

Hometown Hearts

As she stepped onto the sidewalk leading to the front door of her old high school, Jamie Marshall's stomach clenched and her palms began to sweat. Suddenly, she was seventeen again, self-conscious, awkward and impossibly shy.

"I've changed my mind. I wanna go home."

"Too late now, kiddo. We're here."

Why she'd let Jacob and Melanie talk her into coming home to Saskatoon for this class reunion she had no idea. Ignoring her protests, her friends each looped an arm through hers and escorted her into St. Theresa High School's gym.

"This dress is too short," she muttered. "I shouldn't have let you talk me into wearing it."

Melanie chuckled. "You're perfectly decent. Besides, if you've got it, flaunt it, I always say."

"Jacob, would you tell your wife she's a big bully? I'd tell her myself, but I'm no longer speaking to her."

Jacob chuckled at the long standing joke between the two women. At five foot eight, Jamie towered over the petite five foot one Melanie. But ever since any of them could remember, Mel had been able to talk Jamie into just about anything. No wonder she was the symphony's best fundraiser. After one conversation with Mel, people begged her to take their money.

They'd been the three amigos in high school, three brainy, nerdy kids who didn't fit in anywhere but with each other. Jacob was a computer nerd long before it was fashionable. Melanie, whose small, mousy-looking appearance hid a forceful personality, was musically gifted. Her love of opera and classical music made her a distinct oddball in high school. And Jamie, cursed with coke-bottle thick glasses, a bad overbite, and at least twenty-five too many pounds, had thought of herself as the ugly duckling to end all ugly ducklings.

For three nerdy kids, their lives had turned out pretty well. Jacob and Mel were married and had two smart, beautiful children. Jacob owned his own business designing computer systems for businesses and government. Mel played cello with the Saskatoon Symphony Orchestra and was a tireless booster and fundraiser for the SSO. And Jamie had realized her dream of becoming a doctor. She'd just finished her residency and was waiting to hear if her application for a position at one of the preeminent pediatric hospitals in North America had been accepted.

Jacob and Mel pulled her along to the registration table where they received their name tags and a small bag of welcoming gifts. After a brief debate over where to place Jamie's name tag on her sleeveless, low-cut dress – Mel eventually pinned it to the shoulder strap – they purchased drinks and looked around the gym for a table.

"Oh, my God," whispered Mel. "Do you know who that is?"

Jamie glanced in the direction of Mel's gaze. A plump woman headed their way. She smiled at Mel and squeezed her hand as if they were bosom friends.

"Melanie, Jacob, how nice to see you again. It must be what, three years? We really must get together more often. And who do you have with you?" The woman squinted at Jamie's name tag, then gasped when recognition dawned.

"Jamie Marshall? Is that really you? Chubby Jamie with the crooked teeth and the glasses? I can't believe it! What happened to you?"

Jamie forced herself to smile. "The wonders of modern medical science. I got braces and laser surgery a few years ago. I'm sorry, I didn't catch your name."

"I'm Anita Bennett. Remember me?"

Remember? How could she forget? Anita, cute, blonde, head cheerleader, the most popular girl in high school. She had teased her relentlessly. But now Anita was the one who was overweight. Perhaps it was petty, but it gave Jamie satisfaction to know the shoe was on the other foot now.

"Of course I remember you, Anita. How are you?"

"Wonderful! I'm married to a doctor."

Jamie smiled, unable to resist a little dig. "What a coincidence. I'm a doctor, too."

Anita's smile slipped a little, but she continued gamely. "Oh, isn't that interesting. You'll have to meet my Thomas. He's a highly respected family physician here in Saskatoon."

Anita drifted off to chat with another group. Jamie, Mel and Jacob found an empty table and sat down with their drinks.

"Well, you know what they say," Mel said, an impish grin hovering on her lips. "Living well is the best revenge."

The three of them touched glasses in a toast. "To nerds everywhere," Jacob said. "Long may they reign."

"Hear, hear," Mel and Jamie chorused.

Christopher Patterson arrived at the gym late. His teenage babysitter forgot about the babysitting assignment and hadn't shown up. Luckily for him, his mother was a soft touch and willing to babysit her grandson at a moment's notice.

Chris wasn't sure why he was even here. Except for a couple of good friends from the football team, he rarely saw people from high school anymore. For reasons he didn't fully understand, he'd let Anita Bennett talk him into coming to this ten year class reunion. So much had happened in the past ten years. Maybe he was trying to recapture his youth, he thought with a roll of his eyes.

He got a drink at the bar and made his way through the crowd, searching the gym for his football buddies. A sudden push from behind him sent his rum and coke flying, mostly on him.

"Oh, I'm so sorry!"

