

Chapter One

I wonder what it would be like to live in a world
where it was always June.

— L.M. Montgomery

Jamie, what on earth are you doing way over here? The party is that direction,” Romy Black said, pointing toward the old red barn and temporary dance floor. “Are you feeling all right? You’ve never been the kind of girl to pass up a good party.”

“Oh, just catching my breath. Beautiful wedding, wasn’t it? Everything went perfectly,” Jamie said hurriedly. She wasn’t exactly sure why she was hovering at the edges of Charlotte and Nico’s wedding reception. She’d never been at the edge of anything in her life. She was a front and center type of girl. If there was fun to be had, Jamie was there. God created her as an extrovert to the extreme and she thrived on being surrounded by people. A country barn dance and dinner was her

idea of a great time. Now, for some reason, she just didn't feel like celebrating.

"It was perfectly perfect," Romy said. "And now it's time to dance, so let's go!" She pretended to hitch the hem of her long, Grecian style bridesmaid dress up above her knees. "We just need some safety pins and we'll be ready."

Jamie laughed, noticing that Romy wore the style so much better than she did. Her tall, athletic body was perfect for the column of pleated fabric, and the dark pink color brought out her large, dark eyes. In contrast, the dress seemed awkwardly wrinkled on Jamie's short and heavy figure, and her pale skin looked washed out against the strong color. Romy had matched her eyeshadow to the dress, blending pale pink and a touch of deep rose, somehow making her eyes even more startlingly blue. Jamie wished she'd tried harder with her make up, but remembered that it was hard to get the same effect through a half inch of glass. She'd never worried much about her appearance. Being the ugly duckling of the group had always had its advantages. Overweight, with washed out skin, bad hair, and thick glasses, she wasn't as worried about picking the perfect pair of jeans. When there wasn't much improvement to be made with her appearance, she'd focused on other areas, like her exuberant personality.

"Shouldn't we wait for the newlyweds?"

At that moment, Charlotte and Nico arrived in an old red Ford truck from the fifties, decorated with streamers and tin cans. Nico opened the passenger door and helped out his bride, then his little girl, Elena. They walked toward the barn holding hands, Elena between them with an enormous smile on her little face.

Nico's brother, Theo, stood waiting at the barn entrance, a glass of champagne in each hand. Theo taught second grade in the classroom across the hall from Jamie, and she secretly thought he was far more handsome than any of the other Delis brothers. Every time she saw him, her stomach gave a little tumble and her heart skipped a beat. She'd tried to engage him in conversation a few times, but he'd mumbled a few words and ducked away. Jamie wondered if he'd heard about her reputation for being a talker and didn't want to get stuck in an endless loop of chatter. Whatever it was, she'd tried to resign herself to the idea of never getting to know the most popular second grade teacher in the county. He wouldn't be interested in her, anyway. The Delis brothers could have their pick of any girl in the county. She tore her gaze away from Theo's wide smile and focused on the newlyweds.

"They look so happy," Jamie said.

"They do." Romy paused, her expression softening. "Are you?"

“Me? Happy, you mean?”

“I don’t mean to pry but you’ve been sort of... quiet.”

Jamie felt herself start to flush. Her mother complained that she never stopped talking. Her friends laughed about how she couldn’t keep her thoughts to herself if her life depended upon it. It was common knowledge Jamie had no filter and tended to say anything that popped into her head. Violet said that was what she loved about her, Mrs. Tam said that was part of her charm, and Nico described her as “refreshingly honest”, but Jamie knew they were simply being kind.

It was kind of Romy to say she wasn’t trying to eke out a confession of jealousy. It was definitely the type of thing Jamie would have done if she’d suspected someone was letting the green-eyed monster take control. She was endlessly curious about everyone, and couldn’t resist a good, juicy tale of woe. She did her best to avoid harmful gossip, but surely there wasn’t anything wrong with getting all the details when someone was going through a hard time. She liked to think she’d helped repair a relationship or two, and she was great at offering much needed consolation.

Her mother said being the town gossip would get her in trouble someday, but Jamie didn’t consider herself a gossip. More like a shoulder to cry on and a listening ear when times were tough.

Sure, she ended up holding a lot of secrets, but she was careful not to share them. She was chatty, but not loose-lipped. There was a real difference. At least, in her eyes.

"I'm fine, really." She added a smile that she hoped dispelled Romy's worry. "Just worried about my dad. He's never really recovered from his back surgery and the farm needs a lot of work." She hadn't been thinking about him when Romy walked up, but his health issues were difficult to ignore.

"Is there anybody he can hire for help?"

