

The Best Laid Plans

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The wind was picking up. Allie Jamison held the hood of her raincoat snug about her head as she raced for the Visitors' Center at Glen Canyon Dam in northern Arizona, the bill of her baseball cap protecting her face. She pushed through the door and turned to her friend Susan, only to find she wasn't there. Allie looked back toward the parking lot, but Susan wasn't anywhere in sight. She was undoubtedly still in the car, pouting.

Allie sighed. Susan was proving to be a great disappointment.

"We should have gone on a cruise like I wanted," Susan said at least ten times every day for the week they'd been vacationing. She looked at the Grand Canyon and said, "Pretty big hole. I'm going back to the lodge and sun bathe." She looked at the magnificent monoliths of Monument Valley and said, "I like sand beaches better."

Allie sighed. She had had such high hopes for this vacation. She'd managed to slip away without anyone in the media being aware. For once she was going to be a regular person doing regular things. No glamour. No glitz. No paparazzi. In fact, if anything, it was dirt and sweat as she hiked in the Grand Canyon and took glorious photos of the Valley at sunset.

"Can't you just see John Wayne riding after the bad guys?" she'd asked Susan just last night as the lowering sun painted the rocks golden.

"Who's John Wayne?" Susan asked without much interest.

Maybe she should just send Susan on that cruise and continue alone. She'd obviously asked too much of a friendship built on sitting next to each other in a UCLA English class. And trying to talk about Jesus with Susan was a true effort in futility.

"I'm sure Jesus is fine for you," Susan said, "but I don't need Him. I mean, I've got God and She likes me just the way I am."

Such heresy all but stole Allie's breath. So did Susan's refusal to enjoy the trip. She took today's rain as a personal slight and a plot against her happiness.

"Where's your friend, Allison James?" a grating voice asked Allie from way too close for comfort.

Allison James. He knew who she was, knew her stage name.

"Allie Jamison," she corrected, trying not to show her distaste and distress as she aimed a vague smile over the shoulder of slimy Kip Whatever. She couldn't remember his last name, probably because she hadn't listened when he said it because she didn't want to know it. Somehow he kept popping up everywhere she and Susan went.

He had been at the Grand Canyon when they were there, often on the same ranger-led hikes or eating at the same restaurant. He'd stopped last evening to be sure they weren't having car trouble when Allie was waiting for the right lighting for her photos. At least his presence then had stopped Susan's whining for a few minutes. Now here he was at the dam at the exact same time she was. A reporter? A fan? Or a stalker? Whichever, his phobic interest made her uneasy.

As the tour group minus Susan followed the guide down into the bowels of the dam, Allie did her best to stay away from Kip. Why couldn't it be the tall blond guy near the back of the group or his equally handsome dark-haired friend who showed such an interest in her? Of course she didn't look much like herself with her duck shoes, ratty jeans, dripping coat and LA Rams baseball cap, her red-gold hair pulled through the back in a slapdash ponytail. In fact no makeup had touched her face for the whole week, much to Susan's disgust.

Allie's skin prickled as she became aware of Kip creeping up on her again. Turning abruptly, she worked her way to the back of the group and sidled up next to the tall, blond guy.

"My name's Allie, and that guy over there is bothering me. Can I hang with you two for the rest of the tour?"

The blond raised an eyebrow in surprise, but he smiled and said, "Sure. I'm Trevor and this is Jase. We left our shining armor at home, but we'll do our best to protect you."

"Stand here between us, pretty Allie," Jase said with a look in Kip's direction that stopped him in his tracks.

"Thank you!" She stepped into the safety of their size and kindness. "I was starting to feel like Marian in *The Music Man*. You know, where she tells her mother about not allowing a common masher near her because she has her standards where men are concerned."

Both men looked at her without the vaguest sign of understanding her reference. Didn't anyone today like the old movies or listen to the old musical soundtracks?

"Got it!" Jase snapped his fingers and pointed at her. "*The President's Daughter*, right?"

Allie brought her finger to her lips in a mute plea for silence. She had so hoped no one would recognize her. She looked completely different from the pampered, beautiful girl who appeared in millions of homes each Tuesday night.