The woman used her bare hand to wipe away the liquid from the sleeve of his jacket. Her dark head was bent over her task, and Chris couldn't see her face, but the rest of her was sensational. Long elegant arms, a small waist, firm rounded breasts, and legs that went on forever. He had the distinct feeling he knew her, but couldn't come up with a name. How could he forget a woman like this?

"I'm so sorry," she repeated. "Someone pushed me and I ran into you. I'll pay for your dry cleaning, but in the meantime, can I buy you another drink?"

She looked up into his face then, and Chris's breath caught in his throat. Beautiful blue eyes fringed by thick, dark lashes blinked at him in recognition. Her sensual lips curved in a smile.

"Chris? It's good to see you again."

He blinked at her a few times, and then it hit him. "Jamie? Jamie Marshall?" He glanced at her name tag. "My God, it is you! You look terrific!"

He pulled her into a one-armed embrace, careful not to spill what was left of his drink on her. He was instantly aware of well they fit together, how good she felt, how sweet she smelled. His head reeled with the knowledge. In the five years since his wife had died there'd been a few other women, but none that made his head spin. He pulled away, holding her at arm's length.

"I haven't seen you since you rescued me in chemistry class. You were the best lab partner I ever had."

"I was the only chemistry lab partner you ever had, so you don't have much to compare me with."

"All I know is if you hadn't spent so much time tutoring me in chemistry I probably would have flunked my senior year."

"Yeah, you probably would have." A teasing smile played on her lips. "As I recall, you majored in football and girls in high school."

She was right about that. He'd majored in girls. Every girl but this one. As he smiled back at her, he asked himself how he could have missed her.

But he already knew the answer. Back in high school, he'd only pursued the pretty girls, and Jamie hadn't been pretty back then. She was funny and sweet and always willing to help him with his homework, but he'd never even bought her a coke, let alone asked her out on a date. He'd been a stupid kid. A stupid, shallow kid. In so many ways.

"So, what are you doing now? Do live here in Saskatoon?"

Jamie shook her head. "I live in Toronto. I'm a pediatrician. I'm just here for this reunion and to visit my mom."

Chris's spirits fell. So far away. "How long are you here?"

"About three weeks. I'm taking a summer break for a little R and R."

He grinned. He knew exactly what he'd be doing for the next three weeks.

Chris and Melanie and Jamie laughed at Jacob's joke. Jamie looked at her old friend with affection. Under that quiet, serious exterior lay the heart of a stand-up comedian. But Jamie knew he only brought out that side of his personality with people he was comfortable with. She found it interesting that he felt comfortable with Chris, but she was very glad.

"So Chris," Mel began. "I understand you're with the police force."

"No, actually I'm with the fire department."

Mel's eyebrows rose. "Really? You have meet some pretty strict physical requirements to get into the fire department, don't you?"

"Yeah, you have to be in good shape."

"Melanie," Jacob said slowly, "what are you up to?"

Mel was the picture of wide-eyed innocence. "Nothing, honey. What could I possibly be up to?"

"Knowing that devious little mind of yours, it could be anything. Come on, Mel. Give."

"Well, if you must know, I was thinking about how popular pin-up calendars are. If we could find eleven more firefighters as good-looking as Chris, we could do a calendar as a fund raiser for the symphony. We'd make a fortune."

Jacob groaned, and Chris and Jamie laughed.

"I told you she was devious," Jacob said.

"What? I think it's a great idea. Jamie, wouldn't you pay big bucks for a picture of Chris, bare-chested, muscles rippling?"

Jamie glanced at Chris and then looked away, knowing her face flamed red with her thoughts. *Oh yeah*. She'd definitely pay big bucks for a calendar featuring Chris.

"You know I always support the symphony, Mel," she said, hiding her smile behind her plastic glass as she took a sip.

"I'll tell you what, Mel," Chris said. "If you can talk eleven other firefighters into agreeing to do a calendar, I'll volunteer my services as well. But no bare chests, muscles rippling stuff. Not even for charity."

Melanie beamed at him. "It's a deal."

"You're doomed, Chris." Jacob shook his head, a sorrowful look on his face. "My wife never backs down from a challenge."

Just then Anita Bennett took the microphone.

"I want to welcome everyone to the tenth year reunion of St Theresa High School's Class of 2005! Now that you've had a chance to get reacquainted, the program can begin!"

What followed was a recreation of the year 2005. Former students modelled fashions and hairstyles of the year, and others played the music

popular at that time. A town crier announced the top news stories of the day. Then the yearbook came out. Pictures from the 2005 yearbook flashed on a screen, and Jamie cringed when she saw her graduation picture. Most of the time she felt like a different person from who she'd been back then. She'd gained poise and confidence in herself and her abilities, and she knew she was more attractive. But some situations brought back all the old insecurities. This was definitely one of those situations.

