

~ Seeing You, Again For the First Time ~

by Colleen

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Love/Sex Disclaimer: This story depicts a loving relationship between two consenting, adult women and contains scenes of intimacy, but nothing explicit. If you are under 18 years of age or if this type of story is illegal in the state or country in which you live, please do not read it. If depictions of this nature disturb you, you may wish to read something other than this story.

Hurt/Comfort Disclaimer: Major angst ahead. But have faith and remember, I love a happy ending!

Thanks so much to my beta reader Barb.

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Part 1

Silvery moonlight peaks between slowly passing clouds, casting the palest of shadows across the gritty surface below. The bluish, lunar sphere pulls the foamy Pacific waves in to meet the sandy shore as it has a million times...and more. Tide is eternal. As are the questions, what is fate? What is destiny? Do we make our own when life is at it's worst or are we gently guided down a path that best suits our soul?

* * * * *

Chapter 1

A chilly winter wind swept over the ocean waters and up the beach to fall against the large, white structure. Inside the beach side home, the two occupants praised the seasonal temperatures. Though not cold by any means, it still allowed them to enjoy the romanticism of a warm, sparkling fire. They cuddle closely on the soft, comfortable sofa and make plans for their future.

"How about April 11th?" asked Erin, as she climbed onto her lover's lap and began absently playing with the long tresses adorning her lover's head.

It was three days into the wonderful New Year, the first year of a new millennium. Erin Casey and Jamie Sheridan had hardly gotten out of bed since the author had accepted Jamie's marriage proposal. The tall, dark haired woman had been so romantic, asking just at the stroke of midnight on New Year's Eve. Erin had, of course and quite enthusiastically, said yes, hence the reason for the three-day celebration. But now the task of choosing a wedding date was upon them.

"That way you'll never forget," teased the blonde.

"You think I'm going to forget something this important?" Jamie asked with a hurtful tone.

Erin brought a hand to her love's face and stroked the soft skin. "Sweetheart, I was kidding," she said gently. After all the progress Jamie had made in the previous six months, there were still times when her insecurities reared up and kicked her in the butt.

When Erin and Jamie had met in June of the previous year, the dark haired chauffer had been living in a lonely world of guilt for past mistakes. Erin Casey was a famous author who was also lonely. They had met at a party and a strong friendship was born. Only after many struggles and much determination on Erin's part, did Jamie finally accept the love that had blossomed between them from the very beginning.

Jamie pulled the angelic face in for a soft kiss. "I'm still doing it aren't I?"

"That's okay honey, I understand. So how about it?"

Jamie chuckled. "The 11th? I don't think so, not on my birthday. Besides that's in the middle of the week."

Erin carefully stood from her place on Jamie's lap. "You're right," she said as she went into the kitchen for more coffee. "I guess it does need to be on a Saturday. But I don't want to wait too long. If we're going to have it outside, I don't want everybody to be hot and uncomfortable."

Jamie walked in behind the smaller woman and grabbed an apple from the bowl on the counter. "Just how many everybodys are we talking about?" she asked before she crunched into the red fruit. "I thought we wanted to keep this small."

Erin let her nose guide her to the sweet aroma and snatched a juicy bite for herself. "Darling, small is a relative term. To you, small would be you, me and the preacher."

Jamie snorted. "Not quite. I know your family has to be there. So that's five, but who else is there?"

Erin grabbed the tall woman by the hand and led her back into the living room, shaking her head as they went. "First of all, half of my family will be in the ceremony. I want Bridgett to stand up for me. Caitlin can be the flower girl and Conner can be the ring barer. Unless you have a problem with that?"

"No, of course not," said Jamie, as they returned to their favorite spot in the corner of the couch. "I'm just not up on wedding procedures. But you're right, I do want your..." She heard the clearing of a throat. "...our family involved."

Erin kissed the hand she still had hold of. "Thank you."

There was a comfortable pause in their conversation as they just enjoyed the warmth of each other's touch. The fire in front of them crackled and shimmered as Jamie mulled over another thought. "I don't suppose you are going to ask your father?"

Erin huffed. "I don't think so."

Timothy Casey had had a very adverse reaction to the news of his daughter's gay lifestyle. His vile words stabbed at her heart and his violence was nearly unforgivable. But after several months of estrangement from his entire family, he had a change of heart. On Christmas Eve he had sent presents and a touching letter of apology. The tears of forgiveness washed away most of the pain that the entire family had endured. But his words were not quite enough to reunite father and daughter. Until he completely accepted her love for Jamie, Erin would never again be close to her father.

Jamie rubbed her partner's back. "Maybe you should at least ask. He might surprise you."

Erin nodded. "Maybe." The tempting apple was placed in front of her mouth and she took another healthy bite. "Do you think we could use the tickets he gave us for Christmas... for our honeymoon?"

Jamie smiled and squeezed Erin's shoulder. "I think that's a great idea, sweetheart. A honeymoon in Ireland sounds wonderful. Maybe I'll get to meet your grandmother."

That thought put a bright smile on the author's face. "Oh, most definitely. And she will absolutely love you." Erin reached up and removed her dark glasses. Once again she wished that she could look into the ice blue eyes in front of her and see the love she felt reflected there. But the sense of sight that her eyes lacked had manifested itself in her heart and her immense imagination. She always saw the love of her partner. And she always felt that love radiating back.

Erin leaned in and floated around the face she loved. Whiffs of sweet aromatic shampoo filled her heightened sense of smell as she followed the hairline down the side of Jamie's face. She smiled at the moan she heard when she reached the spot just below the delicious earlobe. The kisses, nibbles and teasing licks were no longer experimental. Each knew the other better than they knew themselves. The intense physical and emotional sensations they both felt when making love or just holding hands, filled them with a sense of incredible wonderment. Could any other couple on earth begin to understand their connection? Could they ever begin to explain to any other human being just how strong their love was? They both knew the answer to that. No words in the human language could ever do it justice. Their eternal bond, past, present and future was a beautiful secret they both kept locked away, only to share with each other. Erin's lips

finally drifted over to make contact with Jamie's. Once, twice. The feather light touch inspired Jamie to apply a firmer grasp of the cloth-covered flesh beneath her hand.

"Do you know what I want to do?" asked Erin.

"Yes," said Jamie, breathlessly. "But I want to hear you say it."

Erin moved aside the strands of raven hair and whispered in her ear. "Finish the guest list." She immediately felt Jamie's tension deflate. She pulled back with a teasing smile.

Jamie gave her an affectionate swat on the behind. "That's not exactly what I wanted to hear, you tease."

For a blind woman, Erin was always accurate with her kisses as she proved once again, landing right on the tip of Jamie's nose. "You can tease me all you want as soon as we're through here. In fact, I insist on it. But first things first."

Jamie groaned. She had meant it to be a silent one though. "I'm sorry, babe," she said when Erin slipped off her lap, back onto the couch. "I really don't mean to sound as if I don't want to make these plans. I want to marry you more than anything else in the world. You know that right?"

Erin nodded.

"I promise to do whatever we need to do to make this the best day of our lives. So back to the guest list."

Erin twirled her engagement ring around her finger, slightly disappointed that her enthusiasm wasn't matched by her fiancée's "We can finish this tomorrow... I guess." She finished with a shrug of one shoulder.

The pang of guilt pinched Jamie's heart like a vise. "No, we're going to finish it now." She lovingly kissed the side of Erin's head and lingered there. "I'm sorry for being such an idiot. This is important to me."

Erin finally smiled and leaned into the touch. "And I'm sorry for pushing so hard. Being a writer has made me a little compulsive to have everything perfectly organized."

Jamie pulled back a little, but still maintained their touch. "As it should be. I want this to be a perfect day. But I'm just not sure who else we need to invite."

Erin shook her head again. *It was only a month ago. How could she have forgotten?* "What was the last thing Mrs. Davis said to you when you moved out of your old building?"

Jamie's face scrunched together with the realization. "Yeah. I guess we'd better invite everyone there. Wouldn't want sixteen wrathful senior citizens beating down our door." They both laughed as Jamie grabbed a pen and paper and jotted down the names. "So that makes eighteen guests."

"Nineteen. I have to ask Anne." Dr. Anne Carson was a long time friend of Erin's, having been her roommate in college. So another name was added to the list. "Oh and Joseph and his partner." Joseph Hudson was producing the movie being made from Erin's novel, *The Noah Factor*. "And if I ask the producer, then I have to ask the director, Blair."

Jamie just nodded her head as she wrote down more names. "And her boyfriend?"

"No. They broke up right after Christmas." Erin threw out that tidbit absently, while thinking of any others to invite.

Jamie had been jealous when Erin and the beautiful director had gone to a movie premiere together a few weeks earlier. Deep down, she knew her jealousy was totally unfounded. She trusted Erin implicitly. But still the green eyes lurked in her heart, ready to glare at any and all intruders.

Erin sat back and gave an internal sigh. She was about to suggest something and she knew it wouldn't be taken easily. "Jamie?"

"Yes."

"I'd like to invite...Megan. I went to her wedding and she and Karen just had a baby boy. I'd like to meet him and..." She felt Jamie stiffen at the mention of her first and only other lover. Erin and Megan had been together for a short time in college and parted the best of friends. "But if you don't want..."

Jamie pulled Erin closer for a hug. "It's okay, sweetheart. Go ahead and ask her. I have to learn to share your past." *I never asked if she was in love with Megan, thought Jamie. But I guess I don't really want to know. Megan is in love with someone else now and Erin loves me.*

"That's right, my past. And our wedding signifies the future. Our future." They sealed that comment with a long, heated kiss that lasted through the ten chimes of the clock in the hallway. They finally parted with huge smiles that that particular activity always produced. "We still need a date, don't we?" asked Erin.

Jamie reached for the calendar on the coffee table and flipped through to the right month. "How about either April 14th or the 21st. Both still comfortable, weather wise."

They had finally decided on the fourteenth, Erin citing some silly reasoning that it was the sum of their birthdays on the eleventh and the third. Jamie kissed her, sometimes quirky, but always cute, partner on the nose. Before the planning session was over they had also managed to add a few more names to the guest list. Mr. and Mrs. Phillips were giving Jamie the opportunity to fulfill a life long dream, by selling her their sixty-acre ranch. They had become like family, allowing Jamie's passion for horses to soon become a cherished career. She had to invite them as a thank you.

Ten thirty brought an end to their wedding plans, but signified the beginning of yet another practice session for their honeymoon.

On Thursday, after Jamie's workday was over, they drove to the house on Burnham Street in Brentwood. Erin had not set foot in her childhood home since the incident with her father. She felt the car pull into the circular drive and her thoughts were many. The hurt was still there, but much less than it had been on that terrible day in August. Her hand drifted up to rub the side of her face, where his hand had impacted.

Jamie saw the gesture and reached over to kiss the cheek that had bore the evidence of Tim Casey's violence. "Are you sure about this Erin? I know your mother would meet us somewhere else."

Erin turned a confident smile to her partner. "Yes, I'm sure. I should have done this long ago. I grew up here and this house holds so many wonderful memories. I won't let that one incident keep me from that part of my life." She turned back toward the big, white house. "Besides, I have forgiven my father for hitting me. As for the rest..."

Danielle Casey came to the bottom of the grand staircase just as the doorbell rang. "I'll get it Sarah," she told the housekeeper who was coming down the hall. She opened the door surprised to find her daughter there. "Erin...I...come on in," she stammered as she hugged them both. "What are you doing here?" She quickly realized how harsh that sounded. "I mean I wasn't sure you would ever come back."

"That's all in the past now Mom. We've come here today to talk about our future."

Jamie read the confusion on the older woman's face, but she also detected some nervousness as her green eyes kept shifting to the second floor. "Have we come at a bad time Danielle?"

"No, no of course not dear." She stepped in between them, linking her arms with theirs. "Let's go into the family room." Once inside the brightly decorated room, Erin and Jamie took a seat on the white sofa, but declined the refreshments Danielle had offered.

Now Erin had picked up on her mother's anxiety. "What's wrong Mom?"

Danielle took her daughter's hand. "Nothing is wrong dear. It's just...your father is upstairs," she said quietly, as her head dropped to her chest. "We are trying to work things out."

Erin reached out and hugged her. "Mom that's great!"

Danielle gave a surprised smile at her daughter's enthused reaction. "But I..."

"Mom, I have forgiven him. And I want you to be as happy as you were when we were kids. I know that's what you want."

"Yes, it is."

"Good, because I want everyone to be as happy as I am." Erin flashed a smile at Jamie and took her hand. "That's why we came today. Mom, Jamie and I are getting married."

Danielle was momentarily speechless and she nearly fell off the couch as she smothered her daughters with hugs. The tears of a happy and proud mother continued to fall on Erin's shoulder as the three of them embraced.

Jamie heard the heavy footsteps walk away from just outside the door, but she didn't say anything to spoil Erin's moment. She was only glad that he had chosen discretion this time and left them to their private celebration.

Danielle dried her tears, but the realization finally settled in. "But I didn't think you could get married."

"Well, legally we can't," explained Erin. "But we want to express our lifelong commitment to one another in front of our family and friends."

The older woman nodded. "And that's what's most important. So have you set a date?"

Erin hesitated, wanting Jamie to join in on the conversation.

The tall woman easily picked up the cue. "April the 14th."

Danielle grabbed a pen and paper from a nearby desk drawer and began jotting down notes. "That's perfect. It gives us plenty of time to plan a wonderful wedding."

They spent the next hour discussing weddings and other things. When Erin stepped away to the bathroom, Jamie was able to tell Danielle about some secret plans she had. The older woman cried once again over the special woman Erin had chosen to spend her life with.

When the author returned, Jamie detected the slight sadness in her expression.

She stepped over and rubbed Erin's shoulder. "Is everything okay sweetheart?"

Erin threw both arms around her lover's neck. "Everything is wonderful because you are by my side." She planted a long, firm and possessive kiss upon willing lips.

Danielle subtly cleared her throat.

Erin blushed. "Sorry Mom."

"Never be sorry dear. I just didn't want you both passing out from lack of oxygen."

Without totally ending their embrace, they walked back over to the couch. Jamie looked at her watch. "I guess we'd better be going. You still want to go to Bridgett's tonight, don't you?"

"Absolutely."

Danielle kissed them goodbye. "In case you haven't noticed it, I want to tell you how very happy I am for both of you. I love you."

"We love you too," said Erin.

Jamie placed a very special kiss to the older woman's cheek and held her with warm eyes. "Thank you...Mom."

You guessed it. Danielle cried again at Jamie's love laden word. She scooted them both out the door before she flooded the entire house. She watched them pull away before turning back inside. And when she did, she met a pair of gray eyes coming down the stairs.

"I heard," he said as he moved passed her, down the hall and into the kitchen.

Danielle followed closely behind. The cook told them that dinner was ready and she set about taking the steaming dishes into the dining area. Neither Casey said a word as they sat at opposite ends of the long wooden table and waited for the maid to leave the room.

The burly man unfolded the yellow, linen napkin and placed it in his lap. "I don't think we should discuss this now dear," he said as he reached for his fork.

Danielle took a sip of her wine before asking why.

"Because this time is for us. We are rebuilding our marriage and this topic is the main reason for our troubles to begin with."

"You can't blame all our troubles on Erin. We were starting to drift apart long before that. Timothy, our marriage includes our family. Erin is not a topic, she is our daughter."

"I know that. I love her and I want her to be happy. I just don't see how she can be with that kind of person."

Danielle shook her head in frustration. "Jamie loves Erin. She worships her and I couldn't have wished for a better spouse for my daughter. And how could you know whether or not our daughter is happy, you've never spent any time with them. You don't even know anything about Jamie. If you could open your eyes for just one minute and look beyond the fact that Jamie is a woman, you would see that they are not just in love...they are a part of each other."

Suddenly the meal that he had been consuming lay heavy on his chest. He dropped the silver utensil and sat back in his chair with an audible sigh.

"Can you at least try?" she asked as she looked into his eyes through the candlelight.

The shame in his belly almost rivaled the weight from his partially digested food. "I don't know," he finally answered and excused himself from the table.

Danielle pushed away her still half full plate of food. She gave a silent prayer for guidance to help make her husband understand. After informing the maid that they were finished with the meal, she followed her husband to the darkened den.

Only one small lamp near the desk gave the room any illumination. Tim stood by the window swirling the amber liquid around in the bulbous glass he held in his right hand. She approached him carefully. Danielle wasn't afraid of her husband, even after what he did to Erin. But she knew that pushing him to fast would only make him retreat further.

She joined his gaze out over the side yard where the thick shrubs rustled in the early evening breeze. Danielle eased an arm around his waist as she leaned against his strong body. He wrapped his free arm across her shoulder and placed a kiss to the slightly gray hair atop her head.

"I'm sorry dear," he said. "I know this upsetting to you. I don't want to do that."

She nodded her understanding. Danielle's eyes slipped shut and she snuggled closer, basking in their touch for several more minutes. "Can you just explain to me why you have a problem with Jamie being a woman?" she finally asked. "I mean is it religious? Are you afraid what your business associates might say? I just want to understand."

Tim closed his eyes and swallowed the last of his brandy. "I don't even understand," he whispered sadly. "I just know something is preventing me from accepting this. I'm sorry."

Jamie guided her blue SUV up the freeway onramp. "Do you want to tell me what happened when you stepped away to the bathroom?" she asked the quiet woman beside her.

Erin reached over and squeezed Jamie's knee. "You do know me, don't you? But it wasn't all bad. I had one of those happy memories that made me glad I came back home." She took a breath, remembering those very few seconds then related the story.

Erin dried her hands on the fluffy green towel. The fresh smell of the special laundry soap, that her mother preferred, brought a flash of her childhood.

Six-year-old Erin giggled loudly as she was engulfed by soft, brightly colored towel. The huge cloth wrapped her up like a mummy and she was carried off to her bedroom, where her mother proceeded to tickle her mercilessly as she dried the little body. Danielle pulled out a small blue nightgown and helped Erin pull it down over her head. As the cloth went passed her nose, Erin took a huge breath.

"I like the way that smells Mommy," she said as she was helped into bed.

"Me too honey."

"Will you lay down with me and tell me a story?" asked Erin.

The green, puppy dog eyes couldn't be denied. "All right, one story." Danielle snuggled her daughter close and proceeded to tell the tale of Snow White.

Erin never made it passed the eating of the poison apple before her eyes drifted shut. That same bedtime routine repeated itself many times over the next few years. Erin never remembered hearing a complete story, but when she learned to read well enough, she pulled the books from the shelves in her room and read the imaginative tales over and over again. That was what had sparked her passion for writing.

The smile was still on Erin's face when she stepped from the first floor bathroom. Then another smell assailed her and she sensed his presence at the end of the hall. Both stubborn people waited for the other to say the first word. The Irish stand off lasted many long seconds. She finally sighed and started to walk away.

"Erin wait."

She stopped, but didn't turn back.

The big man approached slowly. He placed a tentative hand on her shoulder. "I'm sorry Erin."

There was a sincere tone of regret in his usually gruff voice. She turned and was engulfed in his strong arms. She didn't cry and she didn't say a word. She just loved the father that had been absent from her life all those months. He stroked her blonde hair, knowing he was forgiven...at least for hitting her.

"I've missed you sweetheart," he said when she pulled back.

"Me too Daddy."

"I...ah...was passing by the family room a while ago and...I heard what you were talking about."

Erin pursed her lips, knowing what was coming. But she was mildly surprised.

"I...you appear to be happy," he said softly. "But..."

"I know Dad, you can't give me away...because you already have."

"Erin, please don't say that. I said I was sorry."

"Stop apologizing! This isn't about you...hitting me." Her head shook in disappointment and she turned away. "I have to get back to Jamie. Goodbye Dad."

Erin finished her short story just as they pulled into Bridgett's driveway.

"Come on sweetheart." Jamie opened the car door and helped her out. "You know your sister will be happy for us."

And she was. Bridgett accepted her position as matron of honor with pride and Caitlin jumped up and down with glee, even though she wasn't quite sure what a flower girl was supposed to do. Conner reacted with a smiling "cool" when asked to be the ring bearer. Not wanting Bridgett's husband to feel left out, Erin asked him to be an usher, to which he replied with a smiling "cool". Like father, like son.

Danielle spirited Erin away for an entire Friday to discuss the important things, in her words, like clothes, colors, flowers and food. She amended her earlier statement and complained that three and a half months wasn't nearly enough time to prepare the grand wedding she had envisioned. But Erin's well-chosen words had finally convinced Danielle that they did not want a royal sized ceremony. Danielle did insist on having a special family dinner on Sunday, at their favorite restaurant for an engagement celebration.

Continued in Part 2.

The Athenaeum's Scroll Archive

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Part 2

Chapter 2

Jamie was on the phone, in the office, a business call she had whispered to Erin. The author gave her partner privacy and went into the kitchen to start lunch. She carefully carried the tray of sandwiches out on to the deck, where they often had their meals. The ocean waters always carried in a refreshing, clean scent despite the ever-present pollution that California was famous for. She listened as a few of the local avian inhabitants flew overhead in search of their own mid-day meal. As the waves rolled in with a shallow roar Erin sat back in her chair with a smile, remembering the wonderful feelings of the previous night.

Artemis ran down the private stretch of beach, barking at the funny little crabs she chased through the silver surf. Her black nose got covered in white sand as she rooted around looking for treasures to take home in triumph. She barked once again and looked back toward the house. Her humans lagged far behind, just now exiting the small fenced in backyard. They were in no hurry.

Jamie had suggested a late night walk along the sand, to unwind from their busy day. Her hand gravitated over and grasped the smaller one at her side, as they leisurely followed the northward shoreline. They often joked that they had magnets implanted in them because they just could not be near one another and not be touching in some way.

Only the softly rolling surf and the occasional bark broke the quiet of the brisk January night. The comfortable silence and the tangible presence of the other was enough to calm any nervous exhaustion. Jamie hadn't mentioned the solemn reason for her need to settle her emotions.

She had worked a full eight hours at the publishing company and then had been caught in a traffic jam. She had slowly inched her way home along the crowded highway and after almost an hour and a half, she finally passed by the reason for the delay. She had heard the live report on the radio from the news helicopter circling above. A horrible car crash had taken the lives of a young couple. As sad as the scene had been, all Jamie could think was how lucky they were to have met that fate together. She had been left behind by those she loved and let the loneliness consume her.

Jamie had continued her drive home, thinking about that couple and her parents. For the first time in her life, she was glad that they had died together. She realized how selfish she had been, always wishing that at least one of them would have lived. Even the ten year old Jamie had seen just how much her parents loved each other, how connected they were. To have watched one go on without the other would have been a fate worse than the one she had suffered.

She had finally pulled into the drive and the edges of her mouth curled when she saw Erin sitting on the side deck, quietly reading. Please don't ever let me be left behind again, she prayed.

The ivory shimmer of the moon's image on the ocean waters reflected onto Erin's saffron hair as they continued their walk. Jamie was mesmerized by the, almost, hypnotic scene. Her reverie was soon shattered by the loud bark that raced by them, heading back toward the house. Their mutual, silent agreement saw them turn back and follow the dog's lead. Ten steps later, Jamie kicked something half buried in the sand. She bent down and picked up the item.

"What is it?" asked Erin.

Jamie turned it over in her hand, appreciating the subtle, varying colors and the rough, nubby texture. It was one of nature's beautiful creations. Jamie's brow wrinkled in happy wonderment at how easily that thought had occurred to her. She knew it was the blind woman at her side that had taught her the simple, but amazing ability to see life. "It's a message for you," she said as she placed one end of the small conch shell beside Erin's ear. She leaned down to speak into the other end. Her whispered words echoed through the smooth, coral tunnel and landed loud and clear in Erin's soul. "I love you."

Erin sat at the glass-topped table, absently playing with the seashell that she had insisted they bring home. "Who was that sweetheart?" she asked when she heard Jamie open the sliding door.

Her tall lover sat down at the table and started in on her food before she answered. "It was the courier service. They have an errand for me. It's a rush job and I have to leave first thing in the morning."

"Where are you going?"

"I'm not sure," she said around a bite of her sandwich. "They said I'd find out when I get to the airport. I'll be going on a chartered plane this time"

A sudden, unexpected shiver ran down Erin's spine. A wave of dizziness swept over her and her hand trembled as she reached for her drink. It was several minutes before she could persuade her mouth to ask the question that was sticking in her throat. "What do you mean, you're not sure? Why wouldn't they tell you where you're going?"

"All they said was that it was out of the country." Jamie anxiously gobbled down the last two chips on her plate. "They're going to pay me two thousand dollars. That's all I need to know."

The physical reactions that had assaulted Erin were now gone, but an intense feeling of dread was left in its wake. "That doesn't sound right to me," she said with a slight tremor in her voice.

"I don't care where it is. This means I can meet with the bank official on Tuesday or Wednesday and get the paperwork started on the ranch. Two thousand is exactly how much I need. I thought it was going to take me at least another six weeks, but this is great!"

Erin loved hearing the pure excitement in Jamie's voice and she hated to diminish it, but something nagged at her, grabbing on with very sharp, unrelenting claws. "But they wouldn't tell you where you are going?" she asked again. "That just doesn't sound right. Why all the secrecy?"

Jamie shrugged. "I don't know." She swallowed the last of her drink and got up from the table grabbing the dirty dishes. "I have to go find my passport and get packed."

"How do you know what to pack if they won't tell you where you're going?" Erin said under her breath. She sat there stewing for several more minutes. She didn't know why she felt a sense of fear, but it was nearly overwhelming and she needed some answers.

Erin went into the house just as Jamie was finishing loading the dishes into the washer. She followed the whistling woman up the stairs and down the hall to the bedroom. "I wish you'd get some more information before accepting this," she said. "Did they at least tell you why all the secrecy?"

"No and I didn't ask." Jamie pulled the bigger suitcase down from the shelf in the closet. She tossed it onto the bed and disappeared into the bathroom.

Erin crossed the room and stood by the window, trying to figure out just why she was feeling so strongly about this situation. Try as she might, Erin couldn't put words to the almost sickening feeling that had draped over her soul. But she had to find the words to convince Jamie not to leave, not to get on that plane.

Her grandmother Casey had told her stories of the premonitions she had experienced all her life. She used to call them the leprechaun's whispers. Those whimsical tales, along with the woman's lilting, Irish accent had entertained the wide-eyed little girl for many of her childhood hours. It was a secret only they had shared. The older woman had told Erin that she too would be blessed...or cursed with ability of future knowledge. The little girl had been excited at the prospect, but it had never happened... until now. Her grandmother never mentioned just how lonely and terrifying those feelings would be, knowing with absolute certainty that something terrible was going to happen, but not being able to convince anyone else.

The tall woman came back into the room humming, seemingly without a care in the world. "You'll have to apologize to your mother, since I won't be able to make it to dinner tomorrow night. Tell her that I will take us all out to dinner next week to celebrate our ownership of the ranch." She quickly hugged Erin then went back to her packing. "I'm sure she'll understand."

Erin sighed heavily. "She might understand, but I don't."

Jamie looked up from her busy activity. "What do you mean, honey?"

Erin threw her arms around herself, fighting the sudden chill she was feeling. "I just don't like the sound of this whole thing." Her jaw clenched even tighter. "You are going, God knows where and meeting up with some stranger. Doesn't that sound just a little odd to you?"

The dark haired woman shook her head and gave a crooked smile. "No. I guess I don't have an over-active imagination like you do."

"Oh come on Jamie!" yelled the author. "Even in the real world, innocent people get trapped in horrible situations and I know that is what's going to happen to you if you go on this job." The sea green carpet suffered Erin's heavy pacing, as she went from one end of the room to the other.

Jamie chuckled and sat down on the edge of the bed. "Just what fantastical scenario has your mind cooked up for me, huh?" she asked, stretching out her long legs in front of her, crossing them at the ankle.

"Don't patronize me, Jamie!" The frustration raised the level of Erin's voice. "If you could just get the dollar signs out of your eyes for two minutes, you might comprehend what I'm trying to say. This smells of illegal activity. You could wind up in some God forsaken prison or worse and no witnesses."

Jamie folded her arms over her chest and snickered at the accusations. "Let me guess, your next book is a spy novel, right?"

Erin stopped in her tracks. "Why are you dismissing my concerns? You've never talked to me like this before. What's going on?"

"Last time I looked it was called life. My dream, remember?" Jamie went to the dresser and pulled out a few shirts. "I thought you wanted this for me. What were all those presents and that pretty speech at Christmas? You said you wanted this too."

Erin made her way to Jamie's side and grasped her right arm. "I do, sweetheart. And I understand how excited you are to get this started, but what's wrong with waiting a while longer?"

"Because I don't have to. I have been handed this opportunity and I'm going to take it." Jamie couldn't understand why Erin was being so difficult about this. A thought occurred to her and a part of her brain knew she should sensor what she was about to say...but she didn't. "If you want to know the truth, I had all the money a month ago, but I had to put two thousand dollars down on your ring."

Erin pulled away, her fear turning to anger and getting the better of her. "So now I'm supposed to feel guilty?" Erin ripped the diamond ring from her finger and shook it in Jamie's direction. "If you don't want my concerns, why don't you just take this back." She threw the ring to the floor. "You can sell it and then you won't have to go on this damn trip!"

Jamie's eyes followed the ring's flight and she slumped to the bed, absolutely shocked at Erin's actions. She desperately wanted to stop the argument and save their relationship, but her pride wouldn't let her say the words. On opposite sides of the room, their hearts raced and breaths came in painful gasps. The situation had escalated over the edge and neither was willing to give in.

Erin stood by the door, listening to Jamie's breathing as she had done on so many nights. But those times were spent in absolute contentedness. Now the turmoil had to be stopped. She knew there was one more suggestion to be made and she was 99% sure how it would be accepted...but

she had to do it. Their future might depend on it. She took a deep breath and turned around. "Jamie, please respect my wishes and don't do this. I can give you the mon..."

"Stop right there!" Jamie jumped up from the bed and stomped across the room. "Just stop right there. Don't you say it. Don't you dare say it. I don't want you to give me the money. I want to earn it, every damn single dime of it. And I will do it my way."

"But I can..."

"Oh, I know you can! You can walk into any place on earth and whip out your big platinum card and buy anything your heart desires. I know you have the money. Believe me, you never let me forget it."

Erin shrank back into the corner. "You still can't get past my wealth can you?" she asked in a quiet voice. "Can you!?" she yelled, when her question wasn't answered.

Jamie turned and headed for the door. "I'm leaving before I say something I'll regret."

"It's to late for that. I only wonder if you will regret it. Jamie, please," she begged once again. "A voice in my head is telling me that there is something wrong with this whole thing."

"Well tell your little voice to shut up. I'm going."

"Excuse me, did you just tell me to shut up?"

"No, I told your annoying little voice to shut up. I need some air." She pulled the sliding door open with such force that it jumped the top track and creaked as it swayed with the wind. She flew down the stairs and around the side of the house, leaving the gate swinging as she headed for her car. She got in and slammed the door. Her hand put the key in the ignition, but it wouldn't turn. Her future had just unraveled in the span of a few minutes, but that last unbreakable thread refused to let go. Jamie tossed her dark head back and panted through clenched teeth. The near rage, dissipated to mere anger with twenty or so breaths. *I can't do this*, she chanted. *I can't do this*. She got out of the car and took off at a full out run toward the beach.

The cold water rolled in over her shoes as her steps slowed. Jamie remembered walking that same beach the night she finally let Erin's love into her heart. The night she really started to live again. After the months of self-doubt, Jamie was finally convinced that she wouldn't ruin another relationship. But now look where they were. *How can I just give up? That's what I did before and looked what happened. Erin understands me like no one ever has. But she has to let me make my own decisions. I'm not being selfish. Am I?* Jamie turned back to look at her home, not the four walls and a roof, but the person inside. *She has always had so much faith in me. She loves me.* Jamie squinted against the bright sun as she lifted her face to the sky. "My God, what have I done? Nothing is as important to me as Erin. How could I have said those things to her? I have to talk to her, explain everything."

Jamie climbed the deck stairs after her hour-long absence. She stood there for just a second letting the January breeze dry the last of the sweat on her forehead. She walked slowly to the sliding glass door leading into their bedroom and peaked around the curtain, wanting to know what she was walking into. Her breath hitched and her heart ripped a little more at what she saw. Erin was on her hands and knees desperately feeling across the thick, green carpet, searching for her ring. Every few seconds she raised her hand to wipe at the tears streaming down her face.

A noise, somewhere between a growl and a whimper, brought Jamie's attention to the end of the deck where Artemis was sitting. The big golden retriever stood to all four feet as they stared each other down. Artemis was an extremely loyal companion, being with Erin almost every day since the woman had lost her sight. The animal always fed off Erin's emotions and the dog was...pissed.

"I really fucked up this time, didn't I girl?"

The animal responded by sitting her hind end down, but her big, brown eyes never left Jamie's face.

"Don't worry Arte. I'm going to try and fix this." Jamie closed her eyes and calmed her heartbeat. *I will not lose my temper. I can make her understand...but can I make her forgive me?*

Erin heard the door slide open. She pulled back her hands, not wanting to appear as despondent as she felt. She stayed on the floor and sat back on bended knees. No words were spoken by either one of them as Jamie stood there looking at Erin and Erin sat there listening to the endless silence. A strong wind gust kicked up and blew the curtain aside, allowing the sunlight to hit the diamond and flash a signal. Jamie bent over to pick up the precious jewel that had landed under the bedside table. She approached her kneeling partner and dropped to her knees in front of the sad blonde. Jamie slowly reached for Erin's left hand.

"I'm so sorry." Her voice cracked. "I will never regret buying this ring." Jamie slipped it back onto its home and raised it to her mouth for a kiss. "But I do regret the things I said. Please forgive me."

Erin couldn't speak. She threw her arms around the woman she loved and held on for dear life, knowing that there was going to have to be a compromise to the situation. She just feared that she would have to be the one to make it. And she prayed that her fears would be totally unfounded.

"Of course I forgive you, sweetheart," she finally whispered into Jamie's neck. "I love you. That's why I can't bear the thought of being without you...ever." She brought her hand up between them. "I'm sorry I took the ring off. I will never ever do that again. This is staying here forever."

Jamie nodded against Erin's forehead. "I love you."

Their tears mingled as they kissed. No more was mentioned of the trip, as Jamie led them to the shower in the bathroom. The ritual washing away of the insults, angry words and regretted actions, helped to calm their tumultuous emotions and patch their hurting hearts.

It was only late afternoon, but they were lying atop the patterned comforter on the bed, just holding one another, each lost in their own thoughts. But the conversation had to be continued.

Erin turned to face Jamie and she started out softly. "You said that it was going to be our ranch. So I don't understand why you won't let me put in the last of the money you need."

Jamie smiled sadly, closed her eyes and sighed. "Sweetheart, it will be our ranch and I promise that you can buy whatever we need, once we are up and running. But I started saving for this before I met you and I just...I would really like to do this part of it on my own. I kind of made a promise to my parents. After everything I've done, I want to make them proud of me."

That did it. Those words firmly implanted themselves onto Erin's heart and she couldn't ask Jamie to go back on that promise. "Okay honey, I understand. But can you explain to me why you can't wait just a few more weeks to get the money?" Erin felt a fingertip softly trace her lips.

"Well, it was going to be a surprise," said Jamie, while continuing her gentle explorations. "...but I thought we could have the wedding at the ranch. And in order to do that, it's going to take a couple of months to get things in order. I wanted to build you a beautiful gazebo where we could take our vows. And I want to do some landscaping and create a beautiful garden like the one we were in the first night we met." She received a silent kiss for her romantic sentiments. Then she continued. "Sweetheart, I know you have reservations about this trip and I shouldn't have belittled those feelings. But you know about my past in New York. I know what to look for. I know the signs of illegal activity. And I promise you that I will bail at the slightest hint. In just a couple of weeks, we will be spending our first night in our...other house. And in less than three months we will be getting married in front of our family and friends and this day will all be forgotten."

Erin finally resigned herself to accept the situation. She pushed the feelings of dread far back into her soul and gave her lover a weak smile. It was all she could manage. No words, just the smile and a nod.

Jamie took the small gesture and cherished it, knowing that their love was still as strong as it had always been, as it always would be. Disagreements were a part of life. They may be of one soul, but definitely two different minds. But she was determined never to let their future misunderstandings reach such angered heights.

Later that night, they spent an hour taking each other to passionate heights as they slowly and tenderly shared their love... body and soul.

* * * *

Jamie slipped out of bed very early the next morning for a quick workout and to finish packing. An hour later, she came out of the bathroom, rubbing her long dark hair with a towel. She looked to the bed and realized that her lover hadn't moved an inch since she'd gotten up. But Jamie was totally unaware of the reason why.

After making love and some much needed cuddling, Jamie had fallen to sleep almost immediately. But Erin had laid awake most of the night, trying not to cry, but failing. She hated the feelings that had a strangle hold on her, but short of hearing Jamie say that she wouldn't go on the trip, she knew they wouldn't let go until her partner was back home, safe and sound. Exhaustion had finally crept in and banished the worries to a small area of her brain, allowing her at least a few hours of sleep.

Just as the dark of the long winter's night was sliding across the horizon, the smell of cinnamon wafted into the bedroom, drawing Erin from her dreamless state. She took several very deep whiffs and also detected her favorite mocha coffee, which blended quite nicely with the sweet spice. She smoothed out her mussed blonde hair, gave a small stretch and pulled out from under the heavy blanket to sit up against the headboard.

"Good morning sweetheart," said Jamie as she laid the wooden tray across Erin's lap and scooted up beside her.

Erin smiled after receiving a kiss that was much more enticing than the food. "What's all this?"

"I wanted to serve you breakfast in bed." Jamie took a small sip of her own coffee and hummed at the delicious taste. "And I wanted to say I'm sorry... again. I'll never be able to apologize enough for the way I acted yesterday."

"Yes you can."

"How?"

"By not going." Erin heard the groan and felt Jamie start to move away. "No wait! Now I'm sorry. I promised myself I wouldn't start this again, but..."

"Erin, honey, remember what I said last night? I know how to protect myself and when to get out. I would never do anything to knowingly jeopardize my life." She took the author's trembling hand. "Not when I have so much to live for now."

The blonde pulled their joined hands to her chest. "My head knows that Jamie...but my heart just doesn't get it." The stand off was back again. Two strong willed people who loved each other more anything else in the world, stood on opposites sides of the same wall, clawing their way up, trying to meet at the top and come to a mutual agreement. There was no compromise to this situation. Either Jamie was going or she wasn't. And Erin knew which it was going to be...so she mentally scaled that wall and jumped to the other side. "All right Jamie," she said with a small sigh. "I will trust your judgment. And I won't say another word about it."

The victory did not bring a triumphant smile to Jamie's face. She knew her lover was still scared and hurting...but she also knew that the trip would go smoothly and she would be happily on her way back home...soon.

Erin nibbled on her breakfast roll as Jamie finished up a few details. With the last sip of her coffee, Artemis came bounding into the room. She received her good morning pats from Erin, but as soon as Jamie stepped from the bathroom, the dog jumped over to the tall woman's side.

Jamie threw her travel kit into the open suitcase and started wrestling with the animal. She obviously had the canine's forgiveness for her mistakes of the day before and that made her happy.

Erin listened to the two of them rough house with a bit of envy. She knew how much Artemis had come to love playing with Jamie. The dark haired woman could give the dog the kind of attention that she couldn't. Sometimes Arte had so much extra energy that she literally pulled Jamie from whatever she was doing to go outside and play on the beach. While she was happy that they had formed a bond, it always made her stop and wonder what it would be like when they had a child. With her worries about Jamie and their future, her irrational insecurities ran amok. Who would want to be stuck with a blind parent who might step on them, who might throw a ball and hit them? And later on, one who couldn't teach them to drive or see them graduate. Erin shook her head to rid the morbid thoughts. *Stop feeling sorry for yourself and concentrate on right now.* She then heard Jamie give Arte some instructions.

"I want you to take care of your Mommy while I'm gone." She received a positive response in the form of doggie kisses. "Good girl."

Erin couldn't help, but smile at the word mommy. *I still want to have a child. I can be a good parent, whether I can see or not. But I can only be a parent if...* "I lied before Jamie."

"About what?"

"I have one more thing to ask."

Jamie moved onto the bed.

"I want you to call me every two hours," said Erin staunchly. "I know that sounds really paranoid," she rushed to add. "But I really need to know you're all right."

Jamie smiled and took Erin's face in her hands. "Sweetheart, I will call you every ten minutes if that will help ease your fears."

Erin blushed at how extreme that made her sound. "I think every two hours will do." She pulled Jamie in for a long, hard kiss. Her very creative mind had a split second, absurd thought that her kiss could put some sort of protective spell over her lover. Erin pulled away and giggled at herself.

"My kisses are funny now?" Jamie asked teasingly.

"No. I was just...never mind." Her smile flickered away as she ran her hands through the raven silk and whispered desperately, "Just please be careful."

"I will sweetheart. I promise." Jamie glanced at her watch. "I have to go. I love you."

Erin threw her arms around Jamie for one last hug. "I love you." She finally sent her off with a swat to her jean covered behind. "Go. And hurry back." Please.

As promised, Jamie had called every two hours after boarding the plane. They soon made a game of the conversations, each pretending to be a famous person, complete with silly accents and dialogue. Seven hours into the flight, the plane made a short stop for re-fueling, during which time she was not allowed to leave, the attendant sighting security reasons. It was starting to feel a little odd, but Jamie's finely honed survival instinct still sensed no real danger. She was able to look out the tiny window and saw that they were at a relatively small airport, but she couldn't find a name anywhere on the two buildings within sight. There were several maintenance men milling around the plane going about their normal business, working on the machine. She couldn't tell by looking if any of them were of a certain ethnicity. There were absolutely no clues as to where in the world they were. She wasn't even told the correct time. But she always knew what time it was at home. The bright sunshine looked inviting as she got up to stretch her long legs. The small jet was equipped with plush, luxury seats and if she had had company, Jamie might have enjoyed the privacy since there were now only three other passengers. An older couple sat huddled together at the front of the plane, reminding her of the emptiness in her arms.

The plane ascended into the cloudless sky once again. Ten minutes later a lavish meal of steak, baked potato and salad was served. Jamie relished the surprisingly delicious food and partook of an after dinner drink.

The sun finally started to sink, far off in the horizon as the plane glided along smoothly. But the interior was quiet, a little too quiet. Jamie stealthy watched the short, swarthy looking man who sat near the middle of the plane. Besides the older couple, he was the only one to remain on board after the last stop. He was dressed all in black and his dark eyes had remained ever alert since leaving LA. He had been on the phone numerous times, which wasn't unusual since Jamie had as well. But during every call, he never spoke a word, only nodded. He had made eye contact with Jamie three times and always with a questioning brow. Jamie peered over the rim of the round drinking glass, watching him pull out a black soft-sided satchel. Her eyes widened in mild alarm. A dozen different dangerous items could be concealed within the container. Her gaze flashed forward to the two other passengers who were totally oblivious to the situation.

He continued to rummage around inside the bag as his eyes met hers once again, for just an instant. A sudden chill went down her back. *Shit! Maybe I should've listened to Erin, she thought. I know I promised I'd bail out of a bad situation honey, but not at thirty thousand feet...without a chute.* She downed the remaining amber liquid and casually set the glass aside. *Maybe I should warn the attendant. Maybe she can...* Her thought was interrupted when he set the bag on the seat next to him and stood up. She saw something in his hand as he moved toward

the back where she was sitting. Jamie held her breath, as he came near. She readied herself to strike out against an attack. Her hand twitched, as from the corner of her eye she saw his black shoes just three feet away. Her gaze traveled up the dark slacks to his empty hand. He suddenly transferred what was in his left hand to his right. Jamie took a visible deep breath when she saw the...shaver. It was a small electric shaver. The loud laugh burst forth in the small compartment as she slumped back in her seat. The mysterious man looked at her in surprise as he reached for the handle to the bathroom door. Jamie reigned in her laughter, but continued the silent giggles. *He's going to kill his five o'clock shadow, not me.* She finally managed to calm herself after a few more mirthful minutes. She pulled out the small cell phone and hit the #1 button.

"Hi sweetheart."

"Hi hon. Are you...alright?" Erin asked cautiously.

"Just fine." She proceeded to tell her partner of their stop and her nice meal and drink. She thought to herself that she could really use another one, but she didn't exactly mention that to Erin. The tall man in black stepped from the bathroom and an involuntary chuckle escaped Jamie's lips.

"What was that for?" Erin asked with a slightly amused smile.

"Oh, it was...well I'll explain it when I get home."

"And when will that be?"

"I don't know, but you'll be the first...the second to know." Jamie settled back in her soft seat. "What have you been up to in the last two hours?"

Continued in Part 3.

The Athenaeum's Scroll Archive

~ Seeing You, Again For the First Time ~

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.

Love/Sex Disclaimer: This story depicts a loving relationship between two consenting, adult women and contains scenes of intimacy, but nothing explicit. If you are under 18 years of age or

if this type of story is illegal in the state or country in which you live, please do not read it. If depictions of this nature disturb you, you may wish to read something other than this story.

Hurt/Comfort Disclaimer: Major angst ahead. But have faith and remember, I love a happy ending!

Thanks so much to my beta reader Barb.

No copy write infringement is intended in the use of the lyrics to the song "At Your Side".

This is the sequel to my first story, "At First Sight". I would recommend that you read that one first.

All comments are welcome at coleen30@webtv.net

Part 3

Chapter 3

Danielle carried her granddaughter up the wooden stairs and down to the open door. They had been playing on the beach for just ten minutes. The four year old had on a bright yellow jacket, it's hood pulled up over her head protecting her ears from the winter's breeze. But it did nothing to stop two little feet from getting soaked in the surf. Danielle had hoped to sneak in and change the saturated footwear before her daughter discovered the mishap. She switched the tiny body to her right hip and tucked the front foot under her lower arm. The two playmates sauntered in to find the girl's mother and her aunt sitting at the table, deep in conversation. But not too deep. The older woman had almost made it to the doorway leading into the dining room.

"Mother."

"Yes Bridgett," said grandma, knowing she'd been caught. She had taught her daughter too well.

The red head pointed to several spots on the blue tile floor. "You're dripping. Want to tell me what happened...Caitlin?" Bridgett knew her daughter wouldn't lie to her.

The little blonde head and green eyes dropped in shame as they turned to her mother. "I ran to close to the water." She finally looked up to see her mother giving the mad eye to her grandmother. "Grandma told me not to. Don't be mad at her Mommy."

Bridgett maintained her stern face as she approached the guilty pair. She pulled off the small tennis shoes and the white socks and then tickled the tiny bare feet. Caitlin squealed and laughed, twisting in her grandmother's grasp.

"Mommy don't!" giggled the child. "That tickles!"

The red head took her daughter and set her down on the floor. She sent her off with a kiss and a warning. "Listen to your Grandma from now on." Bridgett stood back up and turned to regard her mother.

Danielle stopped any further reprimand with an upturned hand. "I know dear. I shouldn't have taken her out to the beach, but it's such a nice sunny day and she pleaded with me. The same way you used to do," she reminded the smirking woman. "It worked every time...and still does."

"I know. Just don't teach her to try and cover up her mistakes."

Danielle nodded and they both looked around to find Erin turned in their direction. "You are a great mother."

"Who me?" they asked in unison.

"Yes." Erin gave them a smile, albeit a sad one.

Jamie had called one last time the night before and told Erin that she wouldn't be able to make another phone call until she was finished with her business. Of course this upset the author again, but Jamie managed to calm her with more reassurances. At least that's what the blonde led her to believe.

Sleep had eluded Erin for the second night in a row, leaving her looking pale and haggard. She sat at the small kitchen table finishing off her second cup of coffee, hoping that the caffeine would kick-start her stalled motor giving her the energy to join in on her family's plans for the day. Nothing would take her mind off of Jamie, but her family was trying so hard and she didn't want to disappoint them.

Bridgett's husband Brad had taken their son for a day of male bonding, so they had decided to have a girl's afternoon out starting with Sunday brunch.

Danielle stepped over to the counter and poured herself a cup of coffee. "I am famished. Let's drive up the coast to The Roost. They have those chocolate chip pancakes that Caitlin loves." She walked over and brushed Erin's short hair with her hand. "What about you sweetheart, what are you in the mood for?"

Erin could feel the concern in the air. The hesitations. The attempts at lame jokes. She mentally scolded herself for burdening her family with her worries. She pushed back her shoulders and brightened her expression. "I don't know, Eggs Benedict or maybe that great mushroom quiche they have."

Caitlin came bouncing back into the kitchen with new socks and shoes. Erin always kept extra clothes for her niece and nephew, a decision that had paid off many times. The little girl grabbed a hand. "Come on Aunt Erin. I'll help you find the car."

Erin smiled happily and bent over to place a kiss on top of the curly head. "Thank you sweetie." She followed the little girls lead with Artemis at her other side. They passed through the large dining room and into the living room where the sun was streaming through the big bay window. Erin stopped by the couch and reached down to stroke the dog's golden fur. "I'm sorry girl, but you can't come with us this time. We'll play when I..." The ringing of the telephone cut off her words. She dropped the little hand and reached for phone, clutching it tightly as if her life depended on it. "Hello."

"Hi sweetheart."

Erin giggled as the tension drained from her muscles like water through a sieve. She fought to stay upright on wobbly legs as relieved breaths circulated through her lungs. "Jamie, I love you," she rushed to say. "You are all right aren't you?"

Jamie laughed at her lover's tone of voice. "I'm fine honey, but I'll be even better when I'm back in your arms. I'm on my way home right now and I'll explain everything when I get there."

Erin turned toward the wall as her cheeks blushed with a tinge of pink. "I'm just glad that I was wrong and I'm a little embarrassed. I went a totally nuts over this. I'm sorry. I never want to fight with you again."

"Sweetheart we are bound to have disagreements. But in the future we both should take the time to really hear each other out before the anger catches hold. I honestly don't think we will make that mistake again though. All I have to do is remember how much it hurt when I walked away from you that day."

Erin sniffled. "Can we talk about something else before I start crying?"

Jamie cleared her throat of its tightness. "That's a great idea. I bought you a surprise."

Now Erin smiled. "Well you know how much I like surprises. I'll be anxiously waiting for it..." Her voice dropped to a deep tone. "...and you."

Jamie licked her suddenly dry lips and looked around at the empty seats surrounding her. "You know that thing we wanted to do yesterday over the phone? Well maybe we can do it now. This time I am all alone here in the back of the plane. Alone and very needy, if you get my drift."

"Oh, I get it all right," said Erin with a huge grin on her face. "But I don't think my mother and my sister would appreciate a demonstration of our...abilities."

Jamie's face fell with disappointment as she heard a voice in the background.

"You got that right," said Bridgett, seeing her sister's blush. "Come on you love birds. You can talk later, but I'm hungry."

"Me too," said Jamie pitifully.

Erin chuckled. "When will you be home?"

"In about ten hours. So you go and have..."

Jamie's words were cut off by a loud screech. Then the phone went dead.

"Jamie! Jamie!" Erin called out frantically. She knew it wouldn't help, but she quickly tapped the button on the phone.

Her mother rushed across the room. "What happened?"

Erin pulled the brown phone from her ear and just held it in her hand. The feeling of dread washed back over her and she swayed.

Danielle grabbed her daughter's arm. "Whoa. Take it easy."

Bridgett swooped in to her sister's side and together they eased Erin down into a chair.

"She's just gone," Erin whispered the author.

"I'm sure you just lost the connection." Bridgett raised the phone, which was still clutched in Erin's hand, to her ear. The dial tone sang its mono tune as she and her mother exchanged glances.

"Dear, I'm sure there is nothing to worry about. Jamie will call right back." Danielle reached for the phone. "But she can't do that unless you hang this up."

Once the phone was back in its cradle, Danielle ran to the kitchen and brought Erin a glass of water. The author downed the liquid, but it didn't drown the hurt.

"When are we going?" asked the little voice that came to stand in front of Erin.

Bridgett pulled her daughter into her lap. "We can't leave right now honey."

"But I want to."

"Caitlin, please don't whine. We just can't leave right now. I'll take you back to the beach in a little bit."

Erin listened to the child's pleas and Bridgett's response. She felt the dog nudge her leg. She heard the clock chime the half hour as Danielle took her hand. She might not have been able to see the faces filled with concern, but she could feel their loving concern. Her family. Their support and caring was the second most important thing in Erin's life. Without them, she would be totally alone to face whatever was happening. But her capacity to love them wouldn't let her bring the mounting pain down upon their shoulders. Erin shook her head of the morose feelings. "Why don't you go on without me. I'll stay here and wait for Jamie's call."

"That's all right," assured her sister. "I'm sure she'll call soon and then we can all go to brunch."

The atmosphere in the room sparked with tension as ten minutes passed. Then fifteen. Then twenty. Erin had barely moved a muscle except for the twitching of her hand that lay next the phone on the end table. Her hard, but emotionless expression had been maintained while inside, her heart beat double time with fear.

Danielle moved about the room nervously straightening the already immaculate furnishing and decorations.

A bird that flew past the large window had momentarily distracted Caitlin. She watched the blue creature hunting and pecking for twigs, strands of grass and other nesting materials among the shrubbery. Once it flew off, hunger became her main concern again. Bridgett retrieved a bag of chips and some juice from the kitchen to placate her daughter a little longer.

Erin listened to the crunching as the snack was devoured and while her heart was consumed with worry about Jamie, her head was clear enough to feel the guilt. "You know she really shouldn't have to suffer because of me. Why don't you just..."

Ring

Erin ripped the mouthpiece from its home before the first ring was finished. "Jamie?"

"No Ma'me."

Erin's head dropped to her chest.

"May I speak to Erin Casey?" the voice on the phone asked.

"This is she, but I really can't tie up this line." She had call waiting, but that didn't matter.

"I understand, but this is important. I am from the National Organ Donation Center and we have your tissue donation ready."

The blonde head shot up. "I...I..."

"What is it dear?" asked her mother.

Erin couldn't get her mouth to work and she mutely handed over the phone. She had waited for this moment for almost five years. She craved it, needed it. But why now? She heard her mother's voice in the background, getting the information as her thoughts ran to a single subject. I can't until I know Jamie is all right. It will just have to wait. She suddenly felt two very enthusiastic arms encircle her.

"Sweetheart this is wonderful!" cried the older woman. "You are going to see again. I'll help you pack a bag and we'll leave for the hospital."

"No! I can't leave...Jamie...you just...I don't..." The confusion in her brain wouldn't allow the formation of a complete sentence. Erin felt her soul being torn in two. The best and the worst moments of her life were battling inside her, threatening her sanity if she didn't take control.

Bridgett knelt down in front of the confused woman. "Sis, I will keep your cell phone with me and when Jamie calls I will tell her the good news. Just think about how happy she will be for you. And think about seeing her...really seeing her for the first time. You deserve this. You both do."

One final shudder and a deep breath stopped the turmoil. Bridgett's words finally brought a smile to Erin's face. She wanted nothing more in the world than to be able to gaze into the blue orbs she had imagined so many times. It was going to happen. She would make it happen. Jamie would be there when the bandages came off. She had promised.

Two hours later Erin was lying in a hospital bed. She wasn't concerned about the surgery; it certainly wouldn't make things any worse. But Bridgett had informed her that Jamie still hadn't called. Her fingers unconsciously scratched at the fuzzy yellow blanket that covered her lower body. Under the covering, her leg muscles twitched in tune with the tension that strummed through her. Again the war was building inside. Unbearable worry and giddy anticipation took the front lines. Heartache and hope came next. Tears and smiles held the flanking positions. Neither side held an advantage as every second waiting for a phone call was matched by a second closer to the coming medical miracle.

The doctor, who was going to perform her operation, was delayed by a snowstorm in the east, but he had been in contact with the surgical staff and everything was well prepared. One of the hospital's eye surgeons had been in to see Erin and had asked permission for her surgery to be observed by a group of medical students. She gave him a vague nod of the head since her attention was on much more serious matters. She would probably have agreed to a vasectomy if anyone had asked.

An hour later, Dr. Andrew Mathias stepped into her quiet room. "Good afternoon Ms. Casey." Erin jumped at the sound of his booming voice. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to startle you," he said.

Erin scooted herself up in the bed. "It's all right. I was just concentrating on something." She extended her hand. "It's good to meet you in person Dr. Mathias."

He returned the gesture. "And you Ms. Casey." He studied the chart in his hand as he continued. "Everything looks good to go and I have every confidence that you will regain some, if not all of your sight."

Erin took a deep breath and gave a nervous smile. "I know that you will do everything possible Dr. Thank you for giving me this opportunity."

"When you can tell me what color tie I'm wearing, that will be thanks enough." He reached out and gently squeezed her arm. "I'll see you in just a little while in the operating room."

"Could you ask the nurse to send my sister in here?" Erin asked as she heard his footsteps head for the door.

"I'll do that."

The sterile, white room went back to being silent. The only sound was the faint hiss when the heating unit in the corner popped on. She listened as a wheel squeaked on the metal cart that passed by her door as afternoon meals were being served. The aroma of the hospital food combined with the strong odor of the antiseptic cleaner that permeated the air, did nothing to help the queasiness that began to rumble in her stomach. Erin concentrated on another smell that brought with it very nice memories.

They were at the mall. On a whim, one Saturday afternoon while waiting for Erin to try on clothing, Jamie picked up a bottle of cologne. She cautiously sniffed at it, having had her olfactory senses burned on previous occasions. She smiled at the pleasant scent that held the scent of a clean ocean breeze and just tiniest hint of floral. Jamie was not one to decorate her body with aromatic substances, other than scented soaps or other lotions that she would share with her lover. But she thoroughly enjoyed the perfumes that Erin wore and wondered if she should return the favor, especially since Erin relied greatly on her sense on smell. Jamie gave a curt nod and handed the bottle and the cash to the salesperson. She slipped her purchase into her jacket pocket, totally forgetting about it when Erin stepped from the dressing room in a stunning outfit.

They had returned home from their shopping excursion and started in on household chores. Jamie didn't remember the cologne until that evening when she retrieved her jacket from the car and felt the weight in one pocket. She went to their room and applied some to all the appropriate areas.

Erin was on the deck, in the twilight of the day, listening to nature's harmonies. Her mind was so intent on the ocean waves she didn't hear the door slide open. Two long arms gently settled around her and the kiss that followed stirred the ever-present passion in both of them. Erin pulled back when her lungs demanded air. She inhaled deeply. "What are you wearing?"

Jamie mis-interpreted the tone of Erin's voice. "You don't like it."

"Are you kidding? It's wonderful." She leaned in and nuzzled the tempting neck.

Her busy nose tickled the tall woman, but not enough to stop the sweet affection. "I'm glad you like it," said Jamie. "I wasn't sure."

"Believe me, you made an excellent choice. But I didn't think you liked to wear anything like this."

"I didn't before, never had a reason to, never let anyone get close enough to care. But now..."

Erin pushed against her lover's shoulders scooting her back. She stood, grabbed a hand and walked toward the bedroom door. Once inside, Erin started with the top button of Jamie's shirt and very slowly proceeded downward. "Well I care." She kissed the exposed collarbone. "I really do."

"Wow. I should have bought this a long time ago."

"It's never to late." Erin was now on her knees, in the process of removing the snug black jeans. She brushed a bare hip with her fingertips as she stood back up. "I love you with or without it...but I won't complain if you want to buy a truckload. In fact," Erin said as she pulled Jamie onto the bed. "I might even buy stock in the company, to make sure they never discontinue it."

Erin had snatched up the bottle of Iridescence in her rush to pack. It now sat on the table beside her hospital bed, giving her some small tangible connection to her missing partner. After taking a last deep whiff, Erin threw her head back into the plush pillow. And she waited. The intercom in the hall made three separate announcements before Bridgett made it back to her room.

"I guess this is it," she said as she approached her sister's bedside. She took the slightly trembling hand and placed a kiss on her cheek. "I'm so happy for you. I know this is going to work."

"Bridgett has..."

"No honey. Jamie hasn't called yet. But she will. You have to go into this surgery with a positive attitude." Her sister gave no response. "Right Erin? Tell me."

The blonde author took a deep breath and nodded her head sharply. "Right," she said with as much determination as possible.

Bridgett's husband had come to take Caitlin home, leaving Bridgett and her mother alone in the waiting room. They huddled together in the corner of a brown couch that had seen better days. Bridgett sighed and leaned on her mother's shoulder. She felt somewhat vulnerable, concerned not only for her sister, but for her friend as well. Everyone knew what effect it would have on Erin if something really had happened to Jamie. Bridgett needed the reassurance of a parent and a return to the innocence and happiness of childhood.

They started reminiscing about old times, remembering especially the summer of '77'. Danielle had taken her daughters to Disneyland for the first time.

"You girls were so excited. You hardly slept for two days. That's why we didn't tell you sooner. Every time we tried to get you two to take a nap," Danielle playfully tapped her daughter's nose. "...you would wake up and start ranting about something you'd heard or seen on TV about Disneyland. You would sit up and go on and on and Erin would be wide awake asking questions of her well informed big sister."

Bridgett laughed, remembering how Erin had idolized her and how the redhead had loved it...until she started dating. Having a little sister spying on you and giggling in the bushes when

you were saying goodnight to your date was an experience to remember. Bridgett made a mental note to have a long talk with Caitlin once Conner started dating. And of course since that wasn't going to happen until he was twenty, Caitlin would be sixteen and by then she should be very understanding. Yeah right, thought Bridgett, laughing to herself at that whole little scenario.

Danielle continued the story. *She had been standing by the living room door when she heard two little bare feet hop down the stairs and scamper into her father's den. Danielle quietly followed her youngest daughter and peeked around the double doors just in time to see Erin climb into her father's lap. He dropped the paper he had been reading and settled her into the crook of his arm.*

"I thought Mommy put you to bed over an hour ago," he asked with gentleness in his voice.

Erin scrunched up her face, not wanting to get in trouble. The happiness she felt strummed through her little body as she bounced up and down in his lap. She finally relented. "I can't sleep Daddy. When will tomorrow be here?"

The corner of his mouth curled in as her wide green eyes pleaded excitedly for an answer. "Well unless you go to sleep my little E bug, tomorrow will never come."

She believed the small fib and crossed her arms over chest and her bottom lip popped out in the biggest pout her had ever seen. It took all of Timothy's self control not to burst out laughing.

"Oh all right," she said. "I'll go to sleep. Will you tuck me in Daddy?"

He stood up, dwarfing her with her size, hefting her into his powerful arms. Danielle sneaked around the corner not wanting to be discovered, but she listened to the conversation as the two headed up the stairs.

"Are you bigger than Mickey Mouse, Daddy?"

"I don't know sweetheart, I've never met Mickey in person."

"I think you are," said Erin, confident in her spatial estimation. "He won't be afraid of you will he? I won't get to hug him if he is."

"Don't worry honey, Mickey will love you. But not as much as I do."

Danielle and Bridgett both smiled at the happy memory, but as Bridgett went on to think about the trip, she remembered that Daddy hadn't been with them. But they did have a lot of fun, just the three of them.

Erin got to hug Mickey. In fact she carried on a very lengthy conversation with him about the importance of Pluto in his life and how he should help Chip and Dale find a nice safe tree to live in, one that wasn't always being cut down by Donald Duck.

Bridgett, whose tastes were a little more sophisticated, found Cinderella more to her liking. Her beautiful pink gown glittered under the California sun and Bridgett was mesmerized, asking questions about her castle, telling the costumed woman how she lived in a castle too. Bridgett told her every detail of her prince charming, who she would meet when she was twelve. They went on to discuss the finer points of romance, like sharing a double scoop chocolate ice cream cone in the backyard and holding hands on the swing set. Bridgett looked back where her little sister was still carrying on her animated conversation with the big mouse. *Kids*, she thought, *his lips don't even move he talks*.

"Remember how Erin insisted on buying Dad that special present?" said Bridgett. She ran into the house and down to his office. He stooped down and she put those Mickey ears on his head."

Danielle nodded. "And she said, Mickey may be bigger than you Daddy, but I love you more." What Danielle hadn't told the girls was the real reason why Tim couldn't go with them. He had gotten a call and was needed out of town on business. She didn't even bother arguing with him, but she wasn't about to hurt her daughters. She told them he was not feeling well instead of letting them feel less important in his life.

Danielle had called her husband just after their daughter was taken into surgery. He was very happy for the chance for Erin to see again, but declined to come to the hospital, not wanting to upset her. Jamie's name never crossed his lips, nor his thoughts.

Two and a half hours after the operation had begun, Danielle had slipped out for coffee. Bridgett picked up the silver cell phone from the sofa beside her. She stared at it intensely, willing it to ring. "Damn it Jamie, where are you? Erin needs you. This is one of the most important times in her life and she needs your support." She leaned forward, closed her eyes and rested the phone against her weary head.

Danielle came rushing back into the room a few seconds later. She carefully put down the two cups of hot liquid. "I just saw Dr. Mathias down the hall," she nervously informed her daughter.

Bridgett moved to her mother's side just as the tall, blonde haired man walked through the door. His blue scrubs were rumpled, but clean. He scribbled a note on the chart in his hand then looked into the expectant eyes of the family. He cheerfully smiled through his late day whisker stubble. "Everything went perfectly. We will have to wait about forty-eight hours for the swelling to go down before we will know the results, but it looks very promising."

Danielle couldn't hold it in any longer. The tears slipped from her eyes as she hugged her oldest. They soon parted and thanked him furiously. Danielle took him completely by surprise and pledged one hundred thousand dollars to help him continue to make miracles around the world.

His jaw went slack and his blue eyes widened. "Thank you so much for your generosity Mrs. Casey. I'll have the nurse let you know when you can go in and see Erin. And I'll be by to see her first thing in the morning." With a final handshake he left.

* * * *

The powerful, butter colored horse galloped across the meadow. The two riders, astride her back, held tightly to one another and their shared smiles told the world of their total contentment. The taller woman pulled on the leather reigns bringing the animal to a stop. Erin hopped off and landed softly upon the carpet of vivid green. She stared into the clear blue sky dotted with just a few puffs of pure white. Her gaze slowly followed the beams of sunshine to where they reflected off the small lake ahead of them. She just stared at the shimmering, glassy surface drinking in nature's beauty.

"Erin."

The cherished voice spoke quietly behind her and she felt a hand rest on her shoulder. She smiled and slowly turned, anxious to see the most beautiful blue she could ever imagine. The twinkling eyes of the woman she loved, awaited her. She heard her name called again. But the dream faded away leaving nothing but darkness. "Jamie?" her gruff voice called out.

"No sweetheart, it's your mother."

The fuzzies continued to swirl around her brain, holding stubbornly to the desires of consciousness. She felt a straw placed against her lips and she took just a sip to clear the cotton that coated her mouth. "Mom?"