"Sure. That's not the problem. We can't keep him off his feet." Jamie shrugged. "He doesn't trust me or my mom to supervise the harvest. Quinn's too busy running his river rafting tours. My dad would never ask him to take time from his business, anyway." Quinn was the only person Paul Lawson could trust to run the harvest. She lifted her chin and tried not to let his lack of faith irritate her. She'd done her best to convince him that she was capable of handling the business for the summer, but he just couldn't let go. She'd found him stumbling through the blueberry fields just that morning, pushing his walker over the tall grass and muttering about unseasonable rains. The doctor had said he needed six weeks of complete rest or he would risk permanent injury, but Paul Lawson didn't care.

"That's tough." Romy looked out at the dance floor, where her brother was dancing with his new wife. "Running a farm is hard. Running a farm when you're short-handed is worse. We were blessed to have you all to help us after our mom died."

"You know what it's like," Jamie said, nodding.

"On top of the farm, there were a lot of changes at once. Having Silas move back home, learning to rely on each other again, then watching him fall in love with Violet and get married... I felt like I was on a merry go round and couldn't get it to slow down. And did I tell you my Aunt Lilly Mae and my cousin Rose are coming from Louisiana to visit?"

A Lilly, a Rose *and* a Violet. Jamie couldn't help smiling a little at the mental image of the women standing in a floral shop. "No. When will they be here?"

"Later this week. They'd wanted to come before Mom passed away but my aunt broke her ankle slipping off a horse. She's kind of a character. I've only met my cousin Rose once, a long time ago. I asked my aunt what Rose was up to and she said she was a wedding planner for Al's World of Alligators. I'm pretty sure she was kidding."

Silas had been to visit his cousins in the bayou several times and from the stories he'd told her,

Jamie wasn't so sure the aunt was kidding around. "I'd love to meet them."

"I'll make sure you do. Rose is going back after a week or so, but Aunt Lilly will stay a while. She's like you — loves to get to know everyone. I bet you'll get along great."

"Maybe she's coming to check out Silas's new wife?"

"No doubt about it." Romy sounded serious. "She promised our mother that she'd look after us, but she's kind of late to stop the wedding. That ship has sailed."

They both watched as Violet and Silas stepped out onto the dance floor. Jamie realized the last few months had been much more dramatic for Romy. She'd been so focused on herself that she hadn't thought about how the wedding had affected other people. Her best friend's wedding had been one of the toughest days of her life. On a perfect spring day, Violet Tam walked down the aisle carrying the most delicate bouquet of her namesake flower. Silas Black wore a violet in his lapel. It was a small wedding with just a few friends and family. Just like Silas and Violet, it was sweet, tender, and focused on the miracle God's grace in their lives. She should have been thrilled, but deep down she'd known that it signaled the end of their friendship, in a way.

It was simply how it was and there was no use pretending otherwise. Gone were the days of gabbing for hours in her classroom after the students had left, or going for a quick pizza at Violet's family restaurant, Fire and Brimstone. There would be no more impromptu Gilmore Girls marathons or spontaneous shopping trips to Twin Falls.

Romy went on, looking out at the setting sun, "I love Violet, I promise. It's not about her at all."

"I know." Jamie really did. Silas was a great guy. She'd seen how Violet had fallen in love with him and discovered a whole new world in the process. But it was hard to be left behind.

"Anyway, I just want you to know that I understand about mixed feelings."

"Thank you." For just a moment Jamie thought about sharing how she had never felt so alone, and how she wished she could go back three years when everyone she knew was single and just trying to learn how to be a responsible adult. In the end, she said nothing, not knowing how to explain without sounding bitter or jealous. For the first time in her life, she felt as if there wasn't any reason to talk it through. It was what it was, and there was no changing it.

"Well, when you feel like it, come on out on the dance floor. We single girls have to stick together."

"I will," Jamie promised, and watched Romy walk away.

As the dance floor filled up with guests, she gazed out at the fiery pink and orange sky, admiring how the setting sun had created yet another spectacular Arcadia Valley sunset. Acres of tall grass stretched to the horizon and the wind rippled the surface in waves, creating a softly mournful sound. The hay loft in the old red barn flickered with light, illuminated with strand after strand of warmly glowing bulbs. The Camden's barn must be near a hundred years old and usually housed an assortment of animals, but its tenants had been evicted and the floors scrubbed clean for the party. Through the open doors, she could see bright pink peonies decorating every table and candles flickering in small mason jars. A good portion of land in front of the barn had been mown shockingly short for the portable dance floor. Couples laughed as they quick-stepped to the fast-paced bluegrass music provided by a small band.

