan in the morning. But I really don't expect any further complications."

Jamie released a heavy sigh of relief upon the doctor's words. A single tear slid down her cheek as she quietly turned and left.

When she got back to her building, Jamie bypassed her apartment and went up to the roof. The anger she had held in couldn't be contained any longer. An old, black, metal chair suffered the fury of her wrath, as it slid across the rooftop and crashed into a brick wall. She yelled in frustration. "Why?! Why is this happening again?!" A small, plastic table cracked under the pressure of her slamming fist. "Erin didn't deserve this," she said to the night air. Jamie kept mumbling, as she slumped, tiredly against the wall. "She's so good, so special. How could I do this to her? How?" She tossed her raven head back and stared into the dark sky. A few stars dared to twinkle at her. *The souls that have gone make their presence well known. For the stars in the heavens, have eyes that keep watch. When the twinkles of lights, smile on others below.* The quote from Erin's book was meant to bring peace to those who have lost a loved one. But to Jamie, it only gave her another reason to rage.

"You!" she yelled, pointing to the sky. "This all your fault! Why did you leave me? I would have been a good person if you had been here. I could have loved Erin and made her happy! When you left, you took my soul with you and left behind a breathing lump of heartless, poison." The anger, at her parents, took her last ounce of energy and she crumbled to the ground. The tears, which she had never shed for them, finally fell from her eyes like the rain of a summer storm.

After several minutes of long overdue grief, Jamie wiped her messy face with the back of her hand. She took a few deep breaths and tried to calm her rapidly beating heart. Finally, she peered back into the night sky. "I miss you," she whispered. "Please help me. Help me to fix this mess, I have, once again, gotten myself into." She wrapped her arms, tightly around her body; unknowingly cocooning the fragile soul inside for its coming transformation. "I'm so alone. I never wanted to hurt her. But I have and I don't know what to do. Please Jordan," she begged her twin. "Send me a sign."

First thing the next morning, Jamie returned to the hospital to try and salvage something of her relationship with the blonde author, even it was just to, once again, apologize. Stepping off the elevator onto the third floor, Jamie saw Bridgett standing outside a room at the end of the corridor. She approached her slowly.

"What are you doing here?" asked the still angry red head.

"I came to see how Erin is. I'd like to talk to her."

Bridgett folded her arms over her ample chest. "She doesn't want to talk to you."

Jamie understood her...former friend's attitude, but her own anger, at herself and the situation began to seep through. "Are those her words Bridgett, or yours?"

"Erin told me if you came by, not to let you in. She seemed almost embarrassed by something. She won't tell what went on between you two, but I can tell it was something intense. I'm sorry I ever introduced you to my sister. Now please leave us alone."

Jamie turned and walked back down the long hallway. She stood by the elevator, thinking. *I can't leave it like this. I can't. It would be the best thing if I just walked away, but she needs to understand. I need for her to understand.* She stepped onto the empty elevator and it descended, while she was still deep in thought. Bridgett will never let me near her. I know she loves her sister and just wants to protect her, but I have to find a way passed her.

Back in her lonely apartment, Jamie noticed that her copy of Noah Factor had fallen from the shelf. Not thinking much about it, she picked it up, opened the front cover and saw the recently added words and the signature. She smiled, remembering when Erin had added it.

They had stopped by Jamie's place on their way to the ranch, because Jamie had forgotten something. The tall chauffeur had disappeared into her bedroom, leaving the author sitting in a chair near the window. Erin listened as drawers were pulled out and items were shuffled around. A closet door was opened and then a small curse was spoken. Erin smiled at her friend's impatient antics.

"Okay," said Jamie, as she entered the room having found the forgotten item. "We can go now."

Erin stood, as did her canine companion. "What was so important that had you tearing up your room?"

"Its kind of embarrassing."

"Oh come on now," urged Erin. "It can't be that bad."

"It's just a...well it's a good luck charm, I guess you'd call it." She reached for Erin's right hand and laid the small object in her palm. "It's just a dirty old rock, but it's got these grooves carved into one side. Can you feel them?"

"Yes. It feels like something specific. What is it?"

"That's the funny thing. They're kind of shaky, but it looks like the letter X. Kind of like X marks the spot, I guess. I found it in a creek bed, the first time I went to the ranch and I also had it with me when I met you. Those were two of the most important days in my life, so it just sort of seemed like luck. I like to take it with me, every time I go out there now. I don't know. I'm just being silly."

Erin smiled and held out for the chauffeur's hand, which she held onto as she gave the cherished item back to its owner. "I think you are anything, but silly," she said. "You are intelligent, kind and my best friend. That reminds me, there is something I've been meaning to do. Can you get your copy of Noah Factor?"

Puzzled, Jamie reached over to the bookshelf and retrieved the slightly worn, hardback. "Here it is. Why do you want it?"

"I want to make a personal dedication," said the smiling woman.

Tears pooled in the corner of Jamie's eyes as she read the words, written straight from the heart of the beautiful author.

To my new, best and forever friend, Jamie.

Destiny has merged our paths once again.

May this life bring us all the joys of every one before.

And all the sorrows of a single day.

Jamie's fingertip traced over the signature Erin Brienne Casey, as a tear splashed on to the back of her hand. She closed the book and turned it over. "I promised I wouldn't do this. I never wanted to hurt you," she said to the smiling picture of Erin. "And now you are in pain. Even if you can't be my friend anymore, I have to fix this." Her eyes were drawn to a single sentence, in rather small type, at the bottom of the cover that she hadn't noticed before. It said, this title also available in Braille. Jamie's eyes brightened just a touch. "That's it. That's what I have to do." She placed the book back on the shelf and a small smile came over her face. "Thanks Jordan."

Bridgett entered the tiny hospital room, her heart tightening at the sight of her sister's small, still form, engulfed in the sterile, woolen blanket. She quietly set the small travel bag on the chair beside the bed and tiptoed to the window.

"I'm not asleep, Bridgett."

"Well you should be," said the red head, as she moved back to Erin's side. "How are you feeling?"

"The same as when you asked this morning. Stiff and sore, but I'll live."

Bridgett silently cursed her ex-friend again, for not only causing the physical hurt, but also the obvious emotional pain her sister was experiencing.

"I finally got a hold of Mom and Dad to tell them what happened. But," she stopped Erin's imminent objection. "I told them you said not to interrupt their vacation and that you would be fine. They said they love you and they will worry about you, because that's what's in a parent's heart."

Erin gave a fond smile and accepted the water her sister offered.

"I went to your place to get some clothes," said Bridgett. "But just enough for a couple of days. I'll go get more tomorrow..."

"Why would you need to get more?" Erin asked, afraid of what was coming.

"Because you're staying with us for a while."

"No I'm not. I'll be fine at my house."

"Erin..."

"No Bridgett! I mean it. A little bump on the head and a sprained wrist does not make me an invalid!"

"I know that sis. I'm just worried about you. Ten stitches and a concussion are not a little bump on the head. This never should have happened. I told Jamie to stay away from here."

Erin raised her head up quickly, a move she instantly regretted as a wave of dizziness hit her. "She was here? When?" she asked through the pain.

"First thing this morning. You said you didn't want to talk to her and I totally agree with you. It was all her fault."

"No it wasn't!"

"But you said...."

"I said we had a disagreement. This," Erin said, holding up her bandaged arm, "...was my fault. I was stupid enough to go down those stairs like I did and that's all there is to it. Jamie can't be blamed for this."

Bridgett bit back the words on the tip of her tongue, knowing it would only aggravate her sister more. "Okay, I don't want to argue with you right now. You don't need to be any more upset than you already are. But I still have issues with her."

Eyes closed behind dark glasses at the thought of what she'd lost.

"About our previous conversation, can I ask you one favor?"

Erin sighed. "Yes."

"Will you at least spend tonight with your family. I already took Arte to my house and the kids pounced on her the minute she got out of the car. You wouldn't want to take away their fun now, would you?" She knew her sister couldn't resist the emotional blackmail. "Besides I haven't seen you much in the last few weeks. Can we catch up while you rest up?"

A slow smile came to the blonde's face. "Yes, we can do that." She grabbed onto her sister's hand. "I love you Brig."

"I love you to, Erin."

Jamie pulled into the hospital parking lot and took the envelope from above the sun visor. She studied the white paper and prayed that it would help her connect to her missed friend. She walked toward the lobby entrance putting the envelope into the back pocket of her jeans.

Erin had reluctantly let her sister help her get dressed, do to her body's current state of immobility. She slowly eased her way down into the chair by the bed, alleviating the lightheadedness she was feeling.

"I'll go tell the nurse you're ready to leave," said Bridget. "I'll be right back."

Turning the corner, she saw Jamie standing at the nurse's station. Bridgett tried to keep cool for her sister's sake. "What do you want now?" she asked, walking up behind the dark haired woman.

A startled Jamie turned at the sound of the calm, but disturbed voice. "The same thing I wanted this morning. How is she?"

"She's in pain." She strongly implied a double meaning. But with those words, she saw the tall woman flinch and her blue eyes fill with guilt, but even more, a pain of her own. This observation lessened Bridgett's ire...slightly.

"I know she doesn't want to talk to me, but...I have to let her know what happened. Could you give this to her." Jamie handed Bridgett the letter. "Ask to her please read it. It is private, she'll understand."

Bridgett just nodded and let the nurse know that they were ready, while Jamie headed off in the other direction.

"Well, she'll be right in with your metal limousine," said Bridgett as she strode back into the room. She didn't notice Erin's bandaged head drop to her chest at the reference. "Sis, I have something for you."

"What?"

"It's a letter... from Jamie. She asked you to please read it and that it would help you understand. But I'm asking you to please not read it...at least until we get home."

She placed the envelope in Erin's trembling hand. The author just nodded her agreement as the nurse arrived.

From a hidden corner, Jamie watched as Erin was wheeled to the elevator, the envelope clutched in her hand as a thumb unconsciously rubbed over the dotted white surface.

It was just after three o'clock when they arrived at Bridgett's home. The blonde was enthusiastically greeted by one dog and two children, but was soon feeling the effects of her injuries and with little persuasion, went to her room to get some rest.

She woke just in time for dinner, but barely touched her meal. After a quick trip to her room, she told her sister that she wanted some fresh air and was going to sit in the garden. Of course Bridgett asked to come along, but that idea was quickly rejected.

"Everything's okay," said Erin, as she hugged her well-meaning sister.

Sitting on the same bench that she had shared with Jamie, the first night they met, Erin lifted the flap on the envelope and pulled out the folded piece of paper. The fingertips of her right hand were soon gliding across the Braille lettering.

Dearest Erin,

I am so sorry that this happened. It tears me up to know that you are in pain and that I'm to blame. I just thank God that your injuries weren't more serious. I don't really know where to begin. My reaction to your declaration of love was rude and unacceptable. I can't go into details in this letter, but I would like a chance to explain everything. I owe that to you, as my best friend. And that is what you are and what you always will be to me. You have not lost my friendship, but I fear losing yours, after you hear my explanation. Your instincts as to my feelings for you were not totally wrong. I do care about you, very much. You are the best thing in my life. Please meet with me. We need to discuss this in person. I want you to hear my voice when I tell you the truth about myself. If you can't bring yourself to ever talk to me again, I will understand. But I am asking for a second chance. I need you in my life.

Your best friend, Jamie

Erin turned to the departing sun and made her decision; the only one she could live with.

Strains of soft music drifted through the darkened room as Jamie drowned her sorrows in root beer, fearing the mindless oblivion alcohol would have wrought. A state she knew all too well and promised herself she would never indulge in again. Two many lost nights had hounded her youth.

A watched phone never rings. She remembered hearing that once, thus the reason for the absence of light in the room. But she held the cordless phone tight in her hand all afternoon, silently willing it to ring. The ten o'clock hour was fast approaching and hope was fast fading. She closed her eyes, just drifting off to sleep to the melodious vocal sounds of the Irish soprano.

The phone rang once, but Jamie was almost afraid to move. On the second ring she lifted it to read the caller ID. Recognizing her co-workers number, she pressed the button.

"Hello," she said in a hoarse voice.

There was silence for a moment.

"Jamie, it's me," Erin said, timidly.

Jamie held the cold bottle to her throbbing head. "I'm glad you called. I was afraid I'd never hear from you again."

"I wouldn't do that to you, for the simple reason that I do love you. I understand you don't feel the same and you really don't owe me an explanation. It just happens."

"But I do...owe you an explanation. Please," begged the distraught woman.

"Okay, why don't you come by my house Friday evening, unless you're working."

"No. No, this is too important to let anything stop me. I'll be there."

"Okay. That's an interesting choice of music I hear," teased the Irish lass.

Jamie smiled for the first time in twenty-four hours. "Yeah, it's my favorite now. My best friend gave it to me."

"Well, she has great taste in music... and friends."

More silence. Neither one wanted to break the frail connection they had re-established. But someone had to bring the call to an end.

"I'll see you Friday night then. Take care of yourself Jamie."

"I will. Bye."

"Bye."

How could someone anticipate and dread an event at the same time, she wondered. But that is exactly what Jamie felt as she lay in bed that night, waiting for sleep to take away her sorrow ...at least temporarily.

Driving to the beach house the next day, Bridgett noticed her sister's normally outgoing demeanor was subdued. Her one or two word answers to her sister's questions were disturbing.

"I know you talked to her," said the redhead, as they continued down the road.

The annoyance was evident when Erin asked, "Were you eavesdropping Bridgett?"

"No. I was just passing in the hallway when I heard you say goodbye to her."

Erin purposely waited a while before explaining. "She apologized, even though none was necessary and she wants to talk. She's coming by Friday night."

Bridgett's silence spoke of her disapproval.

"Why are you so concerned about this?" the blonde asked. "This is my life and my decision. I know you and Jamie, were not that close, but I also know you liked her or you wouldn't have invited her to the party that night. Maybe you're eager to just give up a friend, but I'm not."

"A friend is not that irresponsible in her actions."

"I told you it was an accident and all my fault. Now whether or not I choose to continue my relationship with Jamie is my business. I know you're just trying to look out for me, but please don't interfere with my life."

No more words were spoken as they neared the oceanfront house.

Jamie and Bridgett had come to a civil understanding at work. On Friday they had even had lunch together. But Bridgett did leave Jamie with a word of caution.

"I don't like seeing my sister hurt."

"Neither do I," agreed Jamie. "And I wish I could erase everything that happened this last week. But I can only move forward and do my best to see that it never happens again. If that means staying out of Erin's life and losing her friendship then that's what I'll do. But that is Erin's decision, not yours."

"That's the same thing she told me." Bridgett smiled, conceding the debate. "I just want the best of everything for her in life, including friends. She's had enough sadness since she lost her sight."

The dark head nodded in agreement, wanting the same thing, only tenfold.

"Do you have a sister, Jamie?"

She was shocked by the question. "No," she admitted with sorrow. "I had a twin sister, but she died when we were five."

That surprised and saddened Bridgett, remembering how close she had come to losing her sister. "I'm sorry."

"I've often wondered how I would react to things in her life," said Jamie, solemnly. A small smile came to her face. "I've come to realize that I would probably be as over protective as you are toward Erin." They shared a small laugh. "So, I do kind of understand. Your sister is very special and I promise you that I would never do anything to intentionally hurt her."

Green eyes looked upon her with conviction. "I think I believe that now."

Chapter 9

Erin kept herself busy all day on Friday, writing, laundry, playing with the dog. But even the busy work couldn't keep her thoughts from drifting to the beautiful brunette she loved and what might happen later that night. Her mind kept the conscious thought that everything would stay the same, as it had been for weeks they had known one another. Jamie had promised that their friendship would not suffer and Erin believed that above all else. But could she be a friend to Jamie? Would her jealousy be a barrier between them, if Jamie ever found someone to love? Another woman...or man? *Maybe that's it*, she thought. *Maybe she's not gay. She never mentioned any past lovers. Maybe she's just not attracted to women. I almost hope that's it. It will be much easier to handle that way. She walked on down the beach, the gritty sand beneath her bare feet. But I felt the way she held me the night of the storm. That was not my imagination. That gave me my first hope that we could be together. Ahhhh!* Her mind screamed. *I don't know!* Her heart was desperately grasping at straws, any shred that could bring them together.

Erin had just finished making dinner, a feat hampered by the invasive tan wrap on her right wrist. Artemis barked once and then she heard the tires on the gravel, coming up the driveway. An intense wave of nerves rocked her and she had to steady herself against the cabinet.

A knock on the door.

"Come on in," she yelled, shakily.

Inside the door, the excited, furry occupant met the dark haired visitor. "Hi girl," said Jamie, with a brisk rub of the furry ears.

Erin took a deep, calming breath. "I'm in the kitchen, Jamie. I'll be right out."

The author walked into the living room, carrying two tall glasses. She handed one to Jamie. "Here, I thought you might like something cold to drink. Dinner will be ready in about ten minutes."

Their fingers grazed as Jamie took the glass and that spark of emotion hit them both, although neither gave any outward indication.

"Thanks. How are you feeling?"

"Fine actually, accept for this reminder." Erin held up her injured limb. "And this." She brushed the strip of white that covered the right side of her forehead. "But at least these are coming out on Monday."

"I'm so glad you're okay Erin. I..."

"No. No, please I don't want to have this conversation on an empty stomach. After we eat, okay?"

Jamie studied the floor and simply nodded her head.

"Jamie, you still here?"

"Yeah. Um, I'm sorry. Yes, I agree we should wait."

Polite small talk passed between the nervous eaters. Jamie complimented the cook and Erin graciously accepted. The tension left both with very little appetites around the knots in their stomachs.

Together they took the dirty dishes to the kitchen and Erin started the coffee machine. "Let's go in the living room." Erin thought it best to avoid the room that was the sight of the previous week's encounter.

More minutes of uncomfortable silence ensued.

"I don't know about you, but I'm tired of trying to make small talk. I think it's time for what we are really here for."

"You're right," said Jamie. Clearing her throat of the lump that was forming, she began to speak. But Erin beat her to the punch.

"Jamie, there is really just one thing I want to know. And I would like the truth. I don't think you have ever purposely lied to me... have you?"

"No Erin, I've never lied. But there are some things I never told you about my past, a lot of things actually. Things I never wanted you to know, because I didn't want you to hate me, or worse, be ashamed of me."

"Jamie, I don't think that could ever happen." Erin moved to sit near the nervous woman on the long camel colored sofa. "I just need to know...are you gay?"

Yes," said the whisper.

Erin's heart twisted with the realization. "Then it's just me, you're not attracted to." She stood to move away.

Jamie gently grabbed her healthy arm. "No, don't you run away again. I want to explain everything to you. Now please sit down and hear me out. I know I never told you anything about my life before I moved here and maybe I should have. If you understood me more, this whole thing might not have happened."

"What, that I wouldn't have fallen in love with you. I had no choice Jamie. From the minute I heard your voice, it started and I would've fallen no matter what." Erin sat back down. "I do want to hear all about you and what you think that has do with why you don't love me."

"Don't say it like that," Jamie said, dejectedly. "Look, I have to start at the beginning. I've never told anyone everything of what I'm about to tell you. But if you stop me anywhere along the way, I may not be able start again, okay?"

"I understand. Go ahead."

Jamie took a deep, but emotionally painful breath. "When I was ten, my parents were killed in a boating accident. Up until then I guess you could say that my childhood was as normal as any other. My parents loved me and they gave me everything a child needed. But just below the surface they were always sad. I was born a twin, an identical twin. But Jordan contracted meningitis when we were five...and died. I don't suppose any parent gets over the death of a child or any child gets over the death of a parent. My ten-year-old mind thought they went away on purpose, to be with her. And of course, if they wanted to be with her more than me, that had to mean that they loved her more than me. That's when I became angry...at everything and everyone. But I can't blame them for what I became, for what my rage turned me into." Jamie paused and gave a small laugh. "Although there are still times when I, irrationally, accuse them of causing the tragedies in my life," she said, remembering the shouting session of just a week ago.

The sorrow in Jamie's words put another dent in Erin's, already disfigured heart. She wanted to reach out and hold the woman, but that would have been a mistake. She knew Jamie had to do this alone.

"Anyway, I didn't have any other relatives so I was put in foster care and they found me someone to stay with pretty quickly. They were a nice couple, but that didn't matter to me. I treated them horribly. My grades fell and I got into trouble at school all the time. The Matthews were patient with me for a while, knowing what I'd been through. But that changed three years later when I stole five hundred dollars from them and used some of that money... to buy drugs. I hung around some older kids at the playground and heard them say that grass made everything go away. And it did. That first smoke took away everything I could have had. Things got steadily worse and the Matthews put me into counseling, but there was nothing wrong with me, at least that's what I thought. I was passed on to one therapist after another, finally given up for a lost cause when I was sixteen. I ran away from home and they never found me." She shrugged. "Probably never even looked," she added with dejection.

"That's an awful thing to have happened to you, but it still doesn't explain..."

"That was just the first chapter, Erin and the easiest one to tell. After that I went to hell and didn't pull myself out, until two years ago. I ran away to New York and did what so many kids did to survive. When I was eighteen, I met up with this dealer named Johnnie. He took a liking to me, but never tried to sleep with me. Not that I minded, I was so tired of doing that. Anyway, I became a runner for him, but I never used, except for the marijuana, but I even stopped that. He told me that the smart ones, the ones who make all the money, stay clean. After three years I became a very rich woman and branched out into gambling. I flaunted my wealth and they flocked around me like starving lions on a fresh kill. Before it never mattered to me, men or women, as long as they had money. But when I could start making my own choices, I found that

my tastes ran to the female persuasion." Jamie visibly shuddered with her next words. "Sandy was the first person I ever chose to sleep with. We became inseparable, but for different reasons. I liked walking into parties with a gorgeous young woman on my arm. She kept my over inflated ego well stroked, not to mention other things." Jamie scowled at the sound of her own sickening words and the thought of what each syllable was doing to Erin's perception of her. But the author needed the complete truth. "One day she told me she loved me, right out of the blue. I laughed in her face and said she was being stupid. I didn't want to be loved. I just wanted something constant. She just kept hounding me, begging me to say I loved her, whether I meant it or not. She wouldn't give up, so I had to do something drastic." The knuckles on Jamie's hands began to turn white as she squeezed them in anger at what she was about to reveal. "I set her up. She came to my place and found me with another woman. I looked at the tears in her eyes and laughed. She ran out of house and straight into the path of an oncoming car. I stood there looking at her bleeding body and it hit me that I really did care for her. She had been important to me, but I didn't see it."

"Jamie, you don't have to say anymore," Erin whispered with tight emotion.

"Yes, I do. I want you to know everything." She paused before starting again. "The only way I could cope with her death was with anger, the same way as with my parents. A year later I met another woman, who was just as angry as I was. So we shared our anger and as time went on, the rage seemed to lessen for both of us. I still wasn't in love, had no clue what love was. But she did or so she said. She said I saved her. You can guess how glad I was to hear that," Jamie said sarcastically. "If I couldn't be saved, I sure as hell didn't want to help anyone else. I was very selfish," she chuckled. "I tried to be calm about it and explain that I didn't feel that way about her. I didn't want to hurt her like I had hurt Sandy...but I did. I came home one afternoon and Ellie was there. She had her back to me and I didn't see what she had in her hand. She said she had to ask me one more time if I could ever love her. I said no. She turned around, put the gun to her head and pulled the trigger."

The hollow pain in Jamie's voice as she whispered the final words, unleashed the tears that streamed down Erin's face.

"Jamie, I'm so sorry that you had to go through all of that. And I do understand now. I really do, but that doesn't change anything for me. You are not that same person. You got past that anger, but you are still denying yourself. I know you feel something for me. We have a connection. Don't run from this because of things that happened in the past."

"I caused those things, Erin! I ended two women's lives because I was poison!"

"No! You were scared, because you had been alone all that time. You were just afraid to get close. But you are not that woman anymore. What happened to Sandy was an accident, a tragic accident and Ellie had to have had severe emotional problems, problems that you weren't equipped to deal with. But you didn't kill them."

"If I had just tried they wouldn't be dead now."

"No! You can't say that! Those relationships couldn't have worked, no matter what the circumstances. You just weren't meant to be together. But we are and I know you feel it and I know you're still afraid, but we can get through this together."

Jamie stared at the face of reason. But Erin's words weren't enough to erase the past. She caressed a soft cheek and smiled. "You are so beautiful Erin. It would be so easy to fall in love with you. But I can't let that happen because I don't know how to love. You were already hurt because of me and I won't let that happen again."

Erin covered the hand on her face. "Do you believe that I love you?"

"I believe you love the parts of me that you can see. But I can't let you see the rest and it's not fair for you to love only half a person."

Erin pulled away from the touch and stood in frustration. "How dare you presume to know what I see! I may be blind, but I see so much more than you do. And what's not fair is for you to prejudge me, because of what they did and it's not fair to take my choice away from me about who I want to love."

Jamie dropped her weary head. "Maybe I'm still being selfish, just trying to protect myself. But that's the only thing I know how to do," she admitted, sadly.

Erin moved away from the confused woman. "You said that Simeron Noah saved your life; that she gave you hope and made you feel alive. Well I am Simeron Noah. Everything she thought, everything she felt was from me. A fictional character, on a page, in a book, can't love you, but I can...I do. You have a hell of a long life to live yet Jamie and so do I. I don't want either one of us doing it alone. If you walk away from me, that's exactly what will happen. You don't deserve that, no matter what you may think, and neither do I. Because I will never just settle for another relationship, you're it for me. My soul knows it... and so does yours." Erin gave a sigh of resignation. "I am not trying to guilt you into loving me. That's what they did. I just want you to open up your heart because that's what you need. You have been alone for too long. You don't have to worry Jamie, I'm a stable person and I won't harm myself, because life is too precious to just give up. But how you live that life is most certainly your decision." She finally turned to face the woman she loved. "Simeron Noah had the courage to live her life and so can you."

That abyss of silence was back as it had been a week earlier.

"Would you say something please?" begged Erin.

"I heard everything you said. But I don't have the courage of Simeron Noah. I'm not sure if I have any at all. I need some time to find out. Can you give me that time...please?"

"Yes."

Jamie got up from the couch and moved toward the door. "I'm sorry. I'm gonna...go now." The cool twilight air blew in, as Jamie opened the door. "Goodbye Erin."

Tears slipped, once again, from unseeing eyes as she heard the word good-bye instead of goodnight.

On heavy legs, Jamie went down the stairs to her car. She reached for the door handle, but pulled back. Her mind was definitely not able to concentrate, so trying to control a several thousand pound machine, along a darkened road, was a very bad idea. She headed back toward the beach. The normally, calming sounds did nothing to ease the turmoil rolling in her heart. The pictures of her tragically dead lovers played across her mind, but while they were once vivid, they now seemed to pale just a little every time she thought of them. *If only my guilt would fade away with them*, she thought.

"It was not your fault. It was not your fault." The author's words began to echo through her head and embedded themselves in her soul. *Maybe I wasn't directly responsible, but...*

"You had been alone...alone...alone"

Jamie looked down and watched, as her bare feet, dug into the loose sand, with every step that carried her farther away from her future. Her life started playing out before her eyes. The few short years with her parents brought a smile, albeit a sad one. Next came the times with the Matthews, when she could have changed what was about to happen, if she had let them help, like they begged to. She saw them shake their heads, in shame, at her behavior.

The busy, dirty New York streets brought nothing but misery to her spirit.

The drugs, the users, the takers.

The years she spent hating. *What did I hate? Myself.*

There was the guilt again, but then the words, it was not your fault; it was not your fault. The confused layers of her soul fought for dominance, causing her heart to race.

The beautiful smile, the gentle soul.

A walk in a peaceful garden, a race on horseback across a green meadow.

A thunderstorm, shaking, shivering, pleading, holding, caring.

A declaration, a rejection, a fall...a realization.

"I love you Jamie. I love you Jamie." *God, I want to, I want to!* The farther she got down the beach, the harder it became to breathe. Jamie stopped and raised her head to the darkened sky. "Please help me!" she begged. There was a tightening in her chest. Her first thought was that she was having a heart attack. *Maybe this is my punishment for the past.* She turned back in the direction of the beach house and was assaulted by another gripping pain. Jamie closed her eyes and dropped to her knees, a stunning picture of the beautiful author and her brilliant smile filled every ounce of her being. Jamie exhaled a huge breath and it was over.

Erin stepped from the bathroom, after washing away the tears that had threatened to drown her. She couldn't be angry with Jamie, because she truly understood the soul-destroying spiral she had gotten caught up in. But Erin had longed to be able to reach the troubled spirit. She had tried every action and every word she knew. She'd always thought true love would win over the greatest of odds.

The emotional emptiness she felt was soon joined by a total lack of energy. Erin dropped down onto the couch she had recently shared with the greatest friend she had ever known. Her hand absently drifted over and rested on the vacated space. *I will not cry again*, she told herself. *I will...* Her thoughts were interrupted by a knock at the door. A tiny flicker of hope sprang to life, but she was careful to keep it in check. A faithful, Artemis followed her to the door. She did something very dangerous for a blind person or a sighted person, she opened the door without asking who it was, but her throat was too constricted. She opened it just slightly, but the visitor said nothing. A fragrance assailed Erin's senses and she slowly pulled the door open the rest of the way. And she found her voice. "Did you forget something?" she asked, shakily.

"Yes," said Jamie, as she stepped inside the house. "I forgot to do this."

Two gentle hands caressed the sides of Erin's face as Jamie closed the distance between their bodies and their souls. Their lips came together in a kiss that spoke of tenderness and heartfelt love. But soon a wave of passion crashed over them, rivaling the surf meeting the shore, just outside. A need for air drove them apart, but strong arms pulled the blonde head to her shoulder, which once held the weight of a thousand guilty consciences, but was now free. Both held on tight for fear of losing...everything.

"Please share your courage with me," Jamie pleaded in a whisper, against a delicate ear. "I want to be with you. But I need your help." She pulled back and wiped away a tear on the beautiful face before her.

Erin took the hand in hers and placed a kiss on the palm. "Everything I have and everything I am, is yours. We will do this together."

Jamie gently rested her forehead against the blonde's. "I do love you Erin."

"I love you, too."

The door was closed and two clinging bodies made their way inside. Jamie perched herself in the corner of the overstuffed sofa and she pulled the petite blonde to lie against her. "I meant what I said, I will try my hardest to make this work."

"I believe you," said Erin, as she reached up to kiss a salty cheek. "Most of all, we just need to talk, about everything. Whatever you're feeling, whatever you need to know, please just talk to me. There is nothing we can't work through if we both talk and listen." She felt the dark head nod her agreement.

"But I don't want to talk about anymore of that heavy stuff tonight...okay?"

Erin smiled. "That's fine. I think we're both too drained to do that anyway."

A comfortable silence ensued as two hearts came to beat in sync.

The clock on the end table had ticked away an hour, before they knew it. The dog had already called it a night and had stretched out on the brown rug in the corner, sensing her services wouldn't be needed for some time.

Jamie couldn't see the clock because of the angle, so pulled her left arm up to check the watch on her wrist. Her right arm was currently making slow trips up and down a well muscled back. "It's late sweetheart."

Erin smiled at the term of endearment. "I don't want you to drive home this late. Besides," She gave a little extra squeeze to the waist she was curled around. "...I'm comfortable right where I am. Will you stay and hold me?"

Jamie returned the hug. "That sounds good to me."

The smell of fresh brewing coffee woke Jamie from her dreamless state. Slipping back into her jeans, having slept in her T-shirt, Jamie followed the aroma to its origins.

The author stood in the bright blue and yellow kitchen, slicing bread for the toaster. Jamie stopped in the doorway, leaned her head against the frame and appraised her new love. *Please don't let me hurt her*, she prayed. Although she had hardly made a sound, she knew Erin's sensitive hearing had detected her the moment she reached the kitchen door, maybe even before.

Jamie's bare feet glided across the stone tiles of the kitchen floor. She slid both arms across the green silk robe Erin was wearing and came to rest on a flat stomach. "Good morning," she said, with an almost chaste kiss to the author's cheek. She noticed that Erin was having trouble maneuvering the knife because of her bandaged wrist. "Can I help with that?" While not completely taking over the job, she merely covered the author's small hands and helped guide the cutting implement through the tan colored bread. Once several pieces were cut, they both dropped four slices into the toaster.

Erin turned inside the circle of comforting arms. "Morning yes," she said. "...but not good just yet. One thing I should have warned you about is how demanding I can be."

Her teasing smile warmed Jamie's healing heart. "How so?" she asked, playing along.

"Well, the first thing I expect every morning, without fail, is a proper good morning kiss. And I'm afraid to say that that peck on the cheek ain't gonna qualify." She shook her head. "Un, un sorry."

"Well, now can I have a second chance?"

"Most assuredly. You can have seconds as many times as you want." The wordsmith's double meaning was not lost on the tall chauffeur.

The long, slow, deep kiss that followed left both craving much more. Erin finally pulled back. "Great morning," she said breathlessly.

They continued to revel in their closeness until the toast popped up.

Erin reached around for a tanned piece and handed it to Jamie. "Why don't you start with that. Then you can use the shower first, while I make you breakfast."

"I have a better idea," said Jamie. "Why don't you go on and shower. I'll wait till I get home. I don't have any clean clothes to put on anyway. And I'll fix you breakfast."

"I thought you didn't know how to cook."

"Well, I might have exaggerated a tiny bit. I can do scrambled eggs." Jamie placed a quick kiss to the button nose in front of her. "So, you go get wet and we'll have breakfast when you get done."

"Okay. I'll only a few minutes."

Jamie raided the refrigerator for the eggs, butter and milk; a jar of strawberry jam also caught her eye. A bowl, frying pan, plates and utensils soon rested along side the food on the blue countertop. A sudden thought hit her. *Wow, this is the first time I've anticipated making a meal. Maybe that's because I'm doing it for someone else. I'm sharing it with someone else. But not just someone else, someone I love.* The ringing phone snapped her from her reverie.

"Could you grab that," Erin shouted, from down the hall.

"Yeah, I got it. Hello."

There was a pause, the caller not expecting to hear any other voice. "Hello is this the Casey residence?"

"Yes it is, but she can't come to the phone right now."

Another pause. "Jamie, is that you?" asked a surprised Bridgett.

Shoot Jamie thought with a grimace. "Yes...it's me...I..."

"Who is it?" asked the towel-clad author, as she stepped up beside the tall woman.

Jamie turned to the sight of a beautiful bare shoulder, causing her train of thought to derail. "Oh...it's...a...your, your sister," she stuttered.

"Thanks." Erin took the phone, unaware of the flustered state she'd put her friend into.

Jamie stepped into the kitchen to avoid temptation, but her ears stayed tuned.

"Good morning sis," Erin said cheerfully.

"Well, you certainly sound in a much better mood than the last time I talked to you. And what is Jamie doing there this early in the morning?"

Erin sighed. "Bridgett, don't start that protective stuff again. And to answer your question, we talked really long into the night and I didn't want her driving all the way back to the city that late."

"I guess you two worked out what ever it was you were fighting about then."

"We weren't fighting, Bridgett. It was a misunderstanding and yes everything has worked out for the best. She is happy and so am I. Now is that the only reason you called, to check up on me?"

"No, actually Mom and Dad got back yesterday and they want to have a family dinner tonight. That is to say, Dad wants to take us out to dinner, just the four of us. He said he had something to tell us. Oh and it's a semi-formal occasion."

Erin turned in the direction of the kitchen, thinking about the cook.

Bridgett heard her sister's hesitation. "Come on Erin, you don't want to disappoint Daddy."

Daddy is going to be disappointed in me anyway, thought Erin. "Okay, can you pick me up about three?"

"I'll be there. Tell Jamie I said bye. See ya later."

Erin hung up the phone and went back to her bedroom without a word.

Jamie was just scooping out two helpings of eggs, when the blonde came in wearing blue shorts and a white T-shirt. "Right on time," said Jamie, setting the plate down in front of her. "Your eggs are at twelve o'clock and your toast and jam is at six o'clock. OJ top left and coffee, top right."

Erin was momentarily stunned. "How did you know...?"

"Well, I did some research this past week. I missed your evening calls, so I spent a lot of time at the library on the Internet, reading about how you handle everyday situations, kinda made me feel closer to you," she said sheepishly.

Holding out a hand and taking the one returned, Erin said, "That is so sweet. Thank you. And just so you know, that really shows me how much you care about me." She squeezed her hand. "You do know how to love, Jamie. Just listen to your heart, that's really all there is to it."

Jamie studied the smiling face, but couldn't stave off the blush that crept up her neck. "We'd better eat before it gets cold." After accepting a compliment on the food, Jamie asked, "Is everything okay with your sister?"

"Yeah, why wouldn't it be?"

"She didn't sound too thrilled to hear me answer the phone."

Erin waved a hand in the air. "She's just being Brig. I've learned to just go with it and not argue to much. My life is my life."

Jamie cautiously broached another, possibly touchy subject. "Are you afraid of how your family will react to us? I mean do they even know you're gay?"

"No, they don't know. I never intentionally hid it from them; the subject just never came up. The only time I dated...women, was when I was in college and a couple of thousand miles away from my family."

"You don't want them to know about us then?" Jamie tried to hide the disappointment, but at the same time she understood

"Hey, I love you and I'm proud to love you," said Erin. "And I want the world to know I love you. But I don't think my family will handle the news well, especially my father. It has nothing to do with you. Just my being gay will be the only issue. I would like to wait a while before we tell them, only because I don't want to deal with them right now. I want to be able to put my full attention on us and to nurturing this relationship." She was greeted by silence. "Jamie will you talk to me. I can't see what your face is saying."

"I'm sorry. Yes, I understand and I agree."

"Really?"

Jamie moved around the table and responded with a kiss. "Really." Jamie gathered the dirty dishes, while Erin got up and poured herself another cup of coffee.

"Jamie."

"Yes."

"I kind of... I mean I can't see you tonight. I agreed to have dinner with my family. Dad said it was important."

Two strong arms staked their claim on the petite body. "Well, I am very disappointed in that, but I have to work anyway. So, you have a good time with your family tonight and we'll spend tomorrow together."

Erin smiled. "Could we go back to the ranch?"

"Of course. I'm sure Teegan will be ready and waiting for us."

"Do you have anything to do until you have to leave for work?"

"Nope, what did you have in mind?"

"Could I ask a favor?"

"Always."

"Well I need to go to the grocery. Bridgett usually takes me on Saturday, but with going out tonight, she'll be too busy."

"Your chauffeur is happy to drive you anywhere, Madame."

The trip to the grocery store proved very entertaining, especially when Jamie managed to sneak in, among the fresh fruits and vegetables, two cartons of ice cream and a jar of maraschino cherries, which would be put to a test, at a date not too far in the future.