Anita grabbed the mic once more. "Would 2005's King and Queen of the Prom please come forward for the first dance? And in case you've forgotten, the King and Queen in 2005 were St. Theresa's star quarterback, Christopher Patterson, and Stacy Thompson, class president, newspaper editor, and the girl voted most likely to succeed."

Chris groaned softly before standing up. He leaned over and whispered in Jamie's ear.

"Save the next dance for me."

She gave him a smile and watched him weave through the crowd to the dance floor where Stacy waited for him. They made a striking couple; Chris, tall, dark and broad-shouldered, and Stacy, blonde, petite and beautiful. They moved well in perfect harmony, as if they'd been dancing together for years. An odd sensation tightened her chest, and she realized with a start that it was jealousy.

The jealousy was nothing new. Back in high school, she'd had a huge crush on him, even though she's known he was way out of her league. She'd watched him date pretty girl after pretty girl, her heart breaking every time. But she'd never told him how she felt. She never give any sign that she had feelings for Chris that went beyond being his study buddy. To do so would have meant subjecting herself to ridicule by the entire student body, and probably losing his friendship. After all these years, she hadn't expected those old jealousies to surface again. Hadn't she outgrown those feelings?

When the dance was finally over, Chris made his way back to their table. He smiled and held out his hand. Jamie took it, and with a deep breath, followed him to the dance floor.

"I think it's only fair to warn you that I'm a terrible dancer. I wouldn't want to embarrass the King of 2005. If you want to back out now, I'll understand."

Chris grinned at her. "No way."

Jamie sighed dramatically. "Okay, you've been warned. Don't come crying to me when I step all over your toes."

She held him at arm's length and stared at their feet, doing her best to shuffle along with the music. Within seconds she stepped on Chris's foot.

She looked up into his face, which was grinning broadly. "I told you I was terrible. I'm sorry."

“Don’t worry about it.” He put his finger under her chin when she tried to look at their feet again. “Smile, Jamie. You’ve got to be the most serious dancer I’ve ever known. It’s supposed to be fun.”

“It’s no fun when you’re lousy at it.”

“Then we’ll just have to make it fun. Don’t look at your feet. Look at me.”

Jamie lifted her gaze and looked into his eyes. Immediately she felt herself drowning in them. It was the same sensation she’d felt when she was seventeen and trying to explain a difficult chemistry concept to him. He’d look at her with those soulful dark eyes and her brain would turn to mush.

She lowered her head and stared at the floor again, angry with herself for being such a ninny. She was a mature woman of twenty-eight, a confident, respected doctor, not a hormone driven teenager. One evening at St. Theresa’s and she was Jamie the Nerd again.

“Oh no, you don’t. We’re going to have to stop you from staring at your feet.”

He pulled her closer, so close that her breasts pressed against his chest and she could feel the entire length of his hard body. For a moment she forgot how to breathe.

The teasing smile left Chris's face. Slowly he lowered his head, and soft, warm lips touched hers in the gentlest of kisses.

"Guess what, Jamie? You're dancing."

She smiled slowly and held his gaze.

"Yeah, how 'bout that."

Funny, she didn't feel the least bit jealous anymore.

Jamie watched Chris and his son Riley toss a Frisbee back and forth on the lush grass on the banks of the Saskatchewan, the river that flowed through the middle of the city. When he'd called the morning after the reunion to ask her join them for a picnic supper, she had at first refused. She'd told him she wanted to spend time with her mother, but since her mother already had other plans for dinner, she wasn't being entirely honest. The honest truth was that she was scared.

She was scared that all her old feelings for Chris would rise up and consume her. In high school she'd loved him from afar. She was his buddy, the friend who was always available to help with homework, or listen to his problems with girls. Chris was kind, one of the few boys who bothered to speak to her, but he'd barely noticed she was a girl. Last night, at the reunion, he'd noticed. His gentle kiss hinted at what could be. Jamie was

afraid if she saw him again, held him in her arms one more time, she'd be a goner. And then what would she do? She'd be leaving Saskatoon in a couple of weeks. What was the point of starting something, especially if it meant she'd get her heart broken all over again?

And to be honest with herself, she had to wonder about his sudden interest in her. Was he only pursuing her because she was more attractive now?

Jamie hadn't counted on Chris's inability to take no for an answer. He somehow obtained her mother's work number and learned that Adele Marshall was going to be out with friends for the evening. When he phoned her again and confronted her with this piece of information, she'd had no choice but to say yes to his invitation.

So now she sat on a blanket in the late afternoon summer sun and watched Chris and his son. Riley, at nine and a half, was tall and sturdily built, with dark hair and eyes much like his father's. Despite being so young, he moved with the grace of an athlete, and Jamie could picture him in a few years, decked out in full football gear, leading his team to glory.

Riley ran over to her and dropped onto the blanket.