Danielle smoothed down the blonde hairs that stuck out from the white bandage wrapped around her daughter's head. "Yes dear. Your surgery went fine. The doctor expects you to make a wonderful recovery." Another tear slid down the older woman's cheek "You don't know how many times I have prayed for this day," she whispered.

"Me too mom." Erin adjusted her head against the pillow, feeling just a small amount of pain around her eyes. "Did Jamie call?" She heard Bridgett sigh and turned her head to the left.

"No Sis. Not yet."

"It's been too long." The blonde's voice quivered. "Something's wrong." Erin's hand flailed in the air trying to find her sister. "You've got to find out where she is Bridgett. You have to."

The red head shared a concerned look with her mother as Danielle rubbed a soothing hand down Erin's arm.

"I will Erin. I'll call Brad. He will get the information from that courier service. We will find her, Sis."

"Please dear," said Danielle. "You need to stay calm while you are healing. You don't want to do anything to harm yourself."

Erin nodded solemnly. "Just find Jamie and I'll be fine."

* * * *

The next two days passed with still no word from Jamie. Brad had used his contacts and was calling in every favor he could think of to find some answers. The answers he was receiving were vague. He was given false leads by the courier service and told bold- faced lies by the supposed owner of the private plane that Jamie had been on. But Brad dug in deeper, willing to do almost anything to help his sister-in-law.

Erin's mood was increasingly sullen. She said nothing unless asked a question. She picked at her food, even when Bridgett brought her a juicy hamburger from her favorite fast food place. She was slipping away and they didn't know what to do.

Finally the time had come for Dr. Mathias to remove the bandages. Danielle and Bridgett stood by anxiously. Bridgett had brought her children, hoping they could help lift Erin's spirit with their exuberant personalities.

* * * *

Expensive leather shoes walked across the highly polished, gray, hospital floor. The casually dressed man could see the very distorted reflection of his bearded face and he didn't like what he saw. Timothy Casey stopped and considered his thoughts. *Why do I feel so angry, confused....scared. My daughter is about to see again for the first time in almost five years. But what will she see when she looks at me. What do I see? I love her and I know she is happy with the way she is...but...* His thoughts trailed off as he looked up and saw the number beside the open door. Realizing he had arrived, he cautiously approached the room at the end of the corridor. But he did not enter. He chose to remain quietly just outside the door where he could hear the events inside.

* * * *

Dr. Mathias sat the metal tray down on the bedside table then perched himself upon the rolling stool beside the small bed. "Are you ready Erin?"

"I guess," she said with barely an emotion. She sat up, pushed the blanket aside and tossed her legs off to the side of the bed. Her shoulders slumped as the Dr. reached for a pair of scissors.

He slowly and carefully cut away the thick gauze, being careful not to touch her skin or her hair. "I want you to keep your eyes closed until I say." He pulled away the bandage and discarded it. He then peeled off the two oval shaped pads that covered her eyes. He carefully probed the slightly reddened and puffy area where he had removed some scar tissue. "This looks really good Erin," he said in a quiet, but reassuring tone. "There is one tiny scar left that will be mostly hidden by your eyebrow. Other than that, it looks perfectly normal." She nodded. He then took a damp cotton swab and wiped away the residue of the antibiotic cream that had been applied since the surgery. "Okay, I want you to very slowly open your eyes. Everything will be blurry at first."

The room held its collective breath as Erin's eyelids twitched. Her lashes continued to flutter as the tired muscles struggled to move. Slowly her darkened world broke through to a palette of color. Blurred and very muted color, but defiantly the yellow of a shirt, the white of a lab coat; it

all happily spoke to her. Her head turned toward the window where the blue and green plaid curtains were illuminated from behind by beautiful golden sunlight. She expelled a small puff of air and a smile spread across her face as she looked back to the doctor. "Brown," she said simply.

A puzzled expression crossed his handsome features.

"Your tie," she explained. "It's brown and Winnie the Pooh has always been one of my favorites."

He patted her on the leg and gave her a big smile. "I'm very glad to hear that. I think there are some other folks here that you are probably anxious to see. I'll be back in a few hours to determine the specifics of your vision. I think you'll need to wear glasses, but I doubt that will be a problem. Get some rest," were his last instructions as he walked out the door.

Danielle was the first to reach the patient. She placed her hands on either side of Erin's face and just stared into the green eyes that now looked back. Her mouth trembled, wanting to say something, but she finally just pulled the seated woman into a fierce hug.

"I love you too Mom." Jamie was still at the top of all her thoughts, but this moment belonged to her family as much as to her. Their support and love, especially through the down times, was always crucial to Erin. She wanted to be positive for them now.

"Hey, can I get in on this?" asked Bridgett.

Erin tilted her head and studied her sister when she finally came into focus. "I had almost forgotten how pretty your hair is, even though it's a lot shorter." The sisters embraced.

"I'm so happy for you Erin. I love you."

"Thanks. I love you too." Erin was still a little weak from the inactivity and she leaned back against the raised mattress.

Bridgett took her children by the hand and brought them over to the bed. Caitlin immediately climbed onto her aunt's lap. She put her tiny hands on either side of Erin's face and leaned in real close. "Can you see me now Aunt Erin?"

The blonde smiled. "I sure can sweetheart," she said as she ran her fingers through the child's yellow, curly hair. "And you are absolutely adorable." The exuberant four year old bounced on her legs as Erin looked over to her nephew. He was still a little blurry, but his semi-toothless smile shone through loud and clear.

"Will you come and watch me do karate?" he asked excitedly.

"You bet sweetie."

Bridgett stepped forward and lifted the four year old off her sister's lap. "Okay guys, Aunt Erin needs some rest. We'll come back and see her later."

Erin smiled as two small hands waved goodbye. Once she was alone again, her head sank into the pillow. She closed her eyes for just a moment, wanting to test them, just to be sure. She had a sudden thought and her eyes popped open, almost startling her as the beaded white ceiling came into fuzzy view. Erin reached over to the bedside table and opened the drawer. She grabbed the small red velvet bag, pulled open the string closure and tuned it over in her hand. The shining golden, engagement ring lay in her palm, invoking the memory of the words that had accompanied the treasure. Erin picked it up with a trembling motion and slipped it back onto her finger. She must have stared at it for an hour before her tired eyes finally slipped shut. She raised her hand to her mouth and kissed the heart shaped stone that Jamie's lips had touched two days before.

* * * *

Erin heard muffled words near the doorway. She strained her hearing to make out who it was. *What am I doing, she thought. I can see now. Unless it was a dream. Please don't let it be a dream. Please.* Erin raised her head and blinked several times. The two fuzzy shapes turned in her direction. She could see enough to tell that it was Bridgett and her husband. She gave them a slight smile as they approached. But once she saw the expressions on their faces that smile fell like lead. "What? What is it?" She sat up quickly and nervously shifted the blanket over her lower body. "Tell me," she demanded. "It's Jamie isn't it? Where is she?"

Bridgett took her sister by the shoulders. "Erin calm down."

The author pulled away. "No! Just tell me what's going on."

"All right, all right. We Will." Bridgett nodded to her husband as a tear came to her eye.

The tall man stepped forward and clasped his wife's hand. "Erin, the plane Jamie was on...crashed."

Erin began to shake her head furiously, but she remained silent.

"They were over a mountainous region of Asia. Three people on board, including Jamie, were not found. But they are presumed...dead." He almost whispered the last word.

An icy hand clamped around her throat. The world stopped, as did her heart. Oh it still pumped blood to her organs, but there was nothing else. No feeling. No anger. No sorrow. Nothing.

"I am so sorry."

Erin sluggishly brushed aside her sister's comforting hands. She just sat there numbly, barely breathing. "You promised Jamie," she squeaked through parched lips. "You promised." The darkness swallowed her once again. Erin gave in to it and gave up everything else.

To be continued...

Author's note: Sorry about this particular cliffhanger. In light of recent events, the posting of this chapter is kind of bad timing and I would just like to refer everyone to the statement I made in the disclaimers in part one of this story. The next part will be out in a week or so. Oh and the sight of Jamie's disappearance is purely coincidental.

Continued in Part 4.

The Athenaeum's Scroll Archive

~ Seeing You, Again For the First Time ~

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.

Love/Sex Disclaimer: This story depicts a loving relationship between two consenting, adult women and contains scenes of intimacy, but nothing explicit. If you are under 18 years of age or if this type of story is illegal in the state or country in which you live, please do not read it. If depictions of this nature disturb you, you may wish to read something other than this story.

Hurt/Comfort Disclaimer: Major angst ahead. But have faith and remember, I love a happy ending!

Thanks so much to my beta reader Barb.

No copy write infringement is intended in the use of the lyrics to the song "At Your Side".

This is the sequel to my first story, "At First Sight". I would recommend that you read that one first.

All comments are welcome at colleen30@webtv.net

Part 4

Chapter 4

Bridgett turned off the main road and down the long, winding drive. A quarter of a mile later, she pulled up in front of the huge, old farmhouse. She climbed the wooden stairs, which creaked slightly under her running shoes and studied the wrap around porch, noticing two tiny cracks in

its cement surface. Nothing had been added since her last visit almost two months before, no furniture or potted plants, only the two spider webs that spanned the distance between the oak beams in the corners.

Two knocks on the heavy green door brought no answer. Bridgett tried the handle and when it turned in her grasp, she opened the door and stepped inside. "Erin," she called out. And then again. With no answer, she began searching the rooms.

The sparsely placed furniture hadn't been used by anyone in months. There were still a few unpacked boxes sitting in the corner of practically every room she entered. But there were no pictures or decorations on the walls, no knick-knacks or books sitting the shelves. Bridgett swiped one finger across the top of the black stereo unit and it came away covered in dust. She shook her head sadly.

Climbing the carpet-covered stairs, Bridgett made her way to her sister's bedroom, where the most depressing sight greeted her. A basket of freshly laundered, but horribly wrinkled clothes had been tossed on the floor inside the door. The big rumpled bed sat in the middle of the room, but it had rarely been slept in.

Near a corner window, on the floor, lay a nest of blankets and tear stained pillows. That was where Erin had crawled to every night, since mid-April, when it became too painful to sleep in their bed alone.

"All right Sis, I can see you've been lying to everyone. You are not fine and it's time to do something about that."

Bridgett headed down to the kitchen, still in search of her missing sister. There she found another room that seemed useless. A quick search of the cabinets and refrigerator uncovered only the bare necessities of food, enough to sustain life, but as with the rest of the house, nothing that spoke of the enjoyment of life. By the back wall sat a big, double dog dish, full on each side.

A golden, sad-eyed head poked its way through the swinging doggie door.

The red head knelt down and rubbed the drooping ears. "Hey girl. Do you know where your mommy is?"

The dog whimpered. "I know. You're sad too. Let's see if I can do something about this." Bridgett made her way out to the main barn through the back yard.

"Hello Mrs. Nelson," said the man brushing down a brown mare.

"Is my sister around here Dan?"

"She saddled up Simeron a few hours ago and rode out." He stepped over to the fence that separated them, removed his hat and wiped the sweat away from his smudged forehead. "She's

been doing that a lot here lately and the fellas and I are kinda worried. We like Miss Casey a lot and it's not really our business I guess...but we can see she's in pain."

"I know Dan. Thanks for caring. I'm glad she has you guys to watch over her. I'm gonna take the cart. I think I know where she might be."

A lot had happened in the last six months. Brad had kept digging for the truth about the plane crash, determined to find some answers for Erin. He was finally able to discover that the courier service was involved in illegal industrial espionage. The worst part of all was that Jamie had just been a decoy. She was only carrying blank documents and shouldn't have even been on that plane.

Eventually, enough of the wreckage was discovered to determine the cause of the crash, but a bomb had been ruled out immediately. The preliminary findings showed that it was mechanical failure due to lack of maintenance. Brad had immediately filed a lawsuit against the owner of the private plane on behalf of the families of the victims.

After Jamie's death, Erin had gone into a deep depression, but she had never shed a tear. At first she hid herself away at the beach house with only her four-legged companion. Her family gave her all the support they could, but little did they know what was going on inside the despondent blonde. When she was alone, Erin's mind was full of the memories she had of the love of her life. They would play over and over again like a cherished movie. But that's all Erin did, day after day. What was worse, she had no face to go with the memories, no photographs or video...nothing. She only saw the eyes. Those eyes that smiled at her, twinkling with the utter joy that they brought to one another. Eyes that cried with a pain that Erin would have given her life a thousand times over to stop. The eyes that possessed her, pierced her with that singular shade of blue that existed nowhere else, but in Erin's heart. Her soul had been on that plane, wrapped around the woman she loved and it died over and over again, every time she closed her eyes at night and opened them in the morning. The empty shell that had been left behind was soon to follow.

But then something changed.

One afternoon, about a month after her operation, Erin received a call from Mr. Phillips. He was the owner of the ranch Jamie had been desperate to buy. He was calling with a question about the horse Erin had bought Jamie for Christmas. During that conversation, Erin's mind latched on to a bare thread of hope. When she hung up from Mr. Phillips, she immediately called her banker and her lawyer. Two weeks later she was moving into the ranch house.

The bodies of Jamie and the two others were never recovered. The family had arranged a small memorial service for Jamie in a quiet corner of the ranch. But Erin had refused to attend. She wasn't angry, but wouldn't give a reason why and they didn't push her. They figured that she would go there on her own when she was ready.

As the end of March approached, her family was astounded at the change in Erin. She seemed back to her old self, happy and lively. Every time Danielle or Bridgett had talked to Erin, the

blonde always said she was so busy, that there were so many things to plan. No one questioned her or ever mentioned Jamie for fear of bringing back the pain.

The movie, being made from Erin's novel, was filmed without any further input from the author. She kept saying she had no time fly to the exotic shooting locations. And she hadn't touched a keyboard or a piece of paper. Her well of creativity had evaporated on the wind and her inspiration had vanished in the span of a heartbeat.

When Erin had regained her sight she kept the loyal four-footed friend, in some ways needing her even more than before. She had donated ten new puppies to the canine helpers program and had started a therapeutic program of her own at the ranch. Every week, ten blind children from the ages of seven to sixteen would spend the day at the ranch with their families, riding, playing games and having picnics. That quickly earned Erin an outstanding citizenship award, which she accepted graciously. But through all the laughter and smiles, Erin was harboring a dark secret. A secret that saw the light on a sunny April day and had devastated her once again.

* * * * *

Leather reins dragged the ground as the white horse munched on a patch of sweet green grass. She didn't need to be tied off because she would never stray far from the blonde author. The dark haired woman had named the treasured animal Simeron, after the character in the author's novel.

Erin could never bring herself to ride Teegan. She cherished Jamie's first horse and gave it all the love and respect that Jamie would have. But they had always ridden together when Erin was blind and without the tall woman to hold onto, it just wasn't the same.

Erin heard the drone of the golf cart and knew it was her sister approaching. Bridgett preferred a mode of transportation that didn't have a mind of its own.

The red head stopped the motorized vehicle far enough away as not to scare the grazing horse. Artemis hopped down off the back of the cart as Bridgett called for her wayward sister. But an answer was not forthcoming. She walked in circles, finally stopping by the strange, leaning tree. "I know you're here Sis. Come on out."

Something dropped to the ground behind her. "Right here Brig."

Bridgett jumped high into the air, almost to the perch Erin had just vacated. "Don't do that!" she yelled.

Erin gave a halfhearted chuckle. "What brings you all the way out here?"

Bridgett quickly regained her composure. "I just wanted to see you. You never call. The kids are really missing you."

Erin's eyes dropped under the rim of the Stetson she was wearing. "I know. I'm sorry. Tell them I miss them too."

"Why don't you come back with me and tell them yourself. You can stay for a week and we can talk and go shopping like old times."

Erin bent down and snatched a long blade of grass from the ground. "Nothing can ever be like old times for me Bridgett." She leaned back against the old tree, ripping the piece of foliage into strips. "I love you and the kids and I don't want to hurt any of you, but...I need you to try and understand."

"Erin, it's been six months."

The small woman turned away and shoved her left hand in the pocket of her jeans. There she rubbed her thumb over the golden band of the engagement ring still on her finger. "You say it's been six months...and I say it's only been six months. And it hurts today just as much as it did then. How long would it take for you to get over Brad's death?" she asked after a long pause.

Bridgett looked away and shook her head. "That's not the same."

Erin whirled around, her eyes slightly ablaze. "Why, because he's a man? I know you always thought this was just a phase and that Jamie and I wouldn't last."

"I didn't mean it like that Erin. I just meant that Brad and I have been together so long and we have children and..."

"How long does it take to know your soul mate? I knew right away. I wanted a lifetime with Jamie and I am mourning the future I lost with her. All the precious moments, the children we would have shared, the grandchildren we could have watched grow up, the anniversaries, the birthdays, the Christmas's that I will never get to spend with her. I ask you again, how would you feel?"

"Like half my world had been ripped away," whispered Bridgett.

"Well Jamie was my whole world. Oh I'll go on and with my luck I'll live to be a very old woman, but my life will never be the same."

"Alright, I can see how much pain you're still feeling. But can you really dishonor her memory?"

"What do you mean? There's not a second that goes by that I don't think of her."

"That's just it! No you shouldn't forget her, but you shouldn't waste the gift you were given. You can see again for the first time in five years, but all you have seen in the last six months is four walls and these sixty acres. Yes, it is beautiful here, but there is so much more beauty in the world to see. Remember how much Jamie wanted you to see again. Well see everything that she wanted for you. Make her proud."

Erin was silent for a very long time as she studied a half buried rock by the tip of her boot. She remembered the plans they had made to travel around the world, one country at a time. She bent

down and pulled a clover from beneath the edge of the stone. Its four leaves triggered thoughts of her grandmother and the stories she used to tell. "Ireland. We were going there on our honeymoon...I don't know...maybe."

"Do it Sis. Make yourself happy by making her happy."

* * * * *

Erin's first destination, upon arriving in Ireland, was her grandmother's farm in Kerry, near the southwestern shore. The traditional, old world cottage was nestled in the corner of a lush valley, nearly surrounded by a range of majestic, forested mountains. The emerald jewels stood high and proud against the soft blue sky, guarding the special land and her people.

As Erin started into the valley, an early morning rain had given way to the sun, bringing with it a pale rainbow of yellow, pink, blue and purple. Erin would find a treasure at the end, the grandmother that she had waited so long to see again.

Kathleen Casey was a small, but strong woman. She had barely been sick a day in her life and had given birth to three healthy children, at home. She had also done more than her share of midwifery, lending her magical touch to the births of a good portion of the population of Kerry, past and present. There were more than a few girls and boys who shared one of her names or at least a version of.

The white haired woman had an opinion on everything and was never shy about sharing it. Some called her feisty and she loved it when they did. Some called her a woman ahead of her time. But they all called her friend. The woman had nearly single-handedly seen to the day to day running of her farm since her return to her homeland six years before. Her flock of sheep produced some of the finest wool in the country, most of it being purchased by the best mills and hand weavers in the land and tuned into beautifully crafted garments. Her life was prosperous. She had seen wonderful times and sorrowful times. But no matter what the times, her family was always first in her mind and in her heart.

Kathleen stepped onto the porch when she saw the car coming down the dirt road. She waved excitedly the whole time Erin was moving up the bumpy drive. She had been anxious all morning waiting for her granddaughter to arrive. Erin hadn't told her grandmother of her impending visit, wanting to surprise her...but Kathleen knew.

Erin pulled the car to a stop, hurried through the small wooden gate and ran into her grandmother's arms. They hugged and held onto one another for half an hour, sharing their joy at being reunited.

The happy woman gave her granddaughter a quick tour of the tiny, five room cottage. The house would have been a picture postcard, perfectly depicting the traditional Irish lifestyle if not for one tiny reason. A gray satellite dish was perched upon the thatched roof. The modern day technology brought the rest of the world into Kathleen's day and many times through out the night as well.

Every wall in the house was a living pictorial history of the Casey and O'Rourke families. Erin had inherited her grandmother's strong sense of family and she reveled in that as she studied the cherished photos. There were the great-grandparents she had never met, the distant relatives who stood straight and tall, proudly wearing the uniforms in service their country. The black and white images painted a colorful history rich in champions of every imaginable kind, from the war veterans to the nurse who had adopted a lonely little boy who had lost his parents in an accident, to the mother who educated her own children at home when they suffered hateful prejudice in the public schools. There was a hero perched on every branch of Erin's family tree and even with the human flaws that plague everyone, they all held up the proud legacy. That is why Erin was so disappointed in her father's attitude toward her lifestyle. Even though he was misguided, he never lost his place in Erin's heart, just her life.

When he had been told of Jamie's death, he couldn't hold back the smile of relief. The rest of the grieving family had admonished him for his attitude and he did admit to himself that it was a tragic loss of a young woman with such promise for a future, but still...his daughter was once again...normal. He had approached Erin in mid February, as she was preparing to move. He was hoping to regain their closeness now that the obstacle was no longer in the way. He expressed his sympathies at her loss and explained his hopes for their future relationship. But Erin was not swayed. She had told him that she loved him and always would, but if he didn't want her around while Jamie was in her life, then she didn't want him to be around now. He walked away despondent, but still knowing that his daughter was better off alone.

Erin enthusiastically told her grandmother of the family back home. She presented new pictures to fill what few empty spaces were left on the walls and shelves. She told the story of her restored eyesight and of her successful career. Kathleen had read Erin's novel and told her how proud she was of her. She neared the end of her stories and was about to ask of her grandmother's life, but the white haired woman had another plan.

"Tell me about yer love?" she asked with her heavy accent.

For just a second Erin was stunned, but she quickly remembered that you could never underestimate Kathleen Rose O'Rourke Casey. Erin hadn't intended to make her grandmother unhappy by telling her about her lost relationship with Jamie, but the old woman had seen and felt the sadness behind Erin's smile. They sat in rocking chairs in front of the small, stone fireplace as Erin told her tale, which was anything but a fairytale with the proverbial happy ending.

Halfway through the story a wrinkled hand clasped onto Erin's slightly trembling one. That touch helped her finish without too many tears.

"Tis heartbreakin ta hear that ya lost yer mate after such a short time together," said Kathleen. "She sounds like a lovely young lass."

Weary green eyes met. "She was Grandma, she was." Erin stood and went to the small window. She looked out over the meadow full of grazing sheep, put her arms around herself and sighed.

"What is it honey?"

The blonde head shook. "I just feel like...I could have prevented it." Erin turned back to the seated woman and knelt down in front of her. "I knew something bad was going to happen to her, Grandma. I heard the leprechaun's whisper. I should have found a way to stop her, I should have..."

"No, dear. No." Kathleen caressed the soft hair on the head lying in her lap. "I know it feels that way sweetheart...I do know. And I also know that ya did everything possible to protect her. But I bet she was a wee bit stubborn. No matter how much she loved you, she had ta do things her way."

Erin nodded. "How did you know that?"

Kathleen smiled. "We seem to be attracted to that type, you and me." She continued to rock softly, letting Erin feel the comfort. They both watched the dancing flames, each thinking about their lost soul mates. "It was the first time ya heard, wasn't it?" Kathleen finally asked.

"Yes."

The older woman gently pulled Erin's face to meet hers. "I'm going to tell ya somethin sweetheart, somethin no one else knows. Because no one else would understand."

Erin looked at her grandmother with quizzical eyes, but listened intently.

"Ya know that yer grandfather died when you were just a wee one."

"He had a heart attack."

"Yes, but I knew it was gonna happen. I knew weeks ahead of time, but he was so stubborn, the old goat. He called me daft and promised me he was in the best of health. But I woke up one mornin...and he didn't. He passed away peacefully, but he took a part of me with him."

Erin nodded staunchly and tears of agreement rolled down her face. "Does the pain ever go away Grandma?" Calloused hands touched her face.

"No dear. Not completely. But I came ta realize that it was just his time. Ronan and I had forty-two wonderful years together. We raised three beautiful children. And we saw seven absolutely adorable grandchildren come into this world."

"But I didn't get to do any of that with Jamie," Erin whispered thickly.

"You will dear, you will."

Erin stood and wrapped a brightly patterned quilt around her shoulders, feeling the warmth of the love with which it was handcrafted. "I don't think so Grandma. I could never love anyone else with the intensity that I loved Jamie. And that wouldn't be fair to them."

Kathleen soon joined Erin by the window. She put her arm around the sad girl and closed her eyes. "She's still here ya know," said Kathleen after a long silence.

"I know Grandma. I feel her spirit with me all the time. Just like you feel Grandpa's."

The older woman nodded, but instead of sadness a strange twinkle filled her eyes. "I'm gonna make us some tea darlin." She came back minutes later carrying a tray with a steaming china pot, matching cups and golden biscuits laced with almonds.

Erin's eyes lit up at the sight of the sweet treats. She quickly sat down beside Kathleen and reached for a biscuit. Erin drizzled honey over the fluffy confection and bit into it with anticipation. She swallowed with a euphoric expression on her face. "You have no idea how much I have missed these. They are incredible."

A smile spread the wrinkled face. "Maybe it's time I teach ya to make them."

Green eyes went wide. "Are you joking?"

"A Casey woman never jokes about baking."

"Well I know I couldn't make them as good as these, but I would love for you to show me."

"Then I will. But first I want you ta do somethin for me Erin."

"Anything Grandma."

"I want ya to go back ta Dublin and visit there like ya planned."

"I will Grandma, in a few days, but first I wanted to visit with you. I miss you so much."

"And I you darlin. But will ya do like I asked first?"

Erin was puzzled, but couldn't refuse her grandmother's request. "Well, if that's what you want."

"It is. And I promise you will understand before ya return home."

Continued in Part 5.

~ Seeing You, Again For the First Time ~

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.

Love/Sex Disclaimer: This story depicts a loving relationship between two consenting, adult women and contains scenes of intimacy, but nothing explicit. If you are under 18 years of age or if this type of story is illegal in the state or country in which you live, please do not read it. If depictions of this nature disturb you, you may wish to read something other than this story.

Hurt/Comfort Disclaimer: Major angst ahead. But have faith and remember, I love a happy ending!

Thanks so much to my beta reader Barb.

No copy write infringement is intended in the use of the lyrics to the song "At Your Side".

This is the sequel to my first story, "At First Sight". I would recommend that you read that one first.

All comments are welcome at colleen30@webtv.net

Part 5

Chapter 5

Erin took the train back to Dublin and arrived at four in the afternoon, but she spent the rest of the day in her hotel room. She stayed there, not so much from being tired, but more from the morose feeling that had descended over her. She had started to feel excitement at the prospect of exploring the land of her heritage, but when she had gone to check in at the hotel, the couple in front of her had been wrapped around each other, smiling, whispering and kissing. They were so happy to be on their honeymoon, they had told the man behind the desk. After that scene, Erin couldn't get the thoughts of Jamie out of her head.

In her cool, comfortable room, the soft, melodious notes of the local music had serenaded her from a radio and after a light meal they had lulled her to sleep. Her dreams that night were surprisingly pleasant. They were filled with the sounds of Jamie's voice, telling Erin how much she loved her and how nothing could ever really separate them. Jamie's last whispered words finally set Erin's heart and her mind down a new path. She had said, "Above all else, I want you to live." Erin awoke the next morning with a smile on her face and lightness in her soul.

* * * *

Erin stepped from the taxi, walked up to the courtyard and through the black iron gates. She had set out bright and early, determined to see all she could in her five day stay. Her first stop was Trinity College.

Tall, stone pillars with ornamental end caps, decorated the facade of the main entrance. A blue-faced clock, high in the eaves, chimed eight thirty as she opened the large wooden door. Erin entered with great respect and quietly walked the public halls of the huge building, appreciating the architecture and artistry. School citations and awards hung on the walls, telling the world of the fine academic reputation of the Irish institute.

She spent over two hours perusing the many books in the huge old library, but the one that sparked the greatest emotions was the famous Book of Kells. As she stood there looking through the glass case, Erin found herself shedding a tear as she gazed upon the pages of the ancient manuscript. She was in awe of the artwork that had been painstakingly handcrafted with nothing more than a quill and ink. After several minutes gazing at the pages and thinking about its creation, she had a sudden flash of something.

Her modern day surroundings faded away as she looked down at her own hands and saw her calloused fingers delicately holding a white, feathered quill. She watched it glide across the tan parchment, forming the words of an unfamiliar language. Twilight was descending over the trees whose branches rustled in the breeze. The trace scent of burning wood wafted under her nose as Erin closed her eyes and let herself drift further into the vision. A garbled voice asked her something about fish and she felt herself responding yes and giggling. Fingertips traced her cheek and Erin reached up to touch the hand, but there was nothing. She jerked at the sound of a voice, but it was not the voice in the dream.

"I didn't mean ta startle ya, but are ya all right?" The gray haired man gazed at her with caring eyes.

She was still slightly dazed as he guided her to a high backed chair in the corner of the room. He stepped away for a minute and quickly returned with a small cup of cool water.

Erin drank down the soothing liquid and returned his worried smile. "Thank you. I'm fine now. I just...I'm not sure what happened, but it was interesting." Her eyes drifted over to the book that had triggered...whatever it was she had experienced.

He followed her line of sight. "It tis a magical piece of history, isn't it? I'm Byron Elias Niessen, by the way."

Her small hand was enveloped by his larger one. "Erin Casey."

His head nodded. "Aye, not a home grown lass, but a daughter of the land none the less."

"Yes. My grandparents and my father were born here, but this is my first visit."

"Well, allow me to bestow a proper welcome." He pulled the small white bloom from the lapel of his jacket and presented it to her.

She took a sniff of the sweet flower. "Thank you." She rose from the chair with his hand on her elbow for support. "Again, thank you for your help, but I guess I should be going. I have a lot more to see."

He gave a gallant nod of his head. "Of course. Maybe we'll see each other again before ya leave," he suggested.

She thought that was probably impossible, but didn't want to insult him. "Maybe."

He took a silver watch from his pocket and flipped open the casing. "May I suggest a walk through St. Stephens Green ta clear yer head. The fountain sparkles under the mid-day sun and it also carries a little magic if ya feed it a coin or two."

She couldn't help but smile at the charming man. "I'll take that advice. Good-bye Mr. Neissen."

Erin strolled through the peaceful green park, enjoying the sights. She studied the faces of the enchanting people around her. The smiles that spoke a dozen different reasons. The serious face of a student enthralled in a textbook. A mother's love as she wiped away a tear from her child that had taken a fall. They were people she didn't know, but brothers and sisters just the same.

The bright sun was just enough to warm her pale skin as she skirted the park's boundaries, passing by the big sprouting fountain. It was just before noon and some people were gathering to eat their mid-day meal in the beautiful outdoor setting. She fished two coins from her pocket, closed her eyes and tossed them into the clear water. A small smile and a fluttering of her heart accompanied the wish.

She took a moment to once again think about the strange vision she had had at the library. It was so real...the smells, the sounds. And that touch. It was laced with incredible affection...the kind she had felt with... *No! I can't keep doing this. I'm moving on.* And move on she did.

She rounded the fountain and was heading for the small cafe on the other side of the park when something caught her eye. Sitting next to the fountain, on a wooden bench, was a woman wearing dark glasses. She was tall and very thin and her short hair was inky black. Her head was lowered and her hands lay still in her lap. The woman's body posture spoke of someone who was despondent and alone. *She's lost*, thought Erin sadly. *She's a lost soul.* Erin also thought that the woman might be blind and that tore at her heart, remembering her sightless years. *Maybe she just wants to be alone. Or maybe she has no one else.* Erin continued to study the woman for quite sometime. Her scrutiny continued to go unnoticed and she found herself strolling closer with every second. When she was just a few feet from the woman, the dark head turned in her direction. The two said nothing, but looked only at each other as the rest of the world continued on around them.

Finally Erin broke from the moment. "I'm sorry. I don't mean to disturb you, but you look like you've lost your best friend."

The other woman sighed. "I probably have." Her voice was low and gravely, but she definitely had an American accent.

Erin saw the scar across the side of her neck and once again felt empathy for the woman. "I'm Erin Casey," she said extending a friendly hand.

It was graciously taken and held for just a second. "Jane Sims. Please excuse my voice. I suffered some injuries to my vocal cords recently and they still haven't quite healed."

Erin smiled and slowly moved onto the bench next to the stranger. "That's okay. You sound fine. Where are you from in the states?"

Jane looked away, embarrassed. "I don't know," she whispered.

Erin didn't quite understand, but she felt this woman's pain. "If you need someone to talk to, I'm a good listener."

Jane hesitated. She felt very confused, but one look at the compassionate smile bolstered her confidence. "Yeah, maybe I can talk to you."

They both pulled one leg up on the seat and turned to face one another. Erin decided that she should make some further introductions. "I'm from California. But don't believe everything you hear about California blondes. Although I have met some less than scholarly towheads, I can promise you some reasonably intelligent conversation."

Jane laughed quietly, realizing that it was the first time she had taken the time to see humor, even in such a simple statement. Even Lia hadn't been able to make her truly laugh. "I believe you," she said to the blonde. "It's me I'm worried about. I'm afraid I don't have much of a story to tell." She took another, closer look at the kind face with the gentle, but expectant expression. "But here goes." She cleared her throat, but the raspy quality of her voice remained. "The same accident that did this to my voice, took away all of my memories. I have no idea what my real name is, where I'm from, if I have family or friends...nothing."

That confession was totally unexpected and Erin was momentarily speechless. "Well, I... can only imagine how that must feel." She paused. "No I can't," she added with down cast eyes.

Jane understood what she meant. "Most of the time I'm afraid to feel. I'm afraid I'll lose my sanity. I'm just...empty."

Erin placed a comforting hand on the dark haired woman's arm. "As I said, I can't really understand exactly what you're going through, but I can relate. Several years ago I was in a horrible explosion. I lost my sight."

Jane hung onto her every word as Erin continued.

"Only a few months ago did I get it back, due to a miracle and a very gifted doctor." Erin looked off into the distance through the misty, barely there tears in her eyes. "Unfortunately, I lost something even more special to me at the same time."

Somehow Jane read between the lines and she knew that Erin was referring to a loved one. "I'm very sorry." The quiet between them lingered until Jane remembered something she had heard a few weeks before. "A love lost remains constant in a left behind heart. Each sunrise brings good memories and souls never part."

"That was beautiful," said Erin. "Thank you."

That Jane would try so hard to console someone she'd just met, told of a caring heart. And her choice of words was made even more touching when she had no memories of her own loved ones.

Erin's melancholy faded just a touch and a new feeling began to trickle over her like the soft drops of a spring shower. The corners of her mouth curled into a warm smile. "Maybe we could both use a friend," she suggested brightly.

The dark haired woman grasped onto the offer with renewed strength. "I'd like that," she said with a smile of her own. Jane stiffly got to her feet. "How about I treat my new friend to lunch?"

"Only if I buy dinner."

They found their way over to the small outdoor café, where they were shown to the last available table in the back, protected from the sun by a towering, old oak. They choose a light meal from the menu and two orders of mushroom soup and fresh bakd bread was soon on its way to the kitchen.

They enjoyed the talent of a nearby street performer as they waited for their food. With guitar in hand, he sang of Irish eyes and roses wild, from Kathleen to Maggie Brown and traveled in verse from Tipperary to Tralee. The audience, of mostly tourists, showed their appreciation in applause.

From behind her dark, prescription sunglasses, Erin once again studied the body language of the quiet woman across from her.

Jane sat slumped shouldered, twitching every now and then from aches and pains that traveled across her back. Her lips tightened to keep from groaning against the strong sensations. She reached into the pouch, secured around her waist and pulled out a brown bottle. She flipped the lid and chased down two white pills with a swig from the bottle of water the waitress had brought. With a deep breath her body seemed to relax, knowing that the pain would soon ease. "I'm sorry," she said. "I don't seem to be much of a conversation starter."

Erin smiled, trying to put the timid woman at ease. "That's okay, I am. And if my questions get to be too much, feel free to tell me to mind my own business."

"I don't think that will be necessary. I feel very... comfortable with you." Jane shook her head. "Maybe that's because you are the first person who isn't poking and prodding me, trying to analyze me or pushing me to do something I'm not ready for." The anger filled emotions drew her fingers into a fist. She looked up see the sadness change Erin's previously sunny expression. And she felt guilty. "I'm sorry." Jane stood to leave. "Maybe this wasn't such a good idea."

Erin felt a desperation grip her. She needed to talk with this woman. And even more, she knew this woman needed her. "No, please. It's fine. If you need to vent your frustrations go ahead. After my accident I was angry for weeks." She placed a gentle hand on Jane's arm. "I do understand."

Jane believed her. And she didn't really want to leave. For the first time in many months she felt something new. She felt the need to take a first step and start her life or to be more precise, create a life. And a new friend was a wonderful thing to start with.

Jane reclaimed her seat as Erin asked, "Should we talk about something else?"

The dark haired woman laughed softly. "Well, since I don't know about anything else, I guess not."

Erin cooled the spoonful of steaming soup with a soft breath. "What kind of accident was it?" she asked, hesitantly.

"I don't know," said Jane, pulling off a chunk of the thick, crusty bread. "I don't remember anything about it. A farmer found me lying in his field. No one knew how I got there." She stopped to take another sip of water. "I was barely alive. My back was broken." Her hand drifted to the scar at her neck. "I had a lot of wounds. The doctor said my recovery was a miracle. They never expected me to come out of the coma and when I did, it took months of rehabilitation to get me walking again. I spent my recovery time in a medical center. There were a couple of special nurses there who would never let me give up, now matter how much I yelled at them. When I was recovered enough to leave, they all chipped in and gave me this trip as a present."

Erin nodded. "Why Ireland?" she asked, as she continued eating her lunch.

Jane paused. "I'm not really sure. They gave me this huge map and all these travel brochures. Everyone was suggesting all these tropical places, like Hawaii, Jamaica, the Bahamas. But none of those places appealed to me. One evening when we were alone, Lia, she was one of the nurses, told me to consider Ireland. I started reading about it and... I don't know. Something just made me choose it. I get the feeling it has some special meaning to me." She looked back over the park. "Maybe I was hoping to find someone here who knew me. It was a long shot I know, but... How about you?"

"Well, my family is from here. My father was always too busy with work when I was a child and we never got to come here as a family. But I always longed to visit." The smile she had sported, slowly faded. "Actually this trip was supposed to be my honeymoon. But my fiancé died before our wedding."

"I'm so sorry."

"Thanks. Jamie was my whole world, but I know she wouldn't want me to spend the rest of my life in mourning. It's just so hard facing everyday without her. We had so many plans for the future." Erin wiped away a lone tear. "I still can't seem to stop crying when I think about her. But those sunrises give me hope for tomorrow."

"I had someone that important to me too," said Jane with a hitch of emotion. Her comment surprised them both. "Hearing the love in your voice just now, triggered something. Not really a memory, but a feeling. Thank you. That's the first thing from my past that has come back to me."

Erin's sadness suddenly flew away and her hand landed on top of Jane's. "I hope everything comes back to you, including that one special person."

"Just talking to you has made me feel so much better."

"For me too. How about we do some sightseeing?"

* * * *

They spent three hours touring the National Museum, learning about the ancient Celts and in particular, a flame haired warrior queen. They saw artifacts from the area that dated back to the Stone Age and read about Celtic Christianity, Protestant conquest and famine and immigration. Together they absorbed the history lesson and each was happy to have a companion to share it with.

When they were leaving, Jane suddenly realized that she had been so pleasantly pre-occupied that her own problems were put to the far recesses of her mind, replaced by pure enjoyment. She smiled all the way to their next destination.

St. Patrick's Cathedral gave them both a sense of unbelievable serenity. They stood in the sun's rays that flowed through the breathtakingly beautiful stained glass panels lining the upper walls. As they were absorbing the moment, their hands touched and clasped just for an instant before they were interrupted by the tour guide and led away. They made no further mention of the touch as the hours went on, but the special moment would be forever remembered by each of them.

Late in the day, Erin and Jane were strolling back through the park where they had met. Jane removed her sunglasses and slipped them into her shirt pocket. Just minutes before, Erin had changed into her regular wire framed eyeglasses.

"Would like to join me for some Irish dancing lessons tomorrow?" asked Erin.

Jane chuckled. "I don't think my back would enjoy that particular activity, but I wouldn't mind watching you. Then maybe we could do something else?" she asked hopefully.

Erin had smiled more in that one day than in all the previous six months. "All right, that sounds like a plan." They soon came to the park's exit. "I'm staying at the Shelbourne," she said, pointing to the fancy building across the street.

"I'm just down the way at the Buswells. I'll meet you here in the morning at... eight."

"That'll work."

They turned to one another and both were struck speechless as their eyes locked. It was the first time all day that Erin had been without her dark sunglasses. And the lenses through which Jane had seen her new friend were auburn and had certainly distorted the color. They were both embarrassed by the mute staring, but hated to break away.

"Winter in Switzerland," whispered Erin.

"Huh?" asked the awe struck woman.

"Sky's blue reflecting off an ice capped mountaintop." Erin finally looked away, blushing. "Your eyes...I'm sorry, it's the writer in me. Beautiful things just inspire me."

"Don't be sorry. I was just going to say that there are now forty one shades of green in Ireland."

Erin blushed even harder at the compliment. "Thank you."

Jane shifted and took a few steps back. "I'll see you tomorrow Erin. Goodnight."

"Goodnight."

Jane watched as the blonde carefully crossed the road and entered the brightly lit building. Once she had disappeared into the lobby, Jane headed down the sidewalk to her own hotel.

* * * *

Erin stepped out of the shower and wrapped herself in a warm robe. She stopped to look at the mirror and caught sight of her own eyes and remembered the compliment from her new friend. "I never really thought I would find joy in anything again. But today I had fun," she admitted to her reflection. She took off the robe, slipped into her nightclothes then into bed. Erin snuggled deep into the covers and smiled. "I love you Jamie and I always will. But I know you want me to be happy. In fact, I felt your presence with me today, guiding me. I miss you." Slumber claimed her, but for the first time in months she didn't dream about her lost love.

* * * *

The low morning sun filtered through the thick pane of glass, spilling out across the table where Erin and Jane were enjoying a traditional breakfast fry. The meal included bacon, fried eggs, grilled tomatoes, potato cakes and black pudding. The huge servings promised to provide plenty of energy for their busy day.

Erin wisely decided not to attempt the dancing lessons on such a full stomach, so they mutually agreed to visit the local zoo first.

The interesting array of specimens from the wild kingdom fascinated them for several hours, during which time Erin told her new friend about her family and her childhood.

Jane enjoyed hearing the amusing tales. She listened to the love in Erin's voice as she spoke, but her thoughts drifted. *Surely I have family, parents looking for me. But how can they find me? I have to look for them. But how in the world do I even start?*

"Jane? Jane?"

The dark head shook. "I'm sorry that was very rude. I really am interested in your life."

"But it makes you think of what you are missing?"

Jane shrugged. "Everything makes me think of that. But I don't want to be a downer. So where are we off to next?" She chuckled as Erin excitedly ran over to the next exhibit.

They laughed as they watched the wild antics of a troop of monkeys chasing each other over and around the trees in their exhibit. Erin gave a cute squeak when she spotted a baby riding under its mother's belly, as she walked along on all fours.

The tigers splashed around in their pool, playing with a huge, blue, hard plastic ball.

Jane had snagged a single use camera at a vendor and insisted on taking a picture of Erin feeding the giraffes. She snapped it just as the long, dark tongue wrapped around the piece of carrot Erin held in her hand. The blonde had broken out in a surprised grin at the tickling sensation.

Jane went on to take several more pictures when they visited the petting zoo. She was sure the smile hadn't left her face all morning as she laughed out loud when a goat nudged Erin in the behind, causing her to squeal.

"You think that's funny huh?" the blonde asked.

Jane held her stomach as she nearly doubled over. "Yeah...yeah I do. I think he likes you."

Erin crooked a finger at the laughing woman. "Well why don't you come over here with our furry friends and we'll see what kind of love connection you can make."

Jane straightened up and marched in the fray of four legged creatures. She scratched behind the floppy ears of an adorable, white goat as Erin looked on.

"She's not quite as cute as Artemis," said the author. "But that is a face."

"Who's Artemis?"

"My Golden Retriever."

"I bet she's beautiful. They had one at the center. He was twelve and a little slow footed, but very lovable." Jane leaned over once again and gave a last pat to the goat's head. Suddenly she was hit from behind and falling forward. The white goat made a hasty retreat and Jamie fell into Erin's surprised arms. They were both stunned as they held an almost hypnotic gaze. "I'm sorry," said Jane, as she regained her balance. Still shaken, not from the fall, but from the feeling of Erin's arms around her, Jane straightened her rumpled clothing, looking everywhere but the Irish woman's face. "They should put a warning sign on that billy," she chuckled.

Erin also had to calm herself after their momentary encounter. "Yeah. Let's get out of the line of fire."

They grabbed a cool drink as they headed back toward the zoo's exit, stopping momentarily to watch an elephant, which seemed to be giving itself a bath. The comfort level had once again returned as they chatted about the beautiful scenery.

Near the exit, they came to a lush garden with an interestingly shaped, metal bench right in the center of a rainbow of petals.

"Go sit down and I'll take your picture," said Erin, as she held out her hand for the camera.

A shiver went down Jane's back. "I...don't..." Her hand reached up to touch the scar on her neck. "I'd rather not."

Erin laid a comforting hand on her back. "That's all right. Let's go." She grinned, trying to lighten the mood. "I've got some dancing to do."

* * * *

Erin and Jane sat in the front row of the small dance hall. The lively music filled the room as a tall woman, with a mane of curly red hair, flitted around the room like a butterfly. She barely touched the ground beneath her feet as she gracefully executed a series of short kicks and silent tapping. The joy on her face was infectious as she moved from one end of the room to the other, dancing on her toes, interpreting the notes being played on the high pitched flute. She finished in a flurry to a generous amount of applause from the dozen or so spectators.

They then watched in fascination as the music ended and six young women marched to the middle of the stage. Their feet began moving at an incredible pace. There was no need for an

accompanying melody, their synchronized, rhythmic tapping created the music. Jane looked over to Erin, tilted her head and with a raised eyebrow wished her luck.

Soon the show was over.

After talking for a short time with one of the helpful instructors, Erin abandoned her Nike's and slipped into a proper pair of dancing shoes. She listened carefully to the words of the teacher and together they walked out the moves one by one. After a few minutes of doing that, the teacher nodded for the music to begin. Erin started moving her feet to the slow beat and she did quite well until the next section of music started and the pace picked up. She began to kick herself in the ankles again and again, knowing there would be bruises the next day. She looked over at her new friend and made a silly face at her own clumsy moves. A huge smile beamed across the dark haired woman's face and she threw her head back in merriment.

The practice continued, even as Erin began tripping over her own feet. She raised herself from the floor at one point and looked to see Jane laughing. But Erin never once felt that she was being laughed at, but laughed with, as she herself soon had tears running down her face.

That evening they dined on fish and chips at the popular Leo Burdocks, as they reminisced about the day's events.

When twilight had long passed, they once again walked through the park on the way back to their hotels.

"Are my feet sore," said Erin, as she nearly limped along.

"I can just imagine. Let's sit down over here for a while."

They stepped up into the huge gazebo and sat side by side on one of the white, wooden benches. Erin slipped out of her shoes and rotated her stiff ankles.

Without even thinking, Jane reached down and lifted the sore feet into her lap and began rubbing them. Neither one found the act awkward. Jane knew well of pain and she just wanted to provide some relief if she could.

Erin reveled in the touch that seemed so familiar. She chose not to dwell on the thought and just went with the feeling. She closed her eyes and lay her head back against the seat. "Ooooo, thank you," she moaned. "That feels so good."

Jane merely nodded, concentrating on the task instead of the other things she was feeling.

"I think tomorrow," Erin slurred through a yawn, "we should do something that doesn't require pounding the floor with my tender tootsies."

Tomorrow. For once Jane liked the sound of that word. And she liked it even more that it was going to still be shared with her new friend. She was afraid she might be intruding on Erin's

vacation, but she had become attached to the personable young woman and didn't know what she would do when the time came for them to go their separate ways. Even without her memories, Jane had found herself feeling whole while in the company of Erin Casey.

Jane listened as the breathing of her companion became slow and even. She didn't think Erin would want to fall asleep there, so after a few minutes of contemplation she asked a question that had been on her mind. She wanted to know what kind of a person Erin would love. "Tell me about Jamie."

A small smile came across her lips and Erin slowly opened her eyes. She looked passed Jane into the distance as she spoke. "Jamie was intelligent. She had a great sense for business, even though she would have told you otherwise. She was funny. She could chase away my blues with a tickle or the worst joke you've ever heard." She chuckled then paused. "I felt safe in her arms, but there were times when I needed to protect her. She would never allow anyone else to see it, but she had some insecurities because of some incidents in her past. Physically, Jamie was almost as different from me as you could get...but we fit, perfectly. I knew that I had been lonely before, but until we met, I didn't realize just how much was missing from my life. Jamie made me complete...even if it was just for such a short time."

When Erin was through with her story, they both silently looked out over the calm lake. Darkness was all around them and there were just a few people left in the park. A light mist began to fall as they got up and silently walked back to their hotels.

Continued in Part 6.

The Athenaeum's Scroll Archive

~ Seeing You, Again For the First Time ~ 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.

Love/Sex Disclaimer: This story depicts a loving relationship between two consenting, adult women and contains scenes of intimacy, but nothing explicit. If you are under 18 years of age or if this type of story is illegal in the state or country in which you live, please do not read it. If depictions of this nature disturb you, you may wish to read something other than this story.

Hurt/Comfort Disclaimer: Major angst ahead. But have faith and remember, I love a happy ending!

Thanks so much to my beta reader Barb.

No copy write infringement is intended in the use of the lyrics to the song "At Your Side".

This is the sequel to my first story, "At First Sight". I would recommend that you read that one first.

All comments are welcome at coleen30@webtv.net

Part 6

Chapter 6

They each had breakfast in their own rooms the next morning, but had made plans to meet by the fountain at 9:00. Jane had arrived half an hour early and was soaking in the early morning sun and reading through a US Today newspaper that she had gotten at a corner newsstand. She knew she had a lot of catching up to do when she got back to the states. Not just a few months worth, but a lifetime's worth.

Once her injuries had been well on their way to healing, her doctor had contacted the proper authorities and explained Jane's situation. They ran her fingerprints, but there was no match found. After a lot of strong and sometimes heated discussions, the politicians finally accepted her status as a United States citizen and began the process of re-establishing a legal identity. The red tape was arduous and the amount of paperwork incredible, but finally she was granted a new birth certificate, placing her age at thirty-two, a new social security number and a passport. They informed her that should her memories return and should she be able to prove it, she would be allowed to resume her true identity. They had asked her what name she wanted and although many were suggested, she had gotten used to being called Jane by the people at the hospital. Choosing a last name became a much more difficult task. After all it was something she might have to live with for a very long time. While perusing a list she was given, she came to the names Sims and Simmons. Something about them struck a cord within her hidden memories, but she just couldn't pull out the reason why. She had finally decided to go with the shorter name and Jane Sims was born.

Jane had felt invisible during that time. People were arguing over her and about her like she was a useless, unwanted object instead of a human being with feelings. At night she would fall into bed with her spirit bleeding. She didn't even feel worthy of her own tears. Then one night, during a restless sleep, she heard a voice within her dreams. The gentle voice simply said, "You are not alone." The phrase repeated over and over until it had permeated her lonely soul and she woke up believing it. From that day on the sadness of not knowing exactly who she was still lingered, but the overwhelming despair had been lifted by...what, she didn't know, but she prayed that someday she would find out.

Jane looked up from her paper and her blue eyes kindled with joy as she saw Erin walking toward her-make that limping toward her. She winced in empathy as Erin got closer. The injured woman shrugged a shoulder and sat down with a sigh of relief.

Jane tapped a jean-covered leg with her folded newspaper. "Maybe we should take the day off," she suggested.

The blonde head shook staunchly. "No, no. I refuse to let a little pain stop me." She heard the soft snort beside her. "Okay a lot of pain. But I will persevere. Maybe you could carry me piggy back," she joked, as another small throb passed through her foot.

The dark haired woman grinned as an idea popped into her head. "Instead of a piggy, how about a horse?"

Erin jerked up from her slumped position. "What did you say?"

"We could go horseback riding. I heard about a stable that rents horses for the day and..." Jane noticed the odd expression on her companion's face. "What's wrong? Don't you like horses?"

"No...I mean yes, I love horses. In fact I own a ranch back in California."

Jane's face brightened even more. "Wow, that must be a dream. To have those beautiful animals around all the time and to be able to go riding whenever you want."

Erin's time on the ranch had been a severely mixed bag of emotions, but still..."Yeah it is," she said wistfully. "What is your experience with horses?" she asked after a slight pause.

"It was part of my rehabilitation at the center. They had three of the gentlest horses there and I helped take care of them. Lia said I needed something to spark my interest. All I ever did was read and she said I needed some outside, fun activity, so she introduced me to the man who owned the horses. I took to them right away and them to me. She called me a Doctor Dolittle because I could almost talk to them and understand them."

Erin had been quiet during her explanation, the skin above her nose wrinkled with concern.

"Am I boring you?" Jane asked with an insecure tone.

"No, of course not. It's just...never mind." Erin pushed the melancholy expression from her face and smiled. "Actually that sounds like fun. And my feet will be forever grateful. Let's go." Erin took Jane by the hand, they hopped into a cab and off they went.

* * * *

The chestnut colored gelding galloped past the black mare and her blonde headed rider. "Come on slow poke," Jane yelled over her shoulder. "Last one back to the stable buys dinner."

"You better check your wallet then, my friend," said Erin as she watched the pair round a curve in the trail ahead. A few clicks of her tongue and a poke of her heels sent the ebony steed racing toward the finish line.

She easily caught up to Jane, who was relishing her place in the saddle and her apparent victory. A cloud of dust was left in their wake as they ran side-by-side, exchanging leads only by a nose. They turned to smile at one another several times before the end of the trail came into sight.

God this is great! Thought Jane. *I don't want this trip to end!* She turned to her companion one final time and gave her a smug wink.

Oh that does it, Erin said to herself. "Yah! Yah!" she yelled aloud. Several flourished kicks sent four hooves pounding the dirt and flying past the over confident brunette.

Erin cruised into the huge corral followed closely by the losing horse and rider. She pulled her steed around and flashed a triumphant glare. They walked the horses around for a few more minutes before ending up side by side, facing each other.

Erin reached out a hand. "No hard feelings."

Jane accepted the hand and bit back a grin. "No, no hard feelings."

Erin continued to watch as Jane tried very hard to keep from laughing. They both dismounted and led the horses back to the barn. But Erin stopped suddenly and grabbed Jane's arm. "Did you just let me win?" she asked.

The taller woman looked down with innocence. "Absolutely not. You beat me fair and square."

There was a pause as Erin stared into the sparkling blue eyes. "Right."

Back at the barn they offered to unsaddle and brush down the horses themselves. The big, brown horse, named Duffy, became restless, pawing at the ground and snorting as his saddle was removed. Jane gave a stern tug on the leather halter than began to hum lightly.

Erin finished with her smaller horse and just watched in fascination as the other animal began to calm down. At one point Jane leaned forward and whispered something into the sable ear. The horse bobbed its head in response and whinnied loudly.

Erin laughed silently and walked over to a basket in the corner. She returned to offer both horses a couple of small, sweet apples. They munched on the treats as Jane finished the grooming and tossed the brush into the tack box.

"Well Doctor D, you certainly do have a way with them," Erin said with a smile.

Jane gave the horse one final pat on the neck. "Thanks. So where can I take you to dinner?"

Since Erin's feet had started to feel better, she decided that a couple of hours shopping was in order. She bought souvenirs of crystal, clothing, collectables and toys. Every member of her family was covered with a present...or two...or three.

Jane watched Erin's eyes flicker with excitement as they walked into one shop after another. From bookstores to fine linens to craft shops, they hit them all. The pleasant merchants were always helpful, finding just what Erin wanted and every time the small woman debated over which item to purchase, she always ended up getting both. She walked out of one place with four handmade teddy bears. She was going to give one to her niece Caitlin, but just couldn't leave behind the other adorable creatures. She held two in the crook of each arm as they walked down the sidewalk, approaching yet another shop.

Jane reached out and ruffled the tan fuzz atop one of the comical bears. "Do you collect these?"

"No I don't." Erin considered it for a moment. "But that is a great idea."

"Yeah, if you are going to do a lot of traveling, you could get one from every country."

A trace of sadness quickly flashed over Erin's features. She had intended to see the world...with Jamie. "If someone had suggested that a few months ago," she said. "I would have turned the idea down cold...but now, now it doesn't sound so bad." She looked up at the clear blue eyes. "Thanks."

"For what?"

There was a pause. "Just thanks."

Once Erin and her personnel beast of burden had unloaded the packages at the hotel, Jane had made good on their bet and escorted the victor to the Chapter One Restaurant. She thought it quite appropriate since its décor honored famous Irish writers.

After a superb meal, they slipped down the street to a small pub for a Guinness and some local entertainment. They sat in a booth near the far wall and gave the barmaid their order. Because of her pain medication, Jane had decided to stay with a non-alcoholic beverage, but Erin was adventurous and decided to try the local ale.

At eight o'clock, three people stepped up onto the makeshift stage in the corner and readied their instruments. A tall, slender woman slid the guitar strap over her head and adjusted the microphone. "Good evenin ta everyone and welcome to our new friends visitin us tonight. I am Shannon. The handsome fella to my right is my husband Ryan." She waved her hand over her right shoulder. "And back there somewhere is my sister Katie. We have ta hide her back there or else she spends all of her time flirtin with all the good lookin lads. Collectively we are..."

"Tilley Dawn," several of the house regulars shouted in unison.

The singer, with the Irish head of flaming red, laughed along with the crowd. "All right wise guys. Shane," she said to the bartender, "ya best be cuttin off their supply of pints for the night." More laughter filled the small room and a few mugs were clinked in celebration, which for an Irishman could be anything from a new job to a haircut.

Shannon always considered their audience each time they played. She knew most of the regulars and was pretty good at spying the tourists. When the small crowd was mostly visitors they added a lot of Irish standards along with some contemporary selections and one or two original works. She pushed the dark guitar around to her back and picked up a small, black flute. Ryan had stepped to the front and started out with 'Danny Boy', which was the unofficial anthem of the Isles.

Erin had turned to watch the musicians and after several notes her eyes had slipped shut and she was immersed in the song. The tenor had the perfect voice to croon the soulful words of the Irish classic. Of course Erin had heard the song many times throughout her lifetime, but it never failed to touch her sensitive soul.

With the last note, Shannon resumed the lead vocals for the next three songs. One was a lively, spirited tune and had there been more room in the place, Erin was sure that quite a few listeners would have gotten up and danced a jig. She might have even been coaxed into joining, because she was in such a good mood. Erin watched as dark haired Ryan beat out a perfect melody on the bodhran, a small hand held drum. The instrument could be played quite loudly and she cringed thinking how her sister was going to react when she discovered that Erin had gotten one for her nephew Conner.

When the latest round of applause died down, Shannon introduced the next song. "I think ya might recognize this one from their international fame. And although we don't claim ta be near as good as the Coors, they are one of our favorites." The guitar started in with the smooth introduction and after several seconds the drum came in with a steady beat. A violin then joined in with the trio of voices.

When the daylight's gone

And you're on your own

And you need a friend

Just to be around

I will comfort you

I will take your hand

And I'll pull you through

I will understand

Listening to those few words, a sudden feeling cascaded over Erin, touching a place deep in her soul, a place that had been dead for months. She pulled her shoulders back, took a few deep breaths and reveled in the feelings of...joy and hope. The simple joy of friendship and the hope to regain something of what she had lost, even if just a small part. Having someone to share all

the little things with. Having someone to laugh with and to listen. And having someone to listen to. That is what she could have. And it is what she wanted. She turned to meet the intense blue gaze. The look in those eyes told Erin she was no longer alone. The chorus continued.

And you know that

I'll be at your side

There's no need to worry

Together we'll survive

Through the haste and hurry

I'll be at your side

When you feel like you're alone

Or you've no where to turn

I'll be at your side

This is what Jane wanted. Just one person, one friend who could help her face the fear of the emptiness in her head, someone who could help her to build a new life. Someone who would care about her...would care if she lived or died. Because of Erin, Jane no longer dreaded another day of loneliness. She had a friend.

Erin reached across to touch the long fingers that tapped a beat on the worn tabletop. Jane turned her hand over and lightly squeezed the smaller one, as the words spoke what they both were feeling.

If life's standing still

And your soul's confused

And you cannot find

What road to choose

If you make mistakes

You won't let me down

I will still believe

I won't turn around

I'll be at your side

There's no need to worry

Together we'll survive

Through the haste and hurry

I'll be at your side

When you feel like you're alone

And there's no where to turn

I'll be at your side

Both women eased into a shared smile that slowly grew into a joyous grin, as they absorbed the love of friendship.

Once the group had finished their set, Erin and Jane settled into a conversation about the ranch back in California. Erin nursed the dark brew, enjoying the malty flavor, but it was quite a bit stronger than she usually liked. The grimace that had followed the first few sips had attested to that fact.

From her vantage point, Jane had noticed that the woman who had been singing kept staring curiously at Erin, from her place at the end of the bar. Her red head kept leaning over to get a better view. Of course Jane knew that Erin was a beautiful woman and she did garner admiring glances everywhere they went, but the singer's leering was stirring up a protective streak within Jane that she had yet to encounter. After fifteen minutes of the rude behavior, she was about to go butch and march over there and tell the skinny songbird to keep her eyes to herself. But she glued her butt to the seat, deciding that it wasn't really her place to interfere. And she certainly didn't want to embarrass Erin.

She returned her attention to the conversation and answered the blonde's question. "That sounds like a great idea. I'm sure the symphony here is wonderful. If there is one thing I have discovered about myself is that I love music of all kinds." Jane clinked the melting ice cubes around in her glass as an unbearable thought entered her head. "That'll be your last night here, won't it?"

Erin heard the sadness in her voice and shared it. "Yeah." She raised the tall glass to her lips and let another strong sip slide down her throat. A small cough followed and she looked up to find her dark haired friend smirking. She held her drink out. "Why don't you try it and see for yourself smarty pants."

One taste shouldn't hurt. Their fingers brushed as Jane took it and she defiantly held the author's gaze as she tossed back a healthy swallow. Her throat spasmed as she fought back the tickling sensation. But after two seconds she exhaled then drew in a wheezing breath, followed by

several coughs. The tears that came to her eyes were a combination of the alcohol and the laughter.

"Are you okay?" asked a wide-eyed Erin.

She nodded and smiled through the small convulsions, drinking down the last of her sparkling water. As her breathing returned to normal, out the corner of her eye, Jane saw that the singer was now joined by her sister and they were both staring at Erin and whispering to each other. Jane tried to flash them an intimidating glare, but they didn't seem to notice her at all.

Erin set the ale aside and put in an order for two more glasses of water as Jane excused herself for a quick trip to the restroom.

She returned a few minutes later, turning the corner just as the two sisters were approaching an unsuspecting Erin. She quickened her steps and scooted back into the booth just a few seconds before them.

"Erin?" said the tall woman.

The author looked up at the sound of her name.

"Erin Casey," the singer clarified.

"Yes, I'm Erin Casey."

The red head just stood there smiling and waiting.

The dark blonde brows drew together as Erin studied the grinning pair. She felt that she knew them and her brain went through its mental files searching for an answer. Her green eyes flew wide open as the light bulb ignited. "Oh, my God! Shannon, Katie." Her eyes bounced back and forth between the two and she jumped up and hugged them. "It's so great to see you! Why didn't I make the connection?"

Jane watched the spectacle with great confusion.

Their exuberant greeting was drawing the attention of the other patrons, but they didn't care. "Well," said Shannon. "it has been twenty years since we last saw each other at Grandfather's funeral. You were only eight and I was ten." She threw an arm around her sister's shoulder. "And Katie here was just a tot."

Erin caught sight of her quiet friend sitting far back in the seat. "I'm sorry," she said. Erin scooted in next to her friend and ushered her family into the other side of the booth as she made the introductions. "This is my friend Jane. Jane these are my cousins, Shannon and Katie."

"Nice to meet you," said Jane. Her face held a smile, but inside she was mentally scolding herself for the previous thoughts she had of Erin's family members.

"You as well. That's why we were starin earlier," Shannon explained. "We just wanted ta be sure it was her."

Jane nodded as Katie piped in. "Actually, the only reason that we recognized ya at all was from the picture on the back of your book. Grandma saw to it that it made the rounds among the family over here."

"She was as proud as a newly crowned Rose of Tralee. And so were we," said the older sister.

Erin gave a flicker of an embarrassed grin. "Well, look at you, up there singing your hearts out. Where is your handsome husband by the way?"

"He left already, had ta pick up our little one from the sitter. As far as the singin goes, we love it and it's a way ta make a livin, but we don't aspire ta be anything but a pub band."

"But we also do our share of weddings and special events around the country," said Katie proudly.

Their conversation went on and on. Jane knew it wasn't on purpose, but she was feeling left out, although she did learn more about Erin's family.

Shannon was the mother of a five-year old named Sean. Katie was still unwed, but at only twenty-two she wasn't in any hurry to change that fact. Their older brother, Ronan had gone to college in the states, where he decided to stay when he met and married his wife.

Erin's father, Timothy Casey, had two younger sisters. Shannon and Katie's mother, Caroline, was the middle sibling. She had married a local man and had never moved from the homeland. The younger sister was Kelly. She had married and moved to Florida years before, where she still resided with her husband and two sons. The Casey family extended to many points around the world, but the emerald isle was always their home base.

* * * *

A quick glance at her watch told Erin that an hour had gone by as she had been jabbering on about her side of the family.

Their little, unexpected reunion could have gone on even further, but the owner of the place had signaled to Shannon that he wanted to close up.

"I guess we should call it a night," said the red head as her sister hid a yawn behind her hand.

Katie gave a sheepish grin and agreed. "I guess I stayed on the phone a little late last night."

"Aye, I'm surprised Da hasn't invested in Telecom."

"Well, you just seem to forget what it's like ta be this age," teased Katie. "It has been so long."

Shannon wagged a finger at her. "Watch yer mouth baby sister."

Erin certainly recognized that relationship. She had a quick flash of regret at the loss of closeness with Bridgett over the past six months. But that was one relationship she could definitely get back.

They all got up and had another round of hugs. "I'm so glad we came in here tonight," said Erin. "I wish we had more time to talk."

"So do I, but we have ta be in Wicklow tomorrow."

"And I'm going back to Grandma's on Sunday." Erin thought a moment. "What we need is a family reunion."

Katie's face lit up. "That's a grand idea! How about later in the year? I've been wantin ta visit the states," she hinted to her cousin. "I hear that a California beach is full of tall, tanned, muscle bound men." The dreamy look on her face sent the others into a bout of laughter.