Jase nodded. "My lips are sealed."

"The President's daughter?" Trevor blinked. "Wow! Really? Where's the Secret Service?"

"I left them at home. That's why I need you. And please be quiet. I'm traveling incognito."

When the tour was over, Allie thanked her rescuers and headed for the door, hoping to get the jump on Kip. She stopped so abruptly that Trevor walked into her.

"What's wrong?" he asked, looking around.

Allie pointed to the pile of belongings resting beside the door, a beige folder lying on top. "That's my stuff. What's it doing here?"

On the beige folder Susan had written, "I'm out of here. Big mistake on my part. Your Jeep will be in your driveway. You can rent a car in Page."

No signature. No apology. No friend.

"Just like that she left you?" Trevor was a mix of sympathy and disbelief. "And took your car?"

"At least she doesn't plan to keep it." *And I can afford to rent one. She can't.*

Allie quickly leafed through the neat folder Benelli Travel had given her. Everything she needed was there. *Thank you, Susan.*

She felt like crying. What more could go wrong on her great adventure? She had prayed so long and so hard about this two-week trip, and she'd been certain that it would be her opportunity to show Susan what being a Christian was all about. Well, that plan had just fallen as flat as the pilot she'd shot three years ago about a college co-ed who wasn't into sex. She sighed. Maybe she should just take Susan's abandonment as a sign from the Lord to go home. "So how do I get to Page to get a car?"

"We can take you," Trevor said. "We're driving through there on our way to Moab and Arches National Park."

"That's where we were going." Allie held out her Benelli folder. "Three nights on a dude ranch just outside Moab."

"Then ride all the way with us," Trevor said.

Every horror story Allie'd ever heard about riding with strangers leapt to her mind and made her hesitate. Then she looked out the door and saw Kip skulking behind the Glen Canyon Dam sign. The rain may have stopped, but his unhealthy attention hadn't.

Trevor and Jase had to be better than risking Kip.

"Only thing is--" Trevor began.

Uh-oh. Here it comes.

"—we're going on a raft ride down the river first." Trevor pointed down Glen Canyon.

"White water?" Allie asked, uncertain. At the Grand Canyon she'd learned all about the death-defying journey of Major John Wesley Powell, a one armed survivor of the Civil War who with ten men shot the rapids of the Green River and the Colorado River down through the Grand Canyon in the late 1800's.

"Wish it were white water," Trevor said, "but it's a float trip. And we stop to see Indian petroglyphs along the way."

So, after a bus ride down a dark tunnel burrowed into the very sides of the canyon, Allie found herself in a fat raft at the foot of the dam, preparing to float down the Colorado River. The last to climb aboard was Kip, who had managed to follow her yet again.

"Wow! What a great idea this is," he said, looking in Allie's direction. She became very interested in the clips on her life jacket.

Everyone wore yellow slickers provided by the rafting concession. When it began to rain again, like magic little waterfalls appeared all over the walls of the canyon.

Watching the lovely sight, Allie leaned against a fat side with Trevor beside her. She closed her eyes. "God is good."

"All the time," Trevor returned softly.

Allie's eyes flew open and she sat up, embarrassed. "I didn't realize I said that out loud."

"I just spent many months saying that very thing as I spit sand out of my mouth or prayed my way through a patrol or—" He made a half smile. "But you don't want to hear my war stories in the middle of this beauty."

Allie had opened her mouth to contradict him when the guide directed the raft to shore. Everyone climbed out for a hike to see the petroglyphs. Allie noticed Kip trailing her constantly, but he didn't get too close. When they climbed back into the rafts, he moved as near as he apparently dared, given her escort.

"I wouldn't worry about him," Trevor said. "He doesn't look like an enemy agent to me—unless the enemy's in worse shape than I thought."

Allie smiled at Trevor's little joke. "I'm more worried about a stalker or the paparazzi."

Trevor turned to her, and his brow furrowed. In fact, to her surprise, he suddenly looked angry. "Or kidnappers," he said. "It just dawned on me that you are a risk to national security wandering around by yourself."

"Me?"

"Believe me," he continued, "I wasn't fighting so you could get kidnapped and be held for ransom by some terrorist cell."

