

# 1

**B**aby Faith stuck her chubby fingers into the bowl of fruit and shoved a fat, ripe strawberry into her mouth. Her lips, which formed a natural pucker, closed over it, her new teeth clamping down to release the sweet juice, which dribbled down her face and onto the coloring book.

“Careful, sweetie,” said Jamie, who was watching her from the living room sofa. “Don’t forget to use your napkin.”

The little girl reached for the paper napkin on the coffee table and gave her mouth an obligatory wipe before dropping it onto the floor and plunging her hand back into the bowl. This time, she came up with a slice of banana. She stuck that into her mouth, too, and grabbed a broken blue crayon with her sticky fingers, drawing a series of lopsided circles around a connect-the-dots image of a princess.

Jamie flipped through the magazine on her lap without really reading it. She felt warm, but had already opened all the windows in the room, the curtains flapping in the light breeze. The shadow of a man passed across them, his image silhouetted by the beige linen, and Jamie tightened her grip on the magazine. Even after a year in her new place, she still wasn’t used to the steady foot traffic that traveled across the windows of the first-floor apartment in Queens, a far cry from the relative calm of the suburbs. She heard a familiar set of keys jingle, and the doorknob of her front door turned.

“Edward . . . doorbell,” she called, closing the magazine.

“Right, sorry,” her brother said, closing the door and stepping back out.

Jamie had given her brother the key to her apartment for emergencies only, and although he had been trying to give her some space for the past two years, Edward was set in his ways. She got up from the couch as the doorbell rang.

“Who is it?” she said.

“Very funny,” Edward said as Jamie swung the apartment door open.

“See? That wasn’t so difficult,” she said.

Edward entered the living room and placed several plastic bags of groceries on the floor. “*There’s* my girl!” he said, spotting Faith near the coffee table. He swooped down to pick her up.

At the sight of Edward, Faith lifted her hands into the air, and he spun her above his head like a propeller.

“You are getting so big!” Edward said.

“Careful, she’s got a mouthful of fruit.” Jamie picked up several of the grocery bags.

“Fruit, shmoot.” Edward tossed Faith into the air. “C’mon, give your Uncle Eddie a big fat, mushy kiss right here.” He pointed to his face, and Faith plastered her wide open mouth onto Edward’s cheek like a suction cup.

“Take it easy, Uncle Eddie. You’re going to reinjure your shoulder.”

“Shoulder’s fine. Good as new.”

“Yeah, sure it is.”

Edward had been back to the orthopedist three times in the past six weeks, according to Trish, but Jamie knew he wasn’t about to tell her that, probably because he didn’t want her to worry.

“There were no agents outside,” Edward said, trying to hide his concern. “They left already?”

“There’s no reason for them to be here. They need to go help some other damsel in distress,” Jamie said with a forced smile. She had to admit, she had grown accustomed to the FBI agents protecting her and Faith for the past two years, but today was to be a new day, and

she was ready to get on with her life, alone with her daughter. She carried the bags into the kitchen, placed them on the table, and began pulling out the grocery items.

“What are you feeding this girl, James?” Faith was sitting on Edward’s shoulders as he walked into the kitchen, a big, red circle stamped onto his cheek, courtesy of Faith’s fruity kiss. “I think she gained ten pounds from last week.”

“Looks like I’ll be feeding her cereal,” Jamie said, eyeing the six boxes of Cheerios Edward had bought.

“Hey, I had a coupon for those. Couldn’t pass them up.”

Edward placed Faith into her high chair at the kitchen table, and the little girl scrambled for the security strap, which she quickly pushed behind her back.

“Wait a minute, little one,” Edward said. “We have to strap you in.”

“She doesn’t like being strapped in,” Jamie said. “You’ll have to—”

“Well, sometimes we gotta do what keeps us safe.” Edward reached behind Faith’s body to pull the strap forward, and the little girl slapped his hand.

“Noooooo,” Edward said sternly, pointing his finger at her. “No hitting.” He shot Jamie a look as Faith began to cry.