"Well, I wouldn't know about that," said Erin. "but I will definitely work on that reunion."

Shannon offered them a ride back to their hotels. Outside of the Buswell's, Katie met up with a friend and they took off, leaving behind her sister and cousin just shaking their unbelieving heads at the seemingly endless youthful energy. The red head then waited as Erin stepped inside the lobby to say goodnight.

"I'm really sorry Jane. I feel like I was ignoring you the whole night."

"Don't be ridiculous. They're your family."

"Well, so..." Erin hesitated.

Jane smiled. "It's okay. We've still got tomorrow." She pulled the small body in for a hug. "Goodnight Erin. Sleep well."

"You too," said the blonde as she stood there watching her friend head for the elevator. They waved one last time as the door slid shut.

Even with the late hour, the cousins were too sad to separate, so Erin invited Shannon up for tea so they could talk some more.

Shannon sat at the small table in the corner of the room, taking a few sips of her steaming drink before asking the question Erin had seemed to avoid all evening. "So Erin, I noticed that ya never mentioned a better half. Do ya have a husband or a boyfriend back home?"

The hot, tan liquid swirled around the silver spoon, in the china cup and Erin watched the tiny whirlpool with a small frown. Talking about her private life with her family was something Erin

had almost come to dread. The incident with her father had taught her a good lesson. Coming out to her immediate family had given her mixed emotions and she was having such a good time catching up with her cousin, she didn't want anything to alienate her. "No," she finally said. "No husband, no boyfriend. I..."

The tall, red head had picked up on some signals earlier at the pub. And judging from her cousin's apprehension, she was even more curious. "Yer friend Jane...are you and she...?"

"No! No, Jane and I are just friends. We only met here a few days ago." She paused as the cooling tea met with more disturbance. "But..."

"But?"

Erin finally made eye contact with the eyes similar to hers. She saw the question there and the tip of the head, urging her to continue. "I am...I was in a relationship last year. Her name was Jamie." When Erin didn't see the shock or revulsion on the pale colored features, she continued the story.

When Erin had finished, a relaxed, understanding smile greeted her. "I'm sorry for yer loss," said Shannon. "I certainly understand the connections of a soul mate. Ryan and I literally bumped into one another at the train station. I was runnin in the rain to catch the early mornin rail and he rounded a corner just as I did. We both fell flat on our bums. The package I was carryin had flown up and smacked him in the face. We both sat there just starin at each other, me with my drenched hair and him with a bloody nose, but all we saw was the person who we knew would make our lives complete."

Erin genuinely smiled at the happy story.

"Every year on our anniversary we take that train to somewhere different and spend the day just enjoyin each other." Shannon pulled from her little fantasy to see her cousin's face. The smile was still there, but there was a lonely wanting in her eyes. "I'm sorry Erin, I shouldn't be goin on about this."

"It's all right Shannon. I will never begrudge anyone his or her happiness. I'm sorry to be such bad company."

"You're not," assured the red head.

"Well, I promise to be much better when you come to visit in the fall. Actually, coming here has helped a lot. As I said, I only met Jane a few days ago, but she has become a very good friend. All of a sudden I'm not so lonely anymore."

"Ya know Erin, I'm not so sure I should say this, I mean it's none of my business, but..."

Erin looked at her expectantly.

"When I was starin at ya back at the pub earlier, yer friend," she stressed. "was givin me the back off look. I've seen my jealous husband flash it often enough to recognize it."

Erin gave several quick shakes of her head. "No. It's just...she was just being protective. Friends do that you know," she stated firmly.

Shannon held up two hands in mock surrender. "All right, all right," she said with a chuckle. "Guess I was wrong." *But I really don't think so.*

Erin laughed at her over reaction. "Jane is a really good friend though. And I do want her in my life. She's really helped me with my grief. Her companionship has been...very important. And I won't lose it."

Shannon sat there listening to Erin with a hidden smile and a knowing twinkle in her eye.

She finally left around two in the morning, but sleep was the last thing on Erin's mind.

Continued in Part 7.

The Athenaeum's Scroll Archive

~ Seeing You, Again For the First Time ~

by Colleen

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This is the sequel to my first story, "At First Sight". I would recommend that you read that one first.

All comments are welcome at coleen30@webtv.net

Part 7

Chapter 7

Erin called Jane on Saturday morning and asked if she could cancel their morning plans. She was slightly embarrassed when she cited the reason. After Shannon had left the night before, she had had a brainstorm of an idea for her next book and she sat up all night working furiously on her laptop. The first few chapters had taken on their basic form as her fingertips tapped out the first creative thoughts to flow from her mind in six months. Erin was so ecstatic that her passion had returned the hours had slipped away without her knowledge. Only when her alarm rang, did she look up to the window to see the sun rising in the distance. The intense, golden rays split the haze in the sapphire sky and in the weary soul. *The dawn of a new day indeed*, she thought with a smile.

Jane was very understanding. Her friend's health was her most important concern, but that didn't stop the disappointment she felt at the prospect of spending the morning without the comforting presence of the small blonde author. Erin had assured Jane that their evening plans to attend a concert and dinner were definitely still on.

So she spent the morning and early afternoon just strolling around the general area. She passed by a stylish clothing shop and suddenly realized that their evening plans called for more formal attire, of which she didn't have.

Jane took her time trying on several different types of outfits. She immediately knew that the dress just didn't feel right on her body. Nor did the knee length skirt.

The middle-aged storeowner was very helpful in showing Jane the things she thought would compliment the tall woman's coloring and her build.

She finally tried on a pair of black slacks and a sleeveless, lightweight, knit sweater in a very pale blue with accents of an iridescent green thread running throughout the soft garment. Jane stepped from the small changing room and studied herself in the full-length mirror... not liking what she saw. There were several small, but noticeable scars on her bared upper arms. The high collar disguised the flawed skin on her neck and she liked the rest of the outfit very much, but she didn't want to be seen like that. *Funny*, she thought to herself, *it never mattered to me what I really looked like or what I wore. But tonight is special. I want to look nice for our evening out. I want to look nice for...Erin.* Her head tilted up to meet her own blue eyed gaze. *You want to impress her. Don't lie to yourself anymore.* The shop owner stepped into her view and with a compassionate smile, handed Jane another item. The tall woman nodded a thank you, slipped her arms into the garment and turned back to the mirror. The long sleeved, slate gray jacket fell to just above her knees and was tailored to hug her slim figure. Jane nodded to herself and smiled, finally confident in her appearance.

* * * *

Erin stood in front of the well-lit mirror applying just the tiniest bit of blush to her cheeks. Next, a spring green powder slid across each eyelid and a light shade of reddish cream accented her lips. She hadn't bothered with any make up as she was doing the tourist thing in the days before, but tonight she felt like really dressing up. The hand carved brush slid through her short hair, as there was a knock on the door.

"Come on in Jane," she called out loudly. Erin heard the door open and close as she finished smoothing down her tresses and any wrinkles in her dress. "I'll be right out."

"We have plenty of time," came the response from the outer room.

Erin settled her wire frame glasses onto her nose and stood back. She made a quick twirl in front of the mirror and smiled as a small wave of giddiness tickled her spine. She blamed it on her lack of sleep and shook it off without a second thought. Erin stepped into the main room and moved to get her purse from the nightstand. "I'm glad I got two tickets when I arrived on Monday," she said as she rummaged through the small bag, making sure she had everything. "I heard that they sold out the..." She looked up to see Jane staring at her, mouth hanging open in a trance like state. "...next day."

My God she's beautiful. Jane's eyes were struck by the vision in green the second Erin stepped through the door. *That dress is absolutely perfect for her. But then she would look wonderful in anything...or noth...*

"Jane."

No answer.

"Jane is something wrong?"

The tall woman blinked several times. *Did she just ask me something?* "Yes, yes."

"What's wrong?"

"Nothing." Jane took a deep breath and rubbed two fingers over her wrinkled forehead. "No, nothing is wrong...I just...um...got distracted. I'm sorry."

The corner of Erin's mouth twitched slightly. "No need to be sorry. It happens to me all the time."

Somehow I doubt it.

Erin moved a step closer. "You look very, very nice. I really like the long jacket."

Jane actually felt herself flush at the innocent comment. "Thanks. So do you. That dress is...you look...really..." *Beautiful. Gorgeous. Breathtaking.* "...nice."

"Thank you." Erin grabbed a light cardigan from the back of the chair, in case the night air was chilled when they left the concert hall. "Are you ready?"

All Jane could manage was a nod.

* * * *

Thirty minutes of melodious solo harp music was followed by another forty-five minutes of selections by a forty-member symphony. Music in all forms was very important in the Irish culture.

Later in the evening, as Erin and Jane sat in the restaurant waiting for their dinner to be served, the blonde author regaled some of the stories and Irish myth's involving music.

"One of my favorites is The Dagda's Harp. It is said that there were two different kinds of people in Ireland: one with long, dark hair and dark eyes, called Fomorians. They carried slender spears made of golden bronze when they fought. Another race of people were golden haired and blue eyed and carried short, blunt, heavy spears of dull metal.

"The golden haired people had a great chieftain who was also a kind of high priest. He was called the Dagda. And this Dagda had a wonderful magic harp. The harp was beautiful to look upon, mighty in size, made of rare wood and ornamented with colorful jewels. It had wonderful music in its strings, which only the Dagda could call out. When the men were going to battle, the Dagda would set up his magic harp and sweep his hand across the strings and a war song would ring out which would make every warrior buckle on his armor, brace his knees and shout, 'Forth to the fight!' Then when the men came back from battle, weary and wounded, the Dagda would take his harp and strike a few cords and as the magic music stole out upon the air, every man forgot his weariness and the smart of his wounds and thought of the honor he had won and of the comrade who had died beside him and of the safety of his family. Then the song would swell louder and every warrior would remember only the glory he had helped win for the king. Each man would rise at the great tables his cup in his hand and shout, 'Long live the King!'

"There came a time when the Fomorians and the golden haired men were at war and in the midst of a great battle, while the Dagda's hall was not so well guarded as usual, some of the chieftains of the Fomorians stole the great harp from the wall where it hung and fled away with it. Their wives, children and a few of their soldiers went with them and they fled fast and far through the night, until they were a long way from the battlefield. When they thought they were safe and they turned aside into a vacant castle by the road and sat down to a banquet, hanging the stolen harp on the wall.

"The Dagda with two or three of his men had followed hard on their tracks. And while they were in the midst of their banqueting, the door was suddenly burst open and the Dagda stood there with his men. Some of the Fomorians sprang to their feet, but before any of them could grasp a weapon, the Dagda called out, 'Come to me my harp.'

"The great harp recognized his master's voice and leaped from the wall. Whirling through the hall, sweeping aside and killing the men who got in its way, it sprang to its master's hand. And the Dagda swept across the strings in three great solemn chords. The harp answered with the magic music of tears. As the wailing harmony smote upon the air, the women of the Fomorians bowed their heads and wept bitterly, the strong men turned their faces aside and the children sobbed.

"Again the Dagda touched the enchanted strings and this time the magic music of mirth leaped from the harp. And with that, the young warriors of the Fomorians began to laugh and they laughed till the cups fell from their grasps and the spears dropped from their hands while the wine flowed. They laughed until their limbs were helpless with excess of glee.

"Once more the Dagda touched his harp, but very, very softly. Now a melody stole forth as soft as dreams and as sweet as joy. It was the magic music of sleep.

"When they heard that, gently the Fomorian women bowed their heads in slumber, the little children crept into their mother's laps and old men nodded. The young warriors closed their eyes and dropped into their seats. One after the other, the Fomorians sank into sleep.

"While they were all in deep slumber, the Dagda took his magic harp and he and his golden haired warriors stole away and came in safely to their own homes again." Erin waited for a response from her dark haired companion. "So what did you think?" she finally asked.

"I think you have the perfect voice for story telling. It's like sugar on a cloud as the words melt into the listener's ear with a sweetness of form and style."

Erin pulled her bottom lip into her mouth as she looked down at the napkin in her lap. The tips of her ears pinked up as she fumbled for the words. "I think you might just be a writer too. And thank you."

Jane let her gaze drift away. "No. You just inspire."

The oddly, intense moment was broken by a rousing birthday song from the next table. Erin took the opportunity to return the conversation to its previous topic. "No matter what the language or the notes, music always touches me in some way."

"If you love it so much why didn't you become a musician instead of a writer?"

Erin gave a wistful smile. "Just because the love is your heart, doesn't mean you have the talent in these," she said holding up her hands.

Jane studied the wiggling digits. "Those look pretty talented to me." The words slipped out before she could censor them.

Neither woman had time to be embarrassed by the flirtatious comment as the waiter arrived with their meals just at that moment. They both dove into the hearty food without further discussion.

But the silence lasted only a few minutes as Erin quickly realized, or perhaps just rationalized, that her friend must have meant the talent of her writing. "So what did you do today while I was in slumber land?" she asked.

Jane took a sip of water. "Actually I just wondered around, did a little shopping, threw a few coins into the wishing well..." she shrugged her shoulder. "...nothing out of ordinary."

What did you wish for, I wonder, thought Erin.

"You know, with the exception of this morning, we have spent nearly every minute of the last four days together," Jane happily observed.

Erin gave a joyous grin. "I know, wasn't it great? It was so much nicer having someone to share all of this with."

"Yeah it was." Jane tried to keep the distress from her voice when she said, "You must be anxious to get back to your grandmother's tomorrow." The disappointment over the impending separation was tied to Jane's heart like a lead weight. She had no idea what she would do without her new friend's guidance. Just her presence had added so many dimensions to Jane's solemn existence. Her life was empty of previous memories, but somehow she knew that the pain of losing Erin's companionship would far surpass that.

I am...but. "Yeah, the next week is going to be...fun." The last word was spoken with less than enthusiasm. As much as she loved her grandmother, she wished she could stay in Dublin for the next week...or two...or...

* * * *

Later, Erin returned from the ladies room to find a bowl filled with huge, bright red strawberries sitting in the middle of the table.

"I hope you don't mind," said Jane. "I saw some of these as we came in and they just looked so good I had to order some. If you want something else I'll get the waiter."

"Oh no! These will be fine." Erin quickly selected a plump, ruby treat and doused it liberally with the rich, sweet cream in one of the smaller bowls beside it. Perfect white teeth gently clamped down and her lids slipped shut in culinary ecstasy as the tartness tingled inside her very happy mouth.

Jane watched in fascination. *God, I know she's not doing that on purpose, but that is so...* She pulled her gaze away and softly cleared her throat. *You have to stop having these thoughts. You know she's not interested in that way.*

"Aren't you going to have any?" asked Erin. "They are as delicious as you thought they'd be."

Jane giggled at herself silently and reached for a large berry. She, however, by-passed the cream and dunked it in the thick, golden liquid in the other bowl. She lifted it and let some of the sweetness drizzle off. Then Jane twisted it slightly and brought it to her mouth. Their eyes met for an instant as she quickly finished the fruit.

Erin leaned forward and brought her linen napkin to Jane's face. She started to touch the corner of the tall woman's mouth. "You...ah...have some...honey." She handed Jane the cloth. "Well here, I guess you can..."

The rest of the dessert was eaten in silence and much less sensually.

They were seated at a table near the back of the restaurant where it was fairly quiet and cozy. A softly scented candle flickered between them as they rested before leaving. The lights outside the building suddenly sprang to life, illuminating the small balcony beside their table. Shadows swayed across the cement landing as the trees danced to the music that was starting on the street below.

Erin turned her head, her hearing attuned to the melody.

Jane watched as the blonde head faintly bobbed with the beat. "Care for some air?" she asked standing, her back popping as she did. "They probably want this table, but we can listen a while longer."

Erin followed her through the open double doors, out onto the balcony. Potted plants and hanging flowers filled the night air with a sweet aroma. They both leaned forward onto the black iron railing and watched the quartet below. Their chosen selections for the performance were soft and spoke of contentment and pleasure, romance and love.

During the musical bridge of the second song there was a small recitation.

If there be another day

To love, to laugh, to live

Take the chance that's in your hand

T'was only God's to give

Thank him with a smile and prayer

And make each day the best

Let your heart create each thought

With love to guide the rest

An owl suddenly made his presence known from deep in the tree to their right. A brush of cool air fell across Erin's shoulders and she shivered for just an instance.

"Do you need your sweater?" asked Jane, realizing that it had been left behind on the back of the chair.

"No. I'm fine." As she continued to listen, Erin felt the body next to hers float a little closer, guarding her from the nippy air. She turned her head to say something and came face to face with those hypnotic eyes. Under the moonlight, the blueness glowed, enchantingly, with silver accents.

Jane held just the ghost of a smile. There it was. The chance. There was no one to say you can't, you shouldn't. Nothing to interrupt. The darkness hid away the rest of the world from their perfect moment in time.

And then it happened.

In just an instant, even before Erin had time to take her next breath, soft lips covered hers, moving slowly and gently. Her eyes fluttered shut and she was lost in the sensation of a long missed touch. Her own lips trembled into the rhythm of the tender dance and she savored the faint taste of... fruited honey.

The kiss only lasted three seconds more then Erin pulled away abruptly. Her green eyes went wide and she quickly looked away, only then remembering to breathe.

Jane stepped back in shock...at herself. "I'm so sorry Erin! I shouldn't have done that! Please forgive me! I just...I've hurt you and I've ruined everything. I..." She ran back into the restaurant, dropped some money onto the table and quickly fled down the stairs and into the consuming darkness.

Erin's hands gripped the railing and her lungs fought to take each breath. Her thoughts swirled into a maelstrom of confusion inside her head as the words of her grandmother and her cousin echoed through the valleys of her gray matter, finally sparking the shock of awareness. But the pain was there too, still pounding from its stronghold inside her heart. The memory and the reality finally crashed head on in a single second and Erin was sent floating into a cloud of possibilities. She only fell back to conscious thought, when, out of the corner of her eye, she saw a tall figure fleeing down the cobblestone road below. "Jane," she whispered.

* * * *

A single tear rolled down a sculpted cheek, followed by another and another. The liquid sadness fell to the ground with barely a splash as Jane sat bent over, arms resting on her knees. The watery curtain over her eyes obscured her vision of the patterns in the gray stone under her feet, as she berated herself for her foolish actions. Here the night was still and quiet, the park otherwise deserted. The only sound was the soft whoosh of the fountain behind her. She had, just that very morning, dropped several coins into the clear water, watching as they settled to the

bottom, mingling with all the other currency. The wishes she had made were all but shattered now. Now all she wanted to do was drown her pain in the cool, shimmering water. *Dr. Kim told me that I had only lost my memories. Who I was in my soul and in my heart was still the same. What does that say about me? I hurt a friend that I have only known for a few days.* Her thoughts continued as the moonlight shone down on her back, glowing like a beacon.

"Can I sit down?"

Jane's body snapped up at the sound of the voice, but her gaze remained into the darkness ahead. She hadn't heard the clicking of heels against the walkway. She barely nodded an answer to the question.

"I knew I'd find you here," said Erin softly, as she settled herself onto the wooden seat. "The first place we met. You looked so lost when I first saw you. I had this incredible need to reach out to you, to help you. That was actually the first time in six months that I wasn't being selfish."

Jane blinked to keep any more tears from falling as she listened to Erin's voice.

"Until then, I was too busy with self pity to notice much of anything else. But you changed all that. These past four days have given me a new sense of life. You helped me to laugh again, to enjoy the beauty around me."

"And then I ruined it all," came the whisper.

Erin placed a hand over the fidgeting ones by her side. "You didn't ruin anything."

"But..."

"No. Don't you know what happened on that balcony?"

"I kissed you against your will."

Erin gave a small ironic chuckle. "You weren't really paying attention then."

Jane looked over for the first time since Erin had sat down.

The author tried her best to answer the questioning look on the sad face. "You did kiss me and I will admit I was startled...for an instant, but then...I kissed you back." Her green eyes fixated on the blue ones before her, imploring her to believe her next confession. "...because I wanted to."

Two dark brows wrinkled. "But you pulled away...and the look on your face...I don't understand." Erin's soft fingertips caressed her cheek.

"I'm sorry if I made you feel like you hurt me." Erin took a deep breath. "When I pulled away I was afraid...but not of you... of me. I liked that kiss...a lot. It would have lasted longer if I hadn't remembered Jamie. I guess I did feel like I was betraying her. I loved Jamie with all my

heart. I still do and always will. You see I never thought I could feel an attraction for anyone else, ever again. That's what shocked me, because I did. I have been attracted to you since we met, but I wouldn't acknowledge it."

Jane nodded. "I understand. But you are still grieving. It wasn't fair of me to take advantage of that."

"You didn't, Jane. I have come to care about you very much, very quickly. I don't want to lose you."

"I don't want to lose you either."

Erin put a hand to her own chest. "I don't know exactly what I am feeling in here or where it could lead, but I am attracted to you. But I know you will be hurt if I can't be anything more than just a friend and..."

The moments of silence hung heavy between them, neither knowing just what say.

"I don't know if you want to hear this," Jane finally spoke. "but when I first saw you it was like I had known you forever. For an instant I thought you would be able to tell me who I am, give me my memories back...save me."

Erin pulled the tall woman into a hug. "I wish I could do all that for you." She pulled away and dried both of their tears. "We can't run away from this and I certainly don't want to lose your friendship."

"So what do we do?"

Erin sighed. "Let's not do anything...I mean change anything. We are friends. Friends who feel an attraction for one another. We'll just let it happen."

"We won't run, but we won't push."

"Right."

"But maybe it's not fair to you either," Jane reasoned.

"Why?"

"What if there was somebody I loved and I remember them. That would hurt you and I couldn't stand to see that."

"There is that possibility. But I would be willing to take that chance...if you are."

The dark head nodded again, not quite convinced. "What about tomorrow? You're going to Kerry and my flight leaves in the afternoon, although I don't know exactly where I'm going or what I'm going to do."

"Actually, I've been thinking about that. Would you like to work for me on my ranch?"

Jane's mood brightened, hesitantly. "Are you kidding? That would be great. But don't you already have ranch hands?"

"Yes. But what I have planned is going to require much more help. I bought that ranch because it was Jamie's dream. But for the last five months it hasn't been a working ranch. I isolated myself from the world and just couldn't move on. But now a weight has been lifted from my soul and I need to start living again. And that means hard work.... and friendship."

Jane smiled. "I need a best friend."

"You have one."

They walked slowly around the park, heading back to their hotels. At one point Erin's hand slipped into Jane's. It was just...right.

"Jane."

"Yeah."

"Would you come with me to my grandmothers? You can re-schedule your flight and we'll get two train tickets. You'll just love my grandmother and I know she'd really enjoy meeting you."

"Erin, I...my money...I just have enough to get my life started and..."

"Maybe I could..." Erin suddenly remembered the rift that her money had caused between her and Jamie. *Jane seems just as proud. I don't want to get started down that road again.* "I could give you an advance on your salary," she suggested.

That seemed to make Jane very happy. "Okay. I will go with you then."

They arrived in front of Erin's hotel. "I'll meet you here at eight," said Jane.

"I'll be ready."

Jane bent down and kissed Erin's cheek then pulled away, but two delicate hands gently pulled her back. They shared a small, but very affectionate kiss on the lips. Erin wanted to reassure Jane that she was willing to give their relationship every chance. But she knew in the deepest recesses of her heart that it wouldn't be easy. The battle would be hard fought. Fear and grief were her worst enemies. And they were foes with insatiable needs. Erin gave one final look into the

beautiful blue eyes and mentally strapped on her armor and readied her weapons for the fight to take back her future.

Continued in Part 8.

Just a friendly reminder, feedback is much appreciated and will be answered. I really want to know how you think this story is going. Part 8 will be out in two weeks. Thanks for reading.
Colleen

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~ Seeing You, Again For the First Time ~

by Colleen

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I have also created a group for discussions of this, past and future stories. Maybe some sneak previews as well.

Join us at http://groups.yahoo.com/group/colleens_corner

Part 8

Chapter 8

Kathleen was once again standing on the porch anxiously awaiting Erin's arrival. She had known that her granddaughter was bringing a guest with her, even though she hadn't spoken to Erin since the blonde left for Dublin.

As the car made its way up the dirt road, Jane's right leg twitched in anticipation. She wanted to make a good impression on her friend's grandmother, but since she had no background to tell of, she was going to have to rely on Erin to lead her.

The hour-long train ride had given her plenty of time to reflect on the turn her friendship with Erin had taken. She knew she was taking a big risk allowing herself to fall in love with someone who was still grieving such a loss. But risk or not, it was a chance she had to take. Time was all she had to give and in the coming weeks and months...even years, Jane was certain that Erin would come to love her, even if it wasn't exactly how she wanted.

Fifteen minutes after meeting Erin, Jane knew that she could trust her with her soul, probably even her life. Maybe it was because they shared the emotional traumas of having had life threatening injuries. Maybe it was because she was just so alone and needed someone, anyone to make her feel. Or maybe it was because Erin was just very special and could wrap you up in warmth and comfort with just the sound of her voice and a trusting smile. Jane finally came to the conclusion that it was a little bit of the first two and a whole lot of the third. The puzzle pieces of Jane's life had lain scattered about for months and she had no idea where to start assembling them. But after meeting Erin, it finally began to start falling into place. Erin had become her corner stone. She was her friend. She had given her a job and a place to live, but most of all she had given her hope.

Jane saw the diminutive woman waving wildly as they approached the house and it brought a nervous smile to her face. She wasn't sure exactly how Erin was going to introduce her. Yes they were friends, but possibly more. How should she act? What should she say? Even though their level of affection with each other was still low, would she be able to stop herself from automatically grabbing Erin's hand as she longed to do? Jane was afraid of jeopardizing their relationship by causing friction with her relative. It was almost too much to handle, too much to worry about. But one glance at the profile sitting to her right and all of her fears suddenly calmed and the apprehensive smile widened into one of pure adoration.

As the car pulled to a stop, Jane expected her friend to run and greet her grandmother. But instead the author stepped around the front end of the car just as Jane opened her door.

Erin smiled and took the tall woman's hand. "Come on." She led Jane up the cobblestone walk and through the small gate. She momentarily let go of the hand and stepped into the older woman's arms. She then took repossession of the hand in both of hers. "Grandma I want you to meet my friend Jane. We met my second day in Dublin and did the whole tourist thing together. I invited her to stay here until we go back to the states." She gave the older woman a quick wink. "I knew you wouldn't mind."

Kathleen gave a knowing grin. "I've been expectin ya Dear. It's so nice ta meet ya Jane. I can see that my little E bug thinks very highly of ya."

Erin winced at the use of her long lost nickname.

The tall woman caught the expression out of the side of her eye, but held back the smirk she felt coming on. Instead she turned her full attention to the gracious Irish woman. "It's very nice to meet you Mrs. Casey. Thank you for allowing me to stay at your home."

"Aye, yer quite welcome." She wagged a slightly crooked index finger in Jane's direction. "But only if ya call me Kathleen."

Jane gave a small smile. "All right, Kathleen." She turned to her friend. "I'll get the luggage."

"Oh that'll wait," said the white haired woman as she linked her arm with Jane's. "Let me give ya a quick tour. I'll show ya where you'll be stayin and then we'll get to know one another over tea and biscuits."

Jane held a slightly drawn expression as she was led through the door.

Erin caught the look and reminded herself to have a little chat with her grandmother. The well-meaning woman could be a little forceful.

She followed the pair down the narrow hallway and into the spare bedroom. The small room had one window, its dark wood shutters open to the fresh air. The window overlooked an understated, but aromatic garden in the side yard. One full, but small bed covered with a multi-colored quilt sat against the back wall, right under the window. Next to the bed was a cot, already made up with fresh sheets and a soft goose down pillow.

Dark brows drew together. *How did she know I was going to be staying here? Erin said she hadn't talked to her grandmother since she left here last week.*

Erin just rolled her eyes and shook her head, remembering her motto. Never underestimate Kathleen Rose O'Rourke Casey.

"Now Dear if ya would like to freshen up a bit, I'll be seeing to those refreshments."

The Irish woman scurried out of the room and down the hall, leaving the couple to themselves.

"I'm sorry," said Erin as she brushed her hand over the taller woman's arm. "I did warn you about her. But I'll ask her nicely to back off just a little."

Jane rubbed the back of her neck, which had stiffened up with the long train and car rides. "No. Don't do that. She's fine." She studied the blonde for a few seconds then smiled. "I can see a lot of her in you actually. You both just jump right over the walls and storm the heart." Jane grabbed

the soft hand and rubbed her thumb over the back. "I have a feeling that is exactly what you are going to be like in fifty years."

Erin let out a small chuckle. "Think you'll be able to stand me?" The comment startled both of them, but nothing was said. They quietly joined Kathleen in the cozy living room.

* * * *

Later that night, the two took turns in the bathroom changing for bed. When Erin returned, she saw her friend swallowing one of her pain pills.

The taller woman sat on the side of the low cot. She gave a slow stretch then adjusted the fluffy pillow. Erin thought she looked too cute in her oversized, white t-shirt that had, printed on the front, in exaggerated, green lettering, 'Too tall to be a leprechaun'.

Erin scooted in between the two pieces of furniture and sat on the bed. Their legs touched and their eyes met. "You can't sleep on that uncomfortable thing," she said. "It will be hell on your back."

"I don't have much of a choice. The floor would be just as bad." She reached beside her and patted the white sheet. "Besides there must be three or four quilts under here. It's not that bad." Jane turned to find the blonde head cocked to one side, sporting raised eyebrows.

Erin slipped under the covers and scooted off to the far side. She held up one side of the colorful bedding. "Come on, get in."

Jane's jaw twitched twice before she finally asked, "Are you sure? Cause I'll be just fine right here."

Erin tapped the soft, but sturdy mattress with her palm. "But you'll be even better here."

Maybe too good, thought Jane as she stuck her long legs under the quilt and loosely tucked it around her waist. Her bare arms settled across her mid section, fingertips meeting at her navel. She had to restrain her digits from tapping out a nervous tune on her belly as sleep was eluding her. She wasn't nervous about being in the same bed with Erin. Okay that wasn't totally true. Being that close to that beautiful body definitely made her tingle from head to toe. But she was more afraid of doing something to change the tentative relationship they may be forming. Their friendship was solid, of that she had no doubt, but she found herself craving more. Not just sex, but the intimacy that was shared by two people in love.

"Just look at those stars," said the awed blonde.

The dark headed woman craned her neck sideways to share Erin's view. "Yeah, they're beautiful. I would assume that being way out here, so far from the city lights, that you have a perfect view for all the night sky productions."

"It's that way back home too, on the ranch I mean." Erin felt the bed shift as Jane turned on her side.

She held the woman with a soft gaze. "Sounds wonderful."

Erin hummed an agreement, her eyes never leaving the sky. "I can't tell you how many times I have just laid there studying each spot of light." Her head gave a little shake. "I don't know what I was looking for."

"Maybe you were trying to figure out which one is Jamie." A moment passed in stillness, but then the blonde head flipped to face her.

"Why would you say that?"

Jane was taken back by the slight forcefulness of the question and her face showed the panic. "I...I didn't mean any disrespect to her...I..."

Erin's eyes fell shut. "No! No that's not what I meant." She opened her eyes, smiled softly and brushed a hand down Jane's arm. "I just meant, what made you say it that way?"

"I...I read it...in a book. I borrowed it from a nurse at the center. After long hours of therapy, I would try to relax by reading. I could only get in a few pages at night before I got too drowsy, but it helped take my mind off the pain until the medication took effect."

Erin turned to her side to fully face the tall woman. "I'm sorry you had to go through all that alone." Jane just shrugged a shoulder. "Do you remember the name of that book?"

Jane gave it some consideration. "I think there was a Bible reference in the title. It was a great story."

"The Noah Factor?"

"Yeah that was it. Have you read it too?"

Erin gave her an ironic, half smile. "I wrote it."

The blue eyes went very wide. "Really! That's incredible. I know you said you were an author, but of all the books in the world, I find that one. That's a pretty big coincidence huh?"

They stared into each other's eyes as Erin silently agreed. "Goodnight Jane."

"Goodnight Erin."

*

* * *

Erin tied the belt on her robe as she stepped into the kitchen. Kathleen was just reaching down to pull a pan of her granddaughter's favorite biscuits from the oven. The small room was filled with the enticing aromas of a big Irish breakfast. Erin cautiously hugged her, being careful of the hot dish. "Good morning Grandma."

"Good mornirn to you. Did ya sleep well Dear?"

"Better than I have in a long time."

"And yer friend?"

"I'm not sure," Erin said as she snatched a golden pastry. "She was in the shower when I woke up."

"Since I'm the only other she in the house," said Jane as she stepped through the door. "I guess you must be talking about me."

Erin looked up with a grin on her face. The smile faded and her breath hitched as she got a glimpse of her friend, whose short, dark hair was slicked back from the shower. There were still a few shimmering droplets of water clinging to her temple. It made her look...sexy...very sexy. Erin pulled her gaze away and cut a slab of butter for her sweet confection. She was a bit surprised by her intense reaction. But she soon confessed to herself that it was a nice surprise.

"Have a seat Jane, Dear," said Kathleen as she placed the rest of the meal on the table. "And how did you sleep?"

Jane settled into the wooden chair and poured herself a cup of the aromatic tea. "Wonderfully. That bed is very comfortable."

Kathleen smiled as her back was to the table.

Four shocked eyes met. "Jane has a bad back Grandma. I let her share the bed so she could be more comfortable."

The older woman took her seat. "Of course Dear. That was very generous of you."

The three engaged in a light conversation over the meal. Jane paid Kathleen several compliments on her cooking. The woman accepted them graciously, but quickly turned the tables and raved about her granddaughter's culinary skills.

"Well Grandma, I did learn a lot of that from you. Which reminds me, you did mention something about teaching me to make these," Erin said, biting off a fluffy piece of biscuit.

"That I did dear. I've scheduled that lesson fer Friday afternoon. You will be quite busy till then."

"I will. Doing what?"

Kathleen pulled a piece of paper from the pocket of her yellow apron. "I have yer itinerary right here. Ya must show Jane some of the best Kerry has ta offer." She read off a list of the places they were going to visit and sights they were going to see. "In fact ya best get ta move on if ya are goin ta get to the castle before mid mornin. Ya know this time of year tis a busy one." Kathleen stood form her chair and put the teakettle back on the stove.

"What castle?" asked Jane.

The small woman turned and brought both hands to her hips. "Why, Blarney of course," she stated indignantly.

"Of course. Sorry." Jane turned back to Erin and shrugged.

Kathleen began putting the dirty dishes in the sink "When ya return I thought ya might like ta go up the road ta the village for a little while. They have a lovely little shop where they sell the most beautiful capes, made no less, from the wool of this very flock. And then ya can have a nice late evenin meal out in the back and enjoy the stars. I have a meetin ta go to at church, but I'll prepare somthin nice for ya to warm up in the stove."

She turned back to find Erin and Jane still in their seats, sharing dumbfounded expressions. "Well, what are ya waitin for, scoot. I've got chores ta get to."

"You're not coming with us?" asked Erin.

"No Dear, too much ta do. But give her a kiss for me." Kathleen flashed a quick wink in the dark haired woman's direction.

It took a minute to sink in, but Jane finally realized that the older woman was referring to the Blarney Stone. She looked over at the beautiful blonde. *But I'm quickly learning that with Kathleen Casey, you never know.*

* * * *

Blarney Castle was about sixty miles away, in neighboring County Cork. With driving directions in hand, they hopped into Erin's rented car and headed off, straight into the morning sun. Along the way they listened to a CD by the famous Irish artist Enya. The flowing, sometimes haunting melodies, became a soothing background as each of them took the time to contemplate...things. As the last song faded away Erin removed the disk and was about to slip in another one.

"That was nice," said Jane as she rolled down the side window.

The mid morning temperature was a comfortable sixty-one degrees, but the sun streaming through the front glass considerably warmed the air inside the vehicle. Erin followed her lead,

creating a refreshing cross breeze. "I've got several more at home, in California. You are welcomed to use them any time. Just remind me when we get back."

"Thanks, I will."

Erin studied the passing countryside in silence until she heard a soft chuckle from her passenger. "What?" she asked.

"I was just thinking about your grandmother. She is really something."

"That she is. I love all of my family, but she and I have a special connection. We share certain personality traits, not the least of which is a fair amount of stubbornness and curiosity."

Jane turned in her seat and watched Erin as she spoke. The corner of her lips curled as she saw the breeze ruffle shaggy blonde bangs as those bright green orbs watched the road from behind wire-rimmed glasses. The blue eyes followed the hairline down to the well-defined shoulder, displayed nicely in the black sleeveless shirt. And yet farther down the outstretched arm where delicate hands loosely gripped the steering wheel, telling of her comfort level, even under the unusual driving conditions. She also noticed a very faint tan line where a watch would have rested. A flash of light struck her eye and the smile wavered. The ring on Erin's left hand finger quickly reminded her of the blonde's reluctance to deepen their relationship. *I know I shouldn't be jealous of Jamie. The woman died a horrible death and that's very sad. But did she leave enough of Erin's heart behind? I know I can't make her forget, but can she make a place for me in her broken heart?*

Erin was well aware of the intense blue-eyed gaze and she felt her face flush under the slightly lustful scrutiny. But the only way she could handle her own feelings, not to mention the racing vehicle under her control, was to go right on with her story and not give her tingling body too much thought. "She lived in the states for a long time after my grandfather died," she continued. "My sister Bridgett used to get so embarrassed when Grandma would interrogate her dates when she was in high school."

"I can just imagine." Jane paused as the first buildings came into view. "Even though I've only known her a day, I know I'll miss her when we leave."

Erin smiled over at her friend. "I'll just have to convince her to come visit us in California."

Us, thought Jane. *What a wonderful word.*

* * * *

Once arriving at their destination, they took their time exploring Blarney House, a grand Scottish mansion that shared the same grounds as the castle. They also took a tour of the arboretum and lush gardens before heading off to the main attraction.

Little remained of the 15th century castle that housed the Blarney Stone. The battered, weather worn rocks of the keep and nearby towers spoke not only of its age, but the strife it had been a witness to in its prime. They took a few minutes to examine a druidic circle of stones and a sacrificial alter just outside the main structure. Erin declined to visit Blarney's dungeon, but Jane took a quick trip into the dark, dank area.

She returned just a few minutes later, looking a little on the pale side.

As Erin and Jane started the six-story climb to the top, they thought a lot about the people that had lived there and the kind of lives they had led. Their trip to the museum back in Dublin had helped with their perceptions.

Erin stopped to look out a window in the castle wall. The floor to ceiling opening was less than a foot wide and served a strategic purpose in its time. An archer could shoot with great accuracy to the ground below, but it was an almost impossible task to return fire through such a small space. Erin quickly got lost in thought as she could almost hear the sounds of clanking swords desperate for freedom. The tang of a blood soaked ground would not have been far behind as warriors fell beneath the unending assaults. She caught movement out of the corner of her eye and turned to see a horse and rider dashing across the nearby field. The white steed kicked up chunks of earth as it carried the dark haired hero off to a victorious celebration. She blinked twice, but the vision remained. A soft touch fell upon Erin's shoulder and she looked around.

"Are you ready to head on up?" asked Jane.

Erin turned back to the window, but there was no sight of the ghostly rider. She shook her head of the spooky feeling "Yeah. Let's go."

Their soft-soled shoes scuffed against the stone steps as they ascended the steep, spiral staircase to the battlements at the very top.

"This place is kind of intense, isn't it?" Jane asked in a hushed tone.

Erin gave a nervous laugh. "Especially if you have an overactive imagination."

Jane was left to wonder just what had held the author's rapt attention back at the window and just what had she seen in the eerie, black space beneath the castle floor.

Reaching the top, they held back, waiting for another group of visitors to finish. When it came their turn, they bantered momentarily, each insisting that the other go first. Jane finally won and watched as the small woman lay on her back and was then suspended backward over the two-foot gap under the stone parapet.

Erin's hands held tight to the iron bars and her eyes closed, not wanting to see the ground so far below. When she felt the cold stone near her face, Erin peaked out and a sense of pride passed over her. She kissed the stone once and then a second time before being helped to her feet by a

strong hand. "Just what me or my grandmother need is the gift of gab," she said with a chuckle while dusting off her back end.

"My turn huh?" said Jane with slight trepidation.

Erin smiled and stepped aside.

The tall woman quickly bestowed her single gesture and rose to find a brilliant smile still focused in her direction. She took the author's hand and led her back to the stairs. "Thanks for bringing me here."

"Thanks for being here to share this with me."

* * * *

After stopping along the way for a late lunch, they were back to the house by four o'clock. Erin found a note in the kitchen reminding them of there next scheduled activity.

Sleep came quickly to both of them after their busy day. As did dreams that brought smiles to two slumbering faces.

* * * *

Bright and early the next morning they were sent off again on another day's adventure. Today they were touring the Ring of Kerry, a 112 mile route around the Iveragh Peninsula. Kathleen's house was closet to the northern shore, so they chose Caherciveen, the main town on the peninsula, as their starting point. Erin took them three miles northwest of the town to see Leacananbuaile Fort. The round, stone structure with its ten foot thick walls, was excavated in the early forty's. Objects found inside were of iron, bone, bronze, lead and stone suggesting the fort was used in the 9th or 10th century.

From there they headed southeast on to the town of Waterville and then through Caherdaniel, a pretty village on the shores of Derrynane Bay. After taking a few minutes to get out and stretch and watch the boats on the harbor, they were once again driving through some of the most beautiful scenery in the world. Erin made many stops along the way for pictures to share with her family and to preserve the memories forever.

One of those stops happened as the road climbed through a pass. There they got out to view the fine panorama of the Sneem Valley. The backdrop of mountains stretched as far as the eye could see. In those mountains were scooped out corries, an effect of the ice age.

Jane stayed close as Erin snapped picture after picture from all angles and views. The blonde finally stopped to rest her arms, but her eyes never left the breathtaking scene before her.

"This must be really incredible for you," said Jane. "I mean after being blind for so long."

Erin nodded, overcome with emotion. "It is," she finally managed. "I can't even begin to describe how it really feels."

Jane placed a hand over the smaller one resting on the fence rail. "I think I'll probably be speechless too...if my memory ever returns."

Erin turned and held her with a soft, caring expression.

Jane gave the hand a gentle squeeze. "I want to thank you for allowing me to make these very special new memories." She gave the author a small kiss on the cheek.

Erin smiled. "I'm just glad I'm not making these memories alone." A few seconds later she looked at the camera, then over at the tall woman by her side. She chewed on her bottom lip, contemplating a question.

"What is it?" asked Jane.

Erin nodded toward the instrument in her hand. "Could I? I know you were reluctant to have your picture taken back at the zoo. And it's not that I won't remember our time here forever...but I would really like a picture of you...here."

Jane hesitated just a moment then caught the subtle, pleading, green gaze. She nodded. "For you."

The clouds moved aside at the very moment she snapped the shutter, giving the sky behind Jane a magical glow. A satisfied smile followed the tall woman back to the car and they were off to their next destination, which was just up the road.

The charming town of Sneem greeted them with its brightly painted cottages lining the streets. Sneem was a fishing village proud of its reputation for having the finest salmon in Ireland. They had earlier decided to delay lunch to avoid the mass of tour buses that converge on the towns at mid-day. But a rumbling stomach signaled that a meal was needed. It was only right that they put the reputation to the test.

An hour later they were back on the road, knowing that Sneem's boasting was quite deserved.

They drove straight through Kenmare and headed on northwest through bleak bog land and more high mountainous terrain before being offered more stunning views at Moll's Gap. The sun was dropping as late day approached. They reached Killarney and although the scenic lakes called to her, Erin knew they still had quite a drive to reach home. Besides, she knew they had an all day trip to the lakes scheduled before leaving for the states.

Once home, the exhausted pair bid Kathleen a quick goodnight and they fell into bed for yet another goodnight's sleep.

Continued in Part 9.

~ Seeing You, Again For the First Time ~

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.

Love/Sex Disclaimer: This story depicts a loving relationship between two consenting, adult women and contains scenes of intimacy, but nothing explicit. If you are under 18 years of age or if this type of story is illegal in the state or country in which you live, please do not read it. If depictions of this nature disturb you, you may wish to read something other than this story.

Hurt/Comfort Disclaimer: Major angst ahead. But have faith and remember, I love a happy ending!

Thanks so much to my beta reader Barb.

No copy write infringement is intended in the use of the lyrics to the song "At Your Side".

This is the sequel to my first story, "At First Sight". I would recommend that you read that one first.

All comments are welcome at coleen30@webtv.net

I have also created a group for discussions of this, past and future stories. Maybe some sneak previews as well.

Join us at http://groups.yahoo.com/group/colleens_corner

Part 9

Chapter 9

The next morning, as they ate another delicious breakfast, Erin convinced her grandmother that she and Jane wanted to stay around the farm and help with the chores. The author appealed to the older woman's sense of family, asking to hear some of the delightful stories she had been told as a child. Kathleen gave a prideful smile and relented to allow them to help.

With the morning dishes put away in the beautifully hand made cherry wood buffet, Erin and Jane set about dusting the shelves, pictures and rugs. Kathleen was a consummate housekeeper

and the chore was finished in half an hour. The beds were stripped and the bundles were placed in the automatic washing machine. That and an automatic dryer was another modern luxury that Kathleen had insisted on, even though a laundry room had to be built to house them.

The cot had been removed from the small bedroom when they had arrived home from their trip to Blarney. They had climbed into the bed that night with just a small bit of trepidation. They felt themselves getting closer by the minute, but it was not without worries on both sides.

Erin had awoken in the middle of the night that night to find a hand gently wrapped around her upper arm. The long fingers began to tremble and she looked over to see the beautiful face twitch in fear. Eyes jerked rapidly under closed lids and a muffled moan escaped the slightly opened lips. She reached out and cupped the troubled face. "It's all right Jane," she said soothingly. "I'm here. You're not alone." The movement slowly stilled and Jane slipped back into a peaceful sleep. Erin studied the face, as best she could in the pale light coming through the window. She began absently tracing the contours of the high cheekbone and moved down across the jaw. What am I doing? She suddenly pulled her hand away, burned by the realization that it was no longer necessary. She could see every inch of tanned skin, every strand of dark hair that was cut up over the ear and lay close against the long neck. Erin reverted her eyes to the ceiling and released a long puff of air. Her lips drew into a thin line and she mentally kicked herself. The odd thing was that she wasn't even sure exactly why she was scolding herself. The hand around her arm gave a gentle squeeze. Erin looked back to find her friend still sound asleep. She leaned over, kissed Jane's forehead and returned to her own slumber.

* * * *

Erin returned from the laundry room to find Jane sitting at the upright piano that sat in the corner of the living room.

The tall woman studied the black and white keys intently then she ran the tip of one finger backwards along the music-making device. Little pressure was applied and the notes came out nothing but a faint chime.

"Do you play?" asked Erin as she stepped up behind the seated woman.

Jane answered without looking up. "I don't know." Both hands were soon poised over the keyboard and a series of finger movements brought forth a lovely tune and a bright and shining smile.

Erin scooted onto the bench and gave her friend a one armed hug. "That was great! See, I knew things would start coming back to you."

Jane met the green eyed gaze with a timid smile. "Yeah, I hope so."

Kathleen had been standing in the doorway, watching the scene with a twinkle in her eye. She clapped her hands twice. "All right, you two wanted to do chores, it's time to move this outside."

They followed her through the kitchen, where they stopped just a moment to take a healthy sniff of the mouth-watering aromas coming from the large cooking pot on the stove.

"Lunch," Kathleen informed them as she stepped onto the back porch. Her white head popped back through the doorway. "Come along, times a wastin." She handed them each a pair of black, rubber booties as she slipped her own pair on over her comfortable shoes. "Tis always best ta wear these when you're goin into the sheep barn."

Erin wrinkled her nose and nodded. "Thanks Grandma." She turned to her friend with a mischievous grin. "Guess what new job you get at the ranch?"

Jane laughed. "Oh well. I think I might like starting at the bottom and working my way up." She casually turned her back, knowing exactly how she had meant the comment and it had nothing to do with work. But she wasn't sure she wanted to see Erin's reaction.

What was Erin's reaction? Well, she was just glad that her grandmother was already out the door or else Kathleen surely would have asked why Erin's face looked like a house a fire.

* * * *

The three busy workers had the barn cleaned, fresh water delivered and feed served within an hour.

"I thank ya much for yer help darlins," the older woman said. "Now I want ya to relax fer the afternoon." Kathleen slipped into the kitchen and soon returned with a tan, woven basket filled with goodies. "In fact, I thought ya might like to have a picnic down by Clover Lake." She leaned closer and spoke in a hushed voice. "Actually, your Grandpa and I used to call it Sweetheart Lake. We used ta spend many a day there just...bein together." Her weathered face took on a sweet, but melancholy expression. "Just follow the tree line west and turn right when ya see the old barn. You'll find it in no time."

Erin hugged her beloved grandmother. "Thank you," she whispered then looked back at Jane. "It sounds like fun."

The tall woman nodded and retrieved the basket as they headed for the back door. Just as they stepped onto the carpet of green, they heard a voice call from inside the house.

"One word of warnin, ya best be on the lookout fer banshees."

Erin gave half a smile and a shake of her head as they kept walking.

A couple of bored looking sheep glanced in the their direction as the couple passed by. Aside from the dozens of woolen grazers in the pasture, it seemed as though she and Jane were the only two people in the world. It was another picture perfect day, as had every day she'd been in the country. She knew their luck with the weather was bound to fail soon, but it wouldn't be enough to squelch what she was feeling.

That morning spent helping her grandmother was almost as fun as any day she had ever known. She fondly remembered the best moments of the morning as they made their way to the lake.

They had been raking dirty hay from the far side of the barn (no, that was not the fond moment) and the mid-morning breeze wafted through the open windows, stirring up the dust and smell (and definitely not that one either). Suddenly Kathleen burst into verse.

Long, long ago, beyond the misty space

Of twice a thousand years,

In Erin old, there dwelt a mighty race,

Taller than Roman spears

Like oaks and towers they were giant race

Were fleets as deers,

With wind and waves they made their biding place,

These western sheperd seers.

Their ocean-god was Manannan MacLir,

Whose angry lips,

In their white foam, full often would inter

Whose fleets of ships

Cromah their Day-God and their thunderer

Made morning and eclipse

Bride was their Queen of Song and unto her,

They prayed with fire-touched lips.

Great were their deeds, their passions and their sports

With clay and stone

They piled on strath and shore those mystic forts,

Not yet overthrown

On cairn-crowned hills they held their council courts

While youths alone

With giant dogs, explored the elk resorts,

And brought them down.

Of these was Fin, the father of the Bard

Whose ancient song

Over the clamour of all change is heard,

Sweet-voiced and strong.

Fin once o'ertook Grania, the golden haired,

The fleet and young

From her the lovely and from him the feared

The primal poet sprung.

Ossain! Two thousand years of mist and change

Surround thy name

Thy Finian heroes now no longer range

The hills of fame.

The very names of Fin and Gaul sound strange

Yet thine the same

By miscalled lake and desecrated grange

Remains and shall remain!

The Druid's altar and the Druid's creed

We scarce can trace,

There is not left an undisputed deed

*Of all your race
Save your majestic song, which hath their speed,
And strength and grace
In that sole song, they live and love and bleed
It bears them through space.
O inspired giant hail we'er behold
In our own time
One fit to speak your spirit on the world,
Or seize your rhyme
One pupil of the past, as mighty souled
As in the prime,
Were the fond, fair and beautiful and bold
They, of your song sublime!*

They had soon found themselves lost in her lilt, their strokes keeping time with the rhyme. All thoughts of laboring around the unpleasant odor were soon forgotten and the chore was finished upon her last word.

"There now, that wasn't too bad," Kathleen said, as she gathered the farming tools and set them aside. She walked over to a doorway that led to another room and beckoned the pair with the crook of a finger. "There is someone I want ya ta meet." She pulled the latch back and opened the half door, inviting them to go in first.

The hay crunched under Erin's feet as she gingerly stepped inside. She took one look and a grin the size of all out doors graced the author's face.

From the far end of the twelve by six foot stall, the tiny, gray creature leapt forward on knobbly legs to greet its visitors. Erin dropped to her knees and gently scooped up the delicate baby. "She's adorable," she cooed as she snuggled her face in the lamb's soft, fuzzy wool.

"Aye, that she is," said Kathleen as she retrieved a baby bottle from a corner shelf. "Her name is Eire. I'm havin ta hand rear her, cause her mother rejected her."

"That's awful," said Jane, as she watched the author cuddled the four-legged little one.

"It happens to some first time mothers. But thankfully not very often." A steady string of baaas started filling the air and Kathleen handed the milk to Jane. "I think she is wantin her lunch."

Jane gave a quizzical look at the item in her grasp then to the helpless baby. Its pitiful cries tugged at her heart. She knelt at Erin's side and held the bottle up to the charcoal colored face. The ravenous mouth soon latched on and began guzzling down the sweet substance. The lamb calmed in Erin's arms as it ate and blue eyes met green. With matching smiles they shared in the feeding of the small animal and in the joy of the moment.

A partially dilapidated, old building loomed in the near distance as they continued on their way to the lake. "I guess this is where we go right," said Jane, breaking Erin from her memories.

"Huh? Oh yeah."

"Are you okay?"

"I'm fine Jane. I was just thinking about this morning."

They walked side by side down the narrow footpath where the thick trees created a canopy above their heads. Shadowed patterns danced on the ground ahead as the sun peaked through the leafy branches. They began making a game of chasing the dark spots as they bounced around from the grass to the dirt and back again. They were soon jumping around and laughing so hard that at one point they bumped into one another.

Jane's free hand flew around the smaller woman's waist to keep her from falling. She tested the waters and pulled her a little tighter. "That's funny, I didn't see any goats around here," she teased.

Erin caressed the arm wrapped around her as she laughed. "Nope, just my two left feet." They stood there just a second longer. "I guess we should find that lake. I'm starved."

Jane pulled back and quickly agreed. "Yeah me too." She wasn't disappointed. On the contrary, it gave her hope that Erin had allowed the intimate, albeit brief touch.

* * * *

After efficiently stuffing themselves with Kathleen's delicious, culinary delights, a long rest was in order.

"Bunny rabbit," Erin called out unexpectedly.

Jane looked into the surrounding grasses. "Where?"

The author giggled and pointed skyward. "There."

They soon stretched out on the soft blanket, side by side, hands behind their heads and settled down to a session of cloud watching, which brought about some very unusual observations. Again, it became a competition of sorts, to imagine the strangest shapes in the sky above. Jane quickly pointed out a donut shaped cloud that slowly morphed into the letter C. That led to a rousing chorus of the cookie monster song and some rib tickling fun.

At one point Erin proclaimed that a blob of the graying vapors looked like a monkey reading a book, riding on the back of a unicorn. Next she saw a seahorse pulling a wagon full of pumpkins.

"Is this cloud watching or a Rorschach test?" joked the raven-haired woman.

"Let's see you do better, oh seer of donuts."

"Hey, it had rainbow sprinkles," she rebutted.

Erin snorted her reply.

"Okay that does it." With pursed lips, Jane scouted the sky for a winner. After about three minutes she spotted it. She flashed a sideways glance at her friend and sported a very cocky smile. "There," she pointed far off to the right. "A buck toothed bat flying off to group therapy."

"Group therapy?" came the skeptical question.

"Yeah, look at the way his wings are drooped. An obvious self-confidence problem."

"Obvious."

"Poor thing, being the butt of all those bad bat jokes. Like, how many bats does it take to open a bottle of blood?" Jane looked to find a raised eyebrow pointed in her direction. "Only one as long as it's Bartholomew," she explained. "You know, because of the pronounced overbite. The teasing of his name alone was enough, but when the teeth grew in..." She gave an exaggerated shudder.

Erin couldn't hold it in any longer. She burst out laughing, soon joined by the brunette.

When their laughter quieted down, Jane began thinking about the woman next to her. She remembered how good it had felt holding Erin in her arms, earlier under the trees. How wonderful the kiss at the restaurant had been. How sleeping next to her for the past several nights had given her a feeling of safety, of finding something...familiar. Jane turned to her side and rose up on her elbow. At first she appeared to be taking in the splendor of the countryside, but her eyes soon drifted downward to admire the human splendor beside her. "Do you know how beautiful you are?" she asked softly.

A flicker of a smile hit the corner of Erin's mouth, but her eyes never left the clouds. "No."

"No, you don't know or no, you're not?"

The author turned to the brunette and the smile widened slightly as she answered. "Yes."

The blue eyes momentarily rolled skyward. "Well either way, I say you are."

Erin held the sparkling blues for several seconds before raising a hand to caress Jane's cheek. "Thank you." The sun peaked from behind a passing cloud, creating a halo of brilliance around the dark head. That hand slipped around her neck and Erin pulled Jane down to her. The kiss was that followed, by no means, tentative. It was firm and hot and delicious. The blonde rolled Jane to her back as tongues began their passionate play. Jane was careful with her hands, happy to just let them rest on the middle of Erin's back. Soft moans and hums joined the chorus of affection as the kiss continued.

Erin was in definite control as she pressed harder into the strong body beneath her. Every curve of the feminine form fit next to her like two pieces of a puzzle. The hands on her back felt so familiar. It was almost as if...so much like...before. There was another grassy field and the kisses, the intimacy... It felt so good, so right...but it wasn't. Erin sat up and closed her eyes in shame, not wanting to see the disappointment on Jane's face. "No, no, no," she chanted quietly to herself. *It's so much like her. But I can't do that to myself again.* "I'm sorry," she told Jane. "But I can't stop thinking about..."

"Don't be sorry. That was wonderful. And I promised not to push you, remember."

"You didn't. I started it. I kissed you and...more. I just...I just can't go there...yet."

Jane sat up beside the distraught woman. "It's okay."

Erin still couldn't look at her friend as she continued. "It was wonderful and so are you. I wish..." Long fingers reached under her chin and she was gently turned.

"I understand." The words were spoken firmly, but tenderly.

The rustling of the nearby trees replaced the absence of words as Erin studied the face of her friend. "You do, don't you?"

"Erin, you are all I have in the world. Now whether it's as a friend or a lover, I need you. And I think you need me. I really do understand the conflict that you're feeling. As much as I love you...and I do," she confirmed when the startled expression appeared. "I won't push you, but I just want to ask you not to give up on us because you're afraid. Take all the time you need and do everything you feel you have to to reconcile your feelings for Jamie. And if in the end, your heart tells you that you can do nothing but be by my side, hold my hand and lend me a shoulder every now and then, I will still be the luckiest woman in the world."

Erin threw her arms around her friend. "I do care about you...so much," she said as the hug was returned.

The next baby step in their developing relationship had been tentatively, but successfully taken. And Erin had felt one more barrier dissolve away. It still hurt, but somehow the pain was cushioned by the compassion of the woman in her arms. But there was still one more confusing feeling stirring inside her heart. And until that could be resolved, she knew she might never be able to move on and love again. And the thought of hurting the incredible woman at her side was unbearably painful.

Erin's dilemma continued.

Could she heal her own pain and prevent someone else's? She wasn't sure she could prevent it at this point. They were already too close. And if she couldn't pledge her heart again, her conscience would bare the pain of both of them. Erin now understood the kind of torment that Jamie had gone through at the beginning of their relationship.

Love is the strongest force in the universe. And that is what makes loving so easy and so hard. For Erin it was always so clear, true love was forever. In life and in death. And beyond. Facing a new love meant letting go of the past one. Her forever was suddenly hazy and the wind carried no clear answers.

The heavens suddenly opened up on the embracing couple. Their luck had finally waned. They pulled away laughing as the rain fell down upon them. "The old barn," they said in unison. Jane grabbed the basket and Erin scooped up the blanket. They quickly ran back to the path and through the grove of trees to the faded, brown structure.

Once inside, they shook drenched arms and squishy shoes, not that it did a bit of good. They had no choice, but to stay there shivering as they waited for the summer shower to dissipate.

Erin explored the empty stalls, not looking for anything in particular. She noticed the hayloft overhead, but wouldn't chance the rickety old ladder that was propped against the upper level. She soon shuffled her way back to the front door where Jane stood. She approached and put a hand against the wet, blue shirt that was plastered against Jane's back. The tall woman didn't acknowledge her presence with as much as a sigh. Erin looked carefully into the face of her friend. The glazed over, blue eyes seemed to be staring into another time. "Jane, are you okay?" She called her name again and finally got a response.

Eyes blinked heavily as Jane looked down to the worried face. "I...um...there was something..."

"What? Did you remember something from your past?" she asked excitedly.

The dark head shook. "Not really. There was just something about rain. Something happened to me that involved rain." She looked away, disappointed. "But that could be anything."

Erin knew there were no words that could really make her friend feel better. She just pulled her into a comforting hug, offering her silent support as the rain continued to fall, softly splashing into puddles that were forming in the soft earth along the path back home.

* * * *

Erin and Jane convinced Kathleen to let them take care of the evening dishes and working together they finished in a matter of minutes.

They stepped out into the backyard to find the older woman sitting in a wooden swing, humming to herself. Her eyes were focused on a point high on the mountain, far off in the distance.

Jane put an arm around the smaller woman's shoulder and Erin leaned into the tall body. They both stood there listening and taking in the peaceful moment.

The song came to an end and the white haired woman slowly turned to the smiling pair. "I'm thinking its time for Eire's last meal of the day." She winked at her granddaughter. "Care ta do the honors again?"

"You bet."

Kathleen checked things over in the barn one last time before bringing in the flock for the night, while Erin slipped into the large stall with a full bottle.

Jane's grinning face was propped on her crossed arms that rested on the top of the stall door. Her eyes took in the heartwarming sight, but her focus was on the beautiful face, which beamed with happiness. *I wish I could keep that expression there forever. And I will do my best to try.*

With her belly now full, the gray, fuzzed lamb bounced all around her new friend. Her small black hooves made the hay crackle as she ran around attempting to jump over Erin's out stretched legs. A little pink tongue poked out as Eire vocalized her pleasure with a series of baas. Soon the four small legs began to tire out and the dark eyes began to droop. Erin snuggled the soft body to her chest. "Sleep well little one," she whispered. She placed a kiss on the curly head and placed her back into the warm hay.

Jane unlatched the door and pulled it open. As Erin stepped out, the tall woman pulled a stalk of yellow straw from the collar of the blonde's white shirt. "That must've tickled," said Jane.

"Yeah it did." Erin wiggled the lower half of her body and giggled. "I won't tell you were more of those ended up. Excuse me," she said as she stepped into one of the empty stalls.

Jane clamped the piece of hay between her teeth. "Sure you don't need some help with those too?" she asked saucily.

The blonde head poked around the door and winked.

Next they watched as Kathleen and Lacey, the multi-colored Border Collie herded the flock across the field and into the barn with precision teamwork.

With all of the day's farm work done, the three of them moved back to the porch and sipped lemonade while Kathleen told more stories. One in particular captured Jane's attention.

"When Erin was just a sprout of two years, she became utterly fascinated with bugs. Ladybugs, crickets, grasshoppers, you name it and she chased it. And smart she was, figured out they liked ta live in the bushes. Every time her parents stepped out the door with her in tow, she was off ta the nearest greenery. One August afternoon, the family was havin an outdoor birthday party fer Bridgett."

Erin looked over to find Jane tugging on her lip with her teeth, trying to hold off the anticipatory laugh. Erin's pursed lips and bobbing head foretold her knowledge of the story's ending. Although she had no recollection of the incident, she had heard the story many times during her lifetime.

Kathleen continued. "Durin the birthday song, Erin runs out from where she'd been sittin...in the bushes. She started dancing around, wigglin her little behind and gigglin up a storm. Everyone thought she was just havin fun, tryin ta get some attention. But she wouldn't stop. Finally, her mother went over ta try and get her ta settle down before she hurt herself, but Erin kept on. Danielle thought that maybe her daughter had soiled and went ta check. All of a sudden she let out a scream would have scared the devil himself. Dani ripped off the diaper right there in the back yard, in front of the guests. She always pinned them on very loosely and no less then three of the little critters had crawled inside intendin ta make a home. Erin had little bites on her pink butt fer a week."

Jamie laughed her head off and nearly fell out of her chair when Kathleen said that they had almost started calling her buggy butt, but settled for E bug as a nickname.

Several more stories followed until darkness began to settle over them. Kathleen moved back inside to flip on the porch light and retrieve the quilt she'd been working on.

Jane stretched and her back gave an audible pop. "I think I'm going to turn in now," she told Erin. "You and your grandmother could use some time alone. Goodnight."

"Goodnight. I'll try not to disturb you when I come to bed."

"You haven't yet. Goodnight Kathleen," she said as the older woman returned.

"Goodnight Dear. Sleep well."

As Jane disappeared into the small house, Erin walked to the edge of the porch, into the shadows of the night. She watched the twinkling lights overhead, wondering at the turn her life had taken since coming to Ireland.

Kathleen watched as her granddaughter stood there in silent debate. "The stars make no noise," she said after several minutes.

"What?" asked Erin, turning back into the light.

"You can tell the stars all yer thoughts, but they can't talk back."

Erin nodded and smiled. "Sometimes that's a good thing."

"Aye, but sometimes it's not. Tell me what's on yer mind Dear. Have ya not been having a good time here?"

"No Grandma it's been fun. Jane and I have had a great time."

The wrinkled hands stitched with sure precision on the multicolored cloth that lay in Kathleen's lap. "Maybe that is the problem, do ya suppose?"

The low voice was barely heard above the chirping insects hidden in the blackness that surrounded them. "I don't know. It shouldn't be. Jane is wonderful."

"Aye, I think so too. And I think she cares a great deal fer you."

Erin released a long puff of air and turned to lean against the low, wooden fence. "She does. Today she told me...she told me that she loves me. She didn't expect a response, she just wanted me to know."

"And how do ya feel about her?" Kathleen asked cautiously.

Erin pushed off the wooden rail and began pacing the short length of the stone patio. "Oh, I could fall in love with her Grandma. I know I could. But how can I? How can I feel this close to her so fast." Her head shook with the mystery of it all. "I fell in love with Jamie right away...because she was my soul mate."

"Dear, you can have more than one soul mate in yer lifetime."

Erin stopped and pinned her grandmother with an intense expression. "Yes, but there is only one person who is the other half of your soul. And I know, without a doubt that Jamie was my other half."

Kathleen momentarily abandoned her sewing. "Put all that aside for just a moment," she said "How do ya feel when ya are with Jane?"

Erin closed her eyes and sank into the memories of the last week. A smile eased onto her troubled face as she remembered the laughs, the words spoken across meals, the jokes, the touches...the kisses. "Complete," she whispered. But then the scowl returned. "That is why this all so frustrating. I just don't understand it." Erin buried her face in her hands.

Kathleen hurt for her granddaughter. She got up and took her into her arms. "Maybe ya shouldn't try Sweetheart."