The ride back to the beach house was filled with laughter and song as they tuned in to the all 80's radio station and bopped to the memories.

With all the groceries put away, with their Braille labels attached and in the proper order, Jamie announced that it was 2:30 and she should leave before Bridgett arrived.

With a short, but sweet kiss, Jamie left her new love standing in the kitchen.

"Jamie, wait!"

The dark haired woman stopped at the front door. "Yeah, what is it, sweetheart?"

"It's just..." Erin paused. "I'm afraid..."

Jamie took two steps back inside, took the author's hand in hers and finished the other woman's thought. "That when I leave, you'll never hear from me again."

A head, filled with shame, nodded.

Jamie poured everything her soul had to offer into a thorough kiss. "Erin, my heart loves you more than anything, I've ever felt before. I'm sorry I tried so hard to deny it. And my brain might

sometimes not know how to show it. But I promise you, I do want to try." She pulled the body to hers and squeezed with desperation. "But I will take my own life before I hurt you."

The blonde head jerked away and startled Jamie. "Don't say that! Jamie, in any relationship there is the risk of getting hurt. That's the price we pay for being human and having emotions. But we also get tremendous rewards by feeling this incredible thing called love, the ultimate emotion. Don't anticipate that we won't work out and I'll be hurt. Just live one moment at a time."

"Okay." Jamie brought both of the smaller woman's hands to her mouth and kissed the back of each one. "So, don't doubt that I'll be back. I love you and I will call you in the morning and we will have a whole day of those precious moments."

Chapter 10

The stretch white limo pulled out onto the quiet street, heading toward the freeway onramp about a mile away. The name of tonight's client rolled around in Jamie's head, *Timothy Casey, Casey*. Erin had never mentioned her father's name, but it had to be a coincidence, didn't it? *There has to be more than one Casey in LA*, she thought as the tires ate up the miles to Brentwood.

Inside the large brick house on Burnham Street, Erin sat in her childhood room, which according to her sister looked almost exactly the same as it had the day Erin left for college. Danielle Casey insisted that she was maintaining her daughter's rooms for her grandchildren, but Bridgett's son didn't like the pink frills of his mother's old room and three-year-old Caitlin preferred a Rugrats motif. So her mother's theory didn't hold much credence, but her daughters just smiled and humored her.

Erin was seated next to an open window. She took a deep breath and was filled with the fragrance of the rose bushes just below her room. She remembered when she was a young girl, before the sound of storms terrified her, when it would rain she would sleep with the window open and dream of playing in a field of flowers with a friend. She could never put a name to the friend or a face, but she knew that friend would always be in her life, to care for her, to protect her and to love her, as best friends do. Erin smiled to know she could now put a name to that little girl.

"Okay," said Bridgett, as she came bouncing into the room waving a small, red bag. "What are you smiling about?" she asked, as she applied the finishing touches to her sister's makeup.

"Why does it have to be about anything in particular?"

"Well that smile was bursting with happiness and I think something very specific had to be behind it."

"Actually, I was just remembering a dream I used to have, sleeping in this room when I was younger."

"Let me guess, the one about the new bike you got on Christmas or maybe one when you and Jason went to the prom and got caught necking in the bleachers. I know he would have given me quite a few nice dreams."

Erin slapped her sister's arm. "Bridgett! I didn't know you had a crush on Jason."

"It didn't matter. He only had eyes for you. I still don't understand why you never..."

"Brig, that's all in the past, please leave it there. Besides that wasn't what I was thinking. I never told you about this dream. It was very special and personal."

Bridgett's curiosity was just as strong as her sister's, but with the family waiting for them she couldn't pursue it further. "There you go," said the red head as she finished brushing her sister's hair. "Just how you like it."

Erin stood and smoothed out her dress, wishing she were dressing for a night with Jamie. "Thanks sis. Has Dad given you any hint what he wants to tell us?"

"No. Mom doesn't even know. And you know I could've gotten it out of her," she chuckled.

A knock on the door brought a message that their impatient father was waiting for their appearance in the den.

Bridgett helped Erin down the long, curved, wooden staircase. Smelling the pipe, long before they reached the big double doors, Erin joked that her nose could have led the way for both of them. The senior Casey hurried to the door, smothering the two women with hugs and kisses, his graying mustache stilled tickling, like when they were kids.

"Don't we have the two most beautiful daughters?" asked their mother Danielle, as she joined in the group hug.

"Indeed we do my dear, indeed we do."

Mrs. Casey ushered her daughters into the room. "Come over here girls. It's been a long time since we had a family photo."

Casey checked his gold Rolex after several clicks of the camera. "That car better be here on time," he grumbled.

"I'm sure it will be dear," said Danielle, trying to ease her impatient husband.

The long, luxury automobile was parked right in front of the house when Casey opened the Mahogany door. The dark haired driver stood tall beside the passenger door. Crisply pressed black slacks, shiny black shoes, brilliant white shirt and black vest and tie adorned the trim body.

"I don't believe it," he grouched. "I told that company to send their best driver."

"What makes you so sure they didn't, Dad?" asked Bridgett as she looked around her father's shoulder.

"Because that's a woman."

"Please Dad this is the year two thousand."

Erin's ears perked up. *A woman limo driver. Nah, I'm sure there is more than one female limo driver in LA.*

Bridgett pulled her sister aside. "You're not going to believe who the driver is," she whispered.

Erin fought the smile that threatened to lift the corners of her mouth. She knew exactly who it was, from the tone of her sister's voice. "Don't say anything. I know Jamie wouldn't want to be treated any different just because she's our friend."

Timothy patted the pockets of his expensive black suit. "I forgot my glasses. I'll be right back."

"Bridgett, what is Jamie wearing?" Erin asked, while they waited for their father to return. She was greeted with silence and a quizzical look from her sister. "What? I've never paid attention to limo drivers before and I'm just curious."

Bridgett shook her head at the strange request, but gave her all the details.

Timothy soon returned from the den. "All right ladies, let's go." The family of four, led by the burly, gray haired man, headed down the long walk.

Jamie heard the clients approaching and looked up to greet them. The sight that met her nearly caused her knees to buckle. Years of practice hiding her emotions, kept her expression neutral, but her thoughts jumped with glee and her libido rattled its chains. Her mother and her sister escorted Erin, on either side. All three women were attractive and elegantly dressed, but Jamie's vision tunneled to the beauty in the center, draped in shimmering green silk. Her glorious beauty had no rivals in the known world. *Come on Jamie, be a professional. Save those thoughts for later.*

"Good evening, Mr. Casey," she said cheerfully. "My name is Jamie and I'll be your driver tonight. Is the itinerary still the same?"

"Yes, yes, just the restaurant." He rudely dismissed her with a wave of his hand, as the three women seated themselves onto the soft upholstered seats.

Jamie closed the door behind the eldest Casey and circled around to the driver's side. Soon the limo was cruising through the posh neighborhood with their perfectly manicured lawns, surrounded by intricate fences, gates and walls that firmly stated, stay out.

Timothy Casey had his hand in many varied business ventures throughout his career, from the airlines to shipping to oil to technologies. It seemed he had the Midas touch, when it came to business and investments. He had enough contacts, around the world, to fill the Astro dome and enough money to buy and support a small country. He was not without his generosity though. He heavily supported many worthy charities and research projects. And when their church had suffered a devastating fire, two years before, he had it rebuilt bigger and better, all from his own pocket. Timothy Casey conducted himself in a tough and intimidating manner. He did not suffer fools and he rarely took no for an answer, but he was mostly well respected by his peers and colleagues. But there were times when he got a little full of himself and couldn't distinguish business attitudes from simple human conduct.

"What did you want to tell us Dad?" asked Bridgett, as they traveled into the city.

"Now, now my dear, there's plenty of time. The evening is just beginning. How are my favorite grandson and granddaughter?"

"Daddy, they're your only grandchildren."

Erin knew what path that comment would lead them down. She pinched the leg that was near her hand.

"Ow!" Bridgett exclaimed softly, receiving the message, loud and clear. "They're fine Dad. Connor has asked to start karate lessons."

"Karate! Bridgett that's so barbaric."

"Actually Mother, it teaches discipline, as well as self defense. Brad and I see nothing wrong with it and we are going to encourage him."

"Just as long as he doesn't start beating up his sister."

"He won't Dad, I promise."

As the car sailed down the highway, Jamie listened in on the family conversation. Curiosity cheered her on and the fact that Casey hadn't bothered putting up the privacy screen aided her task.

Timothy turned to his youngest daughter. "Now, speaking of children..."

Here it comes, thought Erin.

"Just when are you going to settle down and give us another grandchild?"

Erin sighed. "Not now Dad, please."

"Now is the perfect time to discuss this. I relented on this writing thing instead of you going to law school. I understood when you wanted to go to school back east when Jason was staying here, but time is slipping away."

"Dad, I'm only 27. I still have all my own teeth and there's not a gray hair on my head...at least that what Bridgett tells me."

"Don't get smart young lady."

Danielle put a hand on her daughter's arm. "Dear, I thought you wanted children?"

Erin could feel the blue gaze on her, in the rear view mirror. She wanted to answer honestly, but never having discussed the topic with Jamie, was wary to do so.

"Yes Mom, I would like to have a child...someday. But if it never happens, I can deal with it. Right now, I have everything I want and need in my life. Now let's change the subject please."

Ten minutes later, Jamie pulled into the parking lot of the five star restaurant.

The Casey family was soon dining on the best, imported champagne, the most expensive cuts of meats and the tastiest lobster offered on the menu.

After the glorious meal, the vote was unanimous that a short wait for dessert was in order. Erin excused herself and asked Bridgett to help her to the door, saying she needed some air, but reassuring her father that it had nothing to do with his after dinner smoke.

The evening air was a welcomed relief from the heat of the earlier day. "It's a nice night isn't it?" said Bridgett.

"Yes it is." Erin agreed, but her thoughts were not on the atmosphere. She had only thought of Jamie every other second since they had departed earlier. The tall beauty that less than 24 hours before, had said the three incredible words that Erin had waited her whole life to hear and six long weeks to hear from the owner of her heart. "Sis, take me out to the limousine. I want to talk to Jamie for a few minutes."

The red head easily, agreed, but a few things started to puzzle her brain.

Jamie sat inside the long car with the window rolled down, reading a magazine. A feather like tickle, skimmed across the back of her neck. Her eyes drifted over to the side mirror and a slow smile developed. She saw the Casey sisters approaching and tossed the magazine into the front passenger seat. She couldn't appear too excited and pulled in the happy corners of her mouth to a much more neutral expression. She almost over compensated it into a frown, but her insides were on high party mode as Erin drew near.

"It must get awfully boring just sitting in this thing hours on end, as your clients paint the town," said Bridgett.

"It can," said the driver, as she stepped out to join them. "But I can usually find something to occupy my time and my thoughts. Especially lately." She covertly directed her words to the shorter woman. "I have had some very surprising things on my mind in the past few weeks. My life is changing ... and definitely for the better." Jamie could tell from the look on Erin's face that she was whole-heartedly agreeing. "So what's up ladies, why the visit?"

"I needed some fresh air," said Erin.

"Dad just won't give up those cigars, will he," chuckled the older sister, obviously intending to hang around.

A frustrated Erin took a step closer to the car, wracking her brain to come up with a reason for Bridgett to leave.

Jamie, while just as anxious, decided to go with the direct approach. "Bridgett, could Erin and I have a moment alone. I'll make sure she gets back inside."

The red head wasn't thrilled with being dismissed, but another piece of their puzzling relationship was unveiled. She wasn't about to argue, in a darkened parking lot, wearing a designer dress, with her parents waiting inside. "Okay," she said indignantly. "Far be it for me to intrude."

Only when Jamie was sure that Bridgett was far enough away did she ask, with slight alarm, "What are you doing out here? What did you tell your family?"

The blonde shrugged. "Like I said, I needed some air. And I told Bridgett that I wanted to talk to you."

"Well that was subtle."

Erin grinned. "I couldn't very well tell them I wanted to come to the parking lot so I could make out with the chauffeur."

Jamie beamed. "Well, you could tell your father that I'd take that instead of a tip."

"Well that would just be cheating yourself sweetheart, because you're going to get me anyway." Erin stepped back a few feet from the tall driver, looking her up and down.

"What are you doing?"

"Black definitely is your color," she said with a lecherous grin.

Jamie reached for a hand and pulled her closer, leery of watching eyes. Luckily she had pulled into a more shadowy area. "And just how can you be so sure?"

"Oh, Bridgett described these to me," said Erin, fingering the soft material covering a rib cage. "But I do believe I need a more tactile exploration to really be sure."

Jamie's breath caught, as wondering fingers trailed over her thigh. "Isn't your family waiting for you?"

"They can wait a little while longer." Erin searched for the door handle. "Can we get inside...and lock the doors?" Jamie confirmed her earlier observation and couldn't deny the exciting woman's request.

Fifteen minutes had passed and Casey was anxious to continue the evening. "Where is that sister of yours?"

"I'll go get her," said Bridgett.

Careful not to disturb each others clothes too much, Erin and Jamie made out like a couple of teenagers at the drive-in. Well, that was what kids did at some time in the not too distant past, although Jamie had missed out on that particularly carefree experience. But she was more than making up for it now.

"Do you have any idea how much I love kissing you?" Erin asked breathlessly, as she was pressed against the soft, white seat.

"I think so, but convince me some more." Jamie turned her body for more contact.

A tap on the window froze their movements.

Silence, inside and out.

"Come on guys, I know you're in there," Bridgett finally said, with an annoyed tone. "Even though these windows are tinted, I can still tell they're all steamed up."

"I'm sorry," whispered Jamie, as they pulled apart and straightened clothing.

"Don't worry about it." Erin gave her one last quick kiss. "I'm the one who came out here and I don't regret it for a second. No pun intended," she giggled.

The heavy limo door opened and Jamie backed out slowly, helping Erin as she followed. Jamie turned and struck Bridgett with a hard steely gaze, just daring her to say something wrong.

The red head stood there, arms crossed in front of her. "Well, it all makes sense now," she said, rather harshly. "The puzzle finally came together in my slow little brain. And please don't try to deny it. When we went in to the restaurant, Jamie didn't have lipstick on, now she just happens to be wearing your shade."

"That's enough Bridgett!" said Erin. "Stop with accusatory tone. We're grown adults, not your children."

Bridgett snorted and looked away, hurt. "I'm sorry. It's just... how come you never told me Erin?"

"Told you what? About me in general or me and Jamie."

"Both." She shook her head, trying to make more sense of things. "It was a lover's quarrel right? That's why you fell and why you wouldn't give me the whole story."

"Bridgett, I can't stand here and explain this to you now, not that I owe you any...but I do want you to understand how I feel. I am truly in love for the first time in my life and I would like you to be happy for me."

Bridgett said nothing, unable to meet the blue orbs staring at her. "You're right, we don't have time. Mom and Dad are waiting."

"Could you give us just a minute," Jamie asked the perplexed woman.

Bridgett stepped a few feet away and turned, but she still kept them in her peripheral vision.

"I'm so sorry Erin," whispered Jamie. She was afraid to hug her, but Erin didn't seem to have that fear.

She pulled her close and laid her head against a strong shoulder. "Would you stop apologizing. It's okay. She had to know sometime."

"You're right. I'm sor... Never mind," laughed Jamie.

"Good. But I would like to find a better way to tell my parents, when the time comes."

"Yeah." Jamie pulled back enough to place a short, but loving kiss on the author's lips. "You'd better go. But I want you to call me tonight, no matter how late it is."

"I will." With a simple squeeze of their joined hands, Erin stepped toward her sister.

"I know you don't owe me an explanation sis, but I do hope we can talk about this, maybe tomorrow," asked Bridgett, as they made their way back to the restaurant.

"I'm spending all day with Jamie, in the country."

Of course you are, the red head thought sarcastically.

"But we will talk."

Once seated back inside the restaurant and enjoying a fine dessert, Mr. Casey finally made his mysterious announcement.

"Ladies, I have just made the business deal of the century, guaranteed to make me, us household names and provide an income triple my annual income."

Bridgett's eyes flashed with dollar signs and mischief. "What did you do Dad, rob Bill (Gates)?" They were on a first name basis.

"No, my dear, but let's just say, by this time next year, I will be in his tax bracket." He went on to explain, the merger he had arranged and just what business this new company would be performing. He also told them that he was naming his new industrious venture, after the three women in his life. Danielle and her daughters congratulated him and made the proper amount of fuss that they new he expected.

By all means, thought Erin. You're only worth 100 million. Of course you needed a new fortune five hundred company.

During the ride home, Timothy Casey popped open another expensive bottle of imported champagne. He could hold his alcohol well and he was far from being drunk, but drinking tended to make him more abrasive to everyone...except his family. He soon realized that the car had not moved for several minutes.

"Driver, what is the problem?" he asked, gruffly.

"I'm sorry Sir, there is a traffic jam ahead."

"Can't you go around, driver? I hate just sitting here."

Jamie explained calmly. "No Sir, I can't. There are several cars behind us."

Several more minutes passed.

"Driver, go up there and see what the problem is and how long it's going to be."

"Dad," said Bridgett. "She has a name, it's Jamie."

"I don't care what her name is. Just do as I say," he demanded.

Jamie remained calm and tried to make the frustrated man understand. "It's company policy that I don't let the car out of my sight...Sir."

Danielle moved to the opposite seat, next to Erin. She knew to give her husband a wide berth when he got like that. She cringed with his harsh words.

Timothy moved his bulky body up to the seat, closest to the driver. He pulled his smoking case from his jacket pocket and easily clipped off one end of an expensive, imported cigar. "Well, I'm certainly not going any where with it. Now go," he said, with the stogie clenched between his teeth. A flick of his gold lighter made the tobacco glow.

Jamie took a deep breath, but regretted it when the foul smelling smoke entered her nostrils. Even the egotistical celebrities that she had chauffeured had not been as antagonistic as this man. But he was her girlfriend's father and more importantly she thought, professionals maintain control. "Once again, I'm sorry Sir, but I can't."

"Dear, we heard all the sirens," said Danielle. "There must be an accident up ahead."

He dropped back in his original seat, allowing his mumblings to still be heard. "I have a good mind to buy that company and make a few personnel changes. Of all the ignorant...she should have taken a different route."

"How could she know this was going to happen?" reasoned the older sister, hitting the button for the sunroof, to release the smoke.

Erin had been conspicuously quiet during the whole conversation. Jamie was just a little hurt that the woman, who claimed to love her, did not defend her against the ridiculous accusations of the oldest Casey, but at the same time she sort of understood why. Through the rear view mirror, Jamie could see the jaw muscles twitching on the face she loved, as he continued his ranting.

"I told you a stupid woman driver..."

"That's enough!" shouted Erin, surprising everyone in the car. "Dad, she is a human being with feelings. Jamie is doing her job the best she can. None of this is her fault. If you want to know the truth..."

Oh no! Not here sweetheart. I know you're angry Erin, but this is not the time and definitely not the place.

"I am ashamed to be here," continued Erin, with her Irish temper engaged. "And if you say one more derogatory remark to this woman, I will get out of this car and start walking. And you know me Dad, I will do it."

Jamie released the breath she was holding. Her mouth quivered, trying desperately to fight off the smile of pride she was feeling.

"I'm sorry sweetheart," he said, properly chastised as the car started to finally roll slowly forward.

"It's not me you should be apologizing to Dad, it's her."

"I won't go that far, young lady. But I will restrain myself from any further outbursts."

Ten minutes later the limo pulled into the winding drive. As soon as Jamie opened the passenger side door, Timothy Casey mowed his way past without a word. His wife, who did manage a smile and a thank you, followed him.

As nonchalantly as possible, Jamie bent to whisper in her love's ear. "Call me in about forty-five minutes."

Erin nodded and was escorted up to the house by her sister.

Jamie closed the door and rounded the front of the car, but she was halted by a voice.

"Miss, please wait." Danielle Casey hurried back down the walkway.

The tall driver turned back. "Yes Ma'am."

"Jamie, please excuse my husband's rude behavior this evening. I know it's not right and not much of a reason, but it's just his way. Accept my apologies and this." She slipped a single bill into Jamie's hand.

She put it into her pocket without looking, as she always did. "Thank you Ma'am." Jamie slid back into the driver's seat and pulled away from Erin's childhood home.

Erin stepped from the soothing heat of the shower and slipped on her fluffy, yellow robe. Bare feet padded across the plush white carpet of her childhood room and she sat on the soft bed, already turned down by the maid. Erin understood that her mother needed the help to care for the fifteen-room house, but she still felt awkward at having someone pampering her. She liked doing for herself. And she never intended to have servants.

The soft splash of raindrops hitting the pane of glass brought a smile to her face. She crossed the room and raised the window, taking in several deep breaths of the rosy scent. Ten chimes of the big grandfather clock down the hall let her know it was time. She pulled the small cell phone from her purse and lay back on the cool, lavender sheets.

Three rings later. "Hi babe," said the velvety voice, waiting for the call.

"Hi yourself. What are you doing?"

"Well, I was a little late getting home and you just caught me heading for the shower. In fact, I'm sitting here without a stitch of clothes on."

Erin groaned. "Oh, don't do that to me. Now I'll never get to sleep. Or better yet, maybe I will drop right off and dream about that all night."

Jamie laughed. "Well, for me, that's a given, no matter what you're wearing. By the way you're not..."

"Sorry, I am lying on my bed, but I do have on a robe."

Jamie thought about that and smiled. "That'll work. I love unwrapping gifts."

Erin pulled the thick collar away from her heated neck at the topic of their conversation. "Could we change the subject? I'd rather not have to do what I would have to do otherwise, in my parents' home. Not that I haven't..."

Jamie chuckled. "You are a wicked woman Erin Casey."

"I plan to show you just how wicked, sometime...but for now I am soooo sorry for the way my father treated you tonight. I can't believe him."

"You have nothing to be sorry for. You can't control your father's behavior, although you did a pretty good job of it at one point."

"Well, I had to do something," said Erin. "My blood was boiling. Do you have to put up with people like him often?"

"Sometimes, but not in a while. So you're staying at your parent's tonight?"

"Yeah. Mom will drive me home after breakfast, which she will insist I have. So our plans are still on, right?"

"Absolutely. I'll be at your place about ten. Speaking of your Mom, she's kind of cool. She came back out to apologize and gave me a tip."

"My father stiffed you!"

"Yeah, but that's okay. I doubt your father would have tipped a hundred dollars on a good day."

Erin chuckled. "That's probably right, but it should have been five hundred for the abuse you took."

"I'm pretty thick skinned. I had to learn to be early on. It's late, you'd better get some sleep. And I have to go get wet." She giggled lasciviously.

"Now who's being wicked Jamie Shea Sheridan."

Jamie took note of her lover's tone. "Should I worry when you use my full name?"

"Oh yes. Goodnight sweetheart. I love you."

"I love you to. Goodnight."

Chapter 11

"Good morning dear," said Danielle, as she met her daughter at the bottom of the stairs. She always cringed at watching her visually challenged daughter, navigate the long staircase. It took her a long time, but she had learned not to be too over protective.

"Good morning Mom." Erin slipped an arm around her mother's petite waist. Of the two girls, Erin most resembled her mother. They were both the same size with twinkling green eyes, her mother's just a shade darker. They also shared the same hair color, but Danielle's was just starting to show her age.

A variety of delicious aromas greeted the two women as they made their way out onto the patio. "I thought we'd eat out here today," explained Danielle. "Your father had an early golf game, so it's just us."

"That's nice. I miss our time together."

Danielle kissed the top of the blonde head, as Erin seated herself. "So do I dear. Now what can I get you?"

"Just coffee and croissants please."

"Sweetheart, that isn't much."

Erin dropped her head and smiled. Having had this conversation so many times before, she just gave in to save herself time. "Okay. I'll have some fresh fruit and a small helping of eggs. But I have plans for lunch, so I don't want to fill up."

Danielle set a plate in front of her daughter and proceeded to prepare her own. Erin poured a splash of cream and two spoonfuls of sugar into her freshly brewed coffee and stirred, careful of the sterling silver spoon tapping against the expensive china cup.

"Tell me about your plans dear."

She hesitated for just a moment, choosing her words carefully. "I...I'm going up to the mountains with a friend, for a picnic and horseback riding." Erin hated lying to her parents and had only told a couple of small whites to save their feelings.

"That sounds like fun." Danielle took on a wistful expression. "Your father and I used to go on picnics...a long time ago," she added sadly. "Of course he would laugh if I were to suggest one now. I'm sure he would say, why do you want to drive all the way to the country just to eat lukewarm food on the hard ground, when we have this beautiful dining room."

Erin read the underlying melancholy in her mother's voice. Her emotional glasses seemed to be rose colored when it came to her Mother's happiness, but that spark of life appeared to be missing in her demeanor of late. Erin placed a comforting hand on her mother's. "Mom, are you okay? I mean really okay?"

Danielle sighed, but smiled at her precious daughter. "Yes sweetheart, I'm fine," she said with a false confidence.

"You may be fine, but you're not happy are you?"

"Oh Erin, don't mind me." Danielle swept her arms across the view. "I am sitting in the lap of luxury, what more could I want," she said with an unbelieving giggle. She was determined not to clutter her daughter's life with her petty problems. The maid, saying there was a phone call for Mrs. Casey, halted further conversation.

Danielle returned to the table a few minutes later. "I'm sorry that took so long. I'm chairing the annual church dance. You will be coming this year won't you dear?"

Erin sighed and pushed the food around on her plate. "I'll give a donation, Mom. But I don't think I'll be attending this time."

"But it's the perfect social setting for meeting some nice young man. I'm sure Jason would come if he knew you'd be there."

What is it with my sister and my mother and Jason, she thought with exasperation. Maybe it's because he's the only man they ever saw me date, she reasoned. At least Bridgett knows the truth now. I never have to lie to her again. But... "Mom, I'm not interested in Jason. We dated ten years ago in high school, that's all. I'm sure he's not sitting around, pining away for me."

"But you didn't just date, you went steady and he has asked about you. Yes, his mother said he's seen other women, but apparently he's never forgotten about you."

"He was the only boy I really trusted back then," said Erin. High school was so confusing for Erin, as it is with many gay teens. She found herself looking at the females running around with their shorts and tight tops, whereas a boy without his shirt, showing off his muscles, did nothing for her. She could never join in the "boyfriend" talks with the other girls, who she suspected were mostly just exaggerating, but she had no basis to really judge. She had no one with which to talk to about all the conflicting emotions and physical feelings filtering through her body. She had been friends with Jason since grade school and when her parents pressed her to start dating, act like a normal teenager her father had put it, she accepted Jason's offer. She never let him get passed the kissing, hand holding stage and he never pressured her for anything more and for that she appreciated who he really was and came to love him, but only as a dear friend. Only when Erin went to college, did she finally feel comfortable enough to begin exploring other options. In the middle of her sophomore year, Erin discovered that her roommate was gay, but she felt no attraction to her, other than friendship. It took her another month after the discovery, to finally discuss the topic with Anne.

The pre-med student was very compassionate and patient with her many questions. They had, on several occasions, visited a lesbian bar, close to campus. Erin wasn't scared so much as cautious and selective. Anne had warned her of diseases and educated her on safe practices. Only when Erin met Megan did it seem right. They shared many things in common, including a heritage.

The short, red head was also an English major and many study sessions led to heated, lingering kisses. Because she truly cared for Megan, and more importantly trusted her and respected her, did she decide to take that important step. After spending a fun, festive March afternoon together, celebrating St. Patrick, they spent a loving night in each other's arms, both sharing their bodies for the first time. Although it was a wonderful experience and Megan was gentle and patient, as was she, but Erin still felt something missing. She wanted that special feeling that she had always dreamed of, an experience where two souls connected. She and Megan continued to see each other and had some great times, but even though it was unspoken, each knew it was not a lasting love. Their romantic relationship returned to a friendship, long before their graduation.

Erin still held a warm place in her heart for the young Irish woman and they had talked many times, especially after Erin's accident. Erin was so happy when she learned that Megan had found the love of her life and was a bit envious, until that amazing June evening when it was finally her turn to be complete.

"Are you dating someone now Erin?" asked her mother, pulling Erin from her thoughts of school.

The piece of green melon stopped half way to her mouth. "Why do you ask, Mom?"

"Because I'm curious. And I happened to be walking by your room last night and overheard the last of your phone conversation," she added, timidly.

I'm gonna have to make sure that my door is closed tight from now on. Erin returned the food to her nearly empty plate and cleared her throat. "Yes Mom, I am seeing someone."

Danielle broke out in a huge smile of joy and relief. She wanted her youngest daughter to be as happy as her oldest, as happy as she had once been. But she prayed that Erin would find a lifelong happiness. "That's wonderful dear. When can we meet him?"

Erin released a breath and consented her conscience to tell another ivory fib. The truth would come later...much later. "Mom, this is a new relationship and I need to give it time. We need to concentrate on us first. I promise you when the time is right, I will introduce you."

"All right," said Danielle. "Can I at least know his name?"

It is gender neutral I guess and she'll really grill me if I don't tell her something. "It's Jamie."

Danielle Casey hugged her daughter for several parental seconds. "Well, I'm sure he's very nice and I'm happy for you," she finally said, planting a kiss to Erin's forehead.

Oh boy, thought the author through her smile.

"My mother overheard me say goodnight to you last night," said Erin to the woman seated next to her.

"And," prompted Jamie, as she guided her SUV down the winding road, toward the ranch in the California hills.

"And, she asked me if I was seeing someone and I said yes, but that we needed time and she would get to meet you soon. I did tell her your name though."

Jamie nodded absently. "But not that I'm a woman. Good," she sighed. "After the drive last night, I bet your father will want to kill when we finally meet and I ain't ready to die just yet."

"Sweetheart, my father won't even remember you. Even if I took you home tomorrow."

"If you say so." Jamie tried desperately to hide her concern.

The golden palomino galloped across the lush, emerald pasture, her white mane flying freely behind her. On her back, two riders enjoyed the warm sun, shining down on them and the breeze created, as the animal's strong legs carried them away. Two fair arms were wrapped tightly around a taught abdomen and a smile-laden face pressed against a strong back. The tall woman, holding the reins, echoed the expression, but with just an added touch of sadness, not because of her riding companion, but because of her own regretful memories.

"I love you," said Erin. She felt the reaction in the body molded to her, as the horse was slowed to a gentle walk. "Okay, what was that for?"

"What do you mean?"

"Oh no." Erin pulled a tanned cheek around and gave it an understanding kiss and a reminder. "Talk and listen, remember?"

Jamie responded with a subdued smile "Yeah, I remember. There's a grove of trees just ahead. We'll stop there and talk, okay?" Jamie felt the nod, as the yellow head resumed its previous position.

Carefully dismounting and securing the horse to a branch, Jamie led her friend to the shade of a tall oak. They sat cross-legged, knee-to-knee. Jamie needed the space, but at the same time craved the contact that their positions offered.

Erin softly rubbed a jean-covered knee. "Okay, why did you stiffen up when I said I love you?"

Jamie fidgeted with the long blade of grass she had liberated from the ground nearby, and sighed. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to," she said around the knot in her gut. "I love...to hear you say that."

Erin smiled. "Good, because I love to say it. And I intend to say it for the rest of my life. You do intend to be around to hear it that long, don't you?"

There was a hesitation. Fear gripped Erin's heart and she grabbed for a hand.

"Jamie, you're not having second thoughts, are you?" A deep intake of breath was heard.

"No. I don't want to, but..."

"I don't like butts. Actually, I am very fond of one in particular." Erin grinned and got the response she hoped for.

A slight chuckle broke the tension. "Well, the feeling is very much mutual. I do love you Erin, no doubt about it."

"But you still have doubts about a relationship?"

"My doubts are all about me. I...I had a dream last night. I thought I had gotten over the guilt." Jamie threw aside the blade of grass in frustration.

"That kind of guilt doesn't just vanish in an instant," Erin explained patiently. "I know that. I just ask that you keep trying." She raised the hand in hers and gave it a kiss. "On the beach the other night, you gave yourself permission to love and to be loved. I don't know if that's easy for anyone. Most people worry about getting hurt. But you worry most about causing the hurt. And I understand why, but I want you to get passed that, no matter how long it takes. I want you to be happy because you deserve it. Tell me about the dream," she asked quietly.

"It was about Sandy. The same things I told you the other night. She was on her knees begging and whining, telling me that she loved me and pleading with me to say I loved her. Finally I did, just to shut her up. But of course I didn't mean it. It just got worse from there. She wouldn't leave me alone no matter how rude I was to her. She was there at my door all the time; she followed me around like a shadow. That's when I set it up for her to see me with another woman and..." Jamie angrily wiped the tears falling from her eyes.

Erin covered both knees in front of her with consoling hands. "Jamie, you can't continue to see her blood on your hands. Sandy was an extremely dependent person with severe emotional and maybe even mental problems. She would have latched onto anyone and ended up with disastrous results. They were her problems."

"That doesn't matter. She is still dead because of what I did."

Erin called on the knowledge she had learned in school. "Did you want her to die?"

"No, of course not! I just wanted her to leave me alone."

"That's right, that's all you wanted. Maybe what you did was a little harsh, but you had no idea she would run in front of that car. It was a tragic accident, but that's all it was...an accident."

Jamie grasped at irrational straws. "But if I would have just seen that she had problems, maybe I could've helped, instead..."

Erin scooted herself around and wrapped her arms around her hurting friend. "Sweetheart, you were suffering from your own emotional difficulties at the time. You were in no condition to recognize hers. Uncontrollable circumstances led you to make a misguided decision. But you are not responsible for her death."

There was a long silence as the dark haired woman processed every bit of information.

"I am not responsible for her death," she whispered, after several long moments.

Much hugging and consoling caresses followed until the tears had vanished and the sobs quieted. "But it still hurts," admitted Jamie.

"I know. That's because you have an incredibly caring soul."

"But, I never thought I had a soul at all, until I read your book and wasn't absolutely certain until I met you. You are very special Erin Casey. You saved my soul."

One gentle kiss became two and then three turned into four. Two entwined bodies lowered themselves onto the plush carpeting of green. Hands roamed over cloth-covered curves. Breaths were shared and actions were quickly heading toward the point of no return. Suddenly lips ceased their actions and foreheads met.

"We should stop," came Jamie's breathless suggestion.

"Yes," agreed the flushed blonde.

The tall woman rolled onto her back beside the smaller body. They both giggled. "This is getting harder to resist, isn't it?" asked Jamie.

"Yeah, but we can't do this here."

Jamie moved onto her side and propped her head on her hand. "How do you know so much about psychology anyway?" she asked of their previous conversation.

"I minored in it in college. I thought it would help me develop better fictional characters, if I understood why we human animals, do the things we do."

"Guess it worked huh?" Jamie plucked a strand from the blonde head.

"Was that a gray hair?" Erin asked, through a yawn.

"No silly it was grass."

Jamie leaned over for a simple, but loving kiss. "You won't have any gray hairs for a long time. And even then I will tell you that you are even more beautiful than you are on this day."

Erin smiled. Hearing Jamie talk about a future together filled her with a joy unsurpassed by anything she had ever felt before.

Fuzz tickled her chin, and then stopped. There it was again. Erin reached up and brushed away the irritant with fingers protruding from the tan wrap. A few seconds later it was back, strong enough this time to bring her to reality. Her head rested on a firm, denim-clad thigh. Three hands covered her rumbling, stomach. "I guess I fell asleep huh?"

"That you did, but that's okay. You've only been out about thirty minutes," said Jamie as she checked her watch and tossed aside the tickling flower. That hand came back down and resumed stroking the soft blonde hair beneath her fingertips. "Didn't you sleep well at your parents house last night?"

"I slept fine." A huge happy smile crossed her face. "In fact I had a dream too."

"A good one I hope."

"A very good one. In fact it was a reoccurring dream that I used to have as a little girl. But I haven't had it in about thirteen years."

"Maybe it was just being in your old room."

"Possibly, but I think it's more. You want to hear it?" Erin asked with an anxious lilt.

"Absolutely."

Erin pulled their entwined hands under her chin as she explained. "I was playing in this huge meadow, filled with wild flowers and tall grass that tickled my bare legs as I ran through it. There were a couple of tall trees, but there was one in particular. It didn't stand nearly as tall as the others, mostly because it leaned sideways. It was so unusual looking, like its branches were reaching for something. The trunk was pretty thick and it had a lot of low hung branches, perfect for climbing, so that's what I did. Couldn't go very high, but it was still fun. I was sitting on a strong branch swinging my legs and watching a hawk that was flying off in the distance. All of a sudden I hear a voice asking if they could play to. I climbed down and met this little girl. I told her my name and we started playing. We climbed in the tree, chased each other through the meadow and back again, made daisy chain necklaces." She smiled, remembering. "I had never had so much fun, as I did with her. I had the dream many times, but she never told me her name. And the next day, I could never remember what she looked like. All I could remember was seeing long dark hair bouncing around as I chased her. We were the best of friends; I knew that right away. And I felt safe with her, not that I was really afraid of anything, she just made me feel... protected.

Jamie had her head leaned back against the tree and her eyes closed, picturing the scene.

Erin laced the fingers of their joined hands and squeezed. "I had the dream again last night, but it was a little different. We played all day long and started to walk back to our tree, hand in hand.

We got there and she turned to me. I finally got to see her face. Then she said...my name is Jamie and I'll be your best friend forever."

Her revelation was met with silence, but curiosity got the better of her. She carefully reached up from her reclined position and touched the quiet face. A huge, happy smile greeted her fingertips.

"I was just trying to imagine what you looked like as a little girl," explained Jamie, playfully nipping the exploring fingers.

"I had much longer hair and a few freckles across my nose, which have thankfully faded. Bridgett described me as too cute for my own good. But I was never sure if she meant my looks or my personality," she chuckled. "I have some pictures at home if you're really curious."

That got a big reaction from the tall woman. "Of course I am! I'd like to know everything about you. I don't suppose your mother has any of those embarrassing type baby photos. You know the ones with your cute, little, naked butt showing."

Erin blushed. "Yes, I'm afraid she does."

"Can't wait." It was now Jamie's turn to yawn and stretch her long legs. "I wish we had known each other as children," she said wistfully. "Maybe you could have saved me from falling into that dark spiral of anger."

"So do I sweetheart. But everything happens for a reason. We found each other when we were supposed to. We've come together to stop the loneliness, heal the wounds...reunite a soul."

They lay there a few more minutes, each thinking about the same subject, desiring the same thing.

"Jamie?"

"Yeah."

"I need to ask you something."

"Okay. You can ask me anything."

"Are you...I mean have you ever...been tested?" She heard Jamie chuckle. "What's funny about that?"

"Nothing," said Jamie. "To answer your question, yes, I got tested right after I moved here and it was negative."

