

Protecting the Innocent

by Simon Wood, ...

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“See you later.” Nick kissed Melanie goodbye and watched her walk away. The lunchtime throng on Market Street swallowed her up, but the crowd parted at different times to expose glimpses of an arm, a leg, a shoulder.

He couldn’t get enough of her. The last couple of months had been a whirlwind. It was more than just an infatuation—he felt a connection with her on every level possible. For the first time in his life, he was thinking about marriage, although he didn’t want to share that with her until he was sure she felt the same way. If things carried on the way they were going, he’d test the waters, maybe whisk her off to somewhere romantic and let the moment sweep both of them away.

A friendly sounding voice called his name. Instinctively, he turned.

The man looked familiar and at the same time didn’t. He was tall, blond and well-attired. His suit certainly hadn’t come off the rack.

“Nick Forbes, yes?” The man put out a hand.

“Yes.” Nick took it and shook. “Do I know you?”

“Sort of. I’m Melanie’s brother, Jamie.”

Now Nick saw the resemblance. Melanie had mentioned a brother, but they’d never met.

“If you’re looking for Mel, she’s just gone.” He pointed in the direction of the Wells Fargo building.

“I came to see you, not Melanie.”

“Me?”

“Yes, you. You and Melanie have become close.”

“There’s no become about it. We are close.”

“Please let me finish.”

People brushed by them, so eager to get on with their own lives that they paid scant regard to this encounter. It was as if the two men had fallen off the world and no longer had any impact on society.

“Your relationship with my sister is a problem.” The smile went out of Jamie’s eyes. Coldness replaced the warmth.

Who did this son of bitch think he was? Nick thought. “A problem?”

“Yes, a problem. You have to stop seeing her.”

“Look, I don’t know who you think you’re talking to, but you have no right to tell me or Melanie how to live our lives.”

“Yes, I do.” Jamie pressed his fingers into Nick’s chest. “Stay away from her or there will be trouble.”

Nick knocked Jamie’s hand aside. “Is that a threat?”

“Just do as I tell you and you won’t get hurt.”

“Now that is a threat.”

Jamie shrugged the response away like he’d heard it all before. “I’m not going to argue with you anymore. Just do as I say. It’s not a threat. It’s a warning. Break it off with Melanie before it’s too late.” Jamie walked by Nick and let the current of people sweep him away. “I’ll be watching.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Nick called out to Jamie’s retreating form.

Nick picked up Melanie at her condo the next night. He wanted to mention Jamie’s reprehensible scene but couldn’t do it. From what she’d mentioned about him, they were close. Very close. Telling her about what happened yesterday might force her to choose sides.

While he waited for Melanie to finish changing, Nick tried to make sense of what had happened. The guy was just trying to protect his sister. That was understandable. His outburst was almost admirable. Except it wasn’t. It was excessive and totally uncalled for. There was no way Nick could tell Melanie about it. She took his arm and led him to the elevator.

Nick had reservations at her favorite restaurant in the city, a French place called The Fifth Floor. He had planned on taking her to a Greek place he liked on Battery, but he’d switched at the last minute. The reason—privacy. The Fifth Floor was secluded and somewhat exclusive. If Jamie wanted to create a scene, he’d have a hard job.

During the drive, Nick’s animal instincts kicked in. He sensed a car was tailing him. This wasn’t the first time he’d had this feeling. For the past couple of weeks, he would have sworn he’d seen the same car outside his home, at the gym and

parked across from his job. If it wasn't a car, it was someone following him on foot. He'd put it down to paranoia, but after Jamie's warning, he wasn't so sure.

"You're quiet tonight," Melanie said.

He dragged his gaze away from his rearview mirror and the Acura that had been trailing him since he left the office. "Just a little distracted is all. Sorry."

She smiled at him. "Well, don't be. You're with me tonight. I demand attention."

He laughed. "Yes, my queen."

"That's more like it."

He looked back in his rearview. The Acura was gone.

The hostess showed them to a corner table. Nick took the seat that gave him the best view of the bar leading into the dining area. If Jamie planned any sort of confrontation, he'd see it coming.

They ordered. Melanie chatted and Nick struggled to concentrate on what she said. She called him on it a couple of times and he apologized, promising to do better. He expected Jamie to appear at any moment, but he didn't show. By the time the entrées were served, Nick felt this wasn't the night Jamie would make his scene. His tension lifted and clarity seeped in. A thought came to him.