"I'm starved. When do we eat?"

Chris sat next to Jamie and reached over to affectionately tousle his son's hair.

"This kid's going to eat me out of house and home. Would now be soon enough for you, son?"

Riley grinned and threw open the lid of the cooler, bringing out dish after dish. Chris distributed paper plates, napkins and plastic cutlery before opening the lids on the dishes.

"My Dad makes awesome fried chicken." Riley helped himself to a chicken leg and a generous serving of potato salad. "It even tastes good cold."

"I'm impressed," Jamie said, savoring a bite of chicken. "This *is* awesome. When did you learn to cook like this?"

"When you're a single parent, you learn a lot of skills by necessity. And we all take turns cooking at the fire station. I had to learn to make things that were edible pretty quick. The guys don't appreciate burnt offerings."

"Dad, did you bring chocolate cake?" When Chris nodded yes, Riley licked his lips and rolled his eyes heavenward, making Jamie laugh. "Dad's chocolate cake is to *die* for, Jamie."

She laughed again, charmed by his enthusiasm. Reaching over, she gently pulled a lock of his dark, curly hair.

"To die for, eh? Sounds dangerous."

Riley grinned at her, and he looked so much like Chris, it took her breath away.

As they ate, Riley told funny stories about the kids in his class, his teacher and his soccer coach. Jamie found herself drawn to him. For the last few years she'd treated kids just like Riley, but she never let herself get too close emotionally; she wouldn't be able to do her job if she did. What would it be like to care for a child, love him, without reservation?

Not a good idea to go there. Riley was Chris's son, and she had no idea where their relationship was going. Or if it was going anywhere at all.

A group of Riley's friends came by and he raced off to join them in a pick-up game of soccer. Jamie and Chris watched them play.

"He's really a great kid, Chris. You've done a terrific job with him."

He smiled, his gaze still directed toward his son. "I've had a lot of help from my folks, even before Patty died."

She'd heard through Mel and Jacob that Chris's wife had died in an accident, and she'd mourned for him. That had been nearly five years ago. She'd never asked her friends for any details, because she didn't want them to know how much she'd thought about Chris over the years, how much she cared.

"I'm so sorry. What happened to her?"

Chris stretched his long legs out on the blanket. "There's not much to tell. She and Riley were out shopping one day and a guy ran a red light. Patty was killed instantly, and Riley was...was hurt pretty badly. He was only four and a half."

Jamie heard the catch in his voice and understood how awful it must have been for both Chris and Riley, and how painful it still was for him. Without thinking she intertwined her fingers with his. He smiled at her, a sad little smile that tore at her heart.

They sat so close together that Jamie could pick out tiny flecks of green in eyes she thought were pure brown. A shiver of awareness rippled through her. They were still holding hands, and it felt so good to be close to him, both physically and emotionally, that she was hesitant to ruin the moment. But there were things she had to know.

"Riley must have been born the same year we graduated." She watched his eyes for signs of anger or evasion. But Chris's gaze remained serene and steady.

"Yes, he was."

When he didn't volunteer any further information, Jamie averted her gaze. It really was none of her business, but she wanted to know about Riley, and especially about his mother.

"I remember Patty, a little, from high school. She was very pretty."

"Yes, she was." Chris took her chin in his hand and gently turned her face to his. "What do you want to know about her, Jamie?"

She swallowed and shifted uncomfortably on the blanket. What right did she have to ask?

"Whatever you want to tell me."

"I can tell you we were young and in love, or at least we thought we were. And then, near the end of our senior year, we found out Patty was pregnant. Our folks insisted we get married. I resented her and our unborn baby at first. I was too young to be tied down with a wife and a kid."

He looked away, toward the soccer pitch where his son played with his friends.

"But then Riley was born. When the doctor put him in my arms and I looked into that little face, I knew I'd walk through fire for him."

Jamie swallowed the lump in her throat. "Interesting choice of words coming from a fire fighter."

He grinned, then brought her hand to his lips for a kiss. "I only wish I could give Riley two parents who loved each other. He deserves that."

A rush of emotion rendered her speechless. She tried to think of a word that described Chris. *Honorable* came to mind. He was honorable in the old fashioned sense of doing the right thing and putting someone else's well-

being ahead of his own. The boy she had known in high school had grown up to become one hell of a man.

“You’re a good dad.” Her voice shook with emotion. One corner of Chris’s mouth lifted in a grin.

“I don’t know what I’m doing a lot of the time.”

“I think you’re doing just fine.”

He took her face between his two large hands and rubbed her cheek with the pads of his thumbs. Her eyes fluttered shut and she trembled with need. He gently kissed her closed eyes, then trailed a row of soft kisses across her cheek. He kissed one corner of her mouth and then the other before slanting his mouth against hers. His kiss was gentle, soft, the way it had been on the dance floor, but she wanted more. Her experience with the opposite sex wasn’t extensive, but she knew he was holding back, and she didn’t want him to.