Erin looked at her quizzically.

"I know ya've heard the saying, the heart has reasons that the head might not understand. There's no shame in lovin someone as long as that love is true. I believe you can love both of them, but never make it a competition. Jane knows about Jamie, yes?" At the nod she continued. "She knows just how important she was in yer life?" Another nod. "And she's willin to wait until ya can commit yerself ta her completely."

"Of course. She promised me that several times."

"And that proves just how special she is. Erin, Sweetheart I just hope that ya don't let fear keep ya alone the rest of yer life. Don't be afraid ta love again."

"I'm not afraid to love again. I'm afraid to lose again. And the closer I get to Jane, the more that becomes a real possibility. You don't understand what I went through when Jamie died, no one could. I don't even know if there are words to describe exactly what I felt." Erin hesitated, staring at a spot on the cement. She knew her grandmother was urging her to continue by not saying a word. *I haven't really told anyone...except for the grief counselor.* Her voice was almost void of emotion as she began again. Erin could tell of the events during that period of time, but if she even tried to convey the emotions, that would be her undoing. And she wasn't about to fall to pieces in front of her grandmother. "At first I put up a strong front for the family. I know that's how I was always perceived, especially after I conquered my fear after losing my sight. I didn't want to disappoint them. But when I was alone, I was...truly alone. Nothing else in the world existed and I wallowed in my solitary reality. But that reality soon turned into fantasy, a fantasy world where everything was perfect. I began living Jamie's dream because I knew...**I knew** that she was only away on a trip and that she would be back any day. Time meant nothing to me. The calendar was merely numbers on a page." *There was only one date that meant anything to me, April 14th. But I can't...I still can't talk about that. I'm sorry Grandma, but I can't.* Erin pulled in a deep breath of fresh air and let it settle into her lungs before she continued. "I was finally pulled back to reality and only then did I seek professional help." But even the therapy had only helped her accept Jamie's death...it hadn't eased the hollow feeling in her heart where Jamie's voice still echoed.

"I'm glad ya told me this Dear and I hate that ya had ta go through that, especially alone. It was different fer me, I had children..." She reached up and cupped Erin's face. "and grandchildren ta support me. I still had that part of yer grandpa with me, but it didn't ease the loneliness. It hurt terribly."

"Isn't that why you never fell in love with anyone after Grandpa, because of the pain?"

"No Dear. I just wasn't lucky enough ta find anyone that I wanted ta share that with. Sometimes I wish I had. I don't want ya ta be my age and look back with regrets about Jane. You can have a happy life with her, if ya just take the chance." Kathleen kissed her granddaughter's cheek, said her goodnights and went back inside.

Once again the author turned back to stare into the night sky. She remembered giving guidance similar to that once upon a time. She had urged someone to have courage, to open their heart. *Maybe it's time to take my own advice.*

Continued in Part 10.

The Athenaeum's Scroll Archive

~ Seeing You, Again For the First Time ~

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.

Love/Sex Disclaimer: This story depicts a loving relationship between two consenting, adult women and contains scenes of intimacy, but nothing explicit. If you are under 18 years of age or if this type of story is illegal in the state or country in which you live, please do not read it. If depictions of this nature disturb you, you may wish to read something other than this story.

Hurt/Comfort Disclaimer: Major angst ahead. But have faith and remember, I love a happy ending!

Thanks so much to my beta reader Barb.

No copy write infringement is intended in the use of the lyrics to the song "At Your Side".

This is the sequel to my first story, "At First Sight". I would recommend that you read that one first.

All comments are welcome at colleen30@webtv.net

I have also created a group for discussions of this, past and future stories. Maybe some sneak previews as well.

Join us at http://groups.yahoo.com/group/colleens_corner

Part 10

Chapter 10

The Lakes of Killarney. The three bodies of calm, glassy waters reflected the peace of the surrounding emerald landscape. The shores were dotted with ruined castles and abbeys, but the lakes were the focus of the attention. The moody, watery scenery is subject to subtle shifts of

light and color, bringing a new, enchanted vision to each traveler throughout the long day's visit.

Erin and Jane had arrived at the dawn of the new day to join the small tour group. The area could be a little confusing and that was the best way to see the major viewing spots.

The group consisted of an older husband and wife couple, three women in their forties and fifties who, they found out, were sisters (siblings not nuns). The tour guide was a gentleman in his early fifties, his dark hair just beginning to gray. His voice reverberated with the local brogue as he welcomed each tourist with a handshake and a smile. He promptly made sure everyone had sufficient water and good walking shoes before heading off on the morning hike around the lakes.

Rounding out the group of visitors was a young man that had quickly set Jane's temper flaring. He was a thirty something, grinning idiot in her estimation. The second he had seen Erin, he puffed out his chest and stroked his moustache, clearly planning his evening activities. The blonde seemed oblivious to his lustful brown eyes that planted themselves on her backside as the group trudged up the hill and to his obvious throat clearing whenever he stepped up next to her. Jane had thrown him several daggered glares, but it was his turn to be oblivious.

From the Torc Waterfall down to Dinis Island, where they saw the meeting of the waters from the three different lakes, they spent the morning in wide-eyed wonder.

About three hours into their journey, the group stopped for a rest. Most of them chose a seat on a nice, soft spot of grass shaded by a towering old tree. The stalker, as Jane had dubbed him, stood against the bark covered tree trunk, sipping his water, lost in his fantasies.

"How's your back holding up?" asked Erin as she rubbed the body part in question.

"Not too bad," she said just before she popped a pain pill into her mouth. "But not too good either." She smiled to let her friend know that she was okay.

"We didn't have to come here today," said the author. "I mean we have been pushing the sightseeing."

"That's what you came to Ireland for." Jane turned to face the green eyes that she loved. "I'm fine really. I'm not going to let anything keep us from enjoying ourselves. You are enjoying yourself, aren't you?"

"Of course." Erin took in the panorama. "It's beautiful out here."

"It certainly is," said Jane without shifting her gaze. Her appreciation was interrupted as from the corner of her eye she saw him still staring. He was too far away to have heard their conversation or maybe he might have understood that he had no chance. "Stay here," she said. "I'll be right back."

Scottie, as he had introduced himself, pulled a trail bar from his pack. He fumbled to rip open the

tough, plastic wrapping when he heard the grass beside him rustle with footsteps.

"Ya know," said Jane.

The growling voice still startled him and he nearly dropped his snack. He looked up to meet the intense blues as she continued.

"...my friend is not the center attraction on this little trip. She doesn't like being gawked at, so keep your eyes on the foliage and off of her."

He gave a short snort and a smarmy grin. "What are you, her body guard?" he asked, biting of a chunk of the granola bar. Before she could reply, he continued. "If not, I'd like to apply for the job."

Jane waited until he turned to look at her. She flashed him her own evil grin. "Just leave her alone or you might need a body cast."

He still seemed unfazed at the threat from the overprotective friend as he finished his food and took a long swig of water.

Jane returned to Erin's side as the guide moved to get them started again.

"Is everything okay?" asked the blonde when she saw the uneasy expression on her friend's face.

Jane slipped into an easy smile, the one she always felt when looking into those green eyes. "Just fine. Let's go."

The tall woman's attention was always equally divided between the beauty of the land and the beauty at her side. She offered water, snacks and smiles that bathed the Irish author's heart in glowing affections.

Although her grandmother's words from the night before rang in her head, Erin was determined to spend the day in uncomplicated joy. And she was achieving her task quite nicely.

She had finally gone to bed, the night before, after several hours of contemplation. The answers she sought were just within reach, but she finally decided that only time would bring them to her.

Erin had showered and changed before walking into the room that she shared with the dark haired woman. She stopped just inside the doorway to watch the long form languishing in the oak colored bed. The warmth of the evening allowed the absence of blankets across the endless legs that shot out from the red sleep shorts. One of those legs was bent and the knee stuck out over the far side of the mattress. A long, thin foot capped by five perfectly shaped toes involuntarily twitched in the night.

A small, dimly lit lamp was left on the bedside table to illuminate the way in the darkness. Erin's eyes traveled up the sleeping body in earnest appraisal as she crossed the short distance to the bed. While there was a deep physical desire simmering in Erin's belly, the true emotions that were sparked, etched the loving smile onto her face. As she stood at the side of the bed, the upper body, also clad in red, caught her rapt attention. The flat stomach, hidden under the thin material, rose and fell to the gentle rhythm of life. One breath leading to the next, coinciding with a beating heart. A loving heart that had bared its unconditional truth to a hurting counterpart. A lonely heart that reached out in the darkness for companionship. A brave heart willing to risk being broken at the chance of forever.

Erin doused the light with the flick of her wrist, eased herself onto the mattress and settled onto her side, also forgoing the blanket. The dark head unconsciously turned in her direction, but slept on soundly. Lips grazed the smooth forehead before joining her in slumber.

The stalker still managed to do a fair amount of leering at Erin as they continued on. Jane didn't want to make a scene and ruin everyone else's peace, so she devised another plan to whip him up side of the head with a major clue. He always managed to stay in back of them, for obvious reasons, so as they neared a rocky slope, she lagged behind the rest of the group. And of course Erin stayed by her side. Jane took Erin's hand to help her up the large stone covered hill. Once they reached the top, she never let go. She waited just a moment then pulled the back of the smaller hand to her lips.

Scottie pulled himself over the top edge just in time to see the show. Erin reached up to caress the smiling face and his eyes nearly popped from their sockets. Some indiscernible noises escaped his throat and he scrambled passed them, stumbling on a half buried tree root. He fell flat on his ass, stirring up a cloud of dust.

Erin realized the reason for his reaction and a slightly disappointed look drew over her face.

Jane just looked down at the fool and asked him, very calmly, "Having a problem Scottie?"

Without a word, he disgustedly got to his feet and ran off to the rest of the group.

Jane was quite satisfied with the outcome of her plan until she looked down to see a frown. "Hey," she lifted the face to meet her gaze. "Ignore him. He's just an ignorant idiot."

The blonde head nodded. "I know. I know. It's just...when I was blind I didn't have to see that." She started off down the trail, the hand still firmly in her grasp. "Although that was definitely the only good thing about being blind."

Jane gave a comforting squeeze. "Did someone hurt you...because you're gay?"

"No," she answered immediately. But upon a slow review of the previous summer, Erin amended her answer. "Well...yeah I guess he did."

A shiver ran down Jane's back. "What happened...if you want to tell me?"

"It's long story, but..." She proceeded to tell an abbreviated version of the sorted and disgusting tale of Ethan Tyler.

"Sounds like you were able to take good care of yourself," Jane said when it was over.

Erin smiled. "Yeah, I was proud of that."

"You should be. And I know you always will be able to. But I would really like to be around to make sure you never have to."

Erin tried to hide a knowing grin. "Like today."

"You knew?"

"Yeah. I just try to ignore his type, but...it feels really nice to have someone care enough to want to protect me."

"Well you know how much I do care. And I always will." Jane kicked away a small pebble with the tip of her shoe and looked away sheepishly. "Um...it...actually this isn't the first time I...ahh...was being over protective. The night at the pub, back in Dublin, I...almost slugged your cousin." Jane gave a mortified blush at her confession. "I'm sorry."

Erin lifted their joined hands and played with the long fingers. "Don't be sorry. But please don't ever slug anybody because of me. This hand wouldn't look very good in purple."

They looked at each other with matching grins. Jane turned over the smaller hand and noticed a small mark at the base of Erin's right thumb. Her smile changed to a curious frown. "How did you get that?" she asked.

The blonde looked down to see what her friend was talking about. Her hand trembled just a bit and she eased it out of Jane's grasp. "Oh, it's, nothing," she said without meeting the questioning eyes. "Shouldn't we catch up to the others?"

* * * *

After lunch they departed from the tour group to do some exploring on their own. They traversed several short, but interesting trails before arriving at an overlook that spanned across one of the smaller lakes. They stood there side by side soaking in the view and breathing the clean air.

Jane tapped Erin on the arm. "I'll be right back," she said and slipped away to a point they had passed a few yards back.

About ten minutes later, Erin heard her name called. She turned around and her jaw dropped open. Her green eyes laughed and her body soon joined in. "Are you serious?" she asked approaching her friend. "Where did you get that?"

Jane stood off to the side of the trail with a huge grin on her face. "From a place back there," she said. "They were renting them. So I figured why not." She looked down at the red item she supported in her hands. "But they only had one like this. Are you game?"

Erin smiled at her impetuous friend and gave her several short headshakes. "Why not," she finally said.

Jane handed Erin the black helmet, then reached up under her own chin to fasten the strap of the blue one she had been wearing all along. They carefully mounted the bicycle built for two and after a slightly shaky start they finally found a rhythm and off they went back down the trail for more sightseeing.

They peddled for an hour down the well-worn path that had seen many a shoe, tire and hoof in its lifetime. A dozen varieties of trees and plants lined the way and they had fun trying to identify them from their lesson earlier in the morning.

They slowly made their way across the Gap of Dunloe, appreciating that ancient glaciers had carved out the dramatic mountain pass. The boulder-strewn gorge was a perfect example of Mother Nature's impeccable artistry.

Several times during the long ride, Erin found herself staring at the long back in front of her. Only the need to keep a firm grip on the handlebars, kept her from her ever-increasing desire to touch that expanse of bone and muscle and any other part of that body that happened to be within reach. Erin's heart was falling hard and fast and her brain, although still several paces behind, was closing the distance. Her life was slowly slipping back into the place she had been just over a year ago, only this time she was the reluctant one, allowing fear and guilt to command her moves. One more step was all she needed and she was determined to take it before she left Ireland.

* * * *

Darkness had well set in by the time they got back home. They tiptoed in the front door to find Kathleen snoozing on the couch, in front of the television.

"Grandma," whispered Erin, rubbing a hand down the elderly woman's arm.

A tiny squeal and some mumbling escaped from between her slightly parted lips.

Jane covered her grinning mouth, not wanting to embarrass the woman she had come to care a great deal about.

Erin bit back her own smile as she tried to wake the sleeping woman again. "Grandma, its me, Erin. Wake up so you can go to sleep." The absurd sentence brought more silent chuckles to the younger ones.

Finally the white head sprang forward. "What? What?" The knitting needles and half completed garment fell to the couch beside her as she shuffled to straighten up.

"You can go to bed now Grandma," said Erin with a kiss to the older woman's cheek. "We're home safe and sound."

"And what makes ya think I was waitin up fer you?" she asked with as much of a false indignant tone that she could muster at such a late hour. "There was a very interestin movie on the tele. The time just got away from me." She looked up through the glasses perched on the end of her nose at the two youngsters standing before her sporting affectionate grins. "All right, all right." She smiled herself. "Now off ta bed with ya. Tomorrow is another long day."

Since Erin and Jane both were in the same dust covered state and dead tired, they decided showers could wait until the morning.

Jane returned from changing in the bathroom to find her friend already in bed, but not asleep. She let out an audible yelp of pain when she sat down on the bed.

Erin shot up from her pillow. "Are you alright?"

"Yeah," said Jane through clenched teeth. "It's my lower back, it's just a little stiff. It'll go away once I can lay down and relax my body."

Erin took the dark haired woman by the shoulder and guided her face down on the bed. "Let me help you massage those knots out."

The deer in the headlights look went unnoticed as Jane moved her face away from the low light to the darkest side of the bed. She felt the slight body settle onto the backs of her thighs and those small hands go to work on her sore muscles. Her physical desire soon faded into overwhelming relief from the pain as Erin gently, but firmly kneaded the tight flesh. *God, those hands are talented.* Jane's eyes popped open. *Did I say that out loud?* After a pause she thought, *I guess not. But I sure hope that someday I can.*

Erin continued with her healing touch, fulfilling the desire she had lived with all day. The muscles began to relax under her fingers and subconsciously the medicinal touches became

sensual caresses. Her body swayed sending faint shadows moving across the far wall.

They were both lost in the moment and only when Jane felt the thighs grind against her, did she snap back to reality. "I...I think you should stop now, Erin," she suggested nervously.

Erin pulled away as if burned. "God, I'm sorry," she said, falling to the bed beside her friend.

"You took away my pain. Thank you."

Erin couldn't look at the blue eyes. She sighed heavily. "I hate myself for teasing you like this."

Two long fingers pulled the blonde head around. "Hey, don't ever say that. You didn't do it on purpose. You're not that kind of person. Your body was just reacting." Jane wiggled her eyebrows wildly. "So was mine." She received the desired effect when they shared a giggle. "Please don't let this make you pull away from me."

Erin reached up to clasp the hand that was still on her face. "I won't. I promise."

* * * *

The next morning, once showered and dressed, Jane and Erin retrieved the wrapped gifts they had hidden in their luggage. They held the brightly colored boxes behind their backs as they snuck down the hall where they heard Kathleen singing in the kitchen.

Erin stepped up to her grandmother and kissed her cheek. "Good morning Grandma."

"Mornin Dear. Sit down, breakfast will be up shortly." She turned to place the white, china teapot on the table. The youngsters sat on opposites sides of the table, staring at her with conspiratorial grins. Her eyes bounced from green to blue. "All right," she said. "what are ya up to?"

They pulled the presents out from under the table. "Happy Birthday," they said in unison.

She put a surprised hand to her bosom. "Oh my," she sighed. "I haven't celebrated a birthday in six years."

"Then it's about time you do," said Erin. "Sit down and open your presents."

Kathleen stepped back and turned off the oven then returned to her seat. "This is so special, but ya know ya shouldn't have." The trembling hands pulled the white ribbon off of the big, rectangular box then ripped away the multicolored paper. She discarded the lid, pulled back the tissue and let out a gasp at the sight of the blue and green, woolen cape. She fingered the heavy material. "Is this...?"

"Yes," said Erin. "Made from the fine wool you work so hard for." She knew that the older woman didn't own any clothing that had come from her flock and when she and Jane had visited the village up the road, after their trip to Blarney, she knew just what to purchase. "I know it's too hot to wear now, but that time will be here soon enough."

Kathleen leaned over and hugged the blonde. "Thank ya Dear, but that wasn't a hint ya know. I wanted ya ta get somthin fer yerself."

"I did," Erin confirmed. "I also got ones for Mom and Bridgett, for Christmas presents."

Jane held out her much smaller gift box. "This one is from both of us." Erin had insisted, knowing that Jane had wanted to get something, but had no idea what. "Happy Birthday Kathleen. I won't ask how old you are, but what ever your age you don't look it."

"Thank ya Jane, but I am proud ta have been born in the year 1920. I could write a history book all on my own, but I'll leave the writin to my talented granddaughter." She opened the flat, square box and lifted out the picture frame made from Irish blackthorn wood. Inlaid in each corner were coins minted in the birth years of her husband and each of her three children. She ran her fingertips over the copper and silver colored currency as her eyes misted over.

"I noticed that you like to display a lot of photos, so we thought this would be useful," said Jane.

"That I do Dear, that I do."

Erin squeezed the elderly arm. "I thought you might enjoy this too," she said handing her a big yellow envelope.

Kathleen opened it in silence, still a little emotional at the previous gift. She slowly pulled out the contents and smiled brightly. "Aye this is perfect. Tis goin right in here," she said inserting the photo into her newest picture frame.

"What is it?" asked Jane.

Kathleen winked at her granddaughter as she turned the picture to toward the dark haired woman.

Erin saw the apprehension quickly fill the blue eyes, but that slowly faded. It was an eight by ten color photo of Erin and Jane standing together by the Derrynane bay. They were looking at each other, not the camera. Unbeknownst to Jane, Erin had asked a kindly old man to snap the photo of them.

Jane looked up to her smiling friend, knowing full well that it was a very important statement. It was a gift to her as much as to Kathleen, because the photo would soon reside amongst the other family photos. Erin was declaring Jane as a part of her family.

* * * *

As a part of the birthday celebration, Erin and Jane took Kathleen on their boat trip around the Skelligs, a group of inhospitable pinnacles of rock rising out of the Atlantic, located about eight miles off the coast of Ireland.

Setting sail from Valentia Island, the small cruiser navigated the slightly choppy waves out to its first destination. From a distance, the Skelligs looked like floating pyramids of sandstone, but as they came into closer view, they became rugged and uninviting, but definitely picturesque.

With its steep cliffs and sheer ledges providing homes for thousands of seabirds, such as puffins, gulls and gannets, Little Skellig covered seventeen acres in the middle of the ocean waters.

The vessel stopped for several minutes allowing for photographic opportunities before skirting around the smaller island and heading off to the main attraction.

Erin pulled her red slicker closed to protect her shirt, as the wind sent a spray of ocean mist up over the rail where she and Jane were standing. The taller woman used a gentle touch to flick away some droplets that had landed near her favorite green eyes. After holding each others gaze for just a moment, they turned their attention back to the bluish, green water and its small white caps. A flock of gulls flew over the port side, heading back to their nest sight. Their united song of freedom filled the air in an instant and then faded off as they made land once again.

"Look there!" shouted Erin excitedly, pointing a finger straight ahead and down.

Jane followed her direction and a smile came to her face as she and several other passengers watched the pod of dolphins playing along side of the ship.

"They're beautiful and so graceful," said the blonde author.

The group laughed as one of the ocean mammals breached the water and flipped in mid air, before torpedoing back into the deep blue.

Before boarding the boat, they had learned from the guide that the cliffs descended underwater for 165 feet, providing a habitat for not only the dolphins, but for giant basking sharks and sea turtles as well.

As Erin and Jane watched the playful creatures, Kathleen sat at a nearby table, watching them. She could tell that her granddaughter's sorrow was being washed away with each passing day and that Erin's heart was opening up to the charms of the dark haired woman. She wanted nothing more in the world than to witness Erin's happiness. The Leprechaun's whisper had told Kathleen to guide her granddaughter back to Dublin to meet her destiny. And as she smiled, eyes twinkling at the sight of the happy couple, she thanked the Lord that the whisper had come around for a wonderful purpose on this occasion.

As they got closer to the big island, they could see that just off shore, the puffins, with their colorful, orange beaks and wild, yellow, head feathers were riding the waves like little surfers.

The boat soon docked at the small pier on Skellig Michael, the larger of the islands, and two-dozen passengers disembarked. In comparison, Michael covered an area of forty-four acres, twice the size of Little Skellig. Several people immediately started the long climb to the ancient monastery high in the cliffs, but most, including Erin, Jane and her grandmother milled around the mossy areas on the lower ground hearing more of its history from the tour guide.

Mentions of the two majestic outposts were scattered throughout ancient folklore and early Christian history. The earliest reference found, dated back to around 1400 BC. The monks of St. Fionan's monastery spent their simple lives fishing, praying, tending their gardens and studying.

After answering a few questions, the guide sent them off, informing them of the departure time. Kathleen declined to make the seven hundred step climb, but urged the younger ones to go exploring. They only relented when another elderly woman came over and introduced herself. Kathleen assured them that she and her new acquaintance would keep themselves occupied exchanging stories.

They shrugged off their thin, nylon jackets and with a deep breath, Erin and Jane started the climb up the steep, one thousand year old stone stairway. Communication was kept to a minimum as they trudged farther up the hillside.

Reaching the halfway point, they stopped for a much needed breather.

Erin settled herself on top of a rocky perch and guzzled from the bottled water they had brought. Passing it off to Jane, she remarked, "Those monks must have been in really good shape." She looked back down at how far they had come and then up at the distance they still had to go. "I can't believe they did this twice a day."

The dark head nodded in agreement. "Especially carrying baskets of fish and supplies."

Erin scooted to one side and patted the empty space beside her. Jane took the seat, leaving them touching from shoulder to thigh.

"Did you ever wish you could travel back in time?" Erin asked absently.

"I'm sure I have. If you believe in reincarnation, you might have just been one of those super monks or a Celtic warrior, or..."

"I traveled."

"What do you mean traveled? Where?" Jane asked, genuinely interested.

The conversation paused as two other visitors trekked up the stairs beside them.

Erin continued. "I'm not sure really. I just know I traveled around the world...on foot...sometimes horseback. And I wrote...a lot."

Jane smiled and nudged the shoulder next to her. "Just like now. I bet you were a famous...what did they call authors back then, whenever then was?"

"Bard," Erin answered quickly. "Of course that was just one lifetime. Hard telling how many different people I've been. But that's the only other life that I've had...feelings from."

Jane just wanted to feel things from the life she had before she was injured. But she was also thankful for that in some way because it brought her to the point she was at now. And it was leading her to a promising future with the woman beside her. Jane stood up and reached out a hand. "Let's go bard. Or by the time we reach the top, we'll have to turn right around and come right back down."

Erin let herself be pulled to her feet and into the taller body for a quick hug. With a rejuvenated spring in her step, she hopped onto the next big, flat stone.

They covered about twenty steps more when Jane commented, "You know I might just need another massage tonight." Somehow she knew it would be okay to play around with Erin in this way. It just seemed so natural.

With pursed lips, Erin looked up at the sparkling eyes. "Well, I think you'd better ask my grandmother this time," she said teasingly and ran up a few more stairs and around a corner.

"Aw come on," whined Jane, loudly enough for her friend to hear. She gave a crooked smile and followed.

They finally reached the top of mountain and began searching around the monastery. To be honest, if you didn't know what it was, you'd never have guessed. A lot of it was worn away by ages and ages of wind and weather, but the most interesting structures were the individual cells that the monks lived in. Jane and Erin reverently entered one of the smaller, stone, beehive shaped huts. The interior was rectangular in shape, built in such a way as to not let any rain enter between the stones.

The dark haired woman lay down a stone slab, what she assumed was used as a bed. "Those guys must have been really short or else they liked sleeping with their knees in their chin," she said, demonstrating such a position.

Erin turned around and laughed at her contorted friend. "Well, not even every man is a six foot Amazon."

"I hope not." Jane wiggled her raised feet. "Talk about your back problems."

The blonde giggled some more. "Come on shorty."

Together they explored what had been the main church area. They sat on a rocky pew facing the ocean and just watched as the waves rolled and the whitecaps danced. After several moments of peaceful solitude, Jane felt a hand on her arm. She turned to find a solemn face.

"Would you mind if I wanted to be alone for just a little while?" Erin asked quietly.

Jane brought her hand up to cover the one on her arm. "No, of course not. Take as long as you need. I'll be right here."

Erin gave her a slight kiss on the cheek as she stood to walk away.

She only went about twenty-five feet and stopped at the waist high wall, still overlooking the water.

Jane tried to find interest in something else, but her eyes kept being drawn back to the petite figure standing so close, yet so far. She wanted to give her friend her privacy, but human curiosity went on overtime. *What happened? We were having such a good time.* She tried to think back over everything that had happened that day, every word she had said, every expression she had given, but nothing out of the ordinary came to mind. She stared at the ground by her feet, deep in contemplation. After a few more minutes she closed her eyes and snorted in disgust at herself. *Well, don't we have a big head. It doesn't always have to be about you, does it?* She opened her eyes again and watched as a small bug of some kind scurried around the tip of her shoe and disappeared beneath the dirt. *If she wants to tell me about it she will. Maybe she's just sad to be leaving tomorrow. Or maybe...*

"Are you ready to go?"

The voice startled her from her thoughts and her dark head popped up. "Yeah." She took the offered hand and rose to her feet to face the woman whose wind blown hair lay across her eyes. "Are you okay?" she asked as she pushed back the unruly, blonde wisps. She was very relieved at the smile that slowly appeared a few inches beneath the emerald orbs.

"Finally, I think I am." Erin hugged the tall woman, putting her head on the strong shoulder. "Come on, let's go home."

* * * *

The mid-morning flight was crossing the Atlantic, on its way back to the states. The jumbo jet was nearly full to capacity and the flight attendants were kept very busy fulfilling the requests of some demanding passengers. Two tall glasses of orange juice had been delivered about fifteen minutes into the flight and were slowly sipped. Jane read the newspaper she had picked up at the airport before take off and Erin jotted down a few notes for her novel on the scratch pad she always carried with her. At one point Jane tried to sneak a peak at the scribbles, but they were snatched away and she received a soft swat on the arm in playful admonishment.

It had been a tearful departure from the little cottage in the valley. Many rounds of hugs had been exchanged among the trio before the rental car pulled away.

"Jane, please keep in touch. I want ta know how ya are gettin along."

"I will Kathleen, I will. I have your granddaughter's friendship; I'll be just fine. Take care of yourself." She carried the luggage out to the car, giving Erin a private moment to say good-bye.

The author turned misty eyes to her beloved grandparent. They embraced long and hard. "I'm gonna miss you Grandma. I wish we didn't live so far away."

"I know Dear, but I belong here. However, I could be talked into visitin sometime soon. Maybe there'll be a special occasion on the near horizon."

"I don't know about that Grandma, but..." Erin turned to look at the raven-haired woman standing by the car. "I'm gonna be okay now. Coming here has worked wonders for my soul."

Aside from her writing, Erin was kept quite busy for the first hour, playing peek-a -boo with a two year old, who was a few seats ahead of them. After she had smiled and waved at the little brown haired girl the first time, the game was a foot. Two big brown eyes would slowly peak over the back of the tall seat and Erin would give her a silent boo. The giggles were heard as the head ducked backed out of sight, only to return a few seconds later.

Jane watched and laughed as the antics continued on.

The child had finally slipped off to a nap giving Erin a break from playtime.

"You're really good with kids," said Jane as she stretched in her first class seat.

"Yeah," Erin said wistfully, but with a smile. "They are pure innocence and joy, really needing only one thing in the world...love. Love is the provider, the teacher, the playmate, and the confidant. Children are incredible."

Jane didn't want to dash the happiness on her friend's face. She hoped what she was about to say would be accepted in the best way and would not be a reminder of things past. "You will be an incredible mother. And any child of yours will have the best life that money could never buy."

Jane reveled in the grin she received and matched it when the small hand slipped into hers and interlaced their fingers.

The hands remained clasped as Erin napped, the minutes turning into hours, and until the in-flight movie had started.

As most of the other passengers were occupied with the slightly entertaining piece of film making, Erin and Jane concentrated their attention on each other while Erin gave her friend an in depth, verbal tour of the ranch and her plans for its future.

Just after the attendant had made the latest rounds, offering the amenities, Jane finally got up the courage to bring up the subject that had been on her mind since they had boarded the plane. She cleared her throat softly. "Erin, I noticed that you took off your ring."

The blonde looked down at their joined hands and to the faint tan line around her finger. She nodded solemnly and swallowed. "Yes. I did it yesterday when we were at the monastery. That's what I was doing when I went off by myself, making peace with that part of my life."

"I hope you didn't feel like I was pressuring you to do that."

Erin looked up with a tiny smile. "No, it wasn't you. It was just time. I was finally able to put Jamie where she belongs now, in a corner of my heart and in my fondest memories, but not in my future."

* * * *

Bridgett entered the bustling LA airport and made her way to gate seven, where her sister's plane was about to land. After a fifteen-minute wait, she finally spotted Erin through the heavy crowd. The smile on the author's face was a welcomed sight.

Erin ran up and hugged her sister. "I missed you, Brig."

"I missed you too, but it certainly looks like you had a very good time."

The sisters moved off to the side of the over crowded area, near some huge windows.

"I did. I really did," said Erin. "I met a new friend. She's come back with me to work at the ranch."

Bridgett smiled widely. "I'm really glad to see you happy again, Sis." The smile flickered as Bridgett looked down at the purse slung over her shoulder. "I...ah..."

"What is it Brig? Is something wrong with the kids or Brad?"

"No! No everyone is fine. It's just...I found something that I thought you'd want to see. But maybe I shouldn't show you now. I don't want to make you sad again."

The blonde brows wrinkled. "Why would it make me sad?"

The red head fidgeted with her hands for several seconds before she reached just inside her tan

purse. "Do you remember the picture I snuck of Jamie?" she asked nervously. "The one I gave to that artist to carve the sea shell that I gave you for Christmas."

Erin nodded.

"I...I tracked him down and he still had it in his file." She eased the small photo from under the flap.

Erin tried to swallow the lump that had suddenly formed in her throat. Her heart beat against her chest double time and she licked her dry lips. "That's a picture of Jamie?" she asked in a whisper, looking at the white backing of the photo.

"Yeah. Are you okay to look at it?"

The blonde head nodded imperceptibly. "I think so." *I know what I said Jane. But I just have to do this. Please forgive me.*

Bridgett slowly handed her the picture.

Erin closed her eyes and clutched it to her chest as the noise in the room faded to a dim murmur. She took one deep breath before turning it over.

Her eyes were glued to it for merely two seconds before..."Oh my God," she whispered. The world spun in her head and she dropped to the ground at Bridgett's feet.

Continued in Part 11.

The Athenaeum's Scroll Archive

~ Seeing You, Again For the First Time ~

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.

Love/Sex Disclaimer: This story depicts a loving relationship between two consenting, adult women and contains scenes of intimacy, but nothing explicit. If you are under 18 years of age or if this type of story is illegal in the state or country in which you live, please do not read it. If depictions of this nature disturb you, you may wish to read something other than this story.

Hurt/Comfort Disclaimer: Major angst ahead. But have faith and remember, I love a happy ending!

Thanks so much to my beta reader Barb.

No copy write infringement is intended in the use of the lyrics to the song "At Your Side".

This is the sequel to my first story, "At First Sight". I would recommend that you read that one first.

All comments are welcome at coleen30@webtv.net

I have also created a group for discussions of this, past and future stories. Maybe some sneak previews as well.

Join us at http://groups.yahoo.com/group/colleens_corner

Part 11

Chapter 11

"Erin!" Bridgett called out as she dropped to her knees and put her purse under her sister's head.

"Erin!" rang out another voice from the crowd. Jane plowed her way passed the curious onlookers and came to her friend's side. "Who are you?" she asked the red head tersely. "What did you do to her?" She knelt down and smoothed the blonde bangs from the unconscious woman's forehead.

Bridgett rubbed Erin's limp hand. "I'm her sister," she explained. "She just fainted. Who are...?" She looked up for the first time and was dumbstruck when her eyes landed on the tall woman's face.

Jane looked over at the mute woman. "What's wrong?" she asked, but quickly turned her attention back to Erin.

The red head's mouth moved, but no sound came out.

The noises around her began to get clearer in Erin's fogged brain. She heard Jane urging her to open her eyes and when she did, there were those endless blues hovering above her. Her strength suddenly flew back to her and she popped up and planted a hard kiss onto the startled woman's lips.

Bridgett had finally recovered from her own lesser amount of shock. She stood and moved off to one side, trying to disperse the crowd that had gathered. Some of them had already fled at the sight of the same sex public display of affection. She also sent away the medical team that had arrived so quickly.

Erin finally pulled back from the kiss and just buried her head into Jane's neck. Her body shook with heaving sobs.

Jane soothingly rubbed the back beneath her hands. Her own body was twisted to one side and it was painful, but she didn't care at that moment. All that mattered was finding out what had happened to the woman she loved and fixing it. "Erin, what is it? What happened?"

The author could only answer with more breathless convulsions. Jane's white shirt soon became wet with the flood of tears as she rocked the small body in her arms.

Bridgett stepped back over, still not believing her eyes. She reached down and grasped her sister's shoulders. "Erin let's get off the floor and go over there and sit down."

The blonde was barely able to pull herself away from the tall woman long enough to stand. She didn't remove her hand from around Jane's waist all the way over to the long row of wooden seats.

They sat down and Jane was confused as she studied the smile that was now plastered across Erin's face. "Can you tell us what just happened?" she asked, brushing away the remaining tears.

Erin kissed the back of the hand she was clutching and nodded.

Bridgett took the seat next to the grinning author. "Erin, you don't really think..."

Without taking her eyes from the tall woman's face, she answered her sister's unfinished question. "I know it's true Bridgett. And I can tell you a dozen different reasons why."

"But Sis, I agree this is an incredible coincidence, I was even fooled for a minute, but..."

"Would someone mind explaining things to me?" said Jane, wide eyed and totally confused. "What is this all about?"

Erin pitched her head to one side. "This is my sister, Bridgett Nelson."

They nodded to one another as she introduced herself. "Jane Sims."

Erin impulsively hugged the tall woman again before she tried to explain. "I'm sorry I scared you," she said as she caressed the soft face. "I fainted when Bridgett showed me a picture."

"A picture?"

Erin nodded. "I told you that I had never seen Jamie because I was blind when we were together and we thought that they're weren't any photographs of her either. But Bridgett...she found one."

The blue eyes softened with compassion. "Well, I can imagine how upsetting that was for you. I'm sorry."

Erin giggled happily. "No. It wasn't upsetting at all. It was the most wonderful thing."

Dark brows drew together, trying to make sense of the conflicting things she was hearing. "I don't understand."

Erin reached for the photograph that her sister had taken back. She looked at it again and then at the woman sitting next to her. There wasn't a doubt in her mind. She placed it in the tall woman's hand. "This is Jamie."

Blue eyes drifted with natural curiosity to the small picture she held. Once they landed on the chiseled face, they widened. She couldn't help but notice that she resembled the dark haired woman in the photo. There was a great difference in the length of their hair, but it was the unmistakable color of coal. The eyes, the height; it was all there...but... "You think that...?" She looked up at a grinning Erin. "...I'm her...that this is me?" Jane squeezed her eyes and turned away from the smile. She couldn't bear to see the disappointment that she was about to deal out. "Erin...it's not...I had some reconstructive surgery on my face after the accident. It's just..." She felt the soft fingers under her chin pulling her back. She opened her eyes to see the still happy face.

"It's not a coincidence." She brought their joined hands to her chest. "I know it with all my heart."

* * * *

They were in Bridgett's vehicle heading toward the mountain ranch before Erin began to explain the reason she was so certain. "First off, don't you think it would be an even greater coincidence that the surgeon just happened to make you look exactly like Jamie Sheridan, rather than us finding our way back to one another?"

She shrugged. "I suppose."

"Okay. Now consider this. You yourself said that you felt like you were guided to Ireland to find out who you were. How else would you explain how drawn to one another we were, how we became so close, so quickly? How we fell in love in just a few days."

Jamie's head jumped up at that statement. "What did you just say?"

Erin stared deep into her eyes. "I said that I love you."

The dark haired woman sighed. "But do you only love me because you think I'm Jamie?" she asked hesitantly.

"I know now that you are Jamie. But I did fall in love with you when we were still in Ireland. I was just afraid to admit it." She could still see the hesitation written across the furrowed forehead. "Okay, how about some hard facts? When were you found in that farmer's field?" She had never asked before for details about Jane's accident, not wanting hurt her new friend. But if only she had...

That was a date firmly etched in the tall woman's mind. The first day...or the last day, however you look at it that she lost everything. "January seventh."

Although Erin had known what the answer was going to be, it didn't stop her heart from fluttering. "Bridgett was with me when I lost contact with Jamie on the phone. What was that date Brig?"

The dark green eyes glanced into the rear view mirror to meet the curious blues looking back. "January seventh," she confirmed.

"And in what part of the world were you found?" Erin asked the woman beside her.

Jamie let out a deep breath before answering. "China."

The smile widened. "Bridgett?"

"The private plane, in which Jamie had been a passenger, crashed in Asia," she said very formally.

That tone was starting to anger Erin, but nothing was going to sway her attention from her lover. "Jamie, those are not all coincidences. That would be totally impossible."

Jane tightened her hand around Erin's. Her heartbeat pounded in her ears when she let herself even consider the possibility. "Could we really have found each other again?" she asked in a heart aching whisper.

Erin closed her eyes, but couldn't hold back the tears of joy. She was certain before, but hearing Jamie ask that question, clinched it in her heart. Jamie was more concerned with their connection than with her own identity. Their souls were back together...forever.

Once they re-opened, Jamie stared into the green eyes that stared back and she saw the depth of love that resided there. But was it for her or because of a mistaken identity? *God, I want this to be true, she thought. I already love her...from the minute I laid eyes on her.* Suddenly arms were around her neck and words were whispered in her ear.

"I love you. I missed you so much." Erin pulled away and placed a small kiss on her lips. She put her forehead against Jamie's. "God how could I have forgotten that kiss. I didn't really...but I think...I know I was afraid to even consider..."

Jamie dropped her head back, the confusion still running rampant. She raised her fingers to rub her throbbing temples.

"Do you have a headache?" asked Erin.

"Yeah. I get them quite often."

"We'll be home soon. Then you can get some rest."

* * * *

Jamie had fallen asleep and her head was back against the seat of Bridgett's car. All the questions and the reasonable answers had been put aside for the moment.

Peace.

Quiet.

It was all relative. The peace she had found just two weeks before, in the form of a new friend, was now, at the same time doubled and torn apart. Even with all the revelations, a doubt was still lodged at the back of her brain as to her true identity. How would Erin react if somehow the joyous discovery turned out not to be true? What would happen to them then?

The quiet inside of the luxury car was a dichotomy to what was happening in her slumbering head, as a dream played out at the edge of her brain. She saw faceless figures, pacing nervously. She heard voices lifted in anger, but couldn't make out any of the words being shouted. She knew she was one of the two people arguing, but her eyes wouldn't see the other person. The discussion escalated and she turned and walked out. The frustration of the emotion she was feeling in the dream and the turmoil that her conscious mind was experiencing was overwhelming.

Jamie's eyes flew open and she jerked from her sleep.

"It's okay," said Erin. "Everything's okay, it was just a dream." She raised the hand she was holding and placed a kiss on it. "But this isn't."

Jamie gave a halfhearted smile and nodded.

"What is it Sweetheart?" asked Erin. "Aren't you happy about how things turned out? I thought you wanted...us..."

The timber in that voice broke Jamie's heart. She pulled Erin tightly to her body. "Yes, I do want there to be an us. I just...even if it is true, how can I be Jamie Sheridan without her memories?"

Erin reached up and tapped the side of the dark head. "Jamie Sheridan wasn't just in here. The essence of Jamie Sheridan came from here." She laid her hand over the other woman's heart. "And that hasn't changed."

They soon arrived at the ranch. Jamie craned her neck to see out the side window, as they went under the big sign proclaiming Sheridan Stables. They pulled up in front of the big, white house that didn't look a bit familiar to the tall woman. Erin reluctantly let go of the hand she had clutched for the last two hours. She watched as Jamie got out of the car and slowly took in all of the surrounding sights. There wasn't a flicker of recognition about anything, only bewilderment.

Jamie heard a dog bark and she turned to see a big golden retriever barreling off the front porch, heading straight for her. The dog stopped at her feet and waited patiently for her hellos. Jamie bent down and cautiously patted the furry head. The touch was cold and impersonal and the animal was very dismayed.

Erin walked over and stopped to their level. "This is Artemis. I think she was expecting a little different greeting."

Jamie took in the big brown eyes that held a sad quality. "But it's been six months. She still remembers...me?"

Erin pulled the dog's face around and received several doggie kisses. "Of course she does. The two of you were great playmates," she explained. "But she liked it when you played rough. It will just take her a little while to get used to you...being back...like this."

Jamie cringed at her choice of words.

"I'm sorry," said Erin. "I didn't mean it like that, it just..."

She was stopped with a shake of a dark head. "No. It's okay. I understand. And it will take a lot of getting used to...for all of us." Jamie looked back to the dog and reached out with both hands, scratching behind both ears and the two wrestled for several seconds.

Erin watched with a huge smile as once again a tear made its way down her cheek. She soon broke up the playtime. "Okay you two." She reached down and helped the tall woman to her feet. "Let's go inside and I'll show you around."

Bridgett had busied herself taking in the luggage and processing the unusual turn of events. She had, on several occasions, leveled Jamie with a very chilly stare. And she hadn't said a personal word to the stranger since they had gotten in the car.

Half an hour later she sat in the kitchen drinking tea that her sister had brought back from Ireland. Erin practically danced through the door and poured herself a flavorful cup.

"Where's Jane?" asked Bridgett.

"Jamie is looking around up stairs to get herself acquainted. Then she said she was going to take a shower to relax a little. She has a lot of back problems." Erin saw the red head nod. "You haven't said much since you picked us up, Brig. What's going on?"

"Don't take this the wrong way, Sis, but I almost wish I hadn't found that photograph."

"Don't say that!" Erin yelled with rage in her voice. The intensity soon dissipated when she realized that the situation had them all nervous and exhausted. "Bridgett, I will be forever grateful to you for that. But why?" she asked as almost an afterthought.

"Erin, I...I don't want to see you hurt, the way you were in the last six months. Don't you remember what happened to you? We almost lost you. I don't want to see you slip back into that fantasy world by trying to turn this woman into Jamie."

"She is Jamie!" Erin slammed the heavy mug down onto the counter top, the tea sloshing all over her hand. She turned away and took several deep, calming breaths. She certainly understood her sister's concern, but she knew there was no way of convincing her or anyone else just why she was so certain that the woman upstairs was indeed Jamie Sheridan. The author finally took the seat next to Bridgett and took her hand. They had always had such a close relationship. Bridgett had always been so much more than just a big sister, she was a mentor, a listener...a best friend. "Bridgett, you have to trust me on this. It is the truth. I have a second chance to be with the person I love most in the world. And Jamie has a second chance to live. I know she loves me. I have her back."

"I hope so Erin. I hope so."

* * * *

Jamie came down the stairs just as Erin stepped in through the front door. The tall woman had spent the last few minutes just exploring the upstairs rooms. Although she had never lived in that house, she had visited it on many occasions and the house was full of their personal items, which she might have recognized under different circumstances. But it was still a strange experience. "Where is your sister?" she asked, taking a seat on the tan couch that had resided at the beach house.

"She had to get home," Erin answered, taking the seat next to Jamie.

The inevitable tension of the situation was back in full force. Jamie felt like she was stuck in limbo again; afraid to go forward, unwilling to go back. Back before Ireland that is. The last two weeks of her life had been nearly perfect, but now she didn't quite know what everyone was going to expect of her. And there was still that 1% doubt that she couldn't shake.

"Jamie, what's wrong?"

The blue eyes remained fixed to the dark carpeting at her bare feet. She shrugged a shoulder. "It's just...not exactly...what I'd imagined, being here I mean."

"I know this must be scary for you. But that's what I'm here for, to help you through this and to help you get your life back. And this is your life, your dream."

Jamie jumped up from the couch. "I...ahhh...need some water." She pointed toward the back of the house. "The kitchen is through there you said?"

Erin nodded.

Jamie returned a few minutes later with the big yellow dog on her heels.

Attuned to the uneasiness floating around the room, Artemis stood between Erin and Jamie, who was just standing in the doorway. The dog's tongue flopped out of one side of her mouth as she looked back and forth between her humans.

Erin could see the proverbial eggshells gathering on the floor as the minutes of silence slipped away. Finally she'd had enough. She stood slowly and approached Jamie, stopping only to give the dog some long overdue attention.

The tall woman sipped her glass of water as she watched the playful duo.

After a few minutes, Erin found herself actually tiptoeing across the room where her friend...lover...everything stood leaning against the doorframe. "I could go fix us something to eat," she suggested. "Are you hungry?"

"No. Not right now. But you go on."

Erin started to move toward the kitchen, but stopped near Jamie's shoulder. "You still don't believe it, do you?" she asked, staring at the wall across from her.

Jamie stepped over a few feet and set her glass down on a side table that held a small lamp and a pad and pen. "I believe everything that you said and I know for you it's the absolute truth. But I just wish..."

"You think it's all circumstantial and you want some solid physical proof."

The dark head nodded sadly. "Yes. Without my memories, I need that proof, for both our sakes."

"And if we can't find anything and your memories don't come back, you'll never know if I love you or if I love you because I think you're Jamie."

There was no response, but the answer was loud and clear.

Erin turned down the hall and went on to the kitchen.

The situation had become far more difficult than it should ever have been. Finding herself had been the single most powerful desire the dark haired woman had known since she woke up in a hospital bed so many months ago. But this new revelation was a double-edged sword. Her desire to be with Erin had replaced her need to discover her identity. But suddenly she could have both. *All I have to do is accept this. I can be Jamie Sheridan.* She ran frustrated hands through her damp hair as her thoughts continued. *Right up until the day I might remember who I really am. That would...* A loud crash disrupted her musings. "Erin?" She jumped up and headed to the kitchen, running head on into the little blonde that came barreling down the hallway. "Are you all right?" she asked, taking the smaller woman by the shoulders and doing a visual inspection for injuries.

"I'm fine, I just dropped a pan." Erin took the hand from her arm and pulled the taller woman into the living room. She turned to face her very seriously.

"Erin what's going on?"

"I know where to find the proof you need."

Jamie audibly swallowed and asked with a reserved, excitement, "Where?" Whichever way it turned out, she knew they could at least move on.

Erin took a deep breath. "Jamie had a birthmark. A small patch of raised skin in the shape of a crescent moon. It was on the inside of her right shoulder blade." Before anything else could be said, she stepped behind the tall woman and took the hem of the white t-shirt in her hands. There was a hesitation and the dark head turned slightly. Erin looked up at the profile. "I need you to promise me that when I show you that the birthmark is there, you will, without a doubt, finally accept that you are Jamie Shea Sheridan."

"I promise," slipped through trembling lips.

Erin inched the material up, revealing the long, thin, pale scar running down the center of the otherwise perfect back. She would spend a lifetime trying to ease the pain associated with that injury, but the immediate question had to be answered as she reached the sight where the mark should be. One more lift and the mystery was solved. Erin leaned in. "Welcome home," she whispered against the birthmark that she had traced with sensitive fingertips so many times before.

Jamie turned within the arms that suddenly encircled her. Their lips met in a thunderous kiss of desire, passion, love, relief and happiness. "I love you so much," she said.

"And I missed you so much. Don't ever leave me again. I love you."

The minutes ticked away as they stood there holding one another. Their world was whole once again. Their love was a shining light that broke the darkness of solitude. And a future of hopes and dreams was back on its proper path.

A bark interrupted the cherished moment.

They both laughed, swearing they could see a smile on the golden canine's face.

They brushed away the last of the joyful tears from each other's face. "I'm hungry now," said Jamie.

Erin's voice dropped to its lowest possible range. "So am I," she said with a suggestively wiggling eyebrow.

Jamie licked her lips and blushed. "I...um...meant for food."

"Oh."

One blue eye winked. "At least for now."

Erin took her by the hand again and back to the kitchen they went. "Just so you know," she said. "I don't plan to let you out of my sight for..." She tilted her head thinking of a number. "Forty or fifty years."

"Sounds perfect to me."

* * * *

Later that evening, Erin sat on the back porch watching Jamie riding Teegan around the corral. She'd asked for some time alone and Erin certainly understood, but she just couldn't stay away. *She's here Erin. She's not going to leave again. But if you don't give her some space, you might just push her away.* After her little mental scolding, Erin pulled the photo from her pocket. The smiling face was looking off to the right and Erin wondered what Jamie was seeing and thinking at that moment. She said a silent prayer that the photograph even existed given her partner's aversion to cameras. Erin remembered back to the time when she found out why.

It was just three days after Christmas and Erin was sitting in front of the fireplace enjoying her peaceful life.

Jamie had just gotten home from her shift at the limo company and she had traced the smell of the hickory logs to the den. "Hi Sweetheart," she said dropping down on the couch next to her blonde lover. They engaged in several wonderful kisses before Erin asked how her night went. Jamie gave the usual answer. She then noticed something clenched in Erin's fist. "What have you got there?"

Erin smiled and let the chain dangle from her fingers. "Did I tell you how much I love this?" she asked.

The golden locket swayed, hypnotically before the blue eyes. "You've mentioned it once or twice."

"I think it's time we filled in at least two of these spaces," said Erin. "I know a great photographer..." she stopped when Jamie left her side rather abruptly. "What's wrong?"

"I just thought...we could wait until...I mean you can't even..."

"See them?"

A sledgehammer hit Jamie in the stomach at her crass choice of words. She hurried back to the couch and pulled Erin into a hug, cursing the footprints on her tights. "Sweetheart, I am so sorry. That was very insensitive of me." A hand caressed her cheek.

"I forgive you and I am willing to wait until I can see again...on one condition. Tell me why you hate having your picture taken." She felt Jamie stiffen again. "Whatever it is Honey, don't be afraid of it anymore." Erin curled her fingers around Jamie's and waited.

With a small sigh and a shudder Jamie began the story. "I had been planning to runaway from my foster parents for a while. But I needed money. I told you about the counselors they sent me to. One was this man, in his forties I guess. Of course I never mentioned my plan to him, but one day he asked me if I would like to make some money. I realize now how stupid I was to even think about saying yes. But I did. He said he was a photographer and he was putting together a book. He asked me if I would model for him. I went to his house one Saturday, dressed like he had asked. He took some pictures in one room that he had turned into a studio. Then he said he wanted to take some more in a different room."

When Jamie paused, Erin's heart began beating against her ribs, afraid of what she was going to hear.

"Like an idiot, I followed him. There were a bunch of rugs and pillows thrown on the floor and a curtain was drawn across one wall, but I knew there was no window there. He took about three more pictures when the phone rang and he left to answer it. I started looking around and curiosity got the better of me. I pulled back that curtain and what I saw scared the hell out of me. The wall was covered with photos of girls around my age, some even younger. But they were all...naked. And they looked terrified. I could only stand there imagining what horrendous things he had done to them. It was terrifying, but it was too much of a shock. I couldn't even run. A few minutes later he walked back in and I tried, but it was like I was paralyzed. He said that if I told anyone what I saw he would kill me. He was in my face snarling at me and then I started to get angry. Suddenly we heard a siren coming down the street and he loosened his grip on my arms. I pulled away and kicked him where it hurt the most. Of course I never told the Matthews, not that they would have believed me. I ran away a few days later and I've never told anyone about that, until now. I'm an adult and it shouldn't still bother me...but..."

"Oh Sweetheart, it doesn't matter what your age; that was a very traumatic thing that happened to you. I'm glad you shared that with me and now that I understand, you don't ever have to put a picture in here."

"No! I won't let him take away something you want, something I want to give you." She fingered the golden locket. "When I bought this, I thought I could handle it."

"Like I said Sweetheart, I don't ever want you to do anything that makes you uncomfortable."

"But I want to do this. And now that I have told you, I think I can as long as you are there with me."

"What are you thinking about?"

Erin jumped and the photo flew from her hand.

"I'm sorry, I didn't mean to startle you." Jamie took the chair next to her and retrieved the photo.

"That's all right. But I think I have to apologize." Erin nodded back toward the barn. "I know you wanted to be alone, but...I just...I spent all those months not being able to see you and now that I can..." She actually blushed. "I'm making up for lost time."

Jamie smiled and took her hand. "You don't have to apologize. I never want to be that alone. And looking at the most beautiful woman in the world has certainly become my favorite pastime."

They spent the next few minutes just sitting quietly side by side as the twilight landed over the ranch.

Jamie broke the silence a while later. "Erin, I need to ask you something."

"Okay."

"I...ummm...I overheard you talking to Bridgett in the kitchen, earlier."

"Jamie we have the proof now, it's..."

"No. That's not what I'm talking about. I need to know...would you tell me what she was talking about when she said that they had almost lost you." Even in the pale light, Jamie could see the blood drain from the author's face. She quickly reached over and took both hands in hers. "Whatever it is, it's okay. If you can't really talk about it I'll understand. But I would really like to know. I need to know what you went through. We need to help each other."

Erin lost herself in the compassionate blue eyes. She thought about the memory she had just had, about the courageous confession Jamie had made to her. Erin had to follow that example and share her story. Perhaps it would help them both heal or perhaps it wouldn't, but whichever, it needed to be done. She nodded slowly.

Jamie gave her a small kiss on the cheek. "Thank you Sweetheart."

"Before I do this, you have to promise me that you won't feel guilty. You had no control over what happened."

Now Jamie was really scared about what she was going to hear, but it wasn't going to stop her. They would face the truth and their fears together. "Okay, I promise."

"I couldn't face your death. I couldn't accept it. I moved out here from the beach and fell into a total fantasy world. A world where you were still alive, you were just on an extended trip. I even carried on imaginary phone conversations with you. But that world crumbled on what was supposed to be our wedding day.

Bridgett and her mother had tried to keep her occupied, offering to take a trip, inviting her for a day of shopping, etc...but Erin wouldn't go for any of it. She had a wedding to prepare for. She woke up the sunny morning of April 14th and went about caring for the horses and Artemis as usual. She was all alone on the sixty-acre ranch, having given the two employees the day off.

After lunch she had showered and put on the dress Jamie had gotten her for Christmas. She fussed with her hair and added the just right touch of make-up. She had to be beautiful for her soon to be spouse. A bouquet of expensive orchids had been delivered to the house that morning and she carefully took them from the packaging. Erin inhaled their scent and gently fingered the delicate petals. She smiled brightly at the two tiered wedding cake decorated with purple and yellow flowers that sat in the center of the table, surrounded by dozens of plates and silverware. Erin giggled and looked around to make sure that no one was peaking in on her. She swiped the tip of her finger across a small area of white icing and gave it an experimental lick. "Mmmm, that's good," she said to the empty room. Her smile took on a slightly evil quality as she pictured Jamie with cake smeared all over her mouth and then getting to lick it off. "I can't wait to feed my wife this delectable desert." Erin took one last look around and smoothed out her dress. "I think that's everything," she said. "Let's go Artemis, she's waiting for us."

The dog happily followed her human to the barn. Erin carefully stepped through the stable, stopping to say hello to Teegan and Simeron on the way.

The electric golf cart bounced across the field for almost half a mile before coming to a stop. Erin got out and straightened her dress again. She grabbed the flowers from the seat beside her and turned, expecting to see her beautiful lover waiting for her. "Jamie, where are you? I know you like to play games, but can't we wait until the honeymoon." Erin moved toward the small grove of trees. "I know where you are." She giggled. "You can't hide from..." Erin stopped suddenly when she came around behind one of the old oaks. There was the gray, stone marker carved with the simple words,

Jamie Shea Sheridan

April 11, 1971 - January 7, 2001

Beloved partner and friend

Erin looked down at her fancy dress and her stomach wretched. She fought to keep the stinging bile from seeing the light of day. She tossed down the flowers in her hand, the flowers she herself had ordered the day before, but that she had not remembered doing so until that moment. "Oh God!" she whispered sickly. "What am I doing?" Erin dropped to her knees and her face soon became drenched with tears as the pain of Jamie's death hit her like a speeding train. She sat there for just a few seconds with her arms clutching her burning insides. She rocked back and forth, hating herself, hating the world...hating Jamie. "I can't do this! I can't do this again!"

Erin jumped up and started running. It didn't take long for her high heels to get caught in the soft earth and she went tumbling, her right hand landing on a stick puncturing the fleshy part of her palm just below her thumb. That pain didn't even register as she brought her hand up and watched the blood drizzle down her arm.

Erin kicked off her shoes after the minor distraction and she took off again. Her hose lasted just seconds as the scratchy grass and hard clumps of dirt ate through them.

The sun began to set, taking with it the heat of the day. No matter how hard she tried, Erin couldn't out run the intense pain. She knew Jamie would never again be by her side, never hold her hand and she would never feel the warmth and safety as she slept in her lover's arms all night long. All those things filtered through her mind as her feet hit the ground carrying her through the maze of trees, but no closer to home.

Suddenly a lake came into sight. Erin stopped. Her heart beat against her ribs, but that was not it's greatest hurt. Her lungs felt seared as they worked triple time taking in the oxygen. Every square inch of her body and soul was wracked with unbelievable pain and she just wanted it to end...she just wanted oblivion.

Her aching and bleeding feet took one step after the other down the grassy embankment. Erin pushed aside the tall cattails and moved forward as the water rose to her hips...to her chest...to her neck. One final step took her beneath the water line and she sank easily into the depths. The cool liquid cradled her body as the darkness enveloped her soul.

Artemis had finally tracked down her human, but her scent stopped at the shore. The dog barked and barked, edging closer. Just as she was about to jump into the water a blonde head broke the surface. Frantic hands waved and splashed, fighting to stay alive. Erin's fingers scratched and clawed against the muddy bank and she managed to just keep her head out of the water. Just as exhaustion was about to pull Erin back into the murkiness, the dog chomped down on the collar of her dress and planted four paws in the mud. Artemis held tight until Erin regained enough energy to crawl completely out of the water, where she collapsed into unconsciousness.

Erin awoke to total darkness, but she knew she was still alive. Warm doggie breath assailed the side of her face and a long rough tongue soon followed. "I'm okay Arte, I'm okay." Erin tuned on her back and the soft twinkles high above caught her attention. Soon she began to shiver as the chilled mountain air began skimming over her damp body. Artemis began barking, drawing Erin's gaze. The dog ran over to the tree line and stopped, she looked back begging her human to follow.

Erin knew she was in danger of freezing to death, not so much from the temperature itself, but from a combination of the wet clothing and the condition her body was in. She managed to pull herself to her hands and knees and slowly crawled into the brush. She scooted in under a high bush and pulled her aching body into a fetal position. Artemis instinctively stretched out beside Erin, protecting her from the cold and from the night. Several totally absurd thoughts passed through her mind as sleep invaded her confused world.

Erin spent the most miserable night of her life, after having had the second most miserable day of her life. She awoke the next morning feeling numb. But as she trudged back to the spot where it all began, every ache and pain, coupled with every breath made her aware of life. She wasn't quite sure what had saved her from drowning in that lake, but she was happy that it had.

Erin slowly approached the tombstone. She knelt down, ignoring the hurt and placed the discarded flowers on top of the stone marker. She smiled sadly. "I love you Jamie. And I will see you again...someday." She placed a kiss upon her fingertips and touched the name one last time.

Erin looked up and saw tears pooling in her lover's eyes. "I started seeing a grief counselor and slowly my life regained some semblance of order. After much soul searching, I finally came to the conclusion that I didn't want to die that way...because I didn't want you to hate me for giving up."

"God Erin, I..." Jamie's voice always became very scratchy when she very emotional.

"You promised," Erin reminded her.

"I know. It's not guilt, I just can't stand the thought of you hurting so much, almost..."

"But I didn't. And you didn't. We both went through six months of hell, but that's all over now. We're here, together. Right now that's all that's important."

* * * *

After watching half of, what Jamie was informed was one of their favorite movies, the dark haired woman noticed Erin yawning. "I guess you need to get some sleep."

"You're not sleepy?" Erin asked.

Jamie's trembling hands gave away her answer. "I'm not sure." She chuckled. "Boy that sounded silly didn't it? If I don't know, who would?"

She followed Erin up the stairs and into their room.

Erin went to turn down the bed. "You can have the bathroom first," she said.

Without even thinking, Jamie pulled out the exact dresser drawer that had always held her clothes. Erin had unpacked for her earlier and put her things away in the same drawer.

Erin watched with a smile, but said nothing. She knew they were in for some difficult times, but like they had always promised each other, they would do it together.

Jamie returned from washing the layer of corral dust from her skin and hair. Erin was already in the bed with her eyes closed and Jamie hesitated for just a second. The easy banter that they had fallen into over dinner was now replaced by a strange insecurity.

Green eyes drifted open and took in the tall figure.

Jamie looked away from those eyes and sat down with her back to Erin. "I...uh...I don't..." She shook her head. "We've been sleeping in the same bed for the last five nights, but suddenly it's a little awkward." She pulled the covers back and slid her long legs under as her head came to rest on the pillow.

"Jamie, we slept in the same bed for almost five months," Erin reminded her.

"But I don't remember any of that." Jamie took a breath. "Were we this shy with each other at the beginning?"

The author laughed. "No. Shyness was never a problem with us. There were other things to overcome...but let's talk about that some other time." She turned on her side and folded her arm under her head. The strong profile beside her soon turned to face her. Erin cautiously lifted her hand and rubbed the arm closest to her. "Jamie, I don't expect anything from you that you aren't ready to give. But there is something I would like to do, if you feel comfortable."

"Okay, what is it?"

Erin scooted closer and placed her head against her favorite shoulder and cuddled against the long body. "Is this all right?"

Jamie closed her eyes as her arm snaked around to return the caress. "This is wonderful."

"This was always my favorite time of day, just to be close to you and feel your warmth." Erin inhaled deeply. "Smell your clean, fresh scent and hear your heartbeat."

"I'm guessing it was on my list of favorites too," Jamie said with a soft smile. She traced Erin's arm with her fingertips, relaxing them both.

The blonde snuggled in a little more. "I won't rush you into a physical relationship. It has to be awkward not remembering being with anyone in the past."

Jamie stared at the dark ceiling as a memory did come to her. "Erin?"

"Mmmm?"

"I don't want to hurt you. But I don't want there to be any secrets between us either. It didn't really matter before, but now...you need to know."

The green eyes opened, but she didn't move. "It's okay, Jamie. Whatever it is, you can tell me."

"There was a nurse at the center, the one I mentioned several times. Well, we became good friends. I hadn't really given any thought to that part of my life until... I mean..." Jamie let out a frustrated sigh. "About two weeks before I left, Lia was helping me with my physical therapy. Afterward, she decided I needed to do something fun. We went to a small lake that was near by and went for a boat ride. I actually managed to have a nice time and I think I may have even smiled once. Then we went to her apartment for coffee and one thing led to another and I...spent the night. It only happened that one time," she rushed to say. "I mean I felt like I was betraying someone...and I...and I was. I'm really sorry Erin." A small hand landed on her chest and rubbed soothingly.

Erin finally looked up with a gentle, loving expression. "Sweetheart, I'm not mad. How could I be? In fact I guess I have to thank her for allowing you to make that discovery about yourself. As long as she respected you and treated you with tenderness."

Jamie nodded.

"But I am glad you told me."

Jamie breathed a sigh of relief. "Me too."

Erin listened to that heart beating. She just couldn't wipe the smile from her face and the happiness from her soul. "This is all just so incredible," she whispered against the red shirt beneath her head. "Thank you for coming back to me."

"We both need to thank what ever or who ever made this happen."

Erin's eyes had drifted shut as she said that silent thank you. "Once you get your memory back, every thing will be perfect," she mumbled to Jamie.

A few seconds passed before the dark haired woman had another thought. "Are you still awake?" she asked quietly.

"Yeah."

"You don't have to thank Lia for anything."

"What do you mean?"

"Even if I had had no clue what so ever about my orientation, I would have known the minute I laid eyes on you. Because I truly fell in love with you at first sight. I love you Erin."

The author's bright smile broke through the darkness like a beacon. She caressed the side of Jamie's face and leaned in for a lengthy and passionate kiss. "I love you, Jamie Sheridan."

Continued in Part 12.

The Athenaeum's Scroll Archive

~ Seeing You, Again For the First Time ~

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.

Love/Sex Disclaimer: This story depicts a loving relationship between two consenting, adult women and contains scenes of intimacy, but nothing explicit. If you are under 18 years of age or if this type of story is illegal in the state or country in which you live, please do not read it. If depictions of this nature disturb you, you may wish to read something other than this story.

Hurt/Comfort Disclaimer: Major angst ahead. But have faith and remember, I love a happy ending!

Thanks so much to my beta reader Barb.

No copy write infringement is intended in the use of the lyrics to the song "At Your Side".