"What?"

Jase, who was sitting in front of Allie and Trevor, turned. "He thinks you're really the President's daughter. Remember, he's been out of the country."

Allie was distracted by a pre-teen girl climbing to her in the raft. "Aren't you *The President's Daughter*?"

Allie nodded.

"Wow!" the girl said. "None of my friends will believe this! Can I have my picture taken with you? Hey, Mom, I was right. It *is* Allison James."

Forcing a smile, Allie looked at the girl's mother while the woman snapped three pictures.

"I bet the real Secret Service wouldn't let that happen," she muttered, miffed that her identity was blown. She could feel the others in the raft looking at her.

"God is good," Trevor said. "But you've got me thoroughly confused. Are you or are you not the President's daughter?" He turned to Jase. "One of them is blonde, isn't she?"

"All the time," Allie replied and knew she had to jettison her bad attitude, not only over Kip and over the pictures, but also over the fact that her wonderful, prayed-over plans had bombed. After all, what trouble had it been to make a kid happy? So Susan split, stranding her. She could manage. What if Kip was a bit scary? God was still good. He was still in charge of the universe and of her life, even if neither seemed to go the way she wanted. That was what faith was all about, wasn't it? Accepting God's goodness even when He seemed more mysterious than ever?

"I play the President's daughter in a TV show called *The President's Daughter*." Allie smiled at Trevor. "I would never cause an international incident even if someone cared enough to kidnap me, though if someone did, God would still be good, wouldn't He?"

"All the time," Trevor said as the raft pulled into Lee's Ferry and the trip ended.

Allie climbed into the front seat of Jase's truck and prayed her way to Moab, Utah, a rental car, and the dude ranch. When the evening passed without a Kip sighting, she began to relax. God was good.

"Isn't this a great place, Allison?" Kip greeted her the next morning in the dining room. He gave her what he probably thought was an endearing smile.

Allie shuddered. Enough was enough. "Kip, leave me alone! If you don't, I'm calling the police."

Kip's mouth dropped open. Then he turned and walked away, shoulders hunched.

Allie stared at her breakfast, appetite gone. *I certainly handled that well, didn't I?*

A few minutes later Kip re-entered the dining room and took a seat as far from Allie as possible. She tried to ignore him by studying her Benelli Travel folder until Trevor and Jase arrived to take her on a Jeep trip into Canyonlands.

"Too bad we didn't know about this ranch," Trevor said as he ate her toast for her. "It's great."

Allie smiled for the first time since she'd seen Kip. "Benelli Travel." She tapped her folder.

"Look, Larry," a lady two tables over said in a carrying voice. "It's--"
Oh, no! Not again! Allie turned her face away.

"—Kip Benelli! Thanks, Kip! Great trip!"

Benelli! Allie spun toward Kip who was shaking hands with the woman and Larry. She rose and wove between tables toward him, Trevor and Jase following. Was she more angry or embarrassed? She wasn't sure. She thrust her packet at him.

"You're Benelli Travel?"

Kip nodded.

"Why don't I know you?"

"You worked with one of my agents, Mary Alice, not me."

"Oh. Of course. Well, are you following me or not?"

Kip looked uncomfortable. "Yes, sort of."

"Yes?" Anger won.

"But no, not like you think."

"Yes or no?" she demanded.

"I just wanted to be certain you had a wonderful time."

"Do you often follow clients?"

"No, but clients aren't usually TV stars who can help make or break a company."

"I bet he wants you to make an ad about how wonderful the trip was, thanks to Benelli Travel," Trevor said.

Kip's already red face flushed scarlet.

Jase barked a laugh. "He does!"

"I did," Kip said. "But no more. I'm sorry I scared you, Allison. I never meant to."

"Allie. I thought you were a reporter or a stalker."

He nodded. "Don't worry. I'm going home this morning. I won't bother you again."

Allie studied him a minute. "Were you planning on the Jeep tour of Canyonlands today?"

He nodded. "But not any more."

"Sure you are," she said. "You're coming with us." She indicated herself, Trevor and Jase.

Kip looked at her with hope in his eyes. "But I want you to have a good time."

So that's exactly what she did.