“Edward, don’t give me that look. All babies do that. It doesn’t mean anything.”

Faith, her face all blotchy, raised her hands into the air so that Jamie could pick her up. Jamie reached for a pop-up book that was lying on the kitchen table and placed it on the high chair tray. The little girl immediately stopped crying and opened to the first thick laminated page, unaware that Jamie had reached behind her for the seat strap and buckled her in.

“See? Problem solved,” Jamie said.

“More like problem averted.” Edward crossed his arms. “We have to teach her not to do that, you know. She’s not always going to get her way.”

“C’mon, Edward, you’re making a big deal out of nothing.

How would you feel if you were being strapped in and held against your . . .” She caught herself. “I’m sorry.”

Edward shook his head. “Don’t be.”

“I mean—”

“James, really, it’s all right. It’s behind us.”

Jamie blocked the image of Edward hogtied and gagged in the back of the Ford Flex from her mind and returned to unpacking the groceries. She pulled five cans of soup from the third plastic bag.

“Another coupon?” she asked with a smirk.

“I like soup,” Edward said.

“Wait, does that mean you’re . . .” Jamie furrowed her brow.

“Edward, honestly, you don’t have to.”

“I’m staying.”

“But you—”

“I already told Trish,” he said adamantly. “I’m staying with you and Faith just for a few days. Till I know everything is okay. And that’s it.” He jammed the plastic grocery bags into one another, placed them in the recycling bin, and left the kitchen in a huff.

Faith lifted her eyes from her book to watch Edward go. Her splotchy face was regaining its cheery color. The little girl smiled, her upper and lower eyelids meeting sharply at the corners and making the gaze of her dark brown eyes intensify. Jamie felt a familiar pang in her chest; she smiled back at her daughter, although it took every ounce of strength for her not to turn away. Faith looked more and more like *him* every day.

Edward returned with the rest of the groceries and placed them where he knew they belonged in her cupboard. “Now, I’m the one who’s sorry,” he said, closing the last cabinet.

Jamie put her arm around him. “Aren’t we a sorry pair?” she said. “Don’t worry about it.”

The telephone rang, startling them, and Edward reached for the phone.

“Don’t answer it,” Jamie said.

“Why not?” Edward looked at the Caller ID. “Private number.”

"It's the press. I'm sure of it. They've been calling all morning."

"How did they get this number?"

Jamie shrugged. She had changed her number three times in the past six months, and the media managed to figure it out every time.

Edward put the phone back in its cradle. "What time is it happening?" he asked.

"Agent Wilcox said they were transferring him sometime this afternoon."

"Wilcox should have left somebody here, until it's done," Edward said.

"Edward, the transfer's taking place up north, *miles and miles* from here—a four-hour drive." Jamie reached for a bowl, sprinkled a handful of Cheerios into it, and placed it on Faith's high chair tray, but the little girl pushed it away and rubbed her eyes. "He can't be in two places at once."

"I think you're being naive. We know what that guy is capable of, and how many people are loyal to him."

"Wilcox said there is nothing to worry about, that—"

"And you believe him? That there's nothing to worry about?"

Jamie didn't answer.

"I didn't think so."

Edward turned on the small television set on the kitchen counter. The screen warmed to *Dora the Explorer*, which attracted Faith's sleepy eyes until Edward changed the channel to CNN. Faith yelled in protest and threw her book onto the floor.

"Hey," Edward said. "No throwing."

Faith cried again and reached for Jamie.

"Edward, do me a favor and put this on in the living room," Jamie said, trying to ignore the large banner headline that filled the television screen: *Bailino Transfer Imminent*. "I'm going to put Faith down for her nap. She's tired, and I don't want the TV to wake her up."

"Don't baby her, James." Edward turned off the set. "We have to treat her like we would any other child."

"She *is* any other child," Jamie said with a frown.

"You know what I mean." Edward leaned down to kiss the top of Faith's head. "See you later, Faithy," he said, but the little girl leaned away from him. "You see that?" he asked Jamie.