Her arms went around his neck, her fingers curling into his thick, silky hair. She touched her tongue to his, and felt, rather than heard, his low moan. His arms tightened around her, bringing her closer, his hand running slowly up and down her back. She nibbled his bottom lip and he moaned again. When his tongue plunged into her open mouth, her body ignited in a burst of white hot flames.

Somewhere in the background, her foggy mind registered the frightened shouts coming from the soccer pitch. Chris broke their kiss and lifted his head. In another second he was up and running at full speed. Jamie turned to see the boys huddled around another kid who lay still and quiet on the ground. In a flash of fear, she realized it was Riley.

"Here, drink this."

Jamie pressed a cup of hot coffee into Chris's hands. The heat of the mug warmed his icy fingers. The fragrance of brandy mingled with the steam rising from the coffee.

"Thanks."

She sat beside him on the sofa and took a sip of her own coffee.

"Riley's sleeping now. He's a tough kid. It'll take more than a soccer ball to the head to keep him down. We'll watch for signs of concussion, but like the doctor in emergency told you, he wasn't exhibiting any such signs. I'm sure he'll be fine after a good night's sleep."

He wished he could believe her. He'd never forget the sick feeling in his gut seeing his son lying motionless on the ground. It brought back all the fears from the accident, when Riley spent several weeks in the hospital and

he'd been utterly unable to help him. Thank God Riley only blacked out for a moment and was soon able to speak to him.

At least this time Riley only spent a couple of hours in the emergency room. And this time Chris hadn't been alone with his fears. Jamie had been there the whole time, answering his questions, holding his hand.

"Thanks for staying with us at the hospital. It comes in handy having a friend who's a doctor."

Jamie's smile was subdued. "I'm glad I could help."

He regarded her thoughtfully. It was hard to believe that the poised, confident woman beside him was the shy girl he'd known in high school. But when he'd seen her concern and compassion for Riley he realized the kindness she'd possessed as a teenager was still as strong as ever, now backed by the skill and knowledge of her profession. He wished he'd taken the time know her better back then. He was beginning to see that Jamie was a woman with many layers, and he'd barely scratched the surface.

"Tell me about yourself. I want to know everything about you."

Jamie looked up in surprise, and shrugged one slim shoulder.

"I'll tell you anything you want to know. But I've got to warn you, I'm as dull as dish water."

That made him smile. "I doubt that. Where did you go to university?"

“I completed a science degree here at the University of Saskatchewan, and then I was accepted into medical school at McGill in Montreal.”

“Impressive. Where did you intern?”

“At the Hospital for Sick Children in Toronto. I was a resident there as well. I’ve applied for a staff position there. I’m waiting to hear if I’ve been accepted.”

Something tightened around his heart. He’d known she wasn’t staying, but hearing her talk about her plans for the future brought reality home in a big way. There was no future for them.

He set his mug on the coffee table and got to his feet, too agitated to sit. What could he offer Jamie? A share of the mortgage on his modest home? A chance to raise another woman’s son? An end to her dreams of working at a world class hospital? She’d be crazy to accept and he’d be selfish to ask her.

Jamie got to her feet and put her hand on his shoulder. “I wouldn’t kid about Riley’s health, Chris. He took a nasty blow to the head, but there’s no permanent damage. Just look in on him every couple of hours tonight—”

Chris pulled her roughly into his arms and held on tight. He buried his face in her sweet smelling hair and cursed himself for being a selfish fool.

“Don’t go, Jamie. Please. If something happens to Riley tonight I wouldn’t know what to do.”

It was the truth as far as it went. He *was* scared for Riley, but mainly he couldn’t stand the thought of Jamie walking out his door tonight.

She pulled far enough away to look into his eyes. With a gentle hand, she brushed the hair from his face.

“Of course I’ll stay, if that’s what you want.”

Relief flooded through his veins. He released a breath and leaned his forehead against hers.

“Yes, that’s what I want.”

Jamie tucked the covers around Riley and on impulse leaned over to kiss his cheek. He was such a sweet kid, and so much like his father.

She closed the door to Riley’s room and stepped soundlessly across the hall to check on Chris. He lay sprawled across the bed, the covers twisted as if his sleep had been restless. Jamie picked up one of the blankets that had fallen to the floor and spread it across his broad chest. She wished she could run her hands over the muscles of his wide shoulders and feel the strength in them. She wanted to taste him, touch him, love him.

He flung his arm across his face and moaned. She took a step away from the bed, clasping her hands together in case they decided to reach out to him on their own. Starting something now with Chris would only leave her with regret for what she couldn't have. She headed for the door.

"No! Patty, look out!"