Erin was relieved after hearing the story of her rough past.

"I was laughing because I was remembering something. On my lunch hour, just a few days after I met you, I found myself at the clinic, getting another test, just to be sure. I never gave it any serious thought as to why I did it, but I guess my subconscious knew we would end up here. That was negative too, by the way."

Erin explained that she had only had one sexual partner and that they were both virgins, so she was confident in her health.

They shared a few more serious thoughts and a few laughs until Jamie gathered up the horse's reins and announced it was time to head back.

"Can we just walk for a little while?" asked Erin.

"Sure."

With their arms around the others waist and the horse trailing behind, they trekked back across the meadow.

Erin took a deep breath of scented air. "Are there flowers around here somewhere?"

Jamie looked around in an arc. "Yeah, as a matter of fact, wait here." She handed over the leather reins.

Just a few seconds later, she heard Jamie's footsteps brushing through the tall grass.

"For you," said Jamie, placing the white and yellow bloom in Erin's left hand.

She brought the flower to her nose and recognized it. "A daisy."

Jamie reclaimed a hand and started off.

Nature's calming notes blanketed them in peace as they walked along. But a sudden screech of a bird halted their movements.

"I don't think I've ever heard a hawk around here before." Jamie tracked its flight across the sky and when her head came back down, she saw it.

Erin heard the sharp intake of breath beside her. "What?"

"I don't believe it," said Jamie, with awe.

"What is it?"

Silence.

Erin hated this kind of silence. "Jamie, please tell me what's wrong?"

The nervous timber of her love's voice pulled Jamie from her reverie. "It's okay Sweetheart. There's nothing wrong."

Erin visibly relaxed. "Good. Then mind telling me what has your attention?"

Jamie pointed a long finger off to the south. "It's a...I mean it looks like...but I don't know how..."

Erin snapped impatient fingers in front of a mesmerized face. "A few more coherent words if you please. What are you seeing?"

"It's your tree," she said, dumbfounded.

"My tree?"

"Yes. The one you described from you're dream."

Erin laughed. "You're kidding."

"No. There it is about a hundred feet in front of us." Jamie shook her head, still in disbelief. "All the times I've been out here and I don't remember it. I mean there are a lot of trees around, but that one is unusual."

"Come on." Erin pulled the dark haired woman forward, trusting her to offer directions.

When they reached the oddity, Erin put both hands against it, feeling the rough bark. She made a complete circle, knowing just when to step over one of it's large, above ground roots. "This is it," she said with glee and reached above her to grab a thick branch. Lifting her feet, she slightly swung her body. "The daisy, the hawk and now the tree. This is where my dream took place, even though I never knew it existed."

Jamie stepped forward and took the lithe woman into her arms. "Hi, my name is Jamie and I'll be your best friend forever."

The kiss that followed sealed their connection and locked their hearts together for an eternity...again.

Continued in Part 4.

The Athenaeum's Scroll Archive

~ At First Sight ~
by Colleen

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Thanks, to my beta readers Barbara and Jennis.

All positive comments are welcome at coleen30@webtv.net

Part 4

Chapter 12

Monday morning found Erin sitting in another LA traffic jam, which immediately brought to mind the way her father had treated Jamie the previous Saturday. Erin cringed at his words. Funny she never remembered him being that gruff when she was a child. Then he had treated his little girls like princesses, spoiling them with all the material possessions imaginable. Somehow Erin had not succumbed to the material girl scenario, but unfortunately her sister had not escaped that particular fate. Bridgett always had to have the best of everything, not that she was greedy; just the opposite, she was generous, always giving to charities, sharing her vast wealth, but still she wanted a lot and the most expensive of it. Bridgett was most like their father in that respect and Erin had taken more after her mother, actively participating in charity activities, besides just making donations.

Erin sat in the taxi, hearing the blaring of horns and the shouting of obscenities. While she didn't mind the expense of taking taxis to the city when she needed to, it was the annoyance of it all. Visually challenged people may be able to live normal lives, but being sightless did present a heavy set of hassles. Not being able to drive yourself was at the top of the list. She had considered on several occasions, getting her own car and driver. While it may not prevent her from wiling away many hours stuck in traffic, at least she would have someone she knew, to talk to. But at the same time, she never saw herself with a servant and even though she would pay a hefty salary for the service they would provide, to her it would still feel like a servant. She had been on the fence about this issue for some time, but there were other pros and cons to factor in as well.

She was still pondering, when the driver announced they had arrived at her building. She handed him the usual three twenties, telling him to keep the change. Artemis guided Erin through the crowded lobby of the Meridian building, which housed rehearsal halls, conference rooms and some offices for Moonlight productions. Once inside the elevator, Erin pushed the number five button and after three stops to pick up more passengers, she and Arte departed. Making her way to the first left, she then walked eighteen steps down the carpeted corridor. Entering the open door, she was greeted, unhappily by Mr. Tyler.

"Well, look what the cat, or should I say dog, finally decided to drag in." His feet were propped up on the large round table and he drank from a white Styrofoam cup.

"Don't start with me Ethan."

"What, didn't we have a good weekend?" he mocked, condescendingly. "Or a good week for that matter. Thank you so much, by the way. I went down to San Diego and scored big time, three different girls in five days, that's a new record." He gloated, thinking he'd make her jealous.

"Your mother must be proud," she said, sarcastically.

"She is, thanks." Ethan went to the refreshment table and returned to her side with a cup full of steaming, black coffee. She accepted reluctantly. "So you never did answer my question, how was your time off?"

"Not that it's any of your business Ethan, but my weekend was fantastic. It's my morning that's turning out lousy, coincidentally just since I walked in the door. Now lets get to work."

A morning filled with a tug of war, of words, plotlines and character direction, followed at a snails pace. Around noon, the ringing of her cell phone halted yet another debate.

"Hello, and thank you whoever you are." She knew it could only be one of a hand full of people who had the number.

"Well, thank you to you to Babe," Jamie purred with a smile. "What's up, you sound a little frustrated?"

"That's putting it mildly. But, I don't want to waste our time talking about that. It is so good to hear your voice though." Erin continued her hushed conversation off to the side of the room. Artemis kept nosey ears from getting too close.

Ethan concentrated really hard and was able to make out a stray word here and there. He could tell by the tone of her voice and the smile on her face that she was very happy to be talking to whoever it was. *I don't believe it. She's got a boyfriend. Damn. No wonder she's been refusing me. I think a little more research on that luscious little blonde is definitely in order.*

"I'll talk to you tonight Jamie. Bye." Erin flipped the small phone closed and informed Mr. Tyler that she was leaving for lunch.

"I don't suppose it would do any good to ask you to have lunch with me, would it?"

"Now that's the first smart thing you've said since I met you. I'll be back in an hour and a half."

Ethan stood by the window watching Erin and her canine companion leave. He turned around to a view of the busy city below. "Now I just have to find out who this Jamie guy is," he muttered aloud. "She probably met him at the beach where she lives. He's probably one of those blonde surfer duds with three brain cells in his head."

Bridgett came to Erin's that night, not wanting to have their conversation over the phone. They sat on the deck drinking iced tea as if it were any ordinary day. For Erin it was, for Bridgett it definitely wasn't.

"So how long have you...and...Jamie been...you know?"

Erin gave a half smile at her sister's hesitancy. "I fell in love with Jamie right away. And I am in love, Bridgett. What I feel for her is no different than what you feel for Brad. I want the same things you have. Someone to share everyday with. Someone to laugh along me at the joys and someone to lend me a shoulder and dry my tears through the pains. I want to grow old with Jamie and have a life's worth of memories to look back on."

Bridgett looked out over the ocean, as a wave crashed in. She'd never given a second's thought to the gay lifestyle. Why would she, it certainly had no personal meaning for her. She knew they were around, but she had never met any. They were certainly detectable with their outlandish behavior and personalities. She looked back over to the sister she'd known for twenty-seven years; the little girl, she'd taught how to swim, the little girl who played with dolls. The teenager who she went shopping with for clothes, too many times to remember. *How can she be one of them? She certainly doesn't act like that. Then again neither does Jamie.* Rust colored brows drew together with an earth shattering revelation. *She's not one of them. Because there are no them. We are just people who happen to be different in that one aspect of our lives.* Bridgett dropped her head and silently laughed at her own ignorance. She took another look at her beautiful and gentle sister. *I still don't want her to be hurt.* "Is that what Jamie wants?" she finally asked.

Erin hesitated and swirled the ice around in her glass. "I believe it's what she wants. But I need to help her understand it's what she needs. She has some issues from her past to deal with."

"And you're willing to take on someone, with that kind of emotional baggage?"

Erin didn't like that comment. "I'm not taking her on, she's not a servant. I love her. And I know she loves me. And I intend to help her with any problems she ever has, willingly. Jamie is a good person. Now to get back to your first question, we, mutually, confessed our love Friday night." Her smile returned at the thought of the blush that was about to rise to her sister's face. "But we have yet to...you know. But... you know ...we will." Erin gave her a teasing smile and she heard Bridgett shuffle in her seat and drink down about half her beverage.

The red head may have accepted it, but it still was going to take some getting used to.
"So...how... long have you been...?"

"Say the word Bridgett; gay or lesbian. It won't bite you or make you gag. At least I hope not," she added sadly.

Bridgett gave herself a mental kick. *I'm being ridiculous. This is my sister and I'm making her feel like she's doing something wrong.* She cleared her throat. "How long have you been gay?"

"I was born that way."

"Right. I'm sorry. I guess I mean when did you realize it? I mean you did date Jason for two years."

Erin turned in her chair to face Bridgett, now that the situation seemed a little more comfortable. "I guess I suspected when I was about fifteen. But everything was so confusing for me. I didn't have anyone to talk to."

Bridgett flinched, knowing she wasn't there for her at the time.

"You remember the way Dad was pressuring me into dating?" Erin sighed. "Maybe I was using Jason. I knew I would never fall in love with him."

"Jason really cared about you Erin. I don't think he would blame you for anything. I really am glad that you can be yourself now. And if Jamie makes you happy, than I'm happy for you." She pulled her sister in for a loving hug.

"Thanks Brig. That helps a lot."

They moved inside when Erin suggested dinner. Bridgett reached into the drawer for silverware when another thought occurred to her. "Erin, is...will Jamie be your...first. I mean, I know you aren't the kind who is interested in... casual sex... so..."

"Do you really want to know Bridgett?"

"Yes. But I guess that answers my question. Besides I told you about my first."

Erin chuckled. "Oh, I don't mind telling you. I just want to be sure you're comfortable talking about this."

"I am. I mean I certainly don't need details, but I would like to know, so I can understand more about you. I thought I knew everything, but..."

Erin smiled. "I am really glad we can talk about this. Thank you." They sat down to eat. "When I was in college..."

Tuesday and Wednesday brought a repeat of the same headaches for Erin, except that Ethan did seem to be a slightly more agreeable and he had slacked off on his advances...a little. But she was determined to see this project through and to her satisfaction. Hearing Jamie's voice every night and the thought of being together on the weekend got her through almost anything.

The first three days of the workweek seemed to sail by for Jamie. Sitting at her computer seemed much more enjoyable lately, although it wasn't just the work, everything had seemed brighter, happier, lighter since she had confessed her love for Erin. Everyday that went by and Erin still loved her, felt like a mini miracle to Jamie.

They talked late into Wednesday night and both came to the conclusion that it was time to take the next step in their relationship. Erin asked Jamie if she would spend the night Saturday, to which Jamie's soul leapt for joy, but she managed to keep her voice calm, agreeing in a heartbeat. Having already switched with another driver to Friday so she could have Saturday free, Jamie began counting away the seconds. Her dreams that night were filled with visions of blonde loveliness.

"Jamie," said the voice standing beside her desk.

When no answer came the voice called out to her again with an accompanying shake of her shoulder.

"What?" Jamie broke from her reverie, confused.

"I called you twice Jamie. That must have been some daydream."

"Yeah. What do you need Bridgett?" Jamie still felt uncomfortable around her supervisor, since Bridgett had discovered the true relationship between her and her sister.

It was strange that the red head hadn't mentioned it all week. She didn't seem angry or resentful, but her normal jubilation was diminished.

"I need you to double check this manuscript. I think the new reader made a few mistakes, but I'm going to give her some time to settle in. But if you wouldn't mind going over her work for a while, I'd appreciate it." She noticed the strange expression on Jamie's face. Bridgett grabbed an empty chair from a nearby desk and sat next to Jamie, again garnering an almost fearful look. "Jamie, this is not some sort of punishment for you seeing my sister." She whispered so that they wouldn't feed the office rumor mill. "I honestly trust you to do the most thorough job." She gave a reassuring smile and received a nod in response. Bridgett picked up a discarded paper clip and began absently, untwisting it. "I had a long talk with Erin the other night," she explained. "This whole situation is unbelievably surprising, I mean I had no idea. It will take some getting used to...but I do accept it. I should have said something to you sooner. I'm sorry."

Jamie gave a nervous laugh. "Well, there were a couple of times this week when I was afraid maybe you'd slip something into my coffee," she joked.

They both chuckled.

"Look Jamie, I know we've only known each other a short while. But I could always see that you were a good person, even when I was so angry after her fall. I wouldn't have introduced you to my sister in the first place, if I didn't trust to be a good friend. I didn't know that I was playing matchmaker at the time, but it's made my sister happier than I've seen her in years, so I have to trust her choice."

"Thank you." Jamie meant, not only for accepting the relationship, but also for Bridgett's comments on her being a nice person. Maybe she could finally start to believe it. Erin thought so, now Bridgett. Jamie always knew how the elderly people in her building always doted over her. She figured that was just their way, but now she began to see it in a new light.

Jamie finished up the short manuscript and decided to take an early afternoon and surprise the woman she loved. Trolling across town, through the LA traffic, Jamie began to think about Saturday night. She knew it would be the most special time for her, just being with Erin. It would be the first time she actually made love with someone she loved. But she wanted to make sure it was extra special for her visually challenged love, soon to be lover. *If she can't see me*, thought Jamie, *I have to do things to enhance all her other senses*. Since meeting Erin, she had done a lot of reading on life for a blind person. Many interesting things came to light for her and she had been trying to implement them whenever possible, making sure she described things in detail for Erin. Her favorite part was touching the author whenever possible, which they both needed and craved. Jamie continued planning out all the details for Saturday night as she neared the downtown office building.

Sirens came around the corner right behind her and she pulled into an empty space next to the curb. She was just about to pull out into traffic again when she noticed that the huge fire truck stopped at the end of block, right in front of the Meridian Building.

"Erin. No. Please protect her." Jamie jumped from her car and ran down the sidewalk. "Erin!" She frantically called through the crowd of strangers exiting the building. She looked up and saw smoke billowing from the upper windows. Terror gripped her; she knew that Erin worked on the fifth floor. Frightened people began crossing the street at the fireman's request, but Jamie stayed put, still searching for the small woman.

"Are you looking for Erin Casey?" asked a tall blonde.

"Yes. Have you seen her, did she get out okay?"

The woman coughed a couple of times. "I haven't seen her out here, but I met her coming back from lunch about an hour ago, so I know she was in there."

"Damn!" Jamie turned back toward the building. She gave a quick thank you to the woman and took off. Firefighters were pulling hoses from the back of the truck. Water pumps were being activated and orders were shouted. *I've got to get in there. I know she's in danger!* Jamie saw a smudge covered, yellow jacket hanging off the back of one of the engines. She grabbed it, tossed

it on and snuck in with the other firefighters. A thin haze was beginning to form in the lobby, but she knew the higher up she went, the worse it would become. She ducked into the stairwell, knowing that the elevators would have been disengaged by now. Just two floors up and the air was thicker, slowing down her progress. She stopped to take a deep breath. *Hang on Erin. I'm almost there.* Three more flights and finally she crashed through the fifth floor door. The smoke, gathering in the hallway, stung her eyes, but she neither saw nor felt any flames, giving her a small sense of relief. Staying as close to the ground as possible, Jamie went down the hall calling for Erin. She thought she would at least be able to hear Artemis barking if they were trapped somewhere. Jamie checked her watch. She'd been there four minutes already and had almost made a complete sweep of the floor. *Maybe I missed her outside,* she thought. *If I get myself killed in here what will happen to Erin. No, I know she's in here I can feel it!* Jamie shouted out, in the strongest voice she could manage. "Erin!" Three seconds passed. She was just about to call out again, when she heard a muffled voice. She followed the sound a few feet down the corridor and found it coming from behind a closed door.

Erin heard the door open. From her spot in the far corner she cried out, "I'm here! Please help me!"

Two giant leaps brought Jamie to her side. "It's okay honey, I'm here now. Everything's gonna be all right. We're gonna get out of here."

The fear and confusion jumbled her thoughts, but she knew that voice anywhere. "Jamie? What are you doing here?"

"I came by to surprise you," she said, checking over the trembling body. "But I didn't expect this. Are you hurt?"

"No," Erin replied, through a coughing spell. "I just got confused in the rush. I got turned around and ended up in here."

"Where's Artemis?" Jamie asked, taking off her jacket.

"She's not here." More coughing.

Jamie put the jacket over the blonde head, not needing any further explanation for now. "Okay, put your arms around my neck and hold on tight." She picked up the slight woman and headed back out into the hallway and to the stairwell. The smoke now clouded her eyes so badly, she had some idea of what the woman in her arms went through. Fear pumped adrenaline through the tall woman's veins as her rubber-soled shoes met every step, bringing them closer to safety.

No words were spoken to conserve what little clean oxygen floated around them. Jamie used a squeeze of her arms to convey a reassurance and felt the same message relayed back. Reaching the final flight, Jamie stopped for two seconds to take a cleaner breath. "We're almost out sweetheart," she said, knowing the blonde woman had no idea where they were.

Booming voices began to reach Jamie's ears as she went through the ground floor doorway. The crackle of static came across the walkie-talkie held in one fireman's hand and was followed by the terrifying words, "We are now showing flames on the fifth floor. Repeating we have flames on the fifth floor, west side."

She felt the small body, in her arms shudder as she hurried across the lobby, seeing the light of day through the big glass doors. Jamie ignored the protests of, what did you think you were doing; you should have let us do our job; you could have caused more harm than good. The most important thing in her life was safe and that's all that mattered.

Her smoke filled eyes blinked against the bright sun, as paramedics assisted Jamie, but she refused to hand off her passenger until they were safely in the first aid area. They both sucked in the sweet smelling oxygen offered by the medic. Vital signs on both patients were found to be within normal ranges, given the situation. Erin's glasses had somewhat protected her eyes from the smoke, but Jamie wasn't so lucky. Her eyes were heavily irritated, but she refused a trip to the hospital. After a thorough eyewash by an on sight doctor, she was given medicated drops to ease the discomfort. She thanked the doctor and they were left alone in a corner.

Jamie pulled the woman into a ferocious hug. "Are you really okay sweetheart?"

Erin pulled her body back, but confiscated the sooty hands that had saved her life. "I am now." She smiled and reached forward for a gentle kiss. "Thank you," she whispered. "I was never so scared in my life. At least in the explosion, I was unconscious and had no idea what the danger was, until after the fact. But this..."

"I understand. What do you say we go home and talk about it there?" Jamie pulled at her dirty clothes. "I think we both could use a shower." She helped Erin to her feet, never letting their body contact waver. With their arms around each other, they headed down the street toward Jamie's car.

"Erin wait!" The man ran up to face them. "I was looking everywhere for you. Are you okay?"

"Yes, no thanks to you!" came the very angry answer.

"Erin I'm sorry..."

"What did he do?" Jamie asked.

"Never mind let's just go," insisted the author.

"Erin, I tried..."

"Look Ethan it's over. Just go home."

"You're Ethan?" asked Jamie.

He flashed a smile. "Yes, I'm Ethan Tyler. I guess Erin's told you all about me."

"Oh yes, all about you. What did he do back there Erin?"

"I didn't do anything."

"That's right!" Erin yelled, angrily. "You didn't do anything. When the alarms went off, you panicked. I heard you throw everything in your briefcase and run off, even after I asked you to help me."

Jamie's rage exploded and she slammed the weasely man against the side of the building. He trembled at the sight of the fury in the bloodshot eyes staring him in the face.

"You left a blind woman in a burning building," she said, through clenched teeth. "Erin said you were an asshole, but you're a coward to, huh. I should make you wish your mother never laid eyes on your father."

"Jamie, he's not worth it," said Erin's tired voice. "Let's just go home. Please."

Again Jamie couldn't refuse the plea. She released the man's shirt, but the sneer never left her face.

A sudden realization flashed across his features.

"Leave her alone, you little bastard," warned Jamie. "Or next time I'll make good on my threats."

"I'm not the bastard here," he said, as they walked away. "You are, you stupid dyke!"

Jamie stopped in her tracks and stiffened. Erin grabbed onto the tall woman's shirt. "No Jamie. Ignore him. Let's just go."

"At least that explains it," he yelled down the street, at their retreating forms. "I knew it wasn't me!"

Erin fell asleep on the drive out to the beach house, after explaining that she had taken Artemis to the vet, when she discovered her limping when they were in the park at lunch. The rest of their short conversation stayed away from the fire or Tyler.

Jamie looked over at the head resting against the side window. *I can't believe I tried to deny my feelings for you. I can't live without you. After today I know that for certain.*

"Erin we're here." The exhausted woman didn't budge. "Sweetheart, come on, let's go inside where it's more comfortable."

She unbuckled her own seat belt and heard the author mumble, "Comfortable sounds good."

Jamie chuckled, got out and walked to the passenger side door. She opened it and reached in to unbuckle Erin's belt. Suddenly two wide-awake arms encircled her neck and pulled her in for a long kiss. "I love you," said Erin. "But you really need a shower."

"I'm not the only one my dear." Jamie wiped a smudge from the button nose. "Your hair is almost as dark as mine. By the way I love you too."

Sooty clothes were on their second washing cycle. Two pairs of shoes, both still blackened, sat on the doormat on the porch and one blonde and one brunette, now squeaky clean, sat on the couch in the den holding one another.

"It's about time to put some more of those drops in your eyes, isn't it?" said Erin, from her place on Jamie's shoulder.

"They're actually much better," Jamie muttered. "I don't think I'll need them."

The blonde rose from her comfortable position with a stern look. "Jamie, the doctor said it would prevent infection." Two slightly trembling hands softly traced the area around the blue orbs. She whispered with heavy emotion, "These are your eyes we're talking about. Please don't risk them." A single tear landed on Erin's thumb and she felt a soft kiss on her palm.

"You're right sweetheart. I left them on the kitchen table. Why don't I get us something to eat while I'm at it?"

"That sounds good. I'll help."

Jamie knew better than to protest. Erin needed to get back to her normal life right away. She'd allowed herself to be pampered since they had gotten out of the burning building and while she enjoyed it and did a fair amount of pampering herself, some normalcy was in order.

"What did the vet say when you called?" asked Jamie, as she removed left over chicken from the refrigerator.

Erin retrieved two plates from the cabinet and two sets of silverware from the drawer. "She said Arte stepped on something, probably broken glass, when we were at the park. The vet put in a couple of stitches, but she'll be fine. I told them I'd pick her up tomorrow."

After their satisfying meal they returned to snuggle on the sofa.

"You don't mind if I stay here tonight, do you?" asked Jamie.

Erin squeezed the muscled body. "Well, I was hoping that's what you'd want to do."

"Even if I don't have anything to sleep in? I mean this robe is already short, but I don't think it'll be to comfortable to wear to bed."

"By all means, I want you to be comfortable." Erin slid a hand down to check for herself just how short her terry cloth robe was on her tall friend. The soft skin she felt, beneath the hem of the garment, sent a shot of warmth through her. She continued to rub tiny circles on the bare thigh.

"As good as...oh, scratch that, as incredible as that feels, maybe you'd better stop," Jamie suggested.

Erin scolded herself mentally, for torturing the woman, but continued her caresses, silently. Jamie's moans were melodious to her ears. Neither one knew exactly how far things would go, but neither one had the strength to stop...yet. Lips quickly sought out the other and passion rose to great heights, until both were hearing bells.

"Isn't that the phone?" Jamie asked, once she was allowed to take re-possession of her tongue.

"I guess it is," breathed Erin. But then it stopped. "Oh good, now where were we."

Before passions could resume, the phone rang again.

"Maybe you'd better get it," said Jamie. "With my luck it'd be your father."

Erin reached over Jamie and grabbed the phone from the end table. "Hello," she answered, snuggling back against an over-heated body. "Oh, hi Mom."

Jamie panicked and started to jump up, but was stopped by a hand to her knee.

"Oh hi Mom, is that all you have to say?" asked an exasperated Danielle. "Your father and I just saw on the news about the fire. Were you there? Are you okay? Why didn't you call us?"

"Mom, calm down. I'm fine, I promise. Yes, I was there at the time. Things got pretty scary...but a hero rescued me." Erin pulled a strong arm around her waist.

"Yes dear, those fireman are very brave. I'm going to ask your father to send a large donation to the fire department."

Erin smiled. "That's a good idea Mom."

"I'm glad you're all right sweetheart. How are things going with your new beau?"

"It's going well."

"You don't sound very excited, dear. Does he treat you well?"

Erin laid her head back against a cloth-covered shoulder and grinned. "Jamie treats me wonderfully."

"Well that's good to hear. I can't wait to meet him."

"Soon, Mom. I promise."

"You sound tired. I'd better let you get some sleep. Goodbye dear, I love you."

"I love you to Mom. Bye."

"She wants to meet you," said Erin, softly as she put the phone aside.

"Sweetheart that's up to you. I can face whatever their reaction is to me."

Erin was silent, deep in thought. Talking to her mother and thinking about telling her parents, had cooled her lust, substantially. She threaded her fingers through the ones lying on her stomach. "I'm tired. How about you?"

Jamie yawned. "Yeah, I could use a good eight hours."

Due to Jamie's lack of nightwear, they decided to sleep apart. Erin deposited her love at the door of the guest bedroom, with a thorough kiss and prolonged full body hug. I love you's were exchanged and each woman settled in to bed with a smile. Troubles seemed far away for the two, but in an apartment several miles away, anger was brewing that could threaten their happiness, even their very lives.

Ethan Tyler barged passed the surprised executive assistant and through the door marked private. "Hudson we need to talk now!"

The equally startled producer nearly dropped the cup of coffee, he was holding.

"I'm sorry Mr. Hudson," pleaded the assistant, as she raced in behind the irate man.

"It's all right Jessica, I'll take care of it." The big man in the gray business suit calmly put down the cup and the piece of paper he was reading. "Mr. Tyler I am going to excuse your rude behavior because of yesterday's trauma. In fact I was just about to call everyone involved. I trust you weren't injured. If you were, our insurance company is on the case right now. If you're here to threaten a lawsuit, it won't work. The preliminary report is listing the fire as accidental." He reached for the paper, searching for the paragraph. "An electrical problem in the air conditioning unit."

"If you're through," growled Tyler. "This has nothing to do with the fire."

"All right. Have a seat and tell me why you're here."

Tyler began to pace anxiously. "I want off the Noah Factor script immediately. I want to be put on another project and I demand the full contractual amount."

"Mr. Tyler, if you want off the project we can talk about it. If we can't come to an agreement over whatever the problem is, you will be compensated for the time you have put in, but you cannot barge in here demanding things. Things you are not going to get. Now if you would like to sit down and discuss this calmly, then do so. If not, I'll ask you to leave and return at a later date."

Tyler dropped down into the expensive, padded chair with a huff.

Hudson leaned forward on his desk and studied the writer, not liking the body language he was seeing. "Now, I take it you are having a problem with Ms. Casey."

"I prefer to call her Casey the dyke," snarled Tyler.

Hudson's gray eyes flashed with anger. "Excuse me?"

Tyler jumped up from his seat again, crossed over and poured himself a drink from the small bar in the corner. "What, haven't you ever heard that word?" He downed the amber liquid. "Believe me, it fits. Stupid gays." He slammed the glass down and started pacing again. "This isn't damn perverted San Francisco," he muttered. "I didn't take this job to work with someone like her. Not only that, her stupid girlfriend had the nerve to threaten me yesterday. I have to say, Erin certainly didn't act butch, but that girlfriend of hers thinks she's John fucking Wayne. And..."

"That's enough!" shouted Hudson. He would have interrupted sooner, but he had to get control of his temper, before he did something drastic. He rose to his six foot five inch height and slowly circled the huge cherry wood desk. Coming to stand in front of Tyler, he smiled; a truly evil smile that would do Dr. Seuss's Grinch proud. "Your attitude makes me sick, Mr. Tyler. I don't want anyone like you working for me." Without taking his eyes from the shorter man's face he reached back and hit the intercom button. "Ms. Thompson, call the lawyers and tell them to terminate Mr. Tyler's contract as of noon yesterday."

With a confirmation, he once again addressed the scowling man in front of him. "Don't bother looking for employment anywhere else in this town Mr. Tyler. I guarantee you won't find it. Now please leave my sight." He returned to his chair, expecting the sniveling man to be gone when he turned around, but that didn't happen.

Ethan Tyler took his life into his own hands when he leaned across the desktop, right into the face of Joseph Hudson. "What are you, some sort of gay lover?" he asked. The look he received caused him to jump back and nearly wet himself.

Hudson gave another smile, more evil than the one before. "Yes," he said. "Literally."

Tyler spit in the man's coffee cup and spun around. "I should have known. You all stick together. Don't think it's the end of this, old man," he threatened with a pointing finger. "You are not going to ruin my career. I'll see all three of you in hell for this." The door was slammed shut behind the enraged man.

Joseph Hudson sat back in his chair and expelled a frustrated breath. He hadn't had to put up with that kind of attitude for quite some time and the feelings it brought back were very upsetting. After a fair amount of brooding, he picked up the phone and dialed.

The phone on Jamie's desk rang and she ran back from the copy machine just in time before the caller hung up. "Hello."

"Hi, I thought maybe I'd missed you," said Erin.

"No, I was across the room, Xeroxing," explained Jamie. "What's wrong?"

"How do you know something's wrong?"

Jamie opened a drawer, dropped the stack of papers in and took her seat. "Because I know that little tone in your voice when you are upset about something."

Erin sighed. "I just got a call from the producer doing Noah Factor. After the confrontation with Ethan yesterday, I guess I should have expected it. He wants me to come by his office at one o'clock."

"Erin, you signed a contract, he can't let you go just because of your personal life. Did you call your lawyer?"

"Yeah, but she's out of town."

Jamie contemplated for about two seconds. "Would it be okay if I went with you to see this man? I promise not to lose my temper, like I did yesterday."

Erin smiled. "Actually, he asked me to bring you if possible. I thought that was strange. Unless he expects me to break down and being blind he doesn't want to have to deal with me."

"I doubt that's the case Erin. Just give me the address and I'll meet you out in front of the building at 12:45."

Jamie pulled off a blue, post it note and scribbled down the address. "How are you going to get there? Maybe I should leave now and come and pick you up."

"No, that's okay. I'll just take a cab like I do all the time."

"You take a taxi in to town everyday?"

"Yeah, how did you think I got here?"

"Another stupidity on my part," confessed Jamie. "I never thought about it."

"Honey you're not stupid. It just wasn't your problem to think about. Now after this appointment, I'll treat you to a late lunch."

"That's a deal. Bye."

Jamie's temper boiled all the way across town. *If this jerk hurts her, I swear he'll pay. I know I promised Erin I wouldn't lose it, but I can't stand to see her hurt. This movie means so much to her and if she loses it just because of someone's prejudices...well she could always sue, but she wouldn't. That would mean too much bad publicity. Between this and worrying how her parents are going to react, she's really having a hard time, even if she won't admit it. And there is nothing I can do, in either case, to really help. Yes there is, she corrected herself. I can listen, she's taught me that much at least. I can listen, support her and love her. I hope.*

Artemis jumped to her feet, slightly favoring one bandaged paw. Her tail thumped against Erin's leg and she happily whimpered, (the dog, not Erin, her time to whimper would come later).

"Hey sexy, care to give a girl a hand," teased the author, wiggling the aforementioned appendage.

The offered hand was taken happily. "How did you know it was me this time, Sherlock?"

"Arte doesn't react that way to anybody else, except my niece and nephew and I certainly wasn't expecting them. There you have it Doctor Watson," she said with a shrug. "Shall we step into the lion's den?"

"Don't worry, I'll be your personal gladiator," whispered her dark haired hero. "What ever happens I am proud of you and I love you."

Erin shook her head. "Once again you were so wrong."

Jamie panicked. *Damn! I knew I'd mess up.* "About what?"

"Thinking that you don't know how to love. You just said the right thing that I needed to hear."

Jamie let lose a visible sigh of relief. "Only because you're a patient teacher. Come on."

"Mr. Hudson is waiting for you Ms. Casey, go right on in," said the assistant. "May I get you anything, coffee, tea...?"

"No, thank you."

With Jamie's hand held tightly in hers, Erin stepped into the plush office and was immediately greeted by a jovial Joseph Hudson. "Good afternoon Ms. Casey." He shook her offered hand. "May I call you Erin?"

She was definitely confused by his pleasant attitude. "Yes, of course. This is my partner, Jamie Sheridan."

He greeted her with a smile. "Nice to meet you Ms. Sheridan. Please have a seat and we'll discuss why I asked you here."

He's probably smearing on the butter so she won't sue his ass for breach of contract, thought Jamie, sarcastically. She took back the hand next to hers and helped Jamie to one of the maroon chairs.

"I thought I knew what this was about Mr. Hudson," Erin said. "Weren't you contacted by Mr. Tyler?"

"Please call me Joseph, both of you. And yes he paid me a visit, very early this morning. First off, I'm glad you weren't hurt in yesterday's fire, which you might like to know, was ruled accidental and not intentional."

Erin nodded. "Was anyone seriously hurt?"

"No, thank God. The building did suffer major damage, but of course that's not important. It can be rebuilt. Getting back to Tyler. That young man definitely has some serious attitude problems. He burst into my office ranting like a lunatic. I won't trouble you with the particulars, but suffice it to say he is no longer under contract to this company. I truly misjudged his character when I chose him to work with you. And I must sincerely apologize to you both, for submitting you to his personal attacks."

"There's no need to apologize Joseph," said Erin. "You're not responsible for his prejudices."

"No, but I know from personal experience how much these situations hurt. My partner and I have been together for twenty-five years and we have suffered many aggressions from ignorant people just like him."

Erin breathed a sigh of relief. "Thank you Sir, but what exactly does this mean for the movie? I will team up with another co-writer if you want me to."

"Actually, I have been reading over the rough drafts you've sent so far. And I now realize that the writing is far too sensitive and caring for Mr. Tyler to have had much input. Am I right?"

"Well, it was a constant battle, but most of the time I did manage to make my opinions stick."

Hudson smiled. "Good. I don't see the need for another co-writer. I think, no, I know you can finish this project on your own. I should have seen that from the beginning and again I apologize for my poor judgment."

Erin beamed with joy at the outcome and with pride at Mr. Hudson's confidence.

Jamie leaned over to hug the smiling author. "I knew everything would be alright."

Erin stood and shook the big man's hand. "Thank you again Joseph. We don't want to take up any more of your time."

"Actually there is one more thing I'd like to tell you about," he said, joining them at the door. "I'm sure it's nothing, but you should know just in case. Mr. Tyler made some threats against all of us. I am prepared for my lawyers to file for restraining orders, if he continues this harassment. So please be careful and watch yourselves."

Jamie's jaw twitched with fury. "He won't come near her as long as I'm around. I'll make sure of that."

"Sweetheart, I'm sure that idiot is all talk, there's no need to be over protective."

"Yes, I am over protective," protested Jamie. "Not because you're blind, but because I love you."

Erin blushed a little. "I guess I can't argue with that, because I feel the same way." She turned back to the producer. "Goodbye Joseph we'll talk later about the script."

Chapter 13

Jamie pulled into the parking garage of one of the biggest malls in town. Shopping was one of her all time least favorite activities; she tried to avoid it when at all possible. When she did have to venture out into the bargain hunters arena, she at least tried to get everything she'd need all in one day, so that chore could be put off for another month or so.

But this Saturday morning, she actually felt a joy shudder through her when she thought about milling through the throngs of shoppers, dodging strollers and the gangs of teenagers, who seemed to form a slow moving wall as they shuffled down the corridor. She was shopping for Erin this time and it was the anticipation of the wonderful night ahead that gave her the drive to brave the mall. Jamie had given a lot of careful thought as she sat in her limo the night before, while her passengers dined for almost two hours. A list with at least a dozen items, rested in the pocket of her denim jeans as she entered through a side door into one of the large, expensive stores. While she was sparing no expense on this trip, the highbrow store just didn't appeal to her and she quickly exited out into the busy mall in search of her first purchase.

After much discussion she had finally relented and allowed Erin the chance to prepare dinner for them. Jamie had wanted to bring in a catered meal, but Erin had reminded her that she needed to add some romance to their evening as well.

"I know, I know, I'm sorry," pleaded Jamie as they sat on the deck, after returning from the meeting with Joseph Hudson. "I just want you to enjoy everything about tomorrow night."

Erin reached out to cover the hand on her arm. "I will. I really do enjoy cooking. Maybe that's hard for you to believe since you ain't Betty Crocker," she teased with a smile. "...But actually it relaxes me. And the fact that you rave over my cooking only adds the incentive."

Jamie leaned over toward the seated woman. "I get it, but I do intend to have some other surprises for you and there is no talking me out of those."

"I wouldn't think of it." Erin accepted a kiss.

A few more minutes of silence passed as the subject of the earlier meeting plagued Jamie's mind. "Do you ever get scared out here all alone? I mean that would intimidate many sighted people."

Erin formed her answer carefully, given the very protective nature of her partner.

"When it storms, I go bonkers, as you well know," she chuckled. "But most of the time, no. I have an incredible security system. When this place is locked up, it's locked up tight. All the glass is unbreakable, so I don't have to worry about that. Ironically, the only thing that ever really bothers me is the chance of fire. But I know Arte would give me plenty of warning and get me out of the house as quickly as possible. Having a direct exit from my bedroom helps with that. And I check the smoke detectors once a month and I have a fire inspector in twice a year. So to answer your question, sometimes I get a little afraid, but I feel very safe."

Jamie turned into the little shop for the last items on her list. She wasn't in the door two seconds, when she was descended upon by a sales girl...a very perky sales girl.

"Good morning. May I help you find something today?"

"I guess."

"Have you ever used our products before?" the smiling young woman asked.

"No."

The woman teasingly licked her lips. "Well then, why don't you follow me and I'll take care of you."

She led Jamie to the back of the shop. There, on a low counter, sat at least three dozen-sampler bottles. The pastel colors created a nice display, but the titles, some provocative, some playful, some sickeningly cute, confused Jamie even more. She wanted to be sure and make the right choice.