He wondered if he'd really been accosted by Melanie's brother and not by some jealous ex-boyfriend. Melanie had mentioned she hadn't had much luck in the relationship department over the years. The men she bared her soul to always ran out on her. Was it possible these men might not have run out, but have been helped on their way?

"You've mentioned your brother, Jamie, but you've never told me much about him."

"He's a great guy. I'm sure you two would really like each other. He's older than me by a couple of years and of course that makes him my protector. He's always looking out for me. I don't know what he wouldn't do for me," she enthused.

This description matched the guy Nick had met yesterday, but that still didn't mean anything.

"Have you got a picture of him?"

"Of course. I'm surprised I haven't shown it to you before now."

Melanie fished in her purse and removed a photo from her pocketbook. Nick took the picture and examined it and his theory went up in smoke. The Jamie in the picture was the Jamie on Market Street. Nick squeezed out a polite smile and handed the picture back.

"He looks how I expected him to look."

"The three of us should go out together."

"I'd like that," Nick said, and meant it. It would be a good opportunity to show this guy how happy he made his sister. If that didn't work, he doubted Jamie could keep a lid on his jealousy and he'd expose himself for the person he really was. Either way, it'd be a win-win for Nick. "Jamie doesn't have to play third wheel. He should bring his girlfriend. Make it a double date. I haven't double-dated in years."

"Jamie doesn't have a girlfriend. I don't know why."

I do, Nick thought. "Maybe he doesn't put himself out there," he suggested.

They skipped dessert and hooked up with some friends at a club, but left early to go back to Melanie's condo. They fooled around and Melanie wanted him to spend the night, but he couldn't get Jamie off his mind.

He went home, his head full of Jamie. Goddamn the guy for thinking he could destroy his relationship with Melanie. Well, he wasn't going to stand for it. Jamie's threatening ways might have worked with Melanie's past boyfriends, but they wouldn't with him. His blood was up when he went to bed, but it turned icy cold when he picked up the newspaper off his stoop the following morning. The *Chronicle* had been turned to the third page. The headline read Man Killed in Senseless Mugging.

It took Nick a minute to realize the newspaper wasn't current, but six months old. The story detailed the botched mugging. A Wells Fargo employee—Miles Talbot, twenty-six—had been returning home after a night out in the city. He'd been stabbed repeatedly on the Embarcadero and his wallet and valuables had been taken. His body had been dragged from the main thoroughfare and dumped under the archway of Pier 26. After Nick read the story, a vague recollection of the incident filtered through. The cops had never found the person responsible.

There were no prizes for guessing who'd left this piece of San Francisco history for him. It was a cheap and tactless attempt to intimidate him. It was also vague. Was Jamie saying that if he didn't stop seeing his sister, he'd end up in the same condition? Christ, it was as pathetic as it was infuriating. Nick went to toss the newspaper in the trash, but a second thought struck him. He'd taken the news story for a veiled threat. Maybe it wasn't. Maybe Talbot's murder was an example of what happened to Melanie's boyfriends who didn't take a hint. The strength went out of his legs and he flopped into a chair at his kitchen table.

Had Melanie's brother killed this guy? It seemed incredible that he would resort to that. Nick couldn't bring himself to believe it, but an itch at the back of his skull believed it was not only possible but true. There was only one way to find out.

He Googled Miles Talbot's murder. The hits revealed various incarnations of the story he'd read in the *Chronicle*. There were a few more column inches dedicated to announcing when the investigation went cold. None of the hits revealed the one fact Nick looked for—the name of a girlfriend. He called Wells Fargo and asked for Talbot's extension. He received the expected awkward silence before the switchboard operator said, "I'll transfer you. Hold one moment."

Nick was connected to Julia Chastain in the private clients department, who spoke in a hushed tone. "You wanted to speak to Miles Talbot?"

"Yes. Is he there?"

"No."

"Okay, I'll leave a message."

"You don't know, then."

"Know what?"

Julia gave him the Cliff's Notes version. He acted suitably shocked and tossed in the factoid that he'd been an old college buddy of Talbot's, which took him closer into her confidence.

"How did his girlfriend take it?"

“Melanie Lassen? I don’t know. I imagine she took it hard. Do you know her?”

