

JASMINE

by Debbi Mack

“No one should get away with murder.”

Jasmine’s words echo in my head as I walk home. I pull my jacket lapels up around my throat to shield it from the wind. I’m tempted to apply more Chapstick to my raw lips, but delving into my purse will slow me down.

The cold is biting. An old year will soon die and a new one will be born, but I have little to look forward to. Not even Christmas, just two days off. Other people will be with their families. I haven’t seen mine in years.

Leaning into the wind, the walk from the bus stop seems interminable, even though my apartment building is only a block away.

En route, a tattered wreath on a tavern door catches my eye. It looks as old and used up as I feel. A sign, perhaps? Not likely. More like an excuse. I pause, then head inside for a quick one.

Hustling over and ducking inside as if pursued by ghosts, I shut the door firmly against the elements. A look around tells me I don’t belong here. The room is roughly square, illuminated in sickly yellow. Tables and chairs are placed haphazardly, as if tossed about by a

careless decorator. A few are occupied. Men drinking alone. Most of them don't notice me. A few spare me a curious glance, only to return to whatever private purgatory they're enduring.

Normally, I don't frequent taverns, but times are far from normal for me lately.

The bar runs along one mirrored wall. Two men sit at it several stools apart. I hesitate.

Oh, who gives a shit? It's a public place.

I walk up to the bar and take a stool between the two men. The bartender, a reed-thin fellow with sandy hair and the suggestion of a goatee, wanders over.

"What can I get you, ma'am?"

I think of movies I've seen and blurt the first words that come to mind.

"Scotch on the rocks, please."

He nods with an approving look. After he pours and sets the drink before me, I take a sip. Goes down smooth as gasoline. Perfect.

"Can I ask you something?" I say to the bartender.

"Sure."

"Do people actually tell bartenders their problems?"

His mouth quirks up in a half-smile. "Sometimes. Dare I ask why?"

I cup the glass with both hands and gaze into it. "A friend of mine is going to prison. She killed someone."

When I look up, the bartender's smile has faded. "I'm sorry. What happened?"

So I tell him.

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I met Jasmine at a victims' recovery group. To be honest, I knew things about Jasmine before I met her. I work for the police department.

Cops are worse than old ladies and teenage girls when it comes to gossip. And my co-workers gossiped plenty about Jasmine's case. I took a special interest and decided to seek her out and introduce myself. We had a common bond.

Though the name sounded appropriate for a pole dancer, Jasmine turned out to be your basic thirty-something girl-next-door in faded jeans and a long-sleeved peasant blouse. She had light brown hair, doe brown eyes, and a quiet demeanor.

One night I approached her at the coffee table during a bathroom break. She'd just shared her story about being raped and how her attacker was acquitted. I asked her if she was okay.

Her mouth pressed into a thin line, and she blinked rapidly. "It's almost more than I can bear sometimes. Knowing he's out on the streets."

Jasmine didn't want to talk much more about it, so I let it go. However, each time we attended a group session, we'd get together for coffee afterward. She began to open up about her feelings of fear and powerlessness, particularly in light of the acquittal. Week after week she grew angrier. Bordering on rage, really. I kept encouraging her to get it out. I thought I was helping her.

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"I should have known right there, she was headed for trouble," I tell the bartender, as he pours me another drink.

"Wow. That's . . . pretty intense. Must be hard for you."

I nod. "To say the least."

He watches me gulp the scotch. "If you don't mind my asking . . . what happened exactly?"

I suppress a sigh. But then, I'd started this tale. How can I blame him for wanting to know the details? "Well, I made the mistake of buying her a gun. I got it off the street. Easy peasy. I thought it would help her feel better. Feel safer.

"I can see now that was the worst possible thing I could've done." I finish my drink in a single swallow. It burns all the way to my stomach. "She ended up stalking Charles Goodwin, her rapist, and shooting him."

The bartender opens his mouth slightly, then closes it, as his brow furrows. He picks up a rag and wipes the bar. "Wow. How'd they catch her?"

"She turned herself in. Couldn't live with the guilt."

"Well, you can't blame yourself for her actions. She pulled the trigger, not you."

I nod. "Yeah, sure."

He holds up the bottle. "Another?"

I shake my head. "I think I've had enough."

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When I leave the bar, the wind is still vicious. I cross my arms and buck against the chill. My feet feel like frozen blocks. The two minutes it takes to reach my apartment building seem to last for days, but I finally make it. I stumble toward the elevator. The scotch has gone straight to my head.

I ride the elevator twelve flights up to my floor and get off. After a brief disoriented moment, I find my apartment. I'm starting to warm up from the building's heat, yet my heart remains dead cold. I'd hoped the liquor would help. But it can't change everything that's happened.

Once inside the apartment, I shut the door, but don't bother with the deadbolt or the lights. The city's light pollution provides enough illumination for me to make my way down the hall to my bedroom. Just a double bed, a side table, and a dresser. That's all I need. It's not much, but I despise clutter. I move to the dresser and open the top drawer. The picture is still there, face down. I pick it up and look at it.

Me and Charles Goodwin. My step-brother. Who raped me when I was a teenager and never paid.

Until now.

When the opportunity arose to finally make him pay, I jumped at it. A little push here. A little prodding there. Not that Jasmine really needed it. Helping her get closure in the process was a bonus. At least, that was the plan.

I hadn't counted on how guilty Jasmine would feel. Or that guilt could be catching.

I hadn't counted on caring about Jasmine to the point where her guilt and mine became indistinguishable.

I weave slowly out of the bedroom, down the dark hallway, into the living room. Through a sliding glass door, beyond the balcony, I see a panoramic view of the city's distant hills. Lights like diamonds against a velvet black sky.

I open the sliding door and the wind blasts in. A magazine flutters on the coffee table behind me.

I step outside, breathe in the frigid air, and exhale steam that's whipped away in a heartbeat. As I stagger toward the railing, I keep my eyes on the hills and remember Jasmine's last words during our visit at the jail.

“No one should get away with murder.”

She was speaking of herself, but I know to whom those words really apply. Grasping the rail, I swing one leg over, then the other. Now, I’m outside the railing, face forward and hanging off by both hands. The railing is freezing and stings my palms. Now, I’m swinging back and forth. The wind whips my hair, which lashes my face. Tears blow away before they can track down my icy cheeks. The ground is far below. I gaze at the hills. Diamonds of light blurring. Moving back and forth. Back and forth.

Finally, I let go. I aim for the horizon and try to fly.