The tall blonde, wearing a much too short skirt, stood much too close to Jamie's side, as she spoke. "Do you have any idea what fragrance you might like to start with?"

"No. But I don't want anything too strong."

"Okay, why don't we start with this one. My name's Chelsea by the way, what's yours?"

The warning bells went off in the driver's head. But she did answer, just to be polite.

Chelsea put a dab of the yellow lotion on the back of her right hand and held it up for Jamie's perusal. "What do you think? This is actually one of my favorites."

Jamie took a small sniff and nearly gagged, but kept her expression in check. *I guess strength of fragrance is in the nose of the beholder*, she thought. "I don't think that would suit me."

"Okay, there are plenty here to choose from, but I might run out of body parts to try them on," Chelsea purred. She pretended to go about choosing another sample to try. "You know, I do have most of these at my apartment, perhaps I could give you a more personal demonstration."

Jamie saw that one coming a mile away and a few months ago she might have accepted the beautiful woman's offer for a one night...or afternoon stand, but now things were totally different and not for a millisecond was she tempted. "I'm flattered, but no. You see I'm buying this for a very special night with the most beautiful woman in the world."

A small frown of disappointment flashed across the red painted lips. "I see. Well, feel free to try as many samples as you want, until you find the right one. If you need any further help I'll be by the register."

Jamie nodded as the blonde sauntered off. She soon had it narrowed down to three choices, but just couldn't decide on one. *What the heck, I'll get all three. There will be many nights to enjoy them.* A mischievous smile formed on her face at the thought. A quick circle around the small shop and Jamie carried her choices to the counter. Chelsea began scanning the bottles of bath gels, body lotions and massage oils, while Jamie found one smaller, useful item next to the counter. She handed over her credit card to pay the double-digit total.

"Tell your friend she's very lucky to have someone like you," said Chelsea, as Jamie signed the slip of paper.

Jamie looked up with the sincerest of blue eyes. "It may be a cliché thing to say, but I'm the one who's very lucky."

Fifteen minutes later Jamie arrived back at her car for the second time in the span of an hour and a half. The pink sack, from the bath shop, joined the others resting on the back seat, including one from a place Jamie had never ever thought she would step foot into. But a sexy item in the display window called to her and soon, one slightly embarrassed brunette was exiting with one of Victoria's secrets.

Erin's morning at the grocery store went much faster with the aid of a personal shopper. With stops for fresh produce, gourmet cheeses, spices and a trip by the seafood section, her first task was complete. She thanked the man for his services and tipped him handsomely, as he helped her into the taxi with her packages. Next, Erin visited the florist for a beautiful centerpiece for the

dinner table and finally an imported bottle of white wine and a bottle of champagne were purchased at the shop next door. Erin was completely unaware of the pair of anger filled eyes that traced her every move.

The main course was well on its way to being done when the doorbell rang. Erin took a deep calming breath, but couldn't for the life of her, reduce the huge smile that threatened to consume the rest of her face. Although she couldn't see it, the face on the other side of the door mirrored hers.

"Hi," said Erin, almost timidly, as she opened the door.

"Hello." Jamie stepped in and hugged her then she took a step back and studied the petite blonde from head to toe. "You look absolutely gorgeous." The subdued, floral print sundress stopped a few inches above the knee, giving Jamie a wonderful view of strong, tanned legs. Thin straps draped over delectable shoulders that made Jamie's mouth water much more than the delicious smells, emanating from the kitchen.

"Thank you." Erin led Jamie further into the room. "Tell me what you're wearing so I can say the same of you."

Jamie laid the item, in her left hand, on a nearby table and took both of Erin's hands in hers. "I think it will be much more fun for both of us if you find out for yourself." She guided Erin's eager digits to her hips. "I will tell you I have on black loafers, the rest is up to you."

Erin's hands skimmed over the narrow hips and around to the back where she forced her hands into the pockets. "Jeans." She guessed correctly.

"Black," said a helpful Jamie.

"And tight," said the blonde with a squeeze to the firmness beneath her hands. "Just the way I like them."

Her hands moved up to feel the cool, smooth material of her shirt, which she was informed was a copper color. "Very nice," she purred. "And you do look very beautiful."

"Thank you." Jamie took both hands and brought them to her mouth for the wispiest of kisses. "I intend to keep these very busy tonight. Along with these." She nuzzled an ear. "And this," she said with a kiss to the button nose. "And of course these." A long, thorough kiss to her lips quickly consumed their oxygen supply. "By the time this night is over you will see how much I love you." Jamie's long arm reached down to retrieve the item she'd put aside before. "Let this be the first of tonight's olfactory pleasures." Jamie placed the single bloom beneath Erin's nose. Jamie leaned in, closed her eyes and shared the fragrance with her love.

"Is that an orchid?" Erin asked, with surprise, as she gently fingered the delicate light purple blossom.

"That it is. Mrs. Webster, who lives in my building, her sister raises prize orchids and I got it from her."

"Thank you. I'll get a vase to put it in." Erin retrieved the pale yellow, glass receptacle from a hall closet, filled it with water and the beautiful flower then placed it on the counter, in the kitchen. "I hope you're hungry. It'll be ready in about twenty minutes."

"It smells great and I'm starved. I have some things to bring in from the car, I'll be right back."

"Those wouldn't happen to be the surprises you mentioned would they?" asked Erin with a grin.

"They might just be. But the emphasis is on surprise."

"Don't worry, I won't peak."

During the meal, they had a very leisurely conversation. There were still little surprises they were happily discovering about each other and the evening was meant for firsts.

After the dishes were put in the dishwasher, Jamie led Erin out onto the deck that wrapped halfway around the white house. "Wait right there," she instructed before walking down the wooden planks a few feet and slipping into Erin's bedroom. Several minutes later she returned to her patient partner, accompanied by strains of soft music floating through the double doors, she had left open. Two bodies cuddled close and swayed to the music. Jamie leaned close to an ear and hummed along with the familiar song.

And I'm meeting you again for the first time

Two hearts but one soul

Two halves are now whole

Cause you know who I am

And you know what I need

I'm safe in your arms

And you make me believe

"You do remember this don't you?"

Erin smiled. "Of course. This is our song. Like it says, we were together before we even met. You were in my dreams."

Jamie made a surprising revelation, especially to herself. "And you were in mine," she said softly. "I just didn't understand what they meant."

Erin didn't need to ask for any more information, what she felt, being in Jamie's arms, said it all. They continued to move together, listening to the lyrics of their soul.

My dreams heard your voice

There was no other choice

The first time I saw you

It all fell into place

The first time we touched

I saw in your face

My future is yours

I share my life till it's through

I am complete now that I have you

Their song ended and faded into the next, as the couple loved one another. Jamie looked out over the vast ocean; never again taking for granted the view that greeted her. "The sun is dropping close to the horizon," she whispered. "The soft orange glow is shimmering on the water, chasing in the rolling waves greeting the shore. The clouds across the sky are just starting to turn that unique color between pink and pale purple. The sky's the limit for us Erin. I want to make this, the most special night of your life."

"It already is Jamie and it will only get better. So let's move inside and start on the better." This time, Erin led her love inside, to her pale green bedroom.

Jamie turned the music down to a very soft, background level. A few more twirls and a lot of kissing followed. "I told you I wanted to entice all of your senses tonight," the tall woman explained. "We have the music and I think I'll leave the door open for the added ocean sounds. And now I want to show you the room." Jamie moved in behind the smaller woman, took both hands in hers and moved toward the long, low dresser. Together they traced the various shapes of dozen candles that were placed around the room and flames sprang to life at their joint touch. Jamie had chosen only vanilla and coconut scented ones, as not interfere with other aromas to explore later.

"Jamie, it's beautiful. I can picture it in my mind." Erin's throat constricted with emotion. "No one has ever taken the time to do these kinds of things for me."

"I guess they didn't really love you, but I do."

Their journey around the room had brought them to the side of the king-sized bed. Erin began to cover Jamie's face with tiny kisses, as she slid her hands down to the buttons of the satiny shirt. The raven-haired woman was letting Erin take the lead, so she could explore every sensation she needed to enjoy a complete experience. Copper silk landed on the sea green carpet as lips found the unveiled skin. Hot breath slid past a sensitive ear. "I love you," she whispered, as her movements proceeded in slow motion. Form fitting jeans were peeled away, leaving only small, beige undergarments. A single fingertip traced the lace, covering a swell of smooth skin. Before long, Jamie stood before her, in full, unencumbered glory.

Just as slowly, Jamie returned the favor and slid the thin straps down the lightly muscled arms and got her first taste of the delicious shoulders. She slowly pulled the zipper down Erin's back and within seconds she was as gloriously naked as her partner. In a last gesture of absolute trust, Erin allowed her dark glasses to be removed. Jamie kissed around the lightly scarred area. "I knew your eyes would be the most incredible color of green." She moved her mouth lower. "You are so beautiful," breathed Jamie, against the very soft lips. "From the top of your head to the tips of your toes and every square inch in between."

Erin pulled the tall woman down to the green satin sheets. She began mapping out the sensual terrain, hovering above her. Starting with the silky raven hair, Erin's hands never stopped their motion. A stifled moan sounded when she found a particularly sensitive spot behind Jamie's ear. "No, I want to hear you. I want to hear everything," pleaded Erin. She touched the spot again and smiled at the growl she received.

When her hands reached a flat stomach, Erin pushed the tall woman over onto the bed and moved her own body to lie, half covering the panting figure beneath. Erin nipped at the pleasure area on Jamie's neck and was rewarded again with the most arousing sounds to ever reach her ears. Lips fairly devoured the smooth taught skin as she moved down over the pleasant mixture of muscles and curves. Two areas of firm, plump flesh garnered lingering attention, as her hand continued the southerly explorations. Jamie breathlessly offered gentle instructions as Erin's mouth slowly followed the trail her hands had lain out. Upon reaching her desired destination, Erin discovered treasures beyond her widest dreams. Her motions ceased only when her need for breath became urgent. More requests were given and joyously met; especially the barely whispered don't stop. And she didn't, until the quivering climax beneath her, had calmed to quiet sobs. Two strong hands gripped Erin's shoulders and pulled them face-to-face.

"I love you, Jamie," she said before capturing the silent mouth before her. Wetness slid over Erin's face and she pulled back. Her right hand reached to caress the tan cheek, feeling, what could only be tears. "What's wrong? Did I do something wrong?"

Jamie finally composed herself. "No. No, of course not. You did everything so right." She pulled the smaller body even closer to her. "That was the most beautiful experience of my life. No one has ever touched me with such reverence...such love." Jamie ran long fingers down the softly muscled back. Her touches gradually became more erotic, moving toward places begging for inspection. She gently reversed their positions, sliding her sated body over her highly aroused partner. "Thank you for bringing me back to life. I love you Erin. Now I'm going to show you

just how much," she whispered, just before she captured the willing lips for the deepest kiss imaginable.

Their evening had started out an untouched canvas, but a portrait of love was soon painted from the palette of their passion. Blue gazed into green. Silken yellow strands mixed with ebony ones. Tanned flesh tones entwined. And each beating of the heart added a broad stroke of crimson. Each well-placed touch, sigh and word blended to create an emotional masterpiece of love.

Quite sometime later, the glass, double doors were shut and curtains pulled, hiding the now empty bedroom to the world. Six partially melted candles were extinguished, leaving behind a lingering scent of vanilla. Artemis lay on the floor right outside the closed bedroom door. She was not used to being excluded from her owner's nocturnal actions, which of course, until now consisted only of sleeping. She raised a golden head at the unmistakable sound of her human's voice. Thinking she was finally going to be let in to the room, she whimpered, but sadly the door did not open. She flopped back down onto the soft carpeting, laid her muzzle right against the bottom of the door and released a big doggie sigh. The familiar voice once again reached her sensitive ears, but she did not anticipate entry this time.

The mostly darkened bedroom gave way to a soft glow emanating from an adjoining room. Inside the large bathroom, decorated with colors of maroon and white, the six remaining lit candles now sat along the edge of the oversized, sunken bathtub.

Giggles erupted from the mound of bubbles as Jamie slipped beneath the water line to nip at the enticing shoulder blade.

"Jamie that tickles," laughed Erin.

"I have never known anybody who had ticklish shoulder blades before," said Jamie, as she pushed her drenched hair off her forehead and wiped the water away from her eyes. She wrapped her arms around the small waist and snuggled against the body in front of her.

"I won't even ask just how many shoulder blades you've sampled."

A solemn chin rested on her shoulder. "Not as many as you probably think," Jamie said sadly.

Erin turned sideways inside the long arms. "Hey, I was only teasing."

"I know. But every time before, it was just the basics; pleasures of the body, but not the heart. I realize now just how lost I really was. Instead of searching for my own destruction, I should have been searching for you. But back then I never, ever consciously dreamed that someone like you existed."

"I'm just glad we finally found each other."

"Let's move this back into the bedroom," said Jamie, finally pulling away from the erotic onslaught of kisses. "I have more surprises for you."

Watching Erin arise from the thick foam, gave Jamie another shot of acute arousal. *Patience Jamie, patience.* She pulled herself to her full height and helped her lover from the liquid paradise. They wrapped each other in soft velour towels and took special care to see that every drop, of water was dried from sensitized skin.

After blowing out the short candles, Erin was lead, by entwined hands, back into the darkened bedroom. She heard the clicking of the switch on the small lamp beside the bed, then the crinkling of paper. "What are you doing Jamie?"

"I told you I had many special things planned for this evening." She approached the shorter woman and placed the wispy, silken garment in her lover's hands. "While this is for you to wear... I kinda bought it for me," she admitted, sheepishly.

"It feels wonderful. Why don't you help me into this so I can model it for you." It slipped over her head with ease and slid down to hug the curves. It came to a stop just barely past her hips. She twirled around. "Well what do you think?"

"I think I have wonderful taste." Jamie pulled the garment and it's occupant close to her. Her hands followed the soft material down over a firm behind, as the silk slid against her naked skin. "It's flaming red," she whispered.

"Well then it certainly fits this entire evening, doesn't it?"

Jamie picked up the little author and spun her around. "It most certainly does!"

"How about some dessert and champagne?" asked Erin. "I made one of those fantastic chocolate cakes." She grinned, remembering how they had teased each other about it the night they met. "And I hope champagne goes with chocolate, because we have so much to celebrate."

Jamie donned the short, maroon robe and when she opened the door, an excited, four-legged sentry greeted her. The dog skirted right around the tall woman and happily licked the face that bent to greet her.

"How's my baby huh?" cooed the blonde.

"I think she's jealous," said Jamie, as she watched the slobbery display of affection.

Erin vigorously rubbed the long ears. "No, she's just not used to sharing me." She stood and took Jamie's arm. "But she's going to have to learn." Erin reached up to kiss the woman she loved, but was stopped by a hand.

"I'm not kissing those lips, until the doggie drool has been washed off."

"She didn't mind kissing me after you did," said Erin, indignantly as they headed for the kitchen.

Jamie shrugged a shoulder. "I guess she has more class than I do." They both laughed.

After having fed each other the cocoa confection, they returned to the bedroom. The night was still young, at least for insatiable lovers, and more lovemaking was definitely needed. Jamie carried an ice bucket with champagne and two fluted crystal glasses. Erin carried an extra large, crunchy dog treat for Artemis, to reward the patient canine.

Once back inside the enclosed room, small sips of the bubbly were consumed along with soft kisses. More words of endearment were exchanged and hands traveled unhindered.

Jamie took the tall glass from Erin and set it on the nightstand. "I have one more surprise for you." She pulled the red garment from the author's body.

"Jamie you have already made this the most special and memorable night of my life." She gave an erotic little smile. "But who am I to deny you anything."

"I like that about you. Now lie down on your stomach," Jamie instructed with a kiss.

Erin did so and heard her lover cross the room, then return to settle her tall frame over the author's backside.

Jamie removed the top from the small bottle. She leaned over and waved the vessel under a cute nose.

Erin took in an aromatic whiff. "Umm, raspberry."

"Yes. My favorite. Ravenous Raspberry to be exact." Jamie drizzled a line of the scented oil down Erin's back. Her strong hands slowly dispersed the warm liquid across the sculpted surface, teasing the ticklish spots along the way. More oil was applied and fingers massaged the hard muscles along the author's legs. Jamie instructed her lover to turn over and she proceeded to cover the front of Erin's enticing body with the sensual substance, leaving not an inch of skin untouched. Her breathing increased as she stared at the picture of perfection. Jamie could no longer resist the glistening figure beneath her and she slid down and proceeded to completely love the body and soul that had captured her heart.

Chapter 14

Sunday morning was announced by a magnificent sunrise, but it was unnoticed by the entwined, exhausted lovers. A slight chill brushed across Jamie's exposed back as the air conditioning came on. She reached down and pulled the sheet up over her shoulder. Under the covering, she returned her hand to its resting place across a taut stomach. She pried open one eye and spared a glance at the clock on the nightstand. Way too early to even think about getting up, thought the chauffeur. She nuzzled the short blonde hair in front of her as slumber reclaimed her.

From the corner of the room, a golden head popped up from its place on the floor, but also returned to slumber when she saw her human still sound asleep...with her.

Two hours later a bladder screamed for relief. Erin felt warm breath assault her face, soon accompanied by a whimpering.

"What is it?" mumbled Jamie.

"I have to let Artemis out," Erin slurred and stretched, at least as much as the body pressed against her back would allow.

Jamie slowly pulled away and rubbed her face. "No, I'll do it. I need to start winning her favor."

Erin lay there, picturing in her mind, the tall, exquisite body gracefully moving across the room. She smiled.

"What is that expression for?" asked Jamie, as she slid back under the sheet.

The smaller woman turned to face her. "You."

Jamie mirrored the smile. "I believe you once said something about expecting a proper good morning kiss." She proceeded to bestow a series of small fluttery kisses, followed by some teasing nibbles, ending with a serious exploration of Erin's mouth.

"That's it," said the very pleased blonde.

They lounged in bed for another half an hour, cuddling, whispering and caressing.

Artemis took care of her immediate need and then spent several more minutes running around the enclosed yard, playing with the squeaky toy, freeing her energy. She bound back up the wooden stairs and down the deck, where she was frustratingly met with another closed door. She backed up, took one complete turn and dropped down onto the wood planks and assumed, what can only be described as a pout.

Jamie and Erin spent the rest of the day sharing a shower, cooking duties, play time with Artemis, kisses...love.

Jamie stayed until the very last second, but when 4:30 rolled around, she reluctantly announced she had to leave for work.

"It's going to be so lonely in that big bed tonight," said Erin as she escorted Jamie to her car.

The tall woman gave her a squeeze and chuckled. "You've been sleeping in that big bed for years."

"But now I know what it feels like to have you beside me. Even in my sleep I felt you there, touching me, body, heart and soul."

They stopped beside the vehicle and Jamie wrapped both arms around her love. "I'll miss you to, very much. I'll call you when I get home tonight." She kissed her goodbye.

Jamie's clients, that night, were very pleasant and left her a very nice tip. That surprised her, since she was sure they thought she was a few hours short of a day, because she spent the entire night with a silly grin plastered across her face. Every thought was filled with the beautiful blonde and a glorious night at a beach house.

She got home, quickly showered, wrapped herself in her white robe and grabbed a beer from the fridge.

Erin reclined against the headboard as her fingers slid across the pages of the book in her lap. The story of romance and adventure busied her mind while she waited for the call. But she was distracted several times, as a stray current of air would carry the scent of raspberry from the bottle left on the nightstand. The cordless phone, beside her leg, rang. "Hello," she answered brightly.

"Hi beautiful. What are you doing?"

"Do you really want to know, cause it might keep you up tonight?"

"Well it doesn't matter now, just that suggestion will do the trick."

Erin closed the book and put it on the bed beside her. "Actually it's just like I thought. I'm lying here, trying not to miss you, but failing miserably."

The dark head nodded her staunch agreement. "I know what you mean. Would it...I mean could I..." She stumbled over the words, afraid of pushing too hard.

"What is it Jamie?"

She took a big breath and a big chance. "I don't think I can wait until next weekend to see you. Could I come by Wednesday, after work...and stay till Thursday?"

Erin smiled at that happy thought and her lover's timid behavior. "Sweetheart you never have to ask to come out here. You are always welcome. And as for staying over, that to is a standing invitation. Once you got here I probably wouldn't let you leave anyway. In fact how does the title love slave work for you?"

"Ohhhh, I willingly submit to my mistresses every desire."

The call ended twenty minutes later, leaving two very emotionally satisfied, but physically frustrated women to contend with a night of fitful sleep.

The next two weeks passed in a relatively normal fashion. Erin was able to get quite a bit of work done on the script for Noah Factor, now that she didn't have the sniveling Ethan Tyler hindering her every move.

The contractor sat at his desk studying the new blueprint, at the downtown construction site. The Meridian Building. Everything from the fourth floor up had to be rebuilt and smoke and water damage had to be repaired everywhere else. He took a swallow of his strong coffee and got up to adjust the small air conditioner. He stood in front of it for several minutes, dreading having to go back outside under the sweltering, August sun. There was a knock at the trailer door. "Come in," he said gruffly.

In walked a tall, thin man, dressed in worn jeans and a faded T-shirt.

"What can I do for you?" asked the boss, as he sat back down at his desk.

The newcomer scratched his stubbled chin. "I need a job Mr..."

"Brooks."

The blue-eyed man stuck out his hand. "Mr. Brooks. Like I said, I need a job."

"Well, Mr...."

"Taylor, Evan Taylor."

"Have a seat Mr. Taylor and we'll see what we can do." Brooks went to the file cabinet to find an application.

Taylor pulled out the chair, noticing the half-demolished building, out the window. The contractor never saw the demented smile that covered the newcomer's face.

Even though it made for a very long, tiring days, Jamie permanently switched her shifts at Touch of Class Limo to Tuesday and Thursday, keeping her regular Sunday shift. That way she could go the beach house after work on Friday and stay until Sunday afternoon. The Wednesday night stay had also become an important part of their needed time together. Erin's first inclination was to ask Jamie to move in with her, but a few things had to be taken into consideration. Jamie would have an extra long commute from the beach to the city everyday and then there was her feeling of independence. Erin didn't want the woman, who was already holding down two jobs, to feel slighted by her wealth. It was just too soon.

Jamie arrived at Erin's, at a little after five on Friday. As she neared the front steps, she heard Artemis bark inside the house. Over the weeks she had won the dog's favor and had come to know her actions very well. The noise she was hearing now, was not an angry bark, but more of an excited one. She rang the doorbell once, twice. Just as she was about to knock, the door flew open.

"Get your clothes on! Hurry!" Erin called back over her shoulder.

Jamie's blue eyes widened at the comment. "Is something going on here that I should know about?" she asked, half teasingly. She trusted Erin completely, but somehow the idea that she would tire of her and move on, tickled the back of Jamie's mind...and she hated herself for that.

Erin smiled and did some teasing of her own. "Well, this really cute girl stopped by and I just couldn't say no to her. She just got out of the bath and now she's running around my house naked."

"Aunt Ewin," called the three-year-old, who came running into the room with the big yellow canine right behind her. A small hand grabbed onto Erin's and the girl shyly hid behind the author.

"Sweetheart, I told you we were going to have a visitor," said Erin. "This is my friend Jamie." She led the child back into the living room.

The tall woman smiled at the little girl, as she took a seat on the couch. "Nice to meet you kiddo. Well you were right sweetheart, she is very cute."

The blonde proceeded to try and dress the squirming youngster as she explained the situation. "As you can see there has been a change in plans for our evening. My brother in law had a family emergency and Brig wanted to go with him. They needed someone to watch Caitlin and I couldn't say no. I'm sorry honey. I hope you're not too disappointed."

Jamie moved to sit next to her lover. "Of course I'm not disappointed. This is your family. All I want is to spend time with you, it doesn't matter what we do or who else is here." She received a kiss for that sentiment.

"I'm glad you're here," said Erin. "To tell you the truth, the idea of being alone with Caitlin, scares me. There are so many things a three year old can get into."

A long arm snaked around the unsure woman. "I understand. You are a wonderful aunt. So what are we going to do tonight, huh?" asked Jamie as she settled back against the couch.

"I hungry," announced the little blonde head, that popped in between them.

Erin gave the little tummy a tickle. "I guess that's first on the agenda then." She turned to the dark haired woman. "You watch her while I fix us something to eat."

Jamie's nerves jumped to attention. "Wouldn't you rather stay here with your niece, I can..."

"No, no. I know right where everything is. I'll do it. That's if you don't mind staying in here."

She didn't want to disappoint Erin, even though the thought scared the heck out of her. "That's fine," she agreed reluctantly. "We'll be okay...I guess," she added with a whisper.

Erin headed to the kitchen with a self-satisfied smile.

"So kiddo, what do you wanna do?" Jamie watched as she toddled over to a big, canvas bag lying on the floor. Her assumption, that there were toys inside, was soon confirmed when Caitlin returned with a fuzzy, yellow duck and dropped it in her lap.

"Well this is cute," observed Jamie, looking at its orange, slightly crooked bill. "What's his name?"

"Pway!" said the little one.

"Somehow I don't think that's his name."

"Pway!" she said more forcefully.

"Okay, okay." Jamie turned the item around in her hands, thinking maybe it was some sort of an electronic toy. But she couldn't find a switch. "What do you want me to do?" She continued searching the toy while an impatient blonde head bobbed in her vision. "I'm trying Caitlin. I'm...Oh I see." She finally noticed the well-concealed opening on the bottom. "It's a hand puppet."

"Pway!" the youngster demanded, yet again.

Jamie eased her long fingers and thumb into the ducks bill. "You know I'm very hungry too," she said in her best cartoon voice. She nipped the tiny nose with the puppet's mouth and received a high-pitched giggle. Figuring she did something right, Jamie nipped at an ear and a chin and then gently poked at the little girl's belly, tickling her. More giggles filled the room, followed by gleeful barks wanting in on the action.

In the kitchen, a brilliant smile covered Erin's face as she listened to two of her favorite people, quickly becoming playmates. She remembered playing house with her dolls when she was little. Appropriately enough, she never once imagined a husband. She always played single parent, to at least four dolls or stuffed bears. Of course she was a stay in the backyard mom, always having enough money to buy plenty of doll clothes and plastic groceries. Her children were always well behaved, never saying a word in fact. She even tried home schooling them one summer, but her older sister made too much noise in the near by pool. Her children called her mommy and that made little Erin very happy. Grown up Erin, could only imagine hearing a child call her mommy. But that thought warmed her heart. *Someday.*

Her reverie was broken by the sound of crying, coming from the next room. Her first reaction was to rush in, find out the problem and comfort the child, but she stopped at the door, listening to the words being spoken.

"It's okay honey." Jamie took Caitlin into her arms. "You're okay. Let me see." She studied the small arm and softly blew across the red mark. "It's just a little rug burn," she explained. "It'll go away soon." A kiss was placed onto the blonde curls and tiny tears were dried.

With the mini crisis now under control, Erin smiled once again and returned to her work. Soon she was calling the houses occupants, including Artemis, to dinner. "How's everything going?" she asked, when Jamie stepped into the room.

"Great, but I worked up an appetite. Playing didn't seem this hard when I was little."

"I think you'll survive," Erin said with a small laugh, as she lifted Caitlin onto the booster seat at the dining room table. "Did you have fun with Jamie?"

The curly head nodded vigorously. "Funnn!"

"And did you have fun with Caitlin?"

The dark head nodded happily for the little green eyes watching her. "Fun," she said for the woman she loved. And it wasn't a lie. She hadn't had the opportunity to interact with children her entire life. She didn't dislike them, she was just nervous, but the little person sitting across from her now, had eased those feelings and brought yet another layer of joy to a slowly reviving soul.

"I'm glad to hear that," Erin said, setting a plastic, Winnie the Pooh plate in front of the child.

Some wonderful aromas had filled Jamie's senses earlier, but now she looked at the food on the small plate with less than enthusiasm. She knew that had been planning to go out to dinner, so Erin probably did the best she could on such short notice. She couldn't let her disapproval show at the food selection. "Grilled cheese. Good."

"What you don't like grilled cheese?" asked the cook, with mock disappointment.

"No, no it's fine. Been a long time since I had one."

Erin returned from the kitchen. "Well, I guess it'll be a little longer." She placed a bowl of salad and a plate full of lasagna in front of the hungry woman.

"Now that looks delicious." Jamie gently grabbed an arm, before Erin walked away. "But I really would have been fine with whatever you had served me."

"I know. But grilled cheeses isn't my favorite either." Once her food was placed on the table, they dug into the spicy, flavorful meal. "Do me a favor," asked Erin. "Watch Caitlin and make sure she doesn't eat too fast. Brig said she almost choked last week."

Just a few seconds later Erin heard, "You're going to have to slow down that mouth some kiddo. Getting to be just like your aunt and you don't want that."

Erin shook her head and tilted it to one side. "Now that's strange."

"What is?"

"I seem to recall, last weekend, hearing someone begging for my mouth, then a scream of faster pierced the air. I wonder who that could have been?"

Jamie blushed slightly. "That was me, wasn't it?" She turned to the oblivious three-year-old. "Forget what I said, your aunt is perfect in every way."

After much convincing, Erin allowed Jamie to clear the table, while she and Caitlin went into the living room. Soon the girl was climbing into her aunt's lap, yawning and asking for a story. Instead of telling her niece one of her own tales, this time she chose an old children's classic. "Once upon a time..."

Jamie stood over the sink, rinsing plates and slipping them into the dishwasher. She listened to her lover's sweet voice, spinning the fairytale. She thought back over the evening that the three of them had spent together, laughing, playing, and having fun. *Is this what's it's like to have a real family*, she thought to herself. Logically she knew being a parent wasn't always that easy, not by a long shot. And that's what scared her the most. Could she handle the big problems, protect a child from the kinds of things she herself had gotten involved in. Erin had convinced her that she fell into the darkness because nobody was around to stop her. *Could I ever condemn a child to a life without love, if something were to ever happen to both of us? No, I couldn't. But could I deny Erin the chance to be the mother she's always wanted to be. No, I couldn't do that either.* They had never discussed it in depth, but if Erin ever decided that she would want Jamie to be a parent to her child, she would find a way to insure that child's lifelong happiness and safety. *We would find a way*; the thought corrected itself in Erin's voice.

The Irish woman felt her lover brush by her and sit in the chair to her left. The blonde's words continued to sooth the child, whose head was tucked under her chin, against her chest. The tiny eyes had drifted shut minutes ago, but the author continued.

Jamie leaned forward and whispered, "Honey, she's asleep."

Erin turned in the direction of her lover. "Oh I know." She smiled. "I just thought you might like to hear the ending, as long as you don't fall asleep."

Jamie returned the smile and although it couldn't be seen, it was heard in the tone of her voice. "Oh no chance of that. In fact..." She moved closer to an irresistible earlobe. "...I have an alternate ending to that story that I thought you might like to act out with me." Her words were accentuated with a nibble to the fleshy lobe.

A shiver went through Erin's body, nearly dislodging the sleeping child in her lap. "I think I'm going to like your ending much better. Let's hear it."

"Well, after being kissed by the beautiful princess, the frog turned into a...reasonably nice looking woman."

"Let me guess," said Erin. "They fell madly in love, at first sight."

"Well, the woman was pretty dense and scared and in unbelievable denial for a long time, but truth be told, yes, she fell in love with the beautiful Princess at first sight."

"And the Princess fell in love with the beautiful, sexy lady at first..." Lips made their way down a soft warm neck. "...meeting. So, did they live happily ever after?"

Jamie pulled back with a serious expression. "The lady will move hell and high water to make sure they do. But first, they had a heavy necking session on the royal sofa." Jamie suddenly thought of something very important. "Please tell me she's not sleeping in your bed."

Erin giggled and affectionately ruffled the blonde curls beneath her chin. "Well, she could be Goldilocks, but that's another story. I already fixed up the bed in the guestroom. Could you put her down?"

There was another moment of hesitation. But strong arms gently lifted the small body, which snuggled into her embrace. *Yeah, just like her aunt.*

"Leave the door open, honey, so we can hear her if she wakes up," instructed Erin.

Gently depositing her cargo onto the bed, Jamie took great care in covering her, turning the night light on and making sure everything was just right. She wanted to live up to the faith Erin had put in her.

The author gathered up the toys and clothes scattered on the sofa and floor and put them into the girl's bag. Resting her back against the soft couch, she began to think about what they had shared. Her maternal feelings tugged on her heart, harder than ever before. She knew, at first, that Jamie had been very nervous being responsible for her niece, but she had felt that tension slip away with the hours. But that was just one night. *Would Jamie ever want to be a full time parent? No matter how good I think she would be, will she ever have enough faith in herself? Could I ask her to be a parent if she didn't really want to be? No*, she sadly thought to herself.

Familiar steps came down the hall and warmth fell against her face. Another shudder came at the words spoken into her ear. "Ribbit, ribbit."

Jamie tiptoed out into the hall and down to the slightly open door. She peeked in and found the little girl, still fast asleep, but the covers had twisted down to her knees. Jamie knew if she went in there to straighten them, Caitlin would probably wake up. And it wasn't really that cold in there. Making her decision she went stealthy back into Erin's bedroom, but left the door open. She slid back under the covers next to the warm body.

"Is she okay?" asked a sleepy voice.

"Yeah. It's seven o'clock and I'm not positive, but I don't think kids sleep late, do they?"

"No, especially when they went to sleep early the night before."

A head nodded. "That's what I thought. If we get up now, we can probably catch a fast shower."

"I suppose **we** could," agreed the author.

"Is there any of that raspberry body wash left?"

"Enough for one more shower," mumbled Erin.

Jamie pulled herself out of the comfortable bed. "I'll have to go back to the mall and get some more of that."

The tussled blonde head popped up. "Next time, you take me with you. I don't want any more sales girls offering free demonstrations."

"That's a deal." Jamie kissed her nose. "Let's go get that shower."

With a deep sigh and a long stretch, Erin climbed to her feet. Artemis came over for her good mornings. "Arte I want you to stay in the hall and watch out for Caitlin. If she gets up, you let us know." She felt the warm steam of the running shower, when she stepped in to the bathroom. She peeled off her sleep shorts and shirt and deposited them in the hamper, knowing, undoubtedly, that Jamie's clothes were on the floor in the corner. She somehow always managed to miss the white wicker basket. Erin opened the big glass door, carefully stepped in and was immediately wrapped in long, wet arms. Jamie squeezed some of the scented soap onto the bath sponge in her right hand and began to lightly scrub her partner's delicate skin, until every inch was squeaky-clean. The washing was gladly reciprocated. Discarding the sponge, Erin ran soapy hands over the broad back, as the cascading water covered them both. "Have you ever thought about being under a waterfall?" asked Erin, absently.

Jamie laughed at the odd question, but then a feeling of *deja vu* hit her. "No, but now that you mentioned it..."

"What?"

"I don't know...maybe I have."

"Thought about it or done it?" Erin kissed the spot directly between the protruding shoulder blades. The question was left unanswered and another one asked as she traced the small quarter moon shape she found beside the right scapula. "I always meant to ask, is this a scar?"

"No, it's a birthmark. My mom said I got it from my grandmother and no one else in the family had it. Even with my long arms it's just out of reach, so I've never actually felt it."

Suddenly a bark sounded. "We're about to have a visitor," said Erin as she took one final quick rinse and stepped out of the shower.

"Aunt Ewin," the timid voice called out.

"Right here sweetie," she said tying off her robe and stepping into the hall.

"Where's Jamie?" asked the youngster, patting the big dog beside her.

"She's getting dressed, which is what you are going to do to." A small hand slipped into hers and together they walked back to the living room to pick out an appropriate outfit for the day's activities.

Caitlin's breakfast consisted of a bowl of Fruit Loops, three spoonfuls, which upon her insistence, went into Jamie's mouth and two to her favorite aunt. Laughter filled the sunlit kitchen and a squeal of joy was released when Erin suggested they go swimming.

Chapter 15

Bridgett's husband pulled their Mercedes into the drive behind the blue SUV. "I wonder who's here?"

"That's Jamie's car," explained Bridgett.

A slightly sour look passed over his clean-shaven face. "You don't think she spent the night."

"Probably. But I guess that's not our business, Brad."

His voice rose slightly. "But my daughter was in that house."

Bridgett eyed her husband carefully. "I thought you didn't have a problem with their relationship. When I told you about it, you said it was cool."

His hands fidgeted on the steering wheel. "I...I don't. Or at least I thought I didn't. I mean I don't." He looked straight at her. "But I don't want it flaunted in front of my children."

"You can't have it both ways, honey. They have a right to be as affectionate toward each other as any couple. We don't hide that from our own children. And I won't ask my sister to. Would you have the same concerns if she was with a man?" With no response from her husband, she continued. "You know how much Erin loves our children and she wouldn't do anything that would harm Caitlin in any way."

"I know," he said ashamed. "It just took me by surprise."

"Mom why would Aunt Erin hurt my sister?" asked Conner from the back seat. He had previously been engrossed in his Game Boy, but heard the last part of his parent's conversation.

"She wouldn't honey." Bridgett assured her son, as she flashed her husband a scowl. They had yet to discuss Erin's relationship with their son, so now seemed like a good time. The red head turned in her seat to speak to the boy. "Conner, your Aunt Erin has found someone that she

loves. Jamie is her name and she is very nice. In fact she works with me. I want you to be polite to her."

He nodded his head, agreeably, but Bridgett still wasn't sure if he truly understood. But for a seven-year-old, a much more detailed discussion was a few years away.

The family piled out of the luxury car and headed up to the door. As they got closer they heard a dog bark and even over the waves the unmistakable sound their daughter's laughter.

"Again!"

Jamie spun the girl around like an airplane and brought her in for a stomach landing, on the big red blanket.

"Can we join the party?"

"Mommy, Daddy!" The little girl jumped to her bare feet and scampered off to greet her parents.

"How did everything go?" asked Erin, as she heard her sister's family approach.

Brad answered with the squirming girl in his arms. "My Dad didn't have a heart attack, but it was a health scare and fortunately he's going to take it seriously."

"I'm glad to hear that Brad. This is my partner Jamie. Jamie, my brother-in-law Brad."

"It's nice to meet you again Jamie. We never really got the chance to meet when you were at my house a few weeks ago."

She accepted the hand offered to her. "Same here, Brad."

"Conner, come here," said Erin. "I want you to meet Jamie."

The tall woman smiled down at the young man who was a perfect combination of his parents. "Hello Conner."

"Are you going to marry Aunt Erin?" he asked with a child's curious innocence.

Bridgett stepped up beside him. "That's not a question you need to ask Conner. I asked you to be polite."

"But you said Daddy married you, because he loved you."