This is the sequel to my first story, "At First Sight". I would recommend that you read that one first.

All comments are welcome at colleen30@webtv.net

I have also created a group for discussions of this, past and future stories. Maybe some sneak previews as well.

Join us at http://groups.yahoo.com/group/colleens_corner

Part 12

Chapter 12

A face twitched as the sun's rays reached through the sheer curtain, disturbing sleeping eyes. The body turned away from the intruder, but the other senses teamed up to awaken the slumbering

woman. A songbird serenaded from the tree just outside the window and goose bumps were raised along the uncovered arm as the air conditioning popped on. But by far the strongest sensation was the heavenly smell of coffee.

Hands reached up to rub tired blue eyes. The long body stretched, feeling no pain for once. That brought a little smile to the face that bore sheet marks across the right cheek. Jamie tested her muscles again, with a slight twist and was still pleased with the results. That movement brought her around to face the clock where she jerked in surprise. Ten thirty blinked at her and she blinked back making a quick mental calculation. "Eleven hours," she said to the empty room as her head fell back into the pillow. She had slept for eleven peaceful hours.

The space next to her was cold, she realized when her hand drifted over. *Erin must have gotten up a long time ago.* Jamie knew the long flight, coupled with the emotional turmoil of the previous day had led to her extended sleep time. But it was a new day and a new life other than the one, which just two days ago, she had expected to be living. But just the thought of that beautiful, green-eyed face brought a smile to hers. *I guess it's time to go down there and find out who Jamie Sheridan is...was. Whatever I find out, I know who I will be.*

Erin flipped the last fluffy pancake over onto the stack already nine cakes tall. She turned off the griddle and reached for another plate for the perfect slices of crispy bacon. She whistled happily as she finished at the stove and set the plates onto the table

Jamie came down the back stairs just as Erin was pouring the orange juice.

"Perfect timing. Good morning Sweetheart," said Erin, giving Jamie a quick kiss. "I hope you're hungry. It's the first time in a long time that I felt like cooking and my skills might be a little rusty."

Jamie silently took a seat at the round table, but made no move toward the food. She watched as the stream of hot, dark liquid was poured into her cup.

Erin poured her own coffee and sat down with a slight hesitation. "What's wrong?" she asked. "Don't you like pancakes?"

Jamie met the concerned green eyes. "No...I mean yes. It smells wonderful." She confirmed it with a smile. "It's true isn't it?" she asked wondrously. "I woke up feeling great, but then as I was getting dressed, I had this horrible sensation that it was all a dream. But it wasn't?" She asked for one last confirmation.

Erin grabbed the long fingered hand. "No Sweetheart, it's not a dream. You are here Jamie, with me."

After a few giddy giggles they dove into the delicious breakfast. Halfway through the meal, Jamie's curiosity had reached its peak; she just couldn't wait any longer. "Erin, I'm going to be asking you a lot of questions about...me. I know you won't be able to answer a lot of them, but I do need to ask."

"I understand, Honey. What do you want to know first?"

"Okay." Jamie nervously twirled the fork between her fingers. "Where are my parents?" When she saw Erin look away, a sinking feeling hit her gut.

Erin looked back with a compassionate expression. "I'm sorry, Sweetheart. Your parents died when you were ten."

No tears fell from the blue eyes. She couldn't exactly mourn what she didn't know. A blank look just fell across her features. "I guess that explains why no one came looking for me," she said quietly.

Now it was Erin's turn to be hit. She swallowed the food around the lump that had suddenly formed in her throat. She just sat there for a long time, staring at the almost empty plate, unable to meet her partner's gaze. "You're hurt because I didn't come after you, aren't you?" Without even waiting for an answer, Erin threw her napkin down in disgust and jumped up from the table.

Not sure just what had occurred, Jamie jumped up and followed her to the back porch. She could tell Erin was crying and she pulled her into her arms. "Don't cry please. I'm not mad at you. I didn't mean it that way."

The smaller woman sobbed. "I should have. I should have found you, been by your side to help you through all that pain."

"But you thought..."

"No!" Erin pulled away. "No, I didn't want to believe it. And I didn't. When they said they couldn't find your body...a part of me just knew you were still alive. But then when I lost touch with reality and I was afraid for my sanity and...I finally had to accept it." She sighed and closed her eyes. "But even then I just couldn't let go of that last bare thread. In Ireland, I should have known...I should have, especially after we kissed. How could I not have known?" She finally opened tearful eyes. "I'm sorry."

"There is no need for you to be sorry." Jamie drew Erin back into her arms again and soothed her trembles. "I am just so glad that we found each other again. Everything has turned out okay. And I'm so sorry that you had to go through that pain. But I'm also glad that you were willing to go on with your life." She took Erin's face between her hands. "Because that is what I would want."

They kissed through salty tears.

"I don't want to talk about that now," said Erin. "Because we will be together." Another kiss. "...until we are very old." Kiss. "...very gray." Kiss. "And very wrinkled." A final kiss. "Nothing would ever dare separate us again."

Jamie smiled down hoping to illicit a similar response. She got her wish. They went back into the house still holding onto one another. "I guess I was an only child then huh?" she asked absently.

The body beside her sighed heavily. "Okay, I think that's all the questions I'll ask for today," Jamie said with just a touch of humor. A hand softly landed on her stomach.

"No Jamie, you have to know. I just...it just hurts to be the one to have tell you these painful things."

The dark head nodded.

"You had an identical twin sister. Her name was Jordan. But she died when she was five."

Jamie silently absorbed that fact as they finished the meal. Once done, she took the breakfast dishes and began putting the left over food into the disposal. Erin gathered the other utensils and brought them to the sink. They stood elbow to elbow performing the morning chore as Erin continued.

"You were born in Missouri. Your birthday is April the eleventh. That makes you thirty now. Your parents were Michael and Amy. You loved them very much and had a very happy and normal childhood. You fell in love with horses when..."

* * * *

Erin knew it would be a few days before Jamie could even begin to feel like she belonged there. She thought that Jamie should learn about herself just a little at a time so she wouldn't become overwhelmed. And the tall woman agreed. That included meeting Erin's family. The blonde had asked her sister not to say anything to anyone except to her husband Brad, about Jamie's return. That was her responsibility. That topic came up the next day as they were riding around the property, trying as always to find any little thing to jog Jamie's memory.

"I agree that I should take it slow," said Jamie. "But I really think we should get together with your family, soon."

"They're your family too Jamie."

The blue eyes scanned the landscape ahead as she thought about that. "Yeah, I guess they are."

Erin smiled. "But I want you to be sure. Who knows, maybe you will remember something about them when you see them."

"I know I don't want to hide away. Besides, if the rest of your family is anything like your grandmother..." Jamie smiled fondly. "...I think it'll be just fine."

"Well, nobody is like her, but Mom is great. But you'll find that out for yourself. Okay, how about we do this? You made your doctor's appointment for Friday morning right?"

"Yeah."

"So while you are there, I'll go and tell my parents in person. Then I'll have everyone come over to Mom and Dad's house and you and I can go back there Friday afternoon." Erin also had a very special plan for the weekend that involved their beach house. But she was going to keep that part a secret.

* * * *

Over the next couple of days Jamie spent the time getting to know the ranch hands and just coming to terms with the idea that she owned everything within sight. Well, Erin actually owned it, but she had promised that she would add Jamie's name to the deed just as soon as the legal aspects were cleared. Their lawyer advised them that they would need at least three notarized affidavits attesting to Jamie's true identity before any other legal documents could be signed. Those would be taken care of as soon as the rest of the family was informed of her return.

* * * *

Jamie reached into the box, sitting on her desk, and pulled out another stack of notes written in her own handwriting. Erin had saved the small pieces of paper, the charts, the graphs and the pages that Jamie had printed from the Internet. Even though the counselor had encouraged Erin to do so, she couldn't throw out any of Jamie's possessions.

As Jamie read over the written notes, everything made logical sense, but there was still nothing familiar about the specific ideas. They were thoughts and plans she had had for the ranch and things she had wanted to accomplish. *Well, at least I know what to work on now, she thought.*

She took a sip of the lukewarm coffee, promising herself to go and get more just as soon as she looked at the next piece of paper, but then it became the next one...and then the next...and then...

She hadn't wanted to bother Erin, because she knew the blonde was in her upstairs office working on her book. Erin had been spending every minute with Jamie, trying to bring back what was lost. But Jamie was glad that her companion had finally taken some time for herself. She wanted to be supportive. And she was proud of Erin's accomplishments.

The tall woman got up and stretched her stiff muscles. She had learned that even small movements during times of inactivity would lessen the pain in her back. She had also realized that the tension she had been feeling about her lost identity had added a lot to her discomfort. Since she had been home with Erin though, she had been able to cut back on the amount of medication she had been taking. Jamie smiled as she stood at the window thinking. *And Erin's massages certainly have been helping too.* The insistent blonde had been administering her healing touches several times a day. Between Erin's hands and her lips, Jamie was being well taken care of.

But the frequent and sometimes sensual touches hadn't gone any farther. Erin always eased off when she heard Jamie's breathing increase and felt her skin warming up. Jamie knew there was

no lack of desire for either of them and she had come to the conclusion that Erin was waiting for her to initiate more intimate contact.

And why hadn't she?

Back in Ireland, the desire had almost overtaken her on several occasions. And now that she knew she was Erin's lost lover there shouldn't be anything standing in their way. But maybe that was it. Lost was the operative word. Erin had memories of the two of them making love, of all those very special times they had shared in passion. Jamie didn't. Maybe she was afraid of disappointing Erin. Except for the one night Jamie had stayed with Lia, for all intents and purposes she had no other sexual experience. And even then she had mostly been on the receiving end.

Jamie went back to the desk and stood over the box of notes, her heart and her mind still wrestling over the apprehension of making love with Erin. She shuffled through the stack of papers and her hand brushed against a piece of satiny material tied around a cylindrical object. She pulled it out and her brow furrowed. "What in the world?" She gave a small tug on the red ribbon and it tumbled to the desk. The rolled up papers opened in her hand. Each of the four tan colored sheets had several lines of unevenly spaced printing on their textured surfaces. Since they were among her possessions, Jamie assumed that they belonged to her so she proceeded to read them. The first one was untitled.

There was a time, my whole life in fact

When a voice whispered in my ear

Not a name or a place or any words

But the feeling was very clear

Someone waited to fill my heart with love

My spirit with joy

To set my passions aflame

I bided my time, existing just well

Until the moment you came

In a burst of time, an explosion of light

I knew it had arrived

My time to be complete again

My time to be alive
You are my love
You are my heart
My joy, my very soul
Together we are
Together we move
Together we will be
I once was half, but now am whole
Since you, I became we
And the simple word everything
That's what you are to me

She moved on to the next one entitled, 'I See'.

I see, not with eyes, the smile upon your face,
The visions blue
Skin so bronze
And hair of silky night
Your hand in mine illuminates my darkened way
And banishes the fright
You give me hope
Fulfill my dreams
Bring the rainbows to my eyes
I see the world within your voice
That whispers in my ear

Jamie paused in her reading. "Erin must have written these...to me," she said, easing her body down into the black leather chair. After another moment to let that thought sink in, she read on.

I see your love

I see your strength lying beneath a tear

I close my eyes the day is through

And in a beautiful, magical dream

That's where I see you

Jamie smiled as she traced the slightly crooked letters. "I wish I could hear you read these out loud. You are a romantic Erin Casey. But that's always been obvious from the first time we met." She slipped that sheet of paper to the back of the stack and started one called Summer Night.

A summer's night

Dreams on wings

A laugh, a butterfly

A song of love

A lilac breeze

Together you and I

A sunset shared, one from the heart, the other from sight

That's how it was one summer's night

When first we met, but then again no

We have been since long ago

The twilight saw you leave

From my side you did depart

A gentle touch, a soothing voice was imprinted on my heart

The beginning of forever

I knew that it was true

My longtime prayer was answered
In the beautiful form of you
Step by step on a rocky path
We stumbled, but never fell
Love was there to guide us
Hand in hand
Heart to heart
Leading us to a future bright
And it all began on a simple summer night

Jamie could feel the true love, the pure emotion that had been pored into each and every word. She had no doubt that Erin loved her. But the poems, the carefully chosen words written by an unseeing hand spoke to her in glaring tones as to the depth their love had reached and in a heartbeat quelled her lingering fears.

The blue eyes drifted down to the last one of the bundle. They widened a little bit more as she scanned each new part. She reached up to feel suddenly dry lips as the internal heat ruddied her face. Those words, while still written with the greatest of love, dripped with sheer sensuality and the erotic syllables painted an all too vivid picture. Her tongue snaked out to lick those parched lips as she whispered the last few sentences, which seemed to be the tamest.

Touching you is
Brazen
A sultry spark of skin on skin
And nerves alight with fire
Kissing you is
Spicy
A taste of lips leads deeper still
The dewy heat of a panting breath sends the fire higher
Loving you is

Ecstasy

A rhythm found by thrusting hearts

Probes the deepest recesses of the soul

You carry me on gentle wings

To heights otherwise unknown

Then cradle me with whispered words

And I know that I've found home

* * * *

That evening Jamie walked into the bedroom to find Erin standing at the corner window. The blonde had one hand flat against the glass pane, her index finger absently rubbing against the smooth surface. Her head was leaning against the window frame and her gaze gently flicked from one twinkling star to the next.

Her profiled expression seemed content to the dark haired woman, who stayed just inside the doorway studying the quiet author. She watched as the breeze, from another opened window, ruffled the sheer, aqua colored robe Erin had draped around her shoulders. The flowing material revealed the shapely, moonlit silhouette of the petite woman to interested eyes. Jamie's heartbeat increased as she stood there admiring and her thoughts murmured the words of the poems she had found earlier.

A small sigh from across the room nearly broke her heart. Jamie quickly pushed away from the door casing and her bare feet shuffled across the tan carpeting. She slipped her arms around the smaller woman, grinning as she felt the body snuggle back into her. Jamie rooted through the shaggy blonde hair until she found a delicate ear. "I love you," she whispered. Jamie felt the smile that appeared on her lover's face.

Her thumbs began to rub over the soft, flat surface under her hands. The fluttering she felt mirrored her own. Her long fingers moved down and around to caress the slightly flared hips as her lips found purchase on the strong tendon of the neck that was suddenly exposed to her attentions. When Jamie's teeth joined the fray, she heard a sharp gasp of air pulled in through clenched teeth.

Erin suddenly turned to face her tall lover. One look at the adoring features and the eyes glowing with desire was all it took. She reached up and pulled Jamie's face to hers. The fiery kiss that ensued singed sweetly as they drew air from one another's lungs and quickly passed it back. Their bodies were crushed so closely that not a drop of water could have slipped between them. But the steam created by their passion settled in a dewy harvest in spots yet uncovered.

Jamie slipped the wispy material from Erin's shoulders as her swollen lips kept finding new and interesting tastes and textures. She pulled back just a touch, only to breathe and to make a husky request. "Show me how to love you. Tell me what you like. Where you like to be t..."

"Shhh. Your body knows." Erin panted, sending her warm breath against her own fingers and the lips she hushed. "Don't think, just feel."

The silk that had covered Erin's body was soon gone and immediately joined by jeans and a denim shirt in a pile on the floor. The soft sheets felt cool against damp, heated skin as two bodies, lost in time, began moving in the night.

"You are so beautiful," Jamie whispered. After many soft, languishing kisses, Jamie's long digits began dancing in the field of gold, testing the waters, while her lips and tongue slowly savored every inch of skin that she could reach. The enjoyable sounds she coaxed from her lover did strike a cord in the hidden part of her memory. Her nerve endings did somehow recall the textures of velvet and satin, the mounds and valleys that liked to be lightly stroked or heavily teased. It all worked together bringing her partner the greatest physical joy any human could know. When Jamie heard her name screamed at the pinnacle of Erin's excitement, she knew that her body had finally joined her heart in coming home.

Erin flipped their entwined bodies and wasted no time in getting re-acquainted with the length of muscle and skin beneath her. Jamie's unique scent of arousal wafted into her senses urging deeper caresses and many, many more kisses to spots long missed. The green eyes watched, with rapt attention, every twitch and flutter that came from the beautiful body she touched. Even though they had made love many times, she never had the absolute pleasure of watching Jamie, as she loved her. The sight was utterly incredible and it brought tears to those eyes as she whispered, "I love you."

The sounds of love harmonized as the impassioned souls climbed again together, each second of touches pushing them closer to the edge. They wore each other's skin, their hearts beat in the other's chest and they crawled inside the other's soul. Then with one more breath and a final touch, an explosive instant sent them both falling into each other's arms; the safest place on earth.

For Jamie it was their first time. And for Erin, the first time all over again.

* * * *

The dark haired woman waved Erin down as the blue SUV turned the corner in front of the professional building in downtown LA.

"Hi Sweetheart," said the blonde as Jamie got in the car. She received a kiss to her cheek. "What did the doctor say?" she asked, easing back into the heavy traffic. "Did you like him? I know this was your first appointment with him, but I want you to have the best, so if he's not competent or if he's rude we'll find someone better." When she didn't get a response by the next red light, Erin turned to see a huge grin staring at her. "What?"

"It feels so good to have someone care about me this much. I love you."

Erin had to put her attention back to the road when the car behind them honked. "I love you too. And I care more than I could ever put into words. So what did he say?"

"He said that I'm doing better then I should be. But that's what Doctor Kim said too. That's the only reason he released me when he did."

"I'm certainly glad to hear that. But," Erin said with a half hidden smile. "...that's not the only reason. He had a little help from...someone in that decision." Erin once again thanked whatever force had brought them together. "Is there any other physical therapy that you can take to strengthen your back?"

Jamie let out a slightly disappointed breath. "It will never be a hundred percent. And right now it's just about as good as it's going to get. But he did say that I could start a light exercise program at home. I just need to get some equipment."

Erin pulled onto the highway, heading for her parents house in Brentwood. "You've already got the equipment. It's back home in the garage. You were very much into physical fitness when we met and of course you brought it with you when you moved in. I couldn't bring myself to get rid of them either."

Jamie squeezed Erin's leg in acknowledgement. "Guess I'm all set then. How did it go with your family this morning?"

* * * *

At Erin's childhood home, Danielle bandied about the kitchen helping the cook prepare the welcome home dinner for Jamie. Her joyful tears had flowed for hours at the news of her other daughter's return and at the utter joy she had witnessed on Erin's face.

This was indeed a very special occasion and she was determined to make it happy and peaceful. That task had brought her to the large study and to the only person who could ruin the evening's celebration.

She walked in to find him at his usual place, behind the big cluttered desk. He hardly heard her approach as he clattered away at his keyboard. Casey's reaction to his daughter's news had been one of silent shock, but the look in his gray eyes did not escape his wife's attention. Nor their daughter's, Danielle had suspected.

"Timothy."

"Yes Dear," he responded without looking up from the computer screen.

"I would like to talk with you about tonight."

His typing stopped mid-word. "What about it?" he asked with a clenched jaw.

"Would you please look at me?"

His bearded face turned to her and he sat back, drumming his fingers on the armrest of his chair.

"Tim, I know you still aren't accepting of this. But everyone else in this family is. I love Jamie and I am very happy that she has come back to us. I do want you to be there, to support your daughter if nothing else, but I am asking you to keep your expression neutral and your comments to yourself. Or you will lose Erin for good. I suspect this is your last chance."

His response was to turn his chair to the wall. Her response was to walk out the door, hoping she had made him understand.

Within the hour Bridgett arrived with her family. The children clamored all around their grandparents, whom they loved immensely. Caitlin had to show grandma her new doll and Conner was so proud of his new baseball glove. He had saved up his allowance and had paid for it all by himself, he boasted.

They soon asked grandpa to take them to the back yard to see the fish in the koi pond. And when Tim had seen his daughter's car pulling up the long drive, he was more than happy to do so.

Erin turned off the motor and looked over to see Jamie staring in awe at the huge mansion.

"You grew up here?" asked the dark haired woman.

The blonde leaned against the steering wheel and peered out to share Jamie's view. "Yeah. But this is so not my style. It's just so pretentious. It was always like living in a museum. You okay with this?" she asked after a pause.

Jamie finally pulled her gaze from the window and smiled nervously. "Yeah."

Erin walked right in through the front door, knowing that it was going to be unlocked. She took Jamie by the hand and led her down the long, quiet corridor and then down a shorter hall. The big double doors to the family room were standing open and they could hear the chatter going on inside. She felt the hand begin to tremble and pulled Jamie aside before going in. "I know this is a little difficult for you," she said. "But I promise you that everyone in that room loves you." She cocked her head with a little frown. "Well except my father. But that has nothing to do with you," she was quick to assure. "His problem is with me. He can't get passed the idea that I'm gay. But just ignore him. Everyone else in there loves you. But not as much as me." Erin reached up and kissed Jamie, passing on her strength. "I'll be right by your side all night. If you need a break just let me know." After receiving an affirmative nod, she continued on.

Erin stepped in first, knocking lightly on the door to announce their presence. Her eyes quickly scanned the room and she breathed a sigh of relief when her father was nowhere in sight. "We're here."

Jamie stepped in behind her sporting a timid, but brave smile.

Bridgett was the closest to them so she came up first. Erin let go of her hand so the dark haired woman could return the hug.

"I really am glad you're back Jamie," said the red head. "And I'm sorry for how I acted the other day. I was just...worried about Erin. She's just so important to me and I didn't want to see her hurt again."

"I understand. She's really lucky to have a sister like you."

"And I am really lucky to have two sisters." Bridgett pulled both of them into a hug.

"You know," Erin said to Jamie. "Bridgett introduced us to each other last June. And I'm not sure if we ever properly thanked her."

Bridgett put on her teasing face. "Well if you insist. I'm sure I can think of some way for you to thank me. Say maybe two karats set in white gold. I'm not all that hard to please."

"I could beg to differ," said the tall, brown haired man who stepped up behind Bridgett. "But I won't if I know what's good for me."

Erin introduced the handsome man to Jamie. "This is Bridgett's husband, Brad."

He smiled charmingly. "It's good to see you again Jamie. Welcome back"

She nodded slightly. "Thank you."

The couple moved aside to allow Danielle her turn. She silently walked up to the dark haired woman and cautiously caressed the side of her face. The other shaking hand went to her own mouth.

Jamie was a little confused by the reaction, but a reassuring hand on her arm let her know everything was all right.

"I'm almost afraid to say anything," Danielle whispered. "I'm afraid I'll start crying again."

Erin cleared her tightened throat. "It's okay Mom. Go on and cry. God knows we have."

Danielle opened the floodgates and then had everyone in the room shedding a tear as she hugged Jamie to her. "I thank God that you have come home to us Dear. I love you. My family is once again complete," she said, now including Erin in the embrace.

The highly emotional scene was allowed to ease off as Danielle went to check on dinner and the Nelsons slipped away to check on their children.

Jamie took a deep breath and moved across the room to stand by the window. *They really do love me. It's so odd to hear that from people you've just met. But I don't love them...yet. I care about them because they are Erin's family, but that's all.* She paused to watch a ladybug crawling up the outside of the window glass. *I'm sure...no I know that I will come to love them, even if I never remember them.* She felt two familiar arms ease around her from behind. She genuinely smiled as the hands rubbed across her stomach and the soft cheek pressed into her back. "I love you Erin. Thank you for giving me a family." Through her thin shirt, she sensed the warm exhaled breath and could just picture the smile she knew was there. Jamie pulled her lover around to face her and there it was. She didn't need to hear the words. The message was loud and clear in those spring green eyes. But when those perfect lips formed the words, her heart nearly burst with happiness.

Arm in arm they walked over toward the couch. The doors leading to the patio suddenly burst open and in trotted the little curly headed four year old. She spotted Jamie and ran up to her, stopping about a foot in front of her. She waited for only a few seconds, hours to a child, before she thrust her tiny arms out to the side and exclaimed. "Aren't you going to pick me up and spin me around like you always do, Aunt Jamie?"

Erin knelt down to the child's level. "Caitlin. Sweetie, Aunt Jamie has a very big owie on her back and it would really hurt her to pick you up right now. You don't want to hurt her do you?" The little blonde head shook from side to side. "You're a good girl," praised Erin.

Jamie quickly took a seat on the sofa. "Come here...Caitlin." She was thankful that Erin had inconspicuously reminded her of the child's name.

The little girl obeyed and she was carefully lifted onto Jamie's lap. "How's that," the adult asked.

The child scooted around a tiny bit, making herself comfortable. "Good," she replied.

Jamie was momentarily surprised when two small arms, not so gently, flew around her neck and squeezed.

Erin hid a laugh behind her hand at the wide-eyed expression on her lover's face.

"I missed you Aunt Jamie."

"I missed you too Sweetheart." Jamie had to tell the adorable little girl a fib. Amnesia was too difficult to explain to a four-year-old mind.

"Mommy said that you went to heaven. Why did Mommy lie to me?"

Jamie's eyes flashed to Erin for just a second before trying to explain. "Your mommy didn't lie, Honey. She thought that was the truth."

Erin jumped in to help and took a small hand in hers. "Honey, Aunt Jamie got hurt and was very lost. She couldn't find her way back home."

"I even forgot my phone number. But Aunt Erin found me and brought me back home."

Caitlin hugged her, more gently this time. "You're not going to go away again are you?" she asked.

Jamie rubbed the little girl's back. "No Sweetheart, I'm not."

More bodies soon came in from the patio and Conner went to join the reunion on the sofa. Bridgett and Brad went to pour themselves a lemonade. And Timothy Casey went to a chair in the far corner of the room.

Jamie took notice of the slim, sandy haired boy standing in front of her. "Hey there slugger, how are you?"

Her choice of nicknames brought a bright smile to his slightly freckled face. "Fine," he announced clearly.

Erin scooted over and patted the seat in between her and Jamie. "Sit down here, Conner."

"How old are you now?" Jamie asked as he settled in between them.

"Eight," he stated proudly. "I'm still doing karate Aunt Jamie. Will you come and watch me again?"

"You bet. Just let me know when."

"I also played baseball and I hit a homerun," he said, punching his new leather glove.

Jamie ruffled his hair. "Of course you did. Next year I bet you hit a whole bunch of them."

Erin smiled openly and her eyes twinkled, watching the interaction between her lover and her niece and nephew. That was something that hadn't changed, even if Jamie didn't remember them. At first, she had been leery and a little fearful about being around the children, but it didn't take long for her to become their tallest playmate. Two small, little fingers had six feet of adult wrapped tightly around them. And they were not above, unwittingly exploiting that fact from time to time.

The joyful atmosphere in the room was hampered by one gray cloud that hung over the corner. The dark eyes would look up from the newspaper from time to time and the salt and pepper moustache would bristle above pursed, unhappy lips.

"I thought you promised Mom."

Tim looked up at his oldest daughter as he stood and went to the hidden bar near the window. "Would you like a drink Bridgett?"

"No Dad. I don't need alcohol to get me through this evening."

"Neither do I," he insisted gruffly. "I just want it."

Caitlin said something to send Erin and Jamie into a bout of loud laughter. Then Conner added his two cents, increasing the hilarity.

Bridgett smiled at the happy group. Tim didn't. But Bridgett was surprised to see an almost sad look in his gray eyes. But then his jaw tightened again.

"Don't say it Dad."

He turned to whisper to her. "Don't you realize what kind of trouble that can cause, what kind of anger that can lead to? What if your children were...I just don't see how you can let them be exposed to that?"

She tried very hard to keep her voice calm and low. "To what Dad? All I see is two people who love each other. What is so wrong with that?"

"It's dangerous."

"What?" Bridgett shook her head in frustration. "Look Dad, I want Conner and Caitlin to learn unconditional love and tolerance. Those are qualities I happen to admire and want to instill in my children. And I think Erin and Jamie are wonderful examples of that. Unlike the example you have been setting for them."

Timothy set his glass back on the bar. "Well, I can see my presence is no longer needed."

"That's your choice Dad," Bridgett said as he walked away.

His heart ached and felt like it was being ripped in two different directions, as he got closer to the door. *I suspect this is your last chance.* His wife's words echoed through his head and he stopped in the doorway. His barreled chest expanded as he sucked in a deep breath.

Bridgett saw him stop and she called her children over, leaving Jamie and Erin alone on the sofa. They smiled at one another and scooted closer. Erin had just taken Jamie's hand when she heard him softly clear his throat. Her hand stayed put.

The absence of words was ended when he stepped forward. "Jamie...I'm glad you survived. Welcome to my home."

The words were certainly not overflowing with elated emotion, but Erin really couldn't have hoped for more after everything else that had transpired. Just the acknowledgement was enough for now.

Jamie looked at her lover, not knowing quite what to make of his declaration. Erin gave a slight nod and only then did she let go of the hand so Jamie could accept the one being offered in peace. "Thank you, Sir."

Erin stood and hugged him. She whispered in his ear, "I do love you Daddy."

"I love you too," was all he could say.

Continued in Part 13.

The Athenaeum's Scroll Archive

~ Seeing You, Again For the First Time ~

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.

Love/Sex Disclaimer: This story depicts a loving relationship between two consenting, adult women and contains scenes of intimacy, but nothing explicit. If you are under 18 years of age or if this type of story is illegal in the state or country in which you live, please do not read it. If depictions of this nature disturb you, you may wish to read something other than this story.

Hurt/Comfort Disclaimer: Major angst ahead. But have faith and remember, I love a happy ending!

Thanks so much to my beta reader Barb.

No copy write infringement is intended in the use of the lyrics to the song "At Your Side".

This is the sequel to my first story, "At First Sight". I would recommend that you read that one first.

All comments are welcome at colleen30@webtv.net

I have also created a group for discussions of this, past and future stories. Maybe some sneak previews as well.

Join us at http://groups.yahoo.com/group/colleens_corner

Part 13

Chapter 13

Erin peaked into the stove, checking on the seafood dish she had carefully prepared. Moving across the blue and white kitchen she hadn't seen for several months, she began cutting up the various vegetables for the salad.

They had arrived at the beach house late the night before, after leaving her parents home. They had slept in one of the guest bedrooms and in the morning, Jamie had been given an abbreviated tour of her former residence. Erin wanted to keep certain places and plans for the evening secret, wanting to surprise her lover.

As she stood there preparing dinner and watching through the window, where Jamie was sitting on a blanket near the shoreline, Erin thought back to the previous night. Her father's actions, while surprising, led her to feel that maybe they could salvage a close relationship.

Erin laughed as Artemis came up and nudged Jamie from behind and then ran off as if playing tag. The tall woman jumped up and took off after the barking canine, kicking up sand along the way. Erin checked the entrée one more time then headed upstairs to prepare the bedroom and to change.

Jamie had been restricted to the deck and the beach for a few hours while Erin prepared her surprise. The raven-haired woman had practically begged, but the blonde would not relent and the evening's activities were kept shrouded in secrecy. She had gone for a nice long swim, gotten some sun and of course played with Artemis.

At the appropriate time she was allowed to come in through the front door where a note directed her to the upstairs guest bedroom where she found her evening attire laid out on the bed, right down to the shoes.

After showering and changing into the clothing, Jamie eased her way back down to the first floor, where she stopped to take a strong whiff of the enticing aromas coming from the kitchen. It was still early evening, about an hour before sunset, but all the curtains had been drawn bathing the living room in a soft orange glow. Jamie sat down on the couch waiting for her cue to enter. The mystery of the evening sent little tingles down her spine as she sat there contemplating what was in store for the rest of the night.

Her mind was caught up in the fantasy when she heard the clearing of a throat. She looked up to see a summer goddess come to life. Erin stood before her, adorned in a beautiful floral print dress. Jamie decided to take a much more in depth inventory of the vision in yellow. She started at the bottom where white sandals covered the small, and she had discovered, ticklish feet. Tanned, bare legs were displayed nicely beneath the short, but still modest hemline. The smooth, baby soft skin just begged to be caressed and that's just what she had been doing in her previous little fantasy. And it is precisely what she intended to do in reality, not too much later. She continued her perusal up over the rounded hips and slim waist to the perfect breasts, where her mouth began to water. Delicate, white straps draped over the enticing shoulders and tied around

the neck that she so loved to nibble. The smile that greeted the end of the anatomical tour brightened the entire room.

Jamie slowly stood without saying a word. She quickly glanced down at her own attire. The copper, silk shirt and simple black jeans made her feel drastically plain compared to her lover. She wondered why Erin had chosen them. With a mental shrug her eyes once again joined the emerald ones beckoning her closer.

"You must not be hungry for dinner now," Erin said as Jamie took a few steps toward her.

Dark brows furrowed. "Why do you say that?"

Erin slipped her arms around Jamie's neck. "Well, the way you just devoured me...I thought..."

Jamie smiled and bent down to capture those full, slightly pink lips. "Oh baby, trust me, I am starved for whatever you have cooking in the kitchen...and for what you have simmering right here." Her hands drifted down Erin's back to settle just above the lovely swell of muscle. "You are beautiful, in case you didn't read my mind."

Erin wedged her hands into the back pockets of the tight, black jeans. "So are you." She nuzzled the neck that had been lightly doused with her favorite cologne. "I love you in jeans and the tighter the better." Erin gave Jamie another quick kiss and proceeded to lead her to the dining room.

"I guess a shopping trip is in order then, so I can stock up. After all, I have made it my personal goal in life to please you." She got a nice little hug for the sentiment.

The round table was covered in a beautiful, white, lace edged cloth. Two elegant, berry colored candles, softly illuminated the single orchid centerpiece and fine china and silver place settings completed the romantic atmosphere of the small, intimate room.

Jamie leaned down to smell the aromatic flower. "This is beautiful."

Erin watched her lover carefully as Jamie took in the room. But nothing happened. With a small sigh, the blonde went into the kitchen to retrieve the main course.

All through the seafood meal they laughed and talked like nothing had ever changed, like they were never separated for six months...like Jamie hadn't lost all her memories of their time together. That is until...

After dinner, Erin led Jamie out onto the deck and up the stairs to the second level. She slipped into her bedroom, pushed a button and returned to find Jamie staring out across the ocean at the setting sun. She stepped into the open arms and laid her head against a strong shoulder. They both gazed at the slowly changing horizon. "The sky's the limit for us," Erin said, echoing the exact words that had been spoken to her over a year before.

The two of them began moving to the music; one body swaying against the other in the warm summer air.

Jamie listened to the words of the song being played.

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

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

"That's a nice song," said Jamie as they continued to move in lazy circles. "Is it new?"

Erin stiffened slightly as another hope was dashed. Jamie pulled away and Erin quickly covered the sorrowful frown with a twitching smile. It was their song. It played on the first night they met. It played on so many special occasions after that first night. And it sang in Erin's heart. But obviously it no longer played in Jamie's.

"Are you all right?" asked the tall woman.

Erin lied. "Yeah. Come on, there's much more."

Jamie stepped into the pale green bedroom and was pleasantly greeted with the scents of coconut and vanilla. A dozen candle flames flickered around the room casting pale shadows on the white walls in the otherwise darkened room.

Soon, her bare feet sunk into the plush carpeting as she followed the smaller woman to the bed where they slowly divested each other of their clothing. Their bodies melded together as they flowed into the bed, whispering words of love and devotion as hands followed suit. They made love for what seemed like hours, only stopping when exhaustion weakened their limbs.

After a candlelit bubble bath, Jamie was sent into the bedroom to wait patiently. But patience was a hard virtue for her to follow at the moment. She stood at the sliding door staring at the bright moon and its reflection upon the dancing waters below. She was rested after the bath and thoughts of the compact, but curvaceous body that she loved soon had her heart palpitating for more. She just knew that the night was long from over.

She didn't have to wait long.

"I'm back."

Jamie turned and her eyes popped at the sultry vision leaning against the doorframe.

Erin wore a very short, flaming red nightie. The silken garment had lacey patches placed at very appropriate places-appropriate at least for the current activities.

The sexy blonde sauntered over to the drooling, dark haired woman. She lifted the food filled fork, from the small plate in her hand, and slipped it between the obligingly open lips. She chucked a knuckle under the stunned chin to initiate chewing. Erin then took a bite of the chocolate confection for herself, her eyes never leaving the blue ones that had drifted half closed in ecstasy.

"Don't you have anything to say?" asked Erin.

"Delicious."

Erin laughed devilishly and kissed her lover thoroughly.

Jamie licked the sweet essence off of the lips that weren't her own. "The cake's good too."

They shared the rest of the dessert along with a vintage bottle of champagne and many more kisses. After that Jamie was treated to one of Erin's wondrous massages, this time aided by the raspberry scented oil Erin pulled from the drawer of the nightstand. The treatment was graciously reciprocated and when the touches turned to caresses, the two oil-covered bodies were sent, once again to the special place where only they could dwell together in love.

Something awoke Jamie from a sound sleep. She blurrily glanced at the clock. It was 3:18. Her eyes snapped shut at the thought of the late hour and she turned over to snuggle with her favorite body. But her hand fell onto the cold mattress. The dark head lifted from the pillow and she reached up to rub tired eyes. She then saw the silhouette standing by the sliding glass door. It was open just a touch and the salty, ocean air wafted in. Jamie kicked her legs over the side of the bed. "Erin," she called softly as she grabbed for her robe.

The blonde head didn't turn at the sound of the voice. "I'm okay Jamie. Go back to sleep."

The tall woman pulled her into an embrace from behind. "If you were all right, you wouldn't be standing here in here middle of the night."

Erin was glad that the breeze had dried the few tears she had just shed as the dark head settled next to hers.

"What's wrong Sweetheart?"

"Nothing. I'm just...nothing. Let's go back to sleep."

Jamie followed Erin back to the bed, but instead of climbing in, she sat on the front end of the mattress.

"What are you doing?" asked the author.

"I won't be able to sleep until I figure out what's bothering you."

Erin crawled across the disheveled sheets to sit next to Jamie. She looked down by her feet and saw the red silk that had been passionately cast away hours earlier. She picked it up. "You didn't remember any of it, did you?" she asked sadly.

"Remember what?"

"Everything. This whole evening. I recreated everything that we did the first night we made love. What we wore, what we ate, the candles and the bath. You bought this for me." She nodded to the garment in her hand. "You made everything perfect for me that night."

Jamie felt a pang of guilt. She pulled the blonde head to her shoulder. "I'm sorry Sweetheart, but I don't remember. I'm glad that you remember though. And I'm glad I made you happy that night. Just like you made me happy tonight. And nothing will ever make me forget this time." The face with the small smile looked up at her in the dark. "I love you Erin."

"Love you too."

Things slowly fell into a normal routine for Jamie and Erin. The ranch was becoming more prosperous everyday. Jamie hired a contractor to make some much needed renovations and expansions to the current barn. She was also having two other buildings constructed, one nearby

the main stable and one farther off, behind a stand of trees. The closer one would be a birthing stable for pregnant mares and the other one would house the stallions she planned to acquire.

Erin made great progress on her next novel and finally contacted Joseph Hudson, the producer of the movie being made from her first book. She explained the situation the best she could and he was gracious in his response, wanting her back in on the project before the final edits were made.

* * * *

One Sunday afternoon they went riding and took a picnic lunch. They got into a game of tag and Jamie ran off toward a group of trees. Erin bent to catch her breath as the dark-haired woman disappeared into the foliage.

"Jamie no, don't go back there!" she yelled, suddenly remembering where they were. She took off as fast as her legs could go. She rounded the largest tree and there stood her tall lover, staring down at the gray stone marker that bore her name. It was barely visible through the tall grasses, having been forgotten when they returned from Ireland.

"I guess this is something most people don't get to see," Jamie said jokingly.

Erin saw no humor in the situation. "I'm sorry. I never should have let them put this here. I knew..." She let her sentence drift off as she dropped to her knees and grabbed the polished, carved slab with both hands. Her features contorted as she tugged and pulled with all her might, trying to dislodge the deceiving stone from the ground. She was quickly turning blue in the face as she held her breath; her only sounds were grunts and moans behind her strength. Her knees dug into the ground, but the rock didn't budge.

That had all happened before Jamie had a chance to register her actions. She ran and dropped to the ground beside her. "Erin stop."

But she didn't.

"Erin, stop it, you're hurting yourself!" She grabbed the scraped up hands and pried them away.

"It doesn't belong here! You're alive, you're alive!"

Jamie rocked the distraught woman. "Yes, I'm alive. It's okay; we'll get rid of this. It means nothing now." She pulled the injured palms to her lips as she stared into the misty green eyes. Erin's breathing calmed with one final sigh. "You okay now?" asked Jamie.

The blonde head nodded.

"Come on lets go. I'll bring back a shovel and dig it up."

"No! You don't have to do that. Tomorrow I'll pay one of the construction workers to come out here and dig it up...and then pulverize it with a sledgehammer."

Jamie wondered if there would ever come a time when there weren't reminders of her accident and disappearance around every corner. But it had only been a few weeks since they returned from Ireland. She realized that she shouldn't expect any more miracles.

Jamie still hurt for the pain that her soulmate had experienced in those six months she was gone. She never asked any more questions after hearing the horrifying tale of Erin's slip from reality, not wanting her to have to re-live the nightmare. But after seeing Erin's reaction with the grave marker, Jamie was beginning to get a pretty good picture. And she hated every color and stroke on that canvas. She wished that she could take those memories from Erin's mind and toss them away forever. Maybe all she could really do was hold Erin tight when she was upset, reassure her that they had a wonderful future ahead of them and pray that time would totally heal the wounds on Erin's heart and her soul. Or maybe there was something else. But the single most important thing Jamie could do was to love Erin, every minute of every day of every year for a lifetime.

* * * *

That evening as Jamie cleared the table of the dinner dishes, she noticed Erin rubbing her sore hands. The blonde's frantic reaction to seeing the tombstone had really startled Jamie. Of course she had no way of knowing how Erin dealt with emotional situations in the past, but after today's incident Jamie's worried mind scrambled for solutions.

She looked up again to find her lover gone. Jamie quickly checked the back porch, but found nothing. She tracked from room to room, calling out. Her heart sped up just a bit with panic as there continued to be no answer. One window in their bedroom overlooked the drive and Jamie saw that the car was still there and she knew Erin wouldn't go riding alone, after dark. But then again after today...

The tall woman had covered every square inch of the house, except... Jamie ran down the hall to the back staircase, but instead of turning left and moving down, she turned to her right and ascended to a small, unused area. The narrow, claustrophobic stairwell led to a tiny alcove at the top of the old farmhouse. It was so small that it wasn't even used for storage. Jamie knew she had found her prey as she followed the smaller footprints stamped out on the dusty steps. She turned the corner and there was Erin, sitting on the built in bench below the big curved window. The author made no acknowledgement of Jamie's arrival, she just continued staring out over the huge expanse of landscape behind the house. Jamie let the silence continue for just a moment longer. "Erin," she said softly. "Are you okay? Why didn't you answer me?"

Without looking at her, Erin reached out a hand to her lover. Jamie took the offering and joined her on the padded bench. "Did you ever wonder...?"

"Wonder what?"

The blonde hesitated. "Never mind."

"Erin, look at me, please."

The alert green eyes turned in her direction and soon filled with the smile that spread across her face.

Jamie grew even more concerned. The smile was relaxed and genuine, but it certainly didn't reflect Erin's actions of late. "Erin, I'm worried about you."

"About me, why?"

"After what happened today and just now, I mean you hid yourself in here and wouldn't answer me."

Erin brushed her off with a snort. "I just came up here to think. I guess I didn't hear you, that's all."

"Erin, how many times did you see that counselor?"

Erin was bewildered at the sudden change of topic. "Only twice, why?"

"Only twice and that helped with everything you were feeling?"

The blonde head tipped to one side. "I didn't feel comfortable talking to him about our relationship. I know therapists are supposed to be totally objective and not let their personal feelings interfere, but I just didn't believe he had my best interests at heart. After the second visit, I was feeling better so I just never found a substitute."

"Honey, I think maybe you should go back to seeing someone."

"Jamie, I don't need that. I don't need anything else but you." Erin crawled into her lap. "You are here. You'll always be here. You'll never leave me again. I know that now, I'm fine." She sealed her statement with a searing kiss, effectively removing the topic of conversation from Jamie's mind.

* * * *

Jamie had spent eight hours overseeing construction on the stallion barn. Of course that also meant she couldn't resist getting her hands dusty and helping with a hammer or a saw wherever she could. She came home tired, dirty and aching. But it was a good ache. It came from living; moving forward with a life she had quickly come to love.

She was quickly sent to the showers with a good solid swat to her rear end after being mildly scolded for working too hard when she didn't need to. But one kiss, even from smudged lips, was all it took to sooth over her lover's temper.

Jamie stepped out of the steam filled bathroom with a towel draped around her neck. She ran her fingers through her short hair to smooth it down as she spotted a note, written in familiar

handwriting, taped to the bedroom door. She remembered the last note she found and what interesting activities it led to.

She followed the instructions and went downstairs and out the side door, which was on the far side of the house and rarely ever used. A curious smile came to her face as she was greeted by a new square structure built from solid, seven foot high, redwood panels topped by lattice work, much too high for her to peak into.

A voice suddenly drifted over the top. "To your right," it guided.

Jamie followed the stone pathway to the entrance. She walked between the bypassing panels, which totally blocked any outside view. She stopped to just stare at the decadent blonde.

"Come on in," said Erin. "The water's great."

The spacious hot tub bubbled and tendrils of steam drifted around her partner's angelic face. Jamie dipped a single finger into the frothy water and asked non-chalantly,

"And just when did this get here?"

"Today. It was just luck that you spent all day across the field and I got to surprise you."

Jamie leaned her crossed arms on the tub's ledge as more fingers played in the hot liquid. "Well, surprise me you did." Their eyes locked for many silent minutes; each daring the other to make the first move, but knowing that exquisite tension was building as neither said a word. Which would be the first to break? Who would win their little game?

Erin finally decided to make the sacrifice. Even if she lost, she won. "Are you just going to stand there all night or are you going to join me?" she asked. "I know your back must be...tight". She wriggled her body around in the comfortable seat, sighing all the while. "This heat will feel sooooo good."

"I don't suppose you're wearing anything under there?" Jamie asked the blonde head, which was the only thing visible above the waterline. The response was a set of teasing, pursed lips and a coy flicker of golden lashes.

"Uh, huh." Jamie shimmied out of her blue shorts and peeled the t-shirt over her head.

Very appreciative green eyes appraised the length of tanned landscape that climbed the three steps and came over the rim of the tub.

Jamie made several happy sounds as she sank into the warm depths next to her lover. She momentarily let her eyes drift shut as the heat enveloped her tired, stiff muscles. "I am going to have to find a way to thank you for coming up with such a brilliant idea," she said lazily.

After just a few minutes the steam caused water droplets to form at her temples and the hair that had been on its way to drying was once again damp.

Erin reached up and licked away those lucky droplets. "Have I ever told you how sexy you are with wet hair?"

The blue eyes opened. "I don't know, have you?"

Erin's expression dropped and she looked back to the swirling water. "No," she confessed solemnly. "I guess I haven't." She reached over to shut off the jets leaving them covered in calm water. "I'm hungry, how about you?" she asked as she started to leave the tub. A gentle hand on her arm stopped her.

"No, let me." Jamie stepped from the water and grabbed a robe from a nearby hook. She entered the house and shuffled to the kitchen where she explored the cabinets and the refrigerator. After filling a tray with a few leftovers and some fruit and cheese, she grabbed a bottle of wine from the fridge. She made her way back outside, stopping momentarily to talk to the dog, who was content to stay inside chewing on her new rawhide.

Before stepping back inside the tub enclosure, Jamie peaked around the door. Erin hadn't moved a muscle. She just sat there staring at the water with downcast eyes and a troubled expression. The dark haired woman had hoped that Erin's moods were just a part of getting used to the changes in their lives and their relationship. She painted on a smile, knowing that she could do the same for her blonde friend. "Here come the goodies," she said setting the tray on a wide shelf connected to the tub.

"I know," said Erin, pulling out of her temporary funk. "but did you bring any food?"

Jamie giggled at Erin's brassiness as she removed her robe and slid back into the water. *There's that smile*, she thought to herself as she leaned over to kiss the button nose. "Oh yes. Food now, goodies later."

She insisted on feeding Erin pieces of the sharp cheeses and cold chicken. And since she had conveniently forgotten utensils, fingers became the impromptu delivery method. Up until the last bite, which luscious lips delivered.

Once all the poultry and dairy products had been devoured, Jamie traced Erin's cheek with a wet fingertip. "Satisfied?" she asked the relaxing blonde.

"Mmmm, that was good," Erin said lying her head back against the tub's edge.

Jamie agreed. "Yes it was. How about some dessert?" She pulled away a white cloth that had been covering a fruit filled bowl. She lifted the glass dish between them. "Do these bring back memories?"

The water splashed into the dish and onto her partner's face as Erin jerked upright. The flash of excitement waned immediately as she eyed the strawberries. "Oh, you mean Ireland."

Jamie used the discarded towel to wipe the fruit and her face. "Don't sound so disappointed. I thought that was a pretty good night. Look where it brought us." She picked up a large berry and dipped it into the small dish of honey that she had brought along too. "Do you have any idea what I wanted to do that night when I was watching you eating these? Or how crazy you made me?"

"I got a pretty good idea when you kissed me."

Jamie held up the berry and let some of the golden sweetness drizzle into Erin's mouth. Then those perfect white teeth nipped off the end of the tart fruit. Jamie slipped the rest into her own mouth. "Sweetheart, that only scratched the surface of what I wanted." She slowly descended upon Erin's lips. "Let me show you what else I had in mind."

* * * *

The next Jamie drove out to the nearest veterinarian, which was nearly thirty minutes away. She wanted to enlist his services and put him on retainer for the ranch. Work on the new barns was moving ahead at a good pace and she was formulating her plans to start a breeding program.

She pulled up to the renovated home, turned office. The last open parking space in the small lot was next to an old red pick-up. The gravel crunched under her brown boots as she made her way up to the covered porch.

An older man was standing precariously on a chair hanging a new sign. He was obviously so engrossed in what he was doing that he hadn't heard her pull in or walk up.

Jamie didn't want to startle him and make him fall so she softly cleared her throat as she got closer.

He finally turned at the sound. "Oh! Hello there. Can I help you?" he asked, carefully stepping down from the chair.

"I'm looking for Dr. Cooper."

The white haired man dusted off his hand on his slightly less dirty overalls. "That'd be me," he said shaking her hand. "But call me Coop. Everybody around here does."

"I'm Jamie Sheridan." It still sounded a little strange to hear her own voice say that even after four weeks. She smiled at him. "Call me Jamie."

"Nice to meet you Jamie. Come on in and we'll get acquainted." She had come to learn that nobody in the town was a business associate; everybody you met was your friend...or your enemy. Luckily everyone she had met so far fell into the former category.

Coop led her through the comfortable, cool waiting room. There she nodded at the three waiting patients-or more precisely to their owners. One was a little brown haired boy who held a white rabbit tight to his chest. He gave her a shy smile when she passed by. The phone rang and Dr. Cooper stopped to pick it up. Jamie took the opportunity to meet some more of the townspeople. She knelt down in front of the youngster who looked to be about eight. "Hi, I'm Jamie. What's your name?"

"Billie," he answered timidly.

Jamie scratched one finger down the bunny's furry back. "And who's this?"

"Tinker. She isn't feeling too good lately," he explained in a very worried tone. "But Dr. Coop will fix her up." Tiny wrinkles came to his forehead as his feature's darkened. "Won't he?"

Jamie took a quick glance down and noticed the pudgy white tummy. "Billie, do you have any other rabbits?"

"Yeah, why?"

From the corner of her eye, Jamie saw the woman setting two chairs down, smile knowingly. "I'm sure Tinker will be just fine."

The young boy obviously believed her because a smile came to his face and he rubbed noses with his pet, telling her that she was going to be okay.

Jamie rose to her feet as the other woman said in reference to the impending bunny births, "And Dr. Coop will a few new patients."

Jamie smiled and agreed with a nod.

"I'm sorry Jamie," said Coop. "Come on back." He led her down a long hall and into a nice sized office.

She took a seat in the soft green chair and looked around. One wall was filled with photographs of what she assumed were his patients over the years. Another wall held his diplomas and citations. She wondered why he was taking so much time with her when he obviously had patients to see. She gave a mental shrug and continued her perusal. On his desk were several pictures of an attractive older woman with two young men and a young girl in a wheelchair.

"My family," he said smiling, when he noticed her admiring the picture.

"Very attractive group."

"That they are. What about you Jamie, any family? I don't believe I've seen you around the town before."

"Well, I just moved here a while ago. I own the Sheridan stables up near Willow Lake."

"Oh yes. I saw your add in the local paper." He got up and poured himself a cup of coffee.

"Would you like some?"

"No thanks." Jamie squirmed in her seat. *Well here goes. I need to know how he feels about us. I won't work with anybody who can't accept our being gay.* "Yes, my partner, Erin Casey and I bought the Phillips place. And we intend to make a life here together and raise a family, as well as build a business."

He sat back down and took a long sip of his coffee. "Sounds like a fine endeavor. I'm sure you and Miss Casey will enjoy the family atmosphere here in Atkin's Ridge." He smiled to put her at ease.

"I'm sure we will," she said breathing a sigh of relief. "We would like to enlist your services for our animals. I'll put you on retainer to make regular visits as well as any emergencies that might... arise." She hesitated, not liking the way he dropped his gaze from hers.

"Well Jamie, there is a problem with your request. I recently decided to take a partial retirement. And at this time I really don't want to take on such responsibilities."

She nodded in disappointment. "I understand."

"But I do have a solution. Just two weeks ago, I hired a partner. Dr. Chad Benson was the first in his class at one of the most prestigious veterinary schools in the country. Now we don't have all the modern technology here in this little place, but he has connections to all of that. Saw him bringing in that computer and about three dozen of those little things that hold all that information."

"Disks," she supplied helpfully.

"Yeah, that and an arm full of books. With his know how, he could have gotten a job anywhere in the big city, but when he wanted to work here, I knew he wasn't in it to get rich; he loves the critters. And that's what's most important. I believe in him. If you'll give him a chance I'm sure he'll keep your animals in the best of health."

"Okay. When can I meet him?"

She hung around the office until Dr. Benson was free to talk to her. The twenty seven year old was tall and muscular. She knew he would certainly have the strength to contend with an ornery stallion or an agitated mare in labor. His blonde haired, green-eyed good looks would have certainly stirred some attraction if her lifestyle had been different; she did seem to have a thing for that particular combo. He spoke eloquently and intelligently. Not to mention displaying a genuine concern for the animals.

Jamie drove away, content in the knowledge that she had made the best possible choice in veterinary services.

Erin's birthday is less than two months away. I've got to think of something special to do for her. I wonder what I did last year? I certainly can't ask her. She gets moody every time I mention not remembering. That is still the one odd thing between us. I wish... Jamie's thoughts were suddenly interrupted when she came around a curve in the road and saw a woman wildly waving her down.

* * * *

Erin lifted the wooden spoon to her mouth and tasted the red sauce. "Hmmm, not too bad," she said. But no one besides Artemis was in the room to hear. She picked up two spice jars and added just a pinch of the garlic and two dashes of an Italian blend. She stirred and took another taste. This time she merely nodded an affirmative opinion. After adjusting the fire under the huge cooking pot, Erin returned to her seat at the small round table and went back to clicking the keys on her laptop. She had spent the last hour going back and forth between cooking and writing. She even managed to do a load of laundry along the way. Multi-tasking had become a welcomed skill since she now had more than just herself to care for and one that she was becoming proficient at.

She heard the clicking of nails against the polished wooden floor and looked down when a furry chin planted itself on her thigh. Erin glanced up at the clock on the wall. "How do you do that?" she asked the canine. The answer was a subtle shifting of skin over the big brown eyes. "Uh huh. I think your other mommy has been teaching you a few things behind my back." She walked into the pantry, grabbed a big scoop from a hook on the wall and reached down into the large bag. Erin dumped one scoop full of dry nuggets into the dog dish. Artemis looked down at it and whimpered. "I know, I know," she said reaching for the can opener. "I'm not done yet." Once Erin had added the eight-ounce can of tender meat bits and tasty gravy, she stirred them together and the dog wolfed it down in a matter of minutes.

"That reminds me," she muttered. The author sat back down at the table and switched from her word program to a daily calendar on her laptop. The next week Erin was going to New York to see an unfinished version of the movie that was made from her novel, *The Noah Factor*. She had finally regained some interest in the project now that her life was happy again. The big premiere was in November and she planned to be there, proudly walking down the carpet with Jamie by her side.

She clicked in a couple of meal menus for the two days she would be gone. She intended to prepare them ahead of time for Jamie so her tall lover wouldn't stuff her face with junk food. Jamie wouldn't be able to go with her because she had a meeting scheduled. They were both a little antsy about the trip because it would be the first time they would be separated since they found one another again. Jamie had offered to cancel her plans and although Erin's first impulse had been to scream yes, she knew it wasn't fair. Jamie had business to attend to, just as she did.

A few minutes later the phone rang. "Hello." There seemed to be on one on the other end, but she tried again. "Hello."

"Oh, I'm sorry Dear, your father called me from the other room."

"Hi Mom. How have you been?"

"Oh, busy, Sweetheart, busy. Which is why I called. I'm giving your sister a surprise anniversary party on Saturday. I'm sure you and Jamie will want to come."

Shoot. I forgot.

"Are you still there Erin?"

"Yeah Mom, I'm here. I was just kicking myself for forgetting it was their anniversary."

"It is understandable Erin, you have had some other things on your mind lately."

"Yeah, but... What can I bring?"

"Well, I was hoping you would make a couple of those wonderful chocolate cakes with the white chocolate filling. You know how much your sister loves it."

"I can do that Mom. Anything else?"

"I don't think so Dear, but I'll give you a call if I think of anything."

"Okay. Bye Mom."

The front door opened and Jamie called out for her partner.

"I'm in the kitchen, Babe," answered Erin. "Now I'm in the hallway." She turned the corner. "Now I'm in..." Green eyes went wide when she saw the blood soaked shirt and pants. "Oh my God!" She ran toward the woman still standing by the door. "Jamie, what happened? Where are you...."

"It's not mine," said Jamie adamantly. "I'm okay Sweetheart. None of it's mine, I promise."

Erin panted, calming her racing heart. She couldn't say a word; she just threw herself into the arms of her lover, regardless of the state of Jamie's clothing. They held on tight.

"I'm okay," Jamie assured once again. She went on to explain that she stopped to help a neighbor who had been badly injured in an accident.

Erin escorted her up the stairs and proceeded to strip her lover of the gory garments. All the while, Jamie was thinking about the part she didn't necessarily want to tell Erin.

She had run up to the man lying on the ground, moaning in agony. Her insides had clinched several times and a wave of dizziness swarmed her as she saw the blood pooling on the ground

and the shards of white bone that had pierced his skin below the knee. His arm was bent at an odd angle and blood was spread across his forehead and down the side of his face. It wasn't so much the sight of his injuries that had disturbed her, but the memories it had invoked about her own severe traumas and subsequent recuperation.

Jamie did go on to explain that the only emergency transportation in the area had already been on a call twenty miles away at the sight of a car accident. She also found out that the nearest clinic was not equipped to handle emergencies requiring major surgery. Jamie and the nearly hysterical wife had managed to strap him to a board and load him into her SUV. She knew that moving him was a very bad thing to do, but letting him lie there bleeding to death was not an alternative. She drove them forty-five miles to the nearest hospital, which was still small, but the staff seemed more than competent. She stayed around until she found out that he would indeed survive.

* * * *

Erin was concerned that Jamie had been unusually withdrawn during dinner, but given the day's experiences she understood. The tall woman declined the idea of watching a movie. Instead she grabbed a beer and headed for the back porch.

By the time the fireflies had appeared across the darkening field, Erin thought it was time to intervene. The screen door squeaked as she exited the kitchen. "Mind if I join you?" she asked.

Jamie looked up and smiled. "Sure." She nodded her head indicating the empty seat next to her.

Erin slipped under the outstretched arm and settled onto the red striped cushion. Jamie used her longer legs and pushed against the cement, setting the swing in motion. Back and forth they went, silently watching as the night draped its cloak of black over the green pasture.

The blonde turned to her side as the fingertips kept caressing her shoulder. She placed her hand over the flat stomach and rubbed gently. "Are you okay?"

The dark head turned with a surprised expression. "Yeah. Why wouldn't I be?"

"Well you hardly said two words during dinner."

Jamie reached over and kissed her forehead. "I'm sorry Honey. It was delicious."

Erin softly chuckled. "I wasn't fishing for a compliment. What happened today really bothered you, didn't it?" she asked after a short pause.

"Well, I hate to see anyone injured." The dark head shook. "No, it didn't bother me, it just...reminded me. Spooked me a little at first. It also brought to my attention the only bad part about living here, so far away from the city. Medical care is so inadequate. If something were to happen..."

"I know. I'll check in with the local officials and see what can be done about improving emergency personnel and equipment."

The wooden swing creaked a little as it swayed keeping up with the chorus of insect calls coming from the surrounding grasses and trees. The hazy half moon was rising in the early evening sky.

Jamie silently offered Erin the last few sips of her beer.

The blonde swallowed the golden liquid and rotated the empty bottle between her fingertips. "Jamie. We're doing okay, aren't we?" she asked timidly.

"Sure we are." Was the simple reply.

"Because you would tell me if something else was wrong...wouldn't you?"

"I would. I found us a new vet today," she said with a quick change of subject.

Erin scooted back into the warm body beside her. "Doctor Cooper?"

"No, his new partner, Chad Benson. His credentials really impressed me. He's a couple years younger than us and he graduated top of his class."

The night continued on in conversation until the late hour drew them back inside and into their comfortable bed, where disjointed dreams visited the sleepers. The seemingly senseless visions brought one smiles and joy and the other a peak into a wounded psyche where darkness dwells and fear reigns with a cruel fist.

Continued in Part 14.

The Athenaeum's Scroll Archive

~ Seeing You, Again For the First Time ~

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.

Love/Sex Disclaimer: This story depicts a loving relationship between two consenting, adult women and contains scenes of intimacy, but nothing explicit. If you are under 18 years of age or if this type of story is illegal in the state or country in which you live, please do not read it. If depictions of this nature disturb you, you may wish to read something other than this story.

Hurt/Comfort Disclaimer: Major angst ahead. But have faith and remember, I love a happy ending!

Thanks so much to my beta reader Barb.

No copy write infringement is intended in the use of the lyrics to the song "At Your Side".

This is the sequel to my first story, "At First Sight". I would recommend that you read that one first.

All comments are welcome at coleen30@webtv.net

I have also created a group for discussions of this, past and future stories. Maybe some sneak previews as well.

Join us at http://groups.yahoo.com/group/colleens_corner

Part 14

Chapter 14

Thud. Thud. Jamie set the two lightweight dumbbells on the floor beside the padded bench. She grabbed the white terry towel and quickly dabbed at the perspiration sliding down the side of her face. A long drink of cool water followed as she took just a tiny break in her new exercise routine. She'd only been working out for about twenty minutes and already she felt like she'd run a marathon. *I wonder what kind of routine I had before,* she thought absently. *Probably a lot longer than thirty minutes and I could probably lift more than four-pound weights.* Jamie nudged the blue, plastic coated barbell with the toe of her shoe. "Oh well," she shrugged, speaking to nothing but thin air. "I'll never get any where just speculating. Back to work." She walked over to the corner and stepped up onto the machine. She flipped on a switch and her shoes kept pace with the moving black, rubber belt. Jamie set the treadmill at a slow pace to start with, but just three minutes later she turned it up notch to a more vigorous walk. She closed her eyes as she kept walking, going over her schedule for the day. She had a meeting with two prospective clients and Dr. Benson was coming over to check out the new facilities and to give Teegan and Simeron their annual vaccinations. She figured that would take her right up to the time to get dressed and make the two-hour drive to LA for Bridgett and Brad's anniversary party.

She was only allowed ten minutes on the treadmill and since she had gone at a little faster speed than she was told, Jamie thought she shouldn't push it too much. Twenty easy crunches later and she guzzled down the rest of the now, warm water.

Jamie sat on the cushioned floor mat, arms resting against her bent knees, mentally reviewing the list her therapist had given her. *A few slow, easy stretches and I'll be...* Her thought was abruptly halted when she felt warm lips descend upon her neck. Jamie moaned deep in her throat and tilted her head to one side, presenting her sensuous assailant with a taught expanse of tanned skin.

Erin silently kissed her way down the reddened scar and then back up, stopping to nibble on a tender earlobe.

Jamie's breath hitched in her chest as she reveled in the sensation. But her sensible mind reached down and grabbed her by the libido. "In case you hadn't noticed, Sweetheart," she said as teeth joined in the feeding frenzy. "I'm all sweaty."

Erin stopped just long enough to get the words out. "And your point is?"

"My point is..." Jamie thought long and hard. *Oh yes, that's it!* In one quick move Jamie pivoted her long body and gently pushed her lover to the soft surface beneath them. After several long, smoldering kisses she was finally able to verbally complete her thought. Jamie pulled back to focus on those enchanting green eyes. "My point is...I love you. And if you love me enough to get this close when I smell like yesterday's barn, then who am I to deny you."

Erin ran her fingers through the damp, dark hair. "I knew you were a smart woman. And practical too."

The question of why popped into Jamie's head, but it was fleeting as those pink lips begged for more attention.

* * * *

Doctor Chad Benson stepped out of his shiny, black pick-up truck. He grabbed a heavy duffle bag from the back and walked up to the house. He heard the dog bark just before his beefy fist rapped on the wooden door. A muffled voice from inside the house hushed the dog as the door opened. The petite blonde stopped short of opening the screen partition until he introduced himself. "I'm Dr. Benson," he said with a small smile. "I believe Jamie Sheridan is expecting me."

She now returned the smile and invited him in. She took his offered hand. "Yes, she is. I'm Erin Casey. Jamie is in the barn. I'll take you out."

Benson followed her to the kitchen where he finally saw the big dog sitting by the back door. "Will this be one of my patients too?" he asked, stopping a few feet away.

Erin chuckled and reached out to sooth the cautious canine. "Yes. This is Artemis. I'll have her records for you before you leave." She held the door open and motioned Arte to go on through. "She's my former guide dog," Erin explained, "and she's still very protective. But Arte is very sweet and she will warm up to you once you've been around a few times."

His eyes landed on hers as she looked back. "I'm looking forward to that," he said.

Erin stopped at the back gate and pointed to the big barn. "Jamie is out there somewhere. Just give her a call."

He stopped by her side before passing through the gate. "It was a pleasure meeting you Erin. I hope we will have a chance to talk again."

"Yes, I'm sure we will." Erin headed back to the house without giving the tall vet a second thought. Her mind was on the rest of the day's activities.