Chris sat up abruptly, his breathing heavy. Forgetting her vow not to touch him, Jamie sat on the edge of his bed and stroked his face. Her heart twisted. Whatever he'd told her, he still loved his wife and mourned her.

"It's okay. Everything's okay. Riley's fine. He's sleeping peacefully."

His eyes opened and focused on her. "Jamie. I dreamt about the accident. There was so much blood."

The anguish in his voice snapped her out of her self-pity. He'd lost so much, and today he'd had a reminder of how close he'd come five years ago to losing his son.

"Shh, don't think about it anymore. Everything's okay. Just rest."

His eyes drifted shut as she eased him back down onto the bed. After covering him with the blanket once more, she watched him sleep. He was a beautiful man. His shoulders were wide and strong, the muscles on his arms well-developed. Black, springy hair covered his powerful chest, enticing her to touch.

But she couldn't. He didn't belong to her.

After a few moments, she sat up slowly, preparing to leave. Chris's eyes flew open, and his hand shot out to trap her wrist.

"Don't go."

She saw the longing in his eyes and knew it was for his dead wife. But God help her, she didn't care. If he needed her, she'd stay.

Lifting the edge of the blanket, she slipped into the bed beside him. Chris sighed and pulled her close. They lay spoon fashion, with his arm around her waist and his soft breath warm against her ear. She relaxed against him, feeling safe and happy. She'd come home.

The next afternoon Jamie and her mother drank coffee with Melanie in her mother's kitchen. Mel bubbled over with excitement.

"I've got eleven firefighters signed up to do the calendar, and with Chris, that's twelve. We go ahead with the photo shoot in a few days." She lifted her mug in triumph. "I made a deal with the fire department to donate a portion of the proceeds to the burn unit at Royal University Hospital, so now we have two good causes to work for. It's going to be a big success. I can feel it!"

Jamie smiled at Mel, getting caught up in her enthusiasm. She admired her friend; she always knew what she wanted and she went after it with everything she had. Mel was never bothered by self-doubt.

A wave of fatigue washed over her and a yawn escaped. Mel laughed.

"Keeping you up, am I?"

"Sorry about that. I'm just tired."

Jamie's mother Adele nodded at Mel. "She spent last night at Chris's house."

Mel's eyes went wide with speculation. "Oh really? How was he?"

"Get your mind out of the gutter. It's not like that." She explained about Riley's accident and Chris's fear of leaving him alone.

"Poor kid. Poor Chris. For a guy who was such a golden boy in high school, he sure has had his share of tough times since then," Mel said.

Jamie mumbled a reply, and they went on to talk about Mel's plans for the calendar shoot. A short time later, Mel jumped to her feet with her characteristic energy, saying she had to pick up her daughter from dance class. After she left, Adele poured herself and Jamie another cup of coffee.

"Have you heard anything from the hospital in Toronto?"

Jamie smiled over her coffee cup. How typical of her mother to zero in on her thoughts. Adele had a knack of knowing what she felt before she knew it herself. A wave of deep affection sweep over her. She'd missed her mom so much. Long distance calls and the occasional visit weren't the same as living close to her.

"No, I haven't heard anything yet. I expect they'll be making a decision soon." She toyed with her coffee cup. "Mom, I was thinking, maybe it would be a good idea to put feelers out, you know, just in case the job at Sick Kids doesn't pan out."

A gleam of anticipation shone in Adele's eyes before she quickly lowered her gaze. "That sounds like a smart idea. What were you thinking of doing?"

"Oh, I don't know. I'm getting kind of sick of big cities. I thought maybe I'd talk to someone at Royal University Hospital here in Saskatoon."

Adele smiled again, and Jamie could see the barely contained excitement in her eyes.

"It would be good to have you back home again."

"I know, but don't get your hopes up. Nothing may come of it." She smiled into the dark depths of her coffee mug. "It would be nice to hang out with Mel and Jacob again and get to know their kids. And to talk to you in person instead of on the phone."

“And to be close to Chris.”

Jamie looked up in surprise. Once again her mother had read her thoughts. She gave her a little smile.

“And to be close to Chris,” she repeated.

Chris never expected getting his picture taken could be so strenuous. The photographer insisted on several different poses, with different settings and props, and various articles of clothing. Or without some of his clothing.

The beefcake shots embarrassed him, but he reminded himself it was all in a good cause.

Mel bustled about, moving props and equipment around the interior of the fire hall. The fire department had okayed the use of the station and given permission to the firefighters to donate their time. Mel had successfully cut through mounds of red tape with energy and flair.

Jamie walked through the open bay doors of the station, looking as bright as a summer’s day. She wore a sunny yellow dress with a matching ribbon securing her dark, shining hair in a ponytail. Her legs were bare and tanned and she wore sandals that showed off her pink enameled toe nails. When their eyes connected and she smiled at him, his heart thundered in his chest.