She smiled at her son. "Yes sweetheart, but ...I'll explain it to you later okay?"

As kids so often do, he gave up the subject with a simple nod.

"Unless you guys are in a hurry to get back home, why don't you stay awhile," Erin said. "Maybe we could barbecue."

"Yeah Mom can we stay?" asked Conner.

Caitlin had already gone back to playing in the sand; she wasn't about to leave anytime soon.

"What do you say honey?" the red head asked her husband. "I'd really like to spend some time with my sister."

"It's okay with me. After last night I could use some relaxation. But not this much sun. I'm going back up to the house."

"Let's all go," suggested Erin. "We've been out here a while. Come on kids you can play closer to the house."

Sometime later, the two children played with toy cars, racing them through the sand. "Daddy said you couldn't stay over here anymore Caitlin. You might get hurt," said the boy, in passing, as he zoomed up over a small dune he created.

Erin was confused and concerned at her nephew's comment. "Conner, when did your dad say this?"

"When we got here today. He said if Jamie was staying here, Caitlin couldn't."

Erin was mildly outraged. She marched into the house, where her brother in law was watching television. "Brad if you don't want me around your daughter, please have the decency to tell me to my face."

He was totally stunned at her ire and jumped up from the couch. "Wait a minute, what's going on? I never..."

Erin felt the support of her partner next to her and let her anger cool to disappointment. "Your son just told his sister, that she couldn't stay here anymore, because she might get hurt."

His earlier words came back to kick him in the butt. "Look, Erin I'm sorry. I..."

Bridgett walked into the room just in time to hear what her Erin had said. "Sis let me explain."

"No honey, I'll do it," said the embarrassed man. "First of all I want to apologize to you both. I am... was guilty of ignorant prejudice. I saw Jamie's car in the drive and assumed she spent the night." He held up a hand. "But it's none of my business and I know there is nothing wrong with it, if she did. I shouldn't have said those things, let alone in front of my son. I'm not sure what else to say, except again I'm sorry. I love you Erin and I respect you and I'm glad you've found someone who makes you happy. Jamie welcome to the family."

The tall woman put her arm around Erin's shoulder. "I've never cared what anyone thought or said about me, but I love Erin more than anything else in the world and I will protect her from being hurt. The same goes for her family. I promise, that your children are safe with me around, physically and emotionally."

"I believe that. I have always trusted Erin and if she trusts you, so do I." Brad gave an embarrassed giggle. "Now that my temporary stupidity has been lifted, I will correct the mixed impressions my son has. I want my children to grow up knowing tolerance and caring. I'm also sorry I ruined everyone's good time. Do you think we could move on from this incident and have some fun?"

Erin walked up to her sister's husband and hugged him. "Thank you," she whispered. She stepped back and turned to the others. "I say we start up the grill. That does seem to be your department dear brother in law."

He brushed his fingernails up and down the front of his green shirt. "Yeah, well what can I say? I was once offered a job at the finest greasy spoon in Indy."

"I wouldn't brag about that one honey," Bridget said. "Are we sure, we want him handling grilling duties?"

Erin graciously volunteered her partner. "Well, Jamie could keep an eye on him, while we fix everything else. Couldn't you sweetheart?"

Jamie knew what her lover was doing. Erin wanted a close-knit family. Jamie already knew Bridgett from work. She had definitely formed a bond with her niece and hopefully with her nephew, when they had more time together. And although Brad's thinking may have been misguided, he seemed truly sorry and deserved a second chance. Jamie had never been a people person and had never been part of a true family for twenty years, but loving Erin meant changing. Not because Erin expected it, but because Jamie wanted to. She now lived for someone else. Everything she did now, was for this woman and gladly done. Even her financial plans for buying the horse ranch had been set back because of her relationship. While that was disappointing, Jamie knew she was content with her life, leaving the past behind and determined to make a future with Erin.

Erin listened at the kitchen window, as Jamie and Brad, with beers in hand, sat by the big grill, taking turns cooking. He was busy telling Jamie about his Hoosier heritage and life on the farm. He had a particular affinity for horses, which struck a connection with the tall brunette. In fact, there was talk of Brad maybe investing in the ranch along with Jamie, as a silent partner, he assured her. He just wanted someplace for his children to get in touch with nature.

Erin tossed the salad as Bridget added it's different components. "Everything seems to be working out pretty good between them," said the red head.

"Yeah. You know I never gave it a second thought that you or Brad would have a serious problem with our relationship."

"Sis, I never had a problem. It just took me by surprise. I don't know, maybe that is a problem. I guess I should have had the same reaction as if Jamie were a man. And as sad as it is, I guess I'm just a product of society, as to how I saw my family. When something stepped outside the perimeters I had set, I panicked. But I was never ashamed of you or stopped loving you. I am proud of you Erin." The sisters stopped for a loving hug. "When I first told Brad about you, yes he was surprised, but that was it, he didn't say much else. It wasn't until today, when he saw her car here and it finally struck him that your relationship is as...complete as ours; that is when he got upset. But I talked to him and made him understand and he was fine with it then."

"I just wish Conner hadn't heard," said Erin, sadly. "He's so impressionable and he worships his father. I don't want my nephew to be afraid of me or Jamie."

Bridgett put an arm around her sister. "I promise you, he won't be. In fact I would like you to spend more time with the kids; you and Jamie."

Erin smiled. "Nothing would make me happier."

They returned to the food preparations, listening to more conversation on the deck. At one point, Conner hopped up the stairs and asked his father to help him collect some seashells. Brad was just about to agree when a thought struck him.

"Son, I'm kind of busy fixing your hamburger. If you ask real nice, I bet Jamie would help you with that."

The young boy wasn't shy by any means, but he was a child of few words, obviously not taking after his mother's side of the family in that way. He walked over and stood in front of the slightly stunned woman. "Will you...please?" he added, when he remembered his mother's instruction's on politeness.

Jamie couldn't resist the semi-toothless smile that accompanied the request. "Sure, I think I know where we can find some great ones." Her blue eyes flashed a silent thank you to the boy's father.

"Me to, me to!" demanded the excited three-year-old, as they walked out into the yard.

Both of Jamie's hands were confiscated and she was happily pulled down to the beach.

"Don't be gone to long you guys," Brad called out. "These burgers are just about done."

"See, I told everything was all right," said Bridgett. She described the heartwarming scene of the tall woman being led to the sand by her children and Erin smiled. Bridgett danced around another subject in her mind...well, same subject, different area. She finally asked, "When are you going to tell Mom and Dad?"

Erin released a breath. "Oh boy, I don't know. I guess it'll have to be soon."

"Mom has asked me twice now if I've met your boyfriend Jamie. Why did you tell her she was a man? That's only going to make it harder."

"I didn't tell her that, she assumed and it was not the time to correct her. Like you said, they are a product of society and I needed time to find the best way to make that introduction. I know they're going to have a strong reaction, but I think it'll be okay." Erin hedged her previous assumption. "I've never heard them be prejudice against anyone. Have you?"

The red head shook. "No, but still..."

Erin threw down the spoon in frustration. "But still, I'll once again, mess up our perfect family image."

"I wasn't going to say that. I..."

"Steaks and hamburgers done to perfection, as per ordered," said Brad, as he burst through the door, interrupting the conversation.

Two very vocal and hungry children were on his heels followed by a more sedate Jamie. Right away she noticed Erin's drawn expression, even though the author tried to hide it behind a joke that made the kids laugh even more. Jamie let it be for the moment, but a discussion of that and other events of the day would be had before the night was over. She had a nagging feeling that the two topics were one in the same.

Erin locked all the doors, set the security alarm and brushed the dog, before finally slipping into bed beside Jamie, who was patiently waiting. The author was the one who always stressed that they talk about everything, but she had been unusually quiet since the Nelson family had left, shortly after dinner. Erin quietly removed her glasses and placed them on the nightstand. She settled the white silky sheet across her T-shirt clad stomach.

Just as quietly, Jamie watched all this and a tremor of terror swept through her. She'd upset Erin's perfect world by loving her and now they were paying the price. The chauffeur lay there, stewing over the mistakes that were starting all over again. The small woman next to her released several small sighs, each one cutting Jamie like a knife. The debate raged in Jamie's head, *maybe I should go sleep in the other bedroom. That would probably hurt Erin's feelings, but I'm hurting her anyway. My presence...* Her thoughts were interrupted when an arm landed across her stomach and a beautiful blonde head rested against her chest. Jamie returned the affectionate caresses, although she was positive the gesture was more a form of goodbye than I love you.

"Jamie?"

Oh god here it comes. "Yes."

"I want to tell my parents about us next weekend."

Jamie's head popped up and startled her. "What?"

"I think it's time to tell my parents. I want to get that over with so we can go back to concentrating on us and our future." Jamie's silence confused her. "I know after what happened today, it won't exactly be pleasant, but sweetheart I can't lie to them anymore." More silence. "Jamie, say something. Don't you want to tell my folks? I mean do you want us to hide?"

Jamie pulled the small body against her. "No, honey, I don't want us to hide. I want to tell the world I love you. I just..."

Erin nibbled on a nearby chin. "Just what?" A nervous giggle jostled her.

"I thought...you'd been so quiet since your family left and after what happened with Brad... and I know your sister said something to upset you..." She took a deep breath. "I thought you were fed up with all the problems I was causing and decided our relationship wasn't worth it... and you were trying to find a way to break it off."

Erin faced Jamie with a slightly miffed expression. "I can't believe after all I've said, that you would think that. Jamie, life is full of problems. I love you. Don't you believe me?"

Jamie moved the two of them so they were lying on their sides, face to face. "Of course I believe you. And I love you. But that doesn't make it any easier, dealing with the world's prejudice. Like I told Brad, I just want to keep you from all that. You obviously think telling your parents is going to be very difficult. If I wasn't here, you wouldn't be facing that pain." A gentle hand caressed the side of her face.

"Sweetheart if you weren't here, the pain I would be feeling would be crippling. Loving you makes every day sweeter, every problem manageable and every dream conceivable. I love you," she whispered just as their lips met.

Continued in Part 5.

The Athenaeum's Scroll Archive

~ At First Sight ~ by Colleen

General Disclaimer: This is an alternate uber story. The physical descriptions of the two lead characters may remind you of two others we all know and love, but all characters in the story are from my own imagination. This story is an original work and is copyrighted by the author. It cannot be sold or used for profit in any way.

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No copy write infringement was intended in the use of the song "I Need You"

Thanks, to my beta readers Barbara and Jennis.

All positive comments are welcome at coleen30@webtv.net

Part 5

Chapter 16

Jamie pulled into the large, circular driveway of Erin's childhood home and stopped behind the familiar silver Mercedes. "Did you know your sister was going to be here?"

Erin shook her head. "No. I talked to her on the phone last night and told her we were going to do this today. She didn't say anything about being here though."

They were let into the house by the housekeeper and led to the patio, where Danielle, Bridgett and Brad were discussing the gardens.

Danielle beamed when she saw her daughter in the doorway. "Sweetheart, I'm so glad you came by today." She hugged her youngest child. "It's not very often that I have both my daughters here at the same time. Come and sit down. Aren't you going to introduce me to your friend, dear?"

Erin's nerves started to kick in and she asked with a stammer in her voice, "Where's Dad?"

"He got called down to the office. He may or may not be several hours, as he put it. Can I get the two of you some lemonade?"

Erin's suddenly parched throat, screamed yes, but she simply nodded.

"Ma'am," said the housekeeper who appeared in the open door. "I'm sorry to bother you, but there is a call for you and they said it was urgent."

"They always say it's urgent. I'll be right there." She turned back to her family. "Excuse me, I'll be right back."

"Bridgett, what are you doing here?" asked Erin.

The red head squeezed her sister's hand. "Brad and I thought you could use some moral support."

"Thank you Bridgett," said Jamie.

"Yeah, thanks sis. I didn't mean to sound angry. I guess I'm just nervous."

"It's okay, I understand."

Danielle fluttered back onto the patio several seconds later. "Well, that was a complete waste of time. I'm going to have to educate those women on what constitutes urgent." She took the seat next to her blonde daughter. "Now where were we?"

Erin took a deep breath. "Mom, I told you I was in a new relationship. Well, I'm totally in love." She smiled every time she thought about the beautiful raven-haired woman. "For the first time in my life I feel complete. I want you to be happy for me."

Danielle was slightly confused at her daughter's choice of words. "Of course I'm happy for you dear, why wouldn't I be?"

Erin reached for the comforting hand beside her, a gesture not unnoticed by her mother. "Mom, this is Jamie. The person I love more than anything else in the world."

Jamie gave her most charming smile. "It's nice to meet you Mrs. Casey."

Danielle was momentarily stunned, but remembered her promise and returned the handshake. "It's nice to meet you as well...Jamie."

Smiles broke out all around and Erin released the breath she was holding.

"I can tell by my daughter's face, how happy she is. I guess I have you to thank for that."

"I love your daughter, Mrs. Casey and all I ever want to do is make her happy."

The older woman smiled. "I'm glad to hear that, dear and please call me Danielle."

They spent the next hour getting to know one another. Every now and then Danielle felt a pang of disappointment, not in her daughter, but at the things she herself would miss out on, given her daughter's revealed lifestyle. She had wanted to plan the perfect wedding like the one she had given Bridgett. And she would miss seeing her baby have a baby. Danielle didn't care about the reaction of her society groups or the church, although she knew they would be strong ones. She was proud of her youngest child and no one would make her feel otherwise.

One down and one to go, thought Erin. She was unbelievably relieved and happy at her mother's immediate acceptance of her relationship with Jamie. Given her parent's love for one another, could her father's reaction be any different? She and Jamie had gone for a short walk, waiting for Timothy Casey to return home. By the time they reached the pool, Danielle informed them that Erin's father was in the study and in a particularly good mood over a new business venture.

Erin removed her hand from Jamie's, just before they entered the room. The dark haired woman understood and waited right outside the door. Danielle and the Nelsons soon joined her.

"Dad?"

The big man stood from behind his desk and crossed the room. "Sweetheart, your mother said you'd come for a visit. I'm sorry I wasn't here sooner." He enveloped her in a hug.

"That's okay Dad. I have someone I want you to meet."

"Yes, it's about time you brought this young man home. Your mother told me about him weeks ago. I want to make sure he's good enough for my little girl."

"Dad, that's what I want to tell you. There is no man. Um...I am in love and I have found the person I want to spend the rest of my life with."

"I'm not sure I know what you're saying Erin."

The blonde stepped back to the open double doors and reached out a hand. She led the nervous woman back inside. Erin took a hard swallow. "Dad I'd like you to meet Jamie... the woman I love."

Jamie stepped in closer to her lover's side. Her smile immediately dropped. She was glad Erin couldn't see the expression beneath the graying beard. Erin felt the tall woman tense up and started to move them back. The other three adults stepped into the doorway. *Oh shit*, thought Brad with one look at his father in law.

Danielle moved next to her daughter. "Maybe we should let your father be alone, dear."

Just a few seconds ago, Erin had been nervous; now she was getting angry. Angry because she couldn't see for herself what her father was doing and angry at his absolute silence. "No! Dad, say something."

"This had better be your idea of a cruel joke, because if not, don't you ever call me that again."

"This no joke...Dad. I love Jamie and we are together forever. So you'd better get used to the idea."

The disturbed man turned his back on the group for several seconds then turned back, seeming a bit more at ease. "I need to speak with Erin alone," he said, calmly, but sternly.

"No," said Jamie. "I don't want to leave you to face this alone."

Erin hugged the brave woman. "It's okay sweetheart. Just let me talk to him." Jamie gave her a quick kiss and was gently pulled from the room by Danielle and Bridgett.

The author heard her father return to his desk and shuffle through some papers. "What are you doing Dad?"

"I'm looking for the name of the doctor who treated you, after the accident."

"Why?"

"I'm going to sue him for malpractice. Then I'm going to get you the best specialist in the world. That blow to the head obviously left some lingering brain damage."

As ludicrous as it was, Erin knew her father was absolutely serious. "I do not have brain damage and I am as sane as ever."

He continued to go through his messy desk drawers. "Oh, yes, you do. Because you weren't perverted before that happened." His demeanor remained calm, but strained. "Don't worry, I'll pay off that person in the hall, she won't cause us trouble, I promise."

"Dad stop." He continued muttering. "Stop! Stop! Just stop!"

"She's obviously perverted to."

She yelled and advanced on him. "Don't you say that! You have no idea what you're saying. You don't understand. Just stop and listen to me. I love her, we love each other and there is nothing wrong with that!" She was now in his face. "You're just being too foolish to realize it!"

Jamie was pacing behind the closed doors, rattling off her fears "I don't like this. We should just leave. She doesn't need this kind of pain."

A loud crash sounded behind the big doors. Jamie burst into the room and saw Erin sprawled across the floor, a broken table and crushed vase beside her. "Erin!" She yelled for her as she jumped over the couch that was in her way. "Don't move baby, I'm here. You're gonna be okay." Jamie saw the bruise forming on the beautiful face and the slightly swollen lip.

Erin groaned and rolled onto her back. "Jamie?" She subconsciously felt around for her glasses that had been knocked off. "Sweetheart, I've got your glasses, but you don't need them right now. Are you hurt anywhere?"

"No," she sobbed. "Just hold me."

Jamie gathered the small woman into her arms. "I got you. I got you," she murmured and gently rocked the trembling body.

Erin's mother knelt near by, but her daughter seemed to only need one person. But she needed some contact with her child and stroked her soft blonde hair. "You hit my daughter?" asked Danielle, when she finally got past the initial shock.

Timothy sat, placidly, behind his desk, still looking for the papers. "You obviously lied to me. She is not my daughter. She is an abomination and I want her out of this house. Bridgett, I don't want my grandchildren anywhere near... them."

Bridgett was appalled at her father's behavior and her Irish temper exploded. "Stop calling them that! And as for my children, that is up to Brad and me to decide who is in their life."

His head snapped up to meet her. "I guess I know what kind of a mother you are then."

Danielle wanted this situation over as soon as possible without any more violence. "Timothy, just calm down."

He jumped to his feet. "Don't you tell me to calm down, woman! You knew about this didn't you? Don't tell me you accept this," he said disgustedly.

Jamie was seething and what she wanted to do was give the bastard everything he did to Erin, only ten fold. But her heart was breaking for the small, trembling woman in her arms. She knew where she was needed the most. She continued whispering words of love, trying to block out everything else. She had tried to pick her up and get her away from the hostilities, but Erin was too terrified to move.

Danielle left her daughter and marched over to the man to answer his question. "Yes, I accept this and I'll tell you why. Four years ago I sat by a hospital bedside, and watched as my unconscious daughter fought for her life. I was so afraid that I would lose her forever. I begged God to give me my daughter back and when he did, I made him and myself a promise, a promise to love her even more than before and to cherish her second chance at life."

Timothy shoved a stack of folders into his briefcase and stood. "Well, I won't stand for it in my house." He moved toward the door.

"This house is mine too and my daughter is staying here as long as she wants," said Danielle. "You on the other hand are free to leave anytime you please."

Bridgett was shocked to hear her mother talking this way to her father, shocked, but loving it.

"Do you know why God gave her back?" he asked. "He didn't want her kind of filth in heaven. When **they** decide to leave, I'll be back."

The only thing that kept Jamie from pummeling the pompous ass was the death grip Erin had on her arm.

"Another thing..."

Brad jumped up and grabbed Timothy's suit lapels. "I think you've said quite enough. Did it make you feel like a man, hitting a defenseless blind woman because she said something you didn't like? Well, I'm about to say something you won't like, but you won't you get the chance to hit me. You will never be allowed to see my children ever again, because I won't have them influenced by an ignorant, windbag, bigot. Now do us all a favor, keep your big mouth shut and just leave."

A sneer broke through the facial hair and gray eyes shot daggers at the couple huddled together on the floor, but Timothy Casey turned on his heels without another word. The sound of a slamming door followed his angered wake.

The shock slowly faded from everyone in the room except Erin, her wounds were the deepest.

Danielle returned to her daughter's side. "Let's get you upstairs to bed dear and I'll get you an ice pack for your face."

Only Jamie caught the barely discernable nod. "Come on sweetheart, I'll help you."

Together they stood on shaky feet.

Bridgett hovered over her sister too, but Brad urged her away.

"I think she just needs Jamie right now, honey."

Bridgett turned in her husband's arms and cried. "I can't believe he did this. I never thought he...he never even spanked us as kids. Oh God, Erin."

He rubbed her back, soothingly. "Your sister is strong. She'll be fine. This was a shock to all of us, but we will get past it."

At a snails pace, Jamie helped Erin up the stairs. Halfway up, she stumbled. "Easy," said Jamie as she picked up the lithe body and finished the climb. She followed Danielle down the hall and gently placed the small woman in the middle of the bed. Jamie pulled off her lover's shoes and covered her with a quilt from the foot of the bed.

Erin still hadn't said a word, because of the pain from her face and more importantly from her soul. Jamie was livid as she sat and watched her shiver, but her need, to pull the woman she loved, back to reality was stronger than anything else in the world. She slipped off her own shoes and lay down beside Erin, holding her, careful of her injury. She whispered words of love and comfort and soon felt the body in her arms begin to relax.

Danielle turned the corner and stopped at the sight of the two women cuddled closely on the bed. The moment of surprise left as quickly as it came. She realized she would have had the same reaction if it were a man holding her daughter that was just the old fashioned way she was brought up. But as she got closer and heard Jamie's words and saw her daughter's reaction, Danielle knew this was a match made in and blessed by heaven. She crossed over to the other side of the bed. "Here, sweetheart, this will help with pain."

Jamie held the cold pack to the bruise covering a large area of the beautiful face.

"Thanks mom," Erin said in a hoarse voice.

"Honey, I'm so sorry. I certainly never expected this."

Erin shrugged her shoulder. "It doesn't matter. As long as I have the rest of my family I'm happy." Her words weren't quite convincing to either her mother or Jamie. The two women exchanged concerned looks, but both also knew time was needed to heal these freshly made wounds.

Danielle laid a comforting hand on the woman who loved her daughter. "I apologize for the things he said to you Jamie."

"Don't worry Ma'am, I've been called much worse."

"Well I won't stand for it. I knew he wouldn't be pleased, but I never thought... I can see that you make my daughter happy and that you love her. That's what's most important to me."

"Me too Ma'am."

"I'm old enough," she laughed. "Ma'am makes me feel even older. Please call me Danielle. Maybe someday you'll even want to call me Mom."

"Thank you Danielle...for everything."

The older woman studied Jamie for a few seconds, her brows drawn together, trying to form a memory. "Were you the limo driver from a few weeks ago?"

Jamie grinned wryly. "Yes, that was me."

"My husband made an even worse second impression, didn't he?" She shook her head in disbelief once again at his behavior.

Erin lay there, her face half-frozen and hurting. She listened to the words passed between her mother and her lover and thanked God that they at least seemed to be forming something of a bond. Since meeting Jamie, her life had definitely changed, hitting some highs and lows and not all because of the tall beauty. But even after the afternoon's fiasco with her father, one of the lowest points of her entire life, she knew that survival was possible, as long as Jamie was by her side.

Danielle leaned down to kiss her daughter's uninjured cheek. She brushed aside a few wisps of golden hair from her forehead, as she had done so many times as a child. Even though Erin was a grown woman, to Danielle she would always be her baby. Skinned knees had graduated to life threatening injuries. Loneliness replaced being teased by other children, when she just didn't fit in. But there is never a time in someone's life when they don't need their mother's love and comfort. Danielle now realized she had to share her place in Erin's life, but no matter what, she would never lose her daughter's love. "I'll leave you two alone for awhile. Get some rest sweetheart. I'll be back to check on you later."

"Thanks Mom. I love you."

"I love you to honey."

Jamie lay back on the bed and felt Erin snuggle deeper into her. She took the silent moments to look around, taking in the room's pristine condition. The colors of white, yellow and purple meshed together in a bright and cheerful way, but Jamie thought humorously, that it reminded her of an Easter basket. There was a white dressing table, which held several unusually shaped bottles, long emptied of perfume, and now filled with colored waters. Combs and hairbrushes, needed by a teenager with much longer hair, sat on a shiny silver tray. A tall bookshelf covered half of one wall and on it, sat rows of books whose spines told of the diversity of interests of the room's occupant. A modest teddy bear collection filled three corner shelves. One small, rather flattened, brown bear caught her interest. She could just picture a little Erin, hugging the well-loved toy and crawling in to bed, maybe telling the silent companion a five-year-olds version of a bedtime story. She smiled as she continued stroking the arm around her waist. Trophies sat atop a huge oak bureau and more framed school certificates hug on the nearby wall. Everything a normal child would have, filled that room. Things Jamie wished she had been able to have so she could share joyful memories with her love, instead of only having terrors to tell. Since meeting Erin, she felt normal for maybe the first time in her life. Jamie kissed the temple next to her face. "I wish it was under better circumstances sweetheart, but I am glad I got to see this room. It fits you."

"It fits who I was at sixteen."

"Oh, I don't know. Every now and then I see that sixteen year old, rear her pretty head and giggle with unbridled excitement."

"I do not giggle," said Erin, indignantly.

"Sure you do, especially when I lick that spot on your lower back, you know the one just above..."

"Yes I know! And you'd better be glad I'm not sixteen when you're in that mood."

"Oh, I'm glad you're not sixteen all the time. I absolutely love the age you are at the moment and always will."

Erin took the blue bag away from her face. She sat up and folded the multi-colored quilt. "My grandmother Casey made this for my twenty first birthday," she said with a fond smile. "She moved back to Ireland a few years ago. I miss her."

Jamie studied the intricate patterns. "It's beautiful."

"Yeah. There is one patch in particular that I have always loved." She felt around the edge, coming to the four corners, explaining to Jamie what to look for. "See how the colors blend to create a pattern."

"It looks kind of like a whirlpool," the dark haired woman observed.

Erin tried real hard to remember the piece. The image was still quite vivid, but she wondered how long it would be before it faded all together. "Yeah. She said it represented eternity and my place in line. Gramma told me to take off this square and use it to start a new quilt and then give it to my granddaughter."

Jamie put an arm around her shoulder and kissed her. "That sounds like a wonderful tradition."

Erin nodded, but then her smile once again faded and she lay back on the pillow. "Why doesn't he love me?" Her voice was a very faint whisper.

Jamie closed her eyes at the pain-laden voice. She once again pulled the golden head to her shoulder. "I think he does sweetheart. He just doesn't understand you."

"No! If he loved me unconditionally, like a parent is supposed to, he would accept who I love."

"I always thought I would be the one to hurt you this much," said Jamie, solemnly.

"I never once thought that."

"No one has ever had as much faith in me as you have."

"No one ever took the time to look inside you and see your true heart and soul. And no has ever loved you as much as I do."

"I love you to baby."

The darkness Erin lived in was made harsher by her father's belligerent reaction. The loss of a parent or a parent's love is a wound that never quite heals. There are reminders at every turn your life takes and returning the anger and hatred only serves to damage your own soul. The only sane option is to forge ahead, no matter how difficult that may seem. But it wasn't just her that would suffer; she dreaded the affect this would have on her mother. The pain of watching the spouse that you have loved for 35 years, brutalize and verbally abuse your child must be indescribable. She knew their marriage would probably never be the same. And her own children; if she were ever blessed, they would feel the absence of a grandfather. Their cousins would still know his love and attention, but they would have to stand by watching. She couldn't bear to think of their tears. Her announcement had touched many lives besides her own and if she let it happen, the guilt could destroy her relationship with Jamie. But she wouldn't let that happen. Jamie was the most important thing in her life, the thing that brought completion to her very soul. Above all, Erin was an optimist and a tiny spot in her heart still held hope that she and her father could someday salvage a relationship and she may even be able to forgive him...but she would never forget.

The ride home from her parent's house was a long and silent one. A strong hand held hers, transferring the love Erin so desperately needed. After spending just an hour resting in her childhood room, she wanted to leave, telling her mother that it would be quite a while before she would be able to return. Her mother promised to call her every other day and she vowed never to

let more than two weeks go by, before visiting her. If anything good came out of the tragic day, it seemed that her relationship with her mother had been strengthened. They had always been close, but the bond seemed even tighter as she walked out the door of the house she had grown up in.

Erin stated over and over again that she was fine, but that was far from the case. Her silence and lack of appetite, when Jamie mentioned dinner, were glaring symptoms of her heartache. Jamie was at a loss of what to do. But no matter how much support and comfort she offered, she knew only time would lessen the hurt.

The long silent moments gave Jamie time to think about her parents. What would they have thought about having a gay daughter? Would they have accepted Erin as the woman she loved? She could only speculate. The heart, that Erin had so recently uncovered, spun a perfect scenario of unconditional love and understanding. But her, still somewhat, cynical mind dismissed the fairy tale and re-placed it with looks of disappointment in the eyes of her mother and father. Eyes that she could barely remember, voices that no longer spoke in her dreams and personalities that the child she was, never truly came to appreciate. But she wouldn't totally give up the idea that they would still have loved her, no matter what.

Jamie placed a kiss to a sleeping forehead and extricated herself from the entwining limbs. Artemis rose to all fours and whimpered as the dark haired woman neared the door. "You stay here and keep an eye on your mommy. I'll be back in a little while."

She trudged, barefooted down the carpeted stairs and through the darkened living room. Being only five in the afternoon, she wondered what happened to the sun of the earlier day. Opening the sliding door and stepping out onto the lower deck, she saw the low hanging, gray clouds and the rough surf, pounding the sandy shore below. *Great this is all she needs*, thought Jamie, knowing her lover's aversion to thunder storms. She returned to the house, secured the door and went to close the kitchen window, which Erin liked to leave open when she left the house. Jamie grabbed a fast sandwich and hurried back to the bedroom to provide comfort from the coming storm. She had called in sick for her evening shift, not baring the thought of leaving Erin in her fragile state. Seeing the current weather, made her even happier about her decision. She hated driving in the rain and she knew Erin worried about it to, even though it had only happened twice in the time they had known each other.

Jamie slipped back into the warm embrace of her sleeping lover, or so she thought.

"What time is it?" asked the lips that touched her, softly.

"It's a little after five," said Jamie. "I thought you were asleep."

"I woke up when you left a few minutes ago."

"I'm sorry."

"Don't be," Erin said with a small stretch. "I won't sleep tonight if I don't get up now."

Jamie gave Erin's back, soothing rubs as she prepared to give more bad news. "I hate to have to tell you this, sweetheart, but there is a storm headed our way."

Erin sighed slightly. "I don't care. I have a safe haven now." She rolled over onto the long body beside her. "Why do I feel a shirt here and jeans here?" she asked, when her hands encountered the items.

The roaming appendages made it slightly hard for Jamie to form a coherent thought. "Well, I..."

The head popped up from her chest. "Wait a minute. It's after five? Why aren't you at work?"

Two hands caressed the author's face. "I couldn't leave you alone. My heart has been breaking for you, all day. I wanted...needed to be right here."

Erin smiled for the first time in hours. She placed a small kiss over the breaking heart. "I love you Jamie Shea Sheridan. Thank you. I'm so glad, you are here." She pulled the thin material from the waistband below her. "But you still have way to many clothes on."

"Ahh...sweetheart. I don't think you're really up to this."

The blonde gave her a sad little smile. "You're probably right. As much as I love you, I can't make love with you right now." She put her face level with Jamie's. "But I could use some TLC and some more cuddling."

Their lips met in a promise of future passion, but current protection, comfort and most of all love. Jamie engulfed the smaller body in a tender hug. "Are you hungry yet? You haven't eaten since breakfast."

The head against her shoulder nodded. "Yeah, a little."

"You stay here and I'll go make you something," Jamie said, with a little pat to a firm behind.

"You are spending more and more time in my kitchen," Erin observed. "You're not to bad at that cooking thing."

"Naw, I've just got a thing for the cook."

A loud clap of thunder rattled the window and the author. "I think I'll go with you," Erin said with a small chuckle. "But you may still serve me," she added regally.

"Anything for you, my Queen."

The thunder was short lived and had moved on, leaving behind a steady, almost calming rain. An hour after consuming a light meal, Erin's bathroom glowed with soft candlelight. A mound of foaming bubbles concealed two reclining bodies in the obscenely large sunken bathtub.

Fingertips soothingly traced the wet, muscled legs that surrounded the smaller woman. Determined hands released the tension in the smooth shoulders and neck in front of Jamie.

"Do you want to talk about it?" asked Jamie, cautiously.

Erin leaned back against her living headrest. "Nothing to talk about really." She sighed. "I can't do anything to change his mind. I just have to live with it and without him." She paused. "I just...I never expected the violence, that's what hurt the most and I don't mean physically. I could have taken his disappointment, his distance, but when he hit me..." Erin shuddered. "Especially when I couldn't see it coming." Salty tears dropped into the cooling bath water.

Jamie murmured, as she rocked the crying child in her arms. "I know, honey. I know"

Chapter 17

August faded away into September with no further turmoil. Erin's mother kept her vow of visiting the beach house often. Mother and daughter spent time shopping at LA's extensive shops, sampling various California cuisines and making plans for a vacation together, the next summer. Actually, Danielle suggested a cruise to the Caribbean with her three daughters. Danielle never spoke of her husband, except to say that he now spent most of his time at work or at the house they owned in Denver. She neglected to mention that when he was home, they had separate bedrooms.

Erin had finished the first draft of her script and began meetings with Joseph Hudson and prospective directors. In a great surprise to her, Hudson had asked her to be an executive producer on the project. She assumed that it was a move to further apologize for exposing her to the maniacal Ethan Tyler, who it seemed, had just disappeared, leaving his pitiful threats in the trash where they belonged.

More trips to the ranch provided Erin and Jamie hours of peaceful bliss. Life was falling into place for the happy couple

The last Friday in September had proved to be a fateful day, bringing with it, in just a matter of a few minutes and a few words, first elation then melancholy. Erin was down on the beach playing with Artemis and Jamie was in the house making phone calls and plans. Erin's birthday was just four days away and Jamie wanted every minute of that day to be absolutely perfect. She had already purchased her main present in an art gallery in San Francisco, on a recent trip, and it was boxed up and wrapped, back at her apartment. Jamie had just finished ordering a delicious cake from a downtown bakery and making reservations at one of LA's finest restaurants. Almost as soon as she hung up the phone, she was answering it.

"Hello, Casey residence."

A sneeze emanating from the caller had obliterated her first words. "I'm sorry," said the caller. "May I speak to Ms. Cas...Cas...achooo." Jamie smiled at the poor man's predicament. "Please excuse me again."

"That's all right," said Jamie. "I'll go get her. May I ask who's calling?"

"I'm from the National Organ Transplant Center."

Jamie was momentarily stunned, and then she broke out into the biggest grin. *Please let this be true, she prayed. It has to be.* "Please don't hang up!" she pleaded excitedly. "I'll go get her. Hang on."

He heard the phone clunk to the table in her joyful rush to get away. *I love my job*, he thought.

Jamie ran through the bedroom and pulled back the sliding door. She took two giant leaps down the flight of wooden stairs and ran across the small yard. "Erin!" She barreled through the gate and onto the sand.

"What is it?" asked the startled woman.

Thirty feet down the beach she met up with the blonde author and spun her around. "Babe, I think the best birthday present you could ever want, is waiting for you on the phone."

A minute spark of hope that it was her father flashed across her heart, but she didn't really expect it. "Who is it?"

"A man from the National Organ Transplant Center."

"You're kidding," she said with a breathless voice.

"Absolutely not!" Jamie turned her back to the surprised young woman and pulled a hand over her neck. "Hop on!" The tall chauffeur carried Erin, piggyback, up to the house with a barking dog on their trail. Once inside the room, Jamie placed the phone in shaky hands.

Erin took a calming breath. "Hello."

"Yes, this is Richard Crawford from the National Organ Transplant Center. I'm happy to tell you we have a donation for your daughter. You need to get her to..."

Erin's smile dropped like led. "Wait! What do you mean my daughter...I don't have a daughter. I'm the one who needs the transplant."

The man on the other end was confused. "Isn't this 555-8979?"

"Yes."

"But you aren't Elizabeth Casin. And you don't have a daughter named Rebecca?"

"No. My name is Erin Casey."

"Please hold on and I'll double check the information."

Erin reached out for the hand she knew would be there, as she listened to the clacking of computer keys on the other end of the line.

"I am so sorry Ms. Casey. I really don't know how something like this could happen, but obviously your information has been mixed up with another name on our list." A wave of regret washed over him at the tragic mistake. "Listen Ms. Casey, I'll just exchange your places on the list and send the transplant to your local hospital."

"No."

He barely heard the frail whisper. "Excuse me?"

Erin swallowed the lump in her throat. "How old is Rebecca?"

The question surprised him, but he scanned the small screen for the information. "She's four. She lost her sight in an automobile accident a few months ago."

She felt the hand squeeze hers. "Give her the transplant."

There was a slight hesitation. "Are you sure Ms. Casey, because..."

"Yes. I'm very sure."

He paused for just a second, admiring the woman on the phone for her sacrifice. "Very well. I'll make that call now and there won't be any more mistakes. Again, I am very sorry."

"Thank you. Goodbye."

Two long arms slipped around and held her close. The disappointment was equally shared by both of them for a few silent seconds.

"I'm sorry," Jamie finally whispered.

"She's about Caitlin's age. She must be so scared. How can you make a four year old understand, why all of a sudden they can't see? It was the only thing I could do."

Jamie turned the woman in her arms. "I love you Erin Casey. You are my hero. This will happen for you. And when it does, my face will be the first thing you see."

Jamie entered the bedroom on the glorious Tuesday. The AM sun filtered through the sheer curtains and the ocean breeze wafted in as the door, sat open, waiting for the big dog to return. "Good morning beautiful."

Erin smiled and accepted a kiss, which she turned into several.

"Whoa," said Jamie. "Are sure it's not my birthday, because that was some present."

"Just wait until April comes around," said Erin, mischievously.

"I look forward to it." Jamie retrieved the wooden tray, she had laid next to the bed and set it across a waiting lap. "Happy birthday sweetheart." She brought the single red rose up for Erin's perusal.

"Umm thank you. I am famished." She reached for a fork. "Tell me where everything is."

Jamie retrieved the silver utensil. "Oh no. This morning your highness will be fed by my own hands." What followed was the most sensual breakfast either one had ever experienced, as hands were not the only delivery method of some very lucky fruit. Then came a sensual shower, sensual playtime on the beach and.... well a definite pattern for the day was established.

After washing sand from some rather uncomfortable places, Erin and Jamie dressed in semi-formal attire for an evening of dining and dancing. Erin emerged from her bedroom and walked down the stairs into the living room, to a gasp of awe. She twirled around, giving Jamie a complete view of the new, deep blue, silk creation. A healthy expanse of tanned leg showed beneath the mid thigh hem and a small slit on the left side, allowed further teasing glances at the alluring appendage.