* * * *

It was three in the afternoon as Jamie stepped into her second shower of the day. The first one was expedited by a second pair of hands helping to scrub her from head to toe, but this time she was all on her own. The absence of the soft flesh that had tempted her soapy hands earlier let her concentrate on her main goal of cleanliness. She was already running late. She had spent far more time with the new vet than she had anticipated, but their shared love of horses led them into long conversations about his lifelong experiences and her very short singular one at the rehabilitation center. Jamie was sure she had made a new friend in the tall, good-looking man.

Dried and dressed in a red silk blouse and dark slacks, Jamie walked into their bedroom to find Erin sitting at her dressing table fiddling with a chain of some sort. "Can I help with that?" she asked, leaning down, looking at her lover's reflection in the mirror.

Erin smiled as she always did when that face came into her view. She silently handed the necklace to Jamie, who brought the golden piece up for a closer inspection. She opened the locket to find an absence of pictures then snapped it shut again. "This is nice." Jamie recognized the design as Celtic. "Did you get this in Ireland?"

The face in the mirror melted into a pronounced frown. She couldn't meet the questioning blue eyes. "You...you gave that to me for Christmas," she explained solemnly. Erin intentionally left out the part about the third attachment being for their future child. They certainly hadn't discussed the subject since getting back together. She wasn't even sure how this new Jamie felt about having children. Erin's gaze dropped to the hand carved music box that sat on the tabletop. They also hadn't discussed getting married, thought Erin as she remembered her engagement ring encased in the red velvet bag and tucked into one corner of the small box. She suddenly felt the cool metal settle onto her upper chest and the warm hands that soothingly rubbed her shoulders. Erin got to her feet and was enveloped into a loving embrace. 'I'm sorry' was whispered into her ear and she looked up with a tiny smile.

Jamie kissed her softly. "Not for giving that to you," she further explained. "But for not..." She couldn't bring herself to say the word anymore. "It's beautiful on you. And you look absolutely gorgeous."

"Thank you. I love you."

"I love you too," said Jamie.

The morose subject was quickly changed by both of them as they put the finishing touches on their attire, secured the house and set out for LA.

* * * *

The party was in full swing by six thirty. Jamie was making her second trip through the incredible buffet, grabbing more tasty morsels for Erin as well as for herself, including two pieces of the luscious chocolate cake that Erin had spent the morning baking.

In between meetings that morning, Jamie had come back to the house to visit her partner. Their early morning interlude had plastered a smile on her face and she needed a few more kisses to get her through the rest of her workday. Those plans however, were put on hold as the sweet cocoa aromas assailed her the moment she stepped into the kitchen. "Is this baking heaven or hell?" she asked, receiving a quizzical look. "I was just wondering because those sinfully delicious smells were produced by the hands of an angel."

The sappy statement got Jamie a taste of a chocolate covered finger. Their gaze never wavered as she licked up every drop of the dark batter. "Ummm, scrumptious," she said, licking her lips. "And the finger's not bad either." That statement got her a swat on the butt.

She finally did get those kisses before she was sent back to work. A few minutes later Jamie turned beet red when one of her employees pointed out a white powder on the back pocket of her jeans. A powder that was shaped, oddly enough, like a hand.

Thirteen stealthy guests, hiding in the huge family room of the Casey home, had totally, but happily surprised the celebrating couple. Their actual anniversary wasn't until the next day and they thought that they were just dropping off the grandchildren so they could have the time alone. But the party soon had everyone smiling and regaling stories of the Nelson wedding ceremony. Even Timothy had appeared happy all evening. He gave a long-winded, but heartfelt toast, making a comment about each of the ten years of his daughter's marriage.

Erin felt just a touch of envy at the happy celebration. Actually she had two points of envy. First she wondered if she would ever be married now. The thought may never even cross this Jamie's mind to make that kind of commitment. Erin didn't quite know why, but that was important to her, not that her current relationship with Jamie would be any better just because they could say that they were married, but it was just something she had dreamed about all her life, as most women do.

Her second feeling of envy came from thoughts of her father. She could hear the pride in his voice as he lamented over his oldest daughter's marriage. Erin strongly doubted that he would even attend her wedding or any anniversary celebration, let alone make that kind of public acceptance.

When Tim Casey was finally through speaking, Erin lifted her glass along with everyone else in attendance.

Sometime later, just as the sun was finishing its descent into the western sky, Erin and Jamie had taken a little break from the rousing celebration inside the house. They had walked to the far side

of the long pool, both feeling some annoyance in the fact that they had to hide in order to be close. But Erin didn't want to give her father any excuses to ruin her sister's celebration.

Some of the guests were Bridgett's co-workers, which meant that at one time they had been Jamie's co-workers, but Danielle had explained the tall woman's amnesia and had politely asked them not to overwhelm her at this time. They had graciously understood, but felt a strange sadness as they were introduced to Jamie and saw no recognition in her eyes.

Jamie sat her beer bottle on the small metal table and took Erin's hand. "I think Bridgett and Brad really liked your present."

"They really liked **our** present," Erin corrected. She and Jamie had picked out the set of fine crystal stemware when they had been in Ireland. Jamie had even made the final choice between the two patterns Erin was considering. She had taken pity on the pleading blonde who debated over the decision for thirty long minutes. Her much appreciated help had been rewarded with a chocolate sundae topped high with whipped cream and nuts, of which Erin snatched a few bites for herself.

"This has been a nice party," said Jamie. "Oh, I promised Conner that he could come to the ranch soon to stay the weekend. Was that all right?" she asked as an afterthought.

"Of course it's all right. Caitlin will have to come too of course. She wouldn't dare let her brother do something that fun without her."

Jamie chuckled as she put her arm around Erin's shoulder. They didn't hear the double doors open and the footsteps that stomped across the tiled edge of the shimmering pool.

They were enjoying the peaceful sunset and Erin tipped her head and kissed the woman she loved. The she suddenly felt a large hand grab her around the upper arm and she was wrenched from Jamie's embrace.

"What in God's name do you think you are doing?!" yelled Timothy. "Out here where anyone can see you, acting like..."

Erin stood there wide-eyed, listening but not really hearing what her father was saying, because the shock had rendered her temporarily deaf. It all seemed to move in slow motion around her as Jamie grabbed his free arm.

The commotion and loud voices were just beginning to be heard back inside the house. The guests had enough tact to move away from the personal family matter. Danielle and Bridgett ran out the door to stop the hostile situation that was rapidly escalating.

"Let go of her!" screamed Jamie. But she wasn't even able to budge the burly man.

"Timothy, what are you doing?" asked Danielle. "Let her go this instance."

His focus was solely on his youngest daughter. "Don't you understand what could happen?! Mr. Armstrong lives just down the street and he owns a gun. What if he were to see you..."

The shock had finally turned to anger for Erin and she painfully wrenched her arm from his tight hold, backing away, bumping into the small table as she did. The bottle, that Jamie had sat there, tumbled to the cement, shattering, leaving only the long neck in tact.

"...acting like this. He could come down here and..." Timothy's tirade abruptly ended as his hands fell limp to his sides. The blood drained from his face turning him a sickly white as the dizziness spun his head. His eyes were glued to the mound of broken glass by Erin's feet and it was his turn to be rendered deaf to the questions that were firing all around him. "Oh my God," he muttered over and over.

In a matter of seconds he looked even worse, his breath came in heaves and he swayed in his footsteps. Even Erin grew concerned. "Daddy, what is it?"

Jamie retrieved a chair and Danielle guided him into it. He sat with a heavy thump. "Call an ambulance," his wife said.

"No. No I don't need an ambulance."

"You are too damn stubborn," scolded his spouse. "You look like you are about to pass out. What if you are having a heart attack?"

He finally looked up into her concerned eyes. His hand patted the one on his arm. "I'm all right Dear. It isn't any thing physical, I promise you."

Danielle let out a cautious, but relieved sigh. She smoothed down some gray hair around his ear. "Then what is it? What happened out here?"

His gaze drifted up to see Erin being soothed by her partner's embracing arms. He also noticed that Erin was rubbing the spot where his hand had grabbed her. His jaw twitched, trying to speak. "I...I'm sorry." The word was whispered.

Erin looked down at the trembling man and noticed the unshed tears forming in his eyes. But his apology wasn't enough. Not this time.

He got to his feet and took a few shaky steps, his head was hung low with shame. Danielle was at his side. She guided him around the side of the house so they could enter through another door and not disturb their guests any more than possible.

Erin, Jamie and Bridgett were still stunned at the turn of events. Nothing was spoken for a while as hearts calmed.

"I'll clean this up," Bridgett finally said, pointing to the pile of glass.

Erin turned around and hugged her sister tightly. "I'm so sorry," she cried. "I ruined your party. I..."

"No. You didn't do anything," said the red head staunchly. "Nothing. This was all his fault. I don't quite know what happened, but he owes us all an explanation." She led them back toward the house where Brad met them.

"Is everyone all right?" he asked, hugging his wife.

Jamie answered yes, although that wasn't quite accurate. Timothy had inflicted yet more mental and physical wounds on his family. And this time they were probably irreversible. Not only did his words cause pain, but he also embarrassed Erin in front of a house full of naturally curious guests.

"Bridgett," said Erin as she moved off behind some bushes out of the view of the glass door. "Go on back inside, back to your party. Unless he scared everyone away." She gestured to her partner. "I think we should go."

Jamie agreed with a nod.

Danielle came back outside calling for her daughter. "Erin, I'm glad I caught you before you left." She hugged her youngest. "Are you sure you're all right, physically I mean?"

The blonde nodded sadly. "Yeah."

"Erin, your father would like to talk to you, both of you." She looked to Jamie who was just over her daughter's shoulder.

The green eyes flashed with anger. "I don't think so Mom. What's the point?" Two strong hands landed gently on her shoulders for support.

"Well as odd as it seems Dear, I think there is a point. I know it's a lot to ask after the way he's treated you, but there is something more going on here. I have never, in all the time I've known him, seen him in a state like this. He wouldn't tell me what's going on. He said he had to talk to you first. Sweetheart I wouldn't ask you to do this if I didn't think it would help. But please just give him this last chance."

Erin hesitated. Her troubled expression looked to the sky, then to the ground, where it stayed for many seconds. Her spirit was in tatters, but could she be selfish and just walk away? Didn't she owe it to her family to try just once more? But how many once mores would there be? She knew that her mother and Bridgett would support whatever she decided, but there would always be that rift. Erin took a deep breath and made the decision. She wasn't going to feel the blame for his misguided thinking. She couldn't bear that burden. At least if she gave him this one last chance, she could leave with a free conscience. Her choice was bolstered by soft words spoken for her ears only.

"I'm here for you," said Jamie. "Whatever you want to do, I'm at your side. But I promise you that he will never get close enough to lay a hand on you again."

Erin closed her eyes and nuzzled the head next to hers. I>Whatever else, there will always be you. She pulled her last jangled nerve back into place and fastened the protective armor over her heart. "Okay."

Timothy lifted the thick square glass to his lips and downed the last of the golden liquid in a single gulp. The scotch burned as it slid down his throat...but it didn't help. His hand still shook as he set the glass down on the small table beside the window. That hand then circled his mouth, raking over his salt and pepper beard.

In a moment's revelation, he had been blasted with a thousand years of guilt. Or at least that's what his soul felt like. Tim knew what he had to tell his daughter, he just wasn't sure how he could...or if it would do any good. But the story, long dormant in his mind, would be brought to life, word-by-word and laid at his daughter's feet. What she did with it from there, he had no control over.

"You wanted to talk to me." Erin clipped every word as she stood just inside the doorway.

Tim's head jerked up from his musings. He stared at his little girl for a few seconds. He had never seen her so hard and unyielding. Her cold eyes pinned him with defiance and Tim was saddened tenfold, knowing that he alone was responsible for the pain that lay behind that stone faced stare.

"Erin," his voice squeaked. He swallowed and started again. "Erin I...I have a story to tell you. I know that it by no means excuses what I've done. There are no excuses for that. But I hope that in...some ...small way that it might explain my behavior. When I'm through, if you still can't forgive me...or even stand the sight of me I'll accept that. And I'll accept full responsibility for what this has done to the family." He began to pace in tiny rows. "Would you please sit down?"

With her six-foot bodyguard glued to her side, Erin made her way to the large, sectional sofa.

"When I was seventeen," he began. "I had the opportunity to come here to the states to attend a semester of school. I was thrilled at the chance and so were my parents. They were already making plans to move here, which as you know they did a few years later. I lived with a very nice family here in LA. It was just a father and his two children. There was a boy exactly my age. Kevin and I became instant friends. It was...we just...he was the best friend I've ever known, then or now." Tim paused to glance at his listeners. There wasn't a flicker of change on Erin's face. He stuffed his fidgety hand into his pockets as he continued. "Kevin had an older sister, Mary. She was twenty one." He gave just the tiniest smile beneath his whiskers as he thought of the small blonde, who had been very much like the sweet daughter across the room from him. "Kevin adored his sister. He worshipped her. I must admit I had a bit of a crush on her myself."

Erin felt the hand around hers tighten softly as a reminder of her support. Under any other circumstances, Erin would have enjoyed hearing about her father's early years, but all she could impatiently think of now was where was this tale leading and what did it have to do with his actions.

Tim finally eased himself into the chair just across from the sofa. He knew he needed to be seated to tell the rest of the story. "Mary had a best friend, I think her name was Susan. They spent a lot of time together just like Kevin and I did. One early spring afternoon the four of us drove out to the country to a lake she knew about. Kevin and I went fishing and Mary and Sue went swimming at the far end of the lake. The fish weren't biting very well and after a while we decided to give up. We packed up and decided to do some swimming too. The end of the lake was around a bend and as we came through the trees, there was Mary and Sue sitting on the bank." He finally looked up wanting to judge Erin's reaction to his next words. "They were kissing. And it wasn't like a sister's peck either. They were as flustered as we were as soon as they saw us. Mary sent Sue back to the car and she explained to Kevin and me what was happening. She said that she was gay and that meant that she loved Sue as a woman would love a man. This was 1956 and neither one of us had ever heard of such a thing. But for Kevin, his sister hung the moon and anything she did was fine with him. And if he was cool with it, so was I. Of course she asked us to keep their secret. I didn't quite understand why...until a few days later." There, he saw it. Those emerald orbs softened just a speck. But it was still a hollow victory of minute proportions.

"The next Saturday night, the four of us went to a movie. We were having so much fun. We left the theater with our cokes in hand and stopped on the corner to talk because it was still early and none of us wanted to go home yet. We were laughing and telling stories. It was like we were the only ones around. I think that's why... Mary must have been caught up in the moment and she leaned over and kissed Sue, not on the mouth, but very close. But we weren't the only ones around. Suddenly, from across the street a group of punks, we'd call them a gang now days, ran over to us yelling awful words, most of them aimed at the girls. Of course Kevin and I tried to stop them, but were just a couple of scrawny teenagers, if you can ever believe I was scrawny. Two of them held us back while the other two continued to taunt them. Mary was a spitfire, I'm sure she must have a bit of Celtic in her the way she verbally laid into them." He paused as the next few minutes flashed across his memories and he tried to form the words to describe the terrifying scene. "The leader grabbed one of our bottles and broke it against the lamppost. He began waving it around...the light was glinting off of the jagged, sharp edges. Sue was having a fit by now, crying and screaming. He told her to shut up and Mary yelled back, all the while trying to protect her friend. And then it happened...I swear that everything around us stopped and what I saw happened in an instant and an eternity. Mary was shoved from behind just as he thrust the broken bottle forward." He paused again and he heard the small escape from Erin's lips. "He pulled back...and the blood on the bottle and on her. They got scared and ran off, Sue ran off and I...I couldn't move...I just couldn't move. I stood there watching as Kevin pulled her into his lap and he tried to stop it...but there was just too much. Before help could arrive, Mary died in her brother's arms."

"Oh God," Erin exclaimed quietly. "Dad, that it an awful thing to have witnessed, especially to a teenaged boy, but..."

"The story doesn't end there I'm afraid. Kevin was never the same after that. He wouldn't talk, he barely ate, and he certainly wouldn't smile. I tried everything, but nothing would help. Finally one Sunday, I persuaded him to go fishing with me...at a different pond. But I went fishing; he just sat there on the edge of the dock staring at the water. After about an hour I needed to go back to the car for more bait. I had a string of fish and I laid them beside him. I got the knife from the tackle box and put it there too. I jokingly said, 'Why don't you make yourself useful and clean those.' Tim's eyes took on a glassy haze as the next words left his mouth tonelessly. "When I came back, the fish were still there, but the knife was gone."

Erin knew what was coming now. She reached up to brush away a tear as Jamie's arm wrapped around her shoulder.

"As I got closer, I saw the knife in his right hand...and blood all over his left arm. He had slit his wrist. I pulled him back onto the dock and tried...but I couldn't...and I knew help was too far away. He never cried or made a sound...it just happened. He died in my arms, like his sister had died in his." Now Timothy was freely crying...all the tears he couldn't shed all those many years ago.

Erin slowly reached out and covered his clenched hands. His muscles relaxed and he took her hand in his as his eyes met her tearful ones. "Daddy I'm very sorry that happened to you."

"So am I." His free hand cupped the side of her face that he had hit months before. "Because it led me to hurt my beautiful, precious daughter." Tim pulled away and walked over to the bar for a drink of water. "My seventeen year old mind...all I felt was anger and hatred. All I knew was that my best friend was dead because his sister was gay." He quickly turned back to the seated couple. "I know now that wasn't the reason," he stated strongly, stalling their objections. "She died because of society's...problems. But back then I couldn't understand that. I had blocked it all out until..."

"The broken bottle by the pool," supplied Jamie.

"Yes. That's when it all came flooding back." He sat back down and tried to explain his behavior of late. "When you came to me last August and told me that you are gay...all I felt was the anger and most of all the fear that surrounded that incident. I didn't know the details...it was just the feeling. I had this flash in my mind of you lying on the ground bleeding...because someone hurt you for... being gay. And I couldn't stand the thought..." Tim looked down at his clenching right hand. He gave a self-disgusted chuckle, remembering the impact of his hand on her face. "And what did I do? I would cut off this hand if I could go back and change all of that."

"Daddy, I can't say that this erases all the hurt, but I do understand now. The trauma you experienced as a child fueled your actions. I...think that we can move on from here. I've missed my father."

"And I've missed my baby girl." Tim fell to his knees and hugged her hard. "I'm so sorry, so sorry."

"But before we can move on, I have to ask you one question Dad. How do you feel about us, truly? Because Jamie is going to be in my life forever. And I need to know."

"Sweetheart, I love you, everything about you. I am proud of who you are and I will tell the world." He turned to Jamie. "I only have one thing to ask of you. Will you take very good care of my daughter, because I don't want to see her hurt?"

"Sir, I will give my life to protect her." She gave him a half smile. "After all, I nearly punched you out by the pool. And I would do it again if I had to."

"That's good to hear young lady."

The author wrapped her arms around her taller partner. "Daddy we will take care of each other."

"I hope you are never in a situation where you have to, but I am glad that you have each other."

Jamie left the father and daughter, giving them the time to get re-acquainted. After the emotional confession she felt confident of her partner's safety. Even though she had not remembered the very first confrontation with Erin's father, when he had first learned of their relationship and of Erin's sexual preference, she had heard the facts from Bridgett. And she was stunned that any parent could treat their child that cruelly. Even with Tim's story, it still boggled her thoughts that the human mind could be twisted into such contortions. But at second thought she realized that her own amnesia was a prime example of the mind's complexities.

The hour was getting late, but the anniversary party still continued although it was winding down. She avoided the few guests that still remained and strolled out to her car. She encountered a very sad little girl who came moping toward her.

"Aunt Jamie?"

The tall woman knelt down and took the child's hand in her own. "What's wrong Sweetheart?" She asked the question, but was quite sure of the answer.

"Why was Grandpa yelling at Aunt Erin? I don't like it when he does that. He scares me."

Jamie stood and led the little one over to the side stoop. She sat down and placed Caitlin in her lap. She waited a few seconds, trying to find a way for a four year old to understand and wondering if she should even try. Perhaps that was her parent's job. But Caitlin unwittingly answered that question.

"Mommy and Daddy said that Grandpa don't feel okay."

"Well, they are right. Your grandpa was mad for just a while, but then he remembered something that made him very sad and he said he was sorry for yelling. I think he'll be fine now."

Caitlin finally seemed satisfied with that explanation and a smile brightened the little face. "I love Grandpa. I love Aunt Erin too."

"And Aunt Erin loves you."

The seated woman and the child in her lap looked up, surprised at the voice that came around from behind a tall shrub. Erin smiled at her partner as she reached down and took her niece into her arms. "Why don't we all go into the kitchen," she said. "I think there is one last piece of chocolate cake with our names on it."

Caitlin agreed with a hearty nod.

"I think we could all use a little comfort food."

Jamie nodded with a kiss to Erin's cheek.

The trio sat in the kitchen, sharing the cake. Erin gently wiped away a milky mustache from the small mouth just before a yawn escaped from it. "I think it's someone's bedtime," she said.

"Aw, do I have to?" Jamie whined jokingly. "I don't wanna," she added with an exaggerated pout.

That brought a bout of giggles from the curly headed child and her aunt.

"Aunt Jamie," said Caitlin. "You a grownup. Nobody can tell you when to go to bed."

The dark headed woman had a sharp retort on the tip of her tongue, but it definitely wasn't for younger ears to hear. Erin mentally filled in the blank and winked at the woman she loved.

Bridgett and Brad chose that moment to come in and say goodnight to their daughter, who was spending the night along with Conner. A not so quick round of hugs followed along with more apologies between the sisters. The Nelson's had been filled in on what had transpired in Tim's life so long ago and now they all felt confident that the family could put all the anger and misunderstandings behind them, heal the wounds and move forward.

Fifteen minutes later, her grandmother carried Caitlin up to bed. Danielle returned shortly to find Erin and Jamie waiting by the front door, obviously preparing to leave.

"I'm glad you didn't leave yet," she told the couple. "I know you were planning on staying at a hotel tonight because of the long drive home, but I was hoping...well with everything that happened here today... Would you girls consider spending the night here? We could all have breakfast together. I really think it would do us all a world of good to spend more time together."

Erin would never make a decision without consulting her partner.

Jamie answered the questioning look. "It's fine with me. As long as you're comfortable with it."

With everyone in agreement, Jamie retrieved their bag from the car and Danielle led them up the stairs and down two turns of the long hall.

Jamie looked around the inside of the large room, decorated in colors of green and burgundy. She had never been given a formal tour of the house, but realized it was just an oversight on the part of Erin's mother. Especially with the tension that always followed their visits.

"Goodnight Erin, Jamie," the older woman said as she hugged them both. "Sleep well. I've been told that this bed is very comfortable."

Erin stopped her mother before she walked out the door. "Why did you put us in this room, Mom?" Danielle's confusion was evident. "Did Dad ask you to put us here, in the room farthest away from your bedroom?"

"Of course not. It was your father's idea that you stay here tonight, but he was a little embarrassed to ask you himself...not because of your relationship, but because of the way he acted. It's going to take him a while to get over that. I put you here because of the large, private bath. I do the same for your sister when they stay here. Caitlin is in your old room."

Erin sighed. "I'm sorry Mom. I shouldn't have jumped to conclusions."

"It's all right Dear. I should have explained my reasons earlier." She gave Erin one final hug. "We're going to be all right. It'll just take time."

"Goodnight Mom."

"Goodnight Danielle."

"Goodnight girls. Sweet dreams."

Erin felt the long arms encircle her just as the door closed.

"What a day huh?"

The small blonde just leaned into the embrace and hummed her agreement. Erin was very glad that the situation with her father seemed to have come to a happy end and that they could begin a new and maybe even better relationship. But as with any relationship it would take work. But at the moment she wanted to put all that aside and just get lost in the one thing that made her life complete. Jamie.

With a renewed burst of energy, Erin turned to face her lover. She attacked those lips with abandon, asking no questions and taking only one prisoner of love.

Jamie finally had to physically separate them in order to breathe. "Where did that come from?" she panted, looking into the slightly predatory gaze.

"I want you," Erin replied simply.

Nervous blue eyes snapped to the closed door. "Ah...Sweetheart, I'm not sure how comfortable I am with the thought of making love..." The first two buttons of her shirt were unfastened. "...here..." Two more buttons were opened. "...in your parent's house."

"Maybe you're right," Erin agreed as her lips found purchase on a collarbone and her hands pulled Jamie's shirt from its confinement.

Jamie's hesitation was waning quickly as busy hands planted themselves on her behind. "Well...maybe we...could...take a quick...shower."

Erin giggled. "Your third shower of the day. Remember the first one this morning."

Jamie did, bringing a giddy smile to her face. "That was a first for me. Just how many times have we made love in the shower?"

"Only one or two."

Jamie snorted. "Yeah right."

"...times a week," Erin confessed with a sultry smile.

"We were insatiable huh?" Jamie asked as her own hands found some interesting areas.

"Were? You have no idea. And some of the places..." Both of the wheat colored eyebrows reached for her hairline as she made some quick searches through her memories.

"Why don't you tell me," said Jamie as she proceeded to undress her smaller partner.

"Well there was the beach at midnight in that deserted old boat and the attic at the beach house which involved a feather duster, but.... Oh and the limo."

"The limo I was driving!?"

"Well you weren't driving at the time," she exclaimed. "Just before Christmas I hired a limo and a driver. After our wonderful date we..." She leaned up to whisper in the tall woman's ear.

Jamie's eyes continued to widen as the incident was described in very vivid detail. "We did that...in public?" she finally asked.

Erin traced a single finger down her lover's jaw line. "No, in the limo." She nibbled the next words onto willing lips. "Just wait until you remember."

* * * *

Jamie followed Erin down the stairs the next morning, enjoying the aroma of coffee awaiting them. She was pleased, but surprised that her lover woke up in a good mood because the night had not been totally peaceful. They had shared a brief and quiet intimate interlude in the bathroom, never quite making it to the shower. Then they quickly jumped into bed had fallen asleep immediately, but unfortunately had not remained that way.

"No! No! I don't want this!"

Jamie rose from her deep sleep hearing the muttered words. The words became more desperate and a flailing arm struck her.

"Save me!" screamed Erin. "I don't want to die! Save me!"

Jamie flipped over and held onto the dangerous limbs as she called to Erin. "Wake up! Wake up Honey. It's okay. Erin! Erin!"

The terrified green eyes snapped open. "What? Jamie?"

The taller woman pulled away just enough to let Erin sit up and she reached to flip on the lamp on the bedside table. "You're okay now Sweetheart. It was just a dream." Jamie smoothed down the sweat soaked hair. "It was just a dream."

Erin was breathing heavily. Her chest burned just as it had then. She buried her face in her hands and felt the bed shift as Jamie scooted in close to her. "God, Jamie I was back there...in that water. It was so dark and so heavy and I couldn't move, but I had to. I didn't want to die. I didn't..."

Jamie soothed her with soft kisses to her temple and murmured I love yous. "I know, I know. You only had the dream because of the story your dad told. I know you didn't want to die, Sweetheart. It was just the pain."

The blonde head agreed with rapid nodding. "I'm fine now." She clutched onto Jamie's shirt. "I'm fine now."

They eventually drifted back to sleep in each other's arms and not a word was mentioned when they did awaken.

As they neared the dining room, Erin wondered just would happen. How would they be greeted? What would be said? She knew what she wanted to happen, but after everything that had transpired between her and her father she was still slightly unsure. Erin did believe the words her father said the evening before, but that could have just been because of the emotions of the flashback he had had. The final proof would be his actions now. Only then would she trust that the situation had really changed.

She turned the corner, feeling the tall woman right behind her. There was her father at his place at the head of the table. His nose was buried in the morning newspaper, a habit he had always had.

Danielle was the first to notice the couple's arrival. "Good morning Dear," she said cheerfully as she got up to greet them. "How did the two of you sleep last night?" The question was spoken right out loud; no attempt was made to hide it.

Erin's eyes turned to her father. He had quickly discarded his paper and was approaching them. His neutral expression turned to a pleasant one as he hugged his little girl. "Good morning Sweetheart. I didn't mean to interrupt, please tell us, how did you sleep?"

Erin relaxed a little as the four of them took seats at the formally set table. "Well, I don't want to speak for Jamie, but I slept wonderfully." She glanced at her partner.

Jamie held her questioning expression in check. "Oh, yes. Very nice, very comfortable," she answered, thinking that Erin just didn't want her parents to know about her nightmare.

With the first few awkward moments out of the way, the meal continued on with many more questions for Erin. Afterward they carried their full coffee cups out onto the patio to enjoy the new August morning. Off in the side yard, a few dozen sparrows and songbirds were setting upon the full birdfeeder. The clouds in the sky did nothing to dampen the spirits of the two couples. They had laughed and told stories until the food had long gotten cold.

Caitlin and Conner had joined them half way through the meal, but quickly downed their cold cereal and dashed off to watch cartoons in the game room.

Timothy returned from retrieving his third cup of coffee and took his seat between his wife and daughter. He leaned forward addressing the dark haired woman, who was on the other side of Erin. "Jamie, Erin tells me you will be going to Houston the third week of November."

"Yes. There is a big auction there every year. I'm hoping to get a couple of new stallions for the breeding program."

"Well, I just happen to have a meeting in Texas that same week. Instead of going commercial, perhaps you would like to join me on my private plane."

"I...ah," she nervously looked to Erin for an answer, which was given in the form of a smile and a slight nod. "That would be fine, Sir. Thank you."

"Jamie, I know that things are still a little unsettled between the three of us. And I know that I have to re-gain your trust, through my actions. I know that will take time. But family members call me Tim."

"All right Tim."

Continued in Part 15.

The Athenaeum's Scroll Archive

~ Seeing You, Again For the First Time ~

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.

Love/Sex Disclaimer: This story depicts a loving relationship between two consenting, adult women and contains scenes of intimacy, but nothing explicit. If you are under 18 years of age or if this type of story is illegal in the state or country in which you live, please do not read it. If depictions of this nature disturb you, you may wish to read something other than this story.

Hurt/Comfort Disclaimer: Major angst ahead. But have faith and remember, I love a happy ending!

Thanks so much to my beta reader Barb.

No copy write infringement is intended in the use of the lyrics to the song "At Your Side".

This is the sequel to my first story, "At First Sight". I would recommend that you read that one first.

All comments are welcome at colleen30@webtv.net

I have also created a group for discussions of this, past and future stories. Maybe some sneak previews as well.

Join us at http://groups.yahoo.com/group/colleens_corner

Part 15

Chapter 15

The roar of the huge jet engines could be heard even through the thick glass panes of the airport windows. Erin shuddered under the arm draped across her shoulder as she watched the white machine ascend into the clear, sapphire sky.

"What's wrong?" asked Jamie.

"I didn't realize...I mean I thought I'd be okay with this."

Jamie led her partner to a nearby seat. "Are you talking about flying?" After the nod, she continued. "You were fine on the flight back from Ireland. I didn't realize you were afraid to fly."

"I'm not. It's just...now that I've got you back, I guess the thought of what could happen...what did happen to you..."

Jamie gave her a comforting hug. "I wish I could come with you. I'm sorry." She stroked the blonde head tucked beneath her chin. "You can cancel this trip Sweetheart. Nobody can make you do anything you aren't comfortable with."

Erin pulled back and took a deep breath. "I know." She stared into the blue eyes, so full of affection and compassion. "But if I don't get on that plane now..." *If there is one more thing I don't need to be concerned with, it's this.*

"You can call from the plane, can't you?" asked Jamie.

Erin just sat there staring, remembering the calls that Jamie had made on her ill-fated flight. *It couldn't possibly happen again...could it? I don't really have a bad feeling about this, like I did before, but still...* The debate nearly screamed inside her head, harmonizing with the pounding that had started long ago.

"Erin. Erin, are you okay?"

A warm hand landed on her cheek. "What?"

"I don't think you should go," said Jamie.

"No." Erin forced a smile. "No, I have to go. I'll be okay. I'll call you every few hours." She hesitated, but no reaction.

"Okay. I'll have my cell with me all the time." They heard the boarding call for Erin's flight over the intercom. Jamie hugged Erin and kissed her temple. "I love you."

"I love you too," whispered Erin, while still clinging to her dark-haired partner.

* * * *

Jamie hit her exit, signifying the halfway point to home; or more precisely, the ranch. Her home had just left for forty-eight hours. Jamie looked down at the clock on the dash. *Forty-six hours, fifty minutes and 10 seconds...9 seconds...8...* The ringing disrupted her countdown. Jamie picked up the small gray phone and pushed the button. "Hello beautiful. Do you know how much I love you and much I miss you already?" She heard silly giggles on the other end of the line.

"You'd better be damned glad that it was me," said Erin with a few more giggles. "Pull of to the side of the road," she instructed abruptly.

"What?"

"Just do what I say. It's too dangerous to drive and talk on the phone. Put the phone down and come back when you have stopped."

Jamie quickly found a small clearing and turned off the engine. "Okay. You now have my full attention."

"Good. What are you wearing?" she asked with a sexy, but slightly slurred voice.

Jamie laughed. "Well, you certainly sound in a much better mood."

"Yeah. Must be the two mimosas I had."

"Champagne loosens you up huh? I'll have to remember that."

"Oh yeah; like on New Year's Eve. That was a night to remember."

Jamie's smile disappeared. "Yeah, well."

"What can I bring you back from New York?"

"Just yourself Sweetheart. Quickly." Jamie chuckled. "I wonder what kind of bill we could run up if we talked through the whole flight?" She sat there waiting for the witty retort. "Erin." There was no answer, but she could tell that the line was still open. A chill went down her spine. "Erin! Rin are you still there?"

"I'm still here."

The morose tone of those words filtered into Jamie's ear. *What happened; you were happy just a minute ago?* "What's wrong, what did I say?"

"Nothing. It's just that we were on the phone when your plane..."

Jamie sighed deeply. "Erin, Honey you've got to stop thinking about that. If I could go back and change it, I would...but I can't. We both have to learn that we can be separated and everything will be fine."

"I know, you're right. And I will. But it's hard."

"I love you Rin. Wrap yourself in my love. It will protect you from those bad feelings. Okay?"

"Okay. Or maybe I'll have some more champagne and sleep all the rest of the way, then I won't have to think."

"No Erin. That's not what you need. Promise me you won't drink anymore. You're too strong to start giving in to that. Promise me."

"I promise. I love you Jamie. I'll call again in a while. But just in case I go to sleep and don't call, don't worry. I will call you when we land."

"Okay Sweetheart. I love you too."

* * * *

Erin took a taxi to the hotel where the producer of P.M. Chat had made her reservation. She was scheduled to be on the popular talk show when it was on live at four in the afternoon.

She had taken a short nap on the plane, but had awakened in time to call Jamie about a half an hour before landing. The tall woman had answered from horseback while she was exercising Simeron. They chatted briefly, their conversation ending with Jamie wishing Erin good luck.

Erin's blue mood from earlier in the day had disappeared. She had a couple of hours before she was needed at the studio and she decided to take in lunch and a little bit of shopping. Luckily her hotel was within walking distance of her favorite New York restaurant.

* * * *

Jamie grabbed the bag of popped corn from the microwave, hissing as the heat stung her fingertips. She soothed them against the cool can of soda as she carried both into the living room where she plopped down into the overstuffed recliner and pulled out the footrest. Once settled in and munching on a handful of the buttery kernels, Jamie grabbed the remote and flipped it to the correct channel. She had to watch half a dozen annoying commercials before the opening logo of P.M. Chat emblazoned itself across the television screen. The unseen voice began announcing the guests and Jamie grinned as her favorite name was listed, although last among the three. Then came an announcement she hadn't expected.

"Today's guest host is Joel Barber."

Jamie's dark brow wrinkled. "Who is he?" She shrugged as the thin, red-haired man appeared from behind the curtain and walked to his mark on the stage, reveling in the prompted audience applause. After a short and very unfunny monologue, he slipped behind the small desk and proceeded to interview his first guest, a bleached blonde, teenage Brittany Spears wanna be. Next up was a contestant from one of the recent rash of reality game shows or as Jamie had called them, upon an experimental viewing, stupidity game shows.

Forty-five minutes into the hour, Jamie crumpled up the empty bag and set it on the table beside her. She hopped up from the chair mumbling. "I can't believe I wasted my popcorn on the R rated Gidget and the over tanned windbag."

Artemis echoed the sentiment with two loud barks.

"Mommy is on next," Jamie said, returning from the bathroom. She sat down just as the theme music started, signifying the return from the commercial break. She reached for the remote and turned up the sound.

The host leveled his smarmy grin directly into the camera as he made the introduction. "Our next guest is the author of the science fiction novel, *The Noah Factor*; soon to be a major motion picture this fall. Please welcome Erin Casey."

Jamie leaned forward to get an even better view of her favorite person. Erin looked mighty fine in her crisp, linen slacks and the matching jacket over a soft yellow blouse. She was wearing her new glasses with the nearly invisible frame, which made her even more adorable.

After the opening amenities, comments finally turned toward the book. "I've read that you infused different parts of your personality into each of the characters in the story," said Barber.

"Yes that's true, but not to a narcissistic degree," said Erin.

Jamie chuckled. "Look at that expression. He doesn't even know what she just said."

Erin continued. "In fact I even used some flawed parts of my persona; ones that I am still trying to improve."

The host glanced down at his notes. "You were sightless when you wrote this, so that's the obvious quality you gave to Simeron, at least for the most of the book. Was it a premonition of your own restored eyesight that made you give the lead character her sight back?"

"No, not a premonition, just a wish."

The red head nodded. "What qualities of yours did you give Jessie, the male lead?"

"Jessie is incurably inquisitive, sometimes annoyingly so. But at the time I wrote this, I think he really represented my love of life."

Jamie reached down to rub the golden head, now in her lap, as she studied the body language of her partner on the television screen. "What do you mean when you wrote that, don't you love life now?" The pondering of that thought was put aside as the next question was asked.

The carrot topped man, non-chalantly, tipped his head to some unknown entity and flashed a ghost of a wink to Erin, who appeared unaware of the gesture. But Jamie caught the suspicious moves and straightened in her seat, suddenly feeling a chill down her spine.

"Now Ms. Casey, there is just one more character that I would like to discuss."

Jamie really didn't like the tone of his voice.

"I guess we all know just what personality flaw," he sneered the last word. "...you gave to Corporal Seeger."

Erin shifted in her seat away from the negative attitude he was projecting. But she wasn't about to back down or hide from his questions. "I am proud of each and every character in this story. And I don't believe any further comment is required. My writing speaks for itself."

"If this issue is so important to you, at least tell us why you didn't make the lead character, Simeron...gay?" Before Erin could speak, he shot back, his voice raised. "Let me tell you why. You knew that a big, butch dyke as a lead character wouldn't sell on the general market and make you big bucks. And I know that I speak for the rest of the world in saying thank you. If there is one thing that we don't need is another queer waved in our faces."

Jamie was seething as she watched her lover being verbally abused. "Who in the hell does he think he is? Why don't they just pull the plug for God sakes?" Just then she saw a man run from the audience, jump over the desk and attack the raving host. The flailing bodies fell toward Erin just as the live broadcast cut away to a commercial. "My God, I don't believe this." She jumped up to grab the phone.

After twenty frustrating minutes of waiting on the line as she was transferred from one operator to another, she finally gave up and slammed the phone down. She would have to wait until Erin called her. Jamie paced as she mulled over the situation. She had seen those other ridiculous, so-called talk shows and they were nothing but laughable and the farthest thing from journalism on the planet. But Erin agreed to go on this particular show because it had such a good reputation for its fair treatment of all guests and subject matter. Until now.

It was over half an hour before the phone rang. "Erin?"

"Yeah Honey, it's me. I guess you saw huh?"

"Of course I saw. Are you alright?"

There was a slight hesitation. "Yeah, I'm fine."

"Erin I saw you get hit just before they cut the signal. Did you get hurt?"

Erin gave a slight chuckle. "I have a little bruise under my left eye and a coffee stain on my jacket, but other than that I'm fine."

"I just don't believe that guy. How could the producers let something like that happen?"

"You want to hear the real joke?" asked a tired Erin. "It was all a set up."

"That was obvious."

"But the producers didn't know a thing about it. They apologized profusely. It seems that Joel Barber wants to build his career on that kind of junk. He wants to be the next Jerry Springer or...whoever. He thought I was going to be in on it too." Erin sighed heavily. "I don't know...it was all just so stupid."

"I wish I had been there."

"I'm glad you weren't."

"Why?" asked Jamie. Her feelings were hurt.

"Because you would have jumped into the fight and maybe have gotten hurt."

"Oh. Well I wouldn't have let it get that far. I would have stopped that jerk long before that. Are you still going to appear on that other show tomorrow?"

"There was a message waiting for me when I got back to the hotel. The producer said I could cancel, but I don't want to hide. I didn't do anything wrong and nothing was my fault. I think it'll be okay."

"Well you know I can't watch it live, but I'll tape it and watch it later." There was no immediate answer. "You must be exhausted?"

"Yeah you could say that. I wish you were here."

"Me too. Why don't you order room service, take a nice long bath and when you are ready for bed call me?"

"What a wonderful idea. You are so smart and I am so glad that I love you."

"So am I Sweetheart, so am I. And I love you. Talk to you later."

* * * *

Jamie scraped the last few bits of food into the garbage disposal and placed the dirty dishes into the dishwasher. Of the two prepared dishes Erin had left for Jamie's dinner, she had chosen the spicy Italian one and it was delicious. After the drone of the cleaning machine started, the tall woman shuffled into the darkened living room and made sure the front door was locked. Walking back into the lit hallway, Jamie glanced at her watch. It had been three hours since she last talked to Erin and she was getting jittery, waiting for her to call back. Jamie was growing increasingly concerned about Erin's emotional state, but every time she even mentioned getting help, Erin glossed over the subject and tried to divert attention, usually with some intimate activity.

The dark haired woman prowled around the big house looking for something to keep busy. She performed half a dozen little chores that could have waited for another day or two. But once every shelf had been dusted and every wastebasket had been emptied, she ran out of busy work. Boredom was tapping her on the shoulder and Jamie was answering the lonely call. She grabbed a book from the crowded shelves in the corner nook of their bedroom, flipped on the reading light and settled into the soft chair. Jamie only scanned the first few pages of the novel before she was distracted by the silence in the room; a silence that pounded in her ears and draped over her like a heavy, wet and musky woolen cloak. *What is with me? I never had a problem being alone back at the hospital. I preferred it.* She thought about that for a few seconds. Then a smile drew across her sullen face. *But that was before Erin.* She chuckled and shook her head. *But she's only been gone a day. Am I that pathetic?* It only took two seconds for her to answer that question. *No. I am in love. It's not loneliness that's bothering me. I'm just temporarily incomplete when she's not here, when I can't look into those incredible green eyes and see... "my world."* It wasn't a startling new revelation for Jamie, subconsciously she felt this every minute of every day, but it was always warm comforting to stop and say the words aloud...even if know one else was listening.

Jamie picked up the phone just after the first ring. "Hello."

"Hi Hon. I'm all snuggled into bed, waiting for my bedtime story. Just make sure it has a happy ending."

"All right. Once upon a time on a far away, isle of green, a lost soul was rescued by a beautiful, golden-haired angel..."

* * * *

Erin dragged out of bed the next morning, after a restless night's sleep. Her first thought was of Jamie. *I guess that's why I didn't sleep well. It was too lonely.* The one thing that she absolutely missed the most was her good morning kiss. That kiss was her sunrise. It was her first breath of a new day. It was a necessity. Erin couldn't even talk to her lover because of the time difference. It was still dark in California and she didn't want to interrupt Jamie's sleep.

Erin walked into the bathroom, looked in the mirror and almost scared herself. Her short hair stuck out in every direction. There were dark circles under both eyes and below that, on the left side, the bruise had spread slightly and was darker than the night before. "Wow. I'm glad Jamie isn't here to see this. Although that's the only reason I'm glad she's not here." As for the bruise, it didn't concern her to go on national television looking this way. She had faith in the professionals to hide the area with make-up.

Erin was hoping that a shower would rejuvenate her, but fifteen minutes later, she didn't feel any better. *Coffee. That's what I need.*

Another forty-five minutes and almost a whole pot of coffee later and she was finally starting to feel human. But still sad. Erin slipped into her casual clothes and placed her good suit into a garment bag and placed it near the door. Just as she did there was a knock. Assuming it was the

driver come to take her to the studio, Erin opened the door. She was immediately greeted with a huge bouquet of flowers of every color of the spectrum. After several seconds she finally looked up to see the barer of the colorful delivery.

"Flowers for you Ms. Casey."

Erin set the flowers on the nearby table and retrieved some money from her purse. Once she was alone, Erin reached for the enclosed card while taking a whiff of one of the largest blooms. She scanned the few, but wonderful words and a smile graced her face for the first time that morning.

The card read: I am proud of you. And I love you so much. J

* * * *

When Jamie went to check on the horses the next morning, she noticed that one of the boarded horses was limping. But there was no visible cause. She called the owner and got permission for the new vet to come by and have a look.

Her night had been no better than Erin's. By morning she had twisted herself into a cocoon of green satin and nearly sprained a leg trying to extricate herself. Jamie almost cried when she realized she had yet another night of similar fun to look forward to.

* * * *

Dr. Benson stopped by just before noon and took care of the minor injury in quick order. Afterward Jamie invited him to stay for lunch, as long as he didn't mind sandwiches. He agreed with a hearty smile. "Will Erin be joining us?" he asked as they trekked back to the house.

"No, she's out of town until tomorrow."

"What a shame. I was hoping to get a chance to speak with her again."

Jamie set the plate in front of her guest. Chad's eyes bulged at the double decker ham and turkey sandwich. With his fingers, he carefully inspected the layers of lettuce, tomato, pickles, meat and cheese topped with globs of mayo.

"What?" said Jamie around a bite of her identical sandwich. "You don't like it like that?"

"No. That's exactly how I like it," he said with a curious grin. "It's just...I've never seen anybody outside of a deli make them like this."

Jamie popped the top on her cold soda. "Well I can't stand a wimpy sandwich. And since that's about the only thing I can make without poisoning myself or anyone else, I have tried to raise it to an art form."

After Chad swallowed his first bite he said, "Well this is a masterpiece. Although cooking is my hobby and I like to experiment, sometimes you just can't beat a good, simple sandwich."

Jamie grabbed a couple of napkins and a bag of potato chips from the cabinet and returned to the table. "You're good looking and you cook too and you're still single?"

Chad laughed at the unintended, reverse bit of stereotyping and blushed slightly. He knew Jamie wasn't flirting, but the compliment still felt good. "Yeah well, I might be single for some time to come. There aren't that many available ladies around here it seems. And the ones that are, are still too young." He shrugged a shoulder and his eyes took on a lonely quality. "I was engaged a few years ago. We were very happy and we had a wonderful time together. We were compatible in all areas, but there was just something missing. And the more we talked about a wedding and...forever, the more uncomfortable we both became. We mutually decided to end things then and save the pain that would have come later. Just before I left Texas, I heard through a friend that Emily was getting married. I really hope it works out for her this time. I also decided that's how I'll know when it's the right one; the thought of forever will feel like bliss and not a jail term."

Jamie sipped her cola as she thought about her blonde partner. Her expression remained neutral. She knew immediately what it felt like at the thought of spending **forever** with Erin.

"You know," said Chad. "When I first saw Erin she kind of reminded me of Emily."

* * * *

Jamie warmed her chicken dinner in the microwave, went into the living room and started the VCR. She was only able to talk to Erin briefly around two o'clock. The author was going out to dinner with some people connected with the movie, including two of the movie's stars. Jamie had heard about the talk show she was about to watch, but she had never seen it before. The opening animation was cute and when the thirty-something female host appeared from behind the curtain, Jamie thought, *well she looks pleasant enough. This should be much better than yesterday's fiasco.* The brunette spoke briefly to an audience member then told a few humorous stories about her personal life before introducing Erin. *And she knows the order of importance for her guests.*

Jamie smiled again as her partner appeared on the screen. She looked good; beautiful as always, but Jamie suddenly realized that there was something missing. It wasn't something Jamie remembered, but she was just suddenly aware that the unique luminescence that made Erin shine was gone. Jamie prayed that that spark was only temporarily misplaced and that together they could find a way to bring it back.

The interview meandered from comments on the movie to talk of Erin's trip to Ireland. During a commercial, Jamie fondly remembered the fun they had there. She suddenly had an idea; something she hoped would help perk up Erin's spirits. Jamie made herself a mental note to check the Internet once the program was over.

The show continued with the introduction of the main star. Lisa Morgan was a new comer to the movie world. Noah Factor marked only her second job and her first starring role. The twenty-one year old actress was tall with long, straight black hair and blue eyes. The attractive young woman had an athlete's build and was perfect for the role. Jamie had another revelation, a rather embarrassing one at that. *She looks like me. Well if I was ten years younger and still had long hair, but...* When she had read the book during her recovery, Jamie had never made the connection to her own appearance, but with a blush to her cheeks it became apparent. She planned on asking her lover just why that was.

Several scenes of the movie were shown and Jamie found herself anticipating its release later in the year.

Jamie flipped off the VCR and then the television as the end credits began to roll. She hopped up the stairs and soon her computer sprang to life and was quickly connected to the Internet. Her favorite search engine brought up a mere three hundred and eleven suggestions for the selected topic. "Okay," she muttered to the screen. "Might as well start at the top." The first three sites were interesting, but did not have anything that caught her attention; not that Jamie knew exactly what she was looking for. She only knew that she wanted to find a special present for Erin's upcoming birthday.

The push of another key brought her back to the search page where her blue eyes scanned down to the next name on the list. Once there she laughed out loud. "You have got to be kidding. How could a search for Irish gifts bring up an obviously X-rated web site?" Still not believing her eyes she read the title again. "Sexy Irish Lasses with Sexy Irish Asses." She shook her head at the absurdity of it all. "Sorry, but I have no use for you. I have my own..." *Ring.* Her cell phone interrupted the thought. "Hello."

"Hi Honey."

"Speaking of sexy Irish lasses." Jamie finished the rest of the title in her mind, because it certainly was true.

"And who was speaking of such things to you?" Erin asked, feigning jealousy.

Jamie laughed. "No one my sweet. I was just thinking of you right before you called."

"Okay, I'll buy that."

As she continued the conversation, Jamie checked out the next relevant site on the list. "Well, you sound in a much better mood than last night at this time."

"Yeah, I had a good day. I had some great food, met some really nice people and I got a kiss from the cutest guy."

"Oh, tell me more, especially about this guy and this kiss."

"Well he's the silent type, but not shy. He made me laugh and he has big brown eyes."

"I thought you were partial to blue eyes?" asked Jamie as she glanced across the page of Irish clothing.

"Well of course I am, but this is a special case. When he put his arms around me I melted. Oh and did I forget to mention that he is two years old."

Jamie laughed again. "Well, boyfriends like that I can handle."

"I thought you could make that exception. So what did you do today?"

"Just the usual. I had lunch with Chad."

"Oh yeah?"

"Yeah. He had to come and look at the Brackman horse and then I asked him to stay." Jamie hit the button for the next link. "But most of all..."

There was a long pause.

"Jamie. Jamie are you still there?"

The dark-haired woman's thoughts were currently spinning around the items of yellow, white and pink staring back at her from the computer screen. "Huh? Yeah, yeah I'm here. Sorry."

"Is something wrong?"

Jamie finally pulled here attention back to the phone. "No nothing's wrong." She scrambled for an innocent fib. "I thought I heard somebody at the front door, but I guess not. So, I'll be there to pick you up in the morning. And remember if you need to, call me from the plane."

"I will. Don't stay on the computer all night."

Jamie grinned. "How did you know that's what I was doing?"

"Just a hunch. See you in the morning. Love you."

"Love you too Rin. Bye."

Jamie set the phone back on the desk and swiveled her chair back around. The Anne Geddes screen savers flashed across the screen. The baby bumble bee, the baby ladybug, the baby on a cloud; they all appeared and faded away as she sat there contemplating what was behind the cute images. It wasn't really what she set out to find, but it had definitely caught her attention and would certainly make a statement. A slow smile slid across her face as she pictured it on her green eyed partner and the joy on that angelic face. "Yeah. Yeah that's what I want."

For the next hour, Jamie debated over the dozens of styles and colors. It had to be the right one. It had to be perfect. Once she had made her final decision, she chose the size, filled out the form and sent it off with the push of a button. "That was easy," she said. But the clenching in her stomach and the sweat on her temple spoke differently. Her brow furrowed. "I don't know...maybe...maybe I should have gotten the more elegant one...or the other color..." Jamie took a deep breath, placed both palms against the oak desk and pushed herself to her feet. "No. I made the right choice. No more debate." Jamie gave a determined nod. "She'll love it." The tall woman flipped the light switch on the way out of the room. Suddenly she stopped in the darkened doorway. "Or maybe not."

* * * *

Jamie tapped her booted foot against the highly polished marbled floor as she checked her watch for the third time in half an hour. She watched through the big window as plane after plane touched down and the hundreds of passengers filed through the terminal. But she had yet to see the only passenger she was interested in. Erin's plane had been delayed to due a storm in the east and Jamie had been bugging the woman behind the counter for over an hour. The gray-haired woman visibly cringed the last time the grim-faced, six-foot woman marched up to her station.

"We certainly have bad luck with planes," Jamie commented to herself as she headed off to a Starbucks. Her journey was halted when the voice over the P.A. announced the arrival of the flight from New York. She turned on her heels and headed back to her former spot. "Finally."

Ten minutes later, she saw the top of a blonde head that looked very familiar. As the crowd thinned and a burly young man in a UCLA t-shirt stepped around a corner, Jamie saw her weary looking lover. But that frown suddenly flipped when the green eyes caught sight of the jean clad vision heading her way.

Jamie wrapped one arm around the blonde's neck while liberating Erin of her carry on bag with the other. "I missed you Sweetheart," she whispered in an ear before placing a gentle kiss to her temple.

A hearty bear hug followed. "I missed you too. I can't wait to get back home."

They made a tiny detour for lunch about an hour outside of L.A., but soon they were driving under the Sheridan's Stables sign.

The four legged blonde rose from her sleeping spot on the front porch as the big truck came to a stop. Artemis greeted her human with a dozen doggie kisses as Jamie carried in the bags.

Once inside, Erin kicked off her shoes and scampered into the kitchen for a glass of milk. Jamie snuck up behind her just as she lifted the glass to her lips, where the cold, white liquid sloshed over the rim. Jamie gently spun the shorter woman and slowly cleaned up her mess before easing lower and engaging in a mind-blowing kiss.

Erin pulled away, wide-eyed. "Wow, am I really glad to be home. That's something you really can't do over the phone."

"It wasn't a totally bad trip though, was it?"

Erin shrugged and smiled. "No. I had one good day and one bad day. But please tell me I don't have to go away again."

"Rin, you never have to go anywhere that you don't want to," said Jamie as she wrapped her partner in loving arms.

Erin landed another smoldering kiss through which she said, "Good. I'll just hibernate here. And maybe we can do something about jogging those memories of yours."

Jamie eased out of the embrace and gave a half-hearted smile. "Yeah. Look, why don't you get unpacked and maybe take a nice long, hot bath. I've got a few things to do in the barn. I'll be back in time to help you with dinner."

Erin was left in a daze at the sudden change in moods as Jamie fled through the back door.

Dinner that night was a quiet affair, neither having much of a need to converse. A few hours of television brought them some welcomed laughs and took them to an early bedtime. Snuggled together, they shared a few slow, sweet kisses. No further expression of love was needed on the solemn September night. It was there; it was always there, surrounding them, binding them together. But it wasn't always enough to protect them from the cruel hand fate had dealt them.

Continued in Part 16.

The Athenaeum's Scroll Archive

~ Seeing You, Again For the First Time ~

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.

Love/Sex Disclaimer: This story depicts a loving relationship between two consenting, adult women and contains scenes of intimacy, but nothing explicit. If you are under 18 years of age or if this type of story is illegal in the state or country in which you live, please do not read it. If depictions of this nature disturb you, you may wish to read something other than this story.

Hurt/Comfort Disclaimer: Major angst ahead. But have faith and remember, I love a happy ending!

Thanks so much to my beta reader Barb.

No copy write infringement is intended in the use of the lyrics to the song "At Your Side".

This is the sequel to my first story, "At First Sight". I would recommend that you read that one first.

All comments are welcome at coleen30@webtv.net

I have also created a group for discussions of this, past and future stories. Maybe some sneak previews as well.

Join us at http://groups.yahoo.com/group/colleens_corner

Part 16

Chapter 16

Erin munched on the last of her popcorn as they exited the five-screen theater. "So what did you think?" she asked her partner. The ladies had decided that a lazy Saturday would be a good day to go and see a movie. They drove to the nearest mid-sized city which was only forty-five minutes away from their house and once there they had chosen to see the new Planet of the Apes.

"I liked it. Not quite sure about the ending though."

"Yeah. But the make-up was great."

"Yeah, that female chimp was kinda cute," Jamie said, as they reached the car.

Erin shut the door behind her and reached for her seatbelt. "Please don't tell me you are developing a thing for hairy women."

Jamie laughed as the engine turned over under her touch. "Don't worry, I won't be asking you to throw away your razor anytime soon."

They had chosen the early matinee so they could have dinner in town afterward. With Erin reading off the directions, Jamie navigated the strange streets looking for the Mexican restaurant they wanted to try. There were quite a few people on the streets for a Saturday afternoon and besides guiding Jamie to their destination, Erin indulged in a developing practice of people watching.

There were kids on their bicycles and roller blades dodging the other pedestrians. Erin rolled her eyes at the group of teens moping down the street wearing their over-sized pants at half-mast.

Even far removed from the big cities, the teenagers still managed to know the current trends. Three pre-teen girls stood outside of the local music store, giggling and swooning over the huge 'N Sync poster plastered in the window.

Erin turned her attention to the large park they were passing by. One couple in particular caught her eye. The tall brown-haired man carried a similar-haired baby in a backpack as he walked along with the person who she assumed was the baby's mother, but that didn't necessarily make her his wife, Erin thought. And endless array of characters paraded before the author's eyes and she studied them intently. As the car stopped at a red light, she noticed another gentleman in clean, but rumpled clothing. He swayed as he walked and judging from the package he tried unsuccessfully to hide inside his jacket, had obviously gotten a good start on his weekend party of one. She wondered what his story was. How many years had he succumbed? Why did he drink? Or maybe this was just a one-time event, triggered by some tragedy in his life. The possibilities were endless. And she would never know for sure as the man faded from sight. *He could be a character in my book. Maybe.* Erin leaned her head against the window. *What does it matter? I can't seem to write more than a few paragraphs at a time any more. Even that is leaving me.*

"I guess this is it," said Jamie, pulling into the nearly empty parking lot and choosing a space near the front entrance. Once seated in the requested non-smoking area, Erin began perusing the tri-fold menu.

"Oh boy," stated the blonde. "I'll never be able to choose. Everything looks so delicious."

Jamie nodded her agreement. "Well, we'll just order several things and share."

Erin smiled. "I like your thinking."

Several minutes later the waitress returned with their drinks and a big basket of red and blue tortilla chips along with several small bowls of dipping sauces. They both avoided the one labeled with a red-hot flame and instead sampled the mild lime salsa and the green guacamole.

Erin held up a crimson chip doused liberally with the chunky red dip. "Bridgett makes an incredible raspberry salsa. I'll have to get her recipe."

"Ohh, that sounds good."

They both continued to munch on the appetizers as Jamie pondered something she had been wanting to ask Erin, something she thought might give Erin a little of her spark back. She cleared her throat of the spicy food with a drink of her beer. "You know, I've been thinking. Chad told me about a rancher over the ridge that has a couple of nice, older horses he wants to sell. I figured that we could offer them a nice place to retire and just to keep them active, I thought we might start up your riding program for physically challenged children."

Erin lowered her eyes to the table and slowly smiled before looking back up. "That would be great."

"Good. Maybe we can kick it all off with a big party."

Erin brightened considerably, rubbing her hands together in anticipation and straightening in her chair. "Bridgett's salsa would be great...and hamburgers and hot dogs for the kids. Maybe chicken for the adults, not that adults don't like hamburgers...or hot dogs, but we should have a variety."

Their meals arrived and they both dove in. Erin joyously bantered around ideas all through the meal and Jamie just watched with glee at the happiness written all over the animated features.

That's it, thought Jamie, she needed something to do, something active. She'll love helping those kids.

Erin snatched a few more bites from Jamie's plate and in turn passed off some of her honey glazed chicken. The noise in the adobe style building started to escalate as the evening crowd began to pick up. Jamie grabbed the desert card preparing to order something sweet before they left while Erin was still working on the remainder of two of their dishes.

Just as an experiment, Erin dipped a touch of the hot salsa onto her bite of food. Her eyes widened just a little as it singed her throat. "This reminds me of the time last summer when we went to that Mexican themed party down the beach from us. Do you remember how you were dared to take a huge gulp of the fire sauce they had. Between that and the bikini top you wore, you were burned inside and out. Remember how you claimed that you stay out there all day and never get burned...but you got burned all right. It was days before you could lay down without yelping."

Jamie sat back suddenly, took a healthy swallow of her Corona and stared at what food was left on her plate as Erin went on. "Would you please not do that," she asked gruffly when there was a break in Erin's story.

"Do what?"

Jamie drew her attention to the twirling fan above their table. "You know I don't remember, so stop asking me if I do."

"I don't do that," insisted Erin.

Jamie's eyes hardened as she caught Erin's. "Yes you do."

"Jamie what are you talking about?"

The dark-haired woman's jaw clenched as she watched a family of six pass by their table. One little girl waved at her and she halfheartedly returned the gesture to be polite. But inside, months of simmering frustration were reaching the boiling point. "We'll talk about it when we get home, Erin."

"Guess that means we're leaving," said Erin as she reached for the wallet in her purse. "because I want to know what you mean."

It was a long, silent ride home. They were both emitting enough negative vibes to know that a moving vehicle was no place for the conversation.

Artemis made a hasty retreat away as her two humans stomped in the front door, Erin slamming it behind her. The car keys landed on the dining room table with a loud clunk and Jamie stormed into the kitchen to start the coffee. She had a feeling that it was going to be a long night and she was going to need it.

"Okay," said Erin. "We're in the privacy of our own home. Now explain exactly what it is you meant back at the restaurant."

Jamie hesitated. She didn't really want to get into this conversation, but now it was unavoidable. Erin wouldn't have let it go, she was like a dog on a bone when she was being challenged. "You've been doing it for weeks Erin," she finally blurted out when the smaller woman demanded an answer.

"Doing what?" Erin shouted.

"What was the last thing you said at the restaurant, before I got upset?"

The blonde head shook at the incomprehensible turn the conversation was taking. "I...I think I was talking about the time we went to that beach party. What is so wrong with that?"

"It wasn't wrong to talk about it Erin, but you said do you remember. It's always, don't you remember, I can't believe you don't remember, just wait until you remember. No matter how much you have been wishing, willing or craving it, it hasn't happened. And it might not. I have accepted that possibility, but you haven't. I always catch you with this sad little expression on your face." The tall woman gave an exaggerated frown to prove her point. "Either that or you're staring at me with this expectant look or you are trying to re-create a past experience." Jamie threw both disgusted hands in the air. "I don't remember, plain and simple. Why can't you just let it go?" After the frustrated rant, Jamie finally took a composing breath. She finally turned to look at her angered partner.

"You're mad because I want you to remember us. It's more like you don't want to remember."

Jamie pointed an accusing finger. "You have no idea what I want!"

"Why don't you tell me then?" shouted Erin. "What is your problem with the things I've done?"

Jamie didn't answer; she paced in tiny circles already regretting starting the argument. Finally she spoke. "Just think about what I said Erin. Because we can't go on like this."

Erin just turned away, trying to understand just what she had done to warrant Jamie's reaction. She stood there with downcast eyes. Her mouth hung open, unable to answer the accusations until all of Jamie's words began filtering through her brain and slowly it dawned on her. She realized that it was true. She had done it all. "Jamie...I only wanted you...to be able to feel all the things that we shared. I love you."

Jamie's watery eyes slipped shut. "I know you love me Erin...I know." She took a shaky breath. "But I don't think you like me without those memories. That makes me feel inadequate. I feel like a disappointment to you."

The verbal one-two punch snapped Erin's thoughts and left a burning in her gut as if two fists had landed squarely on their target. She felt physically ill and her head pounded with the truth. She couldn't say anything to Jamie. At that moment all of her advanced vocabulary faded to a mere shadow in her brain.

Jamie dropped into a nearby chair with a thump. Her legs no longer had the strength to hold up her length of bone. And the rest of her was debating just how to conquer the hurdle that she had erected. She still wasn't able to look up at the sadness that she felt emanating from across the room. She did hear Erin's feet start to move toward the staircase. "Where are you going?" she asked softly.

Erin, of course, remembered their last big disagreement, before Jamie got on that plane. She had felt helpless then and guilty now. An unproductive emotion, but almost unavoidable when a flawed human being loves another human being so much. She stuttered an answer. "I...I can't. I...I need to be alone...for a while." She whispered a final, "I'm sorry."

Jamie sat in the same spot for the next twenty minutes, thinking about everything and nothing. For an instant she clearly heard herself yelling at Erin. But there were none of the words that she had just spoken. This was from another time and another place. She reached out with her soul and tried to grasp the shadows, but the memory never solidified. It vaporized back into the mists of her addled brain. She shook off the feeling of frustration and concentrated on the present. She leaned forward and felt a pain in her back, the tension drawing her muscles into vice grip. *Maybe I was too hard on her. I should have found a better way to discuss this. I made her cry. Damn! I never wanted to do that.* Listlessly she walked to the kitchen and reached for a bottle of water from the fridge. She leaned her backside against the counter and blew out a strong gust of air. *Now she's got me feeling guilty. But I shouldn't. I was right in letting her know how I feel.* Another cool swig of water slid down her throat. I just should have chosen a better way and a better time to do it. The dark head shook. *Maybe I haven't been trying hard enough to remember. I don't know. Maybe I'm afraid to remember. I do want to remember. But it's not that I need to anymore. I know who I am and I have everything I want.* A painful feeling clenched her heart, terrifying her. *But no matter what happens Erin, you are the single most important thing in my life and I won't lose you. I can't let that happen.* Jamie looked at her watch again. It had been thirty minutes. That's long enough. We need to talk.

Her anger had dissipated but with loving determination, Jamie climbed the stairs and approached their bedroom. She knocked once just to give her lover some warning. "Erin." The blonde wasn't

in the room. "Sweetheart, we need to talk about this now," she called as she moved toward the bathroom. Still no Erin.

Jamie then headed for her partner's new hide-away. She had found the elusive woman in the small upstairs alcove no less than three times in the last few weeks. She passed by the hall window, giving it just a cursory glance. But Jamie stopped mid-stride when the image had registered in her mind and she backed up to the clear glass pane. Erin was standing in the back yard, half way between the house and the barn, staring at the ominous clouds gathering overhead. "What is she doing?" the tall woman mumbled to herself.