He loved her and he never wanted to let her go.

It was the first time his head acknowledged what his heart had known since the moment he first saw her at the reunion. He remembered waking with Jamie in his arms the morning after Riley's accident and feeling how right it was for her to be there. All the obstacles to their being together still held true, but he'd find a way around them. He had to.

She walked toward him, smiling as if he were the only person in the crowded station. When she reached him, he pulled her into his arms, knowing his buddies were watching and that he'd face their ribbing later. He didn't care. Right now all he cared about was holding her.

"There you are, Jamie!" Mel's bellow could be heard across the room. "I need some help here. Hurry up!"

She pulled away from him and smiled up into his face. "She's quite the little slave-driver, isn't she?"

"A regular dictator." He kissed the end of her nose. "My shift ends at seven this evening. Can I see you then? Can you meet me at my place?"

Jamie's smile was bright with promise. "There's no place else I'd rather be."

She stretched up to kiss his cheek, and it all he could do not to haul her against him and ravage her sweet mouth. He released her, and watched

the sexy little swing in her hips as she walked across the station floor. The end of his shift couldn't come soon enough.

Jamie's heart beat in double time as she rang Chris's doorbell. It was crazy for her to be here when she knew his true feelings for his dead wife. She was letting herself in for a lot of heartache. Chris was a wonderful guy and she knew he wouldn't hurt her intentionally, but she couldn't believe he could ever feel about her the way he'd felt about Patty.

But she couldn't stop herself from coming here. Whatever happened tonight, she wouldn't regret it.

Chris answered the door, and for a few seconds they just smiled at each other. His hair was still wet from his shower and his shirt was unbuttoned, revealing the broad chest she admired so much. She wanted to run her fingers through the curly mat of hair on his chest, to touch every part of him.

Chris took her hand and pulled her inside. Then he hauled her against his body and kissed her with a passion that set her soul on fire.

"Jamie."

She heard the plea in his voice. She looked up into his face and saw his dark eyes intense with desire. For her. Her own desire stirred low in her belly.

"Where's Riley?" she whispered.

"He's with my folks tonight. All night."

She clasped his hand, bringing it to her mouth for a kiss, her gaze never leaving his. "Then we shouldn't waste any time, should we?"

"No, we shouldn't."

With one quick motion, he picked her up and carried her to his room, surprising her and making her laugh. Happiness bubbled inside her, along with the rightness of being with him. Tonight they belonged together.

Tomorrow she'd worry about what happened next.

Chris laid her on his bed, then loomed over her, not quite touching her. His brow furrowed as he stared into her eyes.

"You're sure?"

She'd never been surer of anything in her life. "Yes. Very."

He let out a breath, and a corner of his mouth lifted in a smile that looked almost relieved.

"God, I want you."

When he pressed close, she felt the evidence of his arousal against her thigh. Knowing he desired her made her bold. She pulled off his open shirt.

“Then you should have me.”

Their clothes disappeared as they helped each other undress. When they were finally able to touch each other skin to skin, Jamie trailed her fingers down Chris’s back and across his buttocks. His skin was hot to the touch, but smooth, like silk under her fingers. When her exploring hand closed around his erection, he closed his eyes and moaned.

“I need you, Jamie.”

He did some exploring of his own. His hand found her most intimate spot and he probed with gentle fingers. Jamie’s head fell back. She lifted her hips, urging him deeper. Her world spun in a kaleidoscope of color, and then suddenly it shattered into a thousand pieces, leaving her breathless.

Chris entered her then, moving slowly at first, as if learning her body, testing her boundaries. But soon his thrusts deepened, grew wild. Jamie welcomed it, raising her hips to meet him. Once more she spiraled out of control. With one last deep thrust he found his release and collapsed on top of her.

She held him tightly and kissed the side of his sweat dampened face. She loved him so much. How was she supposed to let him go?

Chris woke with a smile on his face, and the woman he loved in his arms. When he kissed her forehead, she mumbled sleepily and cuddled closer. Tenderness for her mixed with fear. How was he supposed to let her go?

He kissed her again and Jamie's eyes slowly opened. She smiled at him, and her hands moved in lazy circles across his chest.

"I dreamed of doing this from the moment we met again."

Chris's body responded instantly to her touch. "I suppose you want to have your wicked way with me again."

She kissed one flat, hard nipple and trailed kisses to the other one. "I sincerely hope so."

"Jamie, last night..."

He couldn't finish. He wanted to tell her last night was the most special night of his life, that he loved her and wanted to be with her always. But how could he ask her to stay in Saskatoon? It wouldn't be fair to ask her to give up the career she'd worked so hard for.

"Last night was wonderful," he finished.