It was a classic country wedding reception, similar to any of the dozen or so she'd attended in her life. Jamie felt a strong sense of *déjà vu* as she glanced around at the familiar faces of her community. Old Elise Camden was dancing with Ron Taylor, and he looked like he was begging her to slow down, probably worried about her heart. Alex and Patricia were better than most of the

guests on the floor, and her rounded belly gave special meaning to the joy on her face. Mrs. Delis was dancing with her son Stavros, both laughing at his clumsy footwork. Several of their Greek cousins who had traveled from Boise were clapping along beside them. Javier and Molly Quintana had eyes only for each other as they stepped to the lilting rhythm. The six-year-old Gonzalez twins were spinning in circles, their beautiful dresses flaring out like lacy umbrellas.

It was a run-of-the-mill Arcadia Valley summer wedding. Well, except for the Greek influences. There were traditional Greek tunes mixed into the usual songs, the dessert table featured baklava and fried *tolumba*, and the outdoor grills were working overtime serving up Nico's famous andouille sausages. The rest of it was all so familiar: the deliriously happy couple, emotional family members, and joyful friends gathered to celebrate the holy matrimony of two people.

A weight had settled at the pit of her stomach. She wrapped her arms tightly around her waist, willing herself to banish the ache. Romy had shone a light on the dark and ominous cloud that had been hovering in her thoughts.

As much as she tried to focus on the laughter drifting on the breeze and the twinkle of stars appearing in the summer night sky, Jamie struggled to feel happy. It wasn't just her father's failing

health. The reality of her situation couldn't be denied. This wedding was the second of her close friends to marry in less than six months, and she was acutely aware of her own, somewhat unwilling, transition into adulthood. Violet inspired her to get her teaching license and it was her second year to teach first grade. She could easily support herself if she ever wanted to move from her family's farm, but she'd never felt the need to leave. She loved her life just as it was, and to her mind there was nothing better than a summer spent doing exactly as she pleased. Of course, the family blueberry farm consumed her life from late June to the end of July, but she still had weeks of freedom before she needed to start planning for the upcoming school year.

Watching Charlotte and Nico greeting their guests, Jamie wondered if her mother was right. Maybe she *was* flighty and silly. She'd been trying to be lively and jovial, but maybe she'd missed the mark. Her mother said more than once that unless Jamie started acting like an adult, no man would look twice at her. Of course, she wasn't quite sure what that meant, but she assumed it being less of a social butterfly and more down to earth.

Jamie couldn't help the bitter smile that touched her lips. The way things were going, her mother was about to get her way. Soon, Jamie wasn't going to have any friends left. They'd all be

married and Jamie would be left to wander Arcadia Valley in search of someone, anyone, to talk to. Maybe she'd join some internet groups where people spent most of their time online and not in the real world, where it was lonely and cold.

Charlotte and Nico walked onto the dance floor, holding hands. Charlotte's blond hair had been up for the wedding but was now loose around her shoulders. She'd changed from her wedding gown to a lighter, shorter dress and the pale pink matched the streaks of color in the sky above her. Nico gently took Charlotte in his arms and bent his dark head to whisper in her ear. As they began to dance to the tune of Foggy Mountain Breakdown, Jamie glanced at the faces of the other guests. They were beaming, wiping tears, shining with happiness. Life was changing all around her and she wished more than anything that she could stop it just where it was. Or even better, go back a few years.

Suddenly the music changed into something fast and Greek. Theo stepped forward and announced, "Time for the tossing of coins! Are you ready, kids?" He repeated it in Greek and his cousins from Boise called out something in response. Elena ran forward, dragging her friends Portia and Isabelle with her. Little Ava trotted behind them, with Rachel toddling after. Cassandra

and Valentin positioned themselves next to the happy couple, eyes alight with eagerness.

The guests applauded and started to dig in pockets and purses for change. As Nico and Charlotte danced, coins bounced around them, flashing golden in the setting sun. The kids scrambled on hands and knees, running back and forth to parents to deposit their treasures. Jamie remembered attending a wedding where the couple had money pinned to them as they danced, but had never seen the Greek version. She wasn't quite sure what the point was if the same people who threw the coins seemed to end up with them in the end, but everyone was laughing and the floor was filled with children searching out pennies.

Jamie watched the twins and thought of how it seemed just a few months ago they were learning to walk. Time was moving so quickly, but sometimes she felt as if she were standing still. She wondered if someday soon she would wake up, look around, and realize she was all alone. The chill that crept through her had nothing to do with the setting sun, and everything to do with the realization that all of her friends were moving on without her. As the music swirled around her and laughter floated on the breeze, Jamie had never felt so lonely. She'd always been the life of the party and the center of her circle of friends, but that

comfortable cocoon was dissolving more and more every day.

Life was passing her by and she was powerless to stop it.

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