"She's mad because you yelled at her." Jamie unbuckled the high chair strap.

Edward crossed his arms. "Holding grudges at fifteen months old?"

"Is it any surprise?" Jamie lifted Faith from the high chair. "You know who she takes after."

Edward's eyes opened wide.

"*You, dummy. I meant you. Geez . . .*" Jamie said and hurried into the small bedroom beside the kitchen.

The smell of baby powder settled over her as she sat on the wooden rocking chair in the corner of the small bedroom and rubbed Faith's back. She could feel her daughter getting ready for another cry, so she started to sing:

*"Mid pleasures and palaces though we may roam . . .*

*"Be it ever so humble, there's no place like home . . ."*

The little girl quieted, but fidgeted, trying to find the right position.

*"A charm from the skies seems to hallow us there . . .*

*"Which seek thro' the world, is ne'er met elsewhere . . .*

*"Home. Home. Sweet, sweet home."*

The old song had been a favorite of Jamie's mother, and it had quickly become a favorite of Faith's. The little girl assumed her usual position, placing her head in the crook of Jamie's neck, and without fail, Jamie's mind flashed back two years to when tiny Charlotte Grand held the very same position atop Jamie's chest, her chubby arms clasped around her neck, the two of them sitting in a closet turned into a makeshift nursery far, far away from home.

Jamie cradled the back of Faith's head and sighed. Those four days with Charlotte—followed by the media frenzy upon the little girl's safe return to her father, New York Governor Phillip Grand—seemed to follow Jamie everywhere, like a shadow. The "check up" calls from Special Agent Wilcox and the FBI. The paparazzi. The whispers and the stares. The nightmares that danced under her eyelids when she

tried to sleep at night. The way Edward scrutinized every move Faith made as if they were some clue that would uncover a hidden truth.

Faith's breathing became even, but Jamie kept rocking, her mind fixated as it often was on the darkness of that log cabin bedroom, on the strength of his body, the caress of his hand. She tried to change her focus to something happy, and Reynaldo's face appeared in her mind's eye, as it often did. Jamie could still see him standing there in that dirty garage, his paperwork spread out across the counter, looking at her and Charlotte when they burst through his door as if he had just seen a ghost. She could still feel his floppy thick hair in her grasp and the security of his arms. Kind, gentle Reynaldo, who had helped her when she and Charlotte needed him most, no questions asked. Kind, gentle Reynaldo, who couldn't understand, as much as he tried, why Jamie desperately wanted to have this child, despite everything. Despite *him*.

Over the past two years, friends and family members had suggested Jamie read up on research that dealt with the acceptance and legitimacy of a child of rape, but Jamie had felt nothing but love and a fierce protectiveness for her baby, who was now sleeping peacefully in her arms, from the moment she found out she was pregnant. Reynaldo may have loved Jamie, and she him, but if he could not accept Faith, it could have never worked between them. It was nearly impossible for Jamie to block out the circumstances surrounding Faith's conception when she was reminded of them every time she looked into her daughter's eyes; she didn't want to be reminded of them when she looked into Reynaldo's eyes, too.

Edward appeared at the doorway to the bedroom. "He's on his way," he whispered. "The news 'copters are following the van on the highway. Finally, it's almost over."

Jamie gave her brother a small smile as he left the room. She wanted nothing more than to believe that this was the end of all that ugliness, yet as she watched her daughter sleep, she couldn't shake the feeling that it never would. She crossed her ankles, feeling for the semiautomatic gun that she kept in a holster at the side of her calf, a present she had bought for herself, despite Edward's reluctance. She

thought of her NRA firearms training certificate and manuals that were tucked away neatly in her nightstand drawer, replacing her old yoga CDs, which had been moved to the trash. These days, safety came in the form of a pistol, not a pose. Until two years ago, she had never thought much about the Second Amendment or of herself as a gun person. Until two years ago, she never had a reason to, but if Bailino or anyone else found a way to come after her or her daughter now or anytime in the future, she would know how to handle herself. She would be ready. And, this time, she would be shooting to kill.