

Excerpt from
Alibis and Amethysts
by
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A busboy appeared to replace the empty basket of chips with a full one along with some fresh salsa. Quinn Finnegan came by right behind him to tell Jaye how glad he was to see her there. The man had restaurant savvy down pat. He made every patron feel as if he'd opened his doors specifically for them. Plus his kitchen served up great food at reasonable prices.

"Susana made some great fish tacos tonight," he said. "Even better than Luisa's," he added in a discreet whisper.

"Who's Susana?" Sierra asked.

"Luisa's cousin; she's filling in while my wife's down in Mexico visiting her family.

Would you believe I ate ten of those tacos today?"

Jaye had no trouble believing it. Quinn was looking more like a red-haired Pillsbury Dough Boy every day. The shirt buttons over his ballooning waist were on the verge of popping like mini champagne corks. But in spite of Quinn's glowing recommendation, when the waiter appeared to take their order, the two women passed on the tacos and ordered fajitas instead, chicken for Sierra, vegetable for Jaye.

"I don't know how you do it," Sierra said shaking her head.

Jaye loaded some salsa onto a tortilla chip. "What's that?"

"Being a vegetarian for so many years without ever falling off the wagon. When I tried it, I didn't make it past the first week."

"Yeah, and I remember that week. You weren't any fun at all. What was your name then?"

"Brooke," Sierra said. "I figured if I was going to be a vegetarian, I should sound like I was in sync with nature."

"Let's see...by my count 'Sierra' is...number eight?"

"Legally I only changed my name five times," Sierra said. "Besides, different stages in life call for different names. Of course you have to know your limitations. Personally, I could never pull off 'Tiffany' or 'Lola.' But with your looks – you could pull off just about any name – maybe even 'Gertrude.'"

"Is that supposed to be a compliment?"

"Of course not," Sierra smiled in bemusement, "dark hair, green eyes, heart-shaped face...seriously girl, why would anyone be complimenting you?" She took a moment to drain the last of her margarita. "You can't tell me you've never wanted to change your name," she pursued. When Sierra hooked into a subject it wasn't easy to change the trajectory of the conversation.

"Actually, I did think about it once in our freshman year. You were calling yourself 'Hannah' at the time, because you thought it was a good, solid name; the name of someone

who would work hard and have a high GPA. I guess I was intrigued by the concept of taking on a different persona— sort of like starting over.”

“You never told me that.” Sierra sounded surprised and a bit offended that her friend had been holding back.

Jaye shrugged. “It wasn’t worth mentioning. After all of two seconds I realized I could never do it. My name is the only thing I have left from my mom and dad.”

“Okay, I get it,” Sierra said. “But FYI – you shouldn’t play the ‘poor little orphan card’ too often.”

If those words had come from anyone else, Jaye would have immediately deleted that person from her list of friends, both on and off Facebook. But since they’d come from Sierra, she found herself laughing instead. “You’re rationing me?”

“I’m just looking out for you. You don’t want your material to lose its punch, do you?”

Jaye nearly choked on the chip she was nibbling. There was no way to predict what might come out of Sierra’s mouth at any given moment. She’d made Jaye so wary and uncomfortable when they’d first met that Jaye had considered asking for a different dorm assignment. But after a month of living together in close quarters, it had quickly become apparent that there was no one kinder or more compassionate than her eccentric roomy.

Dinner arrived, sizzling hot and smelling richly of peppers, onions and garlic. Conversation was suspended while they went about assembling their fajita wraps.

“I forgot to tell you --Peggy Kruger literally crashed into my cart in the supermarket yesterday,” Jaye said using her napkin to blot a drop of sauce that was working its way down her chin. “I guess I should be grateful we weren’t in our cars. She rounded the corner into the cereal aisle like she thought she was at Daytona. It took a while for my arms to stop vibrating from the impact. She got all flustered and started to apologize – until she realized it was *my* cart she’d hit. Goodbye apology, hello venomous glare.”

Sierra took her time chewing a mouthful. “I guess you’re guilty by association,” she said finally.

“A little over the top, don’t you think? I know you’re in competition with her, but everyone in business has to deal with that sooner or later. It’s called ‘capitalism.’”

“Change comes hard for some people,” Sierra said without rancor. “Peggy had the only bakery around here for almost twenty years. To her I’m the usurper of customers, the black hole of profits. And if I’m the devil incarnate, I guess she sees you as one of my handmaidens. What I don’t get is why she hasn’t tried to up her game to lure her customers back or to hold onto the ones she still has. From what I’m told, her line of baked goods has been exactly the same for two decades. Even she should be bored to death by now. Speaking of which,” she said, “you’re coming back to my house after dinner to try my new apricot Linzer tarts.”