A smiling face greeted Jamie at the end of her inspection.

"May I assume from your silence that I have rendered you speechless?"

"Uh, huh," mumbled Jamie, as she approached the stunning blonde. "You are absolutely gorgeous."

"Thank you." Erin planted a series of dazzling kisses to the waiting woman's lips as her hands slid down across the fabric, covering the tall body. "Is this new?" she asked, fingering a jacket lapel.

"Yes it is. It's actually the dressiest clothes I've owned...in a long time." She bent down to nuzzle a pink ear. "I'll describe it to you, when you take it off later." A soft sigh was the reply. Jamie took the author by the hand and led her to the couch. "I want to give you your present before we go."

"After everything you've given me today and everyday, you didn't have to get me a present too."

"Oh, but I did." Jamie brought the small hand to the big red bow and instructed her to pull. Then the multicolored paper was peeled away to reveal the piece of art.

Erin smiled as she ran her hands over the smooth curves and intricately carved details of the gray sculpture. Two women knelt in an embrace, creating the shape of a single heart. "Jamie it's beautiful," she said with a catch of emotion. "I can't believe...It's perfect. It is us."

Jamie was touched by the same emotion as her love. "That's what I first thought. It's called Heart and Soul." They mimicked the statue and as they embraced, a love passed between them that no spoken word could begin to describe. Energy surrounded them, linking them for this life and beyond.

A ringing phone soon brought them back from their escape into the blissful plane of existence that was theirs and theirs alone. Jamie softly brushed away the tears of joy from both of their faces. She reached behind her and handed the phone to Erin.

The catch was still in her voice as she answered. "Hello."

"Hello dear," said Danielle, with some concern. "Are you alright Erin? It sounds like you've been crying."

"Yes Mom, on both counts. I was crying, because Jamie just gave me the most wonderful present, a beautiful piece of artwork."

Mrs. Casey smiled at her daughter's happiness. "I can't wait to see it sweetheart. Happy Birthday. I don't have to ask if it's been a good one, I can tell by your voice."

"Yes Mom it's been wonderful. Jamie and I are just about to go to dinner."

"Well then I won't keep you. But I would like to speak with Jamie for a moment."

"She wants to talk to you."

Jamie took the phone from her happy partner. "Hello, Danielle."

"Thank you for the beautiful flowers dear. That was so sweet. I will be the envy of all my friends. Their son-in-laws would never begin to think of such a beautiful gesture."

Jamie felt a hand on her cheek and knew the heat of a blush was being felt. "You're welcome Danielle."

Erin returned the phone to her ear. "I have to ask you what that was all about, because I know my modest partner won't give all the details."

"Your lovely Jamie, sent me the most beautiful bouquet of flowers today. And when I read the card, I cried with joy, just like I did the day you were born."

"Please read it to me Mom." She grabbed another tissue from the table.

Danielle opened the yellow, handwritten card and read "Thank you for making October the third, the most important day of the year to me and for making October the third, 1972 the day that completed me and saved my life. Because on that day, you brought into this, sometimes difficult world, the only person who would ever own my heart. I thank you for that most precious gift.

And I vow to you that I will never take her for granted. Everyday of my life will be dedicated to making the life that you created as happy as my flawed, human soul will allow. With much appreciation and love, Jamie."

Silence.

"You don't have to say anything sweetheart. Jamie is very special and I'm proud that you love her. I love you. Happy birthday."

"Bye Mom," came the strained whisper as Erin once again dabbed away the tears falling from her unseeing eyes. If there was ever a single moment she wanted to visually capture, since losing her sight, it was then. An instant in which she could look into the eyes of the woman she loved and see the love of the ages reflected back. The love of a hundred lives lived before. Each life was different, but each one with the strength of an unbreakable bond.

After a sumptuous meal, they engaged in a few dances, including a very erotic one to the sultry, Latin beat of Gloria Estefan. They returned home early enough to continue to a private celebration, which included something that not only surprised Erin, but also shocked Jamie. In her wildest dreams, she never pictured herself performing the act she had planned. She led Erin to the bedroom and sat her down in the soft chair in the corner.

Two rust colored eyebrows, furrowed in wonder, behind the dark glasses.

"Here goes," said Jamie, nervously as she knelt before the confused woman. "Erin, I want to say I love you, everyday for the rest of my life. But to just say I love you seems so small compared to what you've made me feel. My brain can't put the words together to express myself. So I have to borrow someone else's, but know that they come straight from my heart." Jamie stepped over to the CD player and pressed the button and blended her velvety voice over the singer's.

I don't need a lot of things
I can get by with nothing
Of all the blessings life can bring
I've always needed something
But I've got all I want
When it comes to loving you
You're my only reason
You're my only truth

With that line, she gently traced over her love's beautiful face.

I need you like water
Like breath, like rain
I need you like mercy
From heaven's gate
There's a freedom in your arms
That carries me through
I need you

Tears of happiness trailed down Erin's smiling face, as Jamie continued.

You're the hope that moves me
To courage again
You're the love that rescues me
When the cold winds rage
And it's so amazing
Cause that's just how you are
And I can't turn back now
Cause you've brought me to far

She carried Erin to the bed as she repeated the chorus.

I need you like water
Like breath, like rain
I need you like mercy
From heaven's gate
There's a freedom in your arms
That carries me through

I need you

"I need you," she whispered against Erin's lips as the song faded out.

The heat of their passion had just began to cool, when a lone ember was stoked and stroked back to a roaring fire that burned in each of them and could only be quenched by the other.

Only a completely, sated exhaustion brought their loving activities to a halt for the night.

"I can't seem to keep my hands off you," said a breathless Jamie as she pulled her lover into her arms.

"I certainly don't want you to try." Erin giggled and drew a finger down Jamie's chest. "I guess we're still in the honeymoon phase."

The dark haired woman shifted nervously. "I didn't know you could be in that phase and not be married."

"It's just an expression sweetheart." Erin felt the body below her relax a little.

"I know, it's just I never thought about...that."

"You mean getting married?" Erin felt Jamie nod against her head. She resumed her caresses, trying to keep her lover relaxed as she thought about how to continue the conversation. But Jamie beat her to it.

"You know, you've made so many things possible in my life, opened my eyes to the simplest of pleasures and made me think about things I never imagined. Like singing to you earlier. That made me so happy, but years ago I would have laughed at the mere suggestion of doing that...or maybe even hurt the one who suggested it."

"You're not that person anymore Jamie and anything you can imagine doing, you can accomplish."

"Even marrying you?"

"Sweetheart, just because there won't be a piece of paper with our names on it, filed at the courthouse, doesn't mean we can't have a ceremony, committing ourselves to one another in front of our family and friends."

Jamie's entire body heaved with a huge sigh. "I love you more than anything else in the world Erin, but I have nothing to offer you, but my heart. A marriage means equal responsibility...and right now I don't..."

Erin cut her off with a kiss. "Honey, we don't have to think about that until we're both ready. Now lets get some sleep."

The small body next to her, slipped into slumber almost immediately. But Jamie stared into the darkness, deep in thought. *Why does this scare me so? I have absolutely no doubt that I love her or that she loves me. But love isn't always enough to make a successful marriage. We don't even know what it would be like to live together all the time. Once her movie is released, she's going to become famous and be in demand. She'll probably be traveling a lot and we'll be apart. Of course that has nothing to do with being married or not and she certainly deserves all that life can give her. The problem is with me, as it's always been. As much as I want to be with her, I still don't feel worthy of her. My emotional baggage still weighs me down. If it didn't, I would jump at the chance to make a lifetime commitment to her. Maybe I'm concentrating too hard on making her happy. She is happy. Her life is full. Maybe I need to work on my dream a little more. God knows I have certainly ignored it since meeting her. Not that I regret it for a minute. But if I can get the ranch and start building it into a success, then I can ask her to marry me. Like she said, not until we're both ready; I know she is and I want to be, in the very near future.* She was very content with the new plan of action and she had decided that nothing or no one was going to detour her from its completion. Jamie snuggled closer to the peacefully sleeping woman at her side and she soon drifted off with a smile on her face.

Chapter 18

Jamie started putting in extra hours at the publishing company and took on an extra night, driving the limo. One night she overheard her clients talking about a courier service and the good money it paid. All though it was unprofessional of her, she had asked for more information from the gentlemen, which they gladly provided. Jamie went to see the person in charge and after a lengthy question and answer session, she was offered the job. The work was simple; she would make three hundred dollars a trip to transport packages to different locations throughout the country, usually to the bigger cities like DC, New York, Chicago and Dallas. The airline tickets were paid for by the company, business class but she didn't really mind. Even though the seating was cramped for her tall frame, she had a method of passing away the uncomfortable hours. She would close her eyes and think of her little, Irish beauty and the life that every dollar she was making, brought them closer to.

Erin was delighted that Jamie was once again concentrating on her goal, because she knew it had been neglected since they had met. She encouraged Jamie as much as possible, but she didn't realize that this new job was going to consume every Saturday. That drastically cut into their time together. Jamie wouldn't return to the beach house until late on Saturday night and be so exhausted, that all she could do was take a quick shower and fall into bed. Several times she had fallen asleep under the warm, relaxing stream of water and was caught by a deceptively strong pair of arms and guided into bed.

After seven straight weeks of holding down three jobs, the toll on her health was beginning to show. There were dark circles under her eyes, her skin lacked its normal healthy glow and lack of time on her exercise regiment had caused her strength and energy level to dwindle. She continued to proclaim that she was fine, even after hearing not only Jamie's concerns, but also Bridgett's and those from a co-worker at the limo company.

The Saturday before Thanksgiving was the final straw for Erin. It was 10:35 and Jamie still wasn't home. She always called from the airport to say she was on her way, but this time she hadn't. Erin was nearly frantic. She had contacted the airport and was told that the flight had arrived on time. But that didn't mean Jamie had even been on the plane. *She could still be in Dallas. Maybe she's hurt*, she thought nervously. Erin knew she was Jamie's emergency contact, so she would have heard something by now surely. *But still she could have been...* Erin's frightened mind, went through half a dozen horrible scenarios from auto accidents, to kidnapping, to violent crimes and each one made her heart beat faster, threatening to leave her chest in a bloody burst. Artemis picked up on her human's anxiety and joined her in the pacing, near the front door.

Suddenly she heard heavy wheels roll down the gravel and stop in front of the house. A giant exhale of breath signaled her relief and she waited for Jamie to get to the front door, so she could read her the riot act. Several minutes passed and her nerves went on alert again. A terrifying thought struck her. *What if that wasn't Jamie's car? How do I know who could be out there waiting.* Erin grabbed her aching chest and took several very deep breaths. Her options were to stay inside her secured house and wait for Jamie to arrive, if she was coming at all. Option two, call the police, but that too, and would take time. Artemis was the third option. The dog was highly trained to defend her human against any threat and Erin trusted her implicitly. With the decision made, Erin flipped on the extra floodlights outside the house and bent down to give her faithful friend, instructions. "Arte go check outside for intruders," she said in human terms. She opened the door just wide enough for the big dog to squeeze through and gave the formal command, "Search!"

The canine barreled down the stairs and briefly sniffed around the bushes in the small front yard before moving on to the car. She circled the large vehicle, keeping her nose to the ground, smelling for danger. Approaching the driver's side, the big dog reared up and put two huge paws against the tinted window, which was half way down. She couldn't quite reach the occupant inside, but she took many thorough sniffs then barked loudly, three times. The driver merely groaned and pivoted their head to the other side. More barks.

Inside, Erin listened for a sign. The responses she heard from Artemis didn't indicate any trouble, but she was still cautious, once again cursing her blindness. When she heard Artemis return, she opened the door and let her in. "What is it girl? I know someone's out there." Erin drew up her courage, grabbed the dog's collar and opened the door. She shuddered when the slightly chilled air hit her skin, unexpectedly. The wind was particularly strong and the rustling of nearby bushes and trees contributed to the eeriness. She crept down the five stairs, keeping a tight hold on her friend, as they moved on to the driveway. Artemis pulled harder, determined to take her human where she was needed. Erin's hip soon touched the front bumper and she felt along the side of the car. When she reached the door handle she hesitated. She pulled back for a second to reign in her nerves. Arte gave an urgent bark and nudged her hand again. As if a heavy cloak had been removed from her inner self, the fright slipped away and that freedom allowed her to immediately sense Jamie's presence and the trouble surrounding her. Erin dropped the leash and tore the door open with both hands. "Jamie! Jamie! What's wrong?" She practically climbed onto the woman's lap. The steering wheel was digging into her lower back as she searched for first a pulse, then any injuries the tall woman might have.

Jamie moaned and groggily pushed the intruding hands away. "Leave me alone," she mumbled. "Haven't I hurt you enough. Stay away from me."

"Come on Jamie, it's me Erin. Talk to me sweetheart. Hear my voice, please. You're burning up," she said upon landing on a hot forehead. She lightly slapped Jamie's face to rouse her from her delirium.

The sweet, angelic voice slowly penetrated the feverish haze, clouding Jamie's mind. "Erin? Is that really you?"

Erin smiled and pulled the big woman into a crushing embrace. "Yes, sweetheart it's me. Come on, we've got to get you inside." Erin pulled the older woman up and out the door.

With her first step, Jamie's knees buckled, but her lover's strong grip saved her from a fall. "I love it when you call me that," she murmured as her warm face rested against the sweet smelling, blonde hair. "When you call me sweetheart, my insides melt. No one ever called me that before and meant it. I love you Erin."

"I love you to, sweetheart." Erin walked slowly toward the house. She needed both hands to hold onto her weakened partner, but Arte stayed glued to her human's side and guided them to the stairs. "Jamie, honey we have to climb the stairs now. Can you do that?"

"Honey, I'm not drunk, just tired. I'm sorry I fell asleep in the car. I must have scared you. I'm really sorry."

The three managed to navigate the stairs with only one small misstep. Once inside the house, Erin's confidence returned and she took them straight up to the bedroom. Jamie limply fell onto the bed, like a puppet whose strings had been cut. Erin pulled the sweaty clothes from the tall body and bundled her up in the blanket. When she felt the shivering emanating from the huddled mass, she retrieved another heavier blanket from the closet and piled it on. She reached down to kiss a warm cheek. "I'll be right back, sweetheart." Erin returned from the bathroom with a thermometer, with audio reading, a glass of water and a bottle of Extra Strength Tylenol. She managed to get the groggy woman into a semi-upright position and got two of the capsules into her with only a small amount of spilled water. She then placed the hand held device into Jamie's ear and waited a few seconds for the beep. The number, while still cause for concern, wasn't as bad as she had feared. In spite of the late hour, she called her personal physician.

"Hello," answered the tired voice.

"Anne, its Erin. I hope I didn't wake you."

"No, actually I was just trying to wind down from a long day, before trying to sleep. What's up, are you sick?"

"No, but my partner is. She has a temperature of 101. She's been working herself to the extreme for the last several weeks. And I know she hasn't been eating right or sleeping well. I gave her something for the fever and she's sleeping right now, but I'm still worried about her."

"I know, I can hear it in your voice. It sounds like its just exhaustion, but she may have picked up a bug in her run down state. Keep giving her the Tylenol every four hours and watch her temperature. If it goes any higher call an ambulance and then call me back. Get her to drink as much liquids as possible and keep her warm. I'll come out to your place tomorrow about eleven and check her over. If you have any more questions please call me. And get some rest yourself. I'll see you tomorrow Erin."

"Thanks a lot Anne. Bye." She hung up the phone, flopped back onto the bed beside Jamie and just lie there a while, recovering from the events of the evening. She wasn't afraid of falling asleep. In spite of what the doctor had said, her concern for her sick lover would see to that. A few minutes later she got up, secured the house, praised Artemis with a treat for her good work and changed into her pajamas. She slipped under the covers after setting the alarm. The heat, Erin felt radiating from the other woman, still scared her and she was tempted to wake her just to hear her voice, but she settled for curling around her and placing a protective hand across the warm stomach so she could feel every breath.

The alarm rang. The tall woman hadn't moved a muscle in four hours, neither had Erin's hand. Jamie's breathing was steady and she seemed a little cooler. A quick check and the thermometer confirmed that her temperature had dropped to 100. Although she hated to bother the sleeping woman, Erin gently caressed her face and called out her name. It took several tries before the glazed, blue eyes twitched open.

Confusion wrapped around Jamie, as tight as the blankets covering her over heated body. But through the lethargy, she felt the comforting presence that soothed her. "Erin?"

"Yes sweetheart, it's me." Since Jamie's confession the night before, Erin was determined to use the endearment as often as possible.

"What's going on? How did I get here?" asked Jamie, peeling away the confining material.

"Honey, you're sick. Don't you remember passing out in the car, when you got here last night."

The dark head shook. "No, I didn't pass out, I just fell asleep."

"No sweetheart, you passed out. You were exhausted and that didn't help, but you had a temperature of 101 and you still have a fever." Erin pushed the thin blanket off of herself and reached to the nightstand. "Here." She handed two more pills and a glass of water to the sick woman. "Take these. I'm going to go get you some juice."

Tired blue eyes glanced at the clock by the bed, as she swallowed down the medicine. The slightly unfocussed numbers read 3:05. "You don't have to do that baby, it's late just come back to bed."

Erin fluffed up the pillows behind the tired woman and gave her a quick kiss. "Yes, I do. I'll be right back."

I feel like I've run ten marathons, thought Jamie as her tired and achy body rebelled, when she tried to do something as simple as reach for more water.

Erin returned and handed her the tall glass of orange juice. "I want you to drink all of this."

Jamie nodded. "I will, but before that, I need to get rid of the few gallons already inside me, that are screaming to get out. But I need some help," she admitted sheepishly.

"At your service." Erin pulled back the three layers of covers.

"Whoa, that's cold," said Jamie, with another shiver, when the air hit her.

"Sorry, I forgot you didn't have anything on." Erin walked to the closet and grabbed the long robe from off the hook, inside the door. "Here you go," she said helping the weak woman slip her arms into the heavy garment.

After the trip to the bathroom was complete, Jamie traded the robe for a long sleeve nightshirt and soft, flannel pants. Once back into the comfortable bed, she slowly drank the cool, refreshing juice. Sleep would soon overtake her, but until then, she watched the body language of the smaller woman. Except for taking care of her immediate needs, Erin had said nothing and that worried Jamie. She sat the empty glass on the nightstand and snuggled back into the warm blankets. Erin followed her actions, after having re-set the alarm for another four hours.

"Are you mad at me?" asked Jamie, timidly.

Erin turned to face her partner. She propped her head in her hand and sighed. "I'm not mad at you. I'm upset because you let this happen to yourself. You really scared me."

Jamie couldn't watch the disappointed face and looked away. "I'm sorry." She felt a hand pull her back.

"I know you are sweetheart. Just please don't do it again." Erin kissed the warm lips that tasted of orange juice and they both snuggled back down under the comfortable blankets. "Why didn't you call me when you got to the airport?"

The dark head pulled back in surprise. "I did call you at about... 9:30."

"No Jamie, you didn't call me," insisted the author.

"Well I called somebody," she chuckled. "I was so out of it, I didn't hear your... I mean their response."

Erin laughed to. "I hope they're still not waiting up for you, because they're going to have a long wait."

"I'm so sorry honey. I love you." Jamie's heavy lids finally drifted shut.

"I love you to sweetheart. And we have more to talk about, tomorrow."

The two lovers migrated closer to one another, as sleep claimed them and disjointed visions floated across weary minds.

Erin stood on the deck outside her bedroom, sipping her second cup of fragrant coffee. The late November morning carried a chill, in the wind blowing across the Pacific waters. The previous night's terrors were still fresh in the blonde's thoughts and she shivered, pulling the jacket tighter around her body. For seven weeks, Jamie had driven herself like a woman possessed. They had rarely spent time together and even phone calls were cut short by the older woman's yawns and mumbles, but still Jamie insisted she was fine. Erin started to search her thoughts for a reason to her lover's obsessive actions. She shamefully admitted to herself that she should have thought about it long before it led to Jamie's current state of health. The concerned woman turned back toward the room that held her sick lover. She pulled a chair up to the glass door and her unresponsive eyes watched the bed and the prone figure. As much as Erin wanted to be near the woman she loved, she needed the distance and the barrier provided by the closed door, in order to concentrate on her confused thoughts and emotions. *Everything was fine*, she thought, *until...until right after my birthday. What could have changed so drastically?* Erin ran her fingers down the cool glass in front of her as she continued to ponder the situation. *We had such a good time that day. She was so attentive and loving. Erin smiled fondly. Sending my mother flowers and thanking her for giving birth to me was such a beautiful gesture. That night she was so tender in how she loved me. It felt like our souls melded into one. Then we talked about....* Erin sighed. *We talked about marriage.* Erin remembered her lover's exact words. *"I love you more than anything else in the world Erin Casey, but I have nothing to offer you, but my heart. A marriage means equal responsibility...and right now I don't..."* The blonde head shook dejectedly, thinking of that night. *I didn't even let her finish. She must have thought that I dismissed her concerns because I agreed with her. Damn! I'm the one who preached talking and listening and what did I do...I ignored her and I hurt her.*

The alarm, on the table beside her, rang and she turned it off with one hand and dried her tears with the other. She hurried through the door and pulled in shut quickly before too much cool air was allowed in. She soon returned from the kitchen with a tray, but set it aside for a few seconds. Erin retrieved a washcloth and began wiping down the sweaty face. The rest of the fever had broken sometime in the early morning and Erin was thankful.

"Jamie," she called softly. "Jamie, come on honey, you have to wake up now."

Heavy lids fluttered open, after several tries. "Good morning," she said behind a yawn. Jamie reveled in the caring attention she was being given. The soft hands smoothed away the pain of her illness, but the kiss she expected, never came. She shrugged it off with humor. *Oh well, being sick, I guess morning breath is even worse.*

"How are you feeling now sweetheart?" asked Erin, as she moved to get the tray of food.

"Better, but still tired." It took all of Jamie's strength to pull herself to a seated position against the headboard. "And weak," she added.

"Good. I want you to drink all this juice and eat the toast and fruit. I didn't want to make you anything heavy until we get an official diagnosis."

A dark brow hit her hairline. "What do you mean an official diagnosis?"

"My doctor will be here at eleven to check you over."

Jamie threw her head back against the pillow in frustration. "Erin, I don't need a doctor, just some rest."

The author turned away sharply and folded the extra blanket that was no longer needed. "Please just humor me Jamie. I don't want to take any further chances with your health. It's bad enough I caused this to happen." Her last words were a whisper.

A look of confusion crossed the sick woman's face. "What do you mean, you caused this to happen?"

"I finally realized why you've been so obsessed with work." The doorbell rang ending any further explanation. "That's Anne now. We'll be right back."

"We will talk about this later...right?" asked Jamie.

Erin stopped in the doorway, but didn't turn back. *I won't make that mistake again.* "Yes we will, I promise."

With a grunt of effort, Jamie set the tray aside as her haggard mind tried to grasp at a reason why Erin would be blaming herself for her illness. She didn't have much time to ponder the issue before she heard voices coming down the hall.

Erin led the way into the room and made the introductions. "Jamie, this Dr. Anne Carson. Anne this is my partner Jamie Sheridan."

"It's nice to meet you Jamie, I just wish it was under better circumstances," said the smiling woman, as she set her bag on the end of the bed.

"Me to."

Removing a stethoscope from her bag, she asked Erin to wait in the hall.

"I don't mind if she stays," said Jamie. "I always feel better when she's near."

Anne watched the expression that covered both of their faces and felt their tangible connection. That was something she had seldom witnessed in her life and never that strongly. A small wisp of envy brushed against her heart, as she was still waiting to find the love of her life. She shook off the melancholy and took a quick temperature reading. "Erin tells me you haven't been treating yourself very good these past few weeks."

Jamie shrugged. "I guess I have been acting a little foolish."

Guilt again racked Erin's conscience, at her partner's confession. She moved to a chair in the corner as the doctor finished up her examination.

"I think you are lucky," said Anne, as she put away her medical instruments. "Judging from the schedule, you said you've been keeping, you could have been in much worse shape. But you obviously led a very healthy lifestyle until this slip. You still have a low-grade fever, but your lungs are clear, there are no swollen glands and no nausea, so I'm pretty sure you are suffering from complete exhaustion. The human body just cannot take that kind of abuse." She pulled out a needle and an empty glass vile. "I'm going to take a blood sample and do some tests just to confirm my diagnosis."

Jamie flinched for just a second as the sharp device pierced her skin. Erin moved back to the bed and took her hand when she heard the gasp of discomfort.

Anne smiled at the gesture. "I'm going to have some vitamins delivered this afternoon. Continue taking Tylenol for the fever. I think Erin will see to it that you are well fed." She watched as blue eyes became weary, but their gaze never shifted from the concerned woman by her side. "I don't think I will prescribe a week's bed rest," said the doctor as she scribbled across a note pad.

Jamie's tired eyes flew open and gave the doctor a look of warning.

Anne laughed. "Like I said, I won't do that because the operative word is rest and I don't think that would be happening."

Both women blushed at her implied meaning.

"But I do want you to stay in bed for the next two days," she said sternly. "Tuesday you can resume as much of a normal routine as your body will allow, but nothing strenuous and no work until one week from tomorrow and then in moderation."

"I'll do exactly as you say doctor. I don't want to worry Erin any more than I already have."

Anne nodded. "If there are any more problems or you start to feel any worse give me a call."

"I will. Thank you for coming out here on a Sunday."

"I guess making house calls is antiquated in the medical profession. But to me, a patient's health always comes first. Erin and I go way back. I'd do anything for her, especially keeping the person she loves most, healthy. I want you to get some sleep now."

"I'll see you out Anne." Erin reached over and kissed a slightly flushed cheek. "Do as she says," she commanded with love.

Erin hugged her friend when they reached the front door. "Thanks again."

"I'm glad I could help," said Anne. "Don't worry, she's going to be fine."

Erin simply nodded.

"Okay my friend what's wrong? I don't think you're just worried about her being sick."

"No. I know she's going to be okay. I just can't help blaming myself for her condition."

"Why would you say that?"

"It's kind of complicated, but Jamie's been working so hard to ensure our future...financially."

"But Erin, surely she knows that you are wealthy."

"Yes. But she won't let me support her. She wants us to be equal. We are in every way, but financially. It doesn't matter to me, but it does to her."

Unfortunately, Anne had seen this scenario too many times in her career. "That makes sense for her own ego and conscience, but you need to make her realize that it doesn't have to happen overnight. I've never said this to anyone before, but I can feel the incredible love you have for one another. This may be a small hurdle in your relationship, but believe me, when I say, you two belong together and nothing will stand in your way. You will work this out."

They hugged again and Erin smiled. "You're a good friend Anne. I wish you could know a true love like this."

"From your mouth to God's ears," she chuckled. "I'm looking, believe me. I'm just happy for you. Go on, get back in there and keep her company. Just remember what I said and don't let yourself get sick."

"I won't. Bye."

When Jamie awoke several hours later, she finally felt a little better, like she might be able to stay awake for a while. She looked over to see Erin asleep in the corner chair. She climbed out from beneath the covers and approached the sleeping woman. "Erin, sweetheart." She shook her leg.

The author awoke with a start. "What? What's wrong?"

Jamie brushed the blonde bangs from her face. "Nothing's wrong honey. Why weren't you sleeping in the bed?"

Erin yawned. "I was reading and I didn't want to disturb you."

Jamie hugged the seated woman. "It disturbs me when you're not beside me." She still felt a distance between them and it scared her.

"How are feeling now?" asked Erin, as she retrieved the book that had fallen from her lap.

Jamie stood and performed an abbreviated stretch of her tired muscles. "Better. All that sleep did a world of good." She shivered, not from a chill, but from the thought that she had slept in sweaty clothes all night, not to mention she hadn't had a shower since Friday night. "No wonder you didn't want to sleep next to me," she joked. "I am just a little ripe. How would you like to help out in the shower?"

Erin took a deep whiff and smiled. "You ain't so bad and that's not why I didn't sleep with you. I will lend you a hand...or two, but no funny business," she warned. "You're going to wash up quickly and get right back in that bed. Because you are going to follow Anne's instructions to the letter." Erin pushed the tall woman toward the bathroom.

Clean bodies, in clean pajamas relaxed on clean sheets in the big bed. Jamie had switched to apple juice and was just finishing up the tall glass Erin had brought her, along with a bright, pink vitamin. Jamie's hunger had also been satisfied by a meal of meatloaf, baked potato and fresh vegetables. Now came the time to clear the air between them.

Jamie barely remembered Erin's comment of the night before, but it had something to do with the blonde feeling guilty. "Are you ready to have that talk now, honey?"

Erin took hold of a hand and absently played with the long fingers, as she debated how to start. "I figured out why you were working so hard. It was that conversation we had the night of my birthday. You were concerned about being my equal...financially, but I didn't take your concerns seriously...or at least that's what I led you to believe, because I cut you off when you wanted to talk about it. And you got sick because you thought I was pressuring you to get married and you wouldn't do that until you were able to buy the ranch and..." The rest of her words were cut off by a searing kiss.

"Erin, my foolishness was not your fault. Just like you convinced me that your fall, down the stairs was not my fault, okay?"

"But..."

"No buts!" She tapped a button nose with her index finger. "You were not pressuring me into marrying you, understand me. I was. I love you Erin and I want to make that commitment to you, right this very minute."

"But you can't. I understand sweetheart. The fact that you want to is enough for me. You want to be successful and I want that for you to. But you can't have it overnight." She grabbed both hands and clutched them to her chest. "Please do this in moderation, Jamie. I want to marry you too, right now, but even though we can't, it doesn't change our love. We need to go back to taking this one step at a time."

Jamie smiled and pulled the small woman into her lap. "You're right honey, about everything. One step at a time," she promised. "Do you think I could spend the next week here? We need to see if we can even live together without driving each other crazy."

Erin pushed the two of them down onto the fluffy sheets. "As if I was going to let you go home. And we will not drive each other crazy. I'm already used to your idiosyncrasies."

Jamie pulled back, wide eyed. "Just what idio..whatevers do I have?" she asked indignantly.

Erin poked a hard stomach with a single finger. "You, my beautiful lover, leave the bathroom a mess and your extra long showers use up all the hot water."

"Well, at least half of those times, you are in there with me, prolonging the showers," she reminded the blonde. "But, I will start doing my share of cleaning up after myself. Anything else?"

"Welllll..."

"Come on, I can take it."

"You put orange juice on your cereal."

"Oh, I didn't think you knew about that," she chuckled, embarrassingly.

"Not much gets by me and that's just yucky."

"Yucky," laughed Jamie. "That sounds like something Caitlin would say."

Erin shrugged. "It's really the only word that fits."

Jamie put her free hand behind her head while the other was still making patterns on Erin's arm. "So let me get this straight. If I start cleaning up after myself in the bathroom and keep the OJ out of my cereal, I would make an acceptable housemate."

The blonde nodded an agreement. "Pretty much, yeah. So what do I need to change to suit you?"

Jamie pretended to slip deep into thought. "Mmmmm, let's see."

"Yes."

"Nothing. You are perfect."

"Oh, come on!" Erin covered more of the body beneath her. "That's a cop out. Besides that makes my complaints about you, look really petty." She reached under the sleep shirt and tickled bare ribs. "Come on. I must do something annoying."

Jamie squirmed, not that it really tickled, but she wanted Erin to believe she had the upper hand. "Okay, okay I give."

Erin rolled away and sat up. "Well, I'm waiting."

"In all honesty Erin, I can't think of anything right now. But I promise to tell you the minute you develop some absolutely disgusting habit. Okay?"

Erin giggled. "Okay, if you insist."

Jamie leaped up and pulled the smaller body back to the bed and began her own assault on ticklish ribs. "No you insist!" Jamie soon had to stop when fatigue crept back over her, but she hid it with a kiss. "No matter how many bad habits you ever have, I will never stop loving you."

"Same goes for me," said Erin, as she ran her fingers through the long silky hair.

The pair soon fell into a blissful sleep, happy that the small hurdle had been cleared and the natural, teasing side of their relationship had been restored.

Chapter 19

Thanksgiving brought with it a mixed bag of emotions. Bridgett insisted that the dinner be held at her place, since Erin had still not returned to the Brentwood house since the incident with her father. As for Timothy Casey, he cited that he was needed out of the country on business and wouldn't be able to make it home for the holiday. But Erin knew the real reason of his avoidance of being with his family. Business had never taken him away from a holiday before. At first, her guilt led her to decline Bridgett's invitation and Jamie was willing to do whatever her lover wanted. She too was besieged, not by guilt, but sadness at the Casey family's problems. It seemed a no win situation for everyone, but Jamie took it upon herself to try. She tracked down Mr. Casey to London, England and sent him a telegram, asking him to reconsider his decision, telling him of his family's immense sadness and sacrifices. Of course her efforts were in vain. Thursday morning arrived and there was no response.

Erin's mother finally persuaded her daughter to join them, citing her absence would only make things worse for the family. Erin pasted on the best smile she could manage, when she heard the excited voices of her niece and nephew rushing to answer the door. She was pulled into the room

by both hands, after piling even more dishes into Jamie's arms. Artemis found her own way in, stopping to munch on a juicy piece of food that had fallen out in the transfer.

"Come on Aunt Erin, Mom said you have to make your special salad dressing," Conner said, leading her to the kitchen. "Even if I don't like salad," he added, making a face.

Danielle came down the stairs and hugged her daughter. "Hello sweetheart. Happy Thanksgiving."

"Happy Thanksgiving Mom."

Danielle looked over her daughter's shoulder and saw the tall woman's burden. "Jamie! Dear, you don't have to play pack mule."

"I don't mind Danielle. Your daughter had me playing beach bum all week and I can use the exercise."

She relieved Jamie of two heavy dishes. "Conner, come here and help us take these things to the kitchen." The young man was more than eager to help, taking one from his grandmother. Danielle reached up to hug the tall woman. "How are you feeling now dear? I was so worried about you, when Erin told me you were ill."

Jamie smiled, flashing for just a moment on her own mother and how she nursed her daughter back to health when she had the measles the year before their deaths. "I'm feeling much better, thanks." She put her arm around Erin's shoulder and pulled her close. "This is the best medicine I could ever ask for. After she gave me a good swift kick, that is."

Danielle smiled fondly at the love between her children. *Why can't Timothy see what I see*, she thought. She really felt sorry for the stubborn old goat, but she would not let him hurt her family anymore.

Erin remained quite for most of the day, not in a depressing way, but just enough for her family to feel empathy for her. Bridgett served enough food to feed a Roman army and after dinner, Jamie suggested they take a little stroll through the gardens behind the house. They slipped out before the children could ask to go along, needing just a few quiet moments together.

Jamie joined their hands. "Are you okay sweetheart?"

Erin laid her head on a broad shoulder as they walked along. "Yeah. Today was hard, but not as hard as I thought it would be. It was the first holiday that we weren't all together."

"His decision sweetheart, not yours."

"I know. And each celebration, without him, will seem unusual, but he's not going to stop me from enjoying my family." She stopped and wrapped her arms around Jamie's neck. "And you

are the most important member of my family." They kissed, sending away the chill of the evening air and replacing it with the unequaled warmth of love

Jamie pulled back and placed a final kiss to her forehead. "And you are my only family."

They returned twenty minutes later, just as the pumpkin pie was being served. Bridgett handed each of the adults, a crystal glass filled with a fine dessert wine, at Danielle's request. Everyone was seated, informally in the family room, also at Danielle's request.

Mrs. Casey lifted her glass. "Before we devour this delicious pie. I would like to make a toast." Every glass was raised at her words, even the plastic cups of the children, who had no idea what it meant, but like most children they imitated their adult role models. Danielle looked at every beautiful face that made up her clan and continued. "On this day of thanks, for the bounty of our lives, I would like to say that I am absolutely thankful and very proud of each and every member of my family. I think I speak for all of us, when I say, that this year we have an added blessing." Her warm, green eyes landed on the dark haired woman seated next to Erin. "Jamie, you have not only filled my daughter's heart with love and taken away her loneliness, you have added another chair to our table, another sister for Bridgett, another aunt for my grandchildren and another daughter for me to love. Welcome to the family dear Jamie."

Erin felt the hot blush as she reached to kiss her love's cheek, while everyone else drank in Jamie's honor. "I love you so much," she whispered, as Jamie wiped away a tear that was just about to drop from her own eye.

Jamie remembered the words she had just spoken to Erin, minutes before and how wrong they were. *They want to be my family*, she thought with amazement. She knew she was expected to say something. She was definitely not one for making speeches, but she had to try and relay what she was feeling. "What can I say, but thank you. I haven't had a family for twenty years, but I'm happy to say I do now and I couldn't have chosen a better one. Falling in love with Erin is the best thing that has ever happened to me and gaining every one of you as my new family is definitely the next best." She swallowed the lump that had formed in her throat and was determined to lighten the highly emotional moment. "Now, we'd better eat this delicious pie before someone, who shall remain nameless..."

"More peese," said Caitlin, who held up her empty plate. Everyone turned and laughed at the little, whipped cream, covered face. Erin was quickly filled in on the antics of her niece and asked for a kiss from the precocious one, before insisting on retrieving her second dessert.

Jamie followed her to the kitchen, needing a moment alone with the woman she loved. Erin was pulled into an embrace from behind and sank into the strong, loving arms. Only the beating of a single heart filled the silence.

"Thank you," whispered Jamie minutes later. Every other unspoken word was absorbed into the author's soul, by their closeness.

"You are most welcome."

They were startled from their loving reverie by the sound of running feet. A two and a half-foot blonde burst onto the room and pulled on the tall woman's hand. "Aunt Jamie, more pie!"

Jamie returned to work on Monday morning, but promised Erin that she would only stay five hours, and then take a relaxing walk. When she returned to her apartment that evening, Jamie found a message on her machine. She made the return phone call, which lasted only a few minutes. "All right, I'll do it," she promised, before hanging up. She dropped into the chair by the phone and released a frustrated breath. "Erin won't be happy about this," she said to no one. "But I can make her understand."

On Wednesday, the Hollywood saying, "let's do lunch" really happened for Erin. Joseph Hudson invited her to spend the noon meal, discussing the upcoming movie with newly hired director, Blair McIntire. Noah Factor also represented her freshman directing effort. McIntire was given the chance, only after some strong persuasion and a little bit of Irish charm by the author. The first time screenplay writer wanted to give the same chance to someone else. The fact that Blair was female, helped in the decision, because she knew it was twice as hard for a woman to establish herself and be offered good opportunities.

Their meeting was very successful, ending with Hudson asking Erin to do some pre-publicity, which she was happy to do, since it would involve her lover as well.

Jamie pulled up to the beach house on Wednesday, jumped out and ran up the steps. She tapped her foot, waiting for the door to open and when it did, she scooped up the blonde author and planted a smoldering kiss on her lips. The kiss continued all the way across the living room, down the hall and up the first three steps, leading to the second floor.

Erin pulled back with a gasp, knowing where she was being carried. "Jamie, dinner," she said, replenishing the breath in her lungs.

Jamie didn't miss a step as she buried her face in the sweet smelling neck. "Dessert first."

Erin couldn't deny the erotic onslaught, not that she wanted to. She was just glad there was no open fire left on the stove, because she wasn't about to stop the fire being started between them as they hit the bed.

In the backyard, Artemis peaked through a knothole in the wooden fence and saw Jamie's car. She ran into the house, through the kitchen and bound up the steps, following the sounds of her humans. She came to a crashing halt at the closed bedroom door, which she was encountering much too often. She backed up, trotted back down the stairs and decided to wait in the kitchen, where the humans often ended up after...whatever it was that humans did behind closed doors.

Much later, Jamie and Erin sat at the kitchen table, eating dinner in their robes. It didn't make much sense to get dressed for just a short time, Jamie had said and Erin, being ever practical, agreed.

Jamie knew she couldn't put it off any longer. "Erin, there's something I have to tell you."

"Oh," Erin suddenly remembered. "I need to ask you something to, but you go first."

Jamie fidgeted, nervously until the blonde planted herself in her lap and began nibbling an earlobe. "I know I agreed to slow down on work," said Jamie, trying hard to concentrate. "But I got a call from the courier service on Monday." The nibbling stopped. "And they need a delivery." She got worried when Erin said nothing. "I promise it's just a short trip and I won't take another for several weeks," she explained further. "They're going to give me two hundred dollars more than usual, because they can't get anyone else. I want to keep in good favor with them for the future. It's a lot of money...I promise not to make myself sick sweetheart...it's just this one thing." Her voice was nearly pleading for approval. At least Erin hadn't moved from her lap, she thought that was a good sign. "Aren't you going to say anything?"

Erin ran her hand through Jamie's long hair. "You don't need my permission sweetheart. You are an adult and you can make your own decisions."

Somehow, Erin's tone made Jamie feel even guiltier. "But I promised," she said softly.

"Yes, you promised to take care of yourself, so I'm sure you know what you're doing."

"But you're not pleased that I want to go."

Erin smiled and kissed her troubled lover. "I'm not mad, if that's what you're afraid of. And I don't want to take away your independence." Erin clasped both sides of the face before her. "Just don't you dare get sick on me again."

"I won't," she promised, pulling Erin into a hug.

The blonde started to chuckle. Jamie pulled back with her brows high on her forehead. "What is so funny?"

"Is that why you insisted on making love, when you came in the door? You thought I'd get mad and you wouldn't get any."

Jamie shook her blush-covered face. "No, of course not! I was afraid you'd be mad...but I was thinking about you every second on the drive up here and by the time I got to the door, I was so hot for you, I thought I'd explode if I didn't have you."

Now the blush spread to the blonde. "Oh, okay." She reached up and slipped the robe of her shoulders. "Speaking of being hot..."

Artemis watched the two humans rush back up the stairs and she heard the door close. *Here we go again.*

Erin yawned and pulled the blanket over them. "You never did tell me when this trip was." She was pulled tighter against the tall body behind her.

"I have to leave Friday morning at eleven," Jamie said absently, then remembered. "I'm sorry honey. What was it you were going to tell me?"

Erin sighed. "It doesn't really matter now."

"Why?"

"Joseph wants to start some publicity for the movie. He gave me two tickets to a movie premiere and I wanted to take you along." She smiled crookedly. "But it's Friday night."

Jamie winced. She knew how important something like this would be for Erin's career and she wanted to be as supportive, as Erin was being to her. "I could make it a quick trip," she suggested. "If I can get a flight right back, maybe I can meet you there."

Erin turned in her arms. "No! No rushing, that's how you got sick. It's not that important."

"Yes it is! And I want to be there for you, but... I don't want to make you worry either." She quickly made her decision. "I won't go. I'll stay here and go with you to the premiere."

Erin traced a sensitive ear and planted a loving kiss to nearby lips. "I love you. But you can't. You can't drop everything for me and I don't want you to. No more discussion and no feeling guilty. But I still have to go."

Jamie nodded. "You shouldn't go alone," she mused. "I bet your sister would like to go, or your mother."

"Maybe," mumbled Erin, sleepily. "I'll figure something out."

The swallow of vending machine coffee slid down Jamie's throat with a grimace. She spotted a pay phone across the airport terminal and decided to give it one more try. The phone rang four times and Jamie let out a breath of disappointment. *Where are you Erin?* She knew the author had had a doctor's appointment first thing that morning so they couldn't talk, but she had tried to call her just before she left her apartment. Erin should have been back by then, but she still got the machine. Now she wasn't even answering her cell phone. Jamie went to hang up the receiver, but faintly heard her lover's voice, just before it disconnected.

"Yeah baby, it's me. I'm here at the airport and I just wanted to hear your voice before I left. How did your appointment go?"

"Just routine, nothing important."

"Good. What are you wearing tonight, so I'll have something happy to think about on that crowded plane?" She heard a small giggle.

"It's new, so you haven't seen it before, but I promise a personal fashion show tomorrow. But I will give you something to think about."

Jamie's eyes widened further with every word coming from the teasing little woman. Her mouth ran dry, but she did manage a reply. "That really wasn't fair. Now my flight will be rather uncomfortable, not relaxing. But hold that thought until tomorrow. So is Bridgett excited about tonight?"

"Oh, I forgot to tell you she couldn't make it. Brad is away on business and Conner got sick last night."

"That's a shame. Can your mother go on such short notice?"

"No, she has her monthly church meeting tonight."

"So you have to go alone?" asked Jamie sadly...and with a lot of guilt.

"No. I asked Blair and she's going with me."

Jamie dropped the bag from her shoulder. "Who's Blair?"

"Blair McIntire, the director of my movie. I told you about her."

"Oh yeah...I remember. I just didn't think you'd be socializing with her."

"I think it'll be better publicity if we go together anyway, don't you think?" Erin had no idea of the jealousy rumbling around in her partner's head at the moment or what visions the innocent comment had started.

"Just what kind of publicity do you want Erin?"

The hostility in Jamie's voice wasn't missed. "What kind of a question is that? Don't tell me you're jealous."

No response.

"Jamie? Say something." A pause. "I love you sweetheart. Only you and you know that."

"I know," came the whisper. "I'm sorry. It's just...I want to be the only one by your side. I know how the press is. If you show up together, somebody is going to make something out of it."

"Would you rather I not go?" asked Erin, hoping she would get the right answer.

"No, you have to go."

Erin smiled.

"I understand. I'm just being stupid."

"No you're not." In the background Erin heard, flight 831 to Denver, now boarding. "That's your plane sweetheart. I don't want you to miss it, but I do want you to know that I will miss you all night long and you will be by my side for the next event, won't you?"

"Count on it. I love you. Have a good time tonight. I'll call when I get home."

"Okay sweetheart. And if anybody interviews us, I'll be sure to have Blair mention her boyfriend. Good-bye. I love you."

Jamie hung up the phone, once again secure in Erin's love for her.

Landing in Denver, in December, sent Jamie's body into climactic shock. When she stepped from the airport terminal, she shivered and pulled the fleece collar tighter around her neck. She slung her small canvas bag over her shoulder and took from her pocket, the piece of paper, with the address where she was to deliver the package. She signaled a waiting cab and hurriedly slipped into the car, happy to be out of the biting wind. The driver took the shortest route to her downtown destination and she tipped him well. She crossed the courtyard of the huge building and went into the lobby; double-checking with security, which floor held the main office of E. B. D. Industries.

Jamie stepped out of the elevator and turned to her right to go through the double glass door, etched with the company logo. The young, blonde secretary looked up from her computer to greet the visitor.

"May I help you?" she asked with a friendly smile.

Jamie didn't exactly return the gesture, but she didn't want to appear rude either. "I have a package to deliver to the president of E. B. D. Industries. And I'm supposed to give it to him personally." Jamie thought that was rather odd. She usually just left it with an assistant or secretary, but the instructions were specific.

The woman lifted the phone and buzzed her boss's office.

Jamie took in the view from the big, side window until the call ended.

"You can go in now," said the assistant.

Once inside the huge office, Jamie took in the surroundings. A well-stocked mini bar sat off to one side and on the other, a dark leather couch with a low table in front of it. Several nicely framed pictures were placed there for a visitor to admire. *Must be his family*, she thought. She barely glanced at the subjects of the pictures, but did a double take when some very familiar faces jumped out at her. Just then the tall, heavy chair turned, revealing it's gray haired occupant.

"You wanted to see me," the man said, without looking up. When he got no answer, he finally raised his head. "Yes, what did..." Gray eyes narrowed in thought and recognition slowly turned the look, to a glare. Timothy Casey slowly stood from behind the big desk. The intense anger

Jamie had seen upon their last meeting seemed somewhat tempered. "What are you doing here?" he finally asked.

She raised the brown wrapped parcel, in her hand. "I'm with the courier service, I have your package."

He crossed the room and took the small box without another word, then turned his back. "I hope you're not waiting for a tip?" he asked gruffly, when he noticed she had not gone.

"Of course not," she huffed. "But I would like to give you a tip, Mr. Casey. Reconcile with your family. They miss you." He turned away at her words and his shoulders slumped slightly. Jamie took in his posture and continued. "My father died when I was ten and I still miss him, everyday. And Erin misses you. She has been your daughter for 28 years and she is still the same little baby you held in your arms for the first time on a day in 1972. She's still the same little girl, who you carried on your shoulders at a St. Patrick's Day parade. And she's still the same little girl who gave you that ugly tie for father's day and the hand drawn card that said I love you daddy. She still loves you Mr. Casey. Don't punish her for who she loves." Jamie walked over to the photographs on the table. There was a picture of Timothy and Danielle on their wedding day and one of Bridgett and Brad's ceremony. There was several of Bridgett at different stages of her childhood and four pictures of his grandchildren. And one small, simple, square frame that Jamie lifted to see better. She smiled at the grinning face looking back. She walked over to the big man who was still had his back to her. "This proves that you still care for her." Jamie reached around and handed him the picture of Erin. "Take this small sign of hope and make it grow." She turned and left, never seeing the small tear trailing down his face.

Erin sat through the movie, totally uninterested in hearing the lawyer plead his client's case to a jury of rich, greedy snobs. The inevitable love story between the lead character and the star witness only made her miss Jamie even more. After the movie, Erin made her obligatory appearance at the party, but after one glass of champagne, her heart was no longer in a festive mood. She convinced Blair to stay and mingle and make those all-important contacts, but she was leaving.

As she waited by the theater for the taxi to arrive, Erin began to get a strange feeling. She suddenly wished she had brought Artemis along. She continued to hear the party going on in the nearby lot, so she still felt safe, but as the minutes passed, that feeling fled and was replaced by hard fear. She knew someone was watching her and that that person was dangerous. Erin reached into her purse and took out her cane. It extended to its full length and she turned to move back toward the party, to ask for help. She only took three steps when she felt the air pressure in front of her, change.

"Going somewhere Erin?" A hand grabbed the wrist holding the cane. "Don't scream sweetheart or some innocent people might just get hurt."

A chill went down her spine. "What do you want Ethan?"

He took the cane from her and moved in close to her side; close enough for Erin to feel the weapon in his hand. "Just come with me and act like everything is all right."

She knew she couldn't fight him, at least then and there. Erin called on the knowledge she had learned in her self-defense classes. But that was when she had her sight. Now it was a whole different situation. The words she once told Jamie came back to her, *I do the same things everybody else does, I just have to find an alternate way of doing them.* She prayed she could make that statement come true now.

"You know if you had that mutt with you, I would have had to kill it," he said as he led her to his car.

Erin knew enough not to antagonize him with her own hateful words, nor would he hear her beg for her life. She remained as calm as she possibly could, as he drove away to some unknown destination. His silence was terrifying; his only communication was to remind her of the weapon he had, by rubbing her thigh with the cold blade of sharpened steel.

Soon they stopped. Erin was certain that they hadn't gone to far; she could still hear the heavy traffic and other sounds of the city. He roughly pulled her from the car and shoved her ahead of him through an open door. They got into an elevator and rode up five floors then went down a long corridor.

"Where are we Ethan?"

He leaned in and whispered, "Back where it all began." They went through another door and he pushed her into a chair, not bothering to tie her up. He certainly didn't expect any resistance from a blind woman. "You lost me my job bitch! Now you are going to lose as much as you possibly can. Then I have plans for that windbag, Hudson and that butch girlfriend of yours. But you get the honor of being first."

Jamie pulled up to the theater in her limo, expecting to surprise her partner with a ride home, in style. *We might even finish what we started that night in the restaurant parking lot,* she thought with a grin. Jamie explained to the man at the front gate, who she was and who she was looking for. He had remembered Erin and explained that she had left a short while ago. She was a little puzzled and asked if Blair McIntire had also left. The man said no and went in search of Ms. McIntire.

The director walked out to the entrance. "It's nice to meet you Jamie. Erin told me all about you."

Jamie was taken slightly aback at the beautiful woman's words, mostly because of her concern for Erin. "You too. Why did Erin leave? I thought you two came here together?"

Erin had explained her lover's concerns and Blair took no offense. "We did arrive here together," she explained. "But Erin was missing you and didn't feel like staying for the party. She was waiting for a taxi the last time I saw her. She had no idea you were going to be here."

Jamie nodded, a thousand things going through her head. "I wanted to surprise her," she said faintly. "You said she left about twenty minutes ago?"

"Yes."

Ethan continued circling Erin, spewing out obscenities. "After I take care of you and Hudson, I think I'll teach that girlfriend, of yours, a lesson in manners. Do you know where I sent her today?"

"Jamie works for a courier service, she's on a job for them."

He laughed in her ear. "I know. I paid them big bucks to send her to Denver today. I sent her to see daddy. Can you just imagine daddy's reaction when his dyke daughter in law walks in the door? I went to see daddy too. He hates you as much as I do."

Erin cringed at the thought of her father in a conspiracy with the monster, taunting her.

"I knew he'd pay me big bucks to keep his reputation clean. His business cronies don't care for your kind either and...."

When his voice moved across the room, Erin, very slowly, reached into her purse, opened her cell phone and pushed speed dial #1.

Jamie was just about to call Erin when her cell phone rang. "Hello. Erin is that you?"

There was no vocal response, but she began hearing a slight tapping in her ear. At that terrifying second, Jamie knew her partner was on the other end of the line and couldn't communicate, but much worse, she knew Erin was in danger. She was afraid to say anything more in case she gave away what the author was trying to do. She just listened.

"Surely **Ethan...**"

Jamie's jaw clenched when she heard her partner say the name.

"...You can't blame me for getting you **fired.**"

Jamie heard the inflection Erin gave to the last word. *That has got to be a clue, but for what?* She continued listening as his voice got louder. *You stay away from her you bastard!*

"You're damn right I blame you, bitch! If you weren't such a pervert, I could have handled working with you." His logic and his memories were totally screwed up. "We were getting along fine until I found out that day. But your dyke hero ain't here to save you now, is she?"

Jamie was pacing as she listened, seething at the words being directed at the woman she loved more than life itself. She heard Erin's voice again. She seemed calm, but Jamie knew she had to be scared. *Come on baby, give me another clue.*

"I'm sorry that's the way you feel, Ethan, but will hurting me change anything that has happened."

He laughed again. "No, you're right it won't change anything, but when I finish with you, I'll feel a whole lot better."

Erin's mind raced. She didn't know why, but she was glad he was taking his time to exact his revenge. *I hope you're listening Jamie. I need you.* All though Erin didn't think Jamie was as close by as she was, she hoped she could at least figure out where she was and call the police. "Why did you bring me to this building, Ethan? And how did you get a key to the alley door?"

He fell right into her trap. "I've been working on this plan for months," he gloated. "I got a job on the construction crew to help rebuild this place, won the bosses trust and viola, he gave me a key."

Jamie stopped her pacing when the clues started to add up. *Ethan, fired, building. That's it!* She ran over to the limo, pointing a finger at the director. "Call the police, tell them Erin's been kidnapped. Tell them to get to the Meridian building!" The long car nearly took out a light post, as it rounded the corner, as Jamie raced off to the rescue.

Erin could feel his eyes on her and it sickened her. He ran his hands over her shoulder and she shivered. Of course his insane, egotistical mind misread the meaning of that action. He threw the purse from her lap and leaned in close to her. "See, I knew it would just take the right touch to show you the error of your ways." She heard the unmistakable sound of a switchblade being opened and his next words sent another tremor through her. "It's party time, Erin."

Continued in Part 6.

The Athenaeum's Scroll Archive

~ At First Sight ~

by Colleen

General Disclaimer: This is an alternate uber story. The physical descriptions of the two lead characters may remind you of two others we all know and love, but all characters in the story are from my own imagination. This story is an original work and is copyrighted by the author. It cannot be sold or used for profit in any way.

Violence Disclaimer: This story depicts scenes of mild violence and/or their aftermath.

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No copy write infringement was intended in the use of the song "I Need You"

Thanks, to my beta readers Barbara and Jennis.

All positive comments are welcome at coleen30@webtv.net

Part 1

Chapter 20

Two blocks from her destination, Jamie hit a traffic jam. She slammed her hands against the steering wheel and yelled. "Damn! I hate this city!" She threw the door open and took off at a dead run, dodging crowds of people, when she hit the sidewalk. She came to an intersection, not stopping at the flashing do not cross sign, causing three cars to hit their brakes to avoid hitting her. Jamie let nothing stand in her way, as she saw the Meridian building, looming in the darkness at the far corner. A thought flashed in her mind, *the alley door*. She ducked into the, even darker, back road and came around the corner, nearly running into Tyler's car. Jamie turned her head back toward the street when she heard the sirens in the distance, but waiting for them, never crossed her mind for a second. She went in the open door, knowing exactly where they would be in the huge building. It took her only a second to realize Tyler had locked down the elevators. Jamie ran into the stairwell and began the climb up, five flights. Adrenaline pushed her up each step as if she were floating on air and the breath that should have eluded her long ago was replenished, as if by magic. A heart that beat for someone else pumped blood to the brain that had a single solitary goal...save Erin.

Reaching the fifth floor, Jamie ran down the hall and threw all her weight against the door. Her voice rang on for miles as she called out Erin's name. The wood swung open against her might and everything went silent as her mind took in the scene before her.

They were on opposite sides of the room. To her right, Jamie saw the unconscious body of Ethan Tyler. Blood pooled around his head that lay against a pile of wood planks. She gave him only a second's glance before she ran over to her lover's side. Upon seeing her huddled against the wall, she approached cautiously, clearly announcing her presence. "Erin it's me Jamie. Everything's okay now sweetheart. I'm here."

Erin was stunned into absolute stillness over the events of the last few minutes... until she heard that voice. "Jamie?" she said weakly.

"Yeah baby it's me."

Erin threw aside the knife she held clutched in her hand and threw her arms around the only thing that would make her feel safe at that moment.

"Police! Everybody freeze!"

Erin heard the command, but couldn't let go of her haven, even as she heard the bodies rush into the room. Jamie put up both hands and vaguely explained the act of self-defense that had taken place. Another officer called for the paramedics and two ambulances, meaning Tyler was still alive. Jamie was itching to change that fact, but she didn't move from her spot. The officer explained that he would come to the hospital and take Erin's statement, knowing she was in no condition to say anything at the moment.

Jamie didn't even ask what exactly had happened, but as she pulled the torn dress up over Erin's shoulder, a twist of fear in her stomach, gave her a very strong clue. She continued to rock Erin, whispering soothing words as they waited for the ambulance.

Once inside the busy, hospital emergency room, they waited yet again for a doctor. Jamie resented the fact that several hospital personnel had flocked around Tyler when he was rushed in ahead of them. Although Erin had no major injuries and she had assured her twice that she was not hurt, Jamie couldn't bring herself to ask the big question. Jamie just sat beside her, holding her hand, a hand that no longer trembled. She looked upon a face that no longer twitched in fear. The main shock had worn off and Erin had slipped into anger.

"Erin, what are you thinking?" Jamie asked hesitantly, as she brushed soft yellow bangs from her forehead.

A moment of silence.

"Why?"

The opening of the door interrupted any further statement or questions.

"Erin, my god it is you!" said the woman in blue scrubs. "When I read your name on the chart, I came right here."

Erin gave half a smile at hearing her friend's voice. "Anne. I was going to ask if you were in the hospital but..."

"I'm glad I was here." The doctor snapped on a pair of sterile gloves. She looked up to meet worried blue eyes. "Jamie, could you wait outside while I..."

"No," said Erin. The word wasn't said in fear. "It's okay I want her to stay."

"Erin, I need to ask you some questions and I don't think..."

"I understand Anne. I want Jamie here. It's all right."

Anne relented.

Jamie sat back down on the rolling stool and clasped the hand that reached for her.

Anne had seen many reactions to physical assault in her rotation in emergency, mostly fear and embarrassment, but sometime she encountered denial and she was afraid that was what was happening with her friend.

She started her first question gently. "Erin, I need to ask you something very important and I need you to tell me the truth. It's for your own good that you tell us the truth."

Erin nodded.

The doctor spared another glance at the dark haired woman and saw her shaking with fear and anger. *This is why I don't like relatives around when I ask. Her reaction will be very important to Erin's recovery.* She cleared her throat. "Erin, were you raped?"

Erin felt the hand squeeze hers and she turned in the direction of the woman who needed to hear the answer most of all. "No," she said strongly. "I was **not** raped."

Jamie let out an audible breath of relief and her head fell against Erin's shoulder.

But Anne was not quite convinced. "Erin, are you sure? Were you unconscious at any time?"

The blonde turned her head back to the persistent doctor. "No, I was never unconscious. I'm not trying to hide anything Anne. You can check for yourself if you don't believe me, but I am telling the truth."

A gloved hand clasped hers. "I'm sorry Erin. I do believe you. I just had to be sure, for your own safety."

Erin smiled faintly at her friend. "I know."

Anne gently probed the small bruise on Erin's jaw. "Are you hurt anywhere else?"

"No. Well except my right shoulder."

Anne pulled back the material and bent down to take a closer look. The bleeding from the small wound had already slowed, but there was quite a bit of the dried substance on her upper arm. Anne grabbed a package from a nearby counter and ripped it open. She cleansed the wound thoroughly and swabbed it with a solution to prevent infection. She then pulled out a suture kit and injected a numbing agent around the affected area. "How did this happen Erin?"

The blonde began to explain. "He pushed me down to the ground and I knew he was...going to rape me, but I couldn't let that happen to me." She squeezed Jamie's hand and looked in her direction. "I couldn't let that happen to us. At first I didn't fight him. He figured because I was

blind, I couldn't do anything. And that's what I let him think, for about a minute. He started kissing my neck and the knife was near my shoulder. When he was confident and had relaxed, I kned him. I guess the surprise made him jerk his hand and he cut me. When he pulled back in pain and anger, I knew it was my only chance and I pushed him away with everything I had. I reached around for the knife he had dropped, knowing he'd come back, but he didn't. I guess after that I went into shock."

"Well it only took five stitches." Anne gathered up the used needle and other trash and discarded them in the proper containers.

"He probably needed more, from his own clumsiness," said Erin absently.

Anne froze. "What do you mean Erin?"

"He was taunting me and he must have been playing with the knife and I guess it slipped and cut him. That's when he slapped me, blaming me for that to."

"Erin, was it the same knife?"

"I guess. As far I know, he only had..." A sudden realization swept over Erin's face. "Oh god! I didn't think...but that means..."

Jamie pulled her in close. "It's okay sweetheart. It's going to be okay."

Anne took a deep breath, hating every time, to have to make this kind of statement. "Erin, I think we should do a blood test."

Erin nodded, remembering him bragging about sleeping around.

Dr. Carson went over to the phone on the nearby wall, hit a couple of numbers and began a conversation that soon became animated. She had confirmed that Tyler had a deep cut to his right palm. She soon returned to her patient with a syringe and a vial. "I'm going to take some blood, Erin. And I'm going to the lab and run the test myself." Erin just nodded, from her place in Jamie's strong arms. She explained what was going to happen as she extracted the sample. "The HIV antibodies won't show up this soon after introduction into the blood stream."

Jamie flashed her an angered glare. "Why don't you just run the test on him!"

"That would be the ideal way to know for sure, but that's a problem. Law says we can't run an HIV test without the patient's permission."

Jamie didn't let her finish. "Give me a minute alone with the bastard and you'll have his permission."

"Jamie, he's in a coma," explained Anne. "Unless he dies, we can't do a test until he regains consciousness."

"You're just going to stand there and say that. I thought you were her friend!"

"Jamie, calm down." Erin rubbed the irate woman's arm. "This is not Anne's fault. She's just doing her job."

The doctor couldn't meet the tall woman's eyes. *How many times will the words just doing her job, make me feel so guilty*, she thought to herself. "I'm going to go run this," she said of the vial in her hand. "It won't take too long."

Anne returned sometime later and gave them the news that the test was indeed negative. Erin gave just another nod and although she knew it was most likely the shock of the situation, Anne felt like she was losing a friend and she didn't know what to do about it. She told them that another test would be performed in six weeks, unless they had a confirmation from Tyler, sooner. She warned them to take precautions and not to engage in intimacies that could be harmful to Jamie.

"So we just have to put our lives on hold until that monster either wakes up or dies, right?" asked Jamie still angered at the horrible turn of events.

Anne couldn't answer. She was never in a personal situation like they were facing and she could only imagine the turmoil of emotions. Even though it hurt, she understood the anger being thrown at her, by her friend's partner.

"If you think I'm going to treat the woman I love, like a pariah, you've got another thing coming. Her fate is mine too." With that statement, Jamie led Erin out of the room.

Once home, Erin took the longest, hottest shower of her life and before it was over, her tears mingled with the stream of water cascading over her. Although Erin had asked to shower alone, Jamie sat right outside the bathroom door, matching Erin tear for tear.

They silently climbed into bed and clutched each other as if it was the last time they would be together. They both suffered from horrible nightmares, but soothed one another with loving words and caresses.

The next day, Erin knew she had to tell her family what had happened; they needed to know the truth. She called Bridgett and her mother and asked them to come to the beach house that afternoon. When they arrived, with Jamie by her side, she recounted the horror of the night before. Danielle tried to be strong, but soon broke down in tears. Erin had already cried herself out, but comforted her mother the best she could.

Jamie now stood in a corner, watching the three women, crying and hugging and fearing the future. The guilt washed over her like a tidal wave, drowning her heart. The what ifs flooded her brain in anger. *If I hadn't left her, to go on that stupid trip, if I had taken his threats more seriously, if I had only gotten to her sooner...* She was about to go crazy with all the thoughts. She couldn't just stand there and do nothing; she had to get away. Jamie felt that she could leave for a little while, because Danielle and Bridgett were there to stay with Erin.

Erin was standing out on the deck, feeling the sun on her face, when she heard Jamie open the door and step up behind her.

She pulled the shorter woman into a hug and kissed the top of the blonde head. "Sweetheart, will you be okay, if I go out for a little while?"

Erin pulled back and gave Jamie a small smile. "Of course honey. Mom and Bridgett are staying a while. Don't you want lunch?"

"No. I just need to...go for a drive...you know..."

Erin nodded. "I know." She knew the guilt Jamie was feeling and she knew, even though she had assured her there was no one to blame but Tyler, that Jamie had to work through some things on her own. Just as she had to handle some of the things she was feeling, alone. All though they were very much a couple and the other half of each other, they were also individuals and had to face some troubles of the soul all by themselves.

Jamie traveled down the coast highway for an hour and then turned back. The waiting was excruciating. Even after the reckless times she had spent as a young adult, the stupid chances she had taken, still she was spared the horror of a fatal disease. But when she made her own decision to get tested, she didn't have to wait for anyone else and no one else's lives depended on her. This situation was unbearable and ultimately unfair. *He is the criminal and she is the innocent, yet Erin's the one who's suffering in a prison, waiting for a life or death sentence. Just to uphold his civil rights? Not if I can help it.*

Doctor Anne Carson officially had the day off, but yet there she was sitting in the doctor's lounge filling out paper work, drinking tepid coffee and eating day old donuts. She knew why she was there. The looks of despair she had seen the night before in a sterile emergency room filled her dreams with sadness. She came to work and consulted with the attending physician of one Ethan Tyler. His prognosis was perched high atop the proverbial fence. Chances were about fifty percent that Tyler would not recover from his head injury, but the other half of the coin said he could remain in a coma for a prolonged period of time.

Anne crunched up the piece of paper in her hand, as she made her fifth mistake. *This isn't getting me anywhere*, she thought. She grabbed the stethoscope from the table and draped it over her neck, as she left the small room and headed to the elevator.

Arriving at the room on the fourth floor, Anne pushed the heavy door open and stopped in her tracks. "Jamie what are you doing here?" she asked, as she went to check on the patient.

Cold, blue eyes never left the pale figure, secured to the bed. "I wanted to see if he was suffering, the way Erin is."

"No, he's not suffering. Is that why you're really here Jamie?"

Jamie gave a sinister little smile. "Why, are you afraid I came in here to kill him? Although that would solve part of our dilemma, wouldn't it? I mean at least we would know and she could begin treatments, but like this..."

"Erin wouldn't want you to do that."

"No," Jamie chuckled sadly. "She will probably even forgive him someday; that's what makes her so special." Jamie finally raised her eyes to meet those of the doctor, watching her. "That's why she doesn't deserve this." She walked out the door without another word, leaving the doctor to ponder her conscience.

Jamie and Erin were snuggled together on the couch; neither had made further mention of the previous night's events. Erin felt no real need to discuss things, although she was considering her mother's suggestion of seeing a victim's counselor. In fact, she felt really proud that she was able to defend herself, knowing that losing her sight had not taken away that ability. What bothered her the most was the fact that she might be responsible for someone's death, even if it was in self-defense.

The real threats to her life, from the night before and the possible threat to her life from a fatal disease made her take stock. Erin never felt like she took life for granted, especially since the accident, four years before. She tried to treat every day as a gift from God. And having Jamie come into her life was certainly the single most important thing she could imagine.

Erin sighed and squeezed the body she was wrapped around. "Jamie?"

"Yeah."

"I want a very long life with you," she started slowly. "But if we only have a week, a month or a year together, I don't want to waste a single moment."

Jamie caressed the soft, short hair beneath her fingers. "I agree sweetheart, but what exactly do you mean?"

Erin pulled back and placed a passionate kiss on her partner's lips. "Will you move in here with me?" She curled her fingers with Jamie's. "We've been together five months. I think we're both ready for the next step. I know it's a lot longer trip for you to go to work and everything, but..." A finger against her lips stopped her sentence. Her breath hitched in fear. Erin's right hand was lifted and placed against the huge smile plastered on Jamie's face.

"Yes," whispered Jamie against the fingers, then she kissed the palm of that hand. "Yes." She was thrown back to the cushion by an arm full of excited woman.

"I love you Jamie."

"And I love you, Erin. For the rest of my life...and beyond."

The blonde author melted into the body beneath her as they sank into the couch, in celebration. The kisses they shared ignited passions they knew couldn't be satisfied physically, but needed to be fulfilled emotionally. Their loving actions went on for many minutes, but were soon interrupted by a knock at the door.

"Who would be out here this time of night?" wondered Jamie, as she read the 10:30 time on the clock on the wall.

"I have no idea." They went to answer it, arm in arm.

Jamie opened the door and was a bit stunned.

The visitor pulled her jacket tighter against the blowing wind. "Hi. Can I come in?"

"What brings you out here this time of night Anne?" asked Erin as they led their guest into the living room. "Can I get you some coffee?"

Doctor Carson shifted nervously under the stare of the taller woman. "No, thank you. I have some news. Can we sit?"

"Yes of course." Erin sat next to Jamie in the spot they had just vacated. She took Jamie's hand in expectation.

"An HIV test was performed on Tyler, a few hours ago." Both Erin and Jamie held their breaths for her next words. "It was negative. You're in the clear."

"Oh God," sighed Jamie as she hugged Erin, nearly squeezing the breath from her.

Anne found something very interesting to study, near her shoes as the couple continued their embrace.

Finally Erin turned back to her long time friend. "I don't mean to second guess the hospital staff. But you're sure, there's no chance of a mistake?"

Anne had to smile at the relief on her friend's face even, with asking the question. "I'm positive. I ran the test twice with two different samples. You're okay and your future, at least as far as this incident is concerned, is guaranteed to be healthy."

Jamie didn't mean to sound callus, but she needed to know. "Did he die?"

Anne shook her head. "No, he's still alive."

Erin gave an internal sigh of relief. "So he regained consciousness then?"

Anne was silent for a moment.

Jamie read the answer in the woman's down turned face and was certainly surprised.

"No," the doctor finally said. She went on to explain in an emotionless tone. "I went into his room, took the blood that I needed from his unresponsive body and ran the tests."

"Anne," whispered Erin. "I love you for helping me, but what will happen if they find out."

"I tried to cover my tracks, so hopefully they won't find out, but if they do, I could lose my license." She looked up to meet Jamie's gaze. "But I did what was right, the only thing that was fair."

Jamie mouthed the word thank you to the tired looking woman and received a smile in return.

Erin walked over and hugged the doctor. "Thank you Anne. I couldn't ask for a better friend. Now let me get us all some coffee. I know I could use some."

Jamie went to help her partner and actually surprised herself with the suggestion she was about to make. "Anne looks really beat."

"I can understand why. That was a tough decision she had to make."

"Yeah." Jamie pulled the milk from the fridge and the sugar from the cabinet. "Why don't you ask her to stay here tonight?" she suggested timidly. "It's so late and it's a long drive home and she looks ready to fall asleep and..." A voracious mouth suddenly attacking hers, cut off her ramblings.

Erin remembered how angry Jamie was with Anne the night before and admired what it took for her to make that suggestion. "Once again, you prove just exactly why I love you so much."

Jamie shrugged. "We do have a lot to celebrate, but now we have a long life to do so."

Chapter 21

Erin had been officially cleared of any legal charges. The police cited a clear case of self-defense, because of the past threats, which Joseph Hudson corroborated. Ethan remained in a coma as December progressed, but that no longer concerned Jamie. She immediately turned their lives to a more joyous occasion. Christmas. Their first together and as with Erin's birthday, she was determined to make every second of the celebration memorable.

Erin hadn't decorated for the holiday since losing her sight, so they had to go out and buy everything needed to transform a California beach house, into a wintry Christmas wonderland. In one weekend's time, they had accomplished their goal, quite nicely. A tall, green tree sat near the fireplace in the den. The color scheme of red, blue and silver that adorned the branches, brought to life the festive nature of the sacred holiday. Candles shaped like snowmen and figurines of children on sleds, sat happily atop the mantle. A huge wreath, trimmed in big red bows was hung on the door, ready to greet visitors with a Yuletide welcome. Jamie had strung ten sets of lights

all along the deck and down across the top of the fence, but Erin had managed to talk her out of buying the Santa in the sleigh that she wanted to put on the roof.

By Sunday night, the two tired decorators could only manage enough energy to sit in front of the tree, sipping hot chocolate and holding hands. Erin's big question of the Saturday before had been sidetracked by the good health news and then by the shopping. But it was never far away from her thoughts.

"Jamie, do you still want to move in here?" Erin asked, hesitantly.

"Of course I do!" Jamie sat down her cup and took the one from Erin's hands. They wrapped loving arms around each other. "I'm sorry I didn't say anything about it this week. I just wanted us to move on to something fun."

"I understand, but when do you want to? I don't want to push you, but I just...I want you out here with me all the time."

Jamie smiled. "Well, how would you like to help me move my things out here, say Tuesday. I can take a day off from work. I don't really have that much stuff, so I know we could do it in a day."

Now it was Erin's turn to smile. "Tuesday works for me. Tomorrow I can make some room for your clothes in my closet and clear out a couple of drawers."

"Don't go crazy, sweetheart. My wardrobe consists of six pairs of jeans, a dozen t-shirts, five dressier shirts, one nice suit and two uniforms. Oh, and three pairs of shoes."

"Ooooh, no underwear, I like that." Erin flashed a lecherous grin.

Jamie snorted. "Of course the incidentals."

Erin wormed her hand into the pair of worn blue jeans and across the silk she found there. "These incidentals feel pretty good."

Jamie closed her eyes and enjoyed a few more seconds of Erin's exploration. But the conversation soon popped back into her mind. "Erin...what I meant was...what did I mean? Oh yea." She temporarily stilled the roaming fingers. "I don't need a lot of room. You don't have to make any big changes for me."

Erin took on a serious expression. "Sweetheart, this is a big change. A change I am ecstatic to make. This will be your house too," she assured. "You are not just going to squeeze into a corner. Equal space. Whether you fill it all up, or not."

Jamie brushed a cheek with the back of her knuckles. "You drive a hard bargain, lady. And I've got a hard head. But it's finally starting to sink in." She gave Erin a small kiss. "Let's go to bed, I'm tired."

Moving day.

Jamie's apartment had come furnished, so they didn't have to worry about hauling furniture and appliances, down six floors. Erin did, however, recruit her brother in law to help Jamie carry her exercise equipment out to the small U-Haul truck they had rented. The persistent author finally talked her partner into letting her help pack clothes, books and other unbreakable items. In just a couple of hours, the old apartment looked exactly like the day she moved in. She had no emotional attachment to the few hundred square feet of space, but she did to the most of the other occupants of the big building. She was a little hurt that nobody stopped in to goodbye. She was sure that they knew, even though she had only told Mrs. Howard the night before. But Mrs. Howard was more efficient than world wide e-mail when it came to passing the word and by now the entire building and everyone in a two mile radius should have known.

"Is that everything honey?" asked Erin, as Artemis led her back into the small room.

Jamie gave one last look around to make sure they left nothing behind. "Yeah, I guess. Let's go."

They just stepped out of the elevator, when a little brown terrier came running down the corridor. The small barking dog ran around Artemis, who just looked down at the pesky pup and yawned.

Jamie bent down and picked up the furry noisemaker. "Pepper, what are you doing out here?"

Mrs. Howard came shuffling down the hall, after her runaway dog. "Pepper, you're not supposed to run away from mommy," she scolded, taking the dog from Jamie's arms. "I'm sorry to disturb you dear."

"That's all right Mrs. Howard. I'd like you to meet my friend Erin. I'm moving into her beach house."

The gray haired woman smiled at the blonde and placed a hand on her arm. "It's so nice to meet you dear. I'm glad my favorite youngster here has someone her own age to keep her company." She turned back to Jamie. "May I ask you a favor before you leave?"

"Sure, what is it?"

"Well, I need a box of old photos taken up to my place. I was in the storage room looking for it, when Pepper snuck out on me."

"I can help with that. Do you want to go out to the truck and wait with Brad?" she asked Erin.

"No. I'll come with you, if you don't mind."

"Wonderful," said Mrs. Howard, a little to jubilantly. She scooted around and the three headed back down the hall arm in arm.

The storage room was just off the building's recreation room. Jamie had played some pretty competitive games of ping-pong in there and, surprisingly, lost several times to Mr. Davis on the old pinball machine that sat in the corner. As they neared the room, Jamie remembered last year, when it was Mrs. Medio's birthday and they had thrown her a...

"Surprise!"

The smiling faces of every occupant in the building looked back at Jamie, as she stood frozen in the doorway. The room was decorated with streamers and balloons of every color. A punch bowl filled with a red, fruity concoction sat next to a cake that proclaimed in big letters, we will miss you.

"You didn't think we were going to let you get away without a proper goodbye now did you?" asked Mr. Davis.

A grinning Erin knew just how much this meant to her reserved partner. She squeezed the arm she was holding. "I think they're waiting for you to say something," she whispered.

The tall woman stumbled over a few words in her brain, thinking of the right thing to say. She finally settled on a simple, but heartfelt, "Thank you."

Her friend's burst in to a chorus of For She's a Jolly Good Fellow, as Jamie was taken over to cut the beautiful cake.

For the next hour, one by one, they gave Jamie their personal good byes and reminisced about her time there. She introduced them all to Erin, as the friend she was moving in with, but wasn't quite sure if they really understood the exact nature of their relationship. But it didn't matter. They were her friends, she understood that now more than ever and the smile on her face told the world.

Brad sat down next to Erin with his second piece of cake. "I think your girlfriend is about to float out of here on the cloud she's walking on."

"These people mean a lot to her. They've been her family for almost two years. I know she's gonna miss them."

Jamie came to stand by her side and gave her a little hug. "I didn't mean to ignore you."

"Don't be ridiculous. This is important, to them and to you." The clinking of a fork against a glass interrupted their conversation.

"May I have everyone's attention," said Mr. Davis. "Jamie, I know we've all told you how much we are going to miss you and that's very true, but what's more important is how happy we are for you. We got you a little something to remember us by."

Jamie unfolded the colorful wrap to reveal a framed group picture of everyone in the building, taken at the previous year's Christmas party. "This is great. Thank you, all of you." A tiny tear sat in the corner of her eye and she willed it not to fall as she continued. "I may be leaving the building, but I don't want to leave your lives. I promise to come back and visit and if any of you ever need anything, please call me." She gave one last look at the faces before her. "This has been so great, but I think we need to get going."

Mrs. Howard stepped up and hugged her. "We just ask one thing of you before you go, dear."

"Anything."

"Don't forget to invite us to the wedding," said the gray haired woman with a wink.

Jamie's jaw dropped. *I guess they know.*

Jamie moved about quietly, not having said much on the ride home, three hours earlier. Erin stood in the bedroom door, just listening to her lover unpack. Everything else was already put away. The exercise equipment was in the second spare bedroom. Jamie's books and CDs had joined Erin's in the den and other small odds and ends had found a new home, inside the big house.

Jamie turned back to the box on the bed and lifted out a blue T-shirt. She looked over to the blonde. "Would you like to do the honor of putting away the last item?"

Erin smiled, stepped forward and took the shirt that was placed in her hand. Taking Jamie's hand in the other, they walked over to the dresser and Erin slipped the piece of clothing into the drawer and closed it.

Jamie wrapped her arms around the smaller woman from behind. "It's official." She kissed her temple. "I live here now."

Erin pulled one of the strong hands up to her chest, over her heart. "You've lived here for a long time."

On Friday night, Jamie and Erin took Conner and Caitlin to see a performance of *The Nutcracker*. Conner said it needed some karate, which garnered him silent chuckles from his aunts. Caitlin, on the other hand, loved it. At one point, she jumped up from her seat and started to twirl around, right there in the aisle. They smiled at the little girl's antics and Jamie once again realized just how special children were. They had a unique ability to laugh at the smallest of pleasures and act out there every thought on a whim.

After the show, they went out to eat. Two pizzas were well on their way to disappearing, when something caught Conner's attention. "Aunt Jamie, will you take me over there to play that game?" he asked, with flashing blue eyes.

Jamie still wasn't quite used to being called aunt, but it felt wonderful. "Erin, what do you think?"

"As long as it isn't one of those violent ones, sure."

Jamie felt an insistent little hand slip into hers and she was pulled away from the table.

"Are you having fun tonight sweetheart?" Erin asked the little girl, slurping up the last of her soda.

"Yes. I like the dancing."

Erin smiled and ruffled her soft curls. "You did huh? Would you like to know how to dance like that?"

She nodded. "It would be fun. Can I stay at your house tonight?" Caitlin asked out of the blue.

Erin had had a plan of action for some nighttime activities with her dark haired lover, but they could be postponed. She knew Jamie needed the time with the kids more. "Why don't you ask Aunt Jamie when she gets back." She listened to her partner and her nephew playing the video game and she couldn't decide which one was having more fun. But out of everyone, she knew she was having the most fun, on the family outing. She had never been able to go anywhere alone with her niece and nephew, since losing her sight. With Bridgett along, it was still nice, but with Jamie it had a whole new meaning. In a strange way, Jamie had given her a new kind of independence. She was also getting practice at being a sightless parent. Being a parent at all, was scary, but that added problem made it terrifying. But she wouldn't let that stop her. There were times, lately, when she ached to hold a child of her own. No, there was only one thing that would keep her from being a parent.

"I don't know about you guys, but I'm ready to go," said Jamie, as she returned.

Beside her, Conner was still sporting a big smile at his triumph. "You should have seen it, Aunt Erin. I beat her big time," he boasted.

"Good for you honey. Before we go, I think Caitlin has a question."

"Aunt Jamie, can I stay at your house, all night?"

"Me to! I didn't get to stay last time," said the excited little boy.

Jamie was taken by surprise, mostly at the fact that she was being asked directly. She looked down at the two expectant faces. "Well..." She hesitated, then looked over to Erin and caught the half smile and barely noticeable nod. "Sure. As a matter of fact," she said, helping Caitlin on with her jacket. "I think there are some marshmallows just begging to be toasted."

That got her a rousing cheer from the children and a brilliant smile from the woman she loved.

The fire spit and crackled as Jamie threw a small pinecone into the flames. By her side, Conner sat patiently with stick and marshmallow in hand. Jamie was designated official toaster for the two other women in the room, as they waited on the big couch for their gooey treats.

Two little feet, barely reaching the end of the seat, kicked back and forth and twinkling green eyes watched the dancing flames. "I told Santa I wanted a bouncy horse for Christmas," she said, in response to the question her aunt had asked.

"A bouncy horse huh? Well, maybe someday soon Aunt Jamie will take you see her real horse," said Erin.

She didn't hear the response from Jamie that she expected. Instead she heard Conner's complaint.

"Aunt Jamie, you dropped the marshmallow in the fire."

"What?" Jamie broke from her distracting thoughts. "Oh, I'm sorry. But no problem, there's plenty more."

After two, white, sticky treats each, small yawns signaled the onset of slumber. The children were tucked into the big bed and kissed good night. Erin and Jamie returned to sit by the fire, now cuddled in each other's arms. Erin kicked off her shoes and pulled her legs under her.

"Jamie?"

"Yeah."

"Twice tonight, you deferred to me when the kids asked you for something, why?"

"Well, you know more about children than I do, I just thought..."

"I'm no expert," chuckled Erin. "No parent is. You just have to think about what is best. And I want you to feel okay with making decisions for them."

Jamie smiled. "They're really great kids, aren't they?"

"Absolutely."

They were both silent for several more minutes.

"Erin, I've been thinking..."

"Yes."

"Well...if you would want...I mean...I think I'd like to be...a parent...if you would want me to share that with you...someday I mean."

Erin wanted to run outside and shout it to the world, she wanted to go to the doctor and make it happen right now, even if it was midnight. She was totally ecstatic to hear those words from her partner. "Sweetheart, you are the only one I would ever want to be the other parent to my child. And you will be a wonderful one. Thank you." She squeezed Jamie, pouring all her excitement and love into the gesture. "Maybe this time next year, we could start making plans to have a baby?"

Jamie genuinely smiled at that idea. "Yeah that sounds good."

The fire was just dying down and they both thought about heading off to bed. But another thought came to Erin. "Jamie, what distracted you earlier?"

"What do you mean?"

"When Caitlin was talking about what she wanted for Christmas and you dropped the marshmallow into the fire."

Jamie remembered. "Oh. I was just about her age when I discovered my love for horses," she said with fondness. "In fact, I asked Santa for a horse to, for many Christmas's. Only I wanted a real one."

"But you never got one," said Erin. The body beside her sighed.

"No. But I think I did get every toy horse ever made," she said with a chuckle. "Then I would make a wish every Christmas night that I would wake up the next day and it would be real. I kinda wish I still had them. It would have been nice to show...our child something from my childhood. I took them with me when I moved in with the Matthews, but when things went bad and I ran away...Oh well. That's all in the past. Let's go to bed."

Erin followed the tall woman up the stairs, an idea germinating in her intriguing little mind.

Jamie fought the Saturday morning traffic, as the three other people in the car laughed and discussed holiday's past. Brad Nelson had picked up his children for a day of shopping and soon she and her passengers would be doing the same. She pulled into a parking spot in the underground garage and there she parted ways with Erin, sending her off in the good hands of her sister and mother. Jamie had several things in mind that she wanted to get her love for Christmas. The first of which sent her into a very high-class jewelry store.

Several hours later, Erin, Bridgett and Danielle walked out of an FAO Swartz with four bags between them. They now were carrying a total of nine bags and they had already made one trip back to the car to deposit others. A melody of holiday carols serenaded them, as they made their way to the food court, where they were meeting Jamie for lunch.

Bridgett spotted the tall, dark haired woman sitting on a bench, near a huge potted tree. She was intently studying something in her hand. The red head immediately knew it was a present for

Erin and she wanted to see it, but Jamie saw them coming first and shoved it into her jacket pocket.

"Well ladies," said Jamie, as she pulled the zipper on the pocket closed. "Is there any merchandise left in the entire mall?"

Erin placed a small kiss on Jamie's cheek. "Wait until you see the car, sweetheart."

Jamie scowled. "I can just imagine. So which one of you is going to ride on top of the car on the way home?"

The trio laughed at her joke, at least Bridgett hoped it was a joke. "I wasn't kidding earlier when I said we should have rented another U-Haul for the day," she said as she led them over to an empty table.

Jamie tried to relieve her partner of her packages, but her hands were playfully slapped away. "Oh no, I don't trust you."

Jamie's mock pout brought more laughter from the others.

Bridgett's curiosity kicked into high gear, dying to know what was in the dark haired woman's pocket. "So Jamie, you didn't find anything to buy today?"

"What makes you say that?"

"Well unless you've been to the car to, I don't see any sacks in your hand."

Jamie flashed the woman an enigmatic smile. "Oh, I got everything I came for. What's that old saying, good things come in small packages."

"I resemble that remark," laughed Erin. "So what did you tell Brad to get you?" she asked her sister.

Danielle listened as her two daughters shot loving barbs back and forth and she watched Jamie, as she watched her youngest with the unmistakable look of complete love. This holiday was going to be perfect, except for one small detail. Her high spirits were deflated slightly when she thought of her husband. After everything he'd done to their daughter and his almost constant disappearance the past months, she realized that she still loved him. And she prayed that he would come to his senses and try to make amends to them all.

Jamie played chauffeur and dropped Danielle at her estate in Brentwood and Bridgett at her home several miles away. She refrained from making any comments about the car being lighter on the drive back to the beach house (from packages, not people). When they did arrive home, Erin whisked her bags off to the bedroom and tucked them away in the closet.

It was almost time for Jamie to go and be a paid chauffeur. She stood in front of the full-length mirror, buttoning up her black vest. "I'm really sorry, I have to work tonight babe," she said, straightening her tie. "The client was very insistent that I be the driver and Mr. Owens is insistent on pleasing the customer."

Erin rose from her seat on the bed and moved to stand before the well-dressed woman. "That's okay." She smiled, knowing an important secret. "You obviously made a very strong impression on someone." She reached up and kissed Jamie thoroughly. "You can have a lot more of that later."

Jamie got to the company and received her instructions for the evening. The client gave an address, but no name. She found that rather strange, but thought maybe it was part of a surprise for someone. She liked seeing the looks on people's faces when she drove up in the luxury vehicle, unexpectedly.

She recognized the building as she pulled up to the curb and parked. It was the same place she had met with producer Joseph Hudson, several months back. She hurried up to the front door and went to the security desk.

"I'm from Touch of Class limousine service and I'm supposed to pick up a client here," she explained to the gentleman seated there.

"Yes. You are to go down the hall here to room 17. They're waiting for you."

He must be in on the surprise, she thought, because his directions were cryptic. But she did as instructed and knocked on the door.

"Come in," said the whispered voice.

She walked in to find a cloaked figure, standing by the window, facing away from her. She could tell from the physical build that it was a woman. "I'm from Touch of Class. I'm supposed to meet a client here."

The figure turned slowly, building the mystery. The dark hood was, just as slowly, pulled back to reveal a smiling face.

Jamie's eyes popped. "Erin! What are you doing here? What is this?"

Erin stepped forward, guided by the stunned voice. "Well sweetheart, I hired a limo and my favorite driver for the entire night. Surprise."

"You are a nut," said Jamie, as she pulled her into a hug. "A wonderful, beautiful, nut. By the way, I should tell you that this cloak is turning me on...big time."

"I kind of hoped it would. But you are going to have to restrain yourself... for a little while anyway. We have reservations for six, then tickets for the theatre."

"That's sounds wonderful, but I'm going to feel kind of strange in this uniform."

Erin smiled and walked over to the side of the room. "I can take care of that. I brought you a shirt to change into. One with very special memories I might add."

The silk, copper shirt she was handed did indeed stir some memorable thoughts of a beautiful summer night of love.

"And to go with it," Erin handed Jamie a big, brightly colored box. "...an early Christmas present."

Jamie ripped off the paper, not so much with anticipation, but with a need to get the evening started. The lid dropped to the floor and she pulled back the tissue paper to reveal a black, leather coat. "It's beautiful sweetheart." She easily slipped her arms into the dressy jacket. "And it's a perfect fit."

Erin moved close and checked it out for herself. "Of course it is," she bragged. "I know everything about this body."

"Thank you," whispered Jamie, just before their lips met.

The dark haired woman escorted her beautiful, cloaked date out the front door, winking at the security guard as they went by. They ate at one of the best restaurants in the area, during which Jamie couldn't take her eyes off the vision sitting across from her. She flashed back to a time, many months ago, when she was feeling very sorry for herself having to dine alone. Another moment, from around that time came to her and she smiled. *I guess I chose wisely.*

After the play, Jamie drove them to a secluded spot, she knew. She shut off the engine and went around to the passenger side. She opened the door and grabbed Erin's hand. "Come on."

"Where are we going?" She heard another door open.

"Right back here," Jamie said. Once they settled into the plush seats, she reached into the ice bucket that she had prepared back at the restaurant. The cork popped out under her thumbs and flew into the front seat. "Remind me to find that later," she laughed. They toasted their love and drank down the bubbly. But their thirst for one another soon became too strong to deny any longer.

Jamie's lips crushed against Erin's, as she fumbled with the crystal glasses, which tumbled to the carpeted floor. The author, straddled Jamie's lap, wrangled the chauffeur out of her new, leather jacket and tossed it over her shoulder. She voraciously attacked the dark haired woman's neck, sure to leave behind evidence. Jamie's moans echoed throughout the small space, as kisses followed the divesting of clothes. But Jamie had other ideas. She managed to reverse their positions and pin Erin against the soft cushion. She slid to her knees, in front of the panting woman and pulled Erin's dark covering over her head, cloaking her passionate activities in mystery. Erin felt every glorious movement, breath and heart beat, straight to her soul as the

minutes passed on. Hands snaked out from beneath the black material and reached up to caress firm mounds. The December chill meant nothing to them as muscle met flesh and muffled moans greeted covered ears. The blonde fairly howled to the moon, shining down on them from the window above, as she was sent over the edge.

Seconds later, Jamie tossed off the heavy cloak. "Whew... that was hot."

"You're telling me," panted Erin, through a big smile.

Those smiling lips were soon covered and did nothing to cool either of them down. Not that they wanted to cool off any time soon. Nor did they, for at least another hour.

Chapter 22

Christmas Eve at Bridgett's was a fun and emotional affair. After dinner, the family gathered around the large, decorated evergreen in the family room. Conner and Caitlin were designated elves and helped their mother pass out the presents. Of course they loved their toys from Aunt Erin and Aunt Jamie and said so, with big hugs and kisses.

Erin had realized that her lover was just a big kid, as they shopped for the playthings, together. Erin had to put a limit on the number of presents they bought for the kids. Jamie was absolutely going crazy with generosity and Erin had feared just what was awaiting her on Christmas morning. The dark haired woman had thoroughly tested every toy and game, for safety she claimed. But Erin listened as the evaluations were made with the unmistakable sound of laughter and fun.

Danielle received a grandmother's ring from Bridgett, with stones of emerald and diamond. From her other daughters, she got a beautiful watch pendant with the inscription, "For our wonderful mother. Love Erin and Jamie."

The partners bought Bridgett a Hummel figurine of two children playing dress up, to add to her prized collection and Brad got a new, state of the art, deep sea fishing pole and made him promise them a fish dinner, if he ever learned to use it.

Erin's mother got her the most beautiful, Irish hand woven sweater and matching tam. Danielle had chosen one with shimmering threads of light green, that reminded her of her daughter's beautiful eyes, but she didn't mention that particular reason. And for her newest daughter, she got two very rare books and a set of bookends made from real cowboy spurs, at Erin's suggestion.

Bridgett preceded her present to her sister with a short explanation. "Erin, Brad and I wanted to get you some thing unique, something you couldn't buy in any store. I racked my brain for weeks and finally came up with this." She continued explaining as Erin opened the box. "I was at your place one day and found this big, beautiful conch shell, down on the beach. I had read somewhere about an artist who carves pictures into the shell. So I found one and had him carve out a scene from your first movie. Notice I say first, because I know you will write many more."

She took Erin's fingers and described the scene. "This is Simeron. I used tall, dark and mysterious over there as a model."

"And just how did you do that?" asked the tall one.

"I snuck a picture of you, that's how," she said, with an appropriately smug smile.

Jamie gave her a mock glare that caused the red head to laugh.

"Anyway, I am very proud of you sis. Merry Christmas." The sisters hugged.

"Thank you Brig. This so great and I love it more than anything else you could have gotten me."

Jamie was the recipient of a full set of kick boxing lessons and a year's membership to Antonio's Paradise, one of the best health clubs in the state. Brad got the brilliant idea for the gift, on the day he had helped Jamie move. She had mentioned, in passing, her interest in the sport and wanting to try an indoor climbing wall.

Erin drifted off into a blissful daydream, picturing her partner's buff body after a few weeks of lessons.

"Snap out of it Sis," said Bridgett with a clicking of fingers. "Do I want to know what was so interesting?" she whispered, curiously.

Erin blushed. "That would be a no."

After all the gifts were opened, the children sat on the floor, playing with their new toys and the adults studied their presents in depth. Danielle watched as her ring flashed with the reflection of the tree lights. Jamie and Erin were snuggled, appropriately enough on the love seat, whispering in each other's ears and smiling wickedly.

Once Brad was able to pull himself away from practice fishing in the corner, he set about, cleaning up the room of the paper explosion that had taken place, while the rest of the family sipped their eggnog and chatted. Several minutes later, the doorbell rang. Bridgett returned to the family with a very puzzled expression.

"What is it, honey?" asked her husband, upon seeing the big box she was dragging behind her.

"A messenger delivered this with special instructions." She left the box near the tree and went to her sister's side, handing her an envelope. "Erin, you're supposed to read this first, before we open the box, which is for the entire family."

Everyone was curious at the unusual request and Jamie, was of course, cautious. The blonde took out the several page letter and unfolded it. Her fingers skimmed over the first few sentences and her breath hitched.

Jamie leaned toward her. "What does it say honey?"

Erin sighed. "It's from Daddy," she explained with a small smile, signifying that it was good news.

Danielle closed her eyes and said a thank you. "Can we hear it sweetheart? Or is it too personal?"

She nodded and began with emotion. "My dearest daughter, Erin. It's taken this stubborn old man too many months to come to his senses, what little I have left at that. There are no words to apologize for the things I said and the things I did, on that horrible day. I am sorry, but I certainly don't expect forgiveness. My parent's view of my child's absolute perfection was shattered that day, as it should have been. I have always placed unreasonable expectations on both of my daughter's, but never took the time to really see who and what you were...and are. That is the great shame of my life.

I will be totally honest with you and say that I still don't quite approve of your lifestyle, but I know you don't need my approval...just my acceptance. And I am...trying. I'm sorry. I also want to apologize to the rest of family for my behavior and hope we can, one day, move past all this and once again become a whole family. I miss my grandchildren very much. Tell them grandpa loves them and can't wait to see them, if their parents approve.

I also need to send an apology to your friend Jamie. You all owe her a thank you for this flame of hope." Erin stopped and reached out for her lover. "She must love all of you, very much, because I received a letter from her just before Thanksgiving, asking me to be with my family. Sadly I was still acting stupid and didn't respond. She also gave me quite a kick in the conscience, a few days later when she showed up at my office in Denver."

Jamie looked over to Bridgett and Danielle. The tears that fell from their eyes couldn't hide the looks of pride, thanks and love. She quickly looked back to her lover, who continued.

"The vile things that came out of my mouth, that day, make me sick to think about and striking you.... that alone signified my failure as a parent. My embarrassment at my ignorance and belligerent behavior is keeping me from making this plea in person. I am too ashamed to face all of you. I only hope, that feeling will fade in time and you will, one day, accept my presence. For now, know that I love you Erin, very much. Please accept these presents and enjoy them. I took careful consideration with each and every one. My love to you all. Merry Christmas, Dad."

Inside the box, were special toys for the children; a train set for Conner and a dollhouse for Caitlin. Danielle cried again when she opened her blue velvet box. Nestled in the soft material was a bead necklace of pale green and lavender jade. She recognized it as similar to a piece she had seen when she and Tim were on their honeymoon in the Orient. He told her he couldn't afford to buy it at the time, but promised her that one-day it would hang around her neck. It was the sentiment of that special trip together that brought the tears and more importantly, the fact that he had remembered. And speaking of honeymoons, Bridgett and Brad got tickets for a second honeymoon in the Bahamas with reservations at the Atlantis Paradise Island resort.

Erin was given another envelope with yet another letter that read, I'm afraid to say that I know nothing about your friend Jamie, but I only hope that she will enjoy this along with you. I have a feeling, whatever makes you happy, makes her happy. I do love you and I am glad you are content. He went on to explain the other contents of the envelope.

"What did you get Erin?" asked Bridgett.

"An all expense paid trip to Ireland, for two, including passage on Dad's new executive jet."

Jamie heard the gasps as she took in her partner's happy smile.

"Well, Daddy must love you best," Bridgett, lovingly teased. "We have to fly commercial...first class, but commercial."

Everyone enjoyed her joke and the festive and happy celebration continued on into the night.

Erin was quiet on the long drive home. Jamie reached for the knob and turned down the festive carols playing on the radio. "How do you feel about this new development with your father?"

Erin leaned her tired head, back against the seat and sighed. "I'm glad that he's taken the first step, especially for the rest of the family. I think they're happy about it. And it felt good to know that he does love me."

"But you still can't forgive him."

Erin hesitated. "I think I can, very soon. But things will never be the same. You heard what he said; he still can't totally accept us. And until he learns that you are the person I love and the person I am going to spend the rest of my life with, he will never really truly be my family. I'm not mad at him, just disappointed." Erin needed a physical connection and laid her hand on Jamie's knee. "Why didn't you tell me you contacted him?"

"I would have...if it had done any good. When he didn't respond to my letter, I knew it would only upset you more if you found out. And then when I saw him in Denver... and that whole situation with Tyler made me forget. I'm sorry."

"Don't be sorry. I love you for wanting everything in my life to be perfect."

Jamie stood by the big glass doors, watching the ocean roll in and deposit her secret treasures in the sand. It was still dark out, but the moon had long passed over and left the beach with an eerie pre-dawn glow. Jamie thought about how much her life had changed in the last six months. She now had someone that she loved more than life itself. She lived in a nice, big house with an incredible view. Her dream was well on its way to coming true. The ranch would be hers in just a few short months. She sighed realizing that that also presented whole new set of problems. She couldn't make the two-hour drive everyday from the beach to the mountains. A rancher had to live on their property. Would Erin be willing to give up her house and move there with her. Would she have to return to the beach on the weekends and just visit her lover? Jamie reached

into the pocket of her bathrobe and rubbed her thumb over the package hiding there, debating its purchase. She closed her eyes and rested her head against the doorframe. *I can't let my dream totally disrupt Erin's life. She loves it here and she has this house memorized. It would probably be very hard for her to adjust to living somewhere else.* The dark head shook, firmly. *I can't do that to her. Her life is difficult enough.*

Jamie moved away from the window, stepped into the kitchen and poured herself another cup of coffee. It was only 7:15 and she wanted to let Erin sleep until eight. She walked up the carpeted steps and down the hall. She peeked in and watched her partner sleeping peacefully, curled around her pillow. Jamie wrapped both hands around the warm cup and took a healthy sip as she walked on down the hall and into the den; their personal Christmas wonderland. The lights on the tree sprang to life with a simple movement, as did the radio. Her attention was once again drawn to the big present in the corner. It was oddly shaped, enough so that it couldn't even be wrapped. A huge box, with one end cut open, was placed down over, whatever it was, and a bright red bow was tied around it with a big tag stating her name and the phrase, **Do Not Open Until Christmas**. It seemed that Erin went for big when it came to presents, as two more large boxes sat near the base of the tree. Her eyes drifted over to the pile of presents she had purchased and she smiled. While most of them were relatively small, in size not necessarily price, she believed she did all right choosing her gifts for Erin. And she had never had so much fun shopping in her life.

Jamie curled up in the corner of the soft couch and listened to the carols soothing melody and watched the twinkling, colorful lights. *I haven't been up this early on Christmas morning since I was nine. And this time last year... I woke up alone, ate my simple bowl of cereal, alone and spent the day surfing the cable channels...alone.* Jamie laid her head back against the couch, closed her eyes and smiled. *But I'm not alone anymore. And I never will be again. Even if that means changing my plans a little. I can own the ranch, but hire someone else to run it. I can still go up there on weekends. That will be fine. Erin is my home now and I'll do whatever it takes to make her comfortable and happy.*

Erin's dream faded and her smile widened. She reached over and felt the cold side of the bed, signifying that her lover had been up for quite sometime. A quick check of the clock told her it was 8:05. Artemis jumped up and gave her human her good mornings. After a few good rubs and some praising words, she let the dog outside, shivering against the slight chill of the early morning air. After ten minutes in the bathroom, she went in search of her missing partner. Erin followed the sounds of music to the den.

"Jamie," she called out, but no answer. "Jamie, are you in here?" she asked louder.

The figure on the sofa stirred. "Yeah, I'm on the couch. I must have fallen back to sleep." She yawned as the happy blonde joined her.

"Merry Christmas." Erin leaned in and placed a long deep kiss on Jamie's soft lips.

Jamie sucked in a deep breath. "Yeah, Merry Christmas to me. That's the only present I need."

"Well you can have those presents all year long, but today you are getting those," she said, pointing to the tree. "And one or two other surprises."

Jamie gave her another quick kiss. "I'll go get us some breakfast. We'll eat in here and then start opening that large pile of presents."

Artemis sat in the corner with her new collar around her neck, gnawing at her new chew toy. Jamie handed Erin her first gift, then her second and a third. When it was over, she had a designer gown, which Jamie said was to wear to the opening of Noah Factor, a very skimpy, aqua blue nightie and robe set, which Jamie said, was **not** to wear to the opening of Noah Factor. A pair of pearl earrings, in a velvet box, also surprised her. Jamie said they were to commemorate the month in which they met. She mildly chided her partner for spending too much money, but Jamie assured her it was covered by a surprising Christmas bonus from her boss at the limo company and her last trip for the courier service.

Erin had numbered some of Jamie's presents, wanting them to be opened in sequence. Jamie reached for package number one. Once unwrapped, she discovered that the box was taped shut and with a small grunt she forced it open. She looked inside.

Erin heard the rustling of tissue paper. "I don't remember you ever mentioning you had one."

"No, I don't." Jamie pulled the beautiful headwear out of the box and tried it on for size. "It fits perfectly. Thank you."

Erin smiled. "Well, every rancher has to have a good cowboy hat. Now open box number two." Erin bounced in her seat; almost more excited than Jamie.

Seeing the contents of this box, Jamie was now onto the numbering idea. A shiny, new pair of brown, leather cowboy boots, size nine.

"It's okay if you want to go out and scuff them up a little first," said Erin. "I wouldn't want the horses snickering or calling you a dandy."

Jamie threw aside the footwear and tackled the little blonde against the couch. A small tickle fest ensued. "I'll give you a dandy." Erin, breathlessly, begged her to stop and she exchanged the tickles for small tickling kisses. "Thank you, they're beautiful too," Jamie said, finally.

"Next! Go get number three," ordered the author.

"Okay, but then you open some more."

Erin nodded happily. Then gave a small, devious little laugh.

Jamie let it pass without comment as she ripped off the purple and silver paper. More rustling of tissue paper and she lifted the contents up and looked at a grinning Erin between the leather

pieces. "Honey, I'm going to be riding horses, not busting broncos," she said of the brown leather chaps in her hands.

Erin slid off the couch onto her knees in front of the puzzled woman. "I know, but I just got this vision a while back and I needed to feel you in leather," she purred. "You don't have to wear them to work in, if you don't want to." She took the garment from Jamie, brought it to her face and inhaled. "In fact my vision involved you walking into our bedroom wearing these... and nothing else."

A sweat broke out on Jamie's forehead and she was rendered mute at the erotic implications. After several seconds, she cleared her throat. "Well...a...maybe I'll give you a preview later tonight."

Erin just sat there grinning, wiggling her brows, teasing the dark haired woman.

Jamie grabbed another present from under the tree and handed it to Erin. "Why don't you open that one, while I go visit the freezer."

Erin laughed and grabbed the sleeve of Jamie's robe. "I'm sorry. I'll be good. Now come on back here." She ripped open the angel motif paper and ran her hands over the intricately carved wooden box. She felt their initials enclosed inside a heart.

"I had this custom made," explained Jamie.

Erin lifted the lid and a smile crossed her lips, as their song started to play. She let it go on for several rounds, remembering their first meeting and their first night of love. "It's beautiful, thank you," she said to the woman, sitting next to her. "You are such a romantic."

"Only for you, sweetheart, only for you." Jamie picked up the small box, wrapped in red and placed it in delicate hands. "Here, this my favorite."

Once it was opened, Erin picked up the contents by the delicate, but strong chain and continued to feel out its construction. A smile slowly spread over her face, as Jamie explained its true meaning.

"I guess you know that it's a locket. It's gold and is covered in a Celtic design. It a...has three parts." She unfolded the interlocking pieces. "A place for your picture and one for mine, even though you know how much I hate having my picture taken."

The blonde nodded. "I know. I don't understand it, because you're beautiful, but I know."

"The a... third one is for... our baby. I wanted you to know that I was serious about us having a child." She looked up to see tears sliding down the gorgeous face.

"I love you Jamie. And I can't wait for the day when I can put a tiny picture in here." She reached over and kissed the mother of her future child.

"It's expandable," whispered Jamie, as she dried the tears of joy. "Just in case... you know."

The next few minutes were spent recovering from the intense emotion. More coffee was consumed and another joke was made about the fringed leather garment now resting across the back of the couch.

Erin walked over to the mysterious present in the corner. "You can open this one now," she said, fingering the satiny bow. "Actually this is number four."

Jamie pulled off the bow. "I can't possibly imagine what this..." The words stuck in her throat as the box was pulled off to reveal the present. "I...Erin this is...incredible." Before her was the most beautiful saddle she had ever seen. The hand-tooled design, swirled to form an amazing pattern along each side and on the left, right in the middle of it all, was her name stamped deeply into the golden, brown leather. "This is beautiful."

Erin traced the carved letters of her favorite name, as she had done a dozen times since it arrived. "The salesman said this was the softest saddle blanket that's made anywhere. It's really comfortable for the horse."

"I'm sure Teegan will enjoy it, even if it's just on weekends." The last part was almost whispered.

Erin looked puzzled. "Well for right now, but I'm sure you'll be out there every day, once you own it. You did say you were very close right?"

"Yeah...yeah, I've almost got all the money for the down payment. But I've been thinking..." She moved back to the couch.

Erin didn't like the hesitation in her voice. "About?"

Jamie picked up a piece of discarded ribbon and began shredding it. "I think I'll hire someone to actually handle the day to day operations and I'll go out on weekends."

"That's ridiculous, Jamie!" Erin moved to her side with exasperation. "You have to be there all the time. That's your dream, running a horse ranch, not just in name only. What brought this on?"

More paper fell victim to Jamie's frustrated fingers. But she said nothing. A hand grabbed hers.

"Jamie, talk to me. This isn't like you."

She shrugged. "I just think it's best."

"What kind of answer is that? Best for who?"

"Me."

"Jamie, don't lie to me. Maybe I'm being a little self centered, but this is because of me right?"

"No. But I can't commute four hours a day, that's just too much."

Erin shook her head, more confused than ever. "Why would you need to commute? Surely the house comes with the rest of the property."

"Yes, but...you like it here, at the beach."

Erin shook her head, now understanding. She moved to sit across Jamie's lap. "I do like it here," she said, then wrapped the long arms around her. "But I love it here." A lengthy kiss followed. "Jamie, I don't think you realize how much I want this for you." She tried to find the words to explain. "I am absolutely happy at what I do, writing. And I can do that anywhere, as long as I have my computer. My dream is happening every day of my life. And my life is complete with you. I think I fulfill the same in your life."

"You do," came the whispered reply.

"Then owning this ranch, running this ranch and making it a success will make your dream come true and make you happy. That's what I want. I thought all my presents would have made that clear. This is my dream now and the only thing that could keep me from being by your side to live it out...is your not wanting me there."

All of Jamie's earlier fears were swept away by the honey voice and the sweet, heartfelt words. Her heart fairly burst with love for the blonde haired woman and her decision was made. She reached for the pocket of her robe.

The phone rang. A smile of anticipation flashed across Erin's face. "I'll get it! Don't move." The jubilant expression never left her through the short conversation.

Jamie was kind of happy for the interruption and quickly came up with a new plan of action.

"Okay," said Erin, hanging up the phone. "Grab present number five and come with me."

Jamie did as she was told and followed her partner down the stairs to the front door.

"I'm not quite sure what's going on Erin, but can I open this now?"

"Absolutely."

The contents inside brought a smile to her, because she understood the reason it was given. The replica of the white Arabian mare looked back at her with shiny black eyes. The toy horse came complete with removable saddle and brushable mane and tail. "Just like my childhood Christmas"

Erin reached up, kissed her cheek and whispered, "But I'm going to make that old wish come true." She opened the door.

Jamie glanced outside and did a huge double take. There in the driveway, stood a living breathing, whinnying horse.

"Merry Christmas, baby," said Erin as they walked down the stairs toward the beautiful animal. She understood the emotion that was keeping Jamie silent.

The horse was an exact double for the toy horse she held in her hand; a white Arabian with a dark mane and tail. Jamie rubbed the animal's nose, feeling the warm breath on her face, certifying that it wasn't an illusion.

"I know Teegan will always be your favorite," explained Erin. "But you're gonna need more than just her to start with and like I said I wanted to make that particular dream, come true."

Jamie hugged the woman fiercely. "You make all my dreams come true."

They spent the next several minutes looking over the fine animal. If Jamie hadn't been in her pajamas and robe she said she would have taken off, bareback, down the beach. The thought crossed her mind to run in and change, but Erin explained that the driver still had to take the horse up to the ranch. She had already made plans for Mr. Phillips to keep her there. Jamie bid the horse goodbye and loaded her into the trailer. She gave the driver a hundred dollar tip for taking his holiday time to take care of her special present.

The rest of Christmas day was spent with a long walk on the beach, a turkey dinner, mutually prepared and a soothing soak in the hot tub. During their walk, Erin had suggested that they keep the beach house for use on the weekends, to which Jamie wholeheartedly agreed. While enjoying their soak, Jamie had a suggestion of her own; a new hot tub, for the ranch, was to be the first on their list of purchases. Erin's response was just as expected.

They made love by the fire, as the evening came to a close. Of course that was after Jamie modeled her new leather accessory and Erin showed her how the west was really won. They both considered it a perfect Christmas, each receiving everything their hearts desired.

It was ten minutes till midnight and Jamie popped open the bottle of champagne. She looked over to where Erin was curled up on the couch and smiled, never more sure of anything in her entire life. They had gone out to dinner and then dancing with Bridgett and Brad, but Jamie wanted them to be at home, alone when the new year arrived. She poured two tall glasses of the golden, sparkling liquid and walked over to join her love.

She handed one to Erin. "Here you go sweetheart."

Erin took a small sip. "Mmmm, that's good. Thank you." She was surprised when she felt Jamie take the glass from her and set it aside.

Jamie took both hands in hers and cleared her throat. "Erin, you have made these past six months absolutely wonderful for me. You brought me back to life, by loving me and letting me know

how incredible it feels to love you. We're about to start a new year and I want this to be the first of at least fifty or sixty more."

Erin smiled and caressed Jamie's face. But she remained quiet, feeling that she had more to say.

"This is going to be the first full year of the rest of our lives together and I think it should begin with a promise." She cleared her throat again. "Will you allow me to commit myself to being by your side and loving you forever?" The announcer on the TV started counting down, 10, 9, 8. Jamie opened the blue velvet box and brought Erin's fingertips to feel the diamond ring. "Will you marry me Erin Casey?"

"5, 4, 3, 2."

"Yes! Yes, I will marry you!"

Jamie slipped the ring onto its permanent home and Erin threw her arms around Jamie's neck, as the crowds of people on the screen began singing and celebrating.

But in a house on a California beach, with the moonlight streaming through the window, the happy couple now consumed in a kiss, knew that this acquaintance would never be forgotten and would always be on their minds, as they made a long, happy life together.

The End (maybe, maybe not)

Continued in Part 2.