Nick sagged under the weight of the confirmation. It was as if his flesh couldn’t support the immense weight of his bones. It was an effort to speak but he forced the words out. “Yeah, I know her.”

Julia said something but he wasn’t listening anymore. He thanked her and hung up.

The guys in his office wanted to hit Gordon Biersch for lunch. He possessed the desire to drink, but not the thirst. He hit the streets instead. He stood in line at a Subway, but walked away before his turn came. He was wandering along Spear Street when a voice interrupted him from his thoughts.

“Looks like you’ve read some bad news,” Jamie said.

He had a smug look plastered over his face. Nick would have loved to have wiped it off for him, but this wasn’t the time or the place, so he bottled his disgust.

“Ha, ha, very funny.”

Jamie fell in at Nick’s side. “I take it you’ve worked out the meaning.”

“Yes.”

“Then you’ll be getting out of Melanie’s life.”

“You can’t control her like this. She’s a woman, not a child.” Nick failed to keep his anger in check. “And you’re not her father.”

“From that, I assume you’re going to continue with the relationship.”

Nick didn’t have a choice. He couldn’t abandon Melanie. He guessed this was the decision Miles Talbot had come to and he had paid the ultimate price. Still, Nick couldn’t walk away.

“The murder of a man isn’t enough of a deterrent for you?”

“No. Not even if it was a dozen.”

Jamie shook his head in disbelief. “I can’t make out if you’re dumb or brave, but I’m leaning toward the former.”

Nick grabbed Jamie by the throat and slammed him up against the smoked glass windows of a faceless building. Jamie made no effort to fight Nick off. “You can’t break us up.”

“It’s looking that way,” Jamie said with sincerity.

A handful of people streamed from the office building. A couple of guys puffed themselves up to look more foreboding than they were. “We’ve called the cops,” one of the men said and held up a cell phone.

Nick released his hold on Jamie and wiped his hands on his pants. “Just leave Melanie and me alone.”

Nick backed away from Jamie as Jamie’s unwitting supporters closed in around him, asking him if he was okay.

Nick turned his back on them and walked away.

“Ask her about the others, Nick,” Jamie called out after him. “Miles Talbot wasn’t an isolated incident.”

Nick lay in Melanie’s bed. A sheen of sweat glistened on his chest. He’d made love to Melanie like it was the last time. It left them breathless, but for totally different reasons. He couldn’t get Jamie’s parting remark out of his head. What had he meant? He’d killed for Melanie before? How many times? Two? Five? A dozen? How did anyone get away with that many murders and how did Melanie

cope? She'd have to think she was some sort of kiss of death with a trail of dead boyfriends left in her wake. That was if she even knew they were dead. Melanie said her boyfriends had run out on her, not died on her. Christ, he should go to the cops, but with what? He needed something concrete to give them. If he went to them half-cocked, he'd achieve nothing beyond alienating Melanie and blowing any kind of future with her.

"Wow, don't look too depressed." Melanie returned to the bedroom with a glass of water in her hand. She slipped between the sheets and pressed her naked body up against his. She offered him the glass and he sat up and took it. "You can't be sad after all that."

"No." He sipped the water. "I was just thinking."

"About what?"

"Stuff."

She pinched his arm playfully. "Come on, spit it out. What's eating you?"

"I was wondering how important I was to you."

"Very."

"Really?"

She took the glass from his hand and placed it on the nightstand. She took his face in her hands and stared directly at him. Her eyes shone with a brightness that blinded him. "At this very moment in space and time, you are the most important person to me."

"At this very moment."

She smiled. "Yes. What's all this about? Are you feeling insecure?"

"I feel I know you and at the same time, I don't." This wasn't a line. He really did feel this way. He hadn't realized how much he felt this until Jamie came on the scene.

Concern clouded her expression, but the remark pushed her away from him. She retreated to her side of the bed. "What do you want to know?"

"Anything." He took her hand in his. "Everything."

A single tear leaked from her right eye. "What do you want to know?"

They held each other for a time, not saying anything. Then she told him to get up. He showered and when he returned to the bedroom, she wasn't there. He found her in the living room surrounded by boxes.

"What's going on?"

"Get dressed and I'll tell you my life story."

The boxes contained photo albums dating back to her baby years. She introduced him to two-dimensional images of family and friends, past and present. It didn't matter which photos she showed him, Jamie was always there, lurking in the corners, glued to her heels like an unwanted shadow.