Jamie quickly took the back stairs and marched out through the small wooden gate. She slowed her approach when Erin gave no indication of hearing her. "What are you doing?" Jamie asked, trying not to sound angry, which she wasn't. "It's going to rain any minute."

"Am I still living in my fantasy world?" Erin asked heartbreakingly. "I mean, am I in a bed in some hospital and all this is going on in my head? You're right. I did everything you said, but I don't know why. I don't know what's wrong with me. I should never have hurt you this way. Everything is supposed to be perfect. I got you back and that's all that should matter. Why am I doing this? Why?" She buried her shameful face in her shaking hands.

"No, it's not all that should matter Erin. You have to take care of yourself Sweetheart."

The blonde suddenly looked up with a terrified look on her face. "Or maybe I never got out of that lake. Maybe I did die and this is my heaven...or my hell."

Jamie softly grabbed her lover by the arms and turned her. "Erin this is no fantasy. You are alive. Look at me," she said. "Do you believe in my love for you? Do you believe me when I say this is real?"

Erin peered deeply into the pale blue eyes, seeing the painful truth. "Yes. But that means that I really did hurt you. And that is unacceptable."

"Erin, I know you didn't mean to hurt me. It's just as much my fault. I should have told you sooner how I felt and I certainly shouldn't have yelled at you. Sweetheart, no one is really at fault here. Think about everything that has happened to both of us this year." She saw the realization slowly wash over the sad face. "The stress of it all is just too much for us to handle alone. We both need help to come to terms with everything." She cautiously asked her next question. "Will you go with me to see a therapist?"

Erin nodded rapidly and threw her arms around the tall woman's neck.

"We will work this out Erin. We'll be okay Honey. We'll be okay."

"I'm sorry Jamie. I was never disappointed in you, never." She squeezed tighter. "I love you. Please don't leave me. Don't ever leave me again."

Jamie cupped the blonde head and murmured in her ear. "I'm not Erin. I'm not leaving you and I won't, not ever. I promise." She sealed her promise with a small kiss. "Now let's go inside before we get wet."

They only took two steps when an enormous crackling came from above. Erin and Jamie were knocked off their feet and flew through the air landing with a sickening thud against the hard ground.

The air grew eerily quiet.

A patch of blackened grass smoldered about three yards from where they had been standing. Rain began to trickle down from the gray clouds overhead and within seconds the drops fell more heavily.

The first sensation Jamie became aware of was a wet back. She felt the cotton material sticking to her skin as she tested those muscles. The next thing she felt was something soft under her. She turned her head and saw wisps of blonde hair. Jamie was lying at an angle across Erin's body. She pulled away quickly, calling her lover's name, but the unconscious woman didn't even twitch. The steady rain continued to drench them as Jamie frantically felt for a pulse. In her hysteria, she couldn't tell if there was a beat or not. She did know that her lover wasn't breathing. "No!" she screamed above the thunder. Jamie immediately began blowing life saving air into the still lungs, pulling away every few seconds to check again. "Don't you do this Erin! Don't you leave me!" she pleaded. "Don't leave me!" More air was forced between the soft lips. "You made me promise, now it's your turn!" With the blink of an eye Jamie had another flash, a visual memory this time. She was looking down on an unconscious Erin and there was blood beneath the blonde bangs. But again, Jamie couldn't put it all together and she was pulled back to the current situation. Another breath was given and Jamie pulled back when she detected movement.

Erin sucked in a lung full of air...and rain. She turned her head sputtering and coughing as she was pulled to the dark haired woman's chest.

Jamie beamed with joy. "That's it Baby, that's it. You're okay now."

"What...happened?" the confused blonde asked between wheezes.

Jamie gently returned Erin to the ground and leaned over her, trying to keep the pelting rain from hitting her face. The dark head looked around. She spied the black spot in the grass and quickly put it together. "I think we were hit by lighting...sort of." She returned her concerned gaze back to her partner. "I landed on top of you," she explained. "Are you hurt anywhere?"

Erin took just a few seconds to inventory her body. "No, I don't think so. I just got the wind knocked out of me."

"By me," Jamie said guiltily.

Erin reached up and palmed the worried face. "It was an accident. Besides, I tend to like it when you're all wet and on top of me."

Jamie couldn't help but smile and chuckle slightly. A tinge of embarrassment slid her eyes closed momentarily, but she quickly looked back down and caught the wicked grin. "Erin this isn't...it's not funny," she said, still smiling. She turned and kissed the palm that had rested against her cheek. "If you're sure you're not hurt, lets get inside." Jamie helped the smaller woman to her feet as a huge boom of thunder sounded overhead, even causing her to flinch. Jamie threw an arm over the blonde's shoulder and pulled her in tight, protecting her. They took a few more steps and the thunder sounded again. "Are you okay?" she asked. "Isn't the sound bothering you? You're not going to have a panic attack are you?"

Erin stopped suddenly causing Jamie's foot to slide on the wet grass as she was halted too. "What do you mean?" the blonde asked shakily, turning to Jamie. *I never told her about this*, her mind hummed. But she kept her excitement in check.

Jamie gave her an incredulous look. "The thunder, isn't it bothering you like it did...?" Jamie went mute. Her eyes darted around, but her focus was inward.

Erin remained quiet, waiting for it to register.

The blue eyes finally landed on the green ones. "Like it did that Sunday afternoon," she explained, every word spreading her smile a little wider. The smaller woman was a mirror of her joy. "When I brought you out here for the first time." With her last word, Jamie found her arms full of an ecstatic blonde. She lifted Erin off the ground and spun around as their lips melded.

They finally separated and each threw their head back and let the cool rain wash over them. When the droplets began to slow, Jamie twisted her head furiously, sending splatters of water onto Erin's already drenched face. "You never did answer my question," said Jamie. "Isn't the sound bothering you?"

Erin let a slow grin cover her face. "Not any more. I found my safe haven, someone to chase away all of those demons." She leaned in and kissed Jamie like there was no tomorrow. But there would be many, many tomorrows for the happy couple. A lot of healing was still to come, but the events of this day led to the turning point on their life's path. The detour that had started on a dark day over nine months before was finally coming to an end.

* * * *

Erin stepped from the bathroom brushing her hair. She finally felt dry, after all that time in the rain. The shower had been warm at least, but she still finished as quickly as possible. As she walked across the room, Erin felt an odd chill. She went to the closet and pulled out one of Jamie's heavy button down shirts. She slipped it on, wincing slightly at her sore body. After pulling on a pair of comfortable sweats, Erin trotted down the stairs in a much better mood. A deep sniff of burning hickory led her to the living room.

Jamie sat on the cushioned ottoman in front of the small fireplace. Her gaze was lost in the flickering flames as she lifted the blue mug to her lips and sipped the dark coffee.

Erin took in the slumped shoulders and when she got close enough, the heavy scowl as well. She touched the shoulder hidden beneath the draped lavender towel.

"I'm sorry," whispered Jamie heavily.

Erin pulled over a chair. "What for?"

Jamie couldn't look her in the eye. "I was so selfish. I got on that plane and put you through six months of hell." The dark head dropped and shook morosely.

Erin slid from the chair to her knees in front of the upset woman. She lifted the chin so that their eyes met. "Sweetheart, we both went through six months of hell. But it was an accident...no one's fault."

"But..."

"No. No guilt, no blame. Leave it in the past. That's why we're going to get help, right?"

Jamie flickered a smile as she stared into the pleading emerald eyes. She finally nodded her agreement. "Speaking of the past. I think I remember most of that too. I'm sure there are still some gaps, but I remember enough, especially about...my past."

Erin gently hugged her and placed a kiss on the damp hair. "I know Honey. I never wanted you to know about that. I only wanted you to remember your family and us."

Jamie then smiled fondly. "My family," she said simply. But so few words spoke volumes and it warmed Erin's heart.

The tall woman stood and led her lover over to the much more comfortable sofa. Erin snuggled in closer. "I do remember just about every glorious moment with you," said Jamie. "And you were right. You could explain the actions and events, but what I felt was only in here." She tapped the side of her head. "From the total enrapture I felt when I first laid eyes on you to the nervous stomach I had when I showed up to lunch the next day. You never knew this, but I hardly ate a thing. All I could do was stare at your beautiful face, but I felt guilty doing that because you didn't know I was."

"I knew," Erin confessed softly.

"You did?"

Erin nodded. "I sensed it and liked it. Tell me more."

"You totally disrupted the calm my life had settled into, but only in the very best way. After I left you that day, I couldn't stop thinking about you. I waited every night for you to call. I couldn't sit still and I couldn't concentrate. I needed to be with you, even though my brain fought so hard against it."

"That's kind of how I felt in Ireland, after you kissed me."

Jamie smiled then continued. "I remember the safety of your love wrapping itself around my heart that night at the beach house when I told you about my past. And I remember crying after you made love to me for the first time, because I had never felt so special in my entire life." Jamie took a deep breath. Reliving all those emotions was hard. "And I remember your birthday celebration and Thanksgiving, spending time with Caitlin and Conner." She paused and looked down into the face that held a dreamy expression. "And Christmas when you fulfilled my greatest childhood wish. But most of all, I remember falling in love with you a little more each day. And I love you most of all right this moment, but not as much I'll love you tomorrow."

They were much too tired to indulge in anything more strenuous than a few lazy, but loving kisses. They just sat there watching the fire for several more minutes. "How do you feel," Jamie asked, "physically, I mean."

Erin considered a moment. "Not bad, but I've got this strange tingling all over." She flashed Jamie a teasing grin. "And it's not from you."

The grin was returned. "I feel it too." Jamie glanced over at the grandfather clock that was just minutes away from seven chimes. "I think we should go over to the clinic and see a doctor, just to be sure. I don't think either one of us wants to take a chance."

Erin sighed. "You're right, but that would mean that I have to move and I'm much too comfortable."

"I know Honey, but this is important." Jamie scooted out from under Erin's clutch and stood stiffly. "It won't take long. Let's go."

The blonde winced when she reached up to take the offered hand.

"What's wrong?" Jamie asked.

"My shoulder's just a little sore." She stood and rotated the joint in question.

"Let me see." Jamie quickly undid the row of silver buttons and slipped the shirt off of Erin's left shoulder. She stepped around to take a look. "Erin! Why didn't you say something? There is a bruise the size of my fist back here."

"Well, I'm kinda sore all over and it didn't really hurt until just now. I must have landed on a rock."

Jamie gingerly kissed the injured area. "Now I know we are going to see a doctor."

* * * *

The rain had since ended leaving a fresh, clean scent to greet the twilight. Not much was said during the drive to the small clinic that was quite far away. Jamie knew she had been right in suggesting that they see a doctor because they both were beginning to feel a little shaky.

The black-topped parking lot was empty except for two cars parked at the far end. Jamie opened the heavy glass door and stepped aside to let Erin enter first. She kept her hand against the blonde's lower back as they approached the tall desk and waited.

A middle-aged woman, carrying a purse under one arm and an umbrella in her hand, came around the corner from the back hall. She jumped in surprise. "Oh! I didn't hear the door open."

"Yeah, sorry," said Jamie tiredly. "We were struck by lightning and we thought it was a good idea to come in and see the doctor."

The nurse's deep blue eyes widened. "Oh my! Come on back and I'll get Doctor Maxon." She opened a door labeled exam room A and turned to Jamie. "You can wait in here Miss..."

"Sheridan. Jamie Sheridan and this is Erin Casey."

"Miss Casey you'll be right next door," the older woman said cheerfully.

But Jamie had her own ideas. She took Erin's hand, entwining their fingers and led her into the first room. "We'll stay together," she informed the nurse.

The woman, whose nametag read 'Carol', looked down at their joined hands and suddenly became flustered. "I...oh...well...I guess it's all right." She left quickly, shutting the door quietly.

There was only one chair in the small, sterile, white room. Jamie strategically planted herself there so Erin would have to sit on the examination table and would be taken care of first. The author gave her lover a weak smile just to let Jamie know that the gesture was recognized. The tall woman reached over and patted her thigh.

Just a minute later, a man of about forty-five stepped into the room. He reached up to adjust his glasses while introducing himself. "I'm Doctor Maxon." He conveniently skipped the handshakes and small talk. He laid two green file folders on the counter next to the sink in which he proceeded to wash his hands. "So tell me exactly what happened," he said, wrapping two fingers around Erin's wrist.

By the time she finished the story, the doctor was releasing the tension on the blood pressure cuff fastened tightly to Erin's upper arm. He wrote down the statistics on the chart in the first folder. "And this happened when?" he asked.

Erin deferred to her partner for the answer. "It was a little before six."

Maxon placed the cold stethoscope inside Erin's shirt, over her heart. When that was through, he felt around her skull for any bumps or abnormalities. "Any headaches or dizziness?"

"No."

"Any neck pain or numbness in your arms and legs?"

Again she answered him negatively, but did inform him of the tingling sensation, shaky feeling and the chills she had experienced earlier.

"That can happen because of the trauma and the electrical shock. Everything seems normal, but I would like to do an EKG. Unbutton your shirt, but you can keep it on. Lie back on the table."

His ministrations were gentle. But the bedside manner was that of a wet sponge. Jamie didn't want to jump to the conclusion that it was because they were gay. Although she was sure that the nurse had run right off flapping her gums with the gossip, not that it had anything to do with the reason that they were there.

He quickly placed the white electrodes at several points along Erin's torso, and then flipped the switch on the machine. He leaned closer to watch the blips that appeared on the small screen. They waited for several minutes before he said anything. "Okay everything looks normal here as well."

After he removed the wires, Erin sat up and it was obvious that she was ready to hop down from the high bench without saying anything about her other injury.

"Tell him about your shoulder Erin," said Jamie.

An audible, unhappy huff of air was released from his mouth as he moved around behind her. "Which one?" he asked. Receiving his answer, he pulled the loose shirt away from the area and easily probed the bruise. "I want to do an x-ray on that." He reached into a low cabinet and grabbed a short, cloth top with ties in the front. Handing it to Erin he said, "Remove everything from the waist up and put this on. I'll give you a few minutes to change then the nurse will be back to get you. And I'll check on you," he nodded to Jamie. "while those pictures are being taken."

Erin shrugged off her shirt, wincing again. "Boy he's a ball of sunshine," she whispered.

Jamie jumped up just as Erin was about to reach behind with one hand. "Here let me get that." She bent closer to whisper in her lover's ear as she undid the hooks on Erin's bra. "I've had lots of practice."

Erin giggled and leaned back against the tall body for just a second, wishing she were home and in bed. Jamie slipped the loose garment up over her arms and shoulders, just finishing tying the white strings as nurse Carol walked back.

"I'm sorry," she said shifting her gaze to the corner. "I'm here to take Miss Casey for x-rays."

Erin hopped off the table, lightly poking Jamie in the ribs. "Answer the doctor honestly," she instructed.

"Yes Miss, I'll just forget to mention my bad shoulder."

Erin responded with a coy grin.

About fifteen minutes later, Erin returned to find Jamie sitting in the exact same chair that she had previously occupied. "She said it would be about ten more minutes before he'd be back with the results. What did he say about you?"

"Same as you, pretty normal."

"I get the feeling everyone else in this building considers us anything but normal," Erin said, reaching for her clothes.

Jamie grabbed the white bra and stuffed it into the pocket of her jacket. "You don't need to wear that home." She comically leered at her smaller partner, enjoying the laugh she received.

* * * *

Jamie rolled down her window, hoping the cool air would keep her senses sharp as she drove the winding roads back to the ranch. Nothing but headlights guided the way through the darkness. The pale moon was playing hide and seek among the leftover clouds. She slowed her speed as she navigated around a hairpin turn, her wheels screeching slightly. Once the road straightened back out, she glanced over to see the blonde head leaning against the window, fast asleep. Jamie smiled as she clearly remembered the last time Erin had fallen asleep in the car.

There had been a fire in the building where Erin was working and Jamie had showed up just in time to save her. The author, who was then blind, became confused in the rush to escape and had gotten trapped in an office. They both survived unscathed, but exhausted and the small blond had fallen asleep on their way home.

There was one difference she noted, Erin's left arm now rested in a blue sling. The doctor had said it was sprained and recommended wearing the sling for a few days and using ice packs on the bruise and the swelling.

Jamie soon pulled up to the house and shut off the engine. She called Erin twice, but only received a mumbled not now. The tired and frustrated woman got out of the car and went to open the passenger side door. "Erin, come on now we have to go in the house. You can't sleep here all

night." She leaned down and kissed the blonde head. "As much as I would love to be able to carry you into the house Baby, I can't. I'm afraid my back would give out and we'd both fall."

That proved to initiate the author into action. "No, no, you can't do that. I'm going."

They supported one another and slowly made their way inside and up the stairs. Jamie proceeded to strip her lover of her clothing in a most unsensual, but practical way. Still feeling chilled, she dug their heavier pajamas from the bottom drawer of the dresser. Once dressed, Erin snuggled into the covers.

Jamie smoothed down the mussed blonde hair. "I know you're already cold Honey, but I'm going to get an ice pack to put on your shoulder."

A disoriented nod was the only response.

After placing a towel and the blue bag under Erin's shoulder, Jamie cuddled close to ward off the extra chill. She fell asleep in just seconds and didn't awake until nine hours later.

* * * *

It was another cloudy day and it was Sunday, which meant that Dan and Jackson, the two ranch hands, had the day off. That had its good and bad points, Jamie thought as she sat by the window in their bedroom. She would have to take care of cleaning the barn all by herself, but then she had the rest of the day all alone to spend with Erin. And they really needed it, especially now. She took another sip of her rich coffee as she looked back to the bed, a concerned smile coming to her face. Jamie had been up for over two hours, but her lover hadn't stirred a muscle. It made sense; Erin did take the worst of it in last night's encounter with Mother Nature's Zeus impression. Still, it didn't keep the tall woman from checking every half hour to make sure Erin was still breathing.

Jamie set her mug down on the end table and once again settled herself next to the woman she loved. She watched closely for each breath that moved Erin's chest up and back down, slowly and evenly. *Paranoia be damned. After all we've been through I think it's perfectly reasonable to be just a little paranoid. I wonder what the shrink will have to say about that.* She knew that seeing a therapist was the right thing to do...but that didn't mean it was going to be easy. With a single finger Jamie pushed back a sprig of hair that blocked her view of Erin's angelic face. A happy grin lit up Jamie's face. *That's exactly what I thought when we first met. I remember it perfectly.* Jamie rolled over on her back and stared at the ceiling. *God I never thought I'd be able to say that.* She turned her head to Erin once again. *I never should have gotten mad at you. It's all so clear to me now what you wanted. You didn't want it for you, you wanted it for me.* Jamie took a deep breath. *God we're both feeling so much guilt. There's no blame, just guilt. That's what we need help with.*

A rustling of trees against the window drew Jamie's attention. *I really should get out there and get those things done in case it rains again.* But she put that off until sleeping beauty woke up.

With Erin's, somewhat, fragile emotional state, Jamie didn't want to frighten her by being gone. So she just lay there quietly waiting.

Erin's dreamless mind ascended at a snail's pace from the abyss of slumber she had fallen into. The first solid thing to greet her senses was the dull ache in her shoulder. The second thing was the just slightly duller ache in her whole body. Her nose twitched. *I know that smell. I like that smell. Coffee.* The blonde head snuggled into the soft pillow, one last time. Her eyes fluttered. A lazy smile appeared. Even without her glasses she immediately recognized that fuzzy, tanned silhouette. "Hi."

"Hi," the blurry image answered back.

Those happy, blue eyes came into perfect focus as Jamie leaned in closer and greeted Erin with a kiss.

"How are you feeling?" Jamie asked, staying just inches from the sleepy face.

Erin momentarily forgot and shrugged with her injured shoulder. "Owww," she whined.

"That good huh? Don't worry Ms. Casey, Doctor Jamie is here and at your service. Today's therapies include a hearty scrambled egg breakfast and plenty of bed rest. Perhaps a hot soak for those sore muscles and I might even have to..."

The next words were whispered in her ear. Erin giggled. "I wish I felt a whole lot better so I could really enjoy playing doctor with you."

Jamie tapped a button nose. "You will, my Dear, you will. But today we aren't playing. Today I am both lover and nursemaid, just as you were right before Thanksgiving last year. Your TLC was invaluable and I intend to reciprocate in full."

Erin returned from the bathroom to find Jamie dressed and ready to go. She quickly shuffled forward when she spotted the recently refilled, red mug heading for Jamie's mouth. "Oh,Oh, that's what I'm missing. Share?"

Jamie passed off the warm beverage. "This and everything else I have for the rest of my life. I'm going downstairs to make you breakfast, so hop back into that bed and relax. What?" she asked when the cute little pout covered her lover's face.

Erin twisted back and forth, swinging her good arm. "Can't I come and watch you?"

Jamie took her hand and laughed. "Okay little girl, you can watch. Then back to bed."

"Yes Mommy," said Erin playing along with their little verbal game.

After the meal was finished and the dishes put away, Jamie settled her lover into the big, comfortable recliner in front of the television. Erin had convinced her that she would be too

bored all alone in their room. The dark haired woman handed her the remote and the cordless. She clipped her own phone to the side of her brown belt. "Call me if you need anything," she instructed.

"I'll be fine Sweetheart, really. The food helped. I'm feeling better."

Jamie gave her a kiss. "Call me anyway. It shouldn't take too long. Love you," she called out as she disappeared into the hall.

Erin had fibbed just a bit. Her shoulder was beginning to ache with more intensity. And she was sure that she hadn't fooled her partner for a second. After a few slow deep breaths, she tried to ignore the pain and flipped on the television. Sunday morning didn't bring a lot of interesting choices for relaxing viewing, but after flipping through a few dozen channels, Erin finely settled on an old black and white movie. Her eyes watched the images moving across the screen, but her ears didn't catch but the first few words. Erin's thoughts turned to the events of the night before...of the weeks before...of the months before. Her eyes fell shut and she sighed heavily, mentally listing the emotional valleys of the previous nine months. *I get my sight back, then I think Jamie dies. I become depressed then move my life from the beach to the ranch and get lost in a fantasy world. I just slightly recover from that and go to Ireland and fall in love with a stranger. I return home and find out that the woman I love now is the love of my life, who never really died...only she doesn't remember any of our life together. All the while, I'm still dealing with a father who won't accept me for who I am. Then he does a one eighty and I learn his actions were because of some deep buried trauma he suffered as a teenager. Finally, I get struck by lightning and Jamie gets her memory back. Erin grimaced and rubbed her weary eyes. Oh yeah, therapy.* She fumbled for the phone that had fallen into the space between the chair and her leg. She pressed in the several digit number, but it wouldn't connect her to the woman in the barn.

"Hello," answered the voice on the other end of the line.

"Hi Anne, it's Erin." Dr. Anne Carson was one of Erin's best friends. They had gone to collage together and Anne had helped Erin explore her sexuality. They had never been lovers, but Anne was instrumental in informing Erin of the ins and outs, so to speak, of the gay lifestyle.

"Honey, I'm glad to hear from you. How are you doing?"

"Well, have you got about an hour to listen to my unbelievable tale?"

* * * *

Jamie returned just after eleven o'clock to find Erin scouting the kitchen for something she could fix one handed. "Honey, if you were hungry why didn't you call me?"

Erin's response was delayed by a rather hearty kiss. "Oh, I was, I was. I just wanted to see what we had around here."

Jamie took in the somewhat barren refrigerator. "I guess we need to go shopping huh?"

"Yeah," she agreed. "but tomorrow." She turned and flashed her a look. "That is if you will go into town and get pizza for dinner?"

Jamie laughed and pulled her into a hug. "You can cut out the puppy dog eyes. Don't you know by now that if you asked me to crawl on my hands and knees to the Arctic circle, that I would without a seconds hesitation?"

"Just to town will be fine," said Erin.

Jamie dropped to all fours. "I'd better get started now."

Erin giggled as she watched her lover crawl to the door.

The raven-haired woman stopped and looked back over her shoulder. "You were planning to stop me weren't you?"

Erin just stood there grinning.

Jamie stood and brushed off her hands and knees. "Uh, huh. That's what I thought."

Erin did manage to scare up a few items for a fairly substantial lunch. And Jamie set about preparing them with the helpful instructions of her partner.

During the meal, Erin told Jamie about her morning phone call. "Anne thinks it's a really good idea for us to see a therapist. She was just sorry that I didn't ask her help earlier. Anyway, she recommended Doctor Jennifer Webber. She specializes in counseling gays and lesbians. Actually she is in the building just across the street from where I saw that first therapist. I guess I just didn't research my options very well at the time."

Jamie reached over and rubbed Erin's hand. "She sounds like a good choice Honey. Why don't you call tomorrow and see when we can get an appointment."

"I also invited Anne to come up here and stay for the weekend. But it will a couple of weeks before she'll have the time."

"That's great. I don't want you to feel so isolated way up here away from the city and everyone you know."

"I don't feel isolated. If anything the peacefulness around here is what has allowed me to keep some sense of sanity. If we were still back in the city..."

"I know Honey. We are going to be all right. I love you."

"I love you too."

Continued in Part 17.

The Athenaeum's Scroll Archive

~ Seeing You, Again For the First Time ~

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.

Love/Sex Disclaimer: This story depicts a loving relationship between two consenting, adult women and contains scenes of intimacy, but nothing explicit. If you are under 18 years of age or if this type of story is illegal in the state or country in which you live, please do not read it. If depictions of this nature disturb you, you may wish to read something other than this story.

Hurt/Comfort Disclaimer: Major angst ahead. But have faith and remember, I love a happy ending!

Thanks so much to my beta reader Barb.

No copy write infringement is intended in the use of the lyrics to the song "At Your Side".

This is the sequel to my first story, "At First Sight". I would recommend that you read that one first.

All comments are welcome at colleen30@webtv.net

I have also created a group for discussions of this, past and future stories. Maybe some sneak previews as well.

Join us at http://groups.yahoo.com/group/colleens_corner

Part 17

Chapter 17

Erin pulled her legs up under her and sank into the soft chair in the living room. They had had an early dinner and now with the dishes done she chose to start on the new book she had gotten at a bookstore in LA during their last visit. Jamie had said she had something to do in the barn, so Erin was enjoying the quiet time alone.

It had been two weeks since the events that brought Jamie's memory back. They had been to three appointments with Dr. Webber and both felt on their way to finally becoming whole again. There would still be much more discussion about the stressful issues that plagued Erin and Jamie, but they felt the beginning of freedom from the constricting hand that held their souls in place. In the span of two weeks, there had been many small steps toward a new beginning...a beginning that hadn't really started in Ireland.

Their first visit to Dr. Jennifer Webber came on a cloudy, gray September afternoon. The two-hour drive from their home to the big California city was filled with soothing music, but very little talk. The mood inside the rolling vehicle was somber and tense. The tension was not directed at each other, but rather inward as each worried about what sort of emotional scars would be unveiled and just what it was going to take to finally heal those wounds.

Jamie pulled the car into the parking garage and drove all the way up to the sixth floor before she found an open space. Two slamming doors echoed off the cement pillars like a double cannon shot. The tall woman waited near the back of the vehicle for her partner. "Are you okay?" she asked when the tight-lipped author stepped around the corner.

"Yeah."

The timid answer was not encouraging.

Jamie led them across the hard floor to the row of elevators along the back wall. They waited about forty seconds before a set of doors finally parted at the far corner. They stepped on to find themselves all alone. Jamie felt the small shudder beside her and she reached over and took the cold hand in hers. Erin's eyes slipped shut and she sighed heavily as the touch brought an end to the twitching nerves. She looked up into the easy blue eyes and smiled for the first time that day.

Dr. Jennifer Webber was an attractive lady in her late thirties. A moderate mane of very dark, blonde, wavy hair just reached the therapist's shoulders. She was of medium height, falling exactly between Erin and Jamie and her light brown eyes shown with compassion from behind oval, silver framed glasses. She welcomed them each with a handshake and invited them to a small circle of comfortable leather chairs in the corner of the nicely decorated office. She set a tray of water filled glasses on the small, round table that marginally separated doctor and patients. The notebook in her hand was flipped open as she took her seat. "I know this is a very intimidating situation," she said. "But I want to try and make you as comfortable as possible. I'd like us to be on a first name basis, unless you object." At the nod of two heads the Doctor continued. "Before we get into any of the really heavy stuff, I'd like each of you to tell me a little about yourselves."

They each stated their ages and occupations, but not much else and she found that to be a typical response. Doctor Webber felt that the sharing of that information should be reciprocal. "My partner, Vicki and I have been together for fifteen years," she explained with a smile. "Our son is just starting fifth grade." She glanced over at the wooden framed picture of the grinning, carrot topped boy.

"He's a very handsome young man," said Erin as she studied the photo.

"Thank you." She went on to tell a few more incidental facts then paused as she took just a second to watch the body language of her new patients. They hadn't stopped holding hands since they walked through the door, but she could tell that it was a natural act and not forced by either party. "Can you tell me what it is that you would like to accomplish by coming here?" she asked.

Erin and Jamie's eyes met, each waiting for the other to take the lead.

"Erin, why don't you go first," said Webber.

The blonde head tipped to one side and she cleared her throat. "I...I guess I want...I want to regain control...so my life with Jamie can go forward and we can finally put the past behind us."

"Jamie?"

The rancher didn't have an answer; at least one she thought was worth saying. "I guess I'm not sure. If I hadn't gotten my memory back recently that's what I would've said...now...now I don't know, except that I want the same thing Erin does; to be able to deal with all the recent stresses and strengthen our relationship so we can build a future."

A few notes were quickly scribbled and the doctor took a sip of her water. "Okay. Jamie, why don't you tell me what's gone on in your life that brought you to this point."

It was very telling that the raven-haired woman began her description with meeting Erin. She told of their friendship, which led to a tentative courtship to a marriage proposal to her disappearance and the rest of the events of the previous year.

After the long explanation, Doctor Webber commented, "That's quite a story."

"It's a miracle," said Erin.

"Of course." The doctor turned back to Jamie. "Do you feel as if your life really started after meeting Erin, because I asked about your life not your relationship?" She saw the almost panicked response in the blue eyes. "It's not a wrong response Jamie. I just want to know how you truthfully feel."

A shoulder shrugged. "Well, yes. That's the part of my life that matters most."

"And the twenty nine years before that where they that mundane?"

Jamie snorted. "God no, anything but." Without being prompted further, Jamie went on to tell about her childhood, the death of her parents and the dark mistakes she made thereafter. With a final, shaky breath she turned to smile at her partner. "But Erin helped me to come to terms with all that."

Jennifer just nodded and wrote more notes. "Erin, what about you?"

The author skimmed over her privileged childhood and her bout with blindness, instinctively knowing that that was not the root of her problems. "But the event that robbed me of control was Jamie's...Jamie's..."

"Say the word Erin," urged the therapist. "It's okay, it's just a word."

The first tears appeared and misted over the green eyes. "D...death." She finally stuttered the dreaded word.

"Tell me exactly how you felt about that and about everything that has happened since then."

Erin delved into the explanation of the darkest days of her life along with half a box of nearby tissues needed to dry the heavy flow of tears that accompanied the difficult sentences.

Doctor Webber listened closely to the choice of words being emotionally spoken by her blonde patient, but she paid even more attention to the body language of the woman's partner. Jamie clasped Erin's right hand in both of hers and her eyes were closed for the longest time. The facial muscles beneath her skin twitched and tightened as she tried to control her own intense reaction. Even though she had heard the story, it ripped at her heart even more than the first time. As it was coming down to the end of the story, Jamie's eyes popped open and she looked away with her head lowered. Her lips twisted into a snarl.

Erin finished and downed a glass of water in three quick gulps and her heaves of breath slowly calmed.

"Are you all right Erin?" asked Jennifer.

"Yeah. I just hope I don't have to go through that again," she joked weakly with a small, twitchy smile.

The doctor's right hand was busy making notations as she asked her next question. "Jamie, what were you thinking just now...when you looked away?"

The dark head shook.

Webber looked up from the paper when no answer was forthcoming. "Jamie we all have to promise to be completely honest with each other here. Please answer the question."

She reached up to rub the tight muscles at the back of her neck. "I was thinking maybe I made a mistake by bringing Erin here," said Jamie. "It's too painful for her to relive all of this."

"Don't you think she was in pain before?"

"Yes, but... Is it wrong to try to protect the one you love most in the world from any further pain?"

"No, of course not. But you know that the only way for Erin to get past this pain is to deal with it. Hiding it all these past months is what brought her here to this point. I know you have your own pain to deal with too. But I think you are both essentially strong people and with the love you have for each other you will survive this. And you can have that future you desire."

They left that hour-long session totally drained. Too tired to make the long trip back to the ranch, they checked into a hotel for the night, had a simple meal, a long hot bath and fell asleep curled around each other, for a peaceful and dreamless night.

Four days later they had their second visit to the blonde headed therapist. And it turned out to be even more intense than the first. The most difficult thing that Erin had discovered in the session was that she loved Jamie too much. At first she had been furious that Dr. Webber even suggest such a thing. Erin was adamant that that was impossible and she nearly stormed out of the office. She was only stopped by the comforting voice of the woman she loved. Jamie had led her back to the seat and held onto her hand, urging Erin to listen to what the doctor had meant. Dr. Webber had been recording their sessions, with permission and after hearing the events of the last nine months played back to her in the form of her own voice, Erin began to shake uncontrollably and she felt sick to her stomach. By the time that session was over the writer was an emotional mess, but she finally understood; it wasn't her heart that loved too much, it was her head. She loved Jamie to the exclusion of herself. Erin had lost her true self. And no one could continue to function as a healthy human being without acknowledging his or her own needs. She also learned that her heart had never really accepted Jamie's death. Erin had only placated her conscience to begin a relationship with Jane because of the very strong attraction she felt for her new friend. And when Jamie's true identity had been revealed, Erin just expected everything to be perfect once again. Truly accepting that Jamie could be taken from her again and that she could survive it was the single most difficult thing she had ever done. It was only after that admission that Erin finally began to feel that freedom.

During their most recent visit, Dr. Webber had spoken to them individually. Each had many questions and some serious issues were discussed, but not one tear was shed, leading them each to feel that they were finally regaining control. And with that, Jamie decided that the time was right to start that journey into their future.

* * * *

About twenty pages into the story, Jamie's head popped around the corner of the living room doorway. "I'm going for a ride, Hon," she said as nonchalantly as possible. "And I thought I'd take Arte with me. You know how much she likes to run."

Erin briefly looked up from her book. "Okay, Sweetie. Have a good time." She readjusted her glasses before returning her attention to the interesting story and she missed the crooked, half smile that was aimed in her direction.

* * * *

It was five minutes until the half hour and Jamie had been gone for almost sixty minutes. But Erin didn't give it too much thought. She knew her partner tended to lose track of time when she was out on horseback. The author reached up to turn on the lamp next to her chair as the sun had dipped past the trees in the front of the house. She also decided that a glass of wine would taste very good right about now.

Before she could reach the fridge, a golden body poked in through the doggie door. "Oh, you're back," she said to the canine.

The big dog set her hindquarters down in front of her human and panted.

Erin stooped down to her level. "Did you have a good run?" she asked, vigorously rubbing the dog's ears. Her hand scraped across something ruff under the long, yellow hair. "What did you get into now?" Erin rooted around and found something entangled in the dog's collar. She pulled out a folded piece of beige paper. A flash of panic passed through her, but quickly subsided when she began to read the neatly written note.

Sweetheart, please come to meet me at the glen just passed the white boulder. I have a little surprise for you. Simeron is saddled and ready to go. Lock up the house and make the dog stay home.

Love you, J

Erin smiled, conjuring up all kinds of scenarios in her very creative mind. Artemis obeyed her request and the blonde woman was traipsing out to the barn within minutes. A few nudges from the impatient author sent the white horse into a full gallop across the empty, green field.

Within ten minutes, Erin was approaching her destination. She pulled on the rein, guiding the steed around the huge stone landmark. Her green eyes grew wide as did her grin when she took in the sight before her.

Jamie stood there in her black, denim shirt, which was neatly tucked into a pair of brand new, but slightly faded blue Levi's. Her dark boots had been freshly polished and they walked across the tall grass to meet the new arrival.

Behind Jamie was a fully equipped campsite. A big log had been pulled up next to a roaring fire. Next to it was their very familiar picnic basket and several feet behind was a domed, two person tent.

Erin's feet hit the ground and her lover immediately embraced her. "What is all this?" she asked after a very long kiss.

Arm in arm they moved back toward the fire as Jamie answered. "Just a little idea I've had rolling around in my head for a while. Do you like it?"

Erin briefly squeezed the body beneath her grasp. "Of course."

They took a seat on the soft, red blanket in front of the fire and Jamie reached into the basket retrieving two glasses and a tall, dark bottle. She handed Erin the glasses and with a mighty hand removed the embedded cork from the long, glass neck.

They quietly savored the wine and relaxed in front of the glowing warmth. "This is nice," said Erin. "I'm glad you thought of it."

"Me too." Jamie agreed, nervously. She could barely hold back the grin as the happiness tapped danced around her heart and played a few dozen choruses in her brain. She did laugh out loud when she felt a few wayward fingers slip inside her shirt and brush across her belly.

"So," said Erin, "did you have anything else in mind for this evening? If not, I'm sure I can make a few suggestions."

Jamie savored the kisses that were spreading up her jaw line. Suddenly, through the arousing haze she remembered her main purpose for the special evening. She inhaled and let the breath out slowly. "Actually there is something we need to do," she said, reaching back into the woven basket at her side.

"What's that?" asked the blonde.

Jamie lifted the lid on the little box and held it up for Erin to see. "Get married," she whispered emotionally.

A sound something between a squeak and a gasp escaped Erin's open lips as she heard the words and spied the white gold band with its relief Celtic design and the shining clear solitaire that sparkled in the fire's light. Forcing her jaw to move she sputtered what few words her flabbergasted brain could form. "Oh, Jamie...I...it's...I didn't want to assume...after everything..."

Jamie smiled at her adorable partner. "Is there a yes in there somewhere?" she asked.

Erin finally pulled herself together and looked up at the beaming face. "Of course it's yes!" She threw her arms around Jamie's neck. "God I love you so much."

Jamie plucked the ring from its holder and discarded the velvet box. She slipped it onto the proper finger and added a kiss just like she had done the first time. "Committing my heart to you may not be the easiest thing I've ever done, Erin, but it is absolutely, without a doubt the best thing I've ever done. You've actually owned it from the very first; I was just too stubborn to see it. And you certainly are the reason we are here today. I only wish the road leading to this moment had been much smoother."

Erin cupped her hand around the chiseled face, which was silhouetted by the flickering flames. "I think that scaling those mountains has assured us that we will be together always and can work

through any other obstacles that come our way in the future." Her forehead met Jamie's.
"Together, we can do anything."

Jamie kept smiling as she felt the cool metal against her cheek. "We're getting a brand new start Erin, so I thought I should do it right. I know the first time I proposed was a little more romantic, but I had to be a little creative and come up with something new."

Erin turned and sat with her back up against the taller woman's chest. She pulled those long arms around her and snuggled in. "Sweetheart, the first time you proposed was wonderful, but this is so perfect because it is so much more you...so much more us. And believe me, this is extremely romantic."

"I love you," said Jamie.

They sat there for a long time, just enjoying being close. The comfortable silence was only broken by the occasional spit and crackle of the fire. The smell of the burning hickory added to the mesmerizing sway of the orange and blue flames as the wondrous seconds continued to slip away, although to the two lovers it felt as though time had stopped, suspending their love in an eternity of joy.

Jamie leaned in just a bit and placed a very gentle kiss to the temple just below the blonde locks. "Thank you," she whispered softly.

"For what?"

"Since I got my memory back, I don't think I've told you how much it means to me that you continued my dream. I know what buying this ranch cost you."

Erin knew Jamie wasn't speaking of money.

"After your breakdown you could have sold it. I'm sure you were encouraged to do just that." Jamie felt the tiny nod against her arm. "But you didn't and I understand the sacrifices you made. And it makes me love and respect you even more." The dark haired woman also understood why her partner made no verbal comments after her declaration. The kiss planted on the back of her hand said it all.

A loud rustling, in the trees behind them suddenly caused both heads to turn.

"Maybe that was a banshee," joked Jamie.

Erin laughed. "I believe that particular legend only exists on Irish soil."

"Speaking of, have you talked to your grandmother and told her about everything?"

Erin slowly pulled out of the loving arms so she could turn and see her partner's face. She scooted around and crossed her legs Indian style. "Yeah. I was on the phone almost two hours."

She was thrilled of course and shocked." Erin began rubbing both hands over the solid, jean-covered thighs across from her.

"Do you think she'll come over for the wedding?" Jamie asked.

"Oh no!" Erin exclaimed, without stopping her hand movements.

"What?" Jamie frowned. "You don't think she'll want to come?"

"No. No, of course she'll come. I just remembered that I told my cousins that I'd organize a family reunion. But that will have to be postponed until next spring."

Jamie gave Erin a very sultry smile. "Oh and why is that?" She asked, knowing full well the answer.

"Because I will be much too busy getting married and going on a honeymoon and...well who knows what other spousal activities I'll be engaging in."

Jamie nodded. "Speaking of engaging in activities..." Her eyes dropped to the hands on her legs. "You do know that you are driving me crazy, right?"

Erin gave her a wide-eyed grin. "Right." She looked back over her shoulder. "I assume you intend for us to sleep in that tent over there?"

Jamie was apprehensive with her answer, not quite reading the expression that appeared. "Well, yeah that was the idea. You don't want to?" she asked. "We can always ride back to the house."

"No, no. I think it'll be great, very adventurous."

Jamie leaned way over and nuzzled the smooth neck. "It has a moon roof."

Erin worked a black button free. "Even better," she said. "Spending all night under the stars. I'm sure we could think of one or two things to do in the spotlights."

"Speaking of which, is it too early to turn in?"

Erin kissed her soundly on the lips. "Nope, right on time, whatever time it is. In fact time has no relevance...at least until the sun comes up."

Jamie proceeded to douse the fire as Erin led her horse over to join Teegan. She removed the saddle and gave her a quick brush down, suddenly feeling a tingling in her lower abdomen. Knowing it had nothing to do with the night's anticipated activities, she began looking around. She walked over and ducked her head into the blue tent. Not finding what she was wanting, Erin walked, with a rather funny gait, back to where her partner was tending the dying fire.

Jamie looked up and burst out laughing. She had been watching Erin's exploration and she knew what the blond was looking for.

Erin gave one last glance around. "I, ah don't suppose you thought to bring...umm...a..."

Jamie snickered at her friend's reluctance. "What Erin?"

The author glared at her tall lover. "Somewhere to go..." She let her nodding head finish her thought.

"Oh that! Sure thing." Jamie moved behind the huge log and rooted around in her pack.

Erin breathed a sigh of relief...until she spotted the small item in Jamie's hand. She eyed it suspiciously.

"Here." Jamie handed her a full roll of white tissue and swept her free hand across the landscape. "Pick your spot."

The golden brows went skyward. "You're kidding, right?"

"Nope." Jamie wiggled the roll with a smirk on her face.

Erin huffed then clinched her jaw. She grabbed it, turned and marched off for the trees.

Wrinkles formed on the tall woman's forehead. "Where are you going Erin, it's just me?" She asked the question seriously.

Erin waved a hand in Jamie's general direction. "It's bad enough that I have to do this, at least allow me some modesty."

Jamie just giggled as she snuffed out the remaining fire and stirred the glowing embers.

The blonde returned just a few minutes later and went to pack away the tissue.

Jamie stood and an uneasy expression graced her features. "Uh, Erin could you..."

The small woman turned and tossed it, flashing a knowing grin.

Jamie caught it with ease and headed toward the trees.

"Where ya goin Jamie?" The author teased.

Just before the tall figure disappeared into the shadows Erin heard, "Not another word."

* * * *

Much later they laid together under a soft blanket, cooling from the heated passion they had shared. The netted moon roof allowed a great view for star chasing and wishing. Erin had her head pillowed on the nearest shoulder and her left arm wrapped around the lean waist. She was rapidly relaxing under the tender fingertips that brushed against her back.

Jamie took the arm from her torso and lifted the hand to her face, where she studied the ring by moonlight. A broad smile soon appeared and she began kissing each of those fingers. Erin moaned her approval. "Sweetheart?" Jamie lowered the hand back to her chest. "Do you still have the first ring I gave you?"

Erin answered without looking up. "Yes. When I took it off in Ireland, I wrapped it up and put it away. I could never have gotten rid of it."

Jamie softly cleared her throat. "Well, I was thinking, maybe we should give that ring...to our daughter...maybe on her eighteenth birthday. It can be the beginning of a family heirloom and she can pass it on. It still has very special meaning to me, to us."

Erin couldn't help herself. She let the happy tears fall from her eyes, knowing that all her dreams were really...finally going to come true. She rose to her elbow, brushing away the water and stared down at the smiling face. "Honey, that's a wonderful idea. You have such an incredibly romantic heart." She paused a moment. "There's only one problem." Jamie gave her a perplexed expression. "What if we have a boy?"

In a flash the tall woman flipped her smaller lover onto her back and hovered over her. "I'll guess we'll just have to keep trying until we get a girl." She smothered her with kisses. "And there is no time like the present to start practicing." Jamie jumped just bit as a cold hand brushed between her legs. She questioned with just a look.

"Just checking to see if you've been keeping something hidden from me," the blonde explained.

"Nope. But that, my love is just a technicality. I'm sure we'll come up with something."

Continued in Part 18.

The Athenaeum's Scroll Archive

~ Seeing You, Again For the First Time ~

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.

Love/Sex Disclaimer: This story depicts a loving relationship between two consenting, adult women and contains scenes of intimacy, but nothing explicit. If you are under 18 years of age or if this type of story is illegal in the state or country in which you live, please do not read it. If depictions of this nature disturb you, you may wish to read something other than this story.

Hurt/Comfort Disclaimer: Major angst ahead. But have faith and remember, I love a happy ending!

Thanks so much to my beta reader Barb.

No copy write infringement is intended in the use of the lyrics to the song "At Your Side".

This is the sequel to my first story, "At First Sight". I would recommend that you read that one first.

All comments are welcome at coleen30@webtv.net

I have also created a group for discussions of this, past and future stories. Maybe some sneak previews as well.

Join us at http://groups.yahoo.com/group/colleens_corner

Part 18

Chapter 18

Erin and Jamie quickly chose a mid October wedding date and that gave them only four and a half weeks to make all the arrangements. They had also decided to stay with their original plans of having the wedding at the ranch.

Saturday morning found the three Casey women in an intense pow wow with two phones, three tablets of paper, the L.A. yellow pages and a Rolodex between them. They had easily commandeered the dining room table and were hard at work making notes and calls. Jamie had offered her services, but quickly learned that she was sadly lacking in the knowledge of wedding etiquette. She soon left the work to the professionals and moved on to what she did do best...running her ranch.

She spent a few minutes playing with the exuberant dog, but Arte soon caught sight of a rabbit in the nearby tree line and took off at full speed for a good chase. Jamie laughed, watching until the four-footed beast disappeared into the tall timbers. Leaving the dog to her amusement, the rancher turned and headed back toward the huge barn. Halfway to her destination an intuition tickled at her brain telling her to detour to the far off field at the other side of the house. Following the confusing thought, Jamie backtracked. Along the way she snatched up a long blade of emerald grass and stripped the flora between her fingers as she absently walked the few hundred feet. Her thoughts drifted happily back to the bustle of activities inside the old

farmhouse and the twinkle that was in her lover's eyes. Erin's infectious grin brightened any room and raised the spirits of everyone in it.

Jamie had done a lot of contemplating since her memories had returned. She balanced her lonely and hurtful past, the pain she felt and the pain she inflicted, with her present. And it was almost unthinkable, but one single person, one beautiful Irish lass brought her immeasurable joy that far outweighed that old pain. And although there were still times, many times in fact when she felt unworthy, Jamie had come to graciously accept the wonder that had become her life. A life by the name of Erin Brienne Casey.

As if they had a mind of their own, her booted feet suddenly came to a halt in the middle of the field of knee high weeds. Jamie's focus returned to the moment and she looked up at the expanse of land, seeing nothing out of the ordinary. A tiny door slowly opened in a corner of her mind revealing one of those few still elusive memories. A smile suddenly lit upon her face and she whispered to the wind. "Of course." The rancher turned on her heels and hurried back to her original destination.

Jamie pulled the door shut behind her and settled into the comfortable chair behind the empty desk. The new office, which was connected to the barn, had just been completed the week before and the phone lines installed just the previous day. She studied the ads in the phone book, choosing the most promising one and dialing the number.

She ended the short phone call sometime later with a confident smile having set her plans in motion for the first of the week.

* * * *

Monday morning dawned bright and even earlier than usual for the occupants of the Casey, Sheridan household. The blonde author hopped out of bed and her lover's arms at 6 AM. Normally she loved to laze around next to the long body beside her, but they had a lifetime to do that and she only had a short time to finalize wedding plans. First on this day's agenda was ceremonial attire.

After showering...alone, Erin skipped down the back stairs to fix a big country breakfast. As good as she felt she could not survive on enthusiasm alone. She also knew that when she and her mother and sister got together for shopping their vision and everything else tunneled to those alluring shops.

Jamie followed about fifteen minutes later and took a seat at the table just as a fluffy, overstuffed omelet was slid onto her plate. "Wow, that looks delicious," she said.

"Thanks." Erin planted a kiss atop the dark head. She retrieved her own plate and the full coffee pot and took the place across from Jamie at the small table. "Jackson called a few minutes ago," she said. "He can't come in today because his son is sick." She looked up as Jamie stopped in mid chew. "Is something wrong? You and Dan can handle things, can't you?"

Jamie swallowed with just a little difficulty and wiped her mouth with the white napkin. Her eyes were deep in thought.

"Jamie?" Erin considered the situation. "If you can't, I can put off shopping until tomorrow."

"No!" The panicked blue eyes softened. "That's sweet of you to offer Honey, but we can handle it. I do have some other plans for today, but I still think I can take care of it all."

"Well...if you're sure."

"Absolutely. You go and have fun. After all this will be the only wedding dress you will ever have to buy."

Erin smiled, confident in that thought.

Jamie continued on with her meal, wondering where she could cut corners and save time. The thoughts tumbled around until she heard a noise coming from outside. The dark head cocked to one side as the sound grew louder. She eyed her partner warily.

Erin hurried with the last few bites of her food and chased it down with some coffee. "Sounds like Mom's early," she said. Erin left the table and headed for the front door.

The tall woman was quick on her heels. "Your Mom?" she asked. They walked out onto the porch and the question was immediately answered. Jamie stared wide-eyed at the helicopter in her front yard. *Helicopter!*

The author waved at her mother who was ducking under the whirling blades. "It's Daddy's," Erin explained. "He said we could use it any time. It'll save so much time getting back and forth to the city."

The rancher was still a little dumbstruck. "Yeah." She agreed sluggishly. "I guess it would."

The elder Casey woman entered the porch and greeted her daughter and soon to be daughter-in-law. "Good morning."

Erin hugged her. "Hey Mom. Traveling in style I see."

Danielle straightened her clothes, brushing off some dust from her pant legs. "Not exactly my favorite," she said. "But very convenient. Could I get a some coffee before we head out?"

"Sure." Erin held the door for her mother and followed her in until she realized someone was missing.

The screen door squeaked behind Jamie and she heard the footsteps on the cement. "There is a helicopter in my front yard," she said dully.

Erin grinned, took hold of her confused partner and turned her back toward the house. "Yes Dear, but the big, noisy machine won't hurt you."

Jamie shot an arched eyebrow in the direction of her condescending lover. Erin laughed out loud.

Danielle Casey finished a cup and a half of coffee before she indicated her readiness to leave for a day of shopping. The three ladies walked out to the front of the house where Jamie gave one more look and shook her head.

Erin wrapped her hands around the back of the taller woman's neck. "I should have warned you," she said, tipping her head to the obtrusive transportation.

Jamie returned the embrace and smirked. "I guess you are used to stuff like this huh?"

"Only because I grew up around it. It won't become a habit I promise."

Jamie hugged her lover and whispered in her ear. "Oh Honey don't mind me. It was certainly unexpected, but I guess I'm just suffering from those pre-wedding jitters." She pulled back and kissed Erin thoroughly. "You do whatever you feel is necessary and have a good time doing it." Jamie gave her an easy smile and a pat on the butt as she sent Erin off for the day.

The blonde stopped at the bottom of the stairs and looked back. "You don't mind if I wear a traditional, white, wedding gown do you?"

Jamie joined her and gave her another quick kiss. "Of course not. You don't mind if I don't do you? I'm just not the formal gown type. But you, my love, definitely are."

"Great." The golden brows suddenly furrowed. "What are you wearing though?"

Jamie flashed a dazzling smile. "You have your secrets, I have mine. I will be taking care of that detail tomorrow. You pick out whatever your heart's desire, but I do have one request...shoulders."

Erin laughed as did her nearby mother. "Don't worry Sweetheart, I know what you like."

Jamie waved as the machine ascended into the cloudless sky and stood there until it was out of sight. "Okay," she mumbled, looking at her watch. "I hope you are as reliable as your ad says, Darrin Brother's Construction."

By the time Jamie finished the morning dishes, she heard the rumble of a large truck rolling up the drive. She smiled.

* * * *

Mother and daughter had met Bridgett at the pre-arranged spot in downtown L.A. and had set immediately out on their hunt. Along the way they traded stories of the events surrounding

Bridgett's wedding, including one Danielle had never heard before, involving Erin, a stuffed monkey, a pair of handcuffs and a bachelorette party.

By one o'clock they had been to four different boutiques and Erin had seen at least twenty dresses that she liked...but none of them had that special something she was hoping for. In the last shop, Danielle had found a beautiful dress in a pale shade of lavender. She had almost as much difficulty finding something appropriate as Erin did. The perfect dress couldn't appear too matronly; after all she was still a young woman of 54. She was proud of every single year, but was in no hurry to push the aging process.

With the attendant's attire also chosen in the same shop, Erin was beginning to get slightly discouraged. After lunch they were heading off to Beverly Hills where the most stylish of designers sold their wares. *If I can't find anything there*, thought Erin as they entered a corner bistro, *it doesn't exist*. The light bulb suddenly ignited and so did a smile. *Maybe that's the answer*.

"So Sis, what are you getting Jamie for a wedding present?"

Bridgett's question snapped the author from her rumination over a dress. "Oh...I'm a...I'm working on something very special." Erin's features turned dreamy as she imagined her partner's response to the gift.

"That sounds wonderful Dear," said Danielle. "I know she'll love whatever you choose, because she loves you."

Bridgett grinned evilly as she stared at her sister. "Yes, but I want to know what this something very special is?"

The author tapped her nosey sister on the arm. "It's something very personal and if it happens and Jamie decides to talk about it afterward that's okay, but I will respect her privacy."

The red head huffed and sat back, her curiosity deflated. "Party pooper."

Erin sighed. "I will tell you one thing Bridgett, I really hope this works out because it will mean the world to Jamie."

* * * *

Erin bid her family goodbye and settled into the helicopter for the ride home. It was almost five thirty in the evening. Her feet hurt and she was hungry, but she was satisfied with a good day's shopping. She slipped a pair of headphones over her ears and let her choice of soothing music drown out the drone of the whirling blades above her head. The motion lulled her into a dreamless sleep and she didn't awaken until they had landed and the pilot was gently shaking her shoulder. She had totally missed the sight of the huge brown tent that had been erected in the field on the opposite side of the house.

Erin grabbed her packages, which included shoes, a new pair of emerald earrings and a blue garter that matched the shade of Jamie's eyes. But the author could just picture those orbs getting darker as soon as Jamie spied the accessory and its location.

The blonde was met on the porch and quickly relieved of her shopping bags. Jamie brushed her lips against Erin's. "One good thing about those," said Jamie, her voice rising above the noise of the chopper taking off, "you can't sneak up on me."

Erin laughed and escorted her tall partner inside the house where they were met by a very enthusiastic dog. The author dropped to her knees and kissed the furry head while Jamie placed the bags near the staircase. The dark haired rancher took a quick peak inside at the packages, but everything was well hidden. She turned back to see her lover flop, bonelessly onto the tan sofa.

Jamie joined the smaller woman and patted her leg. "I'll warm up some of Saturday's leftovers so you won't have to cook."

Erin made a very happy face. "Oooo, I love you," she said. "My aching feet love you even more." Her shoes were hurriedly stripped and ten very long fingers went to work on her right foot, rubbing away the day's tension. Erin hedonistically moaned as a strong thumb pressed deeply into her tired arch. After the fifteen-minute pleasure fest the session was topped off by a kiss to the bottom of each tired toe.

"I'm going to go get your slippers," said Jamie. "There is something I want to show you, but we have to go outside." She wondered to herself why Erin hadn't mentioned the large tent on the far lawn; from the sky it couldn't be missed. But she wasn't about to argue the fact. At least now it would be a total surprise.

She returned a few minutes later with the appropriate footwear. Jamie slipped them onto the cute feet and reached out a hand. "Come on, I'll give you a free ride."

Erin yawned and looked at her through concerned, but sleepy eyes. "Honey, your back."

"I'll just carry you to the back door," said Jamie. She shook the offered hand. "Come on."

Erin reluctantly climbed on to Jamie's back and wrapped her legs around the slim waist. Together they jogged through the house and onto the back porch where Jamie stopped and her passenger disembarked.

The rancher was a bit hesitant about her next request. She had spent much of her time lately reviewing her revived memories of her months spent with Erin, when the author had been blind. She remembered how in awe she was at the things Erin could accomplish despite her handicap. But she also remembered the touch of sadness she could detect from time to time. And she certainly didn't want to hurt the woman she loved in any way. "Would you...would it bother you to close your eyes?" she finally asked. "I want this to be a surprise."

Erin gave her a small smile and lowered her lids without hesitation. Her right hand curled around the solid bicep and she followed Jamie out the door. It all came rushing back to her...the skills she had learned in order to live life as a blind person. A whisp of melancholy fluttered over her, but blew away with the wind that soon brushed her cheek. Obviously, she knew when they turned the corner and headed right around the house, but her other, still sharp, senses came alive as well. She felt the warmth of the low evening sun on the left side of her face. She strongly detected the unique barn scents coming from behind them and she felt the texture of the grass change from the freshly mowed lawn to the taller, wild grasses of the far field. It was actually good to know that she hadn't lost any of those abilities. But one thing she still couldn't sense was the surprise. "Come on Jamie, give me a hint," she begged. "What did you get me?"

Jamie leaned down to an ear. "No chance. Besides," she said aloud, "We're almost there." A few more steps and the couple came to a stop. Jamie stepped aside. "Okay, open your eyes."

Erin blinked twice and took in the huge, brown, canvas tent. She looked at her partner and grinned. "My own circus?"

Jamie responded to the little joke with a half smile. She took Erin's hand and led her forward. Lifting the flap, she carefully watched the blonde's expression as they stepped inside. The back of the tent had been left open and the daylight streamed in to illuminate the round, wooden structure. The author quietly stepped up onto the platform and ran her hands over the delicately carved spindles.

"Is it okay?" Jamie asked. "I once promised you a beautiful place to take our vows; a gazebo and a garden of flowers. I didn't want to disappoint you."

Erin stepped up to Jamie, smiled brightly and wrapped her arms around the tall body. "It is perfect," she said. "And we are going to have a perfect ceremony."

They headed back to the house arm in arm. Jamie glowed knowing she had accomplished her goal...making Erin happy. That's all she ever wanted to do, for the rest of her life. "So did you find a dress?" she asked.

Erin sighed wearily. "Yes. It wasn't easy, but I got exactly what I wanted."

Jamie squeezed the trim waist and flashed a private smile. "Me too."

* * * *

The next two weeks passed by in orderly fashion. All the wedding plans had been finalized and everything had come together with out too many problems.

On Friday afternoon, two weeks before the big day, two special deliveries arrived at the ranch. Erin took the large package addressed to her and tucked it away in the back of her closet to hide it from a pair of blue eyes. The other delivery, a black garment bag with Jamie's name clearly attached, hung in the corner of the room taunting her with its mystery. Erin went on about her

household chores, but her attention kept returning to the dark bag, knowing the contents, but not knowing the specifics. And the myriad possibilities fueled her fantasies as the afternoon progressed.

The blonde author stood at the stove preparing the evening meal as one of those visions took center stage in her mind. She didn't hear the back door open or the footsteps come up behind her.

"What's for dinner?"

Erin jumped and the large, wooden spoon flew from her hand. "Jamie!"

The tall rancher laughed. "What did I do?" she asked as she bent to retrieve the utensil.

Erin was obviously flustered. The flush on her cheeks glared like a siren. "Well...you...I..." She put a reign on her mumbling tongue and sighed heavily. "You didn't do anything. I'm sorry. I was...distracted."

Jamie took a large sniff of what was cooking on the stovetop. "And just what had you so distracted?" she asked.

Without a word, the author turned down the flame under the large pan and took her lover by the hand. Jamie obligingly followed her to the living room. The right side of her mouth turned up when she spotted her package hanging in the corner. "I see that my wedding clothes arrived."

Erin turned on her. "I don't see," she said, stepping closer and wrapping her arms around Jamie's waist. She batted flirtatious lashes and slowly moved forward. "Can I?" she asked seductively.

Jamie indulged deeply in the kiss that followed and Erin pulled away to find the tall woman lost in a lustful daze. The author took the momentary distraction and reached for the zipper of the garment bag. A large hand stopped her.

"Uh,uh,uh," scolded Jamie. "I can't see yours, you can't see mine." She kissed the sulking cheek. "But that only goes for our wedding attire. I would be more than happy to show you anything else."

Erin wasn't happy at that moment, but later that night she took Jamie up on her last offer and the mysterious clothing was soon forgotten...mostly.

* * * *

The next evening, after a long days work, Jamie returned to the house with a slightly perplexed expression. She assured her partner that nothing was wrong, but she did have something to tell Erin. And she worried how her lover would react.

After dinner they moved to the swing on the back porch. The smell of rain permeated the air and dark clouds began drifting across the horizon, but the air still carried the heat of an Indian

summer day. Erin slipped into the seat and kicked the swing into motion. "You want to talk about it yet?" she asked cautiously.

Jamie took her hand and gave it a reassuring squeeze. "I got a call this afternoon."

"From who?"

Jamie took a swallow of her beer to coat her suddenly dry throat. "From Leah, Leah Curry. You remember the nurse I became friends with during my recovery?"

A nodding head was Erin's only acknowledgement.

Jamie went on to explain. "I had written her a letter when we got back from Ireland. She had asked me to keep in touch."

"What did she wa...have to say?" Erin's tone was slightly harsh.

Jamie diverted her gaze to the horses grazing in the far pasture. "She's moving back to the states and she wants to come and visit me...us." She rushed to add. "I told her all about you and the wedding and she's really anxious to meet you."

Erin had hurriedly crossed the porch where she began pulling dead leaves from the plant hanging in the corner. "You invited her here without asking me first?" She asked the question with a stiff jaw.

"I...ah...didn't think... You didn't have a problem with it when I first told you about her."

Erin spun around. "That's because she was a few thousand miles away and not in my house."

Jamie slammed the beer bottle down on the side table a little harder than she should have. "Well I thought this was my house too Erin. Can't I invite a friend over without having your permission?"

Erin crossed her arms over her chest and stared defiantly at the blue eyes across from her. "She's not just a friend Jamie, she's your ex-lover."

"I don't believe I'm hearing this from you," said Jamie. "You don't understand what she meant to me."

Erin pierced her with an icy glare, her eyes made even greener with the emotion that was boiling inside of her.

The tall woman jumped to her feet and pointed a long finger. "Don't give me that look! You know what I mean! I didn't and I don't love her. She just helped my time there to not be so lonely. We slept together one time out of comfort, not out of passion or even lust...at least not on my part." That last little admission didn't really do much to help the situation.

Erin certainly didn't want that vision in her head and she shook it away violently. "Exactly!" she shouted. "Don't you think it's awfully strange that she is all of a sudden moving here? She is going to live in California, isn't she?"

Jamie sighed. "Yes." She paused. "Don't you trust me?"

"I don't trust her." Erin sneered.

"You don't even know her."

"And I'm not anxious to."

"Excuse me, but didn't we just invite your first lover to our wedding? A woman you didn't just sleep with once, but many times over many months?"

The accusation took Erin off guard for just a moment. "That was a long time before I ever met you. And you know that Megan is married to someone else now."

Jamie threw her hands in the air. "And that makes a difference? You told me you loved her, how am I supposed to feel about that?"

"You...I...that just..." The author suddenly stuttered helplessly. "I can see this conversation isn't getting us anywhere."

Jamie jumped from the porch and started across the patch of yard. "You're right, it isn't. I'll be back later. I need to think about some things." She got about ten steps when she was hit with another memory of another time when she had run off after an argument. And she remembered the promise she had made then. Jamie slowly turned to see Erin leaning against the large, white post. The blonde's back was to Jamie and her shoulders were visibly shaking. Jamie's heart broke and she ran back up the two steps and pulled the smaller woman around and into her arms. "I'm sorry," she said, rubbing Erin's back "I'm so sorry I made you..." Jamie pulled back when she heard the unmistakable sounds. "...laugh?"

The blonde head shook from side to side. "What was that all about?" she asked, still laughing. "I have no need to be jealous. I know you love me."

They both laughed, feeling the tension drain from their tired bodies. Jamie hugged her again. "Yes, I do know you love me," she said. "I think that was just a big dose of nerves; not about our marriage," she assured, "just about the wedding." She cupped her hands around the slightly pale face. "I'm not jealous of Megan...well not really. All of your friends are welcomed in our home. I'll call Leah and explain things to her."

"No. She was your friend...and I may not understand just how important she was to you, but I really don't want to take that away from you. I'm sorry. Besides I think I do need to meet her."

"Well, how about a compromise. I'll ask her if she can post-pone her visit until after our honeymoon. I don't want to put any more stress on you than necessary right now."

The author nodded. "Okay."

"You honestly have nothing to worry about Sweetheart." Jamie assured her. "She was important in that time of my life. But you are and always will be **the** most important person in my life for the rest of my life."

Erin smiled. "I know that. Do you?"

Jamie smiled. "Oh yeah."

* * * *

Erin jumped when she heard the front, screen door slam shut. She ran from the kitchen listening to the angered voice reverberating off the walls. "Jamie what is it, what's wrong?"

"Damn him!" Red faced, Jamie paced across the room with her hands on her hips, steam nearly coming from her ears. "I don't believe it! The guy is such a bastard." She finally noticed her lover patiently waiting for the tantrum to pass. The rancher took a very deep breath and released it slowly. "I'm sorry Honey," she said as Erin approached.