“Have you ever considered framing an invitation in the form of a question?” Jaye asked with a laugh. “For example, ‘would you like to come over after dinner? I have a fabulous new dessert I’d like you to try.’”

“I like my way. It makes it harder for the invitee to refuse.”

“I guess I’ll take the rest of my dinner to go,” Jaye said with an exaggerated sigh, “since you’re apparently going to be force feeding me dessert.”

Jaye followed Sierra into West Sedona where her friend had plunked down her savings on a small, older home that had started to fall apart the day after she went to closing. As a result, renovating the kitchen and tackling other cosmetic issues had had to wait until the roof, plumbing and appliances underwent repairs. After a brief but rowdy meltdown, Sierra had meditated herself into a generally peaceful acceptance of the situation. Whenever Jaye had tried to practice that art during times of stress she'd only succeeded in falling asleep. Not half bad as failures go.

They had one stop to make on the way to Sierra's house – Dee's Play and Stay, which offered daycare for dogs as well as boarding. Jaye pulled into the lot and waited in her car while Sierra went inside. She reappeared a minute later holding the leash of a prancing, snow-white American Eskimo who answered to the name of Frosty. Sierra had adopted him from the elderly woman whose house she'd bought. Unable to take the dog with her to the nursing home, the woman had begged Sierra to keep him or she'd be forced to leave him at a shelter. Sierra had never owned a dog before, but with her usual "how hard could it be?" philosophy, she'd agreed. Within a week she was completely besotted with him. Unfortunately, it took Frosty the better part of a month to accept his new housemate. He ran away five times, soiled the rugs, couch and linens with every orifice he had and even went on a hunger strike, although that had only lasted for one day.

As soon as they arrived at Sierra's house, she let Frosty out in the backyard to attend to doggie matters, while she started the coffee. He hadn't been outside long when he started barking full throttle as if he'd been ambushed by a band of starving zombies with a yen for dog stew.

"Could you go see what's got him in such an uproar?" Sierra asked as she measured the grounds into the filter. "I'm afraid one day he's going to corner a snake or a coyote back there. He doesn't seem to realize when he's outmatched."

"But I certainly do," Jaye said, stopping with her hand on the doorknob. "Exactly how many snakes and coyotes have visited since you moved in here?"

"None, or at least none that Frosty or I have seen. If you're worried, turn on the outside lights. There's also a flashlight in the pantry."

Flashlight in hand, Jaye switched on the lights and headed out the back door. The elderly woman who'd lived there for three decades before Sierra had let the property return to its natural state of high desert scrub. When Sierra had still been riding her home-buying high, she'd talked at length about whipping the land into shape, buying some ornamental plants and maybe even seeding for grass. But getting her bakery up and running while she was teaching herself the art of baking had barely left her with time to breathe.

Since the backyard wasn't large, it was immediately obvious that Frosty had to be somewhere else. His barking had taken on an hysterical, high-pitched quality. She tried calling his name, but after several futile attempts, she followed his barking around to the left. Whoever had installed the outdoor lighting had clearly not anticipated a need for it on the side of the house, so she had to rely completely on the old flashlight's narrow, amber beam. She found Frosty frozen in place in the darkness, still issuing the doggie equivalent of a call to arms. Jaye couldn't see any reason for his distress until she used the flashlight to follow

his line of sight. She gave a startled yelp of surprise when the beam revealed what appeared to be a woman sprawled face down on the ground a good twelve feet away.

It took Jaye only a moment to throttle down from her initial shock and shift gears into action. She moved forward cautiously, half expecting the woman to jump up and apologize for stopping there to take a nap. But the woman didn't move. Frosty's barking had ebbed to a breathless chuffing now that he'd done his job and summoned the troops, but he kept his distance, clearly not interested in accompanying Jaye on a closer inspection.

When Jaye was at the woman's side, she ran the beam of light down the length of her body and noticed that her limbs were splayed at odd angles like a rag doll flung aside by a child who'd moved on to other toys. She considered the possible reasons why a person might be lying there. There weren't many. Either the woman was a victim of foul play or she'd been felled by a stroke, a heart attack or some other fatal condition. Or maybe she wasn't dead at all. Fighting a sudden case of squeamishness, Jaye managed to hunker down and check for a pulse in her neck. It was only then, with the flashlight so close to the woman's head, that she realized her dark hair was thoroughly matted with blood.