

Sister's Choice

Condensed Excerpt

Most of the time Kendra Taylor found that spending time with her nieces helped fill an empty space inside her. When Alison or Hannah wrapped their chubby arms around her neck or planted a sloppy kiss on her cheek, her primary feeling was gratitude that she and their mother, her younger sister, had finally built a bridge across the abyss of their dysfunctional childhood.

But "most of the time" also meant there were moments, like this one, when Kendra found herself wishing for more than a day or even a week when she and her husband Isaac could enjoy the high-voltage electricity of children in their lives. Now, as she watched four year old Alison shove a red and white Santa Claus hat over her copper Orphan Annie curls, she felt a pang she knew too well.

"They're something, aren't they?"

She turned at her husband's voice and saw that Isaac had moved up beside her and was smiling at the little girls, who had woven their way into the crowd of onlookers enjoying the National Christmas Tree on the Ellipse in Washington DC.

"They are that," Kendra said, over the warbling of a high school ensemble faithfully recounting the Night Before Christmas for everybody's enjoyment. "The girls know how to get what they want."

Without shoving or asking for favors, the girls had wormed themselves into front row positions. Hannah, nearly eight, was instructing her sister on how close she was allowed, but Jamie, their mother, stood two rows behind, near enough to make a lunge in case the ebullient Alison decided to ignore her. "It's been a great visit," Isaac said.

Kendra linked arms with him, and for just a moment rested her head against his shoulder. Jamie's arrival had been a surprise. They hadn't seen her since Labor Day, when she and her daughters had flown in to present plans Jamie had drawn up for a small guest cabin on property the Taylors owned in the Shenandoah Valley. Then, on Friday, after Kendra had casually mentioned on the phone that she and Isaac had nothing going on that weekend, Jamie and the girls had flown in to surprise them.

"Jamie's going to be looking for an internship as soon as she finishes her master's," Isaac said. "Has she said where she plans to settle? Could this visit have anything to do with job hunting?"

"She's been surprisingly evasive."

Isaac glanced down at her. "What do you think that means?"

"Maybe she knows I'll disapprove?"

Isaac wasn't classically handsome, but he was easy to look at. Now he sent her the ghost of a smile as he touched her chin with a gloved finger.

"You don't think Jamie's beyond needing your approval, K.C.?"

When Isaac looked at her sister, Kendra knew he saw the redesigned Jamie, the only one he'd ever known. Sometimes she envied him that view. Yes, the Jamie she saw was at least partly that responsible adult, the excellent mother and fabulous cook, the talented student architect, the forthright young woman who never made self-serving excuses for wandering aimlessly, dangerously, through her young adulthood.

But the other Jamie, the sister who had disappeared for years, who had given no thought to the pain she caused, who had brought two daughters into the world without allowing Kendra access to them? Unfortunately that Jamie still lurked at the periphery of Kendra's vision.

"I'm not sure she needs my approval," Kendra said. "But I do think she loves to avoid a hassle."

"A pretty common trait. I don't like hassles either, do you?"

She heard the gently veiled reminder to ease up. In the year and a half since Jamie had returned to Kendra's life, she had been difficult to fault. She was a spontaneous, free-wheeling mother, but under the thin veneer of "anything goes" the girls were learning a solid respect for others, a deep belief in their own abilities, and the importance of making good decisions. Jamie seemed to be doing an excellent job.

"Worrying is deeply ingrained in me." Kendra squeezed his arm then let her own fall free so she could wind her scarf tighter around her neck. "And right now I'm worried about Alison. She looks beat."

To her credit, apparently Jamie noticed this, too. As Kendra watched, Jamie stretched out her hand and rested it on Alison's drooping shoulder. Alison wiggled her way to her mother's side, and in a moment dark-haired Hannah followed suit.

"You two ready to go home?" Kendra asked.

Hannah leaned against her aunt's hip. She was blithely unaware that she shared her mother's fine-boned beauty, and today she had garbed herself in a faded denim skirt, an adult sized sweatshirt that displayed Harry Potter's Gryffindor crest, and olive and maroon striped knee socks.

"Alison is ready. I would choose to stay, but there will be no living with her," Hannah said.

Quelling a smile, Kendra squeezed her niece's shoulder in commiseration. Hannah was an overly mature eight-year-old with a rich imagination, precise speech, and a strong herding instinct. She kept Alison in line, and sometimes Kendra suspected she kept Jamie in line, as well.

With an expression of forbearance Hannah ran ahead to catch up with Isaac and Alison, who were forging a path through the crowd, and Kendra was left to pick her way with Jamie. They didn't speak until the crowd had thinned and they were walking side by side toward the nearest Metrorail stop at McPherson Square.