She pulled his head down for a kiss.

“And this morning’s going to be even better.”

Jamie carefully set her phone on the kitchen counter before turning to face her mother. Adele drummed her fingers on the table.

“Well?”

“They want me.”

It had been quite a day. In the morning she’d received a phone call from Royal University Hospital offering her a position. And now, a few hours later, an email arrived from Sick Kids Hospital confirming her appointment.

“What are you going to do?” Adele asked.

“I don’t know.”

In the last week, she and Chris had spent as much time together as his schedule would allow. She couldn’t imagine walking away from him. She knew Chris cared for her. He couldn’t make love to her with so much passion and tenderness and not care just a little.

But she couldn’t help wondering if she was just a summer fling for him. And Patty’s ghost hovered between them. Did he still love her?

Sometimes she caught him looking at her with a light in his eyes that burned so bright she could almost believe it was love. A spark of hope flared in her heart.

"I need to talk to Chris. I'll be back a little later."

Jamie grabbed a jacket, and after kissing her mother's cheek, she headed out the door. Maybe it was time for a little faith.

Jamie stepped inside the fire station not knowing if she should even be here. But her need to see Chris outweighed any regulations about visitors the fire department may have had.

She found him in the kitchen preparing dinner with a couple of other firefighters. He looked up in surprise when she called his name.

"Jamie, what are you doing here? Is everything all right?"

"Something's come up that I need to talk to you about."

After wiping his hands on a towel, he walked toward her. He searched her face a moment, then after asking one of the men to finish up for him, he took her hand and led her out of the kitchen. Down the hall, he opened a door and turned on a light to reveal a large storeroom. Jamie followed him inside, and he closed the door behind her.

“What’s going on? I know you wouldn’t be here if you didn’t think it was important.”

“It is.” Jamie swallowed, and took a deep breath, claspng her suddenly clammy hands together. “I got an email from Sick Kids. They want me to start right away.”

He turned away, closing his eyes as he leaned against the door.

“I see.”

“I want to know, I need to know, should I accept, or should I stay here? Do you want me to stay?”

“I won’t tell you not to go. You’ve worked too hard.”

Jamie averted her face. Her worst fears were coming true. He didn’t want her. Had the time they’d spent together meant nothing to him?

“What if Riley and I came with you?”

She swung around to face him, not sure she’d heard correctly. “What?”

“Riley and I could come with you. I could get another job somewhere and we’d be together, a family. I’m asking you to marry me, Jamie.”

For a moment Jamie was too stunned to react. “You’d do that for me? You’d give up your life here? Your job, your family?” Though she was afraid

of the answer, she had to ask the question that was uppermost in her mind.

“What about Patty?”

Chris’s brow wrinkled in confusion. “What about Patty?”

“I know you still mourn for her. I heard you call out for her in your sleep the night of Riley’s accident.”

“If I did, it was just a nightmare, sweetheart. I was scared for Riley and I must have dreamt of the accident again. Patty and I were so young. We only married because of Riley, and we only stayed together because of him. We tried our best, but we both knew our marriage had been a mistake. If she’d lived, I doubt we’d still be together.” He brought Jamie’s hand to his lips and kissed the palm. “Patty is my past. You’re my future. I love you.”

The impact of his words hit her with the force of hurricane. He loved her and wanted to be with her. There were no ghosts between them.

Her heart filled with happiness. Her choice was suddenly very clear. She was going to be very happy right here in Saskatoon with her new job and her new family.

She wound her arms around his neck. “I think I’m going to love living in my hometown again.”

Epilogue

"Here it is, hot off the press." Jamie fanned herself with the glossy calendar. "And *hot* is the operative word."

Chris set down the spoon he'd used to stir the chili and pulled his wife into his arms. Every time he held her he thanked the fates that had brought them together. Their love was truly a miracle.

"Don't you want to see your picture?"

He nibbled her ear. "I'd rather take you upstairs."

Riley's giggle brought Chris's head up.

"I wanna see Dad's picture, Mom."

The smile Jamie gave Riley was pure love. Chris knew it thrilled her to have Riley call her mom. Both of them hoped someday they'd have several more kids to call her that. Jamie gave Chris a kiss on his cheek and whispered in his ear.

"Hold that thought."

She opened the calendar with a flourish and laid it on the table.

"Gentlemen, I give you Mr. October."

Chris stared at his image. Thankfully, Mel had selected the most modest shot of the bunch. In it, he held his helmet in his right hand and wore his jacket open, exposing a sliver of bare chest. His face looked

hopeful, expectant, and he remembered he'd been thinking of Jamie during the entire shoot.

"Way cool, Dad," Riley said.

Jamie laughed and hugged Riley. "Yeah, Chris. Way cool."

Chris smiled at the two people he loved most in the world.

"Way cool."