"Who's that?" Nick pointed to a good-looking boy no more than twelve dressed in a Miami Vice sport jacket over a pastel T-shirt and white pants. Melanie was at his side. The photo had captured some sort of school dance. It was the first picture that failed to feature Jamie.

Melanie flushed and turned the page.

"No secrets." Nick turned the page back. He tapped the boy's image with his index finger. "A first love, perhaps?"

“Yes,” she conceded. “His name was Mikey Pryce. We went steady for six months.” She slapped a hand over her face. “I can’t believe I’m telling you this.”

“So how did Mikey break your heart?”

She pulled back from him. The temperature in the room plunged. “He died.”

Nick’s stomach clenched as a sense of foreboding overcame him. He forced out a single word. “How?”

“Drowned during a family vacation.”

Nick turned the pages. He pointed out something that lightened her mood, then steered her to a picture of another boyfriend. This sparked a long conversation about the boyfriends and girlfriends they’d both had. He pumped her for everything he could get—names, places, dates. His mind was on fire. He committed every detail to memory. Ask him to do this at any other time and he’d have never managed the feat, but tonight it was all about saving his life and every nugget of data was stored. There’d been seven great loves in Melanie’s life, including Mikey Pryce and Miles Talbot. Each of these guys had skipped out on her. She didn’t make it clear whether they’d all been killed, but they’d all broken things off abruptly.

“All my boyfriends have a habit of walking out on me one way or another.” She turned the page on Miles Talbot.

Nick took the album from her. “I won’t. You have my word on it.”

Seven people. It didn’t seem like a lot of people, but digging up seven life stories consumed time like Nick wouldn’t have believed. He possessed a newfound respect for the police. It took hours just to come up with one single facet of someone’s life. But Nick persevered. If he was going to serve Jamie up to the cops, this was how it would happen.

He used every spare moment researching Melanie’s old boyfriends. This came at the expense of Melanie. He saw her twice a week if he was lucky. She complained, but he blamed a big project at work for his absence. On the plus side, Jamie stopped pestering him. If he was daring Nick to learn the truth, it looked as if he’d get his wish.

Nick’s first break came with Mikey Pryce. He found a newspaper story detailing that the boy had drowned at a watering hole in Sacramento where the Sacto and American Rivers met. The competing currents had swept him away. Melanie had neglected to mention that she and Jamie were there, too. Jamie had provided the eyewitness account to the police. Was he just thirteen when he’d committed his first murder?

Looking for a pattern, Nick tracked down Melanie’s high school boyfriend, Trent Barber. Unlike Mikey Pryce, Trent was alive and well. He hadn’t strayed far from his Orange County roots. He was a sound engineer for the movies. Nick used the movie angle to get Trent to speak to him on the phone, but Nick soon found he was out of his depth when the movie talk got technical.

“I hear we have a mutual friend,” Nick said.

“In this business you need friends. Who is it?”

“Melanie Lassen.”

“Who are you?” The question came through gritted teeth.

Nick saw no point in lying. “Melanie’s boyfriend.”

“So what are you doing—checking up on her?”

“Yeah.”

“If you want to know about STDs, ask for a blood test.”

“I’m more interested in her brother, Jamie.”

Nick got the feeling Trent was about to hang up but the mention of Jamie stopped him. Trent’s tone changed from anger to concern.

“So, he’s given you the speech.”

“What speech?”

“Don’t piss around. You wouldn’t be tracking down her high school sweetheart unless he’d given you the no-one-is-good-enough-for-my-sister speech.”

“And what did you do about it?”

“I blew the freak off. What do you think?”

“I think he convinced you to stop seeing his sister.”

Trent went silent for a good minute before speaking again.

“I was a good tight end in school. Could have gotten a scholarship.”

“Why didn’t you?”

“Jamie broke my hand with a hammer. Happy? Now, would you mind doing me a favor and go to hell?”

Nick received similar accounts from Jonathon Tripp and Tommy Frist, both college boyfriends. Both took Jamie’s hints before bodily harm was involved. Matthew Warner wasn’t so lucky. He was an intern at a San Francisco architecture firm when he dated Melanie. They’d gotten real close, according to Warner’s sister, Penny. He was found at the Marin Headlands across from the Golden Gate Bridge with his throat cut. The police theorized the murder was a product of a carjacking, since his car had been found abandoned and burnt out in San Rafael. The only odd factor to the case was that Matt was discovered stretched out on a picnic blanket. When Nick hung up on Penny, she was crying.