"I'm so glad we could make the trip," Jamie said. "It was such a luxury to just hop a plane. All kinds of opportunities have opened up for me, now that I have access to my trust fund."

Kendra had wondered how Jamie would deal with the unseemly amount of money she had recently inherited from their father's estate. Until last year, when she had turned twenty-eight and her share had been turned over to her, Jamie had chosen to live on her own, without help or supervision. She had spent a lot of years counting pennies. The change had to be huge.

"It is nice to be able to just get a ticket on the spur of the moment," Jamie said, as if she was reading her sister's thoughts. "But I still went to a broker for the cheapest deal. It's ingrained in me."

"I tried to ignore the impact when the money came to me, but it's pretty hard. I wondered how you felt." Kendra saw an opening to get more information, and she took it. "If nothing else the money'll help you get established after you graduate. I know you still have more than a year of graduate school. But have you made plans for what comes next?"

They had almost caught up to Isaac and the girls before Jamie answered. "Well, to some extent that depends."

They were interrupted by Alison, who pointed toward a shop across the sidewalk. The moment to find out more about Jamie's plans was lost.

They reached the Metro platform at last. Kendra followed Jamie to the edge overlooking the rails. Somewhere echoing in the distance she could hear a lone violinist playing Silent Night for tips.

"Okay, I've been waiting for you to notice, and you haven't," Jamie said.

"Notice what?"

"What's different about me."

Kendra chewed her lip in concentration. "Since Labor Day?"

"Uh huh."

Kendra gazed at her sister. Jamie's hair—one shade from black—was still halfway down her back, falling in waves from a deep widow's peak. The body under a bright pink ski jacket wasn't visible, but Kendra hadn't noticed that Jamie had gained or lost weight. She still attracted attention just by the way she carried herself and met the eyes of any man who cared to look her way.

Isaac joined them, turned slightly so he could still see the girls. "I haven't seen you smoke."

Kendra realized he was right. "Did you quit?" she asked Jamie. "You've always been so careful about smoking outside that I just didn't pay attention."

"I quit." Jamie nodded to Isaac. "Right after I got back to Michigan after Labor Day."

"Good for you." Kendra gently punched her sister's arm.

"Yeah, way to go," Isaac said.

Kendra heard the rumbling of a train heading their way. "What made you do it?"

"I never smoke when I'm pregnant."

For a moment Kendra thought she'd heard her sister wrong. Then when she realized she hadn't, she searched for an explanation other than the obvious. Jamie was simply pointing out that she could stop and had already proved it twice.

But even as she ran through these possibilities, Kendra knew this wasn't what her sister had meant at all. In her own way Jamie had been answering Kendra's question about her future. This was not a change of subject, but an explanation. As that realization hit her, the void deep inside, the empty place that would never be filled with a child because she could never risk carrying one, throbbed in protest.

Jamie had already proven that she could get pregnant without making an effort. Double proof was sitting on the bench behind them. Hannah and Alison were the product of two casual relationships, and their arrival in the world had been unplanned.

"You're pregnant?" she asked as the train, not yet in sight, grew louder.

Jamie rested her hand on Kendra's arm. "Not yet."

Kendra tried to make sense of this. They were standing on the edge of a subway platform, people streaming by on their way from holiday events downtown. But there was something here she didn't understand, something large enough that Jamie had chosen this moment to play it down. She had needed the crowd, the rush, the noise, to make her announcement.

"I don't get it," Kendra said, and she heard the edge to her words. "You've decided to have another baby? While you're in grad school? Is there a man in the picture? Somebody you're in love with?"

"No, somebody else is in love with this man." Jamie searched her sister's face. Her smile was tentative. "You were asking about my plans for the future? Well, in the immediate future I want to have another baby. Your baby, Ken. Yours and Isaac's."

Kendra stared speechlessly at her sister, but Jamie went on.

"I want to be your surrogate. I'm in perfect health, and my doctor's given me the go ahead. You can conceive, and I can carry. I want to do it this summer when I'll have some of my basic graduate work behind me. I can live in the guest cabin out in the Valley—if it's finished by then—and keep an eye on the crew building your new house."

"Jamie. . ."

Jamie held up her hand. "I can do some work on my own and take a break from formal classes. The timing's right for me, and I know it's right for you."

The train appeared and slowed as it approached the platform, but Kendra might as well have been standing on a newly discovered planet. She didn't know the language to communicate what she was feeling. Somewhere deep inside she thought that the girls must have felt just this way as they waited, breaths held, for the National Christmas Tree to blaze into life.

Jamie rested her hand on Kendra's arm. "Don't make this hard, Ken. It's easy. All you have to do is say yes. Let me do this for you and Isaac. Let me do it for all of us."