"How is Jackson?"

Jamie removed her dark Stetson and tossed it onto the coffee table. She dropped onto the sofa and reached for her boot. "His foot is broken," she explained. With a small huff, the footwear was pulled free and discarded.

Jackson Fields, one of the ranch hands, had jumped down from the back of a pickup truck while unloading hay bales and Jamie had taken him to the local clinic. The same place where the rancher and the author had been treated with less than kindness after their encounter with a bolt of lightning.

Jamie's preoccupied mind continued it's angered line of thought. "Stupid!"

"Jamie, it was an accident. You can't blame Jackson."

The dark head looked up. "What? No, no I'm not mad at him. It's that damn doctor over at the clinic. He was out front when I brought Jackson in and because he was with me that...so called doctor kept us waiting for over an hour. Not only that, but he took two people ahead of us including a woman who only had a cold and another man who came in after us and was only getting a few stitches removed."

Now Erin's temper flared. "He kept a man in obvious pain waiting for that long? Something has to be done about this Jamie."

"I know." She rubbed her weary eyes. "And we will." Jamie pulled her partner in for a hug, which always soothed her soul from whatever ills it suffered. "Jackson will be off for six weeks."

"Can you hire a temporary hand?" Erin asked.

"I could, but I think Dan and I can handle it."

The blonde pulled out of Jamie's arms and gave her a look. "Have you forgotten that you will be gone for over a week during that time?"

The rancher fell back against the cushion and a puff of air escaped her pursed lips. "Right. I'll a...I'll work it out. Don't worry, nothing will interfere with our honeymoon."

Erin smiled and took her partner's hand. "I just don't want you to have any concerns to distract you while we're gone."

Jamie grinned deliciously and leaned forward. "Never happen," she said with a growl. "You are always my primary focus."

The author laughed as kisses were planted behind her ear. "I wasn't worried about me," she said. "I just want you to be able to relax and enjoy yourself."

Jamie cupped the author's face. "In case you didn't know it by now, you are my joy."

* * * *

Jamie tightened her grasp and snickered. "Don't move around so much," she scolded gently, rubbing the yellow head. "I know you've never had anyone attending to your behind like this before, but it won't hurt if you don't tense up."

"How would you know? Have you ever had...?"

"Okay, okay!" Jamie interrupted quickly. "Can we just concentrate on doing this?" She grunted as the weight was pressed into her and she pushed back, nearly losing her footing.

"If this is too much for you, I could ask someone else."

"No, no," said Jamie. "I can do this. I just need to get a better grip." The tall woman adjusted her sweaty hands, planted her feet and held tight, pushing forward slightly. "Okay, I got it now." She spoke as the perspiration started to trickle down the side of her face.

A few minutes passed and the warm air in the small room was filled with more groans and snorts. Jamie's eyes were wide and she only winced slightly as she watched the instrument moving in and out of the pink flesh in a steady rhythm.

"Almost there."

One more quick, jerky movement and it was over. It was safe to say that everyone in the room was now relieved. With a heavy sigh, Jamie stepped back and released the leather harness. She wiped the wet bangs from her eyes and smiled. "That wasn't really as bad as you thought it would be, was it?" She asked, planting a kiss on the soft nose.

"Are you asking me or the horse?" said Dr. Chad Benton as he gathered his medical equipment and moved out from behind the big mare.

Jamie's horse, Teegan, had gotten a large splinter of wood from one of the older fences stuck in her golden hindquarters. As soon as the rancher discovered the injury, a quick call brought the handsome vet out almost immediately. The suddenly skittish horse had required some extra soothing as sutures closed the wound and Jamie wouldn't leave that job to anyone else.

The tall doctor removed a small vile and a syringe from his supplies. "I put in nine stitches," he said as he prepared the injection. "I'll give her something to prevent infection. Don't let the sight get wet and don't ride her for a couple of days."

Jamie nodded as she watched her horse turn away after getting the shot. The big, yellow mare munched on some fresh hay as the humans walked from the warmth of the barn out into the fresh air.

"Any other problems while I'm here?" the vet asked.

"No, no problems." Jamie checked her watch as they headed back toward the house. "How about lunch?" she asked.

The big man chuckled. "Why do think I always make my visits around this time. I hate to eat alone."

Jamie chuckled him in the arm with her fist. "And here I thought you were just the most dedicated vet in California."

"Oh, I am, the free meal is just an enjoyable perk."

Ten minutes later, Jamie returned to the back porch with a tray of leftover fried chicken and a bowl of coleslaw. They had decided to eat on the picnic table in the back yard because the weather was so nice. Letting her guest help himself, Jamie watched as the big man devoured his food with gusto.

He stopped long enough for a breath and a compliment. "Oh man that is so delicious."

The rancher smiled. "You have Erin to thank for that."

Chad took a long swallow of his coke and looked back toward the house expectantly. I was hoping Erin would have joined us for lunch. There's something I've been wanting to ask her."

Jamie wiped her greasy fingers on the napkin as she listened very closely to the tone of his voice. "Erin is gone for the day." She told him then chuckled humorlessly. "You know Chad, if I didn't know better I'd think you were interested in Erin." The dark head shook, dismissing the absurd idea.

"Oh, I am interested in her," the vet plainly stated.

The rancher nearly choked on her food. Jamie wiped her mouth and cleared her tight throat, trying to push back the jealousy that was seeping up from her heart. "Chad, maybe you didn't quite understand. When I said that Erin was my partner, I meant life partner. We're gay and we're getting married next week." The tone of her voice had gotten deeper with every emphatic word.

The man's blue eyes widened as Jamie spoke. He saw her right hand flex, almost forming a fist and for just a second he feared being punched in the face. Suddenly he let loose with a gigantic laugh.

Jamie jumped back in surprise and stared at her friend, who was doubled over and slapping at the table with his left hand. "Mind telling me what is so funny?" she finally asked.

"Oh, Jamie if you could only see your face." He stopped laughing long enough to take a drink of his coke, which was nearly snorted back out his nose as he caught another glimpse of the seething blue eyes. He coughed a few times then was finally able to calm himself. Still smiling, he explained. "I'm interested in Erin's writing. I'm a fan of her book. You have nothing to worry about my friend." His glance darted away quickly and he cleared his throat again. "Although...I should tell you the truth. I probably do have a little crush on her. I think she is intelligent and caring and just a wonderful human being. But I do not fantasize about her or have any notions of having a romantic relationship with her. First off, because I know she is gay, but more importantly, I know that she is completely in love with you."

Jamie was now chagrined about her assumptions. She tipped her dark head to one side. "How do you know that?" she asked quietly.

"Because I know you love her the same. I see it in your face every time her name is mentioned. You belong together like no two people I've ever seen."

She took the offered hand and shook it in true friendship. "In that case, we would like to invite you to our wedding on the thirteenth."

"I wouldn't miss it."

* * * *

Jamie turned over, her body on automatic, and wrapped her arms around the body in front of her. She leaned forward and took a sniff of the sweet smelling, blonde hair. "It's eight o'clock Rin," she mumbled. "I don't think we can sleep any later. We've got a busy day ahead."

Eyes fluttered open and with a small stretch, Erin moved onto her back. She smiled and gave her lover a quick kiss. "Good morning."

"Good morning." Jamie yawned and threw her legs over the side of the bed. "I want to get all the barn work done before your friend gets here." She grabbed her robe and stepped into the other room.

Erin's friend, Dr. Anne Carson was coming to stay the weekend. The wedding was the next Saturday and she would be returning to the ranch as a guest...at least the author hoped she would, but Erin wanted to be able to spend some quality time with her old friend before then. Erin had a full day's worth of relaxing activities planned for the three of them. It was important to her that Jamie and Anne like each other. Jamie had been ill the first time she met Anne and the doctor had been making a professional visit. Their next encounter came when were Erin had been attacked by Ethan Tyler. And there was no time for forming friendships around all the tense and conflicting emotions. This was a day for old bonds to be renewed and new ones formed.

Erin had heard the touch of melancholy in her old friend's voice the last time they had talked and she was concerned. The doctor was lonely, having yet to find her life mate, but the author detected more behind the normally exuberant doctor's hushed tones. While Erin didn't think she could do much to help as far as match making was concerned, she was anxious to help in any other way she could. And Dr. Carson might just be the solution to a problem Erin had wanted to tackle.

Jamie returned from her short trip to the bathroom and went to the oak dresser on the opposite side of the room. She stood there tapping her fingers on the hard top as her other hand rested on one the drawer's handles.

"Don't tell me you are trying to decide what to wear?" Erin asked jokingly.

Jamie shook her head. "No. I just...never mind." She proceeded to pull out a short sleeved, red t-shirt and slowly eased it over her head. Jamie then grabbed the old pair of work jeans from the chair where she had tossed them the night before and slipped into them. Taking her brown boots, the rancher moved back to the bed and sat down. The footwear dropped to the ground with a thud and Jamie studied the view out the second floor window. She finally pushed her foot into one of the dusty boots, but stopped before reaching for it twin.

Erin could read her lover's moods and knew instantly that a question was scurrying around inside the dark head, just waiting to be asked. She rubbed the long back. "What's up Sweetheart?"

Jamie glanced back over her shoulder then looked away quickly. "I know I shouldn't be asking this...especially after the fight we had the other day...but I just can't seem to stop thinking about it. You don't have to answer, but I would like to know."

"I can't answer until you ask me the question."

Jamie took a deep breath. "I know. Were you and Anne ever...did you ever...?"

Erin grinned and was glad her lover was turned away. In truth she liked knowing Jamie was just a little jealous; that was flattering. At the beginning of their relationship, she had told Jamie that she had only one other lover in her life, but Jamie obviously still didn't remember that small fact and Erin didn't want to remind her of those things that were still lost to her. "Jamie," she said softly. She waited until the blue eyes looked her way. Erin patted the empty place beside her and the jean clad bottom scooted back across the wrinkled sheets. "I'm going to tell you the complete truth," said the author. "Anne was a senior and I was a junior. We both had some really tough tests one Friday and when the classes were over and we were pretty confident that we passed, we decided to celebrate. She went out and got some beer and we had a little party, just the two of us."

Jamie nodded, sure of where this was leading.

Erin continued. "I had more beer that night than I had ever had in my life. That combined with the relief over the hard exams...well lets just say I was feeling fine. And so was Anne. We were giggling and goofing off and she tackled me to the bed and started tickling me. At one point her face was right above mine and...it just seemed like the right thing to do, so we kissed. And we kept kissing. Did I mention that we were just in our underwear?"

Jamie bit the side of her lip. "No, you seem to have forgotten that little fact."

Erin watched her lover's jaw clench and she knew she shouldn't be so tormenting...but it was the truth. "Anyway, you have to remember that we were both drunk. Anne was on top, but I wanted to be so I rolled us over...and right off the bed."

Jamie looked up to see the teasing smile.

"That pretty much ended it, especially since I landed on a beer bottle." Erin watched closely as her lover processed the information and how the sides of her lips twitched.

The rancher didn't want to laugh, but the vision of some sloppy kissing, drunken groping and the tumble became hilarious. Slowly a laugh bubbled up from Jamie's belly and burst from her mouth.

Erin loved the reaction; it was exactly what she had hoped for. "Nothing else ever happened after that," she said. "And we didn't want it to. It would have affected our friendship. I didn't mean to tease you Sweetheart, but you asked."

In one quick movement, Jamie stripped the blanket from her lover and covered the length of Erin's body with her own. "That's okay, I needed a good laugh." Jamie kissed her nose then dipped lower to taste the pink lips. Her hand drifted down until it came to rest on Erin's solid behind. She gave it a squeeze then suddenly pulled away from the kiss. "Honey, the scar you have on your butt...did that happen then?"

"Yep. Imagine my explanation to the emergency room doctor."

Jamie winced. "That must have hurt."

"Couldn't sit down for a few days. Even thinking about it now makes it tingle...or maybe that's because of your hand."

Jamie gave the spot in question another gentle rub. "Tonight I'll kiss it and make it all better. But...speaking of stitches. Chad was over here the other day stitching up Teegan and I found out something very interesting. He has a crush on you."

"Aww, that's sweet."

Jamie hung her head in shame. "I didn't think it was too sweet at the time. I guess I was jealous of him too. I'm sorry."

Erin considered it again and explained. "A little jealousy is okay Jamie." She lifted the drooping chin. "But neither one of us is ever going to seriously worry about it."

Jamie smiled slightly, leaving Erin to wonder.

* * * *

The air sizzled as Jamie dropped three thick steaks onto the red-hot grill. The steam quickly began to rise, carrying with it the hickory aroma of the coals and the flavorful scents of the cooking meat.

Out of the corner of her eye she caught sight of Erin crossing the yard with a plate of appetizers. The blonde joined her old friend at the round picnic table and she and Anne were soon immersed once again in happy conversation. Jamie wanted to give them as much time alone as possible, but the smell of the food and her grumbling stomach soon motivated her to take a quick trip across the grass. As inconspicuously as possible, the rancher kissed the top of the golden head and reached for a large, stuffed mushroom, which she promptly bit into as she walked back to the house.

"You have got to be the luckiest woman on earth Erin," Anne said. "Jamie is an absolute doll and I can see that she treats you like a queen."

"Well, I can't argue with any of that and she certainly is the best thing that ever happened to me, but what I like best about our relationship is the equality...in every way, shape and form. Not that any relationship can ever be perfect, but we do try our hardest to make it so."

Anne leaned forward and whispered jokingly. "She doesn't happen to have a twin does she?"

The question took Erin a little off guard. The joke was a little cliché; that was just Anne's particular type of dry humor. But it was also true or it had been at one time. But above all else, Erin respected her partner's privacy and was sensitive to Jamie's feelings about her deceased family. She responded simply. "No."

The lack of a witty comeback surprised the good doctor, but she let it pass without question.

Jamie returned ten minutes later, carrying a huge tin tub filled with ice and assorted drinks. She hefted it onto the wooden table with an audible grunt and slipped onto the bench next to her lover. "Help yourself Anne," she said. The doctor quickly chose a can of beer, causing Jamie to snicker.

Doctor Carson popped the top on the silver can and wasted no time quenching her immediate thirst. The ice-cold beverage slid down her throat with just a little tingle and settled into her belly with the warmth of familiarity. She hadn't indulged in any alcoholic drink in over three years, since she had started work at the hospital. She just never knew when she would be called in and didn't want to take the chance. But this weekend she had no pager clipped to her belt and only carried her personal cell. She was two hours away from the bustle of the hospital and she was determined to enjoy every peaceful moment of her very short vacation.

Just as Anne lifted the can to her mouth for a second sip, Jamie said, "Don't worry there isn't a beer bottle in sight."

Doctor Carson processed the comment for just a second then her brown eyes went wide. She pinned her blonde friend with a silly expression. "Erin! You were so embarrassed that night, you said you would never tell anyone that story!"

The author took her partner's hand. "Anyone but the love of my life."

"So Anne, do you have any other embarrassing stories about my future wife?" asked Jamie.

"Wife! Are really engaged?" The author proudly held out her ring, which was thoroughly inspected. "Erin it's beautiful." The doctor jumped up and hugged her friend. "I'm so happy for you." She then included Jamie. "I wish you all the best. But I know you are going to have a great life together. And you both deserve it. So when's the wedding?"

Erin scratched the side of her jaw. "Ah...next Saturday. I know it's short notice, but I wanted to invite you in person. Can you make it?"

"Nothing will keep me away."

* * * *

After totally indulging themselves in decadent ice cream sundaes, a little exercise was called for. Jamie readied three horses and they set out to show Anne around the huge ranch. The doctor knew how to ride, but hadn't been in many years so it took her a while to get comfortable in the saddle.

The early fall day was slightly overcast, but not a drop of rain was in sight. The tips of the tall tress swayed slightly in the gentle breeze, their leaves, just showing a hint of the vibrant color to follow, rustled a poetic melody of peace.

Jamie quietly tugged on the reins and guided them left into a grove of small trees. The horse beneath her had trod over this path on many occasions and snorted in anticipation of getting a drink of the cool, fresh water just ahead.

Anne sighed heavily, breaking the silence. "My God, this is the most beautiful place I have ever seen," she said bringing her steed to a halt at the water's edge. She followed her companion's lead and dismounted. Picking up a small stone by her foot, the doctor tossed it into the shallow brook. She relished the soft earth beneath her feet and the fresh pine scent softly invading her lungs. The hard, solid floor she was used to standing on ten to twelve hours a day and the pungent aroma of antiseptic and the haunting smell of blood were not at all missed. Nor was the hectic pace. "You guys are so lucky," said Anne. "I wish I could find a peaceful place like this to escape to. Sometimes, especially lately I...the stress at the hospital is really getting to me. There is not a moment's quiet time during the whole day. Even now I can't stop thinking about the dozen or more things I'll have to do on Monday."

Erin stood by listening to her old friend's ramblings and feeling the woman's frustration.

Anne took a deep and absently rubbed the muscles in her neck. "I'm thinking about leaving the hospital for a private practice."

"That's what you always talked about back in college," said Erin. "I always wondered why you changed your mind."

Anne's brown, curly hair swished as her head fell to her chest. "I let myself be talked into it by one of my professors. He said that's where all the important work was done. Don't get me wrong, I love helping the people, but they just pass through and I never know what happens to most of them. And I'm always too busy to do follow ups. I would just like to be able to sit down and have a conversation with a patient once in a while." She looked up and saw the compassion on her friend's faces. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't be laying all this on you. I wanted to come out here and have fun."

Erin hugged the sad woman. "Anne, I want you to be able to talk to me about anything. Friends are for more than just fun."

"I know that...and I love you for it. But right now that's enough of my problems."

The author took some cubes of sugar from her pocket and treated the horses before they all started back to the house. "You know Anne, I certainly don't want to add to your frustrations, but I could use some of your professional advice."

"That's all right. What's up?"

Erin took her partner's hand as the three of them walked back down the path through the forest. "Jamie and I have discovered that the emergency systems up here are..."

"Scary," offered the dark haired rancher.

"Yeah." Erin continued. "There is only one nearby clinic and it's relatively small and I seriously doubt that it could handle much more than a simple broken bone."

"Not to mention that it is run by one very homophobic doctor," said Jamie. "I also discovered that the nearest, major emergency facility is almost forty minutes away."

Anne's brown eyes went wide. "That's ludicrous!"

"Exactly," Erin said. "That's why I have been seriously considering funding a new, larger clinic. One with a well equipped lab, is amply staffed and that would be prepared for emergency surgeries."

Anne nodded seriously. "Sounds like exactly what you need. There is something else you might want to consider since the area up here is so spread out. There is a new emergency vehicle that is a step up from just an ambulance. It allows for emergency surgical procedures in the field."

Erin and Jamie's eyes met and each smiled, knowing that their thoughts were running along the same track. "Then I have just made up my mind to do that," said the blonde author. "I'll get started on it when we get back from our honeymoon."

"I have some business contacts at the hospital that I can put you in touch with. You'll also need to do some serious research to find the right person to put in charge. Although I wouldn't expect you to do anything less, I've just heard about too many private clinics going under simply because of poor management."

Erin glanced over to the serious doctor and grinned knowingly. "Actually, I already know someone who is highly qualified for the job. Someone who loves the people more than the salary. So how about it?"

"How about what?"

Erin stopped along the path and turned to look her friend straight in the eye. "I would like to hire you to run this new clinic. I trust you to make this project work more than anyone else I know."

Anne sucked in a surprised breath. "Wow! I...I don't know what to say."

"This could be the private practice you said you wanted, plus you get the peace and beauty of the country. I promise you that your skills would be very appreciated."

The doctor's unbelieving expression relaxed into a soft grin. "I'll give it some very serious consideration, Erin. Thank you."

Jamie mounted her golden horse and waited for her companions to do the same. "I believe there is a Scrabble board waiting for us back at the house. Anyone up for a little friendly competition?"

"That reminds me," said Anne, "Erin ever tell you that she invented strip Scrabble?"

The blonde groaned and scrubbed her reddening face. A quick click of her heels sent her white stead off in a gallop, leaving her grinning friends behind in a cloud of dust.

Jamie turned to the doctor. "Strip Scrabble huh?"

"Yep."

"Interesting. I'll have to remember that."

Anne chuckled. "I'm sure you will."

Continued in Part 19.

The Athenaeum's Scroll Archive

~ Seeing You, Again For the First Time ~

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.

Love/Sex Disclaimer: This story depicts a loving relationship between two consenting, adult women and contains scenes of intimacy, but nothing explicit. If you are under 18 years of age or if this type of story is illegal in the state or country in which you live, please do not read it. If depictions of this nature disturb you, you may wish to read something other than this story.

Hurt/Comfort Disclaimer: Major angst ahead. But have faith and remember, I love a happy ending!

Thanks so much to my beta reader Barb.

No copy write infringement is intended in the use of the lyrics to the song "At Your Side".

This is the sequel to my first story, "At First Sight". I would recommend that you read that one first.

All comments are welcome at colleen30@webtv.net

I have also created a group for discussions of this, past and future stories. Maybe some sneak previews as well.

Join us at http://groups.yahoo.com/group/colleens_corner

Part 19 (Conclusion)

Chapter 19

Erin picked up the silver brush and worked it through her short hair one more time. She caught a glimpse of the face looking back at her and was startled at the huge grin painted there. A pink tongue poked out and the author laughed at the silliness of her own image in the mirror. She grabbed a little black case from the dressing table and dusted her cheeks with just a small amount of pink powder.

There was total silence in the room around her, giving her the time to reflect on her past and more importantly her future. It had been an emotionally hectic nine months and it was easy to say that the six months before that were not exactly perfect either. And while there were some things that Erin would go back and change if she could, it was certainly a glorious place that the journey had led to. Jamie was waiting for her just a few feet away; waiting to start, hand in hand, down a fresh path. Waiting to begin an exciting new adventure that they would shape together.

The smile had returned. She just couldn't stop it and certainly didn't want to.

As Erin sat there preparing for her wedding her nerves began to twitch. To occupy her mind and dispel the nervous energy she thought back to the very recent past, the turmoil, tears and utter joy that had filled the previous two days.

* * * *

Thursday morning had brought a cool rain shower to the area and a similar forecast for Saturday's weather. Although that thought did float around the back of Erin's mind, she kept hope alive and figured a few prayers wouldn't hurt either.

The day had started out on another bad note as well.

After a breakfast on the run, Jamie was off to the barn even earlier than usual. She was doing double duty since she had yet to find a temporary replacement for her injured ranch hand and the work had to be done by ten o'clock. Erin's grandmother was arriving from Ireland for the wedding and they both wanted to be there to meet her plane. On top of all that, Erin's parents were throwing them an informal engagement party that evening at the ranch and there were some things to prepare for that as well.

The author stepped from the shower and wrapped the towel around her well-toned body. Moving barefoot across the tiled floor, Erin passed by the small window and noticed the car pulling up the drive. "Oh great!" Erin huffed, water droplets running down the side of her face. "Who could

that be?" They definitely weren't expecting anyone that early. She stood there for just a few seconds more to see who would emerge from the sporty, black car. A pair of long legs slid out the door first followed some time later by a barely legal blue skirt. Just as the sight of dark hair appeared the author mumbled, "Who in the...?" The question was quickly answered, but hesitantly accepted when the face, obviously belonging to someone of Asian decent, came into view. "Oh no. I thought Jamie was going to stop her." Erin grudgingly stuffed her arms into her robe, quickly wrapped a small towel around her dripping head and ran for the stairs.

The visitor was about to knock for the third time when the door was flung open. She jumped back slightly and her brown eyes popped when the small, damp blonde appeared. "I'm sorry," she said. "Do I have the right address? I'm looking for Jane...Jamie Sheridan."

The author gave a tight little smile. Here she was, staring at a woman who rivaled her lover's height and while not coming close to Jamie's beauty, the statuesque lady was undeniably attractive. Her silky, midnight hair flowed down most of her back, nearly skimming her tiny waist. The dark eyes topped perfect, china doll features and her golden toned skin was flawless. Continuing the curious tour, Erin took note of the well-endowed bosom. *Did Jamie say that this woman was a nurse or a model?* On the whole, Erin was very confident with her looks, but there were times, when standing beside certain women of exceptional height, that she just felt short and dumpy. Not Jamie though. Jamie always made her feel petite, but very beautiful. Taking another quick gander at the newcomer on her porch Erin thought, *dumpy days are here again.* The author finally found her manors and her voice. "No...I mean, yes Jamie does live here. You must be Leah. Come in." She stepped aside and allowed her visitor entry. "Please excuse me, I was in the shower."

"That's quite alright," said Leah. "Perhaps I'm here too early, but I am very anxious to see...Jamie." The nurse tipped her head. "I'm not used to calling her by that name."

Erin did her best to raise a defining eyebrow. *Yes, but that is her name. Jamie. My Jamie.* "I...umm...Jamie is working out in the field. And if she didn't take her phone, I can't reach her. But have a seat and I'll give her a call." She stepped into the hall and took a deep breath.

Leah could feel the tension aimed in her direction. "I could come back this afternoon," she suggested.

Erin gave her hair a good scrub and lowered the towel to her neck. "Ah no," she said, dialing the phone. "Jamie and I will be leaving later today. She wasn't really expecting you." The phone rang once and then two more times. Erin punched a button and walked back into the living room. "Sorry, she's not answering."

"Oh. I can wait in the car then," said Leah. "There was a mix up over at the inn and my room won't be ready until one, but..."

The author's upbringing sprang up and tapped her on the shoulder. While a stranger to her, this woman was a friend of her partner. Erin was trying very hard not to see this woman as a threat

and she was determined to be a good hostess. "I don't know exactly when Jamie will be back, but you are welcomed to wait here. If you'll excuse me, I'll get changed."

"Why of all days?" Erin mumbled as she discarded her robe and rooted around in the dresser for some clothes. "We have way to much to do today. We can't play hostess. Jamie said she would stop Leah from coming. Why would she lie to me?" The blonde head shook fervently. "No. She wouldn't. There has to be some other explanation." Erin gave her hair a quick blow dry and took the time to try and quell the stampede pounding in her stomach.

Fifteen minutes and a swallow of antacid calmed Erin's trembling body to something a kin to a peaceful state. As the author prepared to return to her guest, the phone rang. Hoping it was her partner Erin hastily grabbed the receiver from the nightstand.

Ten minutes later she hung up after a confidence building conversation with her mother. Erin apprehension's had all but disappeared...until she reached the bottom of the stairs and turned the corner. There she found her lover in the arms of their guest. Erin loudly and not at all subtly cleared her throat. Jamie immediately pulled from the embrace and Erin's jaw fell open as she saw the rancher's shirt hanging open revealing her white bra and a good amount of cleavage.

* * * *

A few hours later Erin was on her way to the L.A. airport...alone. *I am not jealous. I am not jealous. I am not jealous...as long as she keeps her hands off my girl.* Erin released a large puff of air that tousled her golden bangs. She glimpsed herself in the rear view mirror and wasn't thrilled with what she saw there. *A little jealousy is fine, isn't that what you told Jamie?* "Yeah, but I knew Jamie had nothing to worry about. It feels pretty lousy from this side." Her fingers tapped on the steering wheel as she drove distractedly down the freeway replaying the morning scene in her mind.

"Erin! I...just..." Jamie took in the hard scowl and quickly moved away from the tall nurse. She crossed the room and pulled her partner into a hug...which was not returned. "Leah would you excuse us for a moment?" she asked.

After a short nod, the couple hurried into the kitchen where Jamie began the frantic explanation. "I didn't know she was here Honey. Why didn't you call me?"

"No phone," was all Erin said.

"Oh, right. I'm sorry. I didn't know she coming today either. I tried three times to get a hold of her, but she was traveling and couldn't be reached. I left a message for her to postpone, but obviously she didn't get it."

"Obviously?"

"Well, I don't think she would have blatantly disregarded my request."

The blonde crossed her arms over her chest. "Of course not."

"Erin, I thought you said you weren't jealous of Leah."

"That was before I saw her." Erin turned away and let loose with a low growl. "I don't want to be jealous, but..."

Jamie gently grasped Erin's shoulders and pulled her back around. "Then don't...because you have absolutely no reason to be." She planted a kiss that she hoped would leave no room for doubt. Jamie pulled back and cupped Erin's cheek. "Understand?"

The author shyly dipped her head and gave it a ghostly nod. "I understand you," she whispered. The green eyes landed on the bare skin near her chin. "Want to tell me what this is all about?"

Jamie chuckled. "Bad timing," she explained. "I fell out in the corral." She presented her mud covered back to Erin's view. "I was taking this off when I walked into the living room...imagine my surprise. Leah just jumped up and hugged me. I'm sure she didn't even notice."

Erin looked again and softly grinned. "Not unless she's extremely nearsighted."

Jamie leaned over and whispered. "If it helps, Leah got two dirty hands when she hugged me...and I'm pretty sure there was more than just mud on my shirt."

Erin audibly laughed and buried her face in Jamie's chest. She kissed the valley between her favorite breasts and looked up at twinkling sapphire eyes. "Should I feel guilty to say it helps?"

Jamie's response...a devilish smile.

As the morning had progressed and Erin spent more time with Jamie's friend, her fears and feelings of jealousy eased off a bit. The nurse was friendly and extremely caring. It quickly became clear to Erin that this woman had chosen the right profession. The time had gone on smoothly until it was time for them to leave for the airport. Jamie had discovered her friend's accommodations dilemma and had insisted that she remain at the ranch until her room was ready. And of course it wouldn't have been right to leave her there all alone. So at Jamie's suggestion she stayed behind to play hostess and Erin hesitantly traveled to the city by herself.

* * * *

Erin searched the bustling crowd for her cherished grandmother and finally saw the white head bobbing between several towering strangers in dark suits. The diminutive woman clutched her single bag a little tighter and dodged the walking oaks, a smile cracking her face when she saw Erin.

"Grandma!" The author waved wildly even though she knew she'd already been spotted. The two women soon met and embraced for a very long second. Erin then pulled back and assessed her beloved relative. "Grandma you look great. I really missed you."

"Oh my Dear, I've missed ya too. And I'm so happy ta be here for such a wonderful occasion." Kathleen studied the author's face for just a moment then put a hand against her granddaughter's cheek. "What's wrong Dear?"

The blonde brows wrinkled as she answered. "Nothing."

"Ya can't hide anything from me Dear. Tell me about it."

Before Erin could say a word, another voice called out to them. The author looked up to find her cousin running down the hall. "Katie," mumbled Erin.

"I hope ya don't mind me taggin along cousin Erin," said the little red head, "but I've just been dyin to come here ta the states. And this was the perfect opportunity."

Erin returned the hug given to her by her exuberant cousin. "Of course I don't mind," she said. "Family is always welcomed." The author led them toward the other end of the terminal. "Let's go get your bags."

Kathleen cleared her throat as they walked along. "So young lady," she said, addressing her younger granddaughter, "just where did ya disappear to back there, as if I didn't know."

Katie giggled as only a twenty two year old can. "I was sayin goodbye ta that cute guy who was sittin in front of us on the plane. While you were takin a nap, he and I had a nice little talk."

The elderly, white head shook with disdain and she pointed a hand toward the sky. "Saints be praised. I promised yer parents ya wouldn't get into ta trouble over here Katie, so try and hold the boyfriends to a minimum please."

"I'll try Grandma, but a girl's gotta have some fun."

"Uh huh. So what about you Erin, what's the problem?"

Erin put her hand around the hefty waist and squeezed. "Grandma it really is nothing; just a tiny bit of insecurity. I'm sure it will be alright when we get back home."

* * * *

Jamie was in the kitchen cleaning some wine glasses when Erin snuck in behind her and slid her arms around the slim waist. "Grandma's here," she informed her partner. "My cousin Katie came with her."

"Well, the more the merrier," said Jamie as she turned and welcomed Erin back with a kiss.

"I saw Anne's car outside. Where is she?"

Jamie grinned wildly like a child just bursting to tell a secret. "She is with Leah. They went for a walk." The rancher checked her watch. "About an hour ago."

The green eyes popped. "You're kidding!"

"Erin, I swear I literally saw sparks fly when they first laid eyes on each other. I thought they could use some more time together so I asked Leah to stay for the party. Was that alright?" she asked quietly.

Erin hesitated, almost distracted. "What? Oh yeah it's fine. I just never would have thought Leah was Anne's type."

Jamie tapped the button nose. "But you don't really know Leah. I think she sensed you were uncomfortable with her and she was a little more reserved than usual when you were visiting this morning. She really is a very sweet and sensitive person. You don't have to worry about Anne getting hurt."

Erin looked around Jamie's shoulder and glanced out the window where she saw the two women heading for the house. Even from a distance Erin could tell the more relaxed posture and the smile on her old friend's face. Anne's brown head suddenly flew back with genuine laughter at something the nurse had said. "I see what you mean," Erin muttered. She looked back to Jamie and smiled. "If Leah is the one for her, then I will be very happy for them both. Because I wish this kind of happiness for everyone in the world." A lengthy kiss sealed the sentiment.

* * * *

"Good evening ladies and gentlemen and welcome to tonight's edition of 'Know Your Spouse' or maybe it's 'Do You Know Your Spouse?'" Dr. Anne Carson did her best game show host impression and was greeted with the warm applause of her audience, which consisted of Leah, Chad, Katie, Kathleen, Caitlin and Conner.

The small group was spread out around the room on various chairs and stools. Chad chose to play it macho and took a seat on the carpeted floor. Young, cousin Katie had practically swooned when she was first introduced to the handsome, blonde haired vet. And of course she stuck to him like the proverbial flypaper all evening. Subtlety, nor shyness, were traits of this Irish lass.

Anne went to on to introduce the contestants. "To play our game this evening we have three couples, count'em three couples who have been together for a various number of years." She pointed to the two people on the sofa. "First off I am pleased to introduce Timothy and Danielle Casey who have been married...how many years Tim?" Before he could even open his mouth Anne made an annoying buzzing sound and said, "Sorry time is up, but I have it on good authority that the answer is thirty-six years." Her funny antics drew smiles from the older couple as well as the rest of the room's occupants. "Our next couple is Bridgett and Brad Nelson who have been married..."

"Ten years," blurted Brad, who didn't want to be caught in the same trap as his father-in-law. The small crowd laughed again.

"Glad to know someone is paying attention," said Anne. She next addressed the two snuggled closely on the love seat. "And finally we have tonight's guests of honor, Erin and Jamie, who we know will be together for many, many years." The doctor spared a just a second's glance at her knew friend Leah and gave an inner sigh before going on. "Each correct answer is worth twenty-five points so on with the game. The Casey women will answer the first two questions. Number one, what is your favorite color?"

Tim sat a little straighter in his chair not at all worried about this one. 'Purple', his wife stated and he lifted the card in his lap to reveal the correct answer.

Applause from the audience.

"Well," said the next contestant Bridgett, "mine's green."

Brad felt the need to comment further as he revealed he had also chosen the right answer. "That was easy, it's the color of money." He received a small glare from his spouse, but a quick kiss saved the day.

Erin smiled dreamily. "Blue."

Jamie, knowing why Erin reacted the way she did, blushed slightly, having gotten it correct as well.

After the next round there was still a three-way tie and all three couples felt pretty proud of themselves. The host continued on with the third question. "These answers are for Tim, Brad and Jamie. What animal did your partner say you are most like?"

The sandy haired lawyer racked his brain as he went through a list of possible choices, dismissing one after the other for various reasons.

"Anytime this year," Erin chimed in.

"I'll ignore that and say dolphin."

Bridgett gasped at her husband. "Dolphin! Where did you come up with that one?"

He shrugged. "Because I like to swim. What did you say?"

"Gorilla."

"Do I look like an ape?" he asked wide-eyed and insulted.

"No, I said gorilla because they are strong and intelligent which is what I thought you were...until now that is." She grinned to let him know she was teasing.

Tim opened his mustached mouth to answer and was greeted with the echoes of his family's voices correctly matching him. "Bear!" they all shouted. Conner stood and did his best bear growl to the amusement of everyone in the room.

Once the laughter had died down Jamie made a show of stretching out her neck and her long legs, which she crossed at the ankle. "I won't tell you how the subject came up," she said with a tiny grin, "but Erin once told me that I reminded her of a giraffe." She paused before adding, "And it was definitely a compliment." Jamie got a poke in the ribs for her risqué innuendo, even though it was lost on at least half of those present. She, of course was right.

"And now to our final question," said Anne. "What is your favorite thing to eat for a late night snack?" She flashed a look to the tall rancher who batted her eyes in total innocence. "And please keep your answers rated G, there are innocent ears present?"

Those in the know chuckled lowly. Two dark, bushy eyebrows curved downward over Tim's confused eyes. Still not understanding, he shrugged and his thoughts switched to deciding on an answer. Danielle's mouth twitched slightly after about two seconds shock at Anne's comment. Mrs. Casey was a bit worldlier than her husband, but she didn't necessarily want her family to realize that little fact.

Bridgett and Brad both answered crackers and cheese. They did differ slightly on the exact flavor of cheese, but a unanimous vote granted them the points anyway.

The big executive cleared his throat. "I like to have a good glass of Brandy late at night."

Danielle grimaced and lifted her card, with which she slapped her husband in the arm. "She said eat, not drink! You like to **eat** Oreo's before bed."

"Yes my Dear, but I have them with the Brandy."

Danielle merely rolled her eyes to more laughter.

Anne turned to the couple on the loveseat. "Jamie if you get this question right you will have one hundred points and the two of you will win the game. And for that tremendous feat you will be treated, at no expense to us, to absolutely nothing...but the knowledge that you do indeed know your spouse."

The rancher gave her partner a sidelong glance and her mouth twisted comically. The innocent ears had stepped out of the room with their great grandmother for more refreshments and Jamie decided to have a little more fun. "Well, Erin and I have identical tastes, especially when it comes to late night snacks. We like to share in that particular pleasure and we mutually indulge in this fluffy treat. I really like to dive right in to the..." Her lips drew together in a thin line as she started to form the word. "P...opcorn, buttered and salty."

Erin knew where Jamie was going with the answer, but that didn't stop her ears from pinking up. She showed the matching answer and lifted the card higher to conceal their faces as she gave her fiancée' a congratulatory kiss.

The guests cheered and clapped for the winners. The evening had been a rousing success, leaving Jamie and Erin to hope that this circle of family and friends would always surround them.

* * * *

On Friday night, the eve of the wedding, Timothy Casey had every member of his family chauffeured to the best restaurant in Los Angeles. They were shown to a private area where they dined on the juiciest lobster, the finest champagne and imported chocolate delicacies.

Stories, some wild, some heartwarming were shared.

Laughter rang off the walls.

Danielle shed just a tear or two when her husband toasted the happy couple.

Conner tugged at the tie that was too constricting around his neck and his little sister gave an impromptu fashion show, so proud of her new dress.

Katie flirted with the waiter.

Grandma, being the head of the family and quite outspoken in her own right, kept everyone in line.

And Erin and Jamie had eyes only for each other.

But at the end of the evening, Erin did take a moment to gaze at each and every smiling face around the large table. Thankful for every family member there and those far away, her heart swelled. She took special notice of the cigar smoking man seated at the head of the table. Family meant the world to her and her father's presence made the night extra special. A year ago she never would have believed he would be celebrating with them, much less having initiated the event. The wounds he had caused with his intolerance had now completely healed and his love was truly felt.

There was only one problem keeping the evening from being perfect. And it was something that no matter how Erin tried she could never have remedied. At one point after dinner, Erin glanced over to her partner and saw the sadness in the blue eyes. Jamie was missing her family. The Casey's had totally adopted her as their own, but even they could not fill that missing place.

Erin had taken her partner's hand at that moment and smiled compassionately. She knew Jamie understood the silent message when a kiss was placed upon her cheek.

With hugs and kisses, everyone bid goodnight and returned to their respective cars.

After seeing Grandma and Katie to their rooms at the nearby inn, Bridgett continued on to the ranch with the Erin and Jamie. She claimed that her presence was required first thing in the morning to help Erin prepare for the ceremony. The twitch in the dark eyebrow told Erin that Jamie had felt something more sinister in the red head's motives. The author snickered when Jamie's suspicions were proven right.

The tall rancher had balked at Bridgett's unyielding attitude on the evening's sleeping arrangements. "Erin and I have slept together for months," she loudly told her soon to be sister in law.

"Exactly!" Bridgett exclaimed. "You've slept together for months so it won't hurt you to be apart for just this one night."

Jamie grumbled under breath as she shuffled slowly to the guest room. Erin covered the smile on her face as she followed her pouting lover. They stopped at the open doorway and Jamie turned to face Erin. She spotted her partner's bodyguard and glared.

"Could we at least have a few minutes in private to say goodnight?" asked Jamie.

Bridgett chuckled and turned back down the hall.

Erin wrapped her arms around the lanky body and squeezed. "You're not really mad are you?" she asked timidly.

Jamie gave half a smile. "Nah. I just like to mess with her."

Erin laughed softly. "Well, after tonight no one can ever keep us apart."

"Damn right." Jamie studied her lover's face, noticing the faint shifting of muscles and skin around the deep green eyes. That signaled that Erin was feeling some intense emotions. Jamie ran a thumb over the wrinkled brow to ease the tensions she also read there. "I love you," she said as her hand slid down the soft skin. "I'll see you tomorrow at the alter...gazebo...whatever we're calling it I'll be there."

Erin kissed her once. "So will I. I love you too." She kissed her again, longer this time. "Guess it's time to say goodnight huh?"

Guess so, Jamie thought, but her lips were much too involved to speak the words.

* * * *

Jamie had been confined to her temporary quarters, which did include its own outside access, but the rest of the house was deemed off limits. Bridgett did her best maid impression and delivered the morning meal to the confined rancher, where she was drilled with a version of twenty questions, every one of them about Erin.

Once the rancher was convinced that her lover was indeed well and happy, Jamie hopped into the shower and quickly scrubbed herself clean, her whistles complimenting the rushing water jets.

* * * *

Erin placed the brush back on the dressing table for the second time and reached for her jewelry box. While she was deliriously happy, her perfect day already had one dark spot. The weather did seem to be defying all the previous reports as the sun broke through right on schedule, chasing away all the gray clouds that had threatened rain.

At nine that morning Erin stood at the front door waiting for the approaching helicopter to land on the side lawn. The smile the author had worn since the minute her eyes had opened, waned as she saw only one parent leave the chopper. With garment bag in hand, Danielle Casey entered the house sympathizing with the look on her daughter's face.

"Where is he?" Erin asked simply.

"He'll be here Sweetheart, he promised. The helicopter is going back for him right now. There is still plenty of time."

The author turned back into the house and strode across the carpet. "What was his excuse, as if I didn't know?"

Danielle couldn't keep her daughter's eye. She looked away in shame. "He had an emergency, business phone call."

Erin's hands perched angrily on her hips. "Well, that's one thing that will never change will it? Business always has been more important than us. He missed the first play I was ever in at school. He missed my sixteenth birthday, my college graduation and now the single most important day of my life and for what...more money?" Erin's eyes fell shut and she took several very deep breaths. She looked back to her mother. "You know it doesn't even matter. I will not let him get me upset. This is my day, mine and Jamie's and if he has more important things to do than so be it."

The ceremony was now just a few minutes away. Through the open window, Erin could hear the serenading music as the guests took their seats. She took a gold locket from its red, velvet bag and rubbed a thumb over the intricately carved Celtic design. She flipped open the case and peered closely at the pictures inside. Though small, Jamie's grin radiated from the paper photo and a matching one sprang to the author's mouth. All of Erin's dreams were about to come true. A single fingertip traced the third and still empty frame attached to the two others. She still had one or two dreams floating around inside, but this day would bring those well within her grasp.

She settled the chain around her neck and a soft knock on the door broke Erin from her thoughts. "Come on in Mom," she called out. The door opened slowly and Erin's merry expression melted to one of mixed emotion when she saw the person's reflection in the mirror.

"Can I come in too?" the visitor asked.

"Daddy."

The burly man approached and a smile twitched under his graying mustache. His dark eyes held hers through the mirror.

Erin turned and stood on slightly trembling legs. "You came."

He reached out solid arms and she slipped into them, a tear sliding down her cheek. "I promised," he said. Tim pulled back and gently brushed away the glistening sign of emotion. "I know I have broken promises before, but there was **no** way I was going to break this one." Still holding her hand he took a step back and a full smile lit his face. "You are beautiful. And it will be my honor and pleasure to walk you down that aisle and into the arms of the woman you love." He reached a hand into the pocket of his black tux. "But first I have a little gift for you." He placed the present in her hand.

Erin opened the small black box and a creamy oval with specks of pink and green greeted her. She lifted the single, unset Opal from its nest as he explained. "I bought this on the day you were born Princess. And though I wanted it to be a very long time to come, I also thought about this event on that October day." Timothy kissed her on the cheek. "I am as proud of you now as I was on that day and as I always will be. I love you Erin."

"I love you too Daddy."

* * * *

Once all the guests had been seated the introductory music began. A harpist played variations on the bridal theme as Jamie strode down the aisle alone. The sadness she had felt over missing her family the prior night had suddenly vanished. Now she felt the spirit of her father at her side as she walked on and that of her mother and sister close by. And that sensation filled the only part of her heart that was left empty on this day.

In her hand, Jamie carried a single orchid; the first of the many gifts she would bestow on her bride this day. The melody continued as Conner and Caitlin, performing their respective duties as ring bearer and flower girl, followed. Once Bridgett had made her short trek and had taken her place as matron of honor, the guests stood and all eyes looked to the back.

Erin took a deep breath. Tim placed a comforting hand over his daughter's as they began their journey. As the gazebo came into view, Erin's footsteps faltered and she stopped in her tracks. There at the end of the short aisle, waiting for her, was her own personal ideal of beauty. Jamie was a resplendent vision in black and white from head to toe. The only points of true color were the outstanding crystal blue eyes, one of which winked at her. Erin had yet to figure out how something so pale could be so vibrant...and perhaps she was the only one who saw it that way, but she really didn't care why. She was just glad it was. For perhaps the hundredth time she thanked her God for allowing her to **see** this day and those eyes so full of love.

"Are you okay Sweetheart?" the voice beside her asked.

Erin answered without shifting her gaze. "Yes, Daddy. I'm fine." As they slowly began to move forward again, Erin continued her appraisal of her soon to be wife. On Jamie's feet were black dress shoes...flats. She didn't need the extra height, as she already stood tall and commanding. Dark linen slacks adorned the long, slim legs, but was only partially visible. From her neck to the top of her knees Jamie was encased in a tailored, satin, ivory jacket trimmed in a black, hand embroidered design. Held closed by a single button at the waist, the jacket showcased Jamie's trim, but solid physique. A soft, raven hued camisole caressed her bronzed skin and peeked tantalizingly between the light colored lapels. Jamie's shoulder length hair shone like silk beneath the sun's golden rays. The midnight strands fell naturally straight on the right side of her head, but to the left, the locks were held back over her ear by a barely visible, black hair comb. The piece had been hand carved by Erin's grandfather and was a cherished gift the author had lovingly passed on to her love one recent summer's night.

Jamie's smile widened as her eyes followed her partner down the red carpet. Her earthly angel was a heavenly sight, wearing a strapless, satin gown with which flared into a slight hint of a train. Jamie recognized the golden locket that sat above the sweetheart neckline of the dress and her heart fluttered a few extra beats. The white, matte finished bodice of Erin's dress was covered in a fine layer of genuine Irish lace, softening the look to beautiful perfection. The skirt was accentuated with random, individual, floral patterns of more lace and hand chosen beads and pearls.

When Erin finally reached her side, Jamie handed her the orchid, which Erin sniffed and set aside on a small nearby table. The author mouthed a thank you and the dark haired woman took her hand and led her up the two wooden steps into the airy gazebo.

Reverend Lawrence held the bible in her open palms and smiled. She was a long time friend of the Casey family and was honored when asked to perform the ceremony. "Marriage is what brings us here today," she said. "Marriage is a constant. It is every hour, of every day, of every year. It's a joining of lives and a bonding of souls. Love is the foundation, but honesty, trust, compassion and dedication form the frame upon which each day is built. Marriage is not what's written on a piece of paper, but what's written in your heart. Erin and Jamie would now like to tell each other and those present just what is written in their hearts. But I see that Jamie also has it written on that piece of paper in her hand."

The crowd chuckled good heartedly and Jamie addressed them with a little shrug of her shoulder. "I didn't want to forget," she said sheepishly. Her eyes met Erin's again and she confidently slipped the note back into her pocket. "But that's not going to happen. Although you do tend to make me lose all train of thought when I fall into your eyes." She gave her love's hand a squeeze then continued. "Erin," she spoke then paused slightly. "I love the sound of your name," she said. "It's the loveliest sound in the world to my ears when I hear it and it leaves the sweetest taste on my tongue when I speak it. But just to say I love you isn't nearly enough to describe exactly how I feel about you. You bring the breath to my lungs. You bring the sun to my day. And you bring the peace to my nights, which used to be filled with only nightmares. But now I have only sweet dreams of you and our future together. You saved my life twice and gave me reason to hope

when there was none. I want to live every day of the rest of my life with you. I want to raise a family with you. I want to grow old with you and watch as you become more beautiful with each passing year. I do love you."

Erin swallowed the lump in her throat and blinked away the teary curtain in her eyes. "Jamie. The first day we met my eyes couldn't see you, but my heart always did. It saw a lost and vulnerable soul that I needed...wanted to protect. My heart saw the love that you were afraid to express. It saw my home. You were my eyes and you are my heart...and the other half of my soul. We were led to each other not just once, but twice through a miracle. I cherish you and I thank God that you love me. I want to live every day of the rest of my life with you. I want to raise a family with you. I want to grow old with you and watch as you become more beautiful with each passing year. I do love you."

With a little nudge from his father, Conner climbed the stairs, stepped between his aunts and presented the satin pillow to the Reverend.

The spiritual leader retrieved the items, placed them upon the bible's pages and waited for the child to make his exit before saying, "Let the exchanging of rings show each other and the world your commitment."

Erin picked up the larger of the two matching rings. She slipped the pierced band of white and rose gold onto Jamie's finger as she spoke. "This ring is a perfect circle with no beginning and no end, just as I have loved you...forever. Let my love encircle your heart as this ring encircles your finger."

The rancher repeated the action and the words, adding a little kiss to the ring at the end. The couple remained hand in hand as the ceremony was completed.

Reverend Lawrence closed the book in her hands. "What God has joined together let no one tear apart. Ladies you may now seal this union with a kiss."

And that they did as the crowd bound to their feet and gave the newlyweds a round of loving applause. Once they brought the kiss to an end, the happy couple made their way back down the aisle amidst cheers and well wishes from all the guests.

Erin and Jamie disappeared into the house for just a few moments alone while the crowd was led over to the reception area.

The rancher pulled her bride into an embrace and whispered I love you. Erin's only response was a tiny squeak. Jamie pulled away and was not surprised to find tears slipping from beneath Erin's glasses. "I hope those are happy tears?" she asked, wiping away the droplets of water.

"They are," Erin finally said. "This is just everything I have ever wanted. You are all I have ever wanted."

"You have me forever," said Jamie. "You are everything that I have ever needed to make my life complete. And I hope I never give you cause to shed anything but happy tears."

Erin brushed another tender kiss against Jamie's lips. She brightened suddenly and led her bride away by the hand. They hurried up the stairs and into their room. "I have a present for you," said Erin heading for her closet.

Jamie grinned. "Funny that, I happen to have one for you too." She pulled open her dresser drawer and pushed aside a couple of shirts and a few pairs of socks to retrieve the small box hidden back in the corner. She heard a bustle of movement behind her. Jamie turned and her jaw fell when she spied the huge wrapped package sitting at Erin's feet. She quickly questioned with her eyes, but said, "I'd like you to go first."

Erin gathered her skirts in her hand and joined Jamie on the small sofa in the corner of the room. The author took her gift and slowly removed the pink and white wrapping. She opened the hinged lid on the blue, velvet box and her gaze fell upon the sliver bracelet nestled inside. The engraved words jumped into her heart as she removed the precious gift. The single diamond attached to its surface twinkled at her.

Jamie gently took the piece and fastened it around Erin's slim wrist. The dark haired woman pointed to the Celtic words Anam Cara. "I know that you know what this says, but what you don't know is that I bought this while we were still in Dublin. Even then I knew you were my **soul friend**. When we got back here and I found out who I was I knew this day would come and I decided to save it. I had the stone added a few weeks ago. I want to add a new one every ten years."

Erin looked deeply into the blue eyes. "I think this bracelet will look very smart, encrusted with seven gems. Thank you." She claimed Jamie's lips with her own. "We might even try for eight," she whispered against the soft flesh.

Jamie smiled into the kiss. "I'll try if you will."

"Deal. Now your turn."

The rancher tore the paper and ripped off the packaging tape holding down the lid on the plain cardboard box. She lifted the four flaps and peered inside, not knowing what to expect. Erin watched her spouse's face as Jamie's brain slowly processed the various contents. Very slowly the dark haired woman reached for the first item and then quickly hugged the tiny, toy horse to her chest. "How... what... Erin where did you get these?" Her voice, thick with emotion, stuttered the question.

Erin ran a hand down Jamie's arm. "I hired a detective to track down your foster parents. I know it was a long shot that they would have kept anything from your childhood...but they did." The dark haired woman sifted through the other toys and pieces of paper with a shaky hand as Erin continued. "I had a long talk with Mrs. Matthews about three weeks ago and I told her all about the fine woman you are. She says she's proud of you Jamie and that she always loved you."

Jamie couldn't hold back any longer and the tears of mixed emotions fell onto the items she rummaged through.

"Mrs. Matthews would like to see you Honey," said Erin. "I can arrange for her to come out here in a few weeks when things settle down a little."

Jamie was still stunned that all of those cherished childhood mementos had survived all those years. "I'd like that," she said and raised her head to meet Erin's gaze. "I don't know how to thank you for doing this for me."

"I know it doesn't replace your family, but I hoped it would help to have a part of them here with you."

Jamie hugged Erin and held onto her for the longest time, still trying to take in all the incredible love. She pulled back and kissed Erin's cheek. Then she reached for a blue album, whose edges were slightly worn and placed it in her lap. "It does help Sweetheart. You'll never know how much. But if I look at these pictures now, I might not be good for anything the rest of the day." She gently replaced the book and stood. "I believe we have a yard full of guests waiting for us." Jamie reached for her hand. "And we have the honor of the first dance."

The couple soon returned to more applause and well wishes. Danielle Casey signaled the instrumental quartet and the crowd parted for the spotlight dance. The notes of one of their favorite songs floated through the air. Erin and Jamie made their way to the middle of the floor and for the next three and a half minutes they were lost in their own little world; a world that floated three feet above the ground and consisted solely of eyes of emerald and azure.

As the next song began, the guests began to pair up and join the newlyweds for more dancing. Katie asked a rather reserved Chad Benson. Anne and Leah took the opportunity to share some quality time. And of course Erin's parents and Bridgett and Brad indulged themselves in the romantic movements. But soon Kathleen decided to shake things up a bit. She whispered to the musicians, who quickly changed their choice of instruments. The music that came next was decidedly more chipper and loud. Within minutes, Grandma had the group, including her stoic son, dancing a rousing jig.

Catching her breath after the energetic round of dancing, Anne had made her way over to congratulate her friends. Leah had chosen to remain lost in the crowd, feeling slightly out of place.

"After all you two have been through," said Anne, "you both deserve nothing but happiness for the rest of your long lives. And I expect to be invited to your fiftieth anniversary party."

"You'll be the first on the list," said Jamie. "Thank you Anne. You've been a great friend to Erin and now to me as well." Jamie gave her new friend a hug then kissed her bride on the cheek and excused herself to check in with some of the other guests, namely all of her elderly friends from her old apartment building.

Erin watched Jamie walk away then pinned the doctor with a sly grin. "And who might your date be for that party?" she asked. When Anne only responded with a slight blush Erin asked another question. "So what is going on with you and Leah?"

Anne's brown eyes tracked the object under discussion and a smile flew unbidden to her mouth. "We, umm...we seem to be getting along very well."

"And?"

"And for the first time in a very long time I don't feel so alone. She is very wonderful and unique. She makes me laugh. I think I could fall for her very easily."

"Why does it sound like there is a but at the end of that sentence?"

The brown head hesitantly shook. "It's not that, it's just... We've only known each other a few days." She took a deep breath and her eyes met Erin's again. "The physical attraction was there immediately, but there was something else too, something I've never felt before. It was like I already knew her."

Erin nodded and flashed a knowing grin. She placed a hand on her friend's arm. "I don't want to scare you Anne, but that is exactly how I felt with Jamie."

The rancher chose that moment to make her re-appearance. She noticed the rather surprised expression on the doctor's face. "I'm sorry," she said. "I don't want to interrupt, but I just can't stand to spend more then a few minutes away from my beautiful wife."

Erin wrapped an arm around Jamie. "Well, I feel the same about my gorgeous wife." They tenderly kissed, which led to another and another and so on. When the couple finally parted they were once again alone.

"Was that rude of us?" asked Jamie.

"No. Not on a day like this anyway. Come on, there is someone I want you to meet."

They approached one of the back tables under the open tent. There sat two women, one of which was bouncing a very happy baby on her lap. Once Erin was spotted, the red headed one stood, smiled brightly and held out her arms. "Erin, what a lovely bride you are," she said. The two college friends hugged.

"Megan O'Donnell I'd like you to meet Jamie Sheridan, the love of my life."

The small woman extended a hand. "It's very nice to meet you Jamie. Congratulations."

"Nice to meet you too. Erin has told me all about you. Thank you for coming."

Megan took the drooling baby into her arms and swiftly wiped his mouth with a napkin making him much more presentable. "Erin, Jamie this is my wife of two years, Laura." Nods were exchanged and Megan continued with the proud introductions. "And this little one is our son Michael."

Erin reached out to take a chubby hand and the baby leaned her way wanting to greet his mommy's friend a little more personally. She reached for the blue-eyed child. "Do you mind?" The question was addressed to Megan's partner who happily agreed. Erin settled the baby into her arms and kissed his fuzzy head. "Well, what a little cutie you are Michael." He giggled when some fingers tickled his belly.

"How old is he?" Jamie asked as she watched Erin interact with the child.

Michael's eyes went wide and he quickly turned toward the sound of the new voice, craning his neck up to see the tall woman. Jamie stepped closer and cradled the back of his head as his mother informed them that he was eleven months old.

"Hello little man," said the rancher.

He gurgled back at her and flashed a very flirtatious, semi-toothless grin, which sent the adults into a bout of laughter.

Sometime later, Doctor Carson took her new friend by the hand and led her over to congratulate the newlyweds. Leah approached timidly. She reached Jamie and automatically started to hug her, but changed it to a handshake in mid motion. "Congratulations, both of you. It was a beautifully romantic ceremony and I wish you nothing but the best."

"Thank you Leah," said Jamie, who took back the nurse's hand in a much more informal and friendlier gesture.

Erin noticed the movement and accepted it for what it really meant. She shuffled her feet in embarrassment. "I thank you as well Leah," she said holding the dark, but warm eyes. "I also have to apologize for my earlier behavior. I know what you mean to Jamie and I thank you for being there for her when I couldn't."

The two women smiled, acknowledging the peaceful, but tentative friendship they might someday form.

The three-tiered cake was soon rolled out, but before it was cut, Grandma offered her granddaughters a traditional Irish toast. She raised a glass of sparkling champagne. "I have chosen a different blessing for each of my grandchildren's weddings. This is the sixth one and I hope not the last." She flashed a look to her youngest grandchild Katie who had the good manors to acknowledge the words with a sly smile. Kathleen turned back to the newlyweds. "Erin, Jamie may God go with and bless you. May you see your children's children. May you be poor in misfortune and rich in blessings. May you know nothing but happiness from this day forward."

Erin and Jamie thanked her with a simultaneous kiss to each of the old woman's rosy cheeks then together they held the ribbon bound server and cut the first slice of the rich, chocolate confection. The author held the small plate in front of Jamie's face and smiled, her eyes twinkling.

"Be nice," the rancher growled.

"I always show you just how nice I am," said Erin as she broke off a small piece with her fingers and slipped it cleanly into Jamie's mouth. But she did just happen to swipe her icing covered index finger against her partner's nose before pulling away.

Jamie clucked her tongue as she cleaned away the mess. As she fed Erin a bite she leaned down and whispered something in her ear. "I'm going to save a piece of cake for later and then we'll see how really messy we can get."

Erin tried valiantly to hold off the blush she felt rising to her cheeks as she spied the very attentive audience watching their every move.

After opening a treasure trove of gifts, Erin and Jamie were watching Caitlin and Conner run around playing with Artemis. When Conner became interested in something else, the little girl suddenly dropped to her knees and began what looked like a very deep conversation with the big dog. At one point, Arte shook her and then snorted as if answering a question. Erin laughed silently and turned where she was greeted with another adorable sight. Little Michael O'Donnell was practicing his newfound skill of walking. His comical, heavy-footed steps were taken between his two mothers, who held onto each of his tiny hands as they slowly crossed the yard. Erin stroked her partner's arm and nodded in the family's direction. Jamie smiled at the sight.

* * * *

As they had been doing all afternoon, Jamie and Erin took a few private moments to indulge in their favorite activity, kissing. Jamie was lost in the luscious lips when she suddenly felt a tug on her jacket. She pulled back, her lips slightly tinted with pink, and looked down to find a curly headed blonde peering up with a questioning face. Jamie picked Caitlin up and settled her between them. "What is it Honey?" the rancher asked.

The girl absently played with the dark hair as her eyes bounced back and forth between her two aunts. "When are you gonna have a kid for me to play with?"

Blue and green eyes twinkled as they met. Jamie thought back to earlier when Erin was holding baby Michael. That was a picture she was eager to see re-played with a baby of their own. She patted the small leg under her hand. "We're going to work on that real soon Caitlin. Real soon."

The child threw an arm around each adult neck and hugged them tightly. "Yeah!" She cheered then her thoughts quickly changed to another matter entirely. "Can I have some more cake?"

"Ask your Mom first," Erin said as Caitlin was set to the ground and ran back toward the food. The author stepped into the circle of her wife's arms and grinned. "Real soon huh?"

Jamie slightly hesitated as she took Erin's left hand in hers and rubbed her thumb over the shiny band of silver and pink colored gold. "Yeah," she said. "I assume that you still want..."

"Oh yes! Absolutely."

Jamie relaxed and giggled at Erin's enthusiastic answer then her expression molded into something more serious. "I think we have both learned some very hard lessons this year. One of which is don't delay the things that are important; you just never know what will happen."

Erin nodded solemnly and brushed a stray hair from Jamie's eye. Then the smile returned. "I can't wait to see you holding our baby in your arms."

Jamie leaned forward, her lips heading for their counterpart. "I was just thinking the same thing."

* * * *

The five-hour reception was drawing to a close, at least for the newlyweds who desperately wanted some quiet time together. Jamie took Erin's hand and drew the crowd's attention. "Before we leave," she said, "Erin and I would like to thank you for sharing this very special day with us and for the gifts you brought...and I'm not just talking about the beautiful things on the table over there. When you arrived here today, you brought your smiles and your love and you gave us your time. We thank you very much for those very special gifts."

Bridgett gathered up the single women, which totaled only five and herded them near the gazebo where Erin stood on the stairs. The author winked quickly at one certain woman and turned her back, throwing the small bouquet of white and purple flowers into the small group. Katie watched as the floral bundle sailed through the air and she suddenly backed off, not really believing in the superstition, but not wanting to take any chances. The colorful flowers then landed right into Doctor Carson's skilled hands. Her momentary shock quickly gave way to a happy smile and her eyes locked with the tall, Asian beauty at her side.

Erin clapped as she turned and saw that her aim was perfect.

Jamie stepped to her side and leaned down. "I think I'll go for that garter later in private."

"How do you know I'm wearing one?" asked Erin. She looked up to find two intense eyes burning into hers and two raised eyebrows atop them.

Hand in hand they ran down the red-carpeted aisle under a shower of birdseed and flower petals.

* * * *

It was still early evening, but the fall sun had bid its farewell an hour earlier. The caterers had loaded every chair, dismantled the dance floor and every tent and were long gone. The ranch was once again silent and barren except for the newlyweds who were just preparing for their evening

of romance. Their suitcases were packed and sitting by the front door for the early morning trip to the airport and their honeymoon. A beautiful peace had settled over the land.

Jamie had changed into her new, royal blue, satin pajamas and was in the process of lighting several candles across the room when she heard the slight rustle of fabric. She turned and smiled brightly. "You look incredible," she told the blonde goddess standing a few feet away dressed in a sheer, emerald colored gown. "But then you are always beautiful no matter what you wear...or don't wear."

Erin stepped forward and ran her fingers over the thin, blue strap across her wife's shoulder. "I'm really glad you like these," she said of the soft attire she had purchased. "I packed two other pairs similar to these in your suitcase. And speaking of clothes, I think I forgot to tell you what an absolutely wonderful choice you made for your wedding suit. You were very sexy." She slipped her arms around Jamie's neck and nuzzled the soft skin. "It was a perfect day wasn't it?"

"Perfect." No other words were needed at that moment. They just stood there in each other's arms soaking in the love.

Jamie had snagged the last bottle of champagne for their private celebration and using the crystal flutes that Erin's parents had given them, poured two bubbling glasses. They silently toasted each other and sipped the golden beverage sharing a kiss afterward. The tall woman spied her wedding gift in the corner and sighed happily. She retrieved the photo album from the top of the pile and joined Erin on the bed, where she took the smaller hand in hers. "I know I said it earlier and I will probably say it many more times; thank you for bringing this back to me."

Erin smiled. "You are very much welcome." She tapped the blue book. "Introduce me to my new family."

Jamie propped the book on her raised knees and opened the fading cover. A smile replaced the earlier tears, but her throat still tightened up when she saw the first picture of her parents. Her fingers traced the photograph's white border.

Erin gave her a moment before commenting. "You look just like your mother, Sweetheart. She was beautiful. But you definitely got those eyes from your very handsome father."

"Yeah. Mom always teased him about that. You know one thing I remember most about them is they always looked so happy when they were together." Jamie looked down and kissed her attentive wife. "I know exactly how they felt." She turned to a two-page spread of baby photos with her name clearly written across the top. This, of course, elicited a very loud exclamation from her partner.

"Ohhhh! You were absolutely adorable," said Erin.

"Were?"

The author looked up from the pictures and her eyes sparkled. "Oh you still are, this is just different."

"I love you."

"I love you too," said Erin.

Page after page, Erin got acquainted with her second family and gained even more insight to her spouse. The hours of reminiscing soon turned into hours of loving and they finally drifted into a happily exhausted sleep where dreams of their new life together played out the night.

The end.

Coming Soon! **Blindsided**, the third installment in the lives of Erin Casey And Jamie Sheridan.

The Athenaeum's Scroll Archive