Mark Bale proved to be the exception to the boyfriend rule. He’d dated Melanie nine months before Miles Talbot did. He lived in the city and he agreed to meet Nick at a bar on the Embarcadero.

“Did you ever get a visit from her brother?”

Bale turned his nose up. “Not really. He called me once but that was about it. He tried some line with me but I didn’t pay much attention.”

“So, he didn’t scare you off?”

“No.”

“Then why’d you break up with her?”

“Why’s this so important to you?”

“Indulge me,” Nick said. “Call it a commitment thing.”

Bale grinned. “She’s done it to you, hasn’t she?”

If he meant made him fall in love, then yes. Nick grinned back but shrugged.

“If you want the God’s honest truth, the reason Mel and I didn’t last was the plain fact that she got weird. I was ready to settle down, but then the vibe changed. I didn’t like it, so I called it quits.”

Nick’s roommate yelled out, “Phone.”

Nick answered it.

“Good, I’m glad you’re in,” Jamie said.

“What do you want?”

“Melanie decided we should have a night out. I’ve got reservations for three at One Market for Thursday at eight.”

“Okay.”

“I’d appreciate if it you didn’t make it.”

“I would hate to disappoint Melanie.”

“It would be the kinder thing to do.”

Nick ignored Jamie’s request and met them at the restaurant. Melanie’s face lit up when she saw him approach the table, but Jamie just scowled. Nick kissed Melanie and shook hands with Jamie. To Nick’s surprise and relief, Jamie chose to keep the dinner cordial. He and Nick may have exchanged penetrating stares, but that was as far as it went. Melanie led the conversation, choosing to reminisce about her childhood. As Melanie told it, every day had been a Norman Rockwell painting. Mikey Pryce’s drowning never even featured. Nick fought the urge to resurrect the ghosts. If Jamie was playing nice, so would he. Despite the circumstances, Nick was having an enjoyable time.

After they finished their entrées, Melanie excused herself and retreated to the restroom. The two men in her life watched her go.

“I told you not to come,” Jamie said. “This would be a good time to leave. I’ll provide excuses.”

“You don’t get it, do you? I’m here for the long haul.”

“Haven’t I shown you what’ll happen to you?”

“Jamie, I have enough on you to go to the cops right now.”

Jamie smirked.

“I know about the others. All the way from Mikey Pryce.”

That sent Jamie’s smirk running for the hills.

“I don’t want to turn you in because Melanie means so much to me, so I’ll give you a break. You leave now and I don’t just mean the restaurant. I’m talking about the city, the state, the country, I don’t care. Just go. Leave us in peace. I’ll make excuses for you.”

Jamie picked up his glass and polished off the rest of his wine. “I can’t do that.”

“Then this one is going to get messy.”

“I think you’re right.”

Melanie rejoined them. “You two seem to be getting on like a house on fire.”

“Truer words were never said,” Jamie remarked. His eyes sparkled with the irony of Melanie’s statement.

“We’ve got so much in common.” Nick reached over and kissed Melanie. “Like you.”

When the check came, a brief fight over who would pay for the bill ensued. Jamie won. Nick couldn’t help but feel he’d been provided his last meal. While Jamie waited for the waiter to return with his credit card and receipt, Nick took his chance.

“I’ll check in with the valets for our cars.” He snatched up Jamie’s ticket stub.

“That’s okay.”

“No, I insist. Join me, Mel?” He forced the issue by holding out her coat.

Jamie fumed as Nick walked Melanie out. The valet approached them on the street, but Nick waved him away.

“What’s going on?” Melanie asked.

“There’s a crowd. We need some alone time.” Nick smiled. “I have a surprise.”

They crossed the street over to Nick’s car. He’d gotten lucky and snagged a parking spot directly across the restaurant. He gunned the engine and was pulling away when Jamie came tearing out of the restaurant. Melanie waved goodbye to him.

“I feel so bad,” Melanie said. “Where are we going?”

“Don’t ask questions. You’ll spoil the surprise.”

He headed out of the city and across the Bay Bridge. When he reached Berkeley, he pointed the car in the direction of the marina. The place was deserted. The restaurants had closed for the night. If it hadn’t been for the street lighting, the marina would have been in total darkness. He parked in the red zone fronting the pier.

“What are we doing here?” Melanie asked.

“You’ll see. Come on.”

He came around to her side of the car and opened the door for her. He took her hand and led her onto the pier, then guided her toward the streetlamp at the end of it.

“I know we haven’t been dating long,” Nick began, “but I feel I’ve known you all my life.”

She squeezed his hand. “You’re very sweet.”

With every step they took, he cataloged his affection for her. His outpourings left her speechless. She never interrupted. She just listened and that was good. Her silence gave him the courage for what he had to do. When they reached the end of the pier, he released her hand and turned to face her. He looked into her eyes and his throat closed up.

“C’mon. Don’t stop now,” she encouraged. “What is it?”

Out in the bay, a buoy chimed. The water slapped against the pier.

He needed encouragement to finish this, to go all the way, and he got it. A racing engine and squealing tires cut through the calm. Jamie had caught up with him. Nick thought he’d spotted Jamie’s Acura on the freeway. He’d hoped for a longer lead. It didn’t matter. Jamie was too late.

“Melanie, I love you.”

“I love you, too.”

“That’s why I wanted to give you this.”

Nick reached inside his pocket. A distant voice cried out but he and Melanie ignored it. The moment was all that counted. He produced his gift, a small box containing a ring. He fell to one knee.

“Will you marry me?”

“Stop,” Jamie cried out. His feet pounded on the wooden planking.

“Oh, Nick, you shouldn’t have.”

“Why?” Nick asked.

“I can’t.”

“You can. Forget Jamie. Forget everything he’s done. Just think about us.”

“I’m sorry, Nick.” Melanie turned away from him.

Jamie cried out again.

Damn him, Nick thought. That son of a bitch wouldn't win. He jumped to his feet and grabbed Melanie's arm to prevent her from leaving. She whirled on him. He didn't see the switchblade she'd removed from her purse until she plunged it into his stomach. Confusion dulled his pain. She jerked the blade free and his legs went out from under him.

"Why?" Nick asked, his words weak in his throat.

Jamie caught up a moment later. He fell to his knees at Nick's side to examine the wound. "Not again," he murmured.

"Not again?"

Nick looked straight at Melanie. Her gaze was glassy, absent, and a stiffness had overcome her. She was a million miles away from this.

"Nick, why didn't you listen to me?" Jamie said. "I tried to warn you. I did everything I could to protect you."

"You made me think it was you."

"It was easier that way. I didn't want you thinking it was her. She's not a bad person. She's just damaged."

"What are you talking about?" Nick tried to move, but the pain in his abdomen stopped him cold.

"Our father." Jamie tried to apply pressure to the wound, but blood oozed between his fingers and Nick groaned. "He loved her. Loved her too much. Loved her so much he ruined her. You must have noticed she never talks about him and has no pictures of him in the condo."

It started sinking in. "She killed Mikey Pryce."

"And all the others. Father was the first."

The pain in his heart matched the pain in his stomach. "I don't understand. What did I do wrong?"

"I can't explain it. It doesn't make sense to anyone except her. You crossed the line for her."

"I just wanted to love her."

"That's crossing the line. You can love her. You just can't love her all the way."

It made a twisted kind of sense. Nick pictured the day at the watering hole where Mikey Pryce had promised to love Melanie forever, even promising to marry her. Unwittingly, he'd triggered Melanie's murderous reflex, which she repeated with Matthew Warner, Miles Talbot and now him. They'd all promised their undying love only to see it die.

"God, you're bleeding bad." Jamie took his hands away. Blood pulsed from the wound and Nick felt his strength drain from him with every pulse. "There's nothing I can do. I'm sorry, Nick. Truly, I am."

Jamie rose to his feet and hugged his sister. "It's okay. You've done nothing wrong. I'll make this all go away."

"Call 911," Nick pleaded.

"I wish I could, but I can't let the police take her," Jamie said and turned to Melanie. "It's okay. You're safe. Now, go back to the car and I'll take care of this."

Seemingly under a hypnotic trance, Melanie followed Jamie's command and ambled back to the car. Nick screamed out to her, but she was lost to him.

"You can't keep protecting her, Jamie," Nick said as Jamie bent toward him.

"I know," Jamie said with genuine regret, "but I can this time."

It was the last thing Nick heard as Jamie lifted him over the pier railing and rolled him